

Black Joy: A Digital Introduction

(Transcript)

Dr. Berry (00:04:11): I'm Dr. Theodora Regina Berry, Vice Provost and Dean for the College of Undergraduate Studies at the University of Central Florida and Professor of Curriculum Studies in the Department of Learning Sciences and Research in the College of Community Innovation and Education at the University of Central Florida.

Dr. Wozolek (00:24:09): My name is Boni Wozolek and I'm the Director of Inclusive Excellence at Penn State Abington and an Associate Professor of Education.

Dr. Berry (00:31:18): And we're going to have a discussion that is really discussing these three sort of opening questions around our project: 1. What does it mean to be Black? 2. What do we know about joy? 3. In what ways do people who self-identify as Black experience joy?

Dr. Wozolek (00:53:20): Great... so... I guess we'll start from the top. I think it's important though, as we get going...I think important and ethical for me to identify myself. I don't identify as Black. I am a biracial, queer woman, and my heritage is from Goa, India and then from the United States. I'm excited to engage in this project with you and to continue thinking about Black joy, and how we understand that as not just scholars, but across um context because I think the robustness of this topic is really important to explore.

Dr. Berry (01:35:16): I identify as Black, and I choose to identify more as Black than African American based on my own experiences and understandings of my family and my history on my father's side. My family is primarily from the Caribbean, from the Bahamas and in Barbados and we have had our own sort of family traditions on my father's side that are very different than my mother's side of the family. My mother and her family have what some people might consider very traditional backgrounds of people who self-identify as African American. My grandparents, or my mother's father's family was from were from Virginia. My mother's mother's family were from South Carolina and immigrated to Philadelphia as a way of building a different life for themselves outside of the segregated South and had traditional trappings in relationship to that experience. My maternal grandparents were the first to leave the South and subsequently moved family members from their home communities to Philadelphia, so, one at a time they are living in my grandparents' house until they were able to find jobs get themselves on their feet and then build their own homes and continue through that process throughout my mother's side of the family. On my father's side of the family, they immigrated to the United States by way of Miami, Florida and the Miami-Dade Community and then found themselves moving to Philadelphia after that and settled in the area. Because of that knowledge and the kind of experiences I had growing up in the Northeast, and going to Philadelphia Public Schools, I really have a different sense of

Blackness than some other people might have as a result of being geographically situated in the South or in the Midwest or even far West, like California or Washington. Understanding how geography and identity have such an important role in how we experience our Blackness.

Dr. Wozolek (04:36:20): Absolutely. So... I guess, then, the question that you posed is what I'd like to think more with you about. That is: How do you understand Blackness? We're thinking about such great multiplicity here, and distilling it seems like a dangerous game to play. It's not one that I wish to engage in. So, when we think about Black joy, which is the focus of this book, and then, specifically within this question, "How do we understand Blackness?" I'm wondering, either through your personal experience and or your scholarly lens, how you have wrestled with these notions about Blackness in specific.

Dr. Berry (05:16:11): My understanding of Blackness is first centered on the experiences I have with my own identity in my family and in public schools and understanding that through those two contextualized experiences that Blackness was in of itself a sense of joy; that there were people who were well educated, people who were well traveled, people who had all kinds of experiences and, more importantly, people who felt that anything was possible as part of this notion of Blackness. But I also understood Blackness as diverse, as complex, and as intricate as a handwoven rug. You know, people who make these handwoven rugs—and I've watched people up close and on television make these rugs—not only have to be concerned about the various strands of yarn that are used in relationship to making the rug, but then the actual weaving process that's engaged in or that that's implemented in the making of the rug and what kind of design is put forward as the weaving is taking place. I never understood Blackness as monolithic by any stretch of the imagination and grew up with individuals who were as different as every single snowflake or every single star in the sky. I also understood people in general as being that unique. So when we talk about the complexity, and the multiplicity, and the multi-dimensionality of people—and those are terms that we used more frequently historically around white people—those kinds of complexities can be applied to all kinds of people, but, most especially to Black people and while we have shared history and some shared experiences as an African diaspora because of many of the things that have happened globally in relationship to the African diaspora, our interests, our desires, our education, our knowledge, our wants and needs are as diverse as anything. So that's really my understanding of Black joy and Blackness because the sources of joy are equally as complex, multi-dimensional, and interesting, and intricate as Blackness is. So, to put it in any kind of box or confined space just really doesn't make sense in relationship to both this notion of Blackness and joy.

