

Tinka Harvard

Student Number: 2001094

Black Women's Joy and Why It Matters

Heavenly Creatures and the Politics of Feeling Good

Master's Thesis in Social Exclusion

Supervisors: Ann-Charlotte Palmgren and Taru Leppänen

Faculty of Humanities, Psychology, and Theology

Åbo Akademi University

April 2023

ÅBO AKADEMI UNIVERSITY – FACULTY OF ARTS, PSYCHOLOGY AND THEOLOGY

Abstract for Master's thesis

Subject: Social Exclusion	
Author: Tinka Harvard	
Title of thesis: Black Women's Joy and Why It Matters: Heavenly Creatures and the Politics of Feeling Good	
Supervisor: Ann-Charlotte Palmgren	Supervisor: Taru Leppänen
<p>Abstract:</p> <p>This master's thesis is a study of the phenomena of Black women's joy—what it is, why it matters, and how it is helpful in resisting oppression, including racism, sexism, and social exclusion. It is an attempt to grasp the scope of the social exclusion of Black women in anti-Black and sexist dominant cultures. The Black experience entails learning through specified and insinuated language what one can and cannot do according to the barriers and rules of the dominant culture. Those social norms and ways of being are written and unwritten, and a tone policing exists by the dominant culture to reinforce said norms. The importance of this research aims to explore what Black women's joy is and how Black women's joy pushes back on the policing of Black women's existence and the gender inequalities they experience. It resists the boxes or cages systemically created for Black women. The topic was inspired by the reality of how within the Black experience there is a necessity to navigate oppressive terrain that leaves Black women emotionally, physically, and mentally exhausted and traumatised. Black women choosing to live with joy is a radical act. Thus, Black women's joy, why it matters, and how it helps in resistance against oppression is a rigorous act of love. Personal experiences depicted via poetry, vignettes, and traditional academic writing is used to share the research and its findings. The vignettes as well as poetry are created from diary entries, which are a record of the researcher's personal experiences of a Black American woman in general and while living as an international student in Finland in particular.</p> <p>The theories of social exclusion, affect theory, feminist theory, social interaction, and social construction are used as a lens to view and better understand the extent of the marginalisation of Black women and how Black joy is effective as resistance to oppression. The materials for this thesis are personal accounts, autoethnographical material, that have been transformed into a suite of poetry that has been analysed using the methods of autoethnography and poetic inquiry. Experiences related to racial and gender inequality and social exclusion leave Black women with a particular trauma and exhaustion while simultaneously equipping them with particular skills that can lead them from trauma to triumph. Negative experiences can be transformed into positives. Black women's lived experiences help them to understand their own power. When looking closely at Black women's journeys of inequity and social exclusion, it is evident that they often acquire tools to handle adversity. There is a connection between one's own trauma and learning to navigate unfavourable environments. Being able to experience and share joy is especially needed for Black women who are constantly inundated with inhumane acts of racism, sexism, and social exclusion. In response to such substantial issues, the message that "Black joy is an act of resistance" is central to their fight against oppression.</p>	
Keywords: Black women's joy; resistance; intersectionality; gender studies; anti-racism; poetry; autoethnography; poetic inquiry; joy; love; social exclusion; feminism.	
Date: 26 April 2023	Number of pages: 49
The abstract passed as maturity examination:	

Content

1. Introduction	4
1.1. Aim and Research Questions	6
1.2. Limitation and Situatedness	7
1.3. Form of Thesis	8
2. Theory, Approach, and Earlier Research	11
2.1. Social Exclusion Theory	13
2.2. Feminist Affect Theory	15
3. Method and Material	18
3.1. Autoethnography	18
3.2. Diary as Material	20
3.3 Poetic Inquiry	21
4. Three Poems as Analysis Through Poetic Inquiry	24
4.1. The Affect of a Killjoy	24
4.2. Heavenly Creatures and the Politics of Feeling Good	28
4.3. Black Girl Magic	32
5. Concluding Discussion and Final Reflections	38
6. References	46

1. Introduction

June 2022: Few people in my life don't know that I have run into unexpected racism in Finland. I say unexpected because Finland had always been a place of refuge for me. Nature there can be soothing and healing—there is ample space to stretch out one's whole self and to take deep breaths. It is a place where one can roam and find herself. It is a reserved culture bending toward silence. It is a respectful and individual culture, which is ironic in its collective and admirable socialism. With help and insight from friends and with my own personal experiences, I have come to understand that Finland, too, has been swept up in the xenophobia permeating Europe once again. Europe has been there before and should know better. Oftentimes, the “sins of the fathers” fall to new generations if education is not a priority.

It is hard to try to stay out of the way of racism because it permeates society and lurks in the hearts of far too many. My mind has been spinning concerning this subject for quite some time now, trying to figure out how to care for and protect myself in light of racism. Personal experiences of racism are difficult to prepare for because each one presents itself in a new and seemingly creative way.

Accounts of personal experiences, like the one above, along with other vignettes and poetry are the materials that will comprise my thesis, in which I focus on Black women's joy and why it matters as an act of resistance to racism and sexism. The above vignette is from the diary that I began after matriculating in the social exclusion program at Åbo Akademi University as a visiting student from the United States. Surprisingly, documenting my experiences in the diary provide some comfort to me. I have learned that writing and creating can prove helpful in healing painful encounters and experiences. In effort to move past such pain, the idea of joy as a research topic became more and more attractive to me.

I came to choose my research topic for my thesis, Black joy, when a classmate mentioned the idea of Black joy during a conversation in class. This idea was profoundly appealing to me. In addition, I was astonished because I couldn't believe that I had never heard of this phenomenon. The mere mention of it moved.

The same classmate sent me a link to an article by feminist historian Stephanie M. H. Camp (2002) about enslaved Black women finding joy in resistance in the antebellum South in the United States, and this proved to be my gateway into the subject of Black joy. I began to dig for more information about the subject and discovered that Black joy was actually a movement, which even during the COVID-19 pandemic was continuing to grow. With a new awareness, I began to wonder where, with the abundance of images and messages about Black pain and trauma, was the joy that the Black community knows is intrinsic in its existence? I personally was desperate for joy, for any semblance of it. I was like a stone in a dry riverbed desperate for any trickle of water.

I knew that I needed joy. I was thirsting for it. My time as an international student—a Black American woman—living in Turku, Finland, had been full of dreadful and disheartening experiences. I have been made to feel unwelcome in most circumstances of daily life. I have felt at times as if my well had run dry of any semblance of joy, which only accentuated the true value and importance of joy.

Once I began to “look for joy,” a search in university libraries for “Black women’s joy” yielded a result of “not found.” An online search for scholarly work on Black joy and Black women’s joy yielded fewer than ten articles and books with alternative suggestions for resources with the words in the titles such as “Black pain” (Williams 2008), “strong independent Black woman” (Castelin and White 2022), “the angry Black woman” (Motro 2022), and “the burden of the strong Black woman” (Walker-Barnes 2009). Little research exists thus far in academia concerning Black women’s joy. The few articles that exist—including one titled “On Black Queer Joy and the Digital” by Christopher J. Persaud and Ashon Crawley (2022)—are relatively new. Black women’s joy is an emerging field in scholarly research.

Very little has been written about Black women and *affect theory*, and of the little that has been written, nearly all of it is negative. Affect theory in connection to Black women is thought to be “white and racist.” Though affect theory is said to speak to “relation across popular theories of affect,” Black women and feminist scholars are, for the most part, not included in the work. Affect theory is thought to have “closed ranks around whiteness, abandoning theories of racialised affect” (Mosley 2022).

Despite this profound and crucial information, I was surprised by my own attraction to the scholarship on affect theory. In *Happy Objects* by feminist scholar Sara Ahmed, the *feminist killjoy* is positioned alongside the *angry Black woman*, where the angry Black woman is often thought of as a killjoy, one who spoils feminist joy by pointing out forms of racism in feminist politics and disturbing the promise of happiness (Ahmed 2010b, 38).

There is indeed a gap in scholarly research on the theme of Black women’s joy and why it matters. There is also a gap in research on Black women and affect theory. It may be safe to say that it is something other than a gap, as it is nearly non-existent. The good news is that it does exist, though the scholarship is not abundant. For my thesis project, my aim is to research Black women’s joy and why it matters using the methods of autoethnography and poetic inquiry with hope that one day I may add to the emerging scholarship on these subjects.

