

Claremont Colleges

Scholarship @ Claremont

Pomona Senior Theses

Pomona Student Scholarship

2023

Moving in the Underground: The Politics of Black Joy in Roller-Skating and Funk Music in Chicago

John West

Pomona College

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarship.claremont.edu/pomona_theses



Part of the [Africana Studies Commons](#), [American Politics Commons](#), [Community-Based Research Commons](#), [Nonfiction Commons](#), [Other Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), and the [Race and Ethnicity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

West, John, "Moving in the Underground: The Politics of Black Joy in Roller-Skating and Funk Music in Chicago" (2023). *Pomona Senior Theses*. 279.

https://scholarship.claremont.edu/pomona_theses/279

This Open Access Senior Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Pomona Student Scholarship at Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pomona Senior Theses by an authorized administrator of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu.

Moving in the Underground: The Politics of Black Joy in Roller-Skating and Funk Music in Chicago



1

John West Jr.

Pomona College, Intercollegiate Department of Africana Studies

Presented to Professor J. Finley and Professor Mukasa Mubirumusoke

¹ This photo was taken by @raccoondit during the state 2 state skate off 2022 at Skate express in Chino Hills.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	3
Introduction: The Skate Mecca	7
Chapter 1: A literature review of Black Joy and Pleasure	13
A. Scenes of Subjection, Sites of Joy: Joy as Ambivalent Practice in Juba	14
B. Infrapolitics of Joy: Working-class Joy as Infrapolitical Practice	19
C. Black Joy and Pleasure: Sexual and Gender Politics and Fugitivity	23
Chapter 2: Black Roller Skating as Practice	31
A. A Short Political History of Roller Skating	31
B. Making it Funky: JB Roller Skating in Chicago	35
C. Skate Families: Roller Skating Crew Culture	43
D. Ambivalent Pleasure: Violence and Cultural Policing in Skating Rink	45
a. Skate Music Culture: Chicago Djs and the JB Experience	48
Conclusion: JB as Communal Praxis	52
Works Cited	55

Acknowledgements

This essay would not have been possible without the village that surrounded me with support, love, and a passion for Black liberation over the past 22 years. I am eternally grateful for the family, friends, and mentors who have put time and energy into my personal, intellectual, and spiritual growth up until this point.

Thank you to my family, especially my parents Adrienne and John West for supporting me as I embarked on a new journey and for providing me with the love, morals, and strength I needed to pursue my passions. Thank you to my Aunt Glenda Faye Jackson for holding me down while in college and stepping in as a second mom. Thank you for exposing me to so many avenues of expression like djing, photography, and music. Thank you to my grandma, Earlean Sanders, for pouring her knowledge about family, church, and culture into me while I was young. This journey would not have been possible without the people back in Chicago fighting with me for a better world.

Thank you to my UCW community for providing me with knowledge of my people and inspiring me to seek out a better world. This would not have been possible without the lifelong mentorship of so many educators within the warrior community. Thanks to Shayne Evans and Robert Lane for providing me with the perfect examples of brotherhood, manhood, and leadership. Thank you to my mentors Terrance Crayton, David Groves, Ayodeji Ogunniyi, Will Torres, and Capri Wroten for staying in touch and constantly supporting me. A special thank you to Latasha Mcmillon for holding me down at my time at UCW. Thank you to my Academy Group(AG) family for

providing professional and social and emotional development; while motivating me to be a change agent, and work towards changing my future and the future of my community.

Thank you to Posse and Pomona College for providing me with the space to grow intellectually and personally and challenging me to redefine my definitions of Blackness. Thank you to the Africana Studies Department for allowing me to explore my passions in Black culture through an interdisciplinary lens and giving me tools to imagine an alternate world. Thank you to my first undergraduate class, Africana Journal, and New Media, for allowing me the time to explore my love for poetry, pedagogy, and creativity with you all. Thank you to Professor Roberto Sirvent for being the first person to introduce me to radical, Black, Queer, Indigenous, and Feminist perspectives on political theory and politics. Thank you to Philosophy professors Briana Toole and Mukasa Mubirumusoke for dedicating their personal time to helping me improve my writing and argumentation styles. Thank you to Sociologists Marilyn Grell-Brisk for lending me her support in developing this thesis project. Special Thanks to Pomona Alum and colleague Semassa Boko for helping me think through many of these Afro-pessimist arguments in real time.

Words cannot express how grateful I am for the mentorship and love of Professor J Finley. Thank you Professor Finley for challenging me to bring theory to praxis and to think critically about the powers of joy, creative expression, and Black emotion. Your support has allowed me to truly feel seen and motivated me to keep going within the academy.

Thank you to Saidiya Hartman for her iconic work. Hartman's three books have challenged me to push history against the grain and imagine the conditions of possibility for Black people in a society plagued by systemic anti-blackness. This work would not have been possible without the contributions

of CRT scholar David Stovall. Stovall has challenged me to see joy as a political practice and expressive practice as pedagogical and key to the liberation of Black people.

Thank you to Semassa Boko for engaging in Afro-pessimists theory with me and giving me time to ask questions and think through real-world problems. Thank you to my academic peer and friend Q for showing me that there is a space for young Black Chicagoans within academia. Thank you to Nasira Watts for putting in the time to help me edit this paper and theorize Black joy; while simultaneously challenging me to center queerness within my analysis of Black joy. Thank you Nasira for challenging me to explore language and literature as a fun and exciting practice. Thank you to my friends D-Baby, Anwar, Gus, Carlos, Tristen, Jonathan, Jon, Tesfa, Malik, Michael, Daniel, Ziona, Randy, Anya, Khimmoy, and Kennedy for allowing me to ramble about Blackness continuously over the past year and offering me many interpretations of joy and love. Thank you to my Posse family for holding me down spiritually while at Pomona College. Without you-alls strength, love, and motivation this could not have been possible. You all motivate me every day to keep pushing and striving for better.

Thank you all so much for the support and I ask that you lend me your love and energy as I embark on my journey at UIC Criminology, Law, and Justice.

Let us rebuild a sense of community. Let us rebuild the culture of giving and carry on the tradition of fierce determination to move on closer to freedom.

Assata Shakur, "How We Are" (1978)

You were born with the right to be happy. You were born with the right to love, to enjoy, and to share the love.

Don Miguel Ruiz, The Four Agreements

Introduction: The Skate Mecca

He said what everybody is looking for, What everybody's looking for today, They're looking for
ESCAPE-ISM.

- James Brown, "Escape-Ism Pt. 1" (1972)

Funk is a call to action. Funk is impulse, funk is soul, funk is Black, funk is queer, funk is....

- Rinaldo Walcott, *The Long Emancipation*

It's a Tuesday night as the streets clear and people rush home to get ready. Which will it be tonight? The Rink, or Glenwood? The lessons start at 7 pm and the session begins at 9. Black folks put on their best fits and pack their colorful wheels, sweat towel, and liquid courage. The streets are bustling with people, especially on the nine(79th st) near Italian Fiestas. Everyone is getting ready. Ready to enter an alternate world, a hidden world, engaged in fugitivity — a moving world riddled with histories of protests, funk, and skating. A Black mecca to behold, the full moon glimmers over the city of Chicago. It's going to be a good night.

The moment I walk in, I hear the classic Keezo Kane's "Ga Ga Ga" skate mix and the voice of MCs DJ Moneymike and DJ DMC. I am greeted by Curtis and Romona, the friendly faces that have helped run the rink for years. I remember what Calvin said, "you only paid \$10, so you only get to take up this much space." The rink is home to an extended family, a group where we have fostered a new form of kinship. A kinship around expression and survival. Dj DMC and Dj Moneymike take turns mixing the best new-wave JB tracks from producers MzNique, Dj T-Rell, and ShaProStyle. Beyond the front Dj booth, there is the beautiful neon glow of the lights, and the neon carpets have that ancient

smell of an endless workout. The glowing ceiling illuminates the stage, full of Black and brown skaters addicted to the wood. The freshly coated floors are laced with a history of sweat, funk, and creativity. Some boys are in the back getting their hair braided and chatting about the recent skating rink closing in the city. The Smooth Goddess in fluorescent pink and green, repping her Alpha Kappa Alpha lineage, selling her skate gear, and showing that she is one of the queens of JB. In the center of the rink, young skate legend Malik is repping his “JB Chicago” tee and setting up his camera, ready to document the subterranean world.

To the right of the rink, the grown folks are stepping to Jeffree’s 1979 classic “Love’s Gonna Last.” To the left, the middle school and new school are locking in their own grooves drifting by, spinning and dropping. The young skaters challenge the older skaters in a new funky battle. Looks like it will be the JB Assassins versus JB Legacy. As they decide who will be battling whom, a new skater is going into the skate shop to try on her first pair of skates. She is trying on the new Riedell boot customized in black with purple and blue. She almost got the new LA-style Baldwins, but her mom talked her out of it, and she ended up with the classic Riedell boot. She managed to get red roller-bones wheels that all the fast skaters wear. After making sure they were the right fit, she adjusts her wheels, listening for that perfect click, making sure they are just right. As I walk through the dimly lit room, I approach the food court. I notice nostalgic aesthetics of the rink with its Pepsi sign, and fluorescent lights, and icee machine. The vibrant colors and swirling patterns are gifts from the past. The menu displays some of the typical options: slushies, french fries, and chips.

The skate floor is full of skaters, trapped again. Locked in a trance, the skaters next to me are blocking out the trauma, like the increased housing instability caused by the divestment and

community neglect of neighborhoods like Englewood and Woodlawn. The skaters are moving toward freedom. They are blocking out the school closings and yearly teacher strikes that frequently occur at public schools, like Dyett and Bethune, the latest victim in a wave of Chicago school closings. They are blocking out the bone-chilling winds and 30-degree weather that comes every winter. Here in the rink, they are opening up a new circular world where we can just exist and let go for about three or four hours. Letting go of the news reports of another brutal weekend of reckless shootings. Letting go of the violence on the street caused by years of systemic poverty, a historical form of poverty that manifests itself in the daily lives of inner-city Black folk. In 2020, alone over 3200 people were wounded by gun violence in Chicago. Skating enables us to routinely let go. We let go of the economic genocide caused by the increase in the cost of living; let go of the divestment of public housing spaces like Parkway Gardens, Cabrini Green apartments, and the Ida. B. Wells homes.

That's what skating is about, letting go and moving in the underground, away from the abject, subjugating overground. An overground saturated with the sensations of anti-Black systems like the Cook County hold on 27th and California or the hyper-segregation and economic neglect of the South and West sides. In the rink, you may find a metaphysical fugitive rolling toward something, away from something — toward a freer space, a funkier space, a liberatory outer space. Skaters live in an underground space that is both physically public and intimately private. Open to the public but still restricted to those within the skate community. A kind of Black queer outer space that is Black and exists within and against the confines of the real world. The rink is a life-world, offering a new life, a life that allows us to refashion and recreate new names, a new persona. A persona not defined by the socially constructed systems of gender, race, and sexuality. A persona not limited by the

hyper-segregation of the city landscape. A persona that is fictional and metaphysical, not bound to the laws of nature. This new life offers a *continuous yet limited* moment, to move away from the expectations of conformity and control that mark Blackness. This new body with a new name gives Black folks a way to look past the anti-Black world invested in our pathologization and epidermalisation.² In this circulating world, a new kind of subjectivity is forged out of enjoyment. The pleasure of memory, art, and escape.

While on the floor, James Brown's iconic cry "Make It Funky" is letting everyone know exactly what time it is. It is time to get down. Time to pop off. Time to show out. Time to get on the floor. The skaters are "snapping," "big wheeling" and dropping to the floor for the "nutcracker." I can't help but notice the flawless technique of the OGs. OGs like Calvin, a slender yet strong, warm, and equally demanding skate instructor. The first generation paved the way for us younger skaters during the Civil Rights Era. As he guides the train in a coordinated eight-count skate technique, he is (re)writing his story. From Ga Ga to Crazy Legs, the OGs are flawless. They are our teachers, our foremothers, and our JB legacy. They move effortlessly through the crowds untouched yet emotionally touching. JB Skating invites people across generations to free themselves through the funk. This community, no, the family, is the central aspect of the skating rinks. We keep the Black Skate culture going and use the space to uplift and promote each other's growth. Like any family, siblings are going to fight, but as skaters, we always get back up. Skating is a therapy that allows Black people across generations to foster new relationships that reside in the ordinary and otherwise, within joy and pleasure and the shared

²Epidermalization of blackness is theorized in Frantz Fanon's *Black SKin, