



Participatory learning and capacity building for mutual thriving and liberation

Black Joy, Uninterrupted: A Review of the Literature

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*"This joy I have
The world didn't give it to me
And the world can't take it away."
- Shirley Caesar.*

Introduction

Black joy, which has historically been a symbol of empowerment and liberation (Scott, 2022; Tichavakunda, 2021), has faced a profound test in the recent COVID-19 pandemic and the events of the summer of 2020. The dual impact of a global health crisis and heightened awareness of anti-Black racism has cast a spotlight on the challenges faced by Black individuals, injecting a new urgency into the exploration of what it means to experience and sustain joy amid the relentless stress of anti-Black racism and white supremacy (Mendez, 2021; Winters, 2020).

Bettina Love brought significant attention to the term, "Black joy," by advocating for its integration within educational environments, contending that there is more to learn about Black individuals than their oppression (Love, 2019). Black joy is an expansive emotional experience rooted in the resilience, resistance, cultural expression, and communal celebration of Black people. It transcends the boundaries of simple happiness and represents the unfiltered celebration of life in a world interwoven with anti-Black racism and white supremacy (Lewis-Giggetts, 2022). Existing literature has predominantly focused on the negative emotions associated with navigating an anti-Black world (Bonilla-Silva, 2019; Jones et al., 2020), but the concept of Black joy disrupts this narrative. Black joy is an invitation to explore the positive emotions that emerge out of necessity, a steadfast refusal of oppressive systems, and the unwavering belief in a better future (Lavalley & Johnson, 2022; Lu & Steele, 2019).

Black joy was nurtured by the spirit of resilience that has sustained Black communities through centuries of struggle — from colonization, enslavement, genocide, to the ongoing onslaught of anti-Black racism. Black joy did not emerge in

a vacuum and is an active force that challenges injustice and uplifts communities (Oladipo, 2021; Pham, 2021). In a landscape where Black pain and violence have become commonplace (Calvente, 2021; Williams, 2021), and the battle for Black liberation is undeniably taxing on physical, mental, and emotional levels (Gorski, 2019; Smith, 2009), Black joy becomes a sustaining force and beacon of hope.

Background

Black individuals and communities have faced unimaginable challenges throughout history (Hannah-Jones et al., 2021). Despite these obstacles, Black people have used expressions of joy as acts of resistance against the oppressive systems that sought to dehumanize and marginalize them (Lu & Steele, 2019). Resistance among enslaved individuals was woven into the fabric of the institution of slavery itself. Suicides of enslaved individuals during the trans-Atlantic slave trade were acts of reclaiming agency in the midst of unspeakable suffering. Cultural expressions such as song and storytelling served as conduits for the desire for freedom, passed down through generations (Lu & Steele, 2019). The Civil Rights movement, an emblematic struggle for Black peoples' political emancipation, was filled with struggle and resistance but also profound expressions of joy and celebration that often remain overlooked (Carson et al., 1991).

During the era of Black Lives Matter, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the tumultuous summer of 2020, Black joy served as a powerful form of resistance and resilience in the face of anti-Black racism, racialized violence, and a global health crisis (Ekpe et al., 2023). Amidst the challenges of isolation, fear, and grief brought about by the pandemic, Black individuals maintained community online. Social media platforms were used as virtual gathering spaces to engage in dialogue, share humor, and foster connections (Lu & Steele, 2019; Outley et al., 2021). Practices of self- and community care were also uplifted during this time (Hersey, 2022; Packnett, 2017), emphasizing that Black joy is essential for self-preservation in the face of normalized trauma.

Black joy's presence throughout history is indicative that it is not a dismissal of ongoing struggles but a deliberate choice to find moments of happiness and maintain hope during challenging times. Black Joy serves as a source of resilience



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for individuals and communities facing pervasive oppression. It is a reminder that the Black community is more than its history of suffering; it is also a community filled with vitality. In the face of anti-Black racism, discrimination, and historical trauma, the capacity to find moments of joy becomes an act of resistance and a powerful assertion of the full humanity of Black individuals.