1.1. Aim and Research Questions

This study aims to research the phenomena of Black women’s joy. Following are the research questions that I propose to answer in the analysis and autoethnographical poetry: What is Black women’s joy? Why does it matter? How is it helpful in resisting racism, sexism, and social exclusion? This research is important because within the Black experience exists a necessity to navigate white culture: at school, at work, in health and medical facilities, when shopping—in fact, everywhere and every day. In a mainstream magazine article, published by *British Vogue*, journalist Chanté Joseph (2020) states that a great deal of emotional, physical, spiritual, and intellectual energy goes into learning to cope with the

frustration of navigating white culture. Experiences related to racial and gender inequality leaves Black women with a particular trauma and exhaustion. The racist and sexist social norms and ways of being are written and unwritten, and a tone policing exists by the dominant culture to reinforce said norms. Despite existing in an anti-Black and sexist world, Black women choosing to live with joy is a radical act. Thus, Black women's joy, why it matters, and how it helps in resistance against oppression felt like the perfect research topic for me to pursue for my thesis. Black women's joy is important because it pushes back on the policing of Black women's existence and the gender inequalities they experience. It resists the boxes or cages systemically created for Black women. Given that "the present has ancient bones," the context of the research aims to highlight present day dynamic and multidimensional social exclusion keeping in mind that the past influences the present.

To achieve the aims of this project, I will endeavour to contribute to the existing knowledge of this topic by finding a niche, a gap within what exists and add to the conversation. The findings of research will be presented in the formats of poetry for analyses and additional traditional written text.

The objective is to grasp the scope of the social exclusion of Black women and the particulars of how Black Joy can assist with the problems they face. The study of feminism and social exclusion is a lens to view and better understand the extent of marginalisation of Black women and how Black Joy is an effective resistance. This work is of a theoretical framework, an exploration of Black Joy and what it entails and the implication of it in resistance to oppression.

There is joy in undoing harmful social constructions of gender and race, which may lead to the elimination of brutal conditions. The crucial change transforms pain and suffering and ushers in togetherness in community.

1.2. Limitation and Situatedness

Challenges in feminist research exist along with ubiquitous questions asking how we know what we know. Research that entails personal experience, feminist theory, and

autoethnography leads to answers to those questions and responds to the challenges (Holman Jones 2016, 232). I approach this study from the perspective of a Black American woman born and raised in the United States, which has a centuries' long history of racism with a legacy of slavery. I am not a Black woman with European citizenship, nor an immigrant. My experience does not carry the realness of a refugee or one in search of safety and economic stability. It does not carry the hostility and societal separation of being socially excluded as a racialised person in Finland, I do not carry that heartbreak and rejection from this homeland, still, I can profoundly relate as I carry the same if not a heavier burden of exclusion from my own homeland. Though no one person can speak to the experiences of every other person who presents as that person, I can speak to the experience of being a Black woman in Finland. Most people wonder where in Africa I am from. Their first thought is not where in the United States I am from. Black women walk similar paths in Finland sharing the same experiences though our place of origin is different. As a research method, autoethnography helps to examine personal experiences from one particular perspective while not claiming the entirety of viewpoints (Varela 2022, 181).

1.3. Form of Thesis

I have travelled a long and winding road to arrive at the final form of my thesis. While the journey had some side turns and switchbacks along the way, joy was a part of the journey and also intrinsic to the destination (quite often, getting to joy can be complicated).

I initially began my thesis project with the idea of challenging myself by learning how to create podcasts and to produce a thesis that also included a creative avenue to explore my topic and research questions. My plan was for the podcasts to consist of interviews with Black women living in Finland to be used as the method and material for my thesis. Because of time constraints and limited resources, my thesis seminar professor suggested to me that I change from creating podcasts to writing some blogposts as the way to present the findings of my research, and to make one of the blogposts a poem. I eagerly

adapted my plans to this challenge because it would allow me to use my love of writing poetry as a means of sharing information.

The poem that I wrote, “Black Girl Magic,” was well received when I first presented it to my supervisor and professors, which led them to suggest that I write two more poems, a total of three, for the blog posts. I could then include analyses of my material in the form of the poems themselves and in the footnotes within the poems. My supervisor, Ann-Charlotte Palmgren, scholar and associate professor in gender and cultural studies, introduced me to this methodology called *poetic inquiry*, and I found that this method would work perfectly with my poetry and autoethnography, which would allow me to include an analysis of the material of my personal experiences.

After seeing the analysis on the page within the poetry and footnotes, it became clear that instead of having blog posts that included my analysis of the material as an appendix, it is more prudent to include the poetry within my written thesis so that the important analysis of my material would be front and centre and easy to access. Thus, with suggestions from my advisors, the planned section for blog posts was changed to the “Poetic Reflections” section. This revision seemed particularly appropriate because it put my poetry and analysis in its rightful place at the heart of the thesis rather than relegating it to an appendix. Although I have seen podcasts, blogposts, and other creative methods of analysis used effectively for theses, and I appreciate the myriad emerging ways that research and studies are being presented so that both academicians and mainstream readers can access and learn from research findings, the personal choice to use poetic inquiry felt most appropriate for my work.

As a result, I will present my research findings in the forms of (1) poetry, which includes analysis and is annotated, and (2) traditional academic writings. The poetry created from prose writings drawn from my diary is the material for my research using the methods of autoethnography and poetic inquiry as analysis. Academic and non-academic texts are utilised, cited, and referenced in my research for both the poetry as well as the research presented in the traditional text format. This thesis serves an academic discussion

where academic writings are paired with materials created for a more mainstream audience in an effort to present research about one of many perspectives of being a Black woman (my own) as well as Black women's experiences in general.

The poems themselves can be considered as analysis, but additional analysis is shared within footnotes throughout the poems. I have tried to do research using theory and methods that are insightful and appealing for an audience to engage with the material presented in this thesis.

2. Theory, Approach, and Earlier Research

This study aims to examine the phenomena of Black women’s joy—what it is, why it matters, and how it is helpful in resisting oppression, including racism, sexism, and social exclusion. To achieve this outcome of the thesis, I am utilising *social exclusion theory*. Social exclusion is a process, not only the condition reflecting the outcome of that process. At any one time, people are situated on a multidimensional continuum and may be moving towards inclusion in one or another sense, or towards a state of comprehensive, cumulative social rupture. This process has been labelled social “disaffiliation” or “disqualification,” among other terms, and encompasses humiliation as well as social isolation (Silver 2007, 2). I am utilising *feminist affect theory* as it is an exchange of ideas exploring questions such as “who introduces what feelings to whom?” (Mosley 2022). It also explores emotions using the language of affect along with theory regarding individuals and communities while living together in society as a whole and in relationship with one another (Ahmed 2010b, 29). These theories aid immensely in presenting a theoretical framework with the aim of inquiry into Black women’s joy as resistance, what it is and why it matters.

I am utilising *intersectionality* as an *approach* rather than a theory as Kimberlé Crenshaw, scholar of critical race theory and civil rights advocate, perceived it, as it fits well in analysing the diverse forms of systemic harm and injustice that Black women endure (Crenshaw 1991, 1243). The often unrecognised and unique experience of Black women must be reiterated as the oppression and dangers that they face occur at the intersection of sexism and racism (Coles and Pasek 2020, 1–2).

According to communications scholars Stewart M. Coles and Josh Pasek, intersectionality “allows us to examine how systems of power and oppression (e.g., racism, sexism) co-construct each other to create complex and unique forms of systemic harm and injustice” (Coles and Pasek 2020, 1). The term intersectionality was originally conceived by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. Crenshaw created language and vocabulary to capture the multilayered and multidimensional aspects of the diverse and particular forms of social

inequality and injustice as well as the way they intersect, overlap, and interact (Crenshaw 1991, 1243).

The often unrecognised and unique experience of Black women must be reiterated as the oppression and dangers that they face occur at the intersection of sexism and racism. Their experience is an intersectional invisibility. That is, because they inhabit a space at an intersection, Black women themselves and their needs go unaddressed as if they and their unique experience are invisible (Coles and Pasek 2020, 2). A more nuanced differentiation is that Black women are viewed as being less similar to women in general because the prototypical woman is a White woman. When viewed as less similar to what the idea of a woman is, Black women get erased through a masculinization because ideals of femininity centre on Whiteness (Coles and Pasek 2020, 3).

Black women are further erased when discussions on sexism centre on the perspectives of White women and discussions of racism centre on issues associated with Black men because the prototypical Black person is a Black man. It is the result of dual gender and racial marginalisation in such instances that Black women are often rendered invisible. The intersectional invisibility leads to Black women's exclusion and erasure from the single-focus groups at the centre of feminist and antiracism movements (Coles and Pasek 2020, 3). Oppression first occurs in racist and sexist ways via a white supremacist, patriarchal, and capitalist culture, and a revictimization occurs to Black women due to the neglect they encounter by feminist and antiracist movements designed to push back on sexist and racist practices and agendas (Coles and Pasek 2020, 3). Patricia Hill Collins, scholar of African American studies and feminist sociology, shares that intersectionality is about interconnected stories that come from various and diverse histories. It is more than about an identity category (Hill Collins 2019, 23–24).

