feral feminisms
All Worn Out in the Academy: Dreaming for Spirit-Healing Education
issue 18 · fall 2026

Black Joy Vibes: Freedom Dreaming Through Collaborative Playlist Creation

Brenna Pinckard, Alyson Renaldo, and Stephanie Lurch

This paper reflects on the experience of collaborative playlist curation and listening within the neoliberal university. It draws on the authors' personal reflections alongside Afro-futurism and Afro-pessimism to consider the role of music and shared listening within the Black radical tradition. The paper turns toward joy as a methodological and interpretive practice, not as a refusal of Afro-pessimism, but as a response that foregrounds the critical importance of collective imagining and relationality. Ultimately, it argues that collaborative meaning-making through music can generate forms of relational space and practice within the university, offering possibilities for connection within otherwise isolating institutional conditions.

Introduction

During a particularly grey January, in a graduate seminar titled Black Radical Artists and Thinkers, we were tasked by our professor, Dr. rosalind hampton, with collaboratively curating a playlist that engaged themes from the Black Radical Tradition (2025). What began as a run-of-the-mill, just-get-it-done course assignment became something more; it became an experiment in meaning-making and freedom dreaming within the hyper-individualized space of the neoliberal university. Through our collaborative playlist creation, our study group found ourselves grappling not only with course concepts such as Afro-pessimism, racial capitalism, and liberation, but also with questions of how we might continue imagining possibility amid the exhaustion and despair that often infiltrated our environments, lives, and thus, our selfhoods.

This article reflects on collaborative listening as both methodology and praxis. Drawing on Black radical thought, we argue that playlist curation and communal listening can function as practices of care that interrupt academic fragmentation and cultivate spaces of collective imagining. Music, in this context, becomes intervention rather than set dressing, a catalyst for collaborative witnessing that extends not simply from artist to audience but between audience members. In the process of our playlist creation, we asked the question: *What does it mean to be radical*? During a Sunday morning FaceTime conversation early in the project, we were sluggish, slow to speak. Unsettled, we settled on a shared thread, a value that we wanted to reverberate throughout our chosen songs: joy. It wasn't cloudy grey skies we wanted, but the warmth of the sun, a persistent undercurrent of light in a world that often smothers our flames.

Within the Black Radical Tradition, music has long served as a site of survival, resistance, and futurity. As Robin D.G. Kelley (2002) reminds us, freedom dreams emerge not only through political struggle but through the radical imagination itself. Our playlist emerged from this tradition while also responding to the affective conditions of the present moment: burnout, alienation, and the pressures of neoliberal academic life. We wanted to acknowledge our despair—give it a formal, chaste nod—but turn open-armed toward the idea of joy. In the beginning of our working together, that is what joy felt like: an *idea*, something faraway, only to

be dreamed of. Joy for us was not a form of naive optimism or an escape, but instead a radical insistence on life and connection, despite conditions that attempt to foreclose them. As we worked together, joy became more than an idea, but something that started to emerge in our interactions, our writing, and in ourselves.

Our question remains: *What do you hear when you listen*? To collectively bear witness requires more than spectating, but active efforts toward understanding and, hopefully, connection. We can all turn the radio on or put our playlist on shuffle and hum along absentmindedly, but to really listen is to include your whole self as you do so, to listen *present-mindedly*, in the pursuit of its expansion and alteration. In what follows, we reflect on the playlist as a method, analyze its themes within the Black Radical Tradition, and consider how listening together cultivates care and community in spaces otherwise marked by fragmentation and exhaustion. The practice of a listening party is a soul-sharing experience, and now, we invite you to join us.

Listen closely: Do you feel the care?

Methodology

Our methodology in selecting songs was rooted in joy. By this, we mean choosing songs that recognize struggle while still insisting on joy, whether lyrically, sonically, or through their cathartic effect on the listener. We understand joy and pain not as oppositional forces but as coexisting realities; what makes radical joy so powerful is its persistence in the shadow of pain. To prioritize joy, then, is to prioritize life, love, and the ongoing practice of imagining the world otherwise.

