

BLKS and Single Black Female: Joy within the Margin

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“Our living depends on our ability to conceptualize alternatives.”

~bell hooks, 1989

“Honesty and openness is always the foundation of insightful dialogue.”

~bell hooks, 1999

SBF 1: *Yes, you do. I hear you. From the looks of things, I will not be wed anytime soon. This is not the life either of us expected to have as little girls, and that's what hurts. Yes, we are fierce and brilliant and stylish, but deep down? We are just little black girls who want to find someone to make us feel like chocolate magic sunshine.*

~ Lisa B. Thompson, Single Black Female.

Single Black Female by Lisa B. Thompson is a two-person, two-act play about two Black women, “Single Black Female 1” (Sbf1) and “Single Black Female 2” (Sbf2) who recount their stories of joy and collective challenges of being a single Black middle-class female in the United States of Amerikkka.¹ Thompson creates a non-linear dialogic play using only two Black woman/femme bodies on stages to represent many different stories of love, oppression, and sisterhood throughout the entire sequence of theatrical events. *BLKS* by Aziza Barnes is a play that follows the lives of queer young Black girls being beautiful, Black, authentic, and choosing joy when the rainbow proved that its colors were not enough. Through the multisurfaced experiences of characters June, Octavia, and Imani, Aziza Barnes acknowledges that embodied trauma can be acknowledged. Yet, joy can be centered in this ninety-minute liminal theatrical space of cultural production of Black girl magic. I use these plays as examples to show the connection between Black women and femmes living within the margin and on the journey of

¹ I spell “America” as “Amerikkka” to acknowledge the active colonialism and genocide that Amerikkka is rooted in.

their erotic with different given circumstances while at different pivotal moments in their lives. Black women and femmes are not a monolith in reality, nor are they a monolith in plays.

The joy of Black women and femmes in embodied theatrical practices in productions is a beautiful, euphoric experience that requires the curiosity and imagination of the Black women and femmes involved in these productions to expand their creativity, to tune into their joy, their erotic, which is personal, and uplift their stories of radical joy while resisting the oppressive natures of the margin. This bold act of sharing narratives that do not focus solely on the trauma of Black women and femmes while also rejecting negative stereotypes is a radical act. I navigate the world as an artist-scholar rooted in truth and joy. I am an Afro-Indigenous femme on this bitter earth, embracing my ancestral birthright of joy within the margin. I use my voice to uplift myself and those within the collective of the margin and our individuality and personal erotic rooted in radical joy. This paper's language and flow must shift to adhere to their creative distillation to uplift the linear and non-linear worlds created by Aziza Barnes and Lisa B. Thompson. As Barnes and Thompson use their work to break the traditional narrative of theatrical engagement, I use the same tactics in this paper—breaking barriers between reader and author. I frame this paper as a conversation, an invitation, an offering to explore how joy can be explored in Black feminist plays. I embrace joy and root joy as the connection between lineage and the audience, and that is why I write the way I write: to connect to the reader. I turn to D. Soyini Madison, who, in her pedagogy, navigates some of their artistic practices within ethnographic methodologies, such as co-performative witnessing, to be a performer with the “others.” I enter the space as a performer with my others. To write otherwise would disrupt the spark that is alive within *BLKS* and *Single Black Female*. It would dishonor June, Imani, Octavia, SBF 1, and SBF 2. I invite you to experience the erotic within the margin, taking a deep breath in:

OCTAVIA: OH. FUCK. I FEEL IT! I FEEL IT ALL!²

And a deep breath out:

SBF 1 & SBF 2: (*in unison*) Come on in.³

Ceremony (Introduction)

First, I give honor to God, who created me to be unapologetically young, gifted, and Afro-Indigenous, for my genetic makeup on this bitter earth requires strength, courage, and joy. I

² Aziza Barnes, *BLKS* (Dramatists Play Service, Inc., 2020), 70.

³ Lisa B. Thompson, “Single Black Female,” in *Contemporary Plays by African American Women*, ed. Sandra Adell (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 173.

give honor and acknowledgment to my ancestors who, by choice and by circumstance, chose the sea and AmeriKKKa, while this land, though owned by birthright, constantly rebuked their blood. I honor my grandmas on my mother's and father's sides. My grandmothers, who died before I was born as if the earth foresaw a radical awakening if I were to know them and their stories told through their perspectives. I honor bell hooks, who fiercely reminds us of Black radical love; I honor Audre Lorde, who commands us to speak up and stand out; I honor Toni Morrison, who finds the bluest of our eyes to live beyond the stars which are the only thing greater than us. I honor all the Black women and femmes who found the rainbow and decided they were enough. I honor June, Imani, Octavia, Aziza Barnes, Sbf 1, Sbf 2, and Lisa B. Thompson for their vulnerability and for providing a liminal space for Black girl magic, Black women magic, and Black joy. I invite you, the reader, to select one or more of the Black women or femmes to honor in this sacred space. This one is for us. May these words always be held holy, as the sacrifice of the Black woman and femme voice is enough. I aim for this offering to be received as an opportunity to engage with Black feminist plays rooted in individual joy and collective lived experiences within the margin.

