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A Paradox of Pleasure: Black Joy during “the Nadir,” 1875–1905

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Abstract

This article revisits Rayford Logan’s thesis in *The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877–1901* to chart how African Americans experienced joy during a racial low point—“the Nadir” of race relations. Using Logan’s claims as a conceptual framework, the article examines W. E. B. Du Bois’s position on amusement and everyday Black people’s joyful acts during the post-Reconstruction period to understand “a paradox of pleasure”—feeling jovial during dark times. With the Nadir as a case study, this essay argues that historians may develop Black joy as a historical analytic by asking research questions about Black affect, employing the tools of historical imagination, and concentrating on the small delights of daily life. This essay seeks to inspire curiosity about how exploring Black life from the angle of elation, not sorrow, can produce complex histories of Black subjectivity and feeling. It proposes Black joy as an inchoate analytic in hopes of it becoming a formal mode of historical inquiry.

Keywords: African American social life; affect; post-Reconstruction; recreation; pleasure

During the summer of 2020, a time of historic uprisings in response to police brutality and anti-Black violence, Black people invoked joy during a moment that seemed to preclude it. While protesting in the streets, Black mourners broke out into collective song, formed dance circles, and played instruments. Although most protest signs adopted a serious tone, others used humor to both condemn state violence and elicit laughter. At this time of collective Black grief, Imani Perry, paradoxically, meditated on Black joy. She asserted that while racism is terrible, it should not be conflated with Black life, as “Blackness is an immense and defiant joy.”¹ Contemplating the meaning of racism and Blackness after George Floyd’s demise, Elizabeth Alexander explained that she measures her parenting success by the fact that her children can experience joy through dance. Despite the reality that they “must fight the hydra-headed monster of racism and racial violence that we were not able to cauterize,” they maintained the ability to “find the joy and the power of communal self-expression.”² Why would these mourners, activists, and Black scholars invoke joy while feeling so much racialized pain? On what traditions and histories were they drawing? These recent calls to

find, center, and promote joy, even during unrelenting assaults on Black life, are grounded in a longer history of pleasure seeking during dark times.³

For many Black people, George Floyd's killing, as well as that of Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor months before, felt like a "low point" in race relations, a modern iteration of the post-Reconstruction era known as "the Nadir."⁴ As present-day inhabitants of this low point, we were able to witness glimmers of something seemingly contradictory—the manifestation of Black joy—that prompt questions about the antecedents of this depressive moment. How was pleasure experienced during the original Nadir—a time known for its anti-Black racism, racial terrorism, political repression, and state violence? How did African Americans define, conceive of, and feel joy amid the torments of Jim Crow segregation and white hostility? What pursuits allowed African Americans to experience collective gratification during this time?

The Nadir of American race relations reveals volumes about not just structural violence and racial strife but also Black affective histories. As such, in this essay, I revisit Rayford Logan's thesis in his 1954 book, *The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877–1901* as less of a chronological commitment and more of a thought exercise.⁵ In other words, while Logan marked the years between 1877 and 1901 as the "lowest point" in Black political and civic life after slavery, I do not necessarily agree with this assertion or the idea that the "worst" period in African American history is identifiable or measurable. Nevertheless, Logan's study offers a conceptual framework for examining what I consider a "paradox of pleasure"—feeling jovial during abysmal times. The following discussion takes the general premise of the Nadir seriously in order to capture moments when Black people pulled themselves above the "lowest point," even briefly, and allowed themselves to feel good.⁶ It sheds light on what some onlookers perceived as unusual Black behavior during the 2020 protests and frames that behavior as part of a long affective lineage.⁷

This essay argues that historians may develop Black joy as a historical analytic by asking research questions about Black affect, employing the tools of historical imagination, and concentrating on the small delights of daily life.⁸ To model this argument, I use the Nadir as a case study to better understand Black emotional life during a discrete period in U.S. history (between 1875 and 1905). Historians have hinted at the possibilities of Black joy in works covering the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries but have not yet indexed joy as a distinct analytical category to examine modern Black social, cultural, and political history. This essay is a modest offering in service and anticipation of Black joy becoming a formal mode of historical inquiry.⁹

The following pages explore the historical, affective, and instructive significance of Black joy.¹⁰ The first section integrates a historiographical review of Black happiness with questions about how we may approach the historical study of Black affect. It highlights the challenges of examining "good feelings" under racial oppression and proposes ways to access joy from existing scholarship. Using an illuminating but seldom analyzed speech on amusement delivered by W. E. B. Du Bois, the second and final section outlines some of the claims Black people and institutions made about pleasure. Here, Du Bois offers a formulation of Black felicity that explains how and why Black citizens sought joy, amusement, and play during the period that became known as the Nadir. Du Bois and other African Americans asserted that their enjoyment was supremely warranted, well deserved, and even divine, and in doing so, they demonstrated the value and wonder of Black life. This section examines everyday delights and offers vignettes of Black joy that present a "paradoxical" narrative of the Nadir. This final discussion, and the essay more broadly, illustrates the struggles, stakes, and sensations of Black joy-seeking in the post-Reconstruction period.

Approaching the (Difficult) Study of Black Joy

Recent works on Black joy and pleasure, many of which are concentrated in Black and literary studies, mark how academics are reorienting scholarly interests in the direction of positive Black affect.¹¹ This moment, then, is a fitting one to explore how the study of Black joy presents several methodological and conceptual questions for historians.¹² What are the historical politics of Black joy? How does one highlight Black happiness without minimizing Black pain? And then there are epistemological matters—how do we know, or can we possibly know, that historical actors felt what we believe they felt in the records they left behind? The following discussion attends to these questions not as a problem-solving endeavor but to mark a range of difficulties, as well as opportunities, that accompany a seemingly straightforward and joyful scholarly exploration.