We acknowledge the significance of Afro-pessimist frameworks, which understand anti-Blackness as foundational to social life and not simply as a form of prejudice or discrimination. In this view, anti-Blackness shapes both cultural imagination and material relations, resulting in the structural denial of Black humanity and the positioning of Black people as socially dead (Sharpe, 2016). Our movement toward optimism is not a rejection of this understanding, but an attempt to pursue another path: one defined by living, breathing, sweating life rather than remaining solely within the grammar of death. Christina Sharpe conceptualizes "the wake" as not only the life that carries in the face of death, but as "the track left on the water's surface by a ship; the disturbance caused by a body swimming or moved, in water; it is the air currents behind a body in flight; a region of disturbed flow" (2016, 3). In engaging these frameworks, we found ourselves drawn not only to the wake itself, but also to the horizon beyond it: the place where the sky and water meet, bleeding orange-blue hues, a promise of possibility.

Afro-futurism, then, became an important connective thread within our playlist, though we resist locating ourselves too rigidly within any singular theoretical tradition. We understand Afro-futurism as a practice of re-imagining, a mode of engaging futurity that works to transform the present by opening alternative possibilities for Black life. To invest in hope, we must first be able to locate hope and imagine a freer future time, a harnessing of predictive power (Eshun 2003). We came to this project as three students with distinct relationships to Blackness, music, joy, and political imagination. Our listening practices, musical attachments, and interpretive frameworks differ. What brought us together was not theoretical uniformity, but a shared commitment to optimism despite all that renders optimism difficult. In this sense, collaborative playlist curation became both method and praxis: an interdisciplinary, polyphonic, and relational practice of care.

In curating our playlist, we sought songs that hold tension: tracks that dream of freedom in an unfree world, that call for love despite racial capitalism (the understanding that

"exploitation wrought by capitalism is racialized" and that "racism produces a 'consistent disadvantage' for racially oppressed communities") that offers recognition and belonging, and that invites listeners into celebration (Osuna 2017, 26). Our playlist insists that struggle must not be the final world. As Sounds of Blackness reminds us in our playlist's opening track, "never say die … as long as you keep your head to the sky" (Sounds of Blackness 1991).

Overture

Having established our methodology, we move from theory to practice. Each song in our playlist was selected not only for its musicality, but for the ways it embodies joy, care, and radical imagining. Though this playlist was curated collectively, we each arrived at the project with different relationships to music, memory, and listening itself. For Alyson, music offers a permission structure to feel free even within constraint; for Steph, Black music recalls childhood memories of a Caribbean household where artists like Bob Marley and Patti LaBelle were understood as freedom fighters; for Brenna, music offers windows to other worlds and souls, an escape and antidote for loneliness, a place for dreaming. Music, for us, is at once sacred, embodied, communal, melancholic, and deeply affective. It is something we move with and through.

These different relationships shaped our song selections and our reflections. Some songs reminded us of gospel choirs and collective worship; others emerged through solitary walks, long drives, moments of exhaustion, or memories of being held together by sound. We each took a turn at writing track-by-track reflections for the songs most meaningful to us, and these analyses reflect our distinct voices as well as our practice of finding commonality through difference. We are individual and not, together and not, and the practice of collaborative playlist curation and listening reflects that harmonized disjointedness.

Our reflections are organized as a series of movements, much like a symphony: Each track stands on its own yet contributes to a larger narrative. This narrative mirrors our pedagogical journey of grappling with Afro-pessimism, feeling unmoored, and ultimately discovering communal joy through collaborative listening (Kelley 2002, 5). Just as a musical movement can be both self-contained and part of a whole, our tracks reflect individual perspectives woven into collective meaning—commonalities across differences.

We move you through our playlist, track by track, tracing threads of joy, calls for presence and love, and freedom dreaming. When individual musical movements are put together, they become a symphony. As you read and listen, we invite you to experience what we experienced: the power of listening together, of shared care, of moving and being moved.