I uplift radical joy and uproot oppression while exploring the existence of the collective of the margin, which all these characters and I live in. There is joy in healing, relationships, and connections. When we are with our people, sisters, the mamas, the aunties, the nibblings, and people who look like us, talk like, like, and act like us, we create ceremony. We create rituals. We create head bopping, toes stopping, hip wiggling, booty bouncing moments. All while laughing and crying and finding a way to forgive ourselves and others in the end if the spirit says so.

Black Feminist Joy; Erotic within the Margin

Black Feminist Thought, crafted by Patricia Hill Collins, highlights how, in the United States of AmeriKKKA, Black women and femme have a hidden space, a consciousness within a consciousness. It is inside this consciousness that drives Black women and femmes to find peace within the intersectionalities of their makeup through the lenses of race, gender, class, and sexuality. Collins believes that the foundation of Black feminist thought is built upon collective liberation through the self-defined voices of Black women and femmes. Self-esteem is one of the building blocks of Black feminist thought. The Black women and femme have to love themselves first, and the words of bell hooks: *It's All About Love*. It is through this unique lens that Black women and femmes find their foundation and go back to the self as a political act to choose themselves and put themselves first when the oppressors of this bitter earth tell them that this act of putting yourself first is a sin. Collins points out, "The controlling images applied to Black women are so uniformly negative that they almost necessitate resistance. For U.S. Black women, constructed knowledge of self emerges from the struggle to replace controlling images with self-defined knowledge deemed personally important, usually knowledge essential to Black

women's survival."⁴ The verbal choreography and physical embodiment for Black women and femmes to self-define their identity and embodied experiences through their perspective(s) is a liberatory act. And while the journey is personal, they, us, do not have to do it alone. Black feminist thought also relies on the unity of Black women and femmes. As stated, "This issue of Black women being the ones who really listen to one another is significant, particularly given the importance of voice in Black women's lives."⁵ Additionally, Black Feminist Thought is rooted in self-definitive processes and collectivity. Self-definition speaks to the power dynamics involved in rejecting externally defined, controlling images of Black womanhood."⁶ This call for self-definition is a political act of collective liberation, and the validation of the definition of Black women and femmes is a way to take back language and power. Black Feminist Thought also relies on the unity of Black women and femmes. As stated, "This issue of Black women being the ones who really listen to one another is significant, particularly given the importance of voice in Black women's lives."⁷ The idea is that the relationship dynamics between Black women and femmes, who also serve as the voices for their collective liberation, allow for the fruition of cultural liminal spaces that uplift the unique identity that Black women and femmes embody so they can thrive. Oppression for Black women and femmes is by no means an accident, and the oppressive nature is a margin.

bell hooks, in her article, "Choosing The Margin As a Space for Radical Openness," explains the epistemology of the margin: "To exist in the margin is to live in a world we may not always be allowed to take part in"⁸ For Black women and femmes, existing in the margin, outside of the center, is the desired outcome of white supremacy. At the center of the margin is the white space. This space rejects Black women and femmes, and therefore, they do not see their reflections, their mirror, but instead see images of white standards of how those outside the margin are allowed to exist. The margin, as described by hooks, is the oppressive structures created and maintained through Eurocentrism and upheld by the systems we, as Black women and femmes, actively fight against. However, hooks does not view the oppressive nature of the margin as a barrier to the collective liberation of Black women and femmes. Instead, hooks inquires whether the margin, while oppressive, can be transformed into a space of radical resistance—a space to reject white systemic ideologies.

While I agree that resistance in the margin can exist, joy can also be found in the margin. Resistance is not the only promise our ancestors and the divine gave Black women and femmes. To rely and survive solely on radical resistance puts Black women and femmes on a never-ending carousel ride of giving our capacity, labor, and souls to life cycles of oppression. That

⁴ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 10th ed., (New York, Routledge, 2000), 100.

⁵ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 103.

⁶ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 110.

⁷ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 103.

⁸ bell hooks, "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, no. 36 (1989): 21.

itself makes the resistance of the margin tiring. You cannot drive a car on empty. For Black women and femmes to live in the margin, they must have joy. To discuss the specified joy for Black women and femme bodies, I must turn to Lorde. In “Usages of The Erotic,” Lorde describes the sensation of the erotic to be “a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves.”⁹ The “erotic” feeling Lorde is alluding to is not necessarily tied to pornography or sexual pleasure wholly, but the erotic is the phenomenological occurrence Black women and femmes experience when at their most entire point of satisfaction. This journey is personal. For Black women and femmes to experience eroticism, they must experience joy. The depth of power that is within the erotic exists as an “internal sense of satisfaction.”¹⁰ The framework of the erotic is the foundation of radical joy that Black women and femmes deserve to explore, embody, and embrace. I expand Lorde’s definition of the erotic to center radical joy within the margin. The margin is a collective space where Black women and femmes find themselves together as an oppressed group. The erotic is a personal sensation that Black women and femmes individually experience. The erotic is radical. And if existing in the margin requires radical resistance, is this not a call for joy? To exist as Black-embodied women and femme storytellers in the margin, we must experience the radical erotic joy that amplifies our resistance and allows for our existence. The erotic is crucial for Black women and femmes, especially queer Black women and femmes, as the erotic is already marginalized due to the cis, hetero-patriarchal world we exist in. I know that my journey is different from a trans-Black woman or femme. However, we are within the margin. Our erotic cannot be fully aligned given our lived experiences as our identities are separate; however, we belong in the collective of the margin. We are a community in love exploring our space of joy. Lorde places the erotic as a sight for joy. Lorde is aware of the margin and uplifts the erotic, as does hooks. For Black women and femmes to uplift their erotic and work against the restrictions of the margin of oppression, there must be joy. Joy is our birthright. If Black women and femmes must exist in the margin and have the capacity to withstand the pressures of colonialism and at its bare minimum, the capacity to resist, then joy must be another tactic to fight against the margin.