Dr. Wozolek (08:29:26): I think that is an interesting breaking point too. I know that we've had this conversation before, but there's the concern, for me anyway, of the linguistic leanings of the word "joy" because when we think about Blackness, and then the intersection of questions of Black joy, it is in one sense a linguistic question of how do we understand that? Now we're speaking English, and we're thinking about the Western leanings of how we understand the word "joy," either in its singularity or in its multiple expressions. But, when we think about how joy gets framed in other languages...let's think about just the continent of Africa and how many languages are spoken there. The idea that how one might directly translate "joy" to any language first might not translate directly, and then it doesn't sit as simply, necessarily, as it might in the English language. This is not to say that using the word joy in English is necessarily a simple task. There's so many ways to express joy, but there are times that in other languages linguistically where joy is not just on its own. It's paired with other understandings. So, because even the word becomes something that, even as a scholar, I sort of trip on. I guess I'm trying to find some footing for this project. I'm wondering what some of your reflections in that light might be.

Dr. Berry (09:58:04): So, first of all, language means so much to me in large part because of my own experiences as a musician and primarily as a vocalist. I was trained mostly in classical music and, as a result of that, European language became centralized in that experience. When I talk about this notion of joy and, even as we have been in the process of developing this introduction for this text, we start out with asking, "How does language really play a role in us understanding this notion of joy?" Then, moving into asking, "How does that language fit into these constructs and understandings of Blackness?" As someone who went to Philadelphia Public Schools back when Latin was required as a language for individuals to learn, I start out with this notion of joy being derived from the Latin word "gaudium," which then is sort of connected to the old French word for joy, which is "joie," but the relationship between the Latin and the French is a word called "gaudere," which means "to rejoice." Having that understanding that there's this evolution of the etymology around joy and that somehow rejoicing was an outgrowth of this expression of joy was really interesting. Then when we get to the English language, there are all kinds of other words that start to evolve around that, whether it's happiness or relation, or state of well-being or contentment, all of those things are affiliated with joy in the English language. When we think about joy in the sense of languages—original languages—of the African continent, and not the colonized language, I'll be specific about that because most of the continent took on languages of colonizers that were forced upon them but then there was Igbo and Swahili that were always present. In relationship to that and including Arabic, and various derivatives of Arabic, that were part of that. What I found in looking at joy in the context of these original languages is that it was so hard...to make it equation from the English language to these original languages that fully expressed the way in which we understood it in English. Because English is my first language and formal language in which I was educated in, trying to find this space of equality between these words was nearly impossible. So, in one language it might be more closely related to this notion of elation, and another language is about rejoicing, and another language is about happiness, and while there's a

relationship between those words, they don't mean exactly the same thing. When we think about Blackness and relationship to joy—while positive psychology might help us to understand constructs related to that in the English language—the minute we place Blackness in the context of this notion of joy, it becomes so much bigger than that. There is a quote from Bettina Love's book that talks about Black joy as the sense of freedom, and that's even much bigger than anything that can be expressed in any language. When we think about words, and how words have meaning, we have to take that almost with a grain of salt because depending on the language upon which those words were built the meaning becomes more complex and dynamic. I think joy is one of those words that is complex, dynamic, and contextual.

Dr. Wozolek (15:06:23): Absolutely. I'm wondering, then... There are so many examples across literatures that I can think of... the intersections between joy and questions of resistance, refusal, and liberation...all of those things. I'm thinking specifically about James Baldwin's *Sunny's Blues* where there's this overarch of laughter, smiling, and happiness in the text. The narrator uses this when things are a little murky to sort of grasp clarity. The idea of joy being something that you grasp, that you hold on to for a sense of clarity. I'm thinking about the ways that the Black Panthers used questions of joy in terms of liberation, resistance, and refusal. I'm thinking about people that I consider co-conspirators, like Walter Gershon's work on Black joy that talks about it through sonic understandings. As we both come to these understandings through curriculum studies and curriculum theorizing, I'm wondering about the curriculum of Black joy, because of the expression, these intersections, and the tensions that exist within it. I'm wondering if you can speak to that a little bit as well.

Dr. Berry (16:20:10): When we think about this notion of Black joy in relationship to curriculum studies... First of all, I happen to be one of these extremely geeky people that, when we start these conversations around curriculum studies, gives me a sense of joy. The power that's there in relationship to this notion of understanding knowledge—sources of knowledge, what knowledge is, how it's constructed, how it's produced, how it's understood. Then, for me, as a scholar, my focus on knowledge in the context of Blackness and what we deem as important to know, what's valued in Black space, is truly important. In thinking about curriculum studies and this notion of Black joy, the goal here is to really understand what do individuals, and particularly Black individuals, but individuals everywhere--and the word that comes to mind here is "public curriculum"—What the individuals everywhere in the public sphere need to know about what brings Black people joy? This is particularly important in this current moment where for the last four to five years, and I'm going to say much longer than that, going back to Shawn Bell in New York, where Black people have been in the public sphere around the knowledge of what it is that is causing pain to the Black community. In all of the scholarship, all of the journalism, all of the conversations, all the history about the painful moments of the Black experience and what we think we know about the knowledge associated with the pain of Black people that it became really important to engage in a conversation that was kind of the flipside of the same coin of the Black experience. While we have had

public conversations and gain public knowledge about Black pain, it is now time for us to have a conversation to gain public knowledge in the public sphere about what provides Black joy, and how complex and intricate that is and ask, "In what ways are we constructing our own joy? In what ways are we understanding our own joy? What ways are we producing spaces and knowledge around our own joy? In doing so, what are we then privileging other people to know about Blackness?"

Dr. Wozolek (15:06:23): So, I do want to spend a little bit of time thinking about the format of this book. I know that this is something that you and I kicked around quite a bit because we're talking about this thing that exists in multiplicity, not only in terms of questions of joy but also in terms of Blackness. How does one make that tangible in a book of all things?

Dr. Berry (16:20:10): When we think about books, back when I was a grad student, back when you were a grad student, the book was this tangible thing that had pages, it had a cover. We had to think about the design of the cover, we had to think about the organization of the text in a way that was traditional for a scholarly piece of work. While this is a book in some form of the meaning of the word "book," this is more about a production of knowledge that represents Black joy and its multiplicities. What was important to both you, and what I really valued about this partnership in this work is that we're engaged in, is the understanding and the need to ensure that it is dynamic, complex, fluid and its representations of joy because joy is, in fact, all of those things and Black joy is definitively all of those things. So, a book is a bit flat in relationship to what it is that we're attempting to do. It certainly defines the scholarly project in a contextual way, but it's more than that, much the same way that Black joy is more than just about Blackness and joy, but it's about all the complexities and multiplicities around that and allowing the contributors to express joy in ways that are authentic to their experiences. As such we were on the same page, and I was so glad that you introduced this notion of it being a work that was multimedia in its delivery, because then it allows for a broader audience to be engaged with the knowledge that's being presented.

Dr. Wozolek (22:16:10): I appreciate the understanding from a critical disability standpoint that we're engaging in what it means to have this knowledge live in different places that is accessible in different sorts of ways. To that end, I'm going to speak for both of us in this idea that while this is a project that lives in a certain time, the hope that, on one hand, for me, I'm hoping for something that is inspirational across communities. When we think about Black joy, as somebody who sits with Black communities, but is not a part of Black communities, I want to inspire a sense of multiplicity, the understanding of these multiplicities across communities in a very fluid sense. This project exists in a moment, but there's the understanding that Black joy does not begin or end with this project.

Dr. Berry (23:15:04): Oh, absolutely right!

Dr. Wozolek (23:16:21): So, what does that mean as it carries forward?

Dr. Berry (23:19:23): Right. This is also about ways in which individuals who are non-Black can really understand what it means to be in allyship with the Black community in the various ways that that an ally can look. It's interesting because there's a documentary on Netflix that Chelsea Handler did about privilege and, particularly, white privilege. One of the things that she talks about is the fact that non-black people have a lot of opportunities to engage with each other and other people that really value the Black experience. When she said that, it really spoke to me in a way that valued the multiplicity and complexity of the Black experience and the ways in which it can live in so many different spaces without feeling like you've got to march out in a protest with people to be an ally, or you got to wear a t-shirt, or something like that. Because there's so many ways to do that, I think this this work provides an opportunity for contributors to represent and express the many ways in which Black joy lives, how complex it is, and that while as complex and multi-dimensional, that it has a life of its own that I'm hoping through this work will continue long after I retire-- I don't know when that ever is going to happen. You know, long after your kids have graduated from college that somehow this work will continue to reverberate like ripples in a pond that just keep going.

