“WHERE IS THE LOVE?”

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Abstract: "Where is the Love?" examines recent works of feminist scholarship by Lisa Duggan and Tricia Rose that argue for necessary links between macro-social forces and micro-social experiences. By re-examining sermons delivered by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in the early 1960s, the article proposes a revisionist interpretation of the civil rights movement and its continuing relevance for the present distribution of sorrow and suffering in U.S. society.

Resumo: "Where is the Love?" examina obras recentes das feministas Lisa Duggan e Tricia Rose, que defendem a existência de uma correlação entre forças macro-sociais e experiências micro-sociais. A partir de uma releitura dos sermões proferidos por Martin Luther King, Jr. no início dos anos 60, este trabalho propõe uma interpretação revisionista do movimento dos direitos civis e sua continuada relevância para a forma atual como sofrimento e dor se distribuem na sociedade dos Estados Unidos.

"Only that day dawns to which we are awake."

Henry David Thoreau

In his 1963 book, Strength to Love, Martin Luther King, Jr. grappled with the problem of love in a world ruled by hate, hurt, and fear. “Evil in all its ugly dimension” permeates everyday life he observed. “We see it expressed in tragic lust and inordinate selfishness,” King complained, adding in words that seem as apt for our own time as for his that

We see it in high places where men are willing to sacrifice truth on the altars of self-interest. We see it in imperialistic nations crushing other people with the battering rams of social injustice. We see it clothed in the garments of calamitous wars which leave men and nations morally and physically bankrupt (KING JR. 1981, p. 77-78).

This public evil caused unremitting private pain according to King. What he named as the dark midnight within the social order was paralleled by an attendant midnight within the inner lives of men and women. King saw people plagued by pervasive fear, anxiety, and depression, disillusioned by their experiences with what G.K. Chesterton called “cures that don’t cure, blessings that don’t bless, and solutions what don’t solve.”
(KING JR., p. 59; p. 75). Dr. King sought to build a social movement capable of transforming both the inner and outer lives of humans. He sought to change our society, not simply to desegregate it.

No matter how narrowly he has been remembered -- in popular entertainment and journalism as simply an eloquent dreamer and parochial advocate for Black inclusion into the full rewards and benefits of U.S. society, and worse, within neo-liberal and neo-conservative fables as a believer in color blind competition and atomized individualism -- Dr. King and the radical Black prophetic tradition he reflected and shaped stood for the betterment of our entire condition as members of a global community, not just for a renegotiation of our rights as citizens or our rewards as workers. He believed in justice, not just us.

Forty years after Dr. King published *Strength to Love*, thirty-five years after his assassination, and twenty years after his birthday became a national holiday, we find ourselves facing another dark midnight. In some ways our problems seem even more painful today than they did four decades ago. The “Second Emancipation” in which Dr. King played such a large role turned out to be very much like the first emancipation – a victory without true victory. Sharecropping and Jim Crow segregation replaced racialized chattel slavery in the wake of the defeat of radical Reconstruction in the nineteenth century, while neo-liberal economic restructuring at home and abroad after the passage of the civil rights acts of the mid-1960s has produced a re-racialization of opportunities and life chances in today’s world. Just as the betrayal of the first Reconstruction was not only a defeat for Black people but for democracy itself, the betrayal of the social warrant won by egalitarian social movements of the mid-twentieth century has exacerbated inequality, austerity, and insecurity for the majority of the world’s population, reinforcing old forms of dehumanization, exploitation, and oppression while bringing into being new ones at the same time.

Today too, midnight in the economic order has its corollary in the inner lives of men and women, in wounded psyches, blasted hopes, and broken hearts emanating from the calculated cruelty of economic and social policies imposing the most arduous costs of social change on the most defenseless groups – on the poor, on aggrieved racialized groups, on women, on children, and criminalized non-normative populations. For
African Americans the devastation has been particularly severe, in part because anti-Black racism is the ideological linchpin of neo-conservative and neo-liberal attacks on public education, public housing, public health care, and public employees, but also because Black people and Black communities have suffered most from the unraveling of the social wage and social services. The abandonment of efforts to enforce civil rights laws and the subsequent green light given to discriminators and haters has exacerbated inequality and severely impacted the social distribution of suffering, pain, pleasure, and joy. This midnight in the economic order and the political order influences every seemingly private and personal aspect of our lives, it promotes disillusionment, despair, and internalized self hatred. As George Rawick used to say in another context, “in its final stages, genocide starts to look like suicide”.