The theatre can serve as an opportunity to explore that joy and critique the margin. In plays, the playwright has the agency to create liminal spaces and explore different realities or fantasies. In the world of *BLKS* and *Single Black Female*, the theatre provides a liminal space where Black women and femmes, on their terms, inform their audience how their liminal worlds work. It is to be said that white institutional theatrical companies benefit from the exploitation of Black bodies, souls, minds, and spirits. This creative space does not eliminate those factors.

⁹ Audre Lorde, *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power* (1978), Kore Press Institute Edition (Tucson: Kore Press, 2000), 68.

¹⁰ Lorde, *Uses of the Erotic*, 68.

However, how can the liminal space of theaters uplift the joy of Black women and femmes who are ready to tell their truths? Theatre can be that space to explore that joy for Black women and femmes to perform it, to embody and embrace it so they know, too, that this, at least in one world, exists, if not in the world that we live in now. *BLKS* by Aziza Barnes and *Single Black Female* by Lisa B. Thompson are plays that evoke both the erotic and the joy within the margin through the collective experiences of Black women from different generations exploring their journey of radical joy and the sensation of the erotic.

BLKS

BLKS is a one-act, fun, truthful, and hella Black femme play that surrounds the stories of four young Black women in their 20s trying to find their grounding in New York. Each woman takes on their family traumas and their unique joy to navigate the world around them. From onstage orgasms, dealing with grief in family and in the media, being a “super mammy,” and finding laughter in every situation, *BLKS* is a rich example showing the resistance of Black women and femmes who uplift joy while existing in the margin. In this section, I highlight some key moments where the margin is acknowledged throughout the journey of *BLKS*. Within the first ten pages of the play, the awareness of the margin and the radical resistance against oppression through joy is evident in the world of *BLKS*. June, Octavia, and Imani have already expressed three different crises: June has found out her boyfriend has cheated, Octavia, who is unsure of what she wants out of her relationship with her sometimes partner Ry, has found a mole on her clitoris, and Imani is trying to get over the fear of performing by reenacting an Eddie Murphy comedy routine that she would watch with her dad who has just passed away.

The girls meet each other during the crescendo of pain and Imani suggests that they forget about their worries and go to a cultural liminal space and embody joy. The cultural liminal space is the club, and the embodiment of joy is shaking ass:

IMANI: *Listen y'all. We can catch each other up on our respective fuckeries and/or deceased childhood pets all day if we want to, and that's an option but it's a shitty one and I don't recommend it because I can't fully endorse it. There's only one reasonable thing for us to do this here evening. It is incumbent upon us three to get extremely day drunk, get extremely night fly, and shake our god-given asses at that trap night series. You know the one they be doing in SoHo. For some reason. We are on a mission, to Resurrect our Fly Back Kinda like Angela Bassett in Waiting to Exhale. Or like Angela Bassett in the entire plot of Stella Got Her Groove Back. Except less fucking sad. Are we in and are we down?¹¹*

¹¹ Barnes, *BLKS*, 19.

Imani refers to two movies that center on the lives of Black women finding themselves and rooting themselves in friendship and collectivity. This line refers to two different movies that surround Black women and femmes, uplifting their eroticism while undergoing their journeys of self-love and resistance of the margin and battle for love. Terry McMillan's 1992 book and subsequently, the 1995 film, *Waiting to Exhale*, embraces the journey of four women in different life stages while tackling love, loss, and perseverance. Radhika Subhankar Mukherjee points out in her article *Female Friendship and Sisterhood as a Significant Theme in Terry McMillan's Waiting to Exhale* states: "McMillan points out that the black women are empowered by female bonding and interdependent relationships among women as they draw energy and power from each other."¹² McMillan's 1996 book and the 1998 film, *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*, centers on Stella finding love and serenity after losing her job. Pradip N. Pawar and Dr. Rajendra R. Thorat analyze the film in, "Reinvention Of Identity in Terry McMillan's *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*," stating, "It has generated in Stella a strong feeling of need to explore internal identity. It leads her to take decision to go on long vacation to fill up emptiness in the life with a loving companion, to get exposed to hobby, and to find earning source wherein individual identity need not lose."¹³

This bold moment of choosing joy even though the reality of the world they live in with real-life circumstances and real hurt seems almost unbearable, but as the erotic demands for self-empowerment and the margin requires resistance. Acknowledging the margin and choosing joy is another way to say we (Black women and femmes) may be oppressed, but we can also be joyful. You do not have to be one or the other. As the margin exists under the idea that Black women and femmes remain capitalistic, gendered, racialized, and sexualized human beings oppressed by whiteness, existing in the margin—as the sphere is maintained by white supremacy with notable culprits/opportunists such as white women and the spectrum of white feminism (the foul enemy), it is only just to talk about moments that the margin is evident.

