

Cherie Jones

### Indifference, Sex, and a Bajan Madman

In writing this essay, I approached the meaning of love in the same way I do any subject about which I am madly curious and mildly confused – I approached it through a process of elimination. That is, by first seeking to define what it is not. This is how I happened across the words of Ellie Wiesel, the prolific writer and Nobel laureate.

“The opposite of love,” said Wiesel, “is not hate, it is indifference.” If this is true, any writer who answers the impetus to write about anything is writing from a position of love. Simply put, without love, the writer wouldn’t be moved to write. The act of writing about anything is therefore an act of love. Love is not a mere emotion directed at or against the subject of our literary creation; it is the essence of the act of creation itself. All writing, whatever its subject, whatever its tone, is an act of love on the writer’s part. Love, therefore, is action. If writing is an act of love, then the thing written about is beloved. Again, if Ellie is to be believed, then by extrapolation, the subject of every novel, every poem, and every play is love, even when its manifestation in that work of art appears in the breach. I sought to prove this theory by surveying older West Indian texts I would speak about in the same terms – texts I claim to love.

In one of my favorite novels, *The Wine of Astonishment*, Earl Lovelace writes about a small religious community in Trinidad. One of the novel's main protagonists is a man called Bolo, who is first presented as the embodiment of the hopes and dreams of his community but gradually becomes a person who behaves in ways that scare and threaten its members. When Lovelace writes about Bolo, he writes with honesty, curiosity, compassion, and invitation. You could say that his novel explores the socio-cultural significance of the ‘shouter’ Baptist religious community in Trinidad, or his book is about love. So, love is not only action but also honesty, curiosity, compassion, and invitation.

Roger Ebert once said

To know me is to love me. This cliché is popular for a reason because most of us, I imagine, believe deep in our hearts that if anyone truly got to know us, they'd truly get to love us - or at least know why we're the way we are. The problem in life, maybe the central problem, is that so few people ever seem to have sufficient curiosity to do the job on us that we know we deserve.

For Ebert, then, love is not only action but also applied toward knowing. Ebert is not alone in equating love with knowledge. Many parts of the Bible equate ‘knowledge’ with deep intimacy; many have mischaracterized it as sex. In the case of literary work, it is the action of writing applied, with honesty, curiosity, compassion, and invitation, toward the deep and intimate knowledge of a person, place, condition, or thing.

Here I want to stop to tell you a story. It’s a story about a madman from Barbados. A flamboyant character known as King Dyal. King Dyal was a black man who rode a vintage white bicycle in a white bowler hat and white gloves. On any given day, he wore an assortment of three-piece suits in clownish colors – cotton-candy pink, fire-engine red, teal and turquoise, and bright cerise while he smoked a vintage pipe. King Dyal braved the sweltering sun and the stares of many to appear at every noteworthy event on the Barbadian

---

ICPL and the International Writing Program Panel Series, October 14, 2022: Does Anyone Write About Love Anymore?  
Cherie Jones (Barbados), Mohamed Nasserredine (Lebanon), Edson Incopté (Guinea-Bissau),  
Mashiul Alam (Bangladesh), Carey Baraka (Kenya)

For electronic texts, please visit: <http://iwp.uiowa.edu/archives/iowa-city-public-library-presentations>

For video archives, please visit: <https://www.icpl.org/video/series/international-writing-program>

social calendar. Especially cricket. King Dyal was forever at cricket, mostly to spew invective at cricketers of color and to lend his support to any opposing team he viewed as white or European. He loudly proclaimed to prefer the company of white English men and women and even more loudly that he had never worked a day in his life.

The people of Barbados didn't know what to make of him. At first, they dismissed him as a lunatic. Over time, he became a celebrity, a local novelty to be pointed out while giving island tours to tourists. Eventually, he provoked the ire of local pan-Africanists and historians, one of whom had this to say when King Dyal's image and likeness were reflected in a local newspaper:

King Dyal is disqualified from occupying space in a document designed to enlighten and uplift black people of this island by reason of his career of verbal terrorism against his fellow-Blacks during the last ten years of colonial rule and the first 30 years of Independence. (...) He always attacked peaceful Bajan blacks, whose characters he assassinated, calling them 'black cattle', 'black jackasses' and 'black rats' because of his own racial self-hatred (*Nation News Barbados*).

I did a little research on King Dyal; he had been born Redvers Dundonald Dyal and been a social activist in the 1930s, sharing the stage with a man now recognized as a national hero of Barbados in advocating for the enfranchisement of a poor, black underclass. But while Clement Payne eventually assumed a place in Parliament and the adoration of the general public, King Dyal had found himself incarcerated and ill-treated for his activism. One of the police officers who dragged him to jail was black, and he was never the same. Shortly after, he became King Dyal.

Now, what place does King Dyal have in an essay about writing about love? Well, I have a theory. In my view, King Dyal is, at heart, an artist, and a creator, much like many of us writers would claim to be. He has a deep love for his people and his island. In his desire to know both more fully, he finds in them a characteristic he cannot swallow, something inconsistent with the core of who he believes his people to be, something anathema to the island he knows. And so, he seeks to understand his beloved. If you will, he writes a character, a parody of this part of his beloved. In bright suits and bowler hats, he paints a picture of a people who cannot love themselves, who reject their traditions and the practicalities of their way of life, in favor of ill-fitting and incongruent colonial values. He does not just write this parody. He wears it, lives it, and performs it every day at places of interest. Through this work, he seeks to reflect his beloved that part of itself that he believes to be inconsistent with who and what he knows it to be. His work, this character he has written, this madman he performs each day, is an act of love; that is all it is about.

When we write about anything we say, by the very act of writing about that thing, I recognize you; I wish to know you deeply and to present the truth of you to myself, firstly, and then, perhaps, to others. We approach that thing with respect first in deeming it worthy of textual reflection and record. We approach it with a gentleness and honesty, we put ourselves in service to its essence. We make it available to others in a profound way that invites others to bring themselves to it, to know it as we do, and to build on our understanding of it.

What, I wonder, is more loving than that?

---

ICPL and the International Writing Program Panel Series, October 14, 2022: Does Anyone Write About Love Anymore?  
Cherie Jones (Barbados), Mohamed Nasserredine (Lebanon), Edson Incopté (Guinea-Bissau),  
Mashiul Alam (Bangladesh), Carey Baraka (Kenya)

For electronic texts, please visit: <http://iwp.uiowa.edu/archives/iowa-city-public-library-presentations>

For video archives, please visit: <https://www.icpl.org/video/series/international-writing-program>