In this midnight, the publication of new books by Tricia Rose and Lisa Duggan promise and prefigure a new dawn. Tricia Rose’s *Longing to Tell* presents powerful and eloquent testimony by Black women about love, sexuality, and intimacy. It registers, in a way that previously only the most skilled works of fiction have been able to do, what Black women in the U.S. have been through in the age of de-industrialization and what they have learned as a result. Rose enables us to see that while sexuality seems to be experienced as private, personal, intimate, and isolated, it has what she calls “a powerful and volatile public life”. The private and personal choices we make about intimacy, sexuality, and love cannot be detached from the pervasive power of media images, advertising appeals, and self-help stories, from the consequences of public policy decisions that shape the quality and character of interpersonal relations in homes, schools, communities, and work places.

In *The Twilight of Equality*, Lisa Duggan demonstrates how the *public* political projects of labor exploitation, income inequality, and gender and racial subordination that have dominated public policy since the successes of the civil rights movement have depended on the mystification and glorification of an imaginary *private* sphere where properly gendered marriage produces families capable of managing social crises by imbuing their members with morality, restraint, and civility (DUGGAN, 2003). Bad social conditions are blamed on bad families, while selfishness and greed are lauded and legitimated as efforts to protect and promote the interest of one’s own family in competition with others. The dominant political rhetoric about “family values” is not about whether
families will be valued, but rather about *which* families will be valued, just as Dr. Du Bois noted in *Black Reconstruction in America* that the practical function of the discourse of white supremacy in the ante-bellum era actually served to determine *which* whites would rule, not *whether* whites will rule. Duggan shows that in our time the public deployment of discourses about private behavior serves to represent inequality and injustice as natural, necessary, and inevitable, while making collective caretaking and interpersonal empathy seem impractical, inefficient, and even immoral.

Duggan’s analysis enables us to see how we are actually governed, how identity politics actually functions in our society. Public policies *produce* the private spheres they purport to protect, while subsidizing and structuring the racial, sexual, and familial relations they deem normative and natural. A counter-subversive consensus condemns “identity politics” when the identities are those of women, gay-lesbian-bisexual-transgendered subjects, or people of color, while at the same time obscuring how access to the “universal” identities of “citizen” and “market subject” is structured by wealth, whiteness, masculinity and heterosexuality.

Although they may seem to belong to a realm far more removed from everyday life, state policies shape the ways we experience our private and personal identities. Tax codes, zoning regulations, and the criminal justice system posit the family as the privileged locus of personal affiliation and association. They favor hostile privatism and defensive localism over community consciousness. Labor laws, investment incentives, and environmental regulations help give some social groups access to decent incomes, health care, housing, and other amenities, while forcing other groups to become fractured and fragmented because their members have to work long hours at dangerous jobs for low pay, because they lack access to environmental protection and health care, because they face unjust impediments to the accumulation of assets that appreciate in value and can be passed down across generations.

State policies subsidize people whose sexualities conform to dominant norms, while punishing gays and lesbians by depriving them and their partners of insurance, inheritance, and health benefits. Tax breaks for capital gains and inherited wealth increase the dollar value of past and present racial discrimination, providing white families with unearned rewards that augment intergenerational transfers of wealth. At
the same time, the non-enforcement of civil rights laws and the reluctance to prosecute hate crimes combines with the mass incarceration of minorities as part of the war on drugs to give communities of color very different horizons for intimacy, sexuality, and love than are present for the more favored sectors of society. Public health policies that suppress access to information and resources about birth control and reproductive rights while wasting millions on sermons advocating abstinence have clear and calamitous consequences for communities struggling with HIV and AIDS, with sexually transmitted diseases, with unplanned parenthood.