Moments after Imani gives an inspirational speech about shaking ass at the club, the girls, during their travel to the club, encounter the character, Ethnically Ambiguous White Man, trying to date rape the character, Drunk White Woman. June steps in between the two and ends up being physically assaulted. Octavia runs to try to catch the man and Imani immediately calls the police. June interrupts her moment of joy to help a white woman in need of saving. During her laborious process to protect the white woman, June ends up being assaulted and left with the man's handprint on her face. The perpetrator gets away, and the white woman leaves unharmed. She does not even utter an ounce of thanks or appreciation. She leaves drunk, carefree, and unhurt. After the altercation, Imani contacts the police and states,

¹² Radhika Subhankar Mukherjee, "Female Friendship and Sisterhood as a Significant Theme in Terry McMillan's *Waiting to Exhale*," *New Man International Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, (May 2018): 209.

¹³ Pradip N. Pawar and Rajendra R. Thorat, "Reinvention of Identity in Terry Mcmillan's *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*," *Literary Endeavour* IX, no. 4 (October 2018): 93.

IMANI: *Yea, we got an emergency. On Prince and Broadway. Yea, a man just assaulted my friend. Just a man. What? I'm not sure of his ethnicity. He was brown and tall, that's all I know okay? That's all I know! He was cornering this white woman and my friend tried to help her out then the white chick left and the dude turned on my friend and it escalated and he grabbed her and slapped her in the face. Look can you please send some police down here? Are all the police cars in this district dispatched? All of them? That don't even make any fuckin' sense.*¹⁴

The words of Lorde ring true: “The oppression of women knows no ethnic nor racial boundaries, true, but that does not mean it is identical within those differences. Nor do the reservoirs of our ancient power know these boundaries. To deal with one without even alluding to the other is to distort our commonality as well as our difference.”¹⁵ June, Octavia, and Imani’s oppression is unique to their experience as Black women within the margin.

The margin consists of the collective of Black women and femmes who find, through racial resistance, their imagination, their minds are proven dangerous to systemic institutions and Eurocentrism. This moment in the play is a reminder for June, Octavia, and Imani that the margin for them, no matter where or when, still exists. The margin is a sad reality of what it is like to be a Black woman or femme on this bitter earth. The margin requires resistance because the souls of Black women and femmes stuck in the city of bones in the margin will not find peace without advocating for their joy. During Imani's phone call to the police, the police asked briefly what the perpetrator's race was, hinting that if Imani had said they were a Black or Brown person, the police would have come. Perhaps if Imani had been clearer on the description of Ethnically Ambiguous Dude they would have come. If Imani told the police a Black man assaulted a white woman, perhaps the police would have come. There is no protection for those who exist in the margin. The only protection the girls have at this moment is through each other’s presence, making it a continuous circle of life to pour protection, relief, and joy into one another, as the margin doesn't allow for outside help. The margin makes the marginalized their own savior. Below, June recounts the interaction and the usage of her labor:

JUNE: *I really thought I was helping that woman.*

OCTAVIA: *You were. She just doesn't care. Did you want her to care?*

JUNE: *I mean, yea!*

OCTAVIA: *Why? What would that have meant?!*

¹⁴ Aziza Barnes, *BLKS*, 24.

¹⁵ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), 70.

JUNE: *Don't give me that shit, dude. I can't live like that.*

IMANI: *Like what?*

JUNE: *Like hopeless. I have to believe I can do something. Even if that makes me a mammy superhero or whatever. I can't think about being in Petri dish—I have to care. Even if that's stupid. Okay?*

OCTAVIA: *Yea. I get that.*¹⁶

In the passage above, June reflects on her experience and the role of “mammy superhero,” a genderized, sexualized, capitalistic instrument that had been used in this moment of violence. The role of being a “mammy superhero” is a role burdened on Black women and femmes from primarily white women. The role of a “mammy superhero” originates back to minstrel shows, with the “mammy” being the strong Black woman with no feelings, constantly cleaning, cooking, and taking care of others while committing self-destruction of their soul. To some white women, the role of “mammy superhero” is a form of sisterhood. Again, to quote Lorde: “For then beyond sisterhood is still racism.”¹⁷

June’s embodiment of a “mammy superhero” risks the radical acts of joy and feeds into the oppressive acts of the margin. The risk of forgetting the resistance of joy to be a “good marginalized Black woman” was sufficient for June. June had forgotten the erotic. June had forgotten self-care. June had forgotten about hooks and Lorde. It takes the constructive criticism of Imani and Octavia to remind June of the resistance that is needed to survive in the margin. Her friends remind her of the joy that is needed within the margin for June to remember that at the end of the day, her role, whether we embody the “superhero mammy” or the liberated Black woman, does not have the same effects of helping the white fallen feminist who can be threatened by the radical nature of the margin, an ally and also try to explode or recognize the margin or continue to benefit without caring.

