

ON RETHINKING THE POLITICS AND POSSIBILITIES OF JOY

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Over and over you can be sure
There will be sorrow but you will endure (You will endure)
Where there's a flower, there's the sun and the rain
Oh, but it's wonderful, they're both one in the same

Joy and pain are like sunshine and rain
Joy and pain are like sunshine and rain
(Do it one more time)
Joy and pain are like sunshine and rain
(Up and down and all around that goes)
Joy and pain are like sunshine and rain
Joy and pain are like sunshine and rain

“Joy and Pain” by Frank Beverly and Maze (1980)

This year's 2022 AAAS Annual Conference's Call for Proposals (CFP) urges us to reflect on the trajectory and project of Asian American studies through the prism of entangled histories of ruin and renewal. In reading the CFP for this year's conference, I was struck by one of the questions that looks to the current conjuncture as an occasion upon which to think through the indispensability of cultivating joy, pleasure, and love in an age of ruin and renewal. I'm particularly interested and intrigued by the notion of joy, a seemingly simple and straightforward term that is easy to take for granted or dismiss as fleeting or superfluous. The CFP seems to invoke a more expansive notion of joy, a notion that gestures toward imbricated histories of ruin and renewal, one that is resonant with Black feminist thought and politics, which has a long and robust history of exploring the radical and transformative possibilities of joy. What also comes to mind is Nick Montgomery and carla bergman's notion of joyful militancy, a term they came up with in order to name and tap into the collective capacity of people to effect social change. In their theoretical scheme, to experience joy is not simply reactive; it is very much grounded in what they describe as “the growth of people's capacity to do and feel new things.”¹ Here,

1. Nick Montgomery and carla bergman, *Joyful Militancy: Building Thriving Resistance*

Montgomery and bergman are drawing from Spinoza's concept of joy to reorient our understanding of joy, conceiving of joy in terms of power; specifically, "an increase in one's power to affect and be affected" and "the capacity to do and feel more."²

I'm particularly interested in what it means to think of joy in relation to and within the context of Filipinx American studies. The CFP prompted me to think of how Filipinx American studies has served and continues to serve as a site for the cultivation of joy and how we go about cultivating an archive of joy. Affect, of course, has been a focal point of inquiry in the field for some time now. I have in mind the work of scholars such as Martin Manalansan, Allan Isaac, Jeff Santa Ana, Valeria Francisco-Menchavez, and others who have done important work in this area. In other words, the theoretical and methodological protocols of Filipinx American studies have always accounted for the kind of work that emotion does and what kind of effects it produces. Joy, however, remains undertheorized. Accordingly, I look to this roundtable as an opportune moment to examine how joy has been crucial to the work we do. I look at it as an opportune moment to think through what it would mean for Filipinx American studies to pursue joy as an analytic in a critical and sustained manner; what lines of inquiry are opened up? And how does it pave the way for (re)considerations of other interrelated but distinct formations such as love and pleasure?

Re-visiting joy

In conventional terms, joy is viewed as synonymous or interchangeable with happiness, an individual feeling that we should all strive for in our quest for the good life or our search for personal fulfillment. It is construed as oppositional to those emotions configured as "reactionary," emotions (e.g., anger, resentment, and bitterness) that supposedly get in the way of attaining a happy and fulfilling life. What Black feminist theorizing has taught us, however, is that joy is grounded in struggle, a way to work through rather than eschew pain and suffering (hinted at in the epigraph that opens this piece). Black joy constitutes a form of refusal against the inevitability of premature black death, offering glimpses of other worlds and realities predicated on radically different modes of existence and relations. In the words of Francesca Sobande & Akwugo Emejulu,

Joy always creeps up on you, you never quite know when you will be struck by it but when you are, you pause and look again at the world with new eyes. In this way, joy is a shield, a protection against all that would rob us of our sense of self.

in *Toxic Times* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2017), 60.

2. *Ibid.*, 29n30. [CMOS 17: use *Ibid* now only after two mentions of the same authors/publication.]

Joy is a kind of protection magic against those forces that celebrate our destruction and death. Joy refuses death and it refuses the narrative of misery that so many wish to construct about the nature of Black life generally and Black womanhood, specifically.³

Experiencing and claiming joy opens up space for the affirmation of Black life, a mode of reimagining and reclaiming futures that are not bounded by the strictures of anti-blackness. Accordingly, Black feminist theorizing provides an invaluable vantage point for discerning the transformative possibilities of joy while at the same remaining wary of the perils and pitfalls of resorting to neoliberal iterations of joy. In advancing a more expansive notion of joy, Black feminist theorizing speaks to the indispensability of creating and sustaining spaces of joy as a way to counter ongoing threats against Black existence.

To return to the question of the status of joy within Filipinx American studies, it seems counter-intuitive to think of the project and archive of Filipinx American studies in terms of joy given the way unhappiness, misery, suffering, struggle, and despair have historically generated much of the field imaginary of Filipinx American studies. Scholarship that engages these so-called “negative” emotions is critically necessary, illuminating the workings of empire and its conditions of possibility, but so has joy. What if we considered joy as fundamental to contesting the affective work and machinations of empire that make it difficult to imagine otherwise? What would it look like if joy informed the field imaginary of Filipinx American studies? How does joy compel Filipinx American studies to rethink its theoretical preoccupations and political investments? The AAAS annual conference served as an occasion for joyful encounters, an auspicious moment to re-connect and re-engage with colleagues, mentors, and mentees face-to-face. These encounters, of course, take on added significance in the wake of the COVID pandemic. In other words, we simply cannot take for granted the intimacy afforded by physical gatherings. Instead, it places the onus on all of us to cultivate moments and spaces of joy, both virtual and in-person. This speaks to the Filipinx American studies I’m interested in, a Filipinx American studies that brings into critical view the various permutations of joy, embraces joyful transformation as a catalytic force, and fosters joyful encounters in a variety of sites and spaces.

3. Francesca Sobande and Akwugo Emejulu, “The Black Feminism Remix Lab: On Black feminist joy, ambivalence and futures, *Culture, Theory and Critique* (2021): 5.