Lastly, I will utilise *symbolic interactionism*, a sociological theory that describes how individuals interact and behave in relationship based on the shared understanding of language, symbols, and meaning, and *social constructivism*, a sociological theory of knowledge where people construct their realities—meaning the ways that people live,

behave, and believe in society are constructions rather than reality. These theories are helpful additions in efforts to usher in equality and to fight against racism and sexism.

2.1. Social Exclusion Theory

Social exclusion is a process, not only the condition reflecting the outcome of that process. At any one time, people are situated on a multidimensional continuum and may be moving towards inclusion in one or another sense, or towards a state of comprehensive, cumulative social rupture. This process has been labelled social “disaffiliation” or “disqualification,” among other terms, and encompasses humiliation as well as social isolation (Silver 2007, 2).

The idea of social exclusion is that the socially excluded are prevented from fully participating in society. It can also mean that resources that are pertinent for living are difficult to attain or are withheld from them completely. Individuals and communities that are not fully included in the fabric of society are indeed socially excluded. Such non-inclusion can, and often does, lead to emotional, economical, mental, and physical dis-ease (Silver 2007, 2). To better understand the phenomenon of social exclusion, it is important to understand the social, cultural, and psychological effects of social exclusion and its political components as well (Alemanji 2022, 4).

Aminkeng A. Alemanji (2022), head of the social exclusion masters programme at Åbo Akademi University and researcher on issues of race, racism, antiracism, writes in the book *Contemporary Discourses in Social Exclusion*, that social restructuring, which is emerging as result of globalisation and international integration, has created a multitude of exclusions, including a social exclusion that deeply affects the personal experiences of individuals, communities, and groups and how they live in the world. In the foreword, Peter Nynäs (2022, vi), dean of the faculty of arts, psychology, and theology at Åbo Akademi University, writes about the importance of “turning and giving voice to lived experience,” and that it takes a “multivocal co-solving” and “new forms of collaboration” in regard to new perspectives needed in educational practices and research about social exclusion. This

insight and idea also would serve the work of anti-racism and feminism well. The idea of “turning and giving voice to lived experiences” of the socially excluded and working collectively to address the issues involved will go a long way not only toward diminishing the reality and impact of social exclusion, but also toward increasing wellbeing and joy.

Hilary Silver, professor of sociology, international affairs, and public policy and administration, writes that social exclusion is about who is in and who is out (Silver 2007, 2). I have stated in another area of my research that joy is not a white luxury. It feels good in Black bodies too. Black women are refusing to be left out of being well and knowing joy. Silver also writes about the importance of empowerment and how the socially excluded are involved in efforts to create more space for themselves to live free of injustice and oppression (Silver 2007, 3). This speaks to the way that Black women are vulnerable and courageous, saying what happens to them in everyday life living as Black women, making space for themselves that allows them to breathe more deeply and to live more freely. In their refusal to stay in the place allotted to them at the margins of societies, they create more space to not only exist but to flourish.

Oppressive and unjust behaviours are not unusual in a society that is non-inclusive of individuals, groups, and communities. This quite often includes sexist and racist practices. The multidimensional aspect of social exclusion includes connections between “dimensions of disadvantage,” causing a more extensive exclusion. When economic opportunities are fenced off, this affects not only income levels, but also emotional and mental health can be negatively affected. Such situations with linked difficult experiences can lead to “downward and vicious cycles” in terms of emotional, mental, and physical wellbeing (Silver 2007, 12).

Social isolation and a prevention from social inclusion involves a relationship between excluders and the excluded. Those who actively practice non-inclusion not only push away others socially but also in matters regarding the structural systemic makeup of a society. Quite often the socially excluded withdraw from society due to hostile or negative treatment. With an understanding of such a situation, Silver emphasises the importance of

“participation in one’s own inclusion” and to fight against and resist social exclusion. There is a deep necessity for the empowerment of the socially excluded (Silver 2007, 3). Systemic exclusion is embedded in social relations and extends out to policy and institutional practices (Silver 2007, 2).

2.2. Feminist Affect Theory

In *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*, feminist writer and activist adrienne maree brown (2019, 41) expresses that in life she experiences pleasure in being Black, and she loves Black joy and working toward Black liberation. She writes, “I love Black Girl Magic, an unapologetic glee at ways in which Black girls and women subvert white supremacy and the dominant culture with a coolness and abundance in pleasures they have constructed from dreams and thin air.”

Sara Ahmed (2010b, 29) offers in her book, *Happy Objects*, an approach to thinking about the idea of affect as “sticky”—that is, what sticks or what sustains and preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects with the idea of exploring emotions using the language of affect. It is a consideration of the movement between experience and affect regarding subjects.

In his article “‘What Feels More Than Feeling?’: Theorizing the Unthinkability of Black Affect,” Tyrone Palmer (2017, 33–34), whose teaching and research concerns Black critical thought, poetics, and negativity, writes about an “affective turn” and theorises about “the centrality affect” in relation to the critical theory of affect, which is connected to folks’ emotions and feelings while living together in society as a whole and in relationship with one another.

The idea of “affective turn,” coined by Patricia Clough, professor of sociology and women’s studies, explores questions of positive affect and the politics of feeling good. That is, it researches good feelings as a starting point since extensive work has already been done investigating “bad feelings in recent cultural studies.” (Ahmed 2010b, 29–30)

Affect theory, “feminist’s little darling” (Ahmed 2010b, 30), is set apart from prior theories with the exchange of ideas exploring questions such as “who introduces what feelings to whom?” as affect is a “transcendent force” that moves beyond the surface of the body. Affect theory is a turning to look beyond the “surface-boundedness” of bodies and not be influenced by “surface things” (Mosley 2022).

There are many scholars that take issue with affect theory for various reasons. However, little has been written about affect theory as it relates to Black women, and of the little that has been written, nearly all the criticism is negative and quite fervent. Affect theory in connection to Black women is thought to be white and racist. It is said to be deafeningly silent regarding the racism that Black women experience (Palmer 2017, 35). Though affect theory is said to speak to “relation across popular theories of affect,” Black women and Black feminist scholars are, for the most part, not included in the work. Affect theory is thought to have “closed ranks around whiteness,” abandoning theories of racialised affect (Mosley 2022).

The particular experiences of Blackness expose the weakness in the argument of the universality of affect as a “mode of sociality,” revealing the racism in connection to affect theory. Black affective responses are thought to be signs of pathology in society. It is a racial violence that negates Black emotions and more than falls short in research about “how it feels to live under constant erasure” (Palmer 2017, 39–40).

With this profound and crucial information, I was surprised by my own attraction to the ideas of affect theory. In connection, in *Happy Objects*, Ahmed (2010b, 30) places the feminist killjoy alongside the angry Black woman, meaning the angry Black woman is often thought of as a killjoy. She even spoils feminist joy by pointing out forms of racism in feminist politics, disturbing the promise of “happiness” in the contentment found with feminism’s “little darling,” affect theory.

The general ideas of affect theory appeal to me, but the shortcomings and crucial failings of its practice or application remind me of the numerous and important blind spots and failings of the first waves of feminism and anti-racist work. Both forms of activism

“forgot” or simply deemed it not important enough to consider the unique experiences of Black women regarding sexism and racism—that is, the multi-layered oppression they endure. Although feminism and anti-racism have evolved and grown positively over time and the movements are in a far better place than they were decades ago, there is a great deal of progress that still needs to happen in terms of addressing the needs of Black women. I hope and expect that the work of affect theory will also improve and simply do better to help with in the vital resistance against oppression and social exclusion with appropriate attention given to research that is inclusive of Black women. Where affect theory is concerned, let’s not necessarily throw the baby out with the bath water. There is ample room for improvement with such a “little darling” of an idea.

3. Method and Material

In connection to my utilisation of poetic inquiry as a method, I have chosen to write three autoethnographical poems as my material reflecting my experience as a Black woman and international student in Finland. Autoethnography enables me to use a critical lens to help make sense of personal experiences in connection to a wider cultural context (Holman Jones 2016, 229).

