



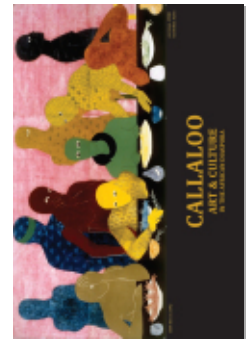
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“LOVE WON’T COME EASY”

by Carter Mathes

In October of 2012, I participated in the CALLALOO CONFERENCE for the first time. Because I had heard and read much about previous conferences, I felt quite fortunate to be invited into the intellectual community Charles Rowell and the conference committee had created. Just as the journal *Callaloo* complicates divisions between the creative and critical, so too did the conference challenge these boundaries through a series of panels and performances that focused on the concept of love in its emotive, phenomenological, epistemological, and political manifestations. The conference framework, with its positioning of love as the through line, provided an array of perspectives on the refashioning of black intellectual, geographic, and disciplinary spaces. This idea of refashioning is reflected in my title, which is intended as a reference to Augustus Pablo’s dub remake of the Heptones classic track and the way that the composition sonically pronounces the fractured, transcendent, evocative quality of love. Indeed the capacious *Callaloo* project in all of its manifestations—the journal, the conferences, and a new book series—is itself a labor of intellectual and transformational love.

Arriving on Friday morning, I first listened to the day’s opening panel, “Sacred Love and Society,” led by presentations from Corey D. B. Walker and Marla Frederick. Then, with the lyrics to the Bad Brains mid-1980s early Afro-Punk, Rastafari, hardcore anthem, “Sacred Love,” resonating between the panel’s title and the convergence of diaspora, faith, and blackness that Walker and Frederick interrogated in their papers, I took my place as a respondent to the next panel, “Writing Love in the African Diaspora.”¹

Keith Leonard and Michael Stone-Richards led the panel with papers that focused on Black Arts Movement poetry and Ralph Ellison’s posthumously published novel, *Juneteenth*. Leonard, in his paper, “Love in the Black Arts Movement: The Other American Exceptionalism,” offered an ambitious, thematic reading of Nikki Giovanni’s poem, “Nikki-Rosa,” drawing our attention to Giovanni’s formulation within the poem that, “Black love is Black wealth,” and pushing against an interpretation of Giovanni’s claim as a subtle, or not so subtle, underwriting of American idealism. Instead, Leonard argues that Giovanni’s call for black love, and the black nationalist discourse of love within the Black Arts Movement more broadly, is transgressive in its reformulation of citizenship, identity, and difference, avoiding a vision of black nationalist possibility in which authenticity and integration become fixed markers of identification and expression. Leonard suggests that black love, read as radical communality, competes and often outweighs racial difference as a simplistic basis for struggle. This love is based upon an idea of black consciousness that takes seriously the idea of living in a nation within a nation. Arguably our foremost theorist of transformational love, James Baldwin, in *The Fire Next Time*, discusses the rela-

tionship between love, power, and race, as one in which black Americans are attuned to love in a critical sense of the concept (what Baldwin terms, “the tough and universal sense of quest and growth”) that demystifies whiteness, defining it primarily by the ability to hold power, for, as Baldwin asserts, “white people cannot, in the generality, be taken as models of how to live.” The challenge and theoretical payoff of Leonard’s argument, then, is that the distinctively communal love posed by black nationalism becomes, as he put it, “an exceptionally radical democratic ideal,” one that critically challenges the foundation of white American democratic citizenship through a deeper critical realization of what that purportedly universal idealism is supposed to represent. Leonard asserts that Giovanni and other Black Arts Movement writers give poetic life to an alternate epistemological and emotional grounding of revolutionary love directly and indirectly represented on the page and recognized by a black nationalist body politic that feels this love as a sensibility emerging from the long historical memory and consciousness of black Americans who reject the “passive spiritual submission” delimited by a strictly Christian version of the concept, instead acknowledging love as an “active pursuit of a morally justified and socially constructed justice motivated by a genuine fellow-feeling, divinely inspired.” The poetics of radical love that Leonard reads in Black Arts Movement poets such as Giovanni, Baraka, Sanchez, and June Jordan could perhaps be understood even further through an increased and elaborated attention to the levels of form and style expressed through the creation, performance, and textuality of the poetry. Listening to Leonard, I was wondering how Giovanni’s inclusion of “Nikki-Rosa” on her album of poetry accompanied by the gospel sounds of the New York Community Choir, *Truth is on its Way* (1971)—or Baraka envisioning free jazz as the sonic context for much of his Black Arts Movement literary production—might impact the analysis of how writing a poetics of love is often so intimately tied to its various potential soundings. Just two examples here, but others such as Sarah Webster Fabio and Jayne Cortez could be considered, as they too mediate appeals to ideas of black nationalism as expansion rather than simply separation, and do so in respect to performed and imagined evocations of sound. Leonard’s presentation shows us how love, as an epistemological force, might shape the counter-tradition of “black nationalist exceptionalism” into an alternative, flexible, and critical practice of black unity. It is intriguing to consider how Leonard will further develop and extend his explication of the poetics of black love in the Black Arts Movement to further account for the ways that the formal, the sensory, and the improvisational can articulate and deepen levels of political meaning.