In *Longing to Tell*, Tricia Rose reveals how these intersections of public policy and personal desire have an impact on Black women who make brave and meaningful choices for themselves despite the many obstacles in their paths. The book reflects an extraordinary and unusual choice by a Black scholar, a choice that reveals much about the promise and peril of our present moment. Nearly a decade ago, Rose won remarkable recognition and reward for *Black Noise*, the first – and still the best – serious book on hip hop. Critics noticed Rose’s brilliance as an interpreter of cultural texts, especially her analysis of how the aesthetics of rupture, layering, and flow that permeated break dancing, graffiti writing, sampling, and rapping continued longstanding African American aesthetic traditions while at the same time reflecting how contemporary Black youths experience time, space, commodities, and identity in the age of deindustrialization. Rose won respect for her sophisticated critiques of sexism within hip hop, but also for her knowing support for sex-positive and self-affirming stances toward pleasure articulated by women rappers.

What many missed, however, was that *Black Noise* was also a collection of oral testimonies by inner city minority youths about how deindustrialization and economic restructuring, that it was not only the best book about hip hop, but also the most valuable archive of the ideas and aspirations of inner city life in the post civil rights era.

Rose could have built on the success of *Black Noise* to position herself as a spokesperson about popular culture, as a translator and interpreter of Black culture for the corporate media, as a visible token of racial inclusion at prestigious universities. These are all honorable and important roles, but Rose did something different. She turned back to the community, to the voices of Black women, to the nettling problem of
sexuality that defines so many people’s hopes for pleasure and fulfillment yet causes so much personal and public pain. In illuminating both the differences and commonalities among Black women of different ages, sexualities, and classes, Rose disrupts any simple ideas about Black life as unified and homogenous. She worked for ten years to make herself into this kind of a conduit for the knowledge, beliefs, aspirations, and experiences of Black women, listening carefully to the things her respondents had to say.

Her findings show both a particular racial dimension to sexuality as well as a more general picture. The situated knowledge of Black people – and Black women especially – offers an indispensable optic on power, struggle, and resistance in our time. But precisely because private pain and public policies are connected, the testimonies that Rose elicit from Black women contain enormous significance for people from all backgrounds.

With minimal commentary of her own, Rose divides the stories her respondents tell into categories that emphasize the three modalities that emerge again and again in their narratives. “Through the Fire” recounts the complicated, difficult, and often hurtful processes through which Black women negotiate their sexual identities. “Guarded Heart” reflects a heightened need to be self protective, often as a result of betrayal, disappointment, abuse, and even assault. Yet “Always Something Left To Love” refers to the sense of possibility that remains, what Rose identifies as “a marked hopeful commitment to loving and being loved, no matter what has gone before” (ROSE, 2003, p. 5).

Rose’s book is neither a prescriptive self-help manual nor the manifesto of a new Black feminist formation. Like previous landmark books built around oral interviews with ordinary African Americans, it offers precise, profound, and timely ways of knowing and ways of being. Just as Sojourner Truth told nineteenth century listeners that “I am sittin’ among you to watch; and every once in a while I will come out and tell you what time of night it is,” Black women seeking what Rose terms “justice in intimacy” in Longing to Tell have stepped forward to let us know what time it is (TRUTH, in LAUTER 1994, p. 1962).
Their testimonies are remarkable in many respects, but perhaps most important as exemplars of contemporary political and intellectual thinking shaped equally by what they reject and what they accept. No single story encompasses these diverse perspectives completely, but many of them cohere around common refusals: refusals of normative femininity and normative families, of normative sexuality and normative socialities, of normative sentimentality and normative cynicism. At the same time, they go beyond mere refusals, fashioning a faith in the future out of a collective and affirmative identification as Black women, and a love of and loyalty to Black people as a continuing collectivity despite all their disappointments with simple, essentialized, and even misogynist constructions of Blackness.

Because they cannot invest their hopes in any un-problematized identity, the women in *Longing To Tell* display sophisticated critical faculties. They discern problems in what others present as solutions. “Rhonda,” for example, finds fault with what she is expected to think about both the family and social movements. “I didn’t buy the family line that your friends will go away, but your family will always be with you; it just didn’t ring true for me,” she offers, understandably enough after describing being sexually abused by her brother and finding that her parents denied that the abuse even happened. Yet her self-active choices to participate in social movements and be “out” as a lesbian expose her to relationships with their own contradictions and corruptions. “People are very uncomfortable with my out lesbianism when I’m in a position of organizing,” she explains., adding “When I’m doing something and I’ll say something that so clearly makes me a dyke, everybody’s uncomfortable because that has no place in a political context” (ROSE, 2003, p. 267; p. 282). With no safe “home,” Rhonda asks questions and critiques social formations that others take for granted.

Yet as Rose reminds us, these refusals come in a context that allows no easy answers. Because Black women have so often been associated with sexual deviance, their frank discussion of sexual desires might be used to reinforce demeaning and dehumanizing stereotypes. At the same time, however, the strategy of uplift that has historically encouraged Black women to perform “purity” and deny their own sexuality has taken a terrible toll over the years, not just through self-denial but also through its attendant proscriptions against lesbianism and other forms of non-normative erotic, romantic, or otherwise intimate connections.
Because the women in *Longing To Tell* cannot afford the luxury of simple solutions, because they cannot contain or resolve contradictions, they have to work through them. They have learned that their problems cannot be solved by an ideal partner, an ideal relationship, or an ideal sexual technique, and as a result, the interviewees in *Longing To Tell* recognize that real problems are almost never actually solved once and for all, but rather that they are worked through, reconfigured, and re-encountered in slightly different forms and different ways throughout our lives. As Rose concludes, “Intimate justice comes from working through not around these histories” (ROSE, 2003, p. 400).

Duggan reminds us that genuinely working through our histories requires public projects and progressive politics. The lives that Black women lead, like the lives of members of other subordinate groups, will not remain static in the years ahead, they are likely to get worse. The neo-conservatives and neo-liberals of our time stay in power by mobilizing counter-subversive coalitions among antagonistic social groups based in a perpetual moral panic about the misbehaviors of others. Duggan shows, for example, how advocates of inequality harp on the alleged moral shortcomings of women on welfare because such punitive language effectively obscures how welfare “reform” entails shifting the burdens of caring for newborns, children and the elderly away from the state and its well-to-do taxpayers onto poorly paid and already overworked women of color.

Similarly, arguments that attribute the weaknesses of contemporary families to the “selfish” desires for independence by individual women hide how structural problems like low wages and inadequate municipal services hurt families. These discourses can also be used as a justification for legislation that makes it hard for women to leave abusive and exploitative relationships. Opponents of public schools, public housing, and public libraries seek opportunities to associate those institutions with non-normativity, with people of color, non-normative sexualities, disease, dirt, and drug use.

The ideas and arguments advanced by Rose and Duggan make us long for mass based democratic social movements capable of enacting some of the social relations they envision. Social movements might become important mechanisms for connecting desires for intimacy and pleasure with struggles for social justice. Yet progressive social
movements have often been politically radical, yet culturally conservative. Uninterrogated attitudes toward sexual and familial normativity have been especially destructive to otherwise democratic struggles. As Michael Miller Topp shows in his work on Italian American anarchists in the early twentieth century, the successful strategy of “gendering” solidarity around a shared understanding of masculinity ultimately made that group unable to address the valid concerns of women workers.

Male workers who might otherwise have felt ashamed of opposing the state and the church could embrace radical anarchism for masculinist reasons, because it enabled them to stand up to the bosses as “men”. Yet that same investment in normative gender roles exacted a large cost. When they encountered a work force that was largely female during the Lawrence strike of 1912, anarchist groups had not developed the women leaders or even the forms of address necessary for winning women workers to their side. Even worse, during and after World War I, Italian fascists found they could win even self-professed internationalists back to the cause of Italian nationalism by invoking the familiar codes of masculinity for new purposes (TOPP, 2001, p. 135-173).

During the great upsurge of labor radicalism in the 1930s, CIO organizers made the trade union movement more legitimate in the eyes of many potential recruits by stressing a family orientation. Women’s auxiliaries actively supported male workers when they went on strike, and the unions presented the interests of male breadwinners as the interests of their entire families. These tactics succeeded in the short run, but in the long run they led the CIO to neglect women for roles as organizers and union leaders, even in industries dominated by women workers. Lizabeth Cohen shows that this family orientation suppressed the growth and squandered the talents of perhaps an entire generation of women leaders in the labor movement. Even worse, it led the CIO to settle for private health plans and pensions rather than universal programs, to support the subsidies for suburbanization granted by the federal government through the FHA and Federal Highway programs rather than advocating reinvestment in the inner city urban working class neighborhoods that provided so much of the base of support for the labor movement (COHEN, 1990, p. 358-359).