3.1. Autoethnography

When the autoethnographic scholar, griot, and dancer Allison Upshaw tells *herstory* of a teenage cousin who began to sexually abuse her around the age of three or four years old, it is indeed a heart-breaking illustration of the “stories of precariously vulnerable lives.” Upshaw’s performative approach of “braiding” various arts-based research methods—such as autoethnography, Black feminist theory, and performance—assists her in her “embodied inquiry.” For example, when she uses her body in dance, it helps her to get in touch with her body and helps her to remember what happened to her when she was three or four years old. As she says, her body knows things (Upshaw 2017, 55).

Autoethnography is a research, writing, and storied method of self-analysis that connects the personal, cultural, social, and political. It is a research method involving studying and writing about culture from the perspective of the self, describing the personal experiences and cultural dynamics as individual encounters. Autoethnography is turning an ethnographic gaze inward on the self, while simultaneously looking outward at the larger context of a cultural analysis through personal narrative. It uses a critical lens to help make sense of personal experiences in connection to a wider cultural context (Adams 2013, 72). Self-reflection and sharing personal experiences are necessary and intrinsic in autoethnography. It takes courage to be honest and open when sharing personal experiences. Such vulnerability can guide one closer to how one wants to be in the world and how one wants to live (Adams 2013, 10). Autoethnography provides a way to “examine personal

experiences from one particular perspective while not claiming the entirety of viewpoints” (Varela 2022, 181). Telling personal stories along with investigation into societal behaviour helps to make clear the ways of society as well as personal experiences within society. Autoethnography encourages an examination of our lives as well as how “we think, act, and feel” (Adams 2013, 10). Personal experience along with cultural practices are to be examined and critiqued (Adams 2013, 22). Autoethnography “helps to diminish silence and carves out space for people and their stories” (Adams 2013, 23). As we reconsider our ways of being, it is an inspiration to re-create all that does not provide a sense of wellbeing. In the process, it “seeks a story” that is hopeful, where autoethnographers creatively reposition themselves in joy and the energy it brings, which allows for the love and care for others (Adams 2013, 10). It is a rigorous and courageous research method with the aim for a more just and joyous existence for the personal as well as for society as a whole.

The reason I chose the methodology of autoethnography as a means to explore my research topic, Black women’s joy, was because autoethnography enables me to reflect on my own experiences as I endeavour to research the phenomena of Black women’s joy—what it is, why it matters, and how it is helpful in resisting oppression, including racism, sexism, and social exclusion. Just as important, the hope is that in doing the research there is a commitment to improving one’s own life and the lives of others. The desire for the research and the use of autoethnography quite often begins because of personal experiences that one wants to understand more fully with the aim of initiating personal and societal change (Adams 2013, 22).

We tell our stories to live, according to Stacy Holman Jones, professor of critical theatre performance who specialises in innovative and critical arts-based methodologies for her feminist and gender and sexualities research. They are a way to understand, theorise, know, and work toward positive change. By placing personal stories, insights, and knowledge into larger contexts, autoethnography allows for research and analysis that lead toward personal and society growth (Holman Jones 2016, 230). From Holman Jones’s narrative and writing regarding her relationship with her father, we learn that autoethnography

can also be queer. She writes about how “queer stories shadow and haunt accounts of what is valid, normal, and right.” According to Holman Jones, linking the lessons of personal experience with the intellectual and political commitments of queer theory and queering practices create bridges between the analytical, practical, and aesthetic modes of inquiry and representation (Holman Jones 2016, 232).

Autoethnography is a method that speaks to the assertion that the personal is political, and it is performative as it is committed to the future—that is, it works toward positive change (Adams 2013, 72). It apprises the reader of particular embodied experiences as it is a method of self-analysis used to connect the personal, cultural, social, and political. It also helps immensely in my own writing from the perspective of the self because in describing my personal experiences and the cultural dynamics I encounter via poetry, autoethnography allows me to use my diary entries as my material for analysis in my research.

3.2. Diary as Material

The materials for this master’s thesis are diary entries that have been transformed into a suite of poetry that I have created using the method of poetic inquiry. The poems have been created by extracting writings from my own prose writings, which were personal experiences and reflections drawn from my diary entries. My goal is to capture in poetry the often complex and nuanced experiences that come from daily living as a Black woman. Quite often, poetry provides an opportunity to express what can be difficult to write in prose form. The creative nature of poetry serves the recording of oppressive experiences well. Yes, it is possible to say what happened from beginning to end; however, poetry and poetic prose are ideal for sharing information involving emotions and feelings because such experiences are not always easy to communicate.

I have kept a diary for many years. The entries over the years were more so to capture memories and experiences to appreciate and revisit at various times in life. I began to notice that my new experiences of living in Finland were an account of difficult and traumatic experiences, not recollections of the common and normal experiences of the ups

and downs in life. In my diary it was hard to miss the daily painful and stressful encounters that were often recorded on a daily basis of my life in Finland without pause. I found moments of relief and space for breathing when I made the decision to stay “safe” inside of my student apartment unless it was for either *unmissable* activities like going to class or the grocery store, or to find refuge at a friend’s home or simply traveling outside of Finland all together. At the onset of the Christmas break and holiday in 2022, I travelled to Barcelona for a few days to see beauty and to feel normal. In Barcelona, I woke up and went for walks at sunrise before having my morning tea and breakfast. Unlike in Finland, no one acted hostile toward me as I walked down the streets or entered dining areas, and if I got lost, my requests for directions from passersby were answered without ignoring my existence. No security person stopped me in the Barcelona airport café while I was having a cup of tea to ask for my passport to ensure that I have permission to be in Europe, although that has happened to me twice at Helsinki-Vantaa Airport. The freedom of movement in Finland is limited and policed for people with brown skin. I have written it all down in my diary and have used it as knowledge production and material in my research of Black women’s joy and why it matters as resistance against sexism, racism, and social exclusion.

3.3 Poetic Inquiry

“Qualitative social researchers are only just beginning to realise the potential of poetry, which uniquely conveys and evokes emotion in a way that enables people to viscerally experience the issues.”

—QUT Creative Industries, Education and Social Justice

The Queensland University of Technology website for “Creative Industries, Education and Social Justice” (2023) states, as iterated in the above quote, that the use of poetry is an effective way to capture unique experiences that can be used as material in qualitative research. Coming to this valuable possibility and understanding is a new phenomenon. Poetry

or poetic-like prose is an ideal method for writing, transcribing, and researching material for qualitative analysis.

Presently, poetic inquiry—documenting the importance and impact of research in the form of poetry—is an emerging method of research and knowledge production. In this study, I utilise the method of poetic inquiry by writing three poems about my personal lived experiences as an international student in Finland. These poems are adapted from prose entries drawn from my diary. Poetic inquiry allows for the unique language of poetry to capture an intimate picture of my world. In this autoethnographical study, I recall experiences and create poems from those memories. This is phenomenological research, a qualitative research approach that seeks to understand and describe the essence of Black joy, while simultaneously providing insight into the painful lived experiences that inform a desire for joy and why it matters.

I made the creative choice of writing poetry as knowledge production for analysis in order to capture personal experiences that otherwise may not easily be written about via prose. Poetry has a way of encapsulating nuanced and “sticky” situations that escape everyday language. The creative way that oppression presents itself can be illustrated in poetry in ways that might not fit so easily into prose writing. In my research into why Black women’s joy matters as a reflective approach, poetry can encapsulate distinctive opportunities for illuminating and sharing particular experiences that are not so easily conveyed. Although some people may think that poetry is difficult to understand, it actually can help to simplify and clarify experiences and ideas that are complex and multilayered (Palmgren 2023, 14).

Writing itself is a method inquiry as it helps to bring understanding of expressions of embodied experiences. Autoethnographic poetry is a reflective autoethnographic form of writing that can be analysed in research. The metaphors in poetry assist in conveying particular experiences that are not so easily captured in prose writing (Palmgren 2023, 14).

The description and interpretation of poetry and writing include theoretical frameworks and theory as analytical tools. Poetic inquiry and analytical practices help bring

understanding in attempts to share embodied experiences. The poetic form and its unique possibilities help to capture and convey experiences—those of the researcher and other Black women—enabling a conveyance of something that is difficult to express in the same way or to the same extent through other forms of inquiry.

In the poems, I combine the concepts of social exclusion, Black feminism, intersectionality, and affect theory, and poetic inquiry to investigate my own embodied experiences of sexism, racism, and social exclusion in my methodological discussion.