Throughout the journey of the play, Octavia, who even opens up the show receiving oral pleasure from Ry, finds out she needs to have a surgical procedure to remove the mole on her clitoris. She is determined to receive oral pleasure from one person before the end of the night before her surgery the next morning because of her fear of becoming a sex eunuch and never experiencing having a “true orgasm again” and “dying alone in a river.”¹⁸ For a queer Black woman to live in her whole truth onstage, where vulnerability is profited, takes a lot of courage. It requires the exploration of their erotic and for them to become well-acquainted kin-folk with their joy. To acknowledge this desire, Octavia measures the erotic by grunting towards the end of

¹⁶ Barnes, *BLKS*, 26.

¹⁷ Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 70.

¹⁸ Barnes, *BLKS*, 21.

sexual pleasure. Octavia also performs the erotic by enacting a ritual of embodying another persona, as seen here in this monologue. Octavia refers to herself as Pam Grier in a playful, sexy manner that allows her to leave her body yet still convey what her body wants to make the moment about her:

OCTAVIA: *Tonight, with you, I'm not Octavia. I'm Pam Grier from Cofy. That's whose pussy you'd be eating. A bad ass from the '70s, saving her brother from heroin and white women We haven't had a big fight in the street about my commitment issues. You aren't the other man in someone's rebound situation from her cheating piece of shit boyfriend. There are no disappointments, requests, or needs.*¹⁹

Cofy is a film starring Pam Grier that explores Black women sexuality and power dynamics. In “Black Pussy Power: Performing Acts of Black Eroticism in Pam Grier’s Blaxploitation Films,” Shoniqua Roach critiques the film while exploring what agency and sexuality can mean to Black women. She finds that,

A cursory glance at black feminist scholarship explicating pussy or ‘pussy power’ in relation to Grier’s work, as well as that of other black feminine sexual icons, proffers the following conclusions: 1) pussy is presumably female genitalia; 2) ‘pussy power’ is equated with objectified female sexuality; and 3) black women performers who leverage ‘pussy power’ are unwitting accomplices to black female sexual alterity.²⁰

To live up to Cofy, Octavia lives in the erotic as she is very unapologetic, and while she acknowledges the margin, the margin does not stop her erotic. It does not cease or limit her joy. Octavia models the character of Pam Grier in Cofy as this is the closest example of the erotic to her erotic that allows her to invite the erotic into the space. Out of all of the characters, Octavia is the most in-tune with her erotic and does not allow others to mold how the erotic exists for her. She finds joy in the moment of escapism and power in receiving her end goal item: an orgasm from oral sex from Justin, a random Black guy whom June meets at the club and dances with briefly.

Single Black Female

Single Black Female by Lisa B. Thompson centers on two middle-class Black women living in New York while embarking on their journeys of healing, embracing their bodies, and finding a romantic partner. Both characters depend on each other to share their real stories through interactive and playful interactions with themselves and the audience. The first noted moment of the margin is when Sbf 2 recounts the story of when they started working at their new

¹⁹ Barnes, *BLKS*, 57.

²⁰ Shoniqua Roach, “Black Pussy Power: Performing Acts of Black Eroticism in Pam Grier’s Blaxploitation Films,” *Feminist Theory* 19, no. 1 (April 2018): 9.

law firm, and her senior partner made a point to share a fun fact about the other Black women who worked there:

Sbf 2: *I remember when I was the new sista at my firm. During my first day I was introduced to the staff. The senior partner made it a point to tell me a little something about every black woman who works there—all six of their four hundred thirty-two employees. I knew not one of them liked me.*

Sbf 1: *Who does she think she is? That broad thinks she's cute. Hmm, she ain't all that. Bet she won't make partner!*²¹

With the senior partner trying to highlight their “awareness” of the other Black women who work there, they show white colonial styles of surveillance on Black women and femmes in the workplace. This is how whiteness attempts to leak into the sacred bloodstreams of Black women and femmes who exist within the margin. Additionally, with only six out of the four hundred and thirty-two employees being Black women, this haunting fact serves as an institutionally built reminder that Sbf 2 was specially selected to work at this big, important job. Sbf 2 has been chosen as she is a “special Black woman.” That is the reality of having a seat at the table. The table is a reminder of the margin. In this instance, it's almost treated as a reward. I push to question what gestures of being rewarded by your oppressor within the margin. And is that reward a seat at the table? Joy and success cannot be intertwined. Lauren Berlant, in her navigation of cruel optimism, states,

Cruel optimism names a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility. What is cruel about these attachments, and not merely inconvenient or tragic, is that the subjects who have x in their lives might not well endure the loss of their object or scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being, because whatever the content of the attachment, the continuity of the form of it provides something of the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world.²²

In this situation, to aim for success, a seat at the table, to gain the world, and to lose your sacred soul denies the individual joy. To view joy as a materialist object rather than the divine experience of the erotic is to play into a reward system that does not service the Black woman or femme. Sbf 2's success is tied to her labor, which is tied to her being a capitalistic tool. For the joy of Black women and femmes to be given as a reward via jobs, promotions, and monetary outlets is a tool used by oppressors to keep them within the margin—if they stay silent and play their “role.” A job or monetary value is not harmful, but the messenger and check issuer must be

²¹ Thompson, “Single Black Female,” 181.