As a general matter, documenting experiences of pleasure is a complex undertaking, as no single concept of enjoyment exists. For historians in particular, feelings of satisfaction, like all other emotions, are highly subjective and difficult to assess in human interlocutors who are no longer alive. Historians often cannot ask their subjects to verify or recall how they *felt*. Historical records ossify inchoate, ineffable, and variable feelings in time. Archival material, especially from secondhand accounts, rarely documents how emotions evolve or how human beings reinterpret their own feelings. The evidence that historians use to make truth claims about affect poses several epistemological challenges.¹³ As such, this essay acknowledges these challenges and presents joy not as a certain, essential feeling but as a possibility that enables us to consider how African Americans formed complex emotional communities under intense subjugation.¹⁴

An examination of how Black people experienced joy during immense strife needs to be approached with great care. Studies on Black contentment or even “agency” pose the risk of minimizing the horrors of anti-Black violence or simplifying a more complicated racial experience.¹⁵ Without proper historical contextualization, one may come away from such examinations believing that African American social and political conditions were more hospitable than they actually were. At the same time, studies that do not account for momentary breaks in despair risk flattening Black humanity and overlooking the natural vagaries of human emotion.¹⁶ This article takes these risks seriously and attempts to thread a delicate needle of individual happiness amid structural torment. In doing so, I demonstrate that Black people valued their own lives enough to seek joy against racist efforts to make Black life ontologically miserable.

Writing affective histories of the modern African American past presents additional analytical challenges when attempting to grasp the politics of Black joy. For many Black people of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, pursuing joy was not purely about “pleasure for pleasure’s sake.” Recreation, leisure, and experiences of delight often accompanied explicitly political imperatives like contesting segregation, struggling against racism, exercising citizenship, and quelling juvenile delinquency. Black reformers, for example, believed that “wholesome” recreation, such as gender-appropriate sports, camping, and learning games, would help develop behaviors they deemed useful to racial uplift projects. Amusement parks, places of literal enjoyment, were marked by protests for civil rights and legal battles over public accommodations. Black leisure activities, such as “negro excursions,” dance hall parties, and pool playing, became subjects of sociological study and pathological signifiers of Blackness.¹⁷

Indeed, for African Americans, politics and pleasure have been bound together. Historians have paid more attention to the former than the latter, as pleasure, joy, and

elation have not constituted primary modes of historical inquiry. But it may be possible to use our historical imaginations and ask research questions about joy that produce complex narratives of Black affect. For instance, Davarian L. Baldwin's *Chicago's New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration, and Black Urban Life* richly examines several leisure sites like gambling halls, theaters, and sporting events to demonstrate how Chicago's Black intellectual life was rooted in its cultural production. While Baldwin highlights some joyful moments experienced by Black Chicagoans, our attention is drawn to how recreation programs represented "larger bids for respectable new Negro manhood and national inclusion,"¹⁸ as opposed to the felt experience of Black leisure. Respectability and citizenship certainly functioned as motivations for "proper" Black amusement in the first few decades of the twentieth century. But Baldwin's approach, which explores recreation primarily through the prism of civic politics and national belonging, generates questions about affective motivations for Black leisure. Did anticipations of excitement also shape Black recreational life in Chicago? How did Black Chicagoans derive joy from (or alongside) the civic politics of recreation? Did African Americans in Chicago and beyond perceive bodily pleasure as fundamental to their struggle for freedom and citizenship?

Victoria W. Wolcott similarly highlights the explicitly political nature of leisure activity in *Race, Riots, and Roller Coasters: The Struggle over Segregated Recreation in America*, noting that recreational spaces served as some of the most important, and violent, struggles for racial justice in the civil rights era.¹⁹ Wolcott is primarily concerned with recreational activism but her work provides a guide for how we may temporarily shift away from traditional civil rights political analyses to make room for new kinds of inquiries. Although she focuses on protests of segregated swimming pools, amusement parks, and skating rinks, we can *imagine* how it may have felt to float in bodies of water, soar on roller coasters, and glide on skates at a time when Black people felt saddled, ensnared, and restrained by racism. We may examine the felt experience of joy alongside the lived experience of violence.²⁰ These studies show that joy and politics live side by side for Black historical actors, and while we cannot separate politics from emotion, we can surely dwell longer in affective analytical spaces.²¹

A few working-class labor histories demonstrate how African Americans experienced joy that enabled them to forge possibilities outside of confining work regimes. In *To Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War*, Tera W. Hunter explores opportunities for pleasure during a time of intense labor and civil rights struggles for working-class Black women in Atlanta.²² As a reprieve from their arduous work, Black domestics would "dance the night away" in jook joints and dance halls in ways that belied their tired, overworked bodies. Hunter notes that although the African American laboring class worked hard, they also "worked hard at having fun."²³ *To Joy My Freedom* is not a book about Black affect. Nevertheless, Hunter provides a springboard for other historians to interrogate how it felt for African American laborers to "joy" their freedom, as conscribed as that freedom was. Robin D. G. Kelley similarly writes that working-class African Americans frequented dance halls to recuperate from their grueling work schedules and that even the hardest of Black laborers still made time for pleasurable activities.²⁴ In the tradition of such scholarship, this article explores what it meant to have fun vis-à-vis working arrangements, physical demands, and economic challenges that constrained the ability to feel joy. Like Badia Ahad-Legardy, the current study looks to examine "new ways of black being, black doing, and black feeling that enable flourishing under adverse social and political circumstances."²⁵

A Bad Time to Have a Good Time: Black Articulations of Joy during the Nadir

Rayford Logan painted a bleak picture of Black life in the 1880s and 1890s that made joy seem elusive—the overturning of the Civil Rights Act of 1875,²⁶ a decline in Black Congressional representation, increasing anti-Black terrorism, debt peonage, rising illiteracy rates, and a host of other harrowing developments.²⁷ Considering these overlapping political and economic crises, one wonders if Black people valued pleasure or, instead, perceived joy as frivolous ambition. If some African Americans prioritized amusement, what kinds of pursuits did they find joy-producing and worthwhile? Did Black thinkers and reformers conceive of pleasure and joy as constitutive of Black progress or a hindrance to racial uplift? Some race leaders, like W. E. B. Du Bois, believed in the moral and social value of pleasure and encouraged African Americans to balance life's hardships with small delights.