4. Three Poems as Analysis Through Poetic Inquiry

4.1. The Affect of a Killjoy



Waterbearer, by Lorna Simpson

there can be no healing
in silence.¹
when a black woman is silent, still,
she exists in an anti-black world,
set up to ensure
she does not breathe too deeply.²

Oh, what a radical act—
choosing joy and
making the great refusal
to reside in the place

-
1. As feminist Audre Lorde (1997, 255–256) writes, “and when we speak we are afraid / our words will not be heard / nor welcomed / but when we are silent / we are still afraid / So it is better to speak / remembering / we were never meant to survive.” There can be no healing in silence. Courageous testimony and naming the pain are essential. It is “a litany for survival.”
 2. Despite existing in an anti-Black and sexist world, Black women choosing to live with joy is a radical act (Joseph 2020).

society suggests she inhabit,
at the bottom of everything.³

Oh, complaint! Oh, what a killjoy!
speaking unwelcomed words,⁴
refusing not only to survive,
but to thrive, to flourish,
to bloom where she is.

“they asked her to tell what happened,
only to discount her memory,”⁵
a testimonial injustice.⁶

still, black women continue to transform,
inspiring a change in society,
pushing back on sexism,
refusing racism,

-
3. Black women live in a society that makes it extremely difficult for them to be well. A rejection of this reality exposes an unacceptable model for them to pattern their lives after. They collectively and individually challenge the social exclusion that mires their everyday lives by incrementally breaking free from the ways their reality is defined and shaped by the dominant culture, creating a reality for themselves that is nourishing, comforting, and infused with wellbeing and joy. By remembering their autonomy and the power they possess within, they are shifting to a place that better serves who they are. It is a refusal of the position that has been reserved for them as “mules of the world” (hooks 2015, 7–8; Silver 2007, 3).
 4. Sara Ahmed introduces the idea of the feminist killjoy alongside Black women in her article titled “Happy Objects,” meaning Black women are often thought of as killjoys. They can even spoil feminist joy by pointing out forms of racism in feminist politics, disturbing the promise of “happiness” in the contentment found with feminism’s “little darling,” affect theory (Ahmed 2010, 30).
 5. The complete three-line poem associated with the photograph titled *Waterbearer* on the previous page by photographer and multimedia artist Lorna Simpson (1986) is: “She saw him disappear by the river / They asked her to tell what happened / Only to discount her memory.”
 6. Philosopher Miranda Fricker (2007, 91) aims to highlight the way that hearers are prejudiced when speakers share their knowledge—a testimonial injustice, an injustice that is not unusual for individuals to be influenced by prejudices in connection to history, blame, and moral disappointment.

and other oppressive -isms⁷

naming the monsters,
naming the pain,
full of desire to recover
and to find room to breathe,
to heal.⁸

affecting a nourishing reality
infused with well-being,
this is a black woman's joy⁹
fashioned out of thin air
by speaking her truth
and standing her ground.

telling her story
and exposing her heart,
with a dedication to wellness
and self-recovery, this is

-
7. It is an understandable desire to want to overcome suffering, and in addition to calling out oppressions like sexism and racism, recovering from pain speaks to the desire to get to joy. Paradoxically, distasteful, or awful events may lead to a process of transformation (Ahmed 2010a, 216).
 8. Loneliness, estrangement, fear, and anxiety contribute to the daily suffering of Black women when they share the truth about their lives. Naming the monsters, naming the pain, helps with healing. In their desire to recover and to find room to breathe, it helps to see clearly everything that causes their pain—to revisit the pain in order to try to understand the diverse ways that oppression operates and causes dis-ease (Cameron 2016, 30).
 9. Black women live in a society that makes it extremely difficult for them to be well. A rejection of this reality exposes an unacceptable model for them to pattern their lives after. They collectively and individually challenge the social exclusion that mires their everyday lives by incrementally breaking free from the ways their reality is defined and shaped by the dominant culture, creating a reality for themselves that is nourishing, comforting, and infused with wellbeing and joy (hooks 2015, 7–8; Crable 2009, 946; Leeds-Hurwitz 2009, 892).

a “rigorous loving”¹⁰
there can be no healing
in silence.¹¹

-
10. With self-recovery, a road can emerge that leads Black women back to themselves, to a place where they knew peace and love before they fell into the place reserved for them by society at the bottom of everything. A commitment to truth reminds Black women of themselves and focusing on the needs of their spirits engages a dedication to wellness. This is a “rigorous loving” (hooks 2015, 19).
 11. There can be no healing in silence. Courageous testimony and naming the pain are essential. It is, as the title of Audre Lorde’s poem puts it, “a litany for survival.” The repressive dominant culture relies on lying to maintain itself, and such a culture is contingent on Black people not being well. Choosing to be well and whole, to be anti-racist and anti-sexist, and to be joyful are acts of resistance in an unjust culture (Lorde 1997, 255–256; Fricker 2007, 91).

4.2. Heavenly Creatures and the Politics of Feeling Good



Réseau Canopé by visual artist and activist Kara Walker.

passionate about reclaiming themselves
bit by bit and piece by piece,¹
black women desire joy
and all the emotions
that gather under its name:
happiness, gratitude, delight, pleasure,
bliss.²
black women now
are agents of transformation.

-
1. As Kara Walker said in her feminist artist statement on the Brooklyn Museum website, “I find that I am rewriting history, trying to make it resemble me, Kara (and me, negress) but doing it in little bits and pieces. It’s a monomaniacal undertaking, but there is a lot of (white, patriarchal) damage to undo” (Walker).
 2. It is an understandable desire to want to overcome suffering, and in addition to calling out oppressions like sexism and racism, recovering from pain speaks to the desire to get to joy and the diverse emotions that gather under its name, such as happiness, gratitude, delight, pleasure, and bliss (brown 2019, 68; Ahmed 2010a, 216).

difficult and painful experiences
are an invitation
to joy,
and that joy
is inviolable, intentional.³

in *Promise of Happiness*,
Ahmed asks, who better to lead the process
of such a transformation
than she who has already been
“cracked up a bit”?⁴

black women are on the mend,
healing brokenness, making space
for joy.
very much like the Japanese art of *kintsugi*,
in which broken ceramics are mended
with gold dust infused lacquer,
thus beautifully highlighting and accentuating
the cracks,
not trying to hide them.⁵

-
3. What remains remarkable is that the loss of joy through disappointment and suffering highlights painful experiences, which can heighten the capacity for one to act. If left to live, the pain and suffering can be the impetus for the quest and process for overcoming painful experiences (brown 2019, 68).
 4. In *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed (2010a, 207) asks, who is better to lead the process of such a transformation than those who have already been “cracked up a bit”? Those who have suffered pain and injury may be ideal for instigating a healing and transformation toward joy.
 5. This can be very much like the Japanese art of *kintsugi*, in which broken ceramics are mended with lacquer mixed with gold dust, thus beautifully highlighting the cracks rather than trying to hide them. Black women are on the mend, working to heal the brokenness with joy and all that comes with it. Those who have been undone by suffering can be the agents of transformation.

when affecting joy is the focus
the process is like opening a window,
letting in fresh air
and creating more space
to breathe.⁶

joy shows what is desirable,
where contentment can be found,
and where there is freedom and space to flourish.
immense joy and pleasure have their own momentum
for both the personal and political.
movement from oppression to joy
is powered by the energy
brought by joy.⁷

weaving a tapestry of joy
reduces the space available
for suffering and self-negation.
joy begets pleasure,
signalling that black women
are on the right path
and in the right place.⁸

-
6. When joy becomes desirable, it is a window that can be an opening, providing more space to breathe on the way to transcending negative experiences. “If we aim for joy, we aim to move beyond pain” (brown 2019, 69).
 7. Ahmed (2010a, 199) refers to the word “happiness” as a “hopeful performative,” or something that bestows an affect, as the word itself is full of feeling. Speaking of happiness has its own energy as it creates a desire for joy. It can be a reminder of the promise of happiness and wellbeing.
 8. Happiness speaks to Black women’s desires and signals what they want and need. The desire for happiness is a placeholder for where their desires can lead them. It is akin to a marked path guiding the way, revealing what they are inclined toward and how to live well. To get to happiness is also a way to reach their potential. If Black women are happy, then they are well. Happiness can also show when others are doing well—when, individually and collectively, Black women are flourishing. The associations between joy, wellness, and flourishing are powerful (brown 2019, 69).

joy is not a white luxury.
it can feel at home
in a black woman's body!
and it does because
"sometimes the night wakes in the
middle of her,
and she can do nothing
but
become the moon."⁹

-
9. This quote from *Salt*, Nayyirah Waheed's self-published book of poems (2013), speaks to me because it illustrates the way Black women are transformed by their experiences. Sometimes the difficulty and pain that Black women endure can be transformed into positive outcomes, much like the dramatic transformation a caterpillar undergoes on its way to becoming a butterfly.