Michael Stone-Richards’s paper, “Love Between Separation and Continuity: The Poetics of Natality in Ralph Ellison,” examines Ralph Ellison’s unfinished and posthumously published novel, *Juneteenth*, through the novel’s framing of love as a critical force positioned between what Stone-Richards refers to as natality—that is, the objectively documentable presence of a people (ethnically or racially defined in this case) based upon birth—and the troubling of that biological truth through the seeming counter-logic of separation. In capturing the dream-like flow of conversation between Senator Adam (Bliss) Sunraider, a racist senator from the South, and Reverend Hickman, a black man who had adopted and raised Sunraider (somewhat mysteriously, from a white woman who is also tied to the lynching of Hickman’s brother) as a light-skinned member of his black community, Stone-Richards draws our attention to a level of racial anxiety regarding natality. Senator

Sunraider/Bliss is shot in an assassination attempt, and beckons Hickman to his bedside where the two men wax poetically, riffing and critically improvising on the existential meaning of childhood, adolescence, and the significance of cutting what Ellison refers to as “that cord woven of love.” Stone-Richards’s close reading of Ellison’s lyrical rendering of the dynamic between a surrogate father and son reveals the sublime power of love to simultaneously be a force of loss and recuperation, as the men are separated and connected by a symbolic umbilical cord that troubles race and ideology, and, as Stone-Richards persuasively argues, that represents a much broader condition of American racial representation. Ellison’s framing of these issues reflects a more general concern over the maintenance of cultural and racial continuity in the face of an idea of love that reflects the complexity of one’s personal and political history. We can begin to capture the diasporic registers of this argument by understanding the severance of the Middle Passage as an initial rupture to various continuities of black life. Stone-Richards underlines this point with reference to W. E. B. Du Bois’s transcribed memory of the African “sound poem” passed down to him by his grandfather’s grandmother: “Do bana coba gene me, gene me!” that he includes in “The Sorrow Songs.” Natality and its fragmentation, a relationship Stone-Richards suggests we might imagine through Du Bois’s reflections on the unknowability of the song, and the permanence of it in his memory, becomes a template for a series of questions and possibilities rather than a presumption of ethnic truth and solidity in this reading of Ellison’s novel. Bringing together Ellison’s National Book Award acceptance speech (“The way home we seek is that condition of man’s being at home in the world which is called love, and which we term democracy”) and James Baldwin’s description of the late 1970s TV miniseries *Roots* (“a study of continuities and consequences . . . It suggests with great power, how each of us, however consciously, can’t but be the vehicle of history which has produced us”), Stone-Richards leaves us with a vision of writing love in the African diaspora as a practice of contingency that must attempt to account for the dialectic between severance and reconstitution, fragmentation and suture. In doing so, writers such as Ellison provide a way of imagining American democracy as a mode of representation that might welcome, rather than erase, forms of radical separation. While the overcoming of separation is still a desirable end for Stone-Richards, it is the deeper understanding of the play between separation and continuity, and the uneven poetics, lyricism, and sound generated through the distinctive convergence of blackness and American democracy, that makes Ellison’s close attention to biological and familial lineage such a crucial theoretical and political flashpoint in twentieth-century African American literary history.

Both of these generative presentations brought me back to ways of reconsidering the possibilities of sound within writing about race, and it was thus fitting that the day ended with a concert, “Love’s Lyricism.” Courtney Bryan’s solo piano and her orchestration of the Ekmeles Vocal Ensemble added a crucial acoustic component to my ability to think through the critical dimensions of change and continuity, rupture and harmony, that Keith Leonard and Michael Stone-Richards asked us to reflect upon on the page. Bryan’s comfort with presenting stillness, minimal sound, and then suddenly the massive depth of deep, rumbling notes, created a fluid and at times disquieting meditation on love as sublime faith. Ending the day with this evening of sound kept the echoes of earlier critical voices, and their questioning of received categories and racial meanings, deeply resonating in respect to Bryan’s artistry, ultimately providing another example of the beautiful organizational logic of the CALLALOO CONFERENCE.

NOTE

1. The Bad Brains connection through the title of the panel became increasingly important to me as I considered how the echoes between the panel title and the song open up onto multiple levels of meaning circulating throughout the conference. For those who aren't familiar with the history of this song, it is in many ways a testament to the peculiar formation of the group and their convergence of Rastafari spirituality (an African diasporic formation of political and cultural kinship) and hardcore sonic assault (representing a specific manifestation of black avant-garde artistic expression). The love H. R. gives lyrical voice to is both a spiritual love of Jah, and the immediacy of romantic, bodily love.