As an NAACP official in the 1950s, Ella Baker noted the pernicious effects of the culture of uplift and normativity on that organization’s local chapters. It upset Baker
that local officers of the NAACP were so reluctant to address the needs of Black people in their towns who did not conform to the dominant culture’s ideas of social respectability. Baker thought the NAACP should be as zealous in defending the rights of the town drunk as it was in defending the rights of the town doctor because both of them confronted white supremacy, albeit in different ways (RANSBY, 2003, p. 120l). As Barbara Ransby notes in her indispensable new biography of Baker, this critique turned out to be prophetic. The mass popular movement for Black freedom won as much as it did in the 1960s precisely because it drew upon the commitment and courage of Black working class men and women who had long been ignored by top-down uplift oriented organizations (RANSBY, 2003). Yet the greatest beneficiaries of the movement’s successes have been Black professionals who are encouraged by the dominant society to see themselves as unconnected to the fate of the Black working class, to be praiseworthy precisely because they are different from other Blacks, to seek individual advancement and escape from racism rather than becoming part of fashioning collective and communal solutions (WOODS, 1998, p. 220-245)³.

Duggan argues that a new “homo-normativity” threatens to repeat within gay and lesbian organizations the very hierarchies that Baker fought so hard to undermine with the civil rights movement. Attempts to win legal sanction for gay and lesbian marriages properly fight against systematic legal discrimination, but they also divide the gay-lesbian-bisexual-transgendered community by advancing the interests of normative respectability.

This legacy of social movements is particularly relevant to the concerns voiced in Longing to Tell and The Twilight of Equality because social movements serve as some of the very few sites in society where alternative socialities and non-normative identities can be constructed, negotiated, and sustained. The family, the church, the school, and the media work together (although not always seamlessly so) to instantiate and legitimate normative identities. When social movements merely replicate the relations that reinforce these identities (as in the gendering of solidarity in the Italian American anarchist movement, the family orientation of the trade union movement, and the dis-identification with non-normativity that Ella Baker protested within the civil rights movement), they undermine in the realms of culture the egalitarianism and creative conflict they seek to provoke in politics. When social movements produce new
identities and new social relations, however, when their affinity groups, workshops, house meetings, consciousness raising sessions, residential clusters, picket lines, and planning discussions produce new kinds of people, they help create and sustain the kinds of consciousness necessary for social change. Perhaps most important, they provide a meaningful alternative to the family as the center of the social world, to its gendered identities, and intergenerational allegiances and obligations. As Ernie Cortes of the grass roots San Antonio group COPS explains, one of the key virtues of social movement is that they are not like families. He explains diplomatically, “We are not a substitute family. While we can never do for each other in our organizations what a family ought to do for its members, we can teach each other how to develop trust in a relationship with people who are not part of our families” (apud POLLETTA, 2002, p. 184).

The legacy of the civil rights movement that haunts the testimonies in *Longing To Tell* (positively and negatively) contains some important precedents for working through rather than working around contradictions. Women who played vital roles in the Black Freedom movement had to contest normative family and gender expectations as they challenged the ruling racial regime. Few people who knew Ella Baker as a tireless traveler and organizer for civil rights knew anything about her personal life. She fashioned an unusual marriage to Bob Roberts that included refusing to take her husband’s last name, leaving him behind in New York as she traveled around the country (even to take care of their adopted daughter), and rarely mentioning her husband’s name in correspondence with close friends. She was so successful in this strategy that even though the FBI conducted extensive surveillance of Baker’s activity, the Bureau did not know that she was married. Moreover, Baker enjoyed a rich affective and emotional life outside of marriage, maintaining extraordinarily close associations with Lucille Black (membership secretary of the NAACP who also never married), Rosetta Gardner of the YWCA, and Shreveport activist Dorothy Simpkins (RANSBY, 2003). Non-Black women active in the movement also fashioned similar unusual and non-normative extra-familial bonds, most notably Grace Lee Boggs, Yuri Kochiyama, and Anne Braden.4