Movement I: "Optimistic"—Sounds of Blackness (1991)

Stephanie: Our journey begins with "Optimistic" by Sounds of Blackness, a track that perfectly embodies the joy and resilience at the heart of our playlist. Choosing this song, I was reminded by our group's methodology of joy: love over hate, optimism over despair. Sounds of Blackness is a vocal and instrumental ensemble from Minnesota known for their gospel, R&B, soul, and jazz performances. I was drawn to their gospel roots, having recently experienced the University of Toronto's Faculty of Music gospel choir live, which left me energized and up on my feet, unshackled. This was an embodied experience, where we sang heartfelt words and felt something

deep in our souls that united us: arms raised, hands held, voices raised in unison. In that moment, optimism did not feel abstract, but embodied: a collective refusal to surrender to despair.

The refrain: "As long as you keep your head to the sky, you can win" embodies the methodological stance of our playlist (Sounds of Blackness, 1991). It reflects the resilience and humanity of Black people in the face of systematic oppression, which George Lipsitz (2017) identifies as central to the Black Radical Tradition. For me, reclaiming humanity, or re-humanizing ourselves, is a radical and necessary act. This aligns with Robin Kelley's assertion: "Any serious motion toward freedom must begin in the mind in that head lifted to the sky" (2002, 5).

Hearing the song, I also thought about Afro-futurism: Black people creating positive identities in spaces that have historically sought to constrain us. Here, optimism emerges not as denial, but as a refusal to allow oppression to delimit the imagination. It becomes a deliberate act of envisioning life beyond oppression.

Movement II: "Broken Clocks"—SZA (2017)

Brenna: I chose SZA's "Broken Clocks," from her 2017 album *Ctrl*. I attach this song with a memory of walking to work during one particularly hard winter of my life: It made me feel at once, seen, and reminded me of something beyond the mundane. In this song, SZA details the frustrations and, more sparingly, the elations of living under a capitalist system that regulates time and productivity. As Damien M. Sojoyner explains, time is "an instrument utilized to levy punitive force upon those who Ruth Wilson calls the 'unfree'" (2017, 59–60). The speaker in the song expresses her dilemma of existing in this capitalist world, stating that she "ain't got no time / just burning daylight" and that she "[doesn't] eat / can't sleep past 9 a.m." (SZA 2017). She oscillates between giving into this individualistic, hustle culture–like structure ("can't beat 'em just join the party / I don't wanna, don't need nobody") and acknowledging that at the heart of her life is still love, but almost as an afterthought, something she must keep reminding herself ("Think I forgot / you love me") (SZA 2017).

The song's structure mirrors this temporal dissonance: The lyrics mess with time, mixing the periods of time the speaker mentions, until time is but a blurry conceit; SZA sings about taking things "day by day" but also about being ten years old, about a relationship from three years ago, about her lunch break, and about being late this morning—her timeline shifts, always jumping around with the stream-of-consciousness style of the song.

SZA's voice acts as a melody that glides over top of the mid-tempo beat, her vocals guiding the thrust of the song. Though the speaker herself exists very much in the throes of a racial capitalist world, living paycheck to paycheck and wondering if she should return to her job at the strip club, the song itself underscores the fragility of this structure and reminds the listener of what is really at stake: love for one another, "still" (SZA, 2017). This song resonates precisely because it captures the temporal exhaustion of neoliberal life: the feeling of always moving, always working, always arriving late to oneself, but insists of the persistence of intimacy and care, however fractured or difficult they may become under racial capitalism.

Movement III: "What the World Needs Now"—Luther Vandross (1994)

Alyson: Luther Vandross's rendition of "What the World Needs Now" transforms a familiar song into something both intimate and communal. Originally written by Burt Bacharach and

Hal David in 1965, the song has been performed by many artists, but Vandross's version carries a particular weight. His warm delivery makes the lyrics feel less like a cliché and more like a collective prayer: "What the world needs now is love, sweet love / it's the only thing that there's just too little of" (Vandross 1994).

Vandross's arrangement exemplifies what Naomi Pabst terms hybridity: "[Enabling] us to conceive of a blackness that crosscuts, overlaps, and blends with other categories, racial and otherwise" (2009, 113). By reinterpreting a mainstream song through a Black musical sensibility, Vandross expands the boundaries of Black music. Songs such as this persist across generations precisely because they are rarely listened to alone; they move through households, car rides, kitchens, churches, and family memory. The song demonstrates how love and care, conveyed through performance, can serve as resistance and affirmation of humanity. This song invites us to remember what happens when we lose our proximity to joy, it beckons us to move back to what matters.