Dr. Wozolek (25:47:08): Then, that question of allyship. I know that many of our colleagues have started differentiating between questions of allyship, being an accomplice, or being a co-conspirator. I'm reminded of so many of the Black Lives Matter protests where Black joy has become foregrounded. There are some in California I was reading about where Black joy necessarily undergirds that sort of work right through music, dance, and things like that. Part of me wonders what means to be a co-conspirator for Black joy. We think about this so many times in spaces of resistance, through the Black Lives Matter movement, but what does it mean to be co-conspirator of black joy through these sorts of projects and other facets of our lives?

Dr. Berry (26:35:18): I'm glad you raised the point about the various ways in which people can operate within the Black experience as a non-Black person either as an ally an accomplice or co-conspirator. For me, not everybody's meant to be at the co-conspirator level. As much as not everybody's meant to be at the accomplishment level or the ally level. It really is about your own sincere willingness and ability to engage with the Black community to be a co-conspirator. However, I would put Bill Ayers as one of those people who has been co-conspirator which, means that you're willing to really put a lot of things on the line to ensure that the experiences of Black people are not only heard, but that wrongs are rectified in very meaningful ways. I think there are a lot of non-Black people who are accomplices because they can be engaged in the context text of their own experiences, helping Black people move forward in their experiences.

For instance, as an academic there can be non-Black people who mentor Black scholars and help them to get promoted to associate professor or full Professor. There can be non-Black people who help people get grants or help them get into an administrative role. And used...what I like to say in a Marvel comic, sense of way, using their powers for good and not for evil. But the ally is typically that person who is going to engage in conversations with people with whom they feel comfortable. Whenever some uncomfortable point might come up, they're not going to really risk too much, right? So, each of these identities has a different risk factor associated with it right, and it can't be just performative. It's got to come from a place of authenticity and sincerity that you really feel, that's not just for the person that you know personally. Allies tend to engage whenever it affects the person they know personally. "You can't say that about so-and-so because I know their work and they're not like these other people they're really great people..." Sometimes they might speak out about some other thing that's kind of generic, but usually where it gets sensitive for the allies when it affects the person that they know. They're willing to take the risk for that person because they know enough about that person, their work, their values, and that sort of thing that they can speak up. Or they know enough about a situation where they can personally speak to that without putting too much at risk. But the greater your level is if you become an accomplice or become a co-conspirator, the greater the risk is to yourself for speaking up on behalf of other people. But, this is the beauty of it... the greater that risk that that individual is willing to take, that non-Black person is willing to take, the greater sense of Black joy that person has access to. So, while we consider Black joy to be a something that is exclusively part of the Black experience, when you become a co-conspirator there's the potential for you to have access to that Black joy too. It's the kind of joy that is not accessible to just anybody because Black joy... on the other side of it has that Black pain, that oppression, that conflict, that negative history that each and every one of us, when we walk into a room with a bunch of non-Black people, are holding on our shoulders every single day. It's interesting because some people want to believe that structural and institutional racism no longer exist, that we've put in place laws and other mechanisms, and that with the passage of time, those things have waned away. They want to believe that when whenever we see individuals who are engaging in such acts it is individual racism, that systems in and of themselves, governments institutions are not engaged in practices that uphold racism in some way shape form or fashion but that is simply not true. The conversations that I myself have to have with young people about how they show up in a space even when they're just driving a car or walking into a hotel are not conversations that many non-Black people have to have with young people about those kinds of things because those spaces, those structures, those institutions, even governmental laws, have a different way of impacting Black people that present themselves as forms of oppression and conflict that make Black joy inaccessible to people who have not had to have that experience.

Dr. Wozolek (33:30:21): Yes... On that, I think it's important to think about systemic racism and systemic joy. Hopefully, the representations in this text. I just wanted to open it up in case you have anything else that you want to add to this digital introduction.

Dr. Berry (33:49:11): I have to say that I am thrilled to have you as a co-conspirator in this project and really excited about the contributions and the representations of Black joy that will be part of this work, and to really have an opportunity to pivot a bit around the conversation of Blackness—not to pretend as if oppression and discrimination don't still exist—but to view the ways in which we've been able, as a community, to survive oppression, conflict, and discrimination through our own sense of joy, our own understandings of joy, our own definitions and meanings of joy in whatever language that we choose to deliver that in.

Dr. Wozolek (34:58:10): Yeah...all right well thank you so much for your time, and thank you, obviously, to the listener as they engage in this work.