



RADICAL LOVE: THE HAPPY BLACK WOMAN

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We live in a very impressionable society. It's easy to fall into a pattern of labeling and putting people and ourselves into boxes. The boxes of which we imprison members of our society rip our communities apart and "Other" us. Black women, specifically, have always been and continue to be Othered. One of the tactics of "othering" is making the disenfranchised group or person feel and internalize inferiority. For Black women that othering comes in the form of sexism and racism. Which only works if the marginalized person or group forgets their worth. Every human's worth is based on their ability to love (whether they act on it or ignore it is what determines their character). Ever since the forced arrival of the Black woman to these shores we've been forced to repress that love—the love for ourselves, the love for our communities. However, in rejecting those boxes we are able to take back that love. To Alice Walker's *Definition of a Womanist*, being ourselves as Black women becomes radical. Loving ourselves and others becomes political, according to Adrienne Maree Brown. Tricia Hersey says rest is subversive. And Audre Lorde says eroticism is entitled to Black women. Black women exercise radical love by means of loving, resting, and embracing all that is erotic because it is against all systems of oppression to love intentionally.

To understand fully the intent of this essay, it is important to understand the language that is used. I would like to define a few terms. Alice Walker, an abundant Black feminist author

uses the term “womanism” and “womanist” to create a more expansive relationship to feminism for Black women (370). In the first, second, and even third waves of feminism, Black women and other women of color were pushed aside as feminism was highly centered on the plights of white women and ignored intersections of race, class, and positionality. Walker adds nuance and depth to the idea of feminism by describing “womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender” (370). I refer to womanism as marker that the existence of Black women is deeper and more meaningful than surface labels and tropes such as “the angry black woman.” Rest is another term I’d like to discuss. In her podcast, Andréa Ranae interviews Tricia Hersey of The Nap Ministry who elaborates on the significance of why she takes a nap everyday and how she prioritizes her own peace. Rest, in this piece, is the is an intentional practice of slowing down. The erotic and eroticism is defined by the prolific writer Audre Lorde in her piece *Uses of the Erotic: Erotic as Power* as “deeply feminine and spiritual plane” (53). Eroticism, though not always sexual, is the power within oneself embodied, the purest form of love. The final definition that I’d like to offer is one that tries to eat away at all these forms of love—and that is called “misogynoir.” First used by Moya Bailey in an article titled *They Aren’t Talking About Me* to properly describe why Black women are attacked, punished, and demonized by not only their appearance, but their manner of speak and dress among other things. I use this term as a launching point and juxtaposition to emphasize the ways in which thrivance is flourishing and efforts are being made to counter systems of oppression (whether subconsciously or not).

Ever since the forced violent arrival of African people to this continent, Black women have had all of their autonomy decided for them. Even through today, Black women are given a tightrope and made to walk a fine line of a double standard. Moya Bailey, author of the article *They Aren’t Talking About Me*, explains her frustration of these double standards with the rap

music industry that often fetishizes and hates on Black women. She alludes to the fact that these double, even triple, standards that Black women are supposed to conform to are upheld by racism and sexism. She calls this misogynoir, “The particular brand of hatred directed at Black women in American visual and pop culture” (Bailey). Misogynoir permeates more than just pop culture, its violence inhibits all aspects of life. One example is through speech. If a young white girl responded to an adult in a thoughtful way, society would praise her. However, if a young Black girl answered an adult in the same thoughtful way she would be scolded with “why are you acting grown?” That is how misogynoir functions, with degradation but also hyper-sexualization, tearing down self-esteem and reinforcing inferiority on multiple fronts. It is the antithesis to the ways in which radical love is practiced.

Love, in all senses and capacities of the word, is always fighting the seemingly ever-present misogynoir. Those who actively are trying to combat internalized, interpersonal, institutional, and systemic misogynoir do so with love. This could be as simple as deflecting and repurposing harm to better fit in alignment with one’s truth. If we recall the little girl who was reprimanded for being “too grown,” Alice Walker would comfort her and tell her to lift her chin. In her piece *Definition of a Womanist*, Walker offers a series of definitions where the first does just that type of deflection and reframing. She says “‘You trying to be grown.’ [Is also] responsible. In charge. Serious.” This is synonymous with “‘womanish.’ i.e. like a woman...courageous or *willful*” (Walker 370). Although the phrase of being grown is often used in a negative way, Walker deflected the intended harm and therefor only remained with the soft encouraging parts. She did this by knowing what is true about herself. In Black feminisms, to be a womanist, as Walker defines, embraces all parts of the self and feed nothing but love. Feed love to one’s self, one’s community, and others that enter one’s circle. Adrienne Maree Brown,

who wrote *Love as Political Resistance* would support Walker's deflection of harm. She would add that "We need to learn how to practice love such that care—for ourselves and others—is understood as political resistance and cultivating resilience" (Brown). This type of love is omitted from the socialization within the U.S. by design because, if not the whole system would fall apart. Taking care and giving love as Walker and Brown suggest eliminate the need for hyper- individualism and competition. Defying and deflecting misogynoir is political resistance because it is woven into the fabric of the foundation of this settler colonialist state. Love for ourselves and others, especially as Black women, cannot and does not fit into that foundation.

The erotic allows love to be mobile and non- conforming in a way that misogynoir does not. Racism and sexism inhibit the spirit. Both wear down mind, body, and soul, confining the spirit and breaking down the creativity of life. To allow oneself to embrace every part of one's being, that is the erotic. That is love at its purest. Audre Lorde describes how the erotic is power, a resource that breathes and gives life and beauty. She characterizes that the erotic is "an internal sense of satisfaction... For having experienced the fullness of its depth of feeling and recognizing its power... we cannot require no less of ourselves" (Lorde 54). In this world that runs on need, wanting, greed, and consumption, it is uproots those systems that enable consumption to feel content, full, and in abundance. Racism and sexism focus on absence, the absence of whiteness and the absence of patriarchy which gives the result of erotic suppression, a mechanism to perpetuate violence. The erotic is a different strain of love that encompasses self-respect, fullness, and healing.

Healing is love. To heal allows us to refill our cup first before pouring for someone else. Tricia Hersey from the Nap Ministry would agree with Lorde, that healing is a necessary component of love. She would add that healing happens by means of rest. “[Rest is] cultivating, slowing down. . . resisting the notion that we can control everything, we have to do everything” (Hersey). In the capitalist system that we live in rest and slowing down are not in the vocabulary. We are expected to produce, exhaust ourselves in labor, constantly stay moving. For Black women specifically, rest has never been given. It is always anticipated that Black women have to be caretakers, providers, do the invisible unseen work, and yet work three times as hard. Rest is loving practice not a lazy one. It is intentional, restorative, it is creative and in itself erotic because it is about feeling and processing. The erotic and rest for the Black woman is about healing through self- determination and autonomy.

Although it is true that racism and sexism together create a beast that Black women are always having to battle, by means of practicing love in different forms we are able to be and in exist in the way that seems fit for them. The pain, struggle, and weight of centuries past, up until the present are not defining attributes to our character. Black women are joyous, creative, visionaries because of their power to love. There is Black excellence because Black women dare to love others and themselves unapologetically, whole heartedly, embrace sensuality and all forms of pleasure, set boundaries and intentional time to restore and heal. Radical love is joy, laughter, movement, self-determination, and celebration in a world that does not want us to.

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