In 1897, only one year after the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision that undoubtedly marked a “low point” in Black social and political life, W. E. B. Du Bois addressed a topic ostensibly unrelated to this discouraging moment—amusement. Du Bois must have been mindful of the grim post-Reconstruction milieu in which he wrote, as he declared in *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880*, “the slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery.”²⁸ Even as Du Bois was aware of the devastations of segregation, the terror of lynching, and the despair of the economic depression of the 1890s, he maintained that pleasure remained the rightful pursuit of Black people. Connecting enjoyment to Black well-being, he stated definitively, “the manner, method, and extent of a people’s recreation is of vast importance to their welfare.”²⁹

In a speech delivered at Hampton Institute titled, “The Problem of Amusement,” Du Bois argued that Black communities should look beyond the church for entertainment and implored African Americans to reconsider the notion that any form of recreation outside of the church setting functioned as the “peculiar property of the devil.” With its “limited and hackneyed amusements,” the church worked to repress the “divine mission of human inspiration.” To support his argument, he defined amusement as a necessary part of life and critical to human development:

All life is rhythm—the right swing of the pendulum makes the pointer go round, but the left swing must follow it; the down stroke of the hammer welds the iron, and yet the hammer must be lifted between each blow; the heart must beat and yet between each beat comes a pause; the day is the period of fulfilling the functions of life and yet the prelude and end of day is night. Thus throughout nature, from the restless beating of yonder waves to the rhythm of the seasons and the whirl of comets, we see one mighty law of work and rest, of activity and relaxation, of inspiration and amusement.³⁰

Here, Du Bois presents rest and relaxation as ordered by nature and integral to the equilibrium of life. This assertion about the balance of human existence, however, would seem out of alignment with the realities of most Black people’s daily responsibilities in the 1890s. African Americans appeared to be constantly laboring, producing, caretaking, and working toward racial uplift. Was it possible to “relax” when the threat of racial hostility loomed large? Could Black people, especially those living in the newly regarded Jim Crow South, balance a demanding work life with rest and amusement? Du Bois believed in these balancing acts. Although not quite concerned with joy, here Du Bois prepares the audience to conceptualize joy as an essential component of “life’s rhythm” and a feeling that accompanies amusement.

During this time of ceaseless work, political setbacks, and unyielding racial antagonisms, Du Bois defined pleasure as a divine right to which Black people were entitled. He worried that “even a proverbially joyous people like the American Negroes are forgetting to recognize for their children the God-given right to play.” According to Du Bois, God had bestowed Black African Americans, especially youth, with a right to diverse forms of amusement. He described Black people’s desire for fun as “perfectly natural” and “legitimate,” and counted it as a mistake to “repress the natural joyousness and pleasure-seeking propensity of young womanhood and young manhood.”³¹ He encouraged young people to sing songs (and not just hymns), “run, jump, walk, row, swim, throw and vault,” take long walks over hills, romp under trees, and more generally, “play and play hard.” He even conceived of play as a “divine institution.” Against the conservative sexual mores held by some African Americans, Du Bois also advocated the mingling of Black adolescents to develop the “natural love they have for each other’s companionship.” He addressed an anticipated concern of his audience—that mixed-gender social interaction would prove true the “sexual impurity among Negro men and Negro women.”³² He assured them that with proper supervision, young people could practice “honor and chastity” within the same leisure spaces, thereby discursively shielding Black people from accusations of racialized debauchery. Du Bois’s rhetoric helped to lay the ideological groundwork of Black pleasure in almost irrefutable terms—both God and nature endowed African Americans with the divine right to rest, relaxation, and joy, even during the Nadir.

Du Bois’s musings about pleasure did not exclusively reside in the realm of theory, as everyday Black people employed similar approaches to their pursuit of joy. The year 1887, which marked the Thibodaux Massacre, the beginning of railroad car segregation in the South, and de facto segregation of baseball, was also a time when Black African Americans simply wanted to enjoy a day at the beach. But pursuing a relaxing, unmolested beach day proved to be a struggle, even in the urban North. James A. Bradley, the white real estate developer and owner of Asbury Park (located on the New Jersey Shore), complained in 1887 that the presence of Black revelers on the Park’s beach was “injuring the place” and diminished its “attractiveness.” White patrons had “object[ed] to the mere presence even of well behaved and well conducted colored people to any considerable number, on a beach to which they go for recreation.”³³ For these reasons, Bradley attempted to restrict African Americans from Asbury Park, except as low-wage waiters, boardinghouse keepers, laundresses, and “maid servants.” A Black objector, nevertheless, retorted that Bradley and his white patrons could not “keep the colored people off God’s beach.” In attempting to colonize the beach, white visitors also sought to colonize the emotional benefits of the beach—relaxation, rejuvenation, fun, and togetherness. But by framing the beach as “God’s beach,” Black beachgoers invalidated white dominion over a natural resource that afforded them these pleasures. By placing ownership of the beach in God’s hands, just as Du Bois offered joy as a righteous entitlement, Black people argued for their divine right to use it, absent laws or customs that restricted Black patronage. Black beachgoers and other joy seekers, similar to those pictured here (Figure 1), redeemed their birthright to pleasure despite white efforts to constrain or “steal” their joy, as the adage goes.³⁴

Du Bois believed that joy-producing recreation allowed Black citizens to withstand the “insult” of racism, sustain some level of faith, and continue to believe in the virtue of personal sacrifice. He explained, “For believe me, my hearers, the great danger of the best class of Negro youth today is not that they will hesitate to sacrifice their lives, their money, and their energy on the altar of their race, but the danger is lest under continuous and



Figure 1. Black beachgoers at Asbury Park, New Jersey, 1908. "Negroes, Asbury," LC-B2-432-8, George Grantham Bain Collection, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

persistent proscription, under the thousand little annoyances and petty insults and disappointments of a caste system, they lose the divine faith of their fathers in the fruitfulness of sacrifice." He added that "true amusement, true diversion" allowed for the "re-creation of energy which we may sacrifice to noble ends, to higher ideals."³⁵ In other words, adults could not expect youths to invest in the struggle for freedom if they placed limitations on their enjoyment, particularly when young people were already subject to daily forms of racism that restricted Black autonomy. Seemingly, these overlapping constraints on freedom, from both Black adults and white agitators, did not have inspiring effects and provided poor lessons in Black self-determination. Indeed, thousands of compounded "annoyances," "insults," and "disappointments" characterized the Nadir and may have left some feeling too dismayed to perform important race work. According to Du Bois, both intraracial and interracial strictures on recreation proved counterproductive to fostering an energized Black youth that would embody "higher ideals" and not hesitate to sacrifice their lives "on the altar of their race."

While Du Bois believed in the intrinsic value of joy for Black people, his meditation on the relationship between amusement and sacrifice points to an operational value. In his understanding of the functionality of recreation, Du Bois did not necessarily conceive of joyful amusement as resistance itself but rather as a possible facilitator of future resistance. In this case, joy is not a reaction to white oppression but perhaps preparation for it. Although he may not have sensed it at the time, Du Bois signaled to the generation that would commence the long civil rights movement to balance their fight for freedom with pauses for joy in ways that made joy seeking and freedom fighting inextricably connected (but not synonymous). Du Bois's theorization of Black joy demonstrates that pleasure was possible, even recommended, during the dismal times of the Nadir of race relations. Joy may have very well served as a regenerating force for African Americans to survive the Nadir.