²² Lauren Berlant, “Cruel Optimism,” *Differences* 17, no. 3 (December 1, 2006): 21.

examined. As mentioned by Victoria Showunmi in her research on Black women in the workplace in “Visible, Invisible: Black Women In Higher Education.” “While Black women perceive they are fulfilled and successful at work, they still struggle with racial and gender stereotyping, workplace discrimination, and inter-racial resentments.”²³ In this moment, Sbf 2 is experiencing what Showunmi identifies as a theme one: being hired or promoted in the workplace.²⁴ As the margin continues to uphold its sphere, Sbf 1 and Sbf 2 center their self-care and therapy. One of the first noted moments of the erotic is when Sbf 1 and Sbf 2 describe their self-care maintenance:

Sbf 2: *No more beauty shop for me! I’m a spa girl. A facial every two weeks. A manicure and pedicure once a week and an organic herbal seaweed body wrap at least once a month. It’s the role of the black middle class to integrate.*

Sbf 1: *The spas?*

Sbf 2: *Yes, the revolution—one massage at a time. Each of us has a role. I’m doing my part. I love the look in the eyes of those old Upper East Side society matrons when they see my naked black ass sauntering towards the sauna.*

Sbf 1: *Somehow I don’t believe that’s what Martin, Malcolm, nor Huey and Bobby had in mind.*

Sbf 2: *(quietly) Don’t judge, I’m just doing what I think is right. You know what Audre Lorde taught us: “the personal is political!” After all, we are all women who come from fine stock. Our mothers and grandmothers were strong black matriarchs²⁵*

This moment of the erotic describes the details of which both characters prescribe physical self-care treatments as part of their love language to themselves. A physical output dedicated to themselves after surviving another day within the margin without forgetting who they are. As Lorde states, “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.”²⁶ That warfare is included within the woes of the sphere of the margin. As rest is resistance, self-care nourishes bodies and minds who exist on this bitter earth in Black women and femme bodies who require peace. Sbf 1 and Sbf 2 find their fight against warfare through these acts of care; however, their care is reliant on their labor, which is rooted in the margin. The self-care is political.

²³ Victoria Showunmi, “Visible, Invisible: Black Women in Higher Education,” *Frontiers in Sociology* 8 (April 20, 2023): 3.

²⁴ Showunmi, “Visible, Invisible,” 3.

²⁵ Thompson, “Single Black Female,” 175.

²⁶ Audre Lorde, *A Burst of Light: Essays* (Ithaca: Firebrand Books, 1988), 131.

To afford the self-care maintenance, one must make a certain bracket or salary to keep up with this bi-weekly maintenance. However, this erotic experience is a ritual for both characters, as they find ceremony in these self-acts of love. The response from Sbf 1 regarding Black male civil rights leaders is rooted in the differences in how self-care is embodied and embraced by those who are in the margin versus those who do not experience the margin at its fullest extent. Black males are marginalized yet still uphold patriarchal power. As mentioned by scholar Bernice McNair Barnett,

Even while suffering the daily indignities heaped on them by their location in the structure of society, many southern Black women were much more than followers in the modern civil rights movement; many were also leaders who performed a variety of roles comparable to those of Black male leaders. Although seldom recognized as leaders, these women were often the ones who initiated protest, formulated strategies and tactics, and mobilized other resources (especially money, personnel, and communication networks) necessary for successful collective.)²⁷

While civil rights leaders like Martin, Malcolm, Huey, and Bobby may not have imagined a world where Black women and femmes experience the erotic and uplift self-care in the ways, Sbf 1 and Sbf 2 do. Their avenues of embracing the erotic are valid regardless of what those ancestors would think. A second moment of the erotic is when Sbf 1 shares a monologue explaining the kind of care they are looking for from their ideal partner:

Sbf 1: *Give me a roughneck nigga with a law degree
Who pulls my hair and spansks me.
Talkin' 'bout a brotha who understands Hegel, Fanon, and slappin' bones
Who knows better than to sit up at Chez Panisse
Ordering rosé and answering cell phones.
Beggin' for a man who finds box symphony seats the bomb
And knows how to sweet talk my Mom.
He's gotta be sanctified Sunday after sinnin' Saturday night.
His desire must be awakened by African skin on a body that's tight.
He reads Toni Morrison and bets half his check on the Knicks,
Saves for our baby's trust fund and new pair of kicks.
Drives his cobalt Porsche into the ground.
Brings home white tulips on the first day of spring without me making a sound.
Whispers in French as we walk along the Seine
After letting me call across the Atlantic to talk shit with my best friend!²⁸*

²⁷ Bernice McNair Barnett, "Invisible Southern Black Women Leaders in the Civil Rights Movement," *Gender & Society* 7, no. 2 (June 1993): 163.