4.3. Black Girl Magic



Photo by poet Nayyirah Waheed (2013).

*
**

sometimes a black girl in Finland comes from
brooklyn, far from Somalia or Ghana . . .
misplaced in europe,
same as in the u.s.a.

like strange fruit in between worlds,
navigating a painful nonbelonging
when brown skin
affects distancing that chills¹
like a cold winter's day—it feels as if
winter is always coming
in Finland.

1. *Feminist affect theory* is an exchange of ideas exploring questions such as “who introduces what feelings to whom?” (Mosley 2022).

in isolation, seclusion, steered toward
keeping her own company,
a steadiness that begins in her heartbeat during
wintry dark days becomes
rhythmic music soothing
and accompanying
her through.²

in a new land, her self-love blossoms,
and the cool isolation is an inspiration
to discover the Joy in herself.³
this Joy is quiet
like an overnight snowfall
softly landing in delight, in pleasure,
in silence, in loneliness,
ushering in a midsummer's
kind of light.

a black girl's Joy can, quite naturally,
be a superpower—black girl magic;
saying no to oppression and to being
at the bottom of everything;
the great refusal—
diminishing white supremacy.

-
2. This part of the poem is inspired by the following text by writer and public speaker Austin Channing Brown (2021, 20): “Darkest depths of human evil cannot snuff out the Black experience of joy—of laughter or love, of good food and good conversation, of family legacy and hope for the future, of creative endeavour and pursuit of justice. The joy of Blackness persists.”
 3. Looking at the issues of racism and sexism through the lens of social exclusion illustrates the social exclusion that Black women experience. In connection, exploring Black pain helps to inform the profound phenomenon of Black Joy and the power that it brings as resistance (Alemanji 2022, 4; and Burke and Brown 2021, xii).

she does this with a coolness
constructed from dreams,
from aspirations
drawn out of thin air, inspiring liberation,
carving out breathing room for the personal,
for the communal yes
to Joy.⁴

a black woman's tool for decolonisation⁵
is her fierce, radical imagination,
claiming her right to shape her own reality
declaring "some of us are brave,"⁶ courageous,
defining herself for herself,
anointed with Joy,
she generates an abundant power
infused with desire for liberation,
for justice.

her Joy decolonises—it teaches differently
that black women are deserving
of being in the thick of Love,
in the midst of human everything!

-
4. adrienne maree brown (2019, 68) writes, "I love Black Girl Magic, an unapologetic glee at ways in which Black girls and women subvert white supremacy and the dominant culture with a coolness and abundance in pleasures they have constructed from dreams and thin air."
 5. In trying to understand the more nuanced oppression of racism, the unique oppression faced by Black women (due to intersectionality) needs to be understood as well because equality cannot be achieved if any woman, especially those who are oppressed and impoverished, are left out of the conversation (Jones 1949, 2; Coles 2020; Hill Collins 2019, 23–24).
 6. The often unrecognized and unique experience of Black women must be reiterated as the oppression and dangers that they face occur at the intersection of sexism and racism. Their experience is an intersectional invisibility. That is, because they inhabit a space at an intersection, Black women themselves and their needs go unaddressed as if they and their unique experience are invisible (Crenshaw 1991, 1243; Hills Collins 2019, 23–24).

this is her magical feat, guided by the penned words
of Audre Lorde and bell hooks
from Sister Outsider to
Sisters of the Yam.⁷

moving toward her own yes,
her own satisfaction,
her own pleasure and delight,
and the promise of Joy!

her Joy feels good,
a goddess's Joy
making irresistible care for others,
looking after one another,
and belonging
to each other in Joy
—in Love.⁸

it's a lot, and it's enough.

Joy, sometimes, can also be still, quiet.
sure, exuberance and bliss
have their place, thankfully,

-
7. Leaning into joy comes with fear and an uneasiness, but it is a risk worth taking because the rewards are enormous. As writer and feminist bell hooks stated, the opposite of the lovelessness at the root of white supremacy and patriarchy is love (Burke and Brown 2021). This could be expanded to say that the answer to the lovelessness inherent in all forms of oppression and social exclusion is love and joy.
 8. How do we cease surrendering our imagination to worlds constructed by Western colonialist imaginations? In his book, *After Whiteness*, theologian Willie James Jennings advises that we release ourselves from the restraints of whiteness and turn back toward divine desire. We can live in a new way where we belong to one another, and we linger together (Jennings 2020, 151; Crable 2009; Leeds-Hurwitz 2009).

but so does a kind of peace⁹ that feels like it stretches
across the vast Finnish landscape
and the surrounding seas.

Joy is a freedom that reminds her of who she is
with a self-love that transcends borders.
the resistance is not only survival,
it's a delicate delight
as well.

ruskeat tytöt,¹⁰ bruna flickor, svarta kvinnor.
sometimes black girls in Finland
come from brooklyn.
imagine¹¹
brown girls, black women
once more with Love,
a Love without exclusion
a Joy born of resistance,¹²
and born within themselves,
way up

-
9. In her Oscar Award acceptance speech, Holocaust survivor Gerda Weissmann Klein (2008) said in reference to those who did not survive, “In my mind’s eye, I see . . . those who never lived to see the magic of a boring evening at home.” For some, the simple idea of joy may seem dull. Black women, however, are desperate in their endeavour for just such a sense of dullness. A safe and boring evening at home is an antecedent to the magic of joy.
 10. The blog *Ruskeat Tytöt* (<https://www.ruskeattytot.fi/>) was started in 2015 by Koko Hubara “for Brown Girls by Brown Girls.” As the website indicates, “Through [Hubara’s] blog and essay collection she coined the term ‘Ruskea’ (‘Brown’) in the Finnish context.”
 11. Negative experiences can be reimagined and utilised to transform what feels unbearable into something that can usher in joy. Unhappiness can make visible the barriers and borders that need to be traversed to get to happiness. “Unhappiness is not an endpoint. . . . Unhappiness gets us somewhere.” At such a stopping point, Black women can ask questions about what they want from life or what they want life to become (brown 2019, 68).
 12. In *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*, adrienne maree brown expresses that in life, she experiences pleasure in Black joy and working toward Black liberation (brown 2019, 41).

from the bottom of everything
in the midst of Joy and
full of Love!¹³

it's a lot, and it's enough.

13. Jennifer C. Nash (2013, 9–10), professor of gender, sexuality, and feminist studies, writes that the self-love that Black women have is a rebellious act. This love transforms. It moves from the personal to the political. It transcends the self and can become a change agent to transform society.

5. Concluding Discussion and Final Reflections

June 2022: Black Girl Magic and Black Women's Joy as Resistance — After having completed a colourless, cold, and sterile academic year abroad in Finland, I landed at JFK Airport upon my return home to New York City. I took the Long Island Rail Road from the airport to Penn Station, a straight shot to the heart of the city. Penn Station is almost always full of people coming and going in a hurry. With trains arriving and departing seemingly continuously, seconds matter. In the midst of the moving crowds at the station, I always pause there to figure out where the correct exit is. This usually makes a world of a difference for me so that I can avoid walking way further than necessary. Navigating through the station is an acquired skill and is essential if one is to traverse the space efficiently. When I return to the city, my goal is always to exit on the 7th Avenue side of the station and avoid exiting on the 8th Avenue side because my destination is to the east, and walking from 8th Avenue to 7th Avenue on 34th Street is not fun, especially with luggage in tow. It's a long hike full of swarms of people and dense traffic, and it's best to try to avoid this unnecessary, frustrating extra hurdle and to get to the right exit out of the station from the get-go.

On this trip, I succeeded in finding the 7th Avenue exit out of Penn Station and was preparing myself emotionally to dart through Manhattan and find my way home. Instead, I ran into a march celebrating Black women's bodies and protesting against the recent U.S. Supreme Court decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, which revoked the constitutional right to abortion in the United States. I was surprised to see a Black Girl Magic celebration, a movement that promotes unity among Black women, empowers a sense of self, and expresses Black women's and girls' resistance and determination to prevail against structural oppressions. This was not a part

of my mental list of obstacles that would need to be overcome on my way home.

Actually, the march was over, but I had stepped right into the euphoria of its afterglow, smack-dab in the middle of the disbursement of the participants. It was a joyful mess in which I found myself on a sweltering hot and sticky summer night in the city. It was a blessing, a baptism, an immersion in joy and jubilation. The women and girls were obviously continuing to enjoy the communal spirit of the gathering as they spilled out from the march and dispersed through the city along the streets, avenues, and sidewalks. Everywhere I walked, there were marchers full of joy and laughter beaming in their colourful fashions after the breakup of the event. Black women and girls also filled subway platforms to the brim and crowded shoulder to shoulder into subway cars.

