

**Strangers in the Village: Democratic Poetry and the Politics of Love in the Political
Thought of Hannah Arendt and James Baldwin
Alexander Tully, Class of 2024**

As an idea, love occupies a strange and central position in our democratic political consciousness. It seems that almost as many people claim that a politics of love is the one thing most sorely needed today as claim that it is powerless to change the world. My research this summer therefore sought to *think through* what it would mean to enact a politics of love. To do this, I placed two major 20th-century thinkers in conversation with one another—the political theorist Hannah Arendt and the democratic poet James Baldwin—and examined the similarities, differences, and unique visions of love in politics offered by each. These thinkers, seldom examined in the scholarly literature together, share a lesser-known dialogue on love that begins with a letter sent by Arendt to Baldwin on the occasion of the publication of his essay *The Fire Next Time*, in which she hails his essay as a major political event but worries about the “gospel of love” he articulates. In closing her letter, she declares: “In politics, love is a stranger, and when it intrudes upon it nothing is being achieved except hypocrisy.” In other words, love is anti-political and has no place in politics. In contrast, Baldwin’s essay—and, in some sense, all of his work—testifies to the potential power of love to begin American politics again, creating a new and truly multi-racial democracy for the first time.

With this exchange as a starting point, my research set out to probe the following questions: First, what are the demands on political life made by a politics of love? Does love, like a tyrant, really eliminate the spaces between human beings and wipe away the reality of a shared world, effacing the possibility of human plurality—a condition that for both Baldwin and Arendt is among the greatest of human goods? Second: what is the role of the poet or writer in the political culture of a democracy? And finally: can love contribute to a cultural project of re-imagining American democracy? In order to think through these questions, I focused on reading key texts by my pair of thinkers. First Arendt’s *Love and Saint Augustine*, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, *The Human Condition*, and *On Revolution*, as well as some shorter essays from early and late in her career. Then Baldwin, beginning with his earlier fiction in *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, *Giovanni’s Room*, and especially *Another Country*, as well as later works like *Tell Me How Long The Train’s Been Gone* and *If Beale Street Could Talk*, before transitioning to closely reading his politically and philosophically rich non-fiction with *The Fire Next Time*, *No Name in the Street*, and numerous other of his shorter collected essays.

I found that Arendt’s conventionally antipolitical understanding of love—predicated as it is upon a concern for human freedom—is not wholly in opposition to Baldwin’s own understanding of love as an important and desirable political force. The root of the overlap in their political thinking lies in a shared commitment to human freedom. However, where Arendt the thinker sees love as threatening this freedom—a line of thought placing her in a great tradition stretching back to the ancient Greeks—Baldwin, as democratic poet, imagines a radical and demanding new form of love suitable to an immature Republic not yet capable of facing up to the living legacies of racism, sexual repression, and moral relativism. In reimagining love as “a state of being,” or “a state of grace”, Baldwin challenges Americans (as Arendt might say) to cultivate an expanded mentality that moves away from conceiving of love “in the infantile American sense of being made happy” and towards a definition of love understood “in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth.” Arendt, operating within a (justifiably skeptical) tradition, did not see that Baldwin had reformulated love—part theological, part erotic, part civic, all articulated at an initially aesthetic level and disseminated culturally and poetically—and made it uniquely suited to changing the American political reality.

Ultimately, I found that Baldwin’s reformulation of love amounts to a compelling call for each human being to authentically love the freedom of his fellow human beings. This means, essentially, wanting one’s fellows *to be*—to be free to disclose themselves to one another as the miraculously unique and equal creatures that they are, thus enacting among men the fragile dream of human plurality. Doing so, Baldwin suggests, may usher in another and more just beginning of American politics; a new beginning that finds a striking echo in Arendt’s writing on natality: the uniquely human ability to freely begin something new, however fragile and unpredictable, as the core of the human condition. In reformulating love, I see Baldwin standing as one of the democratic poets of the future whom Alexis de Tocqueville once imagined would emerge and “illuminate and enlarge certain still obscure sides of the human heart” in America. The new image of democracy that Baldwin poetically constructs out of a reformulated understanding of love ultimately aims at a pluralistic politics practiced by daring, bold, freedom-loving souls of just the sort that Arendt, in her repeated calls for us to “think what we are doing”, is most eager to welcome into political life. In this way, at least, Arendt and Baldwin’s thinking on love and politics reveals itself as more aligned than it may at first appear.

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