Vehicles of Black Joy

Spaces that are neither one's home or workplace foster social connections, encourage a sense of belonging, and contribute to the vibrancy and resilience of communities (Oldenburg, 1999). Despite housing segregation, environmental racism, mass incarceration, police brutality, and detrimental policies (Alexander, 2010; Rothstein, 2017; Washington, 2019), Black communities persist in creating and preserving spaces where joy can thrive. Black-owned businesses, religious institutions (e.g., churches, mosques), barbershops and salons, fraternal organizations, social clubs and cultural centers have been foundational to the resilience, healing, social and civic life, and organizing of the Black community (Alexander, 2003; Brown et al., 2012; Calhoun-Brown, 2000). Institutions that provide avenues for Black peoples' social, cultural, and civic engagement are essential not only to establishing and maintaining community but also play an instrumental role in the cultivation of Black joy in the face of systemic oppression (Tichavakunda 2021; 2022).

Online communities have become vital sanctuaries for Black individuals to assert their agency, reclaim their narratives, and foster a sense of connection and solidarity (Brock, 2020). Following the killing of Trayvon Martin in 2013 and the beginning of the Black Lives Matter movement, media portrayals have often reduced Black lives to images of violence and tragedy. In response, the expression of Black joy on social media is a deliberate act of resistance, countering these one-dimensional narratives (Steele & Lu, 2018). Digital spaces provide a platform for Black individuals to showcase the full spectrum of their humanity, transcending the narrow confines that mainstream media imposes on us. Hashtags like #BlackGirlMagic, #BlackBoyJoy and #CareFreeBlackKids function as digital affirmations, actively challenging dominant narratives that persistently cast



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Blackness as synonymous with violence and death (Hobson & Owens, 2019; Love, 2019; Mbalia, 2021). Further, hashtags like #DisabledandCute and #PrettyPeriod serve as platforms for empowerment and invisibility, carving out spaces of inclusivity and representation for individuals overlooked within the Black community (Brown, 2017; Wells, 2021). By sharing images, videos, and audio celebrating carefree moments online, Black users cultivate a space where joy is asserted, celebrated, and shared.

Future Directions

Though the concept of Black joy is not novel, its thorough examination in the existing literature is notably sparse. This scarcity may be attributed to the prevailing emphasis on spotlighting the historical trauma and oppression faced by Black individuals (Hannah-Jones et al., 2021). Despite this historical underrepresentation, the exploration of Black joy possesses significant potential for unveiling the multifaceted experiences of Black people, unraveling psychological and health implications, and informing more inclusive, community-driven policymaking.

Intersectionality. In future explorations of Black joy, it is imperative to consider the multitude of identities individuals hold that bring forth simultaneous experiences of privilege and marginalization, shaping unique and complex perspectives (Crenshaw, 2017). Delving into how factors such as gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, dis/ability, immigration status, religion, age, and location impact the expression and reception of Black joy offers a nuanced understanding of the diverse experiences within the Black community. This investigation not only enriches our comprehension of joy but also provides essential insights into creating more inclusive communities. By recognizing the intricate intersections of identity and joy, we can work towards fostering environments where everyone feels empowered to express their full humanity, contributing to a more equitable and understanding society. For instance, exploring Black queer joy and Black disabled joy begins to consider how intersecting identities impact Black joy and fosters more inclusive and considerate communities (Gordon, 2021; Mitchell, 2022). True liberation encompasses the freedom to embrace and express joy authentically, irrespective of intersecting identities.



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Creating spaces where all forms of Black joy are not just acknowledged but celebrated is pivotal in cultivating environments where everyone feels seen, valued, and empowered.