Movement IV: "I'm Here"—Cynthia Erivo (2016)

Stephanie: I chose this song because it moves something deep within me. Though I'm not what people would typically call an artist, I practice the art and science of medicine. My medium is people. I engage people in conversation; I help them dream, bend, and I move along a journey so that they can live their best lives. Make no mistake, while I'm helping them move, I'm also helping myself. It is a communal endeavor.

During the hook of the song, Erivo (2016) sings: "I'm beautiful, yes, I'm beautiful, and I'm here," capturing the character's realization of her own worth and strength. Though she says it for herself, she also says it for all who have ever felt dehumanized and unloved. Listening to Erivo's performance, I am reminded of what Robin D. G. Kelley describes as a "scream in the night, an emancipation of language and old ways of thinking" (2002, 10).

This "scream in the night" resonates in Erivo's performance. The character's epiphany, the declaration "I'm here," is not simply individual affirmation but a re-humanizing refusal of erasure. Here, I am reminded of Walidah Imarisha's discussion of visionary fiction, where she insists: "Once the imagination, the mind is unshackled, liberation is truly limitless" (2018, 11:16). This song carries that same spirit, unshackling imagination through unapologetic presence, affirming that self-love is inseparable from collective survival.

Movement V: "Saturn"—SZA (2024)

Brenna: Returning to SZA, seven years after the release of "Broken Clocks," "Saturn" explores existential dread and self-doubt through the lens of a speaker who longs for something more and imagines that "life's better on Saturn" (SZA 2024). The song engages in an act of radical imagining over dreamy piano keys that invoke futuristic ideals of space. This is an example of what Walidah Imarisha (2018) calls "visionary fiction" in song form, although the song spends more time expressing the desire to envision rather than necessarily doing the logistical work of that envisioning. The speaker is questioning the world as it is, asking "why?" and asking the audience to "make some noise [...] if there is another universe" (SZA 2024). The song itself offers us this noise, answering the speaker's call.

The song is personal and fraught with the speaker's own fears and anxieties and their pattern of "floating away" when faced with pain, but at the same time, it is universal. When SZA sings "I'll be better on Saturn / none of this matters," the focus appears to be on individual transformation, but then background vocals kick in, transforming the statement into a communal sentiment—what begins as private despair gradually becomes collective longing (SZA 2024). Amid the "Hell" of racial capitalism, the song acts as a moment of radicalization as SZA sings, "If there's a point to being good / then where's my reward? / the good die young and poor / I gave it all I could" (SZA 2024). She appears to give up on the capitalist system she had invested in, along with the vices used to cope with it, referred to as the pattern of "floating away." Despite this, the overall song is hopeful, as the speaker assures herself, "there's got to be more" and continues "dreaming of Saturn" (SZA 2024).

As Walidah Imarisha asserts in her introduction to *Octavia's Brood*, "for those of us from communities with historic collective trauma, we must understand that each of us is already science fiction walking around on two legs"—here, SZA's speaker embodies that, feeling out of place on Earth (Imarisha and brown 2015, 4). Though the song is personal, it also acts as an anthem, as SZA "demands something of the listener," to "find something worth saving" and dream up their own version of Saturn (SZA 2024). It is a song that I kept coming back to during that dreary January when our group came together, one that lifted me up to elsewhere. As I learned about Afro-futurism throughout our course, my mind always returned to "Saturn," both the song itself, and the vision of a new life SZA helped me imagine, to the material power of dreaming.

Movement VI: "Ah Feel to Party"—Black Stalin (1991)

Alyson: "Ah Feel to Party" by Black Stalin (1991) invites joy; it's about gathering, dancing, and carefree celebration. This song speaks of joy and levity in relation to the Black man's life experience. It is an unapologetic invitation to shift thoughts away from struggle and toward a lightness of being. In a world where Black masculinity is so often framed through suffering and resilience, "Ah Feel to Party" offers another possibility: happiness. To my mind, this is an immensely powerful stance. Through all that you've endured, you still want to celebrate? The song responds with a resounding yes.

