



Essay

The Maaticity of Love: An Afrocentric Analysis of King and hooks' Love Ethics

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Abstract

Two of the most prominent love advocates in the last century were Martin Luther King Jr. and bell hooks. Both love advocates express how *love* in the African American tradition is less romantic and more in line with the pursuit of justice. Although King and hooks functionalized love for their specific revolutionary needs, an Afrocentric investigation shows not a new idea of love but a continuation of the ancient idea of *Ma'at* in the African American context. This study examines the Maaticity of King's and hooks' love ethic by investigating their axiological, philosophical, and ontological cultural components. This article offers how transitioning from the Eurocentric notion of love to the more culturally accurate

pursuit of *Ma'at*, can assist in African American cultural relocation, ecological balance, and community building.

Keywords

love, Ma'at, Martin Luther King Jr., bell hooks, Afrocentricity

The force of evil plans,
To make you its possession,
And it will if we let it,
Destroy everybody,

We all must take,
Precautionary measures,
If love and peace you treasure,
Then you'll hear me when I say,

Oh that, love's in need of a love today,
Don't delay,
Send yours in right away.

~ Stevie Wonder, "Love's in Need of Love Today"

Introduction

What is *love*? The answer to this question is a sign of culture, tradition, and necessity. Famed musician Stevie Wonder, in his 1971 classic, *Songs in the Key of Life*, opens the album with "Love's in Need of Love Today," challenging the listener to see love as more than a romantic feeling but a vital energy to weed out the forces of evil (Wonder, 1976). Wonders' use of love as a functional tool for justice, is in alignment with the African American liberation tradition. Over the past century, love has been an undeniable bedrock for the Civil Rights, New Negro, Black Power, and

LGBTQIA+ social movements. Be it for knowledge of self, racial pride, relational happiness, self-determination, or integration, the term love has been utilized by African Americans in many ways to improve the opportunities for justice to flow.

Although many have written about and utilized love, two of the most prominent advocates of the concept during the past century were Martin Luther King Jr. and bell hooks. Although running on a 2024 presidential campaign of truth, love, and justice, Cornel West's theorization and praxis of love is in many respects a continuation of King's activism and hooks' theorization. Armon Perry, in his recent work, *Black Love Matters* (2020), is a fantastic dive into African American men's voices on romantic relationship and love but lacks a justice-oriented position on the term. The same can be said of Jessica Pryde's work, which has the same title, *Black Love Matters* (2022). In choosing to focus solely on romantic relationships, both authors have accepted the Eurocentric ideology of love and turned away from cosmological force that King and hooks discussed and practiced. King and hooks' pursuit of justice, communal advocacy, internal transformation, and ecological support, allows for a discussion of Ma'aticity in their work.

Inspired by the nonviolent movement led by Mahatma Gandhi in the 1940s, King's love ethic was founded on his Christian faith and nonviolent activism to fuel African American liberation efforts during the Civil Rights era (King, 1998). bell hooks described *love* as a form of salvation from patriarchy, capitalism, environmental destruction, and white supremacy (hooks, 2001a, 2001b). Although these advocates clearly utilized and operationalized the word love, a cultural investigation into the theorization and practice of their ethics shows a continuation of African cultural values and character. This article argues that King and hooks' love ethics are a continuation of the Kemetic (ancient Egyptian) idea of *Ma'at* in the African American context. Using the Afrocentric paradigm, this study argues that when speaking, writing, defining, and advocating for love, King and hooks are seeking Ma'at.

The Maaticity of Love Ethics

For such an analysis, the author must first give a basis of understanding Ma'at for proper evaluation. In the most complete study of the moral ideal of Ma'at, Maulana Karenga explained the etymology of Ma'at as an "evolution from a physical concept