Not everyone, however, agreed with Du Bois's position about the relationship between churchless recreation, pleasure, and sacrifice. Some believed that recreation should be deprioritized or highly conscribed for young people. An 1894 essay published in the *Fisk Herald* by an unnamed but religiously inclined author is a key case in point. Titriling the essay "The Demand for Young Men," the author proposed that young Black men, as the "hope of the family, the race, [and] the nation," should develop physical, intellectual, and moral manhood exclusively through virtuous activities. "Heaven forbid," the writer began, "that we, that any one of us should ever be the robber of an other's [sic] virtue; that one should be the occupant of a gambling hall or the parasite of the accursed saloon! How can we, young men, lie supinely on our backs indifferent to the exigencies of our times?"³⁶

Although the author did not demean all forms of recreation, he placed limits on pastimes that may have brought genuine contentment to Black individuals. But individual pleasure was inconsequential because the saloon "robbed immortal souls," desolated homes, and "retarded" the "onward march to civilization."³⁷ The gambling hall and the saloon, places of legitimate leisure, were not just morally suspect because they were "accursed" venues but also because the "exigencies of our times" seemed to call Black men to make different choices about where to seek gratification. "Exigencies" here could refer to moral exigencies, but in the context of the Nadir, they may have also signified extant racial, economic, and political crises. In contrast to Du Bois, who held more forgiving views on leisure, this writer believed that "the salvation of the race" and "the weighty responsibilities that await us" would be profoundly compromised by the unrestricted and self-chosen activities of Black youth.

The perspective relayed in the *Fisk Herald* was not unique and, in reality, characterized many, if not most, Black institutions of the late nineteenth century.³⁸ Several Black higher education establishments held that having a good time should not be the focus of Black citizens attempting to live upstanding and purposeful lives. In 1893, Nathan Cook Brackett, the once abolitionist and white principal of the all-Black Storer College, applauded young people who avoided "excursions, festivals, picnics, and many other places of amusement" as well as tobacco, alcohol and "all forms of gambling."³⁹ These avoidances, ostensibly, allowed students to save time and money that was better spent on their education and other presumably worthy causes. Brackett held that "diligence" and "self-denial" would produce both the best pupil and dignified Black character.

Because Storer was one of a few Black higher education institutions at the time, perhaps Brackett believed that its students should commit to more serious matters and could not afford to invest in joy. These recreational restrictions seemed to be a missed opportunity for students and a position Du Bois would challenge. Storer was located near "a popular and attractive summer resort" that Black revelers frequented for their vacations, but the students were not permitted to partake in this neighborhood delight.⁴⁰ It must have been difficult for students to pass the resort or perhaps peer outside their windows and see a leisure site they could not inhabit. The college instituted other draconian, joy-reducing policies, such as limitations on bringing "jewelry and gaudy clothing" to campus. Storer could have integrated *some* recreation into the rigorous curriculum or, as Du Bois suggested, conceptualized leisure as necessary to producing balanced Black youth prepared for the racial uplift crusade. But Brackett, instead, announced forcefully that "Storer College is a place for work and not for play."⁴¹

What, then, did Black people do to cultivate joy in their lives? How did they create places not for work but for play? How did they offset the violence of the Nadir—and

object to the prohibitions of some Black institutions—through pleasurable acts? As noted, some did revel in so-called accursed gambling halls, saloons, and dance halls, or confined their diversions to church recreations. But African Americans also pursued pleasure in spaces other than these polarized leisure arenas. They played word games, invented toys, and delighted in the outdoors to actualize their joy.

On a snowy day in February 1899, Black schoolchildren in Virginia did what many young people do in cold weather—they had a snowball fight. The children’s “snowballing” during a particularly heavy storm “filled the youth with joy,” “great zest,” and “good humor.”⁴² Indeed, anyone who has participated in a snowball fight can relate to these young people’s exhilaration—the sensorial pleasure of molding soft snow into a dense globe, the thrill of “hitting” your target, and the elation of watching large snow clumps burst into a cloud that covers your playmate in white dust (being “hit” could also be pleasurable). This innocent snowball fight among Black children may appear to be an ordinary amusement, but it could have felt more consequential in the context of the segregated South. The joys of “snow-balling” may have offered a momentary salve for the injury of recreational segregation or an indulgence that counteracted the bitterness of being deprived of parks, pools, and playgrounds. Perhaps the activity did not hold this kind of weighty significance drenched in racial meaning, but rather, was a simple, fun afternoon spent romping in the snow. After all, the *Southern Workman* reported on the occasion under its “Every Day Affairs” section of the Hampton School Record, suggesting



Figure 2. Although likely staged, this image, taken in 1902, demonstrates the possibility of Black joy at approximately the time that, according to Rayford Logan, African Americans had reached a point of declension. White photographer and explorer William Henry Jackson took this photograph, possibly at Castillo de San Marcos in St. Augustine, Florida. “Four black boys sitting on a cannon by a waterfront,” LC-D4-30806, Detroit Publishing Company Photograph Collection, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

its quotidian nature. In either case, Black children used their local outdoors as their personal playground. They stepped outside, played in nature, and produced their own joy (Figure 2).

African American children also gravitated toward pleasurable activities requiring more inventiveness. The *Rising Son*, a weekly Black newspaper based in Kansas City, Missouri, thought young people would enjoy making, as curious as it sounds, a “fly see-saw.” To assemble the device, children would place molasses or syrup on both ends of a strip of paper and balance the strip on top of a pencil. The *Son* instructed the players to wait for flies to land on the ends of the contraption, in essence creating a seesaw that served as a toy. The seesaw could be used individually or played competitively as a game, in which case the winner would be the player who accrued the most flies on their side of the device. Constructing the toy, anticipating its functionality, and watching its successful execution may have offered, at worst, a feeling of moderate satisfaction and, at best, genuine amusement. If played collectively, it could have produced a sense of shared wonder, discovery, and camaraderie. Transforming flies, often viewed as symbols of poverty, into sources of pleasure was “an amusing little trick” that the paper believed young people “would find lots of fun.”⁴³ A simple “fly see-saw” may have momentarily combated feelings of disappointment and disenchantment experienced by Black children of the Nadir. Observing children tinker with this peculiar toy



Figure 3. Pictured are two Black girls and a Black boy using tree limbs as clubs and a pinecone as a golf ball, circa 1905. Like the young people who may have experimented with the “fly see saw,” Black children turned to natural resources for their amusement during the Nadir. “Golferinos,” LC-USZ62-77635, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

could have also delighted adults, temporarily reducing their own feelings of dismay. Activities like this did not require many resources—except for the will and affective capacity to indulge in “lots of fun” while weathering the agonies of the Nadir (Figure 3).⁴⁴

The Black press also offered games to adults who sought leisure and laughter at social gatherings. The *St. Louis Palladium* presented readers with “Telegrams,” a party word game in which ten random letters were chosen, and attendees would then create a sentence (or a “telegram”) starting with the selected letters. The example provided by the paper included the letters A, L, W, K, B, E, T, O, G, and H, in which a potential telegram could read, “Another Lad Will Kiss Before Edith Thinks Of Going Home.”⁴⁵ One can imagine the creative, funny, or even bawdy telegrams African American partygoers constructed. If played earnestly, a word game such as this could help form new connections between unacquainted party guests, reveal commonalities between neighbors, engender inside jokes between friends, or strengthen bonds between family members.

Diversions like word games might have fostered merriment, conviviality, and a sense of collective euphoria for Black people subsisting in racist worlds devoid of these delights. African Americans, nevertheless, engaged in their own world making. Private spaces of the home may serve as investigative sites for African American merrymaking during the Nadir, particularly when popular, public spaces of entertainment, like Blackface minstrel and vaudeville shows, often elicited laughter and good feelings at Black people’s expense.⁴⁶ These home spaces allowed African Americans to use what they had at their disposal, in this case, words, to induce joy through Black belonging and fellowship. While they suffered from and struggled against institutions of anti-Black racism, we might imagine that African Americans retreated to their homes to delight in the “divine institution” of play.

From the perspective of the Nadir, these examples—a snowball fight, a game played with houseflies, a word competition—may appear insignificant given the massive structural burdens Black people endured at the turn of the century. However, viewed from a space of joy, these instances may have generated a temporary state of well-being and a positive orientation toward the future that enabled Black sustainability and resolve. They may not have detracted from the ideals of personal sacrifice and racial progress but rather contributed to them. As Du Bois explained, these amusements and their attendant affects could “inspire us for [a] renewed effort in a great cause.”⁴⁷

During the Nadir, W. E. B. Du Bois addressed a Black audience who worried that secular amusements would compromise moral turpitude and thought that self-denial, not joy, facilitated racial advancement. But Du Bois reframed amusement for his listeners, presenting it as a natural, God-given right that provided well-deserved pleasure for an oppressed race. At the end of his speech, he pleaded, “I beg you to strive to change the mental attitude of the race toward amusement for the young, from a wholesale negative to an emphatic positive. Instead of warning young people so constantly against [the] excess of pleasure, let us rather . . . show them that amusement and recreation are the legitimate and necessary accompaniments of work.”⁴⁸ While some disagreed with the premise that pleasure constituted a worthy ideal for Black people living under the strains of disenfranchisement, others, as shown, agreed with Du Bois and indeed helped to alter the race’s attitude toward pleasure. They extracted joy wherever and whenever they could by relaxing at the beach, holding parties, playing games, making toys, and relishing nature. While not documented here, Black people experienced joy in numerous ways, from eating, cooking, playing instruments, “dressing up,” dancing, courting,⁴⁹ napping,

gossiping, and many other quotidian acts. Even under incalculable subjugation, during “the lowest point” of American race relations, Black people developed the affective capacity to cultivate, feel, and express joy.

Charting a history of pleasure during times of racial grief might reveal that the joyful protests of 2020 are part of a time-honored repertoire of Black coping, collective care, and freedom dreaming. Turning our attention to the displays of joy during the 2020 demonstrations and the experiences of pleasure during the Nadir may allow us to appreciate the intertwined, double helix of Black pleasure seeking and freedom seeking throughout African American history. As Black feminist writer adrienne maree brown explains, “True pleasure—joy, happiness, and satisfaction—has been the force that helps us move beyond the constant struggle. . . . Pleasure helps us move through the times that are unfair, through grief and loneliness, through the terror of genocide, or days when the demands are just overwhelming. Pleasure heals the places where our hearts and spirits get wounded. Pleasure reminds us that, even in the dark, we are alive. Pleasure is the point. Feeling good is not frivolous, it is freedom.”⁵⁰ The close relationship between joy and liberation, as brown indicates, is instructive for how we may approach historical studies of Black life. When Black people continued to pursue joy during one of the darkest periods after slavery, as they did during the summer of 2020, they may have been experimenting with how freedom might feel. During dismal times, Black people created their own joy and illustrated that Black life was valuable and Blackness was delightful—that even in racial misery, they had the capacity to feel good, heal themselves, and create an affective reality never meant for them.

Joy, then, has much to offer in how we understand Black social, cultural, and interior life. For instance, although the Nadir, as Logan conceived it, mostly concerned structural, top-down analyses of social and political defeat, we may also approach the Nadir curious about the more intimate manifestations of emotional gratification. We may learn that while misery making was a top-down phenomenon during this period, joy making occurred from the bottom-up. Exploring scenes of delight alongside everyday terror may bring to the surface the inherent ambivalence of Black joy and illustrate how African Americans endured a period like the Nadir with a profound level of emotional nimbleness and complexity. Analyzing joy might also reveal a different kind of “paradox of pleasure”—that joy is both remarkable and ordinary. Black joy is radical and resistant; it can seem especially spectacular under Jim Crow oppression.⁵¹ But Black joy is also mundane and, in a sense, unremarkable, as Black people have often found pathways to pleasure amid sorrow.⁵² Finally, joy may encourage us to consider periods like the Nadir as less static and fixed, and more open to different kinds of historical interpretation. When we think of, study, and write about the Nadir and other “low” moments in African American history, the counterintuitive turn to joy might offer these unexpected and rich analytical possibilities.

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Notes

1 Imani Perry, “Racism Is Terrible. Blackness Is Not,” *Atlantic*, June 15, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/racism-terrible-blackness-not/613039/>.