Health. Racism, a persistent stressor impacting the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of Black individuals (Grayson, 2020; Jones et al., 2020), intertwines with historical intergenerational trauma, profoundly affecting the Black community (DeGruy-Leary, 1994; Menakem, 2021). However, acknowledging the cultural richness and resilience within Black communities is gaining recognition. Black joy, emerging as a potent resource amidst an anti-Black world, serves as a catalyst for healing and resistance. Exploring psychological and health implications of Black joy is crucial. Research could delve into how Black joy influences stress resilience, coping mechanisms, and overall well-being. Understanding how Black joy acts protectively against anti-Black racism holds potential for promoting mental health. Additionally, studying how intentional cultivation and expression of Black joy contribute to resilience and healing from historical intergenerational trauma could illuminate how Black joy breaks the cycle of trauma, fosters mental well-being, and preserves cultural identity. Mental health practices embracing Black joy must prioritize self-compassion, vulnerability, and community care (Brown, 2021; Hersey, 2022; Lewis-Giggetts, 2022; Wyatt & Ampadu, 2022), acknowledging the coexistence of joy and pain within the Black experience and its role in holistic healing. Mental health practitioners should explore how Black joy operates as resistance and resilience against historical trauma. Integrating intentional expressions of joy into therapeutic practices can empower individuals to break the cycle of trauma, fostering agency and well-being.

While there is qualitative research and anecdotal evidence about what Black joy means (Brown, 2021; Lewis-Giggetts, 2022), there's a need for more structured quantitative assessments. Future research can focus on developing standardized scales or instruments to measure Black joy and understanding how it correlates with mental health, well-being, and resilience among Black individuals. Policymakers should support research initiatives that aim to develop quantitative measurements of Black joy. These measurements can be integrated into public



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health surveys and used to inform policies aimed at improving the well-being of Black communities.

Community Planning. In examining policy implications, it becomes crucial to recognize the transformative potential of integrating Black joy into the discourse surrounding racial equity and social justice. By acknowledging and promoting the celebration of Black joy within policy initiatives, policymakers can foster an environment that not only addresses historical inequities but actively contributes to the holistic well-being of the Black community. Policies centered around racial equity often focus on remedying disparities and dismantling systemic injustices, yet the incorporation of Black joy introduces a novel dimension.

Recognizing joy as an essential human experience within the Black community becomes a form of reparative justice countering historical dehumanization. Policymakers should focus on avenues of fostering Black joy within various contexts - physical, cultural, and economic environments. This involves planning with the community and being guided by their vision. Incorporating joy-affirming practices like arts, culture, and community engagement into social programs, education, and development initiatives is crucial (Rosario Jackson, 2018). This can include integrating artistic elements into public spaces, designating cultural districts, supporting creative entrepreneurship, ensuring arts education access, and engaging communities in collaborative design workshops. Ultimately, policies prioritizing and celebrating Black joy contribute significantly to fostering a more inclusive, equitable, and compassionate society by integrating such initiatives into community planning and development.

Education. Research has shown the importance of Black joy in educational settings (Brown & Brown, 2021; Williams, 2022), particularly in higher education (Tichavakunda 2021; 2022). However, there's a need for more research into the effectiveness of specific educational interventions that promote Black joy. Future research could evaluate the impact of programs, curricula, and spaces that foster Black joy within educational institutions. Educational policies should support the development and evaluation of interventions that promote Black joy within schools and universities. These policies can include funding for initiatives that create safe and inclusive spaces for Black students.



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Further, freedom schools, born from the necessity to bridge the gaps prevalent in formal education systems, serve as a testament to the transformative power of community-driven initiatives in cultivating Black joy among youth (Bass-Adams & Coleman-King, 2021; Regan, 2012). By infusing curricula with culturally affirming content and addressing sociopolitical issues relevant to the community, freedom schools have created environments conducive to learning, critical thinking, civic engagement and fostering Black joy.

Conclusion

The exploration of Black joy, although not novel, serves as a profound testament to the resilience, resistance, and celebration entrenched within Black culture and communities. Despite persistent oppression, Black joy stands as a resilient force, poised to outlast the very systems that seek to suppress it. The future exploration of Black joy invites us to reimagine societal paradigms and assert hope for the future. As frameworks of liberation like Black joy continue to be introduced, we are reminded of the unwavering humanity of Black people, a fact that has long been denied. The power of Black joy holds vast promise for fostering healing, psychological liberation, and holistic well-being of Black individuals and communities.

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