of straightness, evenness, levelness, correctness... to a general concept of rightness, including the ontological and ethical sense of truth, justice, righteousness, order—in a word, the rightness of things” (Karenga, 2006, p. 6). Kemet, as Karenga detailed, “evolves as a communitarian society, focused not on the individual but on relationships, reciprocal obligations, and related rightful expectations” (Karenga, 2006, p. 8). Nehusi expounded that, “Ma’at articulates order and place within every living organism, from the unicellular organism to the more complex life forms, including each individual, family, clan, society, the earth’s environment and the cosmos” (Nehusi, 2013). This order, which consists of the creator (God), spirits, humans, animals and plants, and phenomena and objects without biological life, places responsibility on humans to be active agents in creating order in this hierarchy. Moreover, it presupposes cooperation between all parties for survival. This establishes a humbleness and respect for all things living and nonliving, allowing humans to see beyond themselves, and always work as part of a unit, never as an individual. Mbiti (1969) explained that the communal nature of African culture is to such an extent that “the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. He owes his existence to other people, including those of past generations and his contemporaries. He is simply part of the whole” (p. 106). At its core, seeking Ma’at is an individual quest for peace, justice, harmony, and reciprocity in all aspects of life, that can only be achieved through good character and sustainable relations with the ontological collective. It establishes balance as an ontological starting point. From this moral understanding, hyper-individualism, capitalism, sexism, racial hierarchy, xenophobia, and all forms of domination are viewed as abnormal (Asante, 2015, 2007; Karenga, 2006; Nobles, 2006; Obenga, 2015).

Although Ma’at was central to Kemetic axiology (nature of value) and ontology (nature of reality), the idea of love is found in Kemetic philosophy and the grand African narrative. Karenga wrote that “the concept of love (mrwt, merut) in Ma’atian ethics is a concept of moral and social worthiness. It is a reward, measure and mirror of one’s worthiness... the reward is both divine and social. The divine reward is love of God and immortality in the other world” (Karenga, p. 282, 2006). Thus, the virtue of love in the Ma’atian context is not so much about loving but making oneself loved because of one’s virtues, deeds, contributions, and doing Ma’at. In other words, by offering Ma’at—spreading goodness over the land so life is

flourishing for all, especially the most vulnerable- love is given as a reward from their peers, the universe, and the all-mighty (Karenga, 2006). This is stressed throughout the Declarations of Innocence, where the deceased would proclaim to have earned love by doing Ma’at during their judgement into the afterlife (Karenga, 2006; Obenga, 2004).

In his most recent work, *SKH: From Black Psychology to the Science of Being* (2023), Wade Nobles maintained that love (Zola) is “a magnetic energy (p. 86). He explained that Zola “makes contact and connection between knowing and knowable spirits (energy) to cause the activation of Ngolo (healing energy)” (Nobles, 2023, pp. 86-87). Since a person in the African grand narrative is a known, knowing, and knowable spirit, love (Zola) is the force/energy that warrants personal transformation and connection to others. Zola represents the necessity of collectivism for personal transformation. From the Kemet concept of Ma’at and Nobles’ examination of Zola, love in the African context is a reward for good character, as well as a force that connects a person to others for transformation. Love in the African context requires great character and duty to earn communal, spiritual, and divine love. It is the reward for doing Ma’at. It is not simply an intense affection as normalized in the Eurocentric and westernized understanding of love.

Methodology

Using the Afrocentric paradigm as the foundation for analysis allows the author to identify the connections between Ma’at and the love ethic that both hooks and King espouse. As a theory, Afrocentricity is a set of principles in which African agency is practiced. Afrocentricity places African people and culture at the center of analysis (Asante, 2007, p.17). Afrocentric theory enables African people to be studied and viewed as active agents in every subject (Asante, 2007, p. 17). This article’s primary methodological tool is location theory in the Afrocentric paradigm. Asante (2007) defines location theory as analyzing text in relationship to psychological time and space. Such a tool will allow the researcher to begin from an orientation that will give meaning to the Maaticity of King and hooks’ love ethics. To be “located” or “centered” from this perspective, is to be psychologically and culturally standing in African ethos. Likewise, dislocation is living on borrowed, foreign, and ultimately

non-African cultural ideologies, worldview, and orientation (Mazama, 2003; Monteiro-Ferreira, 2014).