- 2 Elizabeth Alexander, "The Trayvon Generation," *New Yorker*, June 15, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/06/22/the-trayvon-generation>.
- 3 See also Roger Reeves, "The Dancing Drum: Joy amid the Anger of the Protests," *Yale Review*, June 29, 2020, <https://yalereview.org/article/dancing-drum>. Javon Johnson links joy to the Ferguson uprisings of 2014. Rather than focusing exclusively on Black pain, Johnson wonders "how we might also think about black joy as a theory, a method, and a political device." Johnson, "Black Joy in the Time of Ferguson," *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking 2*, no. 2 (2015): 177–83.
- 4 While written two years before George Floyd's murder, historian N. D. B. Connolly made a prescient observation about the violent political economy that facilitated the return of the Nadir, asserting, "With the presidency of Donald Trump, we can expect a Second Nadir. As was true during the first, white capital firmly holds the levers of both politics and propaganda. If we expect to have any chance at all to prevent the losses of life and rights that white supremacy inevitably exacts, we are going to have to marshal a little Jim Crow wisdom—knowledge carried through the beyond the Nadir—about how racism got us into this mess." N. D. B. Connolly, "To Remake the World: Slavery, Racial Capitalism, and Justice," *Boston Review*, Feb. 21, 2018, <http://bostonreview.net/forum/remake-world-slavery-racial-capitalism-and-justice/n-d-b-connolly-our-second-nadir>.
- 5 At the risk of redundancy, it is important to reiterate that this essay assents to the thesis of "the Nadir" not because I am convinced that the years between 1877 and 1901 constituted the most severe socio-political declension for African Americans. Rather, I use this premise as an occasion to consider the tension between structural misery and Black felicity. Logan's periodization has been a source of debate since its publication, some of which Logan outlined himself in the updated version of the original text. See Rayford W. Logan, *The Betrayal of the Negro: From Rutherford B. Hayes to Woodrow Wilson* (1965; Boston: Da Capo, 1997), xxi–xxii. Original publication 1965. Logan makes other arguments in the book, such as the post-Reconstruction period representing a "betrayal" of promised democracy and participation in civil society for African Americans, which this essay does not address.
- 6 While they do not focus on joy or affect per se, other historians have pointed to the need for more balanced and diverse narratives of the Nadir. See Albert S. Broussard, "Still Searching: A Black Family's Quest for Equality and Recognition during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 22 (Jan. 2023): 3–19; Pero Dagbovie, "Reflections on Conventional Portrayals of the African American Experience during the Progressive Era or 'the Nadir,'" *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 13 (Jan. 2014): 4–27.
- 7 Some onlookers, for instance, mistook dancing during the protests for celebration. See Siobhan Burke, "Dancing Bodies That Proclaim: Black Lives Matter," *New York Times*, June 9, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/09/arts/dance/dancing-protests-george-floyd.html>.
- 8 I use the word "argues" here lightly, as this essay is not meant to serve conclusive purposes. I use a handful of archival and other primary sources to offer a slice of affective history—a tiny portal into how Black people might have experienced joy in the post-Reconstruction period. In doing so, I provide some (but not all) historical grounding and contextualization for a concept, "Black joy," that has garnered increasing interest and rhetorical usage in scholarship, popular culture, and journalism—particularly after George Floyd's murder. See citations in endnotes 9 and 51 as indications of this growing interest.
- 9 Scholars in other humanities fields, however, have used joy and pleasure as analytics, offering thoughtful definitions, meditations, and arguments on Black affect. Here, I offer a selection of some of their insights to demonstrate the productive study of joy and provide a seedbed for a Black joy bibliography. Zadie Smith distinguishes pleasure from joy, noting that pleasure is a straightforward and transient positive feeling while joy is a complicated and "strange admixture of terror, pain and delight." Similarly, Ross Gay wonders if "joy and pain are fundamentally tangled up in one another." Bettina Judd understands joy, from the perspective of Lucille Clifton, as "not without mourning or sorrow" and as a "complex experience of being." Badia Ahad-Legardy also points to the complexity of joy in her study of Black nostalgia, explaining that for people of African descent, joy and other positive feelings, and the memory of happy times, are often enmeshed with trauma and mourning. Lindsey Stewart understands Black joy as a dialectic between Black enchantment and Black tragedy. She examines joy not as a form of resistance but as *refusal*—a mode of agency in its own right, one not concerned with white oppression. She writes, "While resistance foregrounds an oppositional relation between oppressed and oppressors, joy foregrounds a flourishing relation of the self to the self (or, in the case of Black joy, how Black folks relate to one another)." While not focusing on joy but rather pleasure, Tara T. Green partially agrees with Stewart. She argues that for Black women, pleasure "is for the self," and "does not depend on anyone else to be empowering or joyful." In other words, Black women's embrace of pleasure is

neither motivated by resistance to white oppression nor collective racial progress. Tara A. Bynum also asserts that Black pleasure does not necessarily entail collectivity, as it can be “dangerously individual.” Bynum notes that whether individual or collective, the study of pleasure requires an inquisitiveness about interiority and an understanding that “joy lives there” (i.e., in the depths of human subjectivity). In order of mentioned scholarship: Zadie Smith, “Joy,” in *Feel Free* (New York: Penguin, 2018), 331; Ross Gay, *Inciting Joy: Essays* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 2022), 4; Bettina Judd, *Feelin: Creative Practice, Pleasure, and Black Feminist Thought* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2022), 90; Badia Ahad-Legardy, *Afro-Nostalgia: Feeling Good in Contemporary Black Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2021); Lindsey Stewart, *The Politics of Black Joy: Zora Neale Hurston and Neo-Abolitionism* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2021), 9; Tara T. Green, *See Me Naked: Black Women Defining Pleasure in the Interwar Era* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2022), 7; Tara A. Bynum, *Reading Pleasures: Everyday Black Living in Early America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2023), 2.