²⁸ Thompson, "Single Black Female," 184.

Throughout this theatrical engagement, both characters are searching for love, but romantic love. They do not speak to the love from outside the romantic, yet they navigate their self-love through shopping, spa trips, and therapy to forgive their fathers. As bell hooks has offered us, “We fear that evaluating our needs and then carefully choosing partners will reveal that there is no one for us to love. Most of us prefer to have a partner who is lacking than no partner at all. What becomes apparent is that we may be more interested in finding a partner than in knowing love.”²⁹ While Sbf 1 and Sbf 2 need some guidance from hooks, this moment of exploration is erotic. Kimberly Williams and Andrea N. Baldwin explore what Black love can look like for Black women who have similar experiences as Sbf 1 and Sbf 2, stating, “By engaging in activities based in Black rebellious love, rebellious activities, and honoring black life, we acknowledge that we are a part of a Black heredity that, even while enduring brutality, had the “impulse to resist, the impulse to produce oppositional narratives, the mind feeling theory, a profound enthusiasm for black culture, and longings felt in the flesh.”³⁰ Sbf 1 holds the stage and uses creative language to tell her audience what she wants and how explicitly she wants to be loved and cared for. This moment of self-determination and self-pleasure to explore this fantasy and to exist in this blissful dream, a dream they wish to become a reality with their partner. I argue that their erotic is also dependent on another person's existence. However, their ability to dream and imagine breaks away from what colonialism actively tries to steal from Black humans, Black women, Black femmes, imagination, and creativity. Our imagination and creativity keep us free, and if truly unleashed, they could break the mold of the margin. Lorde states,

*For then beyond sisterhood is still racism*³¹

There are moments where both of the plays overlap and the connection between collective experiences of the margin is present. In *BLKS*, the character, That Bitch On The Couch is a young, rich, white woman who is aware of some of her ignorance and utilizes the Black people around her as her personal knowledge bank, while also fetishizing Black women—making the relationship both intellectual and sexually demeaning. When That Bitch On The Couch comes into the world on page twenty-eight, she almost immediately insults June by calling her “angry” and then uses Imani as the Urban Dictionary to reflect,

THAT BITCH ON THE COUCH: *Okay I'm so confused How is saying "angry" fucked up but you can say all that shit?*

IMANI: *Oh nah, I'm not doing this.*

²⁹ bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1999), 173.

³⁰ Kimberly Williams and Andrea N. Baldwin, “Black Love, Black Loving, Loving Blackness,” in *Standpoints Black Feminist Knowledges* (Blacksburg: Virginia Tech Publishing, 2019), 45.

³¹ Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 70.

THAT BITCH ON THE COUCH: *Doing what?*

IMANI: *If you want me to be your blk person survival guide slash encyclopedia, I got a rate.*

THAT BITCH ON THE COUCH: *A rate?*

IMANI: *\$50 per question.*

THAT BITCH ON THE COUCH: *Is that what I was doing?*

IMANI: *Hey, you wanna make it \$100, that's cool with me too.*

THAT BITCH ON THE COUCH: *That's. really fucked up.*

IMANI: *Is it?*

THAT BITCH ON THE COUCH: *This is exhausting!*

IMANI: *Yes! It is!*³²

Imani, recognizing the utilization of labor in the sphere of the margin, demands payment for her labor. That Bitch on The Couch upholds the margin by using Imani as a personal knowledge bank. about Black women. She burdens Imani with probing questions surrounding the situation of June and why one, especially one who identifies as a white woman, should not call a Black woman or femme angry. As the margin from the stance of whiteness has proven to be oppressive, the resistance against oppression, especially between That Bitch on The Couch and Imani, is found by Imani evoking the erotic within her by requiring That Bitch on The Couch pays her for her labor. The connection between the erotic and joy is present as Imani finds her resistance against the margin to be an act of joy and receiving, in total, one hundred dollars from That Bitch on The Couch. However, when the margin is resisted, and joy is enacted, those who uphold the margin can retaliate or retreat. That Bitch on The Couch eventually leaves Imani after they fight about Imani having payment requirements for questions and not for engaging in physical acts of pleasure (for That Bitch on The Couch), and trauma (for Imani). That Bitch on The Couch is upset that the margin is actively being resisted and makes the moment about her being a victim of living in a white woman's body and decides to "be the problem" instead of aiding it.

³² Barnes, *BLKS*, 36.

In *Single Black Female*, Sbf 1 and Sbf 2 go to a club and Sbf 2 has an unwanted interaction with a white woman and a Black man who engages with her which leads to Sbf 2 being removed from the premises.