The Black freedom struggle has also benefited from the situated knowledge of people with non-normative sexualities. It is not just that Claude McKay, James Baldwin,
Angela Davis, Audre Lorde, Bayard Rustin and other prominent artists, intellectuals, and activists have personally been gay or lesbian, and that their commitments to struggle combated the homophobia within the movement itself. Even more important, the presence in the struggle of people with complex identities and allegiances encouraged the development of better theorized critiques of exploitation and oppression, critiques that reflect the multiples ways in which power actually works – as a dynamic and mobile series of interconnected hierarchies, rather than viewing racism, sexism, misogyny, and homophobia as one-at-a-time aberrations from an otherwise just world. Josh Kun reminds us that James Baldwin drew sustenance from Bessie Smith’s music not only because her identity as a working class bisexual Black woman activated the memories and feelings the author shared with her as a working class gay Black male, but also because Baldwin heard in her singing the kinds of defiance and flagrant non-normativity that he felt he needed to face a hostile world. As a woman who defiantly had romantic and erotic relations with other women, Smith’s self-assertion and self-acceptance spoke to Baldwin’s experiences and desires in ways that could not be reduced to simple affinities based on separate experiences with race, class, and sexuality.

On some occasions, non-normative sexuality has turned out to be a great practical resource for the movement. Civil rights worker Curtis Hayes (later Muhammad) found that his most important supporter in conducting voter registration drives in Washington County, Mississippi was a bisexual operator of a house of prostitution (and grandmaster of the Masons). At a time when the few Black professionals in the County were too frightened to associate their names with civil rights work, a Black man who had survived as a bisexual and as an operator of an illicit business had little to fear from whites, having already experienced as much abuse as they could possibly heap upon him (POLLETTA, 2002, p. 61).

The refusals of normative femininity and normative families, of normative psychology and normative sexuality in Longing to Tell might also help remind us that Dr, King did more than simply get shot, that he had ideas, opinions, and strategies for liberation. King’s thinking about love and its seemingly unlikely relationship to power is particularly worth remembering. Drawing on the theological writings of Paul Tillich, King argued that love without power led to sentimentality, but that power without love
led to cynicism. Combining love and power, however, required an expansive definition of what love means.

King noted that the Greek language had distinct words for different kinds of love. *Eros* refers to romantic, erotic, and aesthetic love – a love experienced as pleasure. *Philia* encompasses the reciprocal love and affection within families and among friends. *Agape* references a non-selfish love for others, a creative and redemptive love for all. Genuine love required *agape* as far as Dr. King was concerned. Loving one’s enemies would be impossible if one thought of love as *eros* or *philia* because one does not draw pleasure from one’s enemies, nor would it make sense to like them. But to love them in the sense of *agape*, to hold out hope and a sense of possibility for the world by not adding to its hatred, hurts, and fears was possible. Because *eros* is dependent on one’s own pleasure it can become selfish, aggressive, manipulative, and instrumentalized unless tempered with *philia* and *agape*. Because *philia* is dependent upon family and friendship, it can become exclusionary and hard-hearted, giving love to some at the expense of concern for others, unless tempered with *eros* and *agape*. Because *agape* asks us to look beyond self, pleasure, familiarity, and comfort it can become cold, instrumental, and even fanatical unless tempered with *philia* and *eros*.

Like the women whose powerful testimonies make *Longing to Tell*, Dr. King drew upon a rich tradition of linking love and politics, the public and the private, intimacy and justice. Like Lisa Duggan and Tricia Rose, he did not leave us so much with definitive answers as with better questions and better tools with which to create our own answers. But the search for answers requires working through rather than working around our complex and often contradictory and antagonistic histories. As another preacher, Roebuck “Pops” Staples, sang in 1971 along with his daughters Mavis, Cleo, and Yvonne,

To get water from a faucet, you got to turn it.  
To get butter from milk, you got to churn it.  
and if you want love,  
You got to earn it. (1971).

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1 Tradução de Stelamaris Coser.