10 In using several terms interchangeably, like pleasure, delight, enjoyment, feeling good, felicity, and merriment, I leave open the question of how “joy” differs from or aligns with other “happy” emotions and states of being. For the purpose of this essay, I employ the aforementioned terms and others to signal “a vivid emotion of pleasure arising from a sense of well-being or satisfaction,” “the feeling or state of being highly pleased or delighted,” and an “exultation of spirit.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “joy,” accessed Nov. 12, 2022, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/joy_n?tab=meaning_and_use#40461919. A deep engagement with affect theory, while out of the scope of this essay, may inform definitional questions. I acknowledge the value of this scholarship in exploring questions of race, Blackness, and emotion through the following (non-comprehensive) list of works: Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman, “The Black Ecstatic,” *GLQ* 24 (June 2018): 343–65; Colin Patrick Ashley and Michelle Billies, “Affect & Race/(Blackness),” *Athena Digital* 20 (July 2020): 1–15; Lisa M. Corrigan, *Black Feelings: Race and Affect in the Long Sixties* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2020); Ange-Marie Hancock, *The Politics of Disgust: The Public Identity of the Welfare Queen* (New York: New York University Press, 2004); Aida Levy-Hussen, “‘Black Rage’ and ‘Useless Pain’: Affect, Ambivalence, and Identity after King,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112 (Spring 2013): 303–18; Jose Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); Tyrone Palmer, “‘What Feels More Than Feeling?’: Theorizing the Unthinkability of Black Affect,” *Critical Ethnic Studies* 3 (Fall 2017): 31–56; Jamie Ann Rogers, “Invisible Memories: Black Feminist Literature and Its Affective Flights,” in *Affect Theory and Literary Critical Practice: A Feel for the Text*, ed. Stephen Ahern (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 201–16; Britt Rusert, “Disappointment in the Archives of Black Freedom,” *Social Text* 33, no. 4 (2015): 19–33; Sachi Sekimoto and Christopher Brown, *Race and the Senses* (London: Routledge, 2020); Xine Yao, *Disaffected: The Cultural Politics of Unfeeling in Nineteenth-Century America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021).

11 See citations in endnote 9. All works cited, except one, have been published since 2020.

12 Black feminists have long considered questions about the intersection of race, gender, and good feelings. This essay is indebted to Black feminist theorizing on pleasure, which treats pleasure as both a liberatory pursuit for marginalized people and an important object of study. Much (but not all) of this scholarship examines pleasure from the perspective of sexual and sexualized gratification. This study, however, turns away from sex to understand other forms of Black pleasure and aligns with Audre Lorde’s theory of the erotic, which is not necessarily concerned with sex but understands the erotic as a source of knowledge, power, and the capacity for joy. See Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984). For a sample of Black feminist works that contributed to my thinking about pleasure, see adrienne maree brown, ed., *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2019); Mireille Miller-Young, *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); Joan Morgan, “Why We Get Off: Moving Towards a Black Feminist Politics of Pleasure,” *Black Scholar* 45 (Winter 2015): 36–46; Jennifer C. Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading Race, Reading Pornography* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); Bianca C. Williams, *The Pursuit of Happiness: Black Women, Diasporic Dreams, and the Politics of Emotional Transnationalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

13 The challenges listed here represent only a few of the conceptual and methodological difficulties of researching the history of emotion. See, for instance, Barbara H. Rosenwein, “Problems and Methods in the History of Emotions,” *Passions in Context: Journal of the History and Philosophy of the Emotions* 1 (2010):

1–32, and Peter N. Stearns and Carol Z. Stearns, “Emotionology: Clarifying the History of Emotions and Emotional Standards,” *American Historical Review* 90 (Oct. 1985): 813–36.

14 “Emotional communities” here refers to Barbara H. Rosenwein’s formulation in *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).

15 These concerns are echoed in Stewart, *Politics of Black Joy*.

16 Communication and rhetoric researchers Jessy Ohl, Shalonda Capers, and Caran Kennedy assert that when it comes to the study of Black life, “Scholars have a particular role to play by strategically divesting from the intellectual trauma economy and presuming the persistence of joy.” Jessy Ohl, Shalonda Capers, and Caran Kennedy, “Toward the Preservation of Black Joy in Public Memory,” *Black Perspectives*, Oct. 18, 2022, <https://www.aaihs.org/toward-the-preservation-of-black-joy-in-public-memory/>.

17 Brian E. Alnutt, “‘The Negro Excursions’: Recreational Outings among Philadelphia African Americans, 1876–1926,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 129 (Jan. 2005): 73–104; William H. Jones, *Recreation and Amusement among Negroes in Washington, D.C.* (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1927).

18 Davarian L. Baldwin, *Chicago’s New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration, and Black Urban Life* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 204–05.

19 Victoria W. Wolcott, *Race, Riots, and Roller Coasters: The Struggle over Segregated Recreation in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

20 Other historical works explore leisure sites not necessarily for their potential for Black enjoyment but for other kinds of important examinations of race and real estate, southern economic development and tourism, respectability and citizenship, and recreational segregation in the North. These texts have contributed to our understanding of the historical relationships between race and leisure but could potentially inform studies on affect. See Alnutt, “‘Negro Excursions’”; Myra B. Young Armstead, “Revisiting Hotels and Other Lodgings: American Tourists Spaces through the Lens of Black Pleasure-Travelers, 1880–1950,” *Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 25 (Jan. 2005): 136–59; David E. Goldberg, *The Retreats of Reconstruction: Race, Leisure, and the Politics of Segregation at the New Jersey Shore, 1865–1920* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016); Andrew W. Kahrl, *The Land Was Ours: African American Beaches from Jim Crow to the Sunbelt South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012); Anthony J. Stanonis, *Faith in Bikinis: Politics and Leisure in the Coastal South since the Civil War* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2014).

21 This essay is inspired by these cited works on Black amusement, in which pleasure is an expected (but underexplored) theme, as well as studies that provide models for locating joy when and where we assume there is not much to be found. Writing on the African “captive” body during the Middle Passage and slavery, Bibi Bakare-Yusuf reminds us, “Even though history has been terribly unkind to the African body, the body was and still is capable of being something quite beautiful, quite sensuous, quite joyous. There is always a memory of the ‘flesh,’ . . . that was once liberated.” Bakare-Yusuf calls attention not to what is *expected* of the “African body” but to what is *possible*. Stephanie Camp reveals that respite from the misery of slavery provided enslaved people with opportunities for jubilation. Occasionally, bondwomen and men retreated to swamps and wooded areas for “illicit parties” where they would eat, drink alcohol, and dance. Enslaved women used these parties to “dress up” and adorn themselves in ways that gave them great pleasure. As Camp notes, “For those who encounter oppression through the body, the body becomes an important site not only of suffering but also (and therefore) of enjoyment and resistance.” Both Bakare-Yusuf and Camp contend that Black sentience, even during bondage, was not limited to pain and grief but encompassed momentary gratification. Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, “The Economy of Violence: Black Bodies and the Unspeaking Terror,” in *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader*, ed. Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (London: Routledge, 1999), 311–23; Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 62.