The song reminds us that despite the lingering violences of colonialism and racial capitalism, the Black man still feels to jam, still feels to party, still feels to boogie-woogie. Celebration here is not escapism, but affirmation. It insists that Black life cannot be reduced solely to struggle or survival. Black Stalin closes the playlist with unapologetic joy and invitation to the party, a final movement in the form of offering.

When I hear the beat and lyrics of this tune, I am instantly transported into a realm where I can imagine myself and my male counterparts unencumbered by past or present violence, and what an incredibly powerful sensation that is. It continually undermines any crystallization of cynicism or despair and reconnects me with something that discourses of progress and resistance can sometimes overshadow: the reality that there is much to celebrate. Whenever this song plays, my body keeps time to its rhythm, and keeping in time with this rhythm means keeping in time with a reminder that we are and will always be.

Again, celebration as an element of optimism is not a challenge to Afro-pessimism. Rather, celebration names the very space pessimism seeks to protect. This song tells us that no matter what is happening, it is okay to feel, okay to feel good, okay to feel joyful. As a matter of

fact, it may be one of the most progressive things that we can do. I have no memory of a time in my life before this song and the genre of calypso/Soca. My upbringing was always punctuated by celebrations of us. This listening party permitted me the privilege of explicitly naming just how sustaining and life-giving those celebratory postures have been and continue to be.

Conclusion

By opening with optimism and closing with unapologetic joy, our playlist embodies the belief that art is not ornamental but transformative. In choosing joy, we do not ignore the realities of struggle; rather, we hold struggle alongside the radical insistence on life, love, and possibility. The playlist serves an enactment of what Kelley (2002) calls freedom dreams: visions of liberation born not from abstract theory alone but from the lived textures of sound, gathering, and meaning-making.

In our small group of three, we had been vulnerable in the act of listening to one another's songs, in the act of sharing music, which is another way of sharing memories, attachments, ideas. Now, we were to share this with the wider audience of our classmates. Before we began our listening party, we shared nervous glances but went up to the front of the classroom as a united front. Alternating hitting the play and pause button as each of us read our track analysis after each song, waiting for a nod to keep going. The whole room sat with each song, nodding along, tapping feet, staring out the window, all of us present. Brenna fidgeted nervously. Steph looked warmly out toward the room. Alyson, who could not be there due to a loss in the family, still felt present through her choice of songs, and we ended our presentation by sharing a voice note from her.

In it, she said: "I'm of the belief that the most radical, subversive, and disruptive thing that we could all do is maintain our proximity to joy, authentic joy. … It's difficult to say what quantifies joy, sometimes it's easier to say what it's not, but I can say what surrounds it: It's those moments that go beyond articulation, that are connected to comfort, that are connected to stillness, that are connected to future. Those moments where you're sitting on the couch with somebody that's very close to you but you don't have to say anything, those moments that no matter what you do you couldn't keep your toe from tapping from a song that you love, those moments when the laughter overtakes you, those moments when you're walking in the woods without a thought in your head. If we all understand ourselves to be bearers of legacy, having joy at the root honors the ancestors, those who put up with unspeakable and unimaginable cruelties so that we could experience joy. And if we honour that sacrifice, and if we understand ourselves to these bearers, then what we are maintaining for generations to come is an understanding that beyond evil and beyond agenda, there's an ability to be and be joyful. I hope that makes sense. Take care everyone."

Her voice sounded raw, she spoke slowly and methodically. A careful, thoughtful hush permeated the room, there was a sudden heaviness despite Alyson's movement toward joy. In her voice, her grief was palpable, along with the clear-eyed resolve that comes along with it. She was absent in attendance that day, but not in spirit. Her voice message was the final thing we played and spoke to the heart of our work together. This project had become about more than the playlist itself, but the experience of listening together, of supporting one another, and building our methodology of joy into our praxis.

The listening party itself revealed the power of collective creation: We did not simply analyze music, we shared it, and in sharing, built a fleeting yet meaningful space of community.

To listen together is to bear witness, to affirm one another's humanity, and to dream beyond the confines of what is. Our playlist thus stands as both archive and invitation: an invitation to listen closely, to remain open to one another, and to imagine that even within the bumpy uncertainty of the wake, something else might still be possible. Perhaps freedom begins there: in the power of actively dreaming toward the horizon.