Sbf 2: *White women! White women! White women! You can't turn on the television without seeing some dead or missing white woman. Yet nobody cries for little black girls. You know, only sistas understand that O. J. Simpson murdered his wife as an act of aggression and an absolute rejection of African American women. With every slash of her throat O. J. said loud and clear—I would rather be with a white woman that I have to murder to keep than spend my life with some black bitch. Wait! Maybe I'm paranoid.*³³

The idea of white women not having the same interactions and encounters as Black women and femmes in this world is also evident in *BLKS* with *That Bitch on The Couch* and *Drunk White Woman*. In both stories, Black women and femmes are the heroes or the villains. To be the villain is to be removed from the space and stripped from your seat at the table. To be the hero is to become depleted with no capacity for love or joy. Black women and femmes do not want capes. They want crowns. To refuse the cape and the identity of the hero or villain is to refuse the woes of the world and embrace Black women and femmes' ancestral birthright of joy. The act of rejection itself becomes an embrace of personal and political perseverance. Systemic institutions created under racist ideologies protect and are upheld by colonialism and those who benefit from colonialism, including white women. Black women and femmes find themselves tasked with the burden of having to explain the systematic frameworks of Eurocentrism while also having to be caring towards the white women, who, more often than not, are the ones causing the damage. As Lorde explains in her open letter to Mary Daly, a problematic white woman who used stories of Black and African women in her “feminist” literature, *Gyn/Ecology*, and demonized them, Lorde states, “I feel you do celebrate differences between white women as a creative force toward change, rather than a reason for misunderstanding and separation. But you fail to recognize that, as women, those differences expose all women to various forms and degrees of patriarchal oppression, some of which we share and some of which we do not”³⁴

BLKS and *Single Black Female* engage with the anti-black feminist agenda while experiencing differences in generational and socioeconomic status. In both plays, there are conversations of father-daughter dynamics. However, in *BLKS*, Imani shares her grief for the loss of her dad. In *Single Black Females*, both characters are in therapy and on the journey of forgiving their fathers. Class and economic status are also different in both plays. It is evident in *Single Black Female* that both characters have pursued graduate school and have institutional funding and support, whereas this is not the case for all of the characters in *BLKS*. That does not make either of these characters better than the others. Yet, it calls out the institution and the

³³ Thompson, “Single Black Female,” 197.

³⁴ Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 70.

institutional backings as they are, which is a critique of the world we, you, and I, exist in. Additionally, while on their journey to love and self-care in *Single Black Female*, Sbf1 and Sbf 2 are more focused on finding a husband or partner to share their world. They want someone else to be there with them on the journey. Also, the different kinds of relationships, such as hetero and non-hetero relationships in these worlds, are only explored more in *BLKS*.

While there are vast differences, the margin and radical joy remain. In *BLKS*, Octavia and Ry are solidified due to Octavia's struggles with financial income and making her dreams of being an independent filmmaker a reality. Her inconsistency pushes Ry away as Octavia is in search of her erotic, or her joy. In both plays, these are Black women and femmes who are within the margin and who have been racially discriminated against. They have been forced to adhere to some elements of the "Strong Black Woman" syndrome and have been assaulted and persecuted by Black or nonblack males who have put up with white feminism and feminists. In both of these worlds, different elements of the margin are shown to highlight how the margin exists in the collective of Black women and femmes, yet the individual joy is still present and centered. No Black women of femme in theatrical worlds or reality should have to wait for joy. Joy is now. If joy is continuously tied to an outcome of labor as joy being earned, then joy becomes a neglected and crucial element of Black women and femmes' birthright. The margin has proven to be a collective space where Black women and femmes, onstage and offstage, find solitude in their collective resistance against oppression from white women who look for solitude in the "sisterhood" yet profit off the labor of Black women and femmes and reside in their blissful ignorance. While the margin is collective, the erotic is personal. The erotic sensation of self-empowerment and self-definitive rituals of self-care and pleasure is, by birthright, granted to every Black woman and femme on this bitter earth. The erotic's foundation can be expanded into the groundwork of joy for Black women and femmes who exist as a collective in the margin yet find their resistance through their radical joy upheld by the erotic framework. To resist the margin and use the open space of radicalness, rooted in the individual erotic, can be a space where joy is centered. Black women and femmes can find community, ceremony, and ritual in joy.

Aziza Barnes and Lisa B. Thompson provide rich storytelling through the lenses of Black women and femmes who find moments of joy in almost every situation. Not a scene goes by without one of the women trying to make light out of a heavy moment. *BLKS* and *Single Black Female* provides context to the conversation about how Black women and femmes can be joyful and exist in their bodies, as Black and queer as they are, aware of the margin but still choosing joy. As this is one in-depth application of the erotic and the margin used as a theoretical framework to examine Black feminist plays, future research on the rituals of self-care supported by the erotic within Black women and femme plays would be the next appropriate direction to excavate the work owed to and due to Black women and femmes in the theatrical and non-theatrical world where the margin exists but joy is its centerfold.

Breathe in:

Sbf 1: So, I guess we are making our own history.³⁵

Breathe out:

JUNE: And we figure we'll figure it out from there, after we smoke all the weed in all the world.³⁶

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³⁵ Thompson, "Single Black Female," 200.

³⁶ Barnes, *BLKS*, 68.

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