22 Tera W. Hunter, *To ‘Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

23 Hunter, *To ‘Joy My Freedom*, 167.

24 Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1996).

25 Ahad-Legardy, *Afro-Nostalgia*, 20.

26 The Civil Rights Act of 1875 made an implicit nod to Black joy. A key part of the act read, “All persons within the jurisdiction of the United States shall be entitled to the *full and equal enjoyment* of the accommodations, advantages, facilities, and privileges of inns, public conveyances on land or water, theaters, and other

places of public amusement; subject only to the conditions and limitations established by law, and applicable alike to citizens of every race and color, regardless of any previous condition of servitude [emphasis added].” The Supreme Court, however, declared the act unconstitutional in 1883. Civil Rights Act of 1875 (18 Stat. 335–7).

27 Logan, *Betrayal of the Negro*.

28 W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (1935; New York: Atheneum, 1992), 30.

29 W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Problem of Amusement,” *Southern Workman* 27 (Sept. 1897): 181.

30 Du Bois, “Problem of Amusement,” 182.

31 Du Bois, “Problem of Amusement,” 182.

32 Du Bois, “Problem of Amusement,” 184.

33 “Africa and Asbury Park,” *New York Times*, July 7, 1887, 4.

34 It is important to note that the mere sight of Black people experiencing joy and expressing success could generate white animosity. African Americans enjoying themselves often invited, and continues to summon, white aggression. See Koritha Mitchell, “Identifying White Mediocrity and Know-Your-Place Aggression: A Form of Self-Care,” *African American Review* 51 (Winter 2018): 253–62.

35 Du Bois, “Problem of Amusement,” 183.

36 “The Demand for Young Men,” *Fisk Herald*, June 1894, 3; box 1, folder 6, Adam Knight Spence and John Wesley Work Collection, Auburn Avenue Research Library on African American Culture and History, Atlanta, Georgia.

37 “Demand for Young Men,” *Fisk Herald*, Auburn Avenue Research Library.

38 As “respectable” places of edification, most Black training schools and higher learning institutions of this era placed restrictions on students’ behavior and extracurricular activities. See Hilary Green, *Educational Reconstruction: African American Schools in the Urban South, 1865–1890* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016); Margaret Lowe, *Looking Good: College Women and Body Image, 1875–1930* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Traki L. Taylor, “‘Womanhood Glorified’: Nannie Helen Burroughs and the National Training School for Women and Girls, Inc., 1909–1961,” *Journal of African American History* 87 (Fall 2002): 390–403.

39 “Storer College,” *Storer Record*, Fall Term 1893, box 18, folder 12, Black Print Culture Collection, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina.

40 “Storer College,” *Storer Record*, Black Print Culture Collection, Duke University.

41 “Storer College,” *Storer Record*, Black Print Culture Collection, Duke University.

42 “Every Day Affairs,” *Southern Workman*, Mar. 1899, 107.

43 “Fun with a Fly See-Saw,” *Rising Son* (Kansas City, Missouri), Jan. 6, 1905, 5.

44 Du Bois defined the ability to feel “pure, open-hearted enjoyment of the beautiful world around us” as a “capacity.” Du Bois, “Problem of Amusement,” 183–84.

45 “Telegrams,” *St. Louis Palladium*, Apr. 4, 1905, 6.

46 Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994). Watkins also notes that, with the exception of Charles Chesnutt, Black writers of the late nineteenth century rarely employed redeeming forms of humor in their work, either using serious and polemical language (e.g., Sutton E. Griggs, James Weldon Johnson, and so forth), or humorous but stereotypical tropes (e.g., Paul Laurence Dunbar).

47 Du Bois, “Problem of Amusement,” 184.

48 Du Bois, “Problem of Amusement,” 184.

49 While out of the scope of this essay, I encourage readers to explore expressions of romantic joy during the Nadir through “Something Good—Negro Kiss,” a recently discovered, twenty-second silent film that portrays Black vaudeville actors exchanging four passionate kisses in 1898. Although scripted, this motion picture of a Black couple runs counter to how we might visualize romantic intersubjectivity during the post-Reconstruction period. It reveals how Black people, putatively unlovable and hopelessly downtrodden, could bask in their own romantic euphoria. As vaudeville actors *not* performing minstrelsy but portraying something quite the opposite, the film may also pose a challenge to the concept of the Nadir. In what is believed to be the first on-screen Black kiss, the film is a striking depiction of Black joy. Jack Wang, “Silent Film of Black Couple’s Kiss Discovered, Added to National Film Registry,” *uchicago news*, University of Chicago Office of Communications, Dec. 12, 2018, <https://news.uchicago.edu/story/silent-film-black-couples-kiss-discovered-added-national-film-registry>.

50 brown, *Pleasure Activism*, 437–38; 441.

51 Several scholars, writers, and journalists have described Black joy as resistance. See, for instance, Burke, “Dancing Bodies That Proclaim: Black Lives Matter”; Gay, *Inciting Joy*; Kleaver Cruz, *The Black Joy Project* (New York: Mariner, 2023); Chante Joseph, “What Black Joy Means—And Why It’s More Important Than Ever,” *British Vogue*, July 29, 2020, <https://www.vogue.co.uk/arts-and-lifestyle/article/what-is-black-joy>; Tracey Michael Lewis-Giggetts, *Black Joy: Stories of Resistance, Resilience, and Restoration* (New York: Gallery, 2022); Kim Pham, “Celebrating Black Joy as an Alternative Form of Resistance and Reclaiming of Humanity,” *Voice of OC*, Feb. 1, 2021, <https://voiceofoc.org/2021/02/celebrating-black-joy-as-an-alternative-form-of-resistance-and-reclaiming-of-humanity/>; Catherine Steele and Jessica Lu, “Defying Death: Black Joy as Resistance Online,” in *A Networked Self and Birth, Life, Death*, ed. Zizi Papacharissi (London: Routledge, 2018), 143–59. On Latinx joy as resistance, see Kristie Soares, *Playful Protests: The Political Work of Joy in Latinx Media* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2023).

52 Jennifer Nash has contended, for instance, that Black motherhood is simply enjoyable and ordinary and not necessarily radical or revolutionary. Jennifer C. Nash, “The Ordinary Pleasures of Black Motherhood,” *Boston Review*, Sept. 19, 2022, <https://bostonreview.net/articles/the-ordinary-pleasures-of-black-motherhood/>.

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