I had just had an eight-hour flight and was dead tired, and *still* it was good to see all the jubilant faces. Friendship and affection were ubiquitous.

The jam-packed subway car that I was lucky enough to squeeze into with all my luggage felt as if we all might as well have been floating in air without a proper space to land our feet. The car was dense with people, and some individuals continuing their protest sported T-shirts that read “Bans Off Our Bodies” in response to the Supreme Court reversal of *Roe v. Wade*.

The colourful summer fashions, open displays of delight, and loud and joyous scene was in stark contrast to the silent, sterile, colourless, and emotionally cold space from which I’d liberated myself in Finland. Joy was in abundance all around me. The feeling I had in this magical and inspiring environment was as if glitter was everywhere making the buildings and sky seem to sparkle as I ascended from the subway. It was pure serendipity having landed among such a display of Black women’s joy upon my return home.

Very little has been written in academia about Black women's joy and why it matters. My research on this topic with the aim of exploring what Black joy is, why Black women's joy matters, and how it is helpful in resisting racism, sexism, and social exclusion has been studied through social exclusion, feminist affect theory, and the approach of intersectionality. The method and material I have used includes autoethnography, diary as material, and poetic inquiry. And analysis is shared via poetry with poetic inquiry as my material.

I have, for a long time, been attracted to Hilary Silver's "simplification" of social exclusion when she writes that social exclusion is about who is in and who is out. (Silver 2007, 2). Black women pushing back on sexist and racist practices and refusing to be left out of being well and knowing joy, can also be assisted by the theories of *symbolic interaction* and *social construction*. These ideas are an effective pairing with resisting oppression and social exclusion. The theory of Symbolic Interaction helps us to understand that there are ways of being in society that are "created and imagined through a communicative process." Human beings constructed the phenomena of racism and its realities through a forced or cooperative behaviour (Crabbe 2009, 946; Leeds-Hurwitz 2009, 892). How this construction affects the lives of Black women is unconscionable, as social exclusion sexism, and racism does indeed have an economic impact among other tangible harming outcomes. When Black women are prevented from fully participating in society, social exclusion and its harmful impact permeates their lives in nontangible ways as well, which includes their psychological, cultural, emotional, and social wellbeing (Alemanji 2022, 4).

I return to the theory of symbolic interaction as it provides a path to study the social life in the formation of identity and social reality, and that it is a mutual orientation. That what is known as a symbolic interaction is an acceptance of a role along with the coordination of the behaviours that go along with this mutual way of behaving in the world. (Crabbe 2009, 946) with the idea of no longer accepting a role as in the space relegated for Black women by racism and sexism, this disconnecting and disassociation from a societal idea of the place of Black women is a great refusal.

The theory of *Social Construction* also works well with efforts to diminish the intersectional oppression that Black women experience. Research through the lens of social construction theory reveals the phenomena of a mutual construction and understanding that the people involved, those in power and those relegated to the bottom of everything, participate in. That the construction of the oppressive realities that exist are the result of the people behaving and being in a way together. One without the other, what exists crumbles, the construction demolished (Leeds-Hurwitz 2009, 893). This tells me that Black women have the creativity, the power, and ability to dismantle these constructions and to no longer participate in the role constructed for them.

There is a story about training an elephant to be in submission all of its life. When the elephant is a baby, a rope is tied around its legs. As a baby it cannot break free of the rope. It does not have the strength. But as it grows it does not know its own strength and power, so with a rope around its leg it thinks that it is trapped (Himmelman 2014). With its coordinated behaviour, with its participation, it remains trapped. In essence, what it believes is a constructed reality. With the theories of symbolic interaction and social construction, an understanding emerges that the role-play can be altered to benefit those suffering under the violence of racism, sexism, and social exclusion (Crawley 2009, 947; and Leeds-Hurwitz 2009, 894).

Silver also writes about the importance of empowerment and how the socially excluded are involved in efforts to create more space for themselves to live free of injustice and oppression (Silver 2007, 3). This speaks to the way that Black women are vulnerable and courageous, saying what happens to them in everyday life living as Black women, making space for themselves that allows them to breathe more deeply and to live more freely. In their refusal to stay in the place allotted to them at the margins of societies, they create more space to not only exist but to flourish.

In continued efforts to diminish and eliminate the oppression that Black women experience, we return to the writings of Peter Nynäs in *Contemporary Discourses in Social Exclusion*, to add to resisting practices. Nynäs's idea of a "multivocal co-solving" and "new

forms of collaboration” regarding new perspectives needed in educational practices and research about social exclusion is a helpful addition to the work of anti-racism and feminism well. The idea of “turning and giving voice to lived experiences” of the socially excluded and working collectively to address the issues involved will go a long way not only toward diminishing the reality and impact of social exclusion, but also toward increasing wellbeing and joy for Black women.

Ask a woman why she uses exercise; she will answer because she desires to keep her health. If you then enquire, why she desires health, she will readily reply, because sickness is painful.

—Adapted from writings of Sara Ahmed

The above words adapted from the writings of Sara Ahmed speak to the phenomena of how recovering from pain is connected to the desire to get to joy and the diverse emotions that gather under its name, such as happiness, gratitude, delight, pleasure, and bliss. Unhappiness can be a feeling that inspires imaginative solutions to hurtful histories rather than just being something to overcome, and the desire to move beyond suffering speaks to a hunger for joy (brown 2019, 68). When joy becomes desirable, it is a window that can be an opening, providing more space to breathe on the way to transcending negative experiences. “If we aim for joy, we aim to move beyond pain.” “Unhappiness is not an endpoint. . . . Unhappiness gets us somewhere” (Ahmed 2010a, 216). At such a stopping point, Black women can ask questions about what they want from life or what they want life to become (brown 2019, 68).

BLACK WOMEN’S JOY AND WHY IT MATTERS (*REPRISE*)

a black girl’s Joy nourishes
all that she is and all
whom she loves.

it exposes her heart
and tells the truth—
it's a rigorous loving.

happiness, gratitude, delight, pleasure,
and bliss
create more space
to breathe.

why it matters?
Joy shows what is desirable,
where contentment can be found,
and where there is freedom and space to flourish.

immense Joy and pleasure have their own momentum
for both the personal and political.
movement from oppression
is powered by the energy
of Joy.

sometimes, black girl Joy is quiet,
softly landing in delight,
in pleasure,
in peace.

Joy is a freedom that reminds
her of who she is,
full of love
and
in the thick of love.

it's a lot, and it's enough.

The word “joy” is often used to signify an emotion that comes and goes. The idea of happiness cannot be far from joy, and it, too, is desirable. Joy may have similar effects

as happiness and can also lift Black women up, creating more room to breathe and providing space for wellbeing for themselves and the work they need to do for their community. What does joy do? Joy speaks to Black women's desires and signals what they want and need. The desire for happiness is a placeholder for where their desires can lead them. It is akin to a marked path guiding the way, revealing what they are inclined toward and how to live well. To get to happiness is also a way to reach their potential. If Black women are happy, then they are well. Happiness can also show when others are doing well—when, individually and collectively, Black women are flourishing. The associations between joy, wellness, and flourishing are powerful (Ahmed 2010a, 197–198).

Ahmed refers to the word “happiness” as a “hopeful performative,” or something that bestows an affect, as the word itself is full of feeling. Speaking of happiness has its own energy as it creates a desire for joy. It can be a reminder of the promise of happiness and wellbeing. Saying prayers, singing lullabies to soothe babies to sleep, and talking freely with friends over brunch are some examples of hopeful performative acts that people engage in that have their own energy and lead to the desired effect. Creating happiness might even be connected to sharing happiness. The word “happiness” brings happiness to others, much like affirmations create a habit of optimism that leads to the promise of wellbeing and joy. Words can bring positivity into existence; words can effect change (Ahmed 2010a, 199).

Hopeful salutations said to others without anxiety or much thought—like “so happy to meet you” or “have a nice day”—make space for desire to flourish. These casual greetings serve as containers filled with the hope and possibility of what can come, such as a lovely day or a friendship. They are objects of happiness, simple diverse human aspirations, on the path to joy. “Joy” suggests ease and comfort, warmth and safety. Granted, it can be a temporary feeling, here one moment and gone the next, that interrupts difficult narratives, but its sweetness can also be found in the promise of its return. Joy shows us what we desire and where we find contentment. Desire is revealed and confirmed in connection with the feeling of happiness (Ahmed 2010a, 202). What brings happiness, contentment, and joy

can be found in what is spoken, sung, or even whispered in prayers, or in deep breaths taken in gratitude, or in music or poetry.