References

Black Stalin. 1991. "Ah Feel to Party." On *The Bright Side*. Straker's Records GS 2337, streaming audio. Spotify.

Erivo, Cynthia. 2016. "I'm Here." On *The Color Purple (New Broadway Cast Recording)*. Broadway Records. https://open.spotify.com/track/30q6kWgifW3DwuVydQQX3g

Eshun, Kodwo. 2003. "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism." *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3 (2): 287–302. Michigan State University Press. https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2003.0021.

hampton, rosalind. 2025. "Listening Party Group Assignment." In Black Radical Thinkers and Artists (graduate course). Department of Social Justice Education, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto.

Imarisha, Walidah, and adrienne maree brown. 2015. "Introduction." In *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*. AK Press.

Imarisha, Walidah. 2018. "All Organizing Is Science Fiction." Recorded lecture, University of Massachusetts Amherst, Amherst, MA. Audio, 1 hour, 30 min., 36 sec. https://soundcloud.com/umass-history/all-organizing-is-science-fiction.

Kelley, Robin D. G. 2002. *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*. Beacon Press.

Lipsitz, George. 2017. "What Is the Black in the Black Radical Tradition?" In *Futures of Black Radicalism*, edited by G. T. Johnson and Alex Lubin. Verso.

Osuna, Steven. 2017. "Class Suicide: The Black Radical Tradition, Radical Scholarship, and the Neoliberal Turn." In *Futures of Black Radicalism*. Verso.

Pabst, Naomi. 2009. "An Unexpected Blackness." *Transition: An International Review* 100: 112–32. https://dx.doi.org/10.2979/trs.2009.-.100.112.

Sharpe, Christina. 2016. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Duke University Press.

Sojoyner, Damien M. 2017. "Dissonance in Time." In *Futures of Black Radicalism*. Verso.

Sounds of Blackness. 1991. "Optimistic." On *The Evolution of Gospel*. Perspective Records 28968 1000 1, streaming audio. Spotify.

SZA. 2017. "Broken Clocks." On *Ctrl*. Top Dawg Entertainment/RCA Records 88985-44919-2, streaming audio. Spotify.

SZA. 2024. "Saturn." On *SOS Deluxe: Lana*. RCA Records/Top Dawg Entertainment 19802-89201-2, streaming audio. Spotify.

Vandross, Luther. 1994. "What the World Needs Now Is Love." *Peace & Love*. Epic Records.

STEPHANIE LURCH (BScPT, MEd) is a dynamic storyteller, activist, leader, and physiotherapist. She is an assistant clinical professor at McMaster University and previously served as the inaugural assistant professor and academic lead: equity, anti-racism, and social accountability at the University of Toronto. An award-winning educator, Stephanie bridges the gap between academia and practice across multiple healthcare and education settings. Her career includes working with Cirque du Soleil, caregivers in West Africa, Indigenous peoples in New Zealand, and as a paediatric physiotherapist in the public school system. Celebrated for her transformative contributions to physiotherapy, her extensive experience and thought leadership inspire critical thinking and collective action toward a more abundant future. She is currently pursuing doctoral studies in social justice education at the University of Toronto.

BRENNA PINCKARD is a first-year PhD student in social justice education at OISE, University of Toronto, with five years of experience as an ESL teacher. Her research explores victimhood identities through philosophies of emotion in the context of sexual violence prevention education. She currently works at Accommodated Testing Services at the University of Toronto, supporting accessible education. She is also passionate about artistic, poetic, and creative works that push the boundaries of academia.

ALYSON RENALDO is an academic/artiste hybrid. Alyson is a professor of critical thinking and professional writing at Humber Polytechnic. She designs and facilitates her faculty's four mentorship and onboarding programmes. Beyond the classroom, Alyson serves as a journalist, public speaker, academic writer, and film/theatre writer and producer. Her academic writing and journalism can be found in such publications as *Interdisciplinary Journal of Student Success*, *The Toronto Star*, *The Root*, and *The Huffington Post*. Alyson holds a BFA from the University of Southern California and an MA from Columbia University. She is currently pursuing her PhD in social justice education at the University of Toronto.