Afrocentric orientation relies on African axiology, ontology, and epistemology for a cultural study of the subject. Axiology, within the African context, is grounded in placing the highest value on interpersonal relationships between people; cooperation and collective responsibility; interdependence; and spiritual oneness (Asante, 2007; Flannery, 2017; Mazama, 2003). The ontological assumption, in this worldview, is that all of existence is a spiritual/energy force manifesting on all levels of human reality. Further, African ontology accepts a oneness, not a separation, between the seen and unseen realms of existence (Flannery, 2017; Mazama, 2003; Nobles, 2023). Self-knowledge is the basis of all knowledge, from this epistemological perspective. From this fact, it is understood that logic is diunital (union of opposites) and one knows through symbolic imagery and rhythm (Flannery, 2017; Mazama, 2003, p. 122; Nobles, 2023). As such, the methodological approach for this work is to compare the love ethic of both King and hooks to the African worldview and Ma'atian ethics, and to argue if King and hooks, unbeknownst to them, are seeking Ma'at in their love ethic.

This article makes a cultural argument to explore the continuation of African characteristics in the African American experience. Cheikh Anta Diop wrote that the development of cultural unity is the history of a people (Diop, 1991). Culture, he added, is the glue that unifies a community and provides a consciousness that enables people to identify themselves, as part of a population, that defines their traditional similarities, and distinctions, from other cultural groups (Diop, 1991; Dove, 2021). As such, African and Black will be used interchangeably throughout this article. The Afrocentric paradigm is the most relevant in showcasing the continuation of African values in the description of love by King and hooks, while also situating the intentionality of their arguments in its proper historical and cultural context.

King's Love Ethic

Detailing his pilgrimage to nonviolence, King noted that he grew up abhorring, not only segregation, but the barbarous acts that grew out of it. As a child, he watched the Ku Klux Klan on their rides at night and witnessed lynched bodies (King, 2010a, p. 77). In his youth, he learned that the inseparable twin of racial injustice was economic injustice. While earning his Bachelor of Divinity degree at Crozer

Theological Seminary, King was initially skeptical that social problems could be solved by relying on the love ethic of Jesus (King, 2010a, p. 83). It was not until he attended a sermon by Mordecai Johnson in Philadelphia, where Johnson discussed the nonviolent movement waged by Mahatma Gandhi, that King began to believe in love as a liberating force. King wrote, “Ghandi was probably the first person in history to lift the love ethic of Jesus above mere interactions between individuals to a powerful and effective social force on a large scale” (King, 2010a, p. 84).

King viewed nonviolent pacifism, not as a submission to evil, but a courageous confrontation of evil by the power of love, believing it is better to be the recipient of violence instead of inflicting violence. He contended that the latter multiplies violence while the former may develop a sense of shame in the opponent and transform their heart (King, 2010a, p. 86). In speaking of love, King was “not referring to some sentimental or affectionate emotion... love in this connection means understanding, redemptive goodwill” (p. 92). In the same text, King utilized the Greek words *eros* (the yearning of the soul for the realm of the divine), *phila* (reciprocal love), and *agape* (love of God operating in the human heart) to describe his love ethic (p. 92). Although he discussed the importance of all three, King paid special attention to *agape* as the guiding principle for his philosophy. He wrote, “*Agape* is not a weak, passive love. It is love in action. *Agape* is love seeking to preserve and create community. It is insistence on community even when one seeks to break it. *Agape* is willingness to sacrifice in the interest of mutuality” (p. 94). King clearly articulated that the love ethic discussed is not romanticism but a commitment to bring order. He continued by stating “*agape* is willingness to go to any length to restore community. It doesn’t stop at the first mile, but it goes the second mile to restore community. It is a willingness to forgive, not seven times, but seventy times seven to restore community” (p. 94). The search for reciprocity and order in his love ethic made him challenge not only racism but also capitalism and excessive individualism (King, 2010a, pp. 196-197). Further, his understanding of *agape* recognized that all life is interrelated. By commanding love, one is commanded to “restore community, to resist injustice, and to meet the needs of my brother” (pp. 94-95).

In *The Measure of A Man*, King attempted to expand the idea of Christian love by emphasizing its need to be more holistic when he noted, “any religion that professes to be concerned about the souls of men and is not concerned about the

economic conditions that damn the soul, the social conditions that corrupt men, and the city government cripple them, is a dry, dead, do-nothing religion in need of new blood” (King, 1959, p. 5). In a Christmas sermon on peace, King added “that all life is interrelated. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly... We aren’t going to have peace on earth until we recognize the basic fact of the interrelated structure of all reality” (King, 1967, pp. 71-72). In *The Trumpet of Conscience* (2010b), King called for the protection of the poor, a message that guided the creation of the Poor People’s Campaign. King pronounced the relationship between power and love in his final text, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community* (2010c). He claimed that “power without love is reckless and abusive and that love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice. Justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love” (King, 2010b, p. 38). It is the connection between power and love that King advanced racial justice through political integration, as he challenged the arena of politics to be the most obvious source of this transformational relationship (King, 2010b, p. 38).

hooks' Love Ethic

Following King’s footsteps, bell hooks' love ethic sought to liberate Black people from patriarchy, capitalism, hegemony, and white supremacy (hooks, 2001a; 2001b). Like King, hooks scoffed at the idea of love being strictly romantic and viewed it as a force to deconstruct hyper-individualism and maintenance of white supremacist-hegemonic-capitalistic-patriarchy (hooks 2001a; 2004; 2009). In *All About Love* (2001a) and *Salvation* (2001b), hooks wrote her love manifestos. In these texts she worked with a definition of love as “a combination of care, knowledge, responsibility, respect, trust, and commitment” (hooks, 2009, p. xviii).

For Black people to embrace more wholeheartedly the art and act of loving, hooks lobbied for a satisfaction of the needs of our spirits by caring for our souls (hooks, 2001a; 2001b). She contended that we must do what our ancestors did: utilize a politics of conversion where we return to love. By addressing love, she continued, we proclaim our full and complex humanity (hooks, 2001b). Moreover, she declared that the transformative power of love is the foundation of all meaningful social change (hooks, 2009).

bell hooks fashioned her love ethic as the path toward meaningful, lasting personal and social change (hooks, 2001b, p. xxiv). She explained how, in choosing love, we choose our liberation and become active agents in its manifestation. hooks advanced love as the basis for harmonious interactions between women and men. In *Salvation*, she reminisced on when critical thought on love took place during religious teaching and showed disappointment to how mass media had taken the mantle, and educated youth into a loveless and dominating culture (hooks, 2001b). In *The Will to Change* (2004) hooks argued how love could be actively utilized as an internal transformative power against patriarchy. It is in *The Will to Change* that hooks spoke directly to African American men in hopes of teaching them the art of loving. She wrote, “trying to live up to a hard masculine prowess usually leads black males who embrace this identity without question to devalue and destroy relationships...when black males stop blaming women or any force outside their control for their inability to take responsibility for their lives, they are on the path to self-love and healing” (hooks, 2001b, pp. 42, 147). hooks offered feminist thinking as a useful tool for Black males grappling with the issue of self-love; she argued that it provided strategies to allow them to challenge and change patriarchal masculinity. Her advocacy of Black male feminist thought is founded on a belief that love can only occur between men and women when they are equal. In a love ethic founded on feminist respect for the sexes, hooks believed that there can be a complementary relationship between men and women that will allow love to flourish.

The love ethic offered by hooks also highlighted the necessity for balance between humans and the environment. In *Belonging* (2009), hooks discussed how, by ignoring the earth as a guiding divine spirit, the human spirit is violated. In the same text, hooks discussed how estrangement from the land aids internalized racism when she wrote “estrangement from nature and engagement in mind/body splits made it all the more possible for black people to internalize white-supremacist assumptions about black identity” (hooks, 2009, p. 38). To combat these internalized racist ideas, hooks suggested that African Americans recall “the legacy of our ancestors who knew that the way we regard land and nature will determine the level of our self-regard, black people must reclaim a spiritual legacy where we connect our well-being to the well-being of the earth” (hooks, 2009, pp. 39-40). In *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community* (2010c), King recognized the significance of the environmental balance. He detailed the change in his children’s behavior when they moved from the

spacious south to the crowded flat of Chicago, which he described as an “emotional pressure cooker” (King, 2010c, pp.121-122). hooks contested that when we consider healing the psyche, we must also speak about restoring our connection to the natural world and that a culture of belonging is rooted in the earth (hooks, 2009, pp. 42-50). Nature, she continued, will not only determine the level of our self-regard to reclaim our spiritual legacy, but when we see it as sacred, we can also see our bodies as sacred (hooks, 2009, pp. 25-33).

Location

The philosophies of King and hooks are not Afrocentric and could never be accused of being so. As a theoretical framework, Afrocentricity comes after King is assassinated; hooks does not directly embrace Afrocentricity. Although in *Belonging* (2009) she mentioned George Washington Carver’s agricultural genius and Maulana Karenga’s work in the Black Arts Movement, her environmental mentor is Wendell Berry, and her theoretical framework is feminism (hooks, 2009, pp. 61, 126). Therefore, both King and hooks would be considered psychologically dislocated from the Afrocentric perspective as they are utilizing non-African frameworks, norms, and rational to make sense of the African experience. However, their love ethic aligns with African axiology and philosophy and is clearly a search for Ma’at. Through love, King and hooks called for an understanding of our interconnectedness and oneness that goes beyond their Christian faith. Marimba Ani in *Yurugu* taught us that Christianity’s patriarchy, colonialism, and missionary attitudes, are not only anti-African but also anti-human (Ani, 2014, pp. 109-198). The communalism that hooks and King called for is normalized in African culture and maintained through Ma’at. Utilizing feminism as a theoretical approach, hooks attempted to create a form of complementarity and equality between men and women. If she continued to look at the work of Karenga’s *Ma’at* (2006) instead of Wendell Berry, she may have discovered that the reciprocal relationship between men and women was normalized in the ancient moral idea of Ma’at and extended in African matrilineal societies (Karenga, 2006; Nobles, 2023, 2006; T’Shaka, 1995).

The environmental justice that both called for is necessary for creating ontological balance; again, unbeknownst to these love advocates, they are calling for Ma’at. The vital force moving toward Ma’at allowed Alabamians to walk across the Edmund Pettus Bridge, not agape. While agape may have been the terminology

utilized, the undercurrent of such activism went beyond the Eurocentric concept. Alabamians and the freedom fighters of King's era were not simply attempting to change laws but show the world, as King noted in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," "a just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God" (King, 2000, p. 70). Agape may deal with the law of the land, but King's use of his love ethic dealt with combating the forces of evil, not simply evil laws. Doing Ma'at is the precautionary measure that allows for the love and peace that Stevie Wonder sung about to flourish and combat evil.

Although both love ethic advocates sought to celebrate, praise, and correct Black people from *isfet* (chaos), their frame of reference normalized African oppression. In utilizing a Christian and feminist approach to view African people, hooks' episteme is rooted in African subjugation by normalizing the Eurocentric framework. Her proposals for feminist manhood do not give African men a proper cultural and historical foundation from which to draw inspiration. King is similar in his Christian appeal, for he advocated understanding oneself and the universe maintained through patriarchy, racism, and capitalism (Dove, 2018; Monteiro-Ferreira, 2014; Ani, 2014; Cress-Welsing, 1991). hooks' dislocation disabled her from finding Ma'at and knowing that reciprocity between men and women is the standard, not an exception, in a Ma'atian ethic. Thus, the ideology of feminism is unnecessary for African people to rely upon when one is properly centered in African cultural ideas. In the words of J. Cole, "The good thing is you came a long way; the bad thing is you went the wrong way" (Cole, 2016).

King and hooks pull from a Eurocentric episteme. However, their African retentions are present in a love ethic that can at best be viewed as seeking a Ma'atian ethic of truth; justice; reciprocity; order; harmony; balance; and righteousness, to protect the most vulnerable and revolutionize the values of the nation. Through a moral directive of Ma'at, King and hooks' Christian idea of "love your neighbor" transforms to "do Ma'at so that she may love you and affirm your moral and social worthiness before God and people" (Karenga, 2006, p. 287). In constructing a love ethic, they have pursued Ma'at.

Conclusion

Understanding, practicing, and articulating love as Ma'at is significant in unlocking African Americans from conceptual incarceration. Wade Nobles explained that

conceptual incarceration occurs when Black people are forced to normalize white consciousness. Moreover, it is living in a psycho-social reality that consistently supports white mental functioning, while standardizing it as the norm (Mazama, 2003; Nobles, 2023). Reconnecting with African culture allows African people to find the words to explain the fullness of their expression. As noted above, the love discussed by King and hooks goes miles beyond the definition of the term in the Western perspective. There is no need to try to reclaim or repurpose the term love from Europeans. African people have their own ideas, symbols, words, and rhythms that must be utilized to define who they are and ought to be. The constant attempts to reclaim or repurpose European terms for interactions with the seen and unseen creates the conditions where one attempts to destroy the master's house with the master's tools, a ploy already proven impossible by Audre Lorde (Lorde, 2018). By understanding their love ethic as seeking Ma'at, African people are taking a step toward relocation, ecological balance, and community building. As mentioned above, the actions of King and hooks go beyond the Eurocentric concept of love.

This fact imparts the importance of reconnecting with African concepts, symbols, words, and rhythms to name, define, and explain our interactions with the seen and unseen world. Using African terms allows for a deeper dive into African cultural responsibilities for ontological harmony. The Ma'atic pursuit is communal in that one is not driven to do Ma'at for selfish gain but for harmonizing the ontological order. The expanded ideas of love, as King and hooks explained, called for a commitment to seek Ma'at, not the Eurocentric normalized idea of love, for their advocacy was for a daily internal, external, and spiritual commitment toward reciprocity, balance, and harmony.

hooks ecological examination of love is deeply rooted in the call for Ma'at. Nehusi (2013) reminded us that Africans were environmentalist before environmentalism. What enabled this environmentalist perspective to thrive during the time of the Nile Valley civilizations was the agrarian and communitarian society that promoted ontological balance in the pursuit of Ma'at. "Technological advancements" have not only stifled this dependency but also challenged the agency of many African Americans (hooks, 2009). The decline in African American farms and gardens further demonstrate the disconnect between human and land. This detachment is to such a degree that not only are we unaware of deforestation and environmental decay but when we do know, little concern is made, according to

hooks (2009). bell hooks challenged her readers to love the land and honor the ecology we share. Unfortunately, love as a term is limited in its call for environmental harmony. One can be loving and environmentally destructive, but one cannot seek Ma'at while disrupting the ontological order. Ma'at speaks and acts toward the future, and as such, necessitates a protection of the non-human world (Karenga, 2006). Here again, the change from love to Ma'at allows the practitioner to do what hooks advocates, by making the decision a daily engagement, and not a momentary enterprise.

King and hooks advocated selflessness, sacrifice, unity, and a communal mindset in their love ethics as a proposal to community building. Parallel to their ideology is the existential interlinking of personhood, familyhood, and neighborhood from the African perspective (Nobles, 2023). In love and Ma'at, there is a call for the individual to place the greater whole above themselves. Answering where African Americans should go in the future, King (2010c) suggested that we organize to a point where the government finds it wise to collaborate with the community (p. 145). In comparison, hooks advanced loving Blackness as a political act necessary to move against forces of domination and reclaim Black life (hooks, 2001a). Ma'at is not a tactical tool but a commitment toward a lifestyle that promotes agency and balance in the universe.

Martin Luther King Jr. and bell hooks are the two most prominent love scholars in recent African American history. In choosing love, they hoped to transform African American communities into ones that sought balance internally; externally; in the legal system; with the environment; and with the seen and unseen world (hooks 2001a, 2001b, 2004, 2009; King 2010a, 2010b, 2010c). The axiological, ontological, and epistemological dimensions of their love ethic go beyond the Western definition of the term. Conceptually incarcerated and dislocated from African culture by their normalization of non-African thoughts, terms, and paradigms, the great ancestors chose the term love. In this choice, they give their reader the impossible task of utilizing the oppressor's tools to combat oppression. To truly actualize the ethics they discussed, we must tap into the African ideologies they unknowingly seek- Ma'at. We must do what Ella Baker advocated in her 1974 Puerto Rico solidarity speech and make the struggle every day. Love understood in the Eurocentric conceptual idea lacks the cultural power to do this. However, Ma'at gives cultural power, and psychological reaffirmation, to live on our own terms, with

our own rules of engagement, to harmonize the seen, and unseen world. The writings, activism, and discussion of King and hooks in the African cultural context reveal that in their love ethic, they sought Ma'at.

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