Indeed, a gap exists in scholarly research on the theme of Black women's joy and why it matters. For my thesis project, my aim entailed researching Black women's joy and why it matters using the methods of autoethnography and poetic inquiry with hope that I may add to the emerging scholarship on these subjects. I expected to locate a substantial amount of research completed on Black women's joy, simply because I personally know the importance of joy when there is an abundance of pain, which the Black community often endures internationally. What surprised me is that it is profoundly important to also focus on Black pain in researching Black women's joy. I have learned that Black pain is still abundant and easily located not only in books and academic journals, but it also can be found without much effort in the hearts and bodies of Black woman. Not only can it be found in the next Black woman you encounter, if you are a Black woman reading these words the location may be within yourself. Black women live with the pain and heartache of being socially excluded in Finland, in Europe as a whole, certainly in the United States, and most likely wherever Black women reside. That said, not only does the pain inform the joy, but it just may also be the active ingredient in the mixture that makes up joy. The desperation to relieve the pain inspires a deep desire for something more nourishing, healthy, and enjoyable. If left to live, the pain and suffering can be the impetus for the quest and process for overcoming painful experiences (Ahmed 2010a, 214).

This is now at least one more academic text added to the sparse number of articles that I was able to locate in my hunt for research on Black women's joy. I look forward to adding more writing to the field as well as reading the much-needed writing that is welling up as the topic continues to grow and expand. Currently, this topic is expanding rapidly in non-academic circles. Examples of this are poet, essayist, and professor Ross Gay's beautiful writings in *The Book of Delights* and *Inciting Joy*. As the mainstream avenues continue to grow, I can easily imagine that the topic will gain traction in academia in the not-too-distant future.

6. References

- Adams, Tony E., et al., editors. 2013. *Handbook of Autoethnography*. Walnut Creek, California: Left Coast Press.
- Ahmed, Sara. 2010a. *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Ahmed, Sara. 2010b. "Happy Objects," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, edited by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth. Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 29–51.
- Alemanji, Aminkeng A. 2022. "Introduction to Contemporary Discourses in Social Exclusion," in *Contemporary Discourses in Social Exclusion*, Aminkeng A. Alemanji, et al., editors. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 1–12.
- brown, adrienne maree. 2019. *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*. Chico, Calif.: AK Press.
- Brown, Austin Channing. 2021. "This Joy I Have," in *You Are Your Best Thing: Vulnerability, Shame Resilience, and the Black Experience*, edited by Tarana Burke and Brené Brown. New York: Random House.
- Burke, Tarana, and Brené Brown. 2021. "Introduction," in *You Are Your Best Thing: Vulnerability, Shame Resilience, and the Black Experience*, edited by Tarana Burke and Brené Brown. New York: Random House.
- Cameron, Julia. 2016. *The Artist's Way*. New York: TarcherPerigee.
- Camp, Stephanie M. H. 2002. "The Pleasures of Resistance: Enslaved Women and Body Politics in the Plantation South, 1830–1861," *The Journal of Southern History*, vol. 68, no. 3, pp. 533–572. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3070158>.
- Castelin, Stephanie, and Grace White. 2022. "'I'm a Strong Independent Black Woman': The Strong Black Woman Schema and Mental Health in College-Aged Black Women," *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, vol. 46, no. 2, pp. 196–208. <https://doi.org/10.1177/03616843211067501>.
- Coles, Stewart M., and Josh Pasek. 2020. "Intersectional Invisibility Revisited: How Group Prototypes Lead to the Erasure and Exclusion of Black Women,"

- Translational Issues in Psychological Science* vol. 6, no. 4, pp. 314–324.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/tps0000256>.
- Crable, Bryan. 2009. “Symbolic Interactionism,” in *Encyclopedia of Communication Theory*, edited by Stephen W. Littlejohn and Karen A. Foss. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1991. “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6, pp. 1241–99. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>.
- Fricker, Miranda. 2007. *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Gerald, Casey. 2021. “Simone Biles and the Rise of the ‘Great Refusal,’” *The Guardian*, 28 July. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/jul/28/simone-biles-naomi-osaka-great-refusal-no>.
- Hill Collins, Patricia. 2019. *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press. <https://www.dukeupress.edu/intersectionality-as-critical-social-theory>.
- Himmelman, Peter. 2014. “Elephant Ropes, Our Continuing Attachment to Fear,” *The Huffington Post*, New York, New York.
- Holman Jones, Stacy. 2016. “Living Bodies of Thought: The ‘Critical’ in Critical Autoethnography,” *Qualitative Inquiry*, vol. 22, no. 4, April. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800415622509>.
- hooks, bell. 2015. *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery*. New York: Routledge.
- Jennings, Willie James. 2020. *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Jones, Claudia. 1949. “An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!,” *Political Affairs*, June.

- Joseph, Chanté. 2020. “What Black Joy Means—And Why It’s More Important Than Ever,” *British Vogue*, 29 July.
- Leeds-Hurwitz, Wendy. 2009. “Social Construction of Reality,” in *Encyclopedia of Communication Theory*, edited by Stephen W. Littlejohn and Karen A. Foss. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Lorde, Audre. 1997. “A Litany for Survival,” in *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, pp. 255–256.
- Mosley, William H., III. 2022. “Ecstatic Loneliness: Black Genders and the Politics of Affect in Mykki Blanco’s ‘Loner’,” *Feminist Theory*, vol. 23, no. 1, January. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14647001211062744>.
- Motro, Daphna, et al. 2022. “The ‘Angry Black Woman’ Stereotype at Work,” *Harvard Business Review*, January 31. <https://hbr.org/2022/01/the-angry-black-woman-stereotype-at-work>.
- Nash, Jennifer C. 2013. “Practicing Love: Black Feminism, Love-Politics, and Post-Intersectionality,” *Meridians*, vol. 11, no. 2, pp. 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.2979/meridians.11.2.1>.
- Nynäs, Peter. 2022. “Foreword,” in *Contemporary Discourses in Social Exclusion*, Aminkeng A. Alemanji, et al., editors. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. v–viii.
- Palmer, Tyrone S. 2017. “‘What Feels More Than Feeling?’: Theorizing the Unthinkability of Black Affect,” *Critical Ethnic Studies*, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 31–56. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.5749/jcritethnstud.3.2.0031>. Accessed 23 March 2023.
- Palmgren, Ann-Charlotte. 2023. “Your Roundabout in My Ear Lobe: Poetic Inquiry as Creative and Embodied Knowledge Production,” *Cultural Analysis*, vol. 21, no. 1, pp. 8–21. https://www.ocf.berkeley.edu/~culturalanalysis/volume21_1/vol21_1_Palmgren.html.

- Persaud, Christopher J., and Ashon Crawley. 2022. "On Black Queer Joy and the Digital," *Social Media + Society*, vol. 8, no. 2. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221107629>.
- QUT Creative Industries, Education and Social Justice (accessed 16 April 2023). "Poetic Inquiry: Creating Poems from Interviews with Residents," Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia. <https://research.qut.edu.au/iacp/research-methodology/poetic-inquiry/>.
- Silver, Hilary. 2007. *The Process of Social Exclusion: The Dynamics of an Evolving Concept*. London: Chronic Poverty Research Center, 1 October. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1087789> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1087789>.
- Upshaw, Allison. 2017. "My Body Knows Things: This Black Woman's Storied Theory in Performative Autoethnography," in *Doing Autoethnography*, by Sandra L. Pensoneau-Conway et al., editors. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, pp. 55–65. <https://brill.com/display/book/edcoll/9789463511582/BP000008.xml>.
- Varela, Jéssica Nogueira. 2022. "On the Shore: Autoethnography and Reflexivity from a Black Feminist and Decolonial Perspective," in *Investigating Cultures of Equality*, edited by Dorota Golańska et al. New York: Routledge, pp. 173–191.
- Waheed, Nayyirah. 2013. *Salt*. Self-published.
- Walker, Kara. "Feminist Artist Statement," Brooklyn Museum website. https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/about/feminist_art_base/kara-walker.
- Walker-Barnes, Chanequa. 2009. "The Burden of the Strong Black Woman," *Journal of Pastoral Theology*, 19:1, 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1179/jpt.2009.19.1.002>.
- Weissmann Klein, Gerda. 2008. "Memorable Oscar Acceptance Speech," *68th Annual Academy Awards*, February 24. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5zn-fPM4KS0>.
- Williams, Terrie M. 2008. *Black Pain: It Just Looks Like We're Not Hurting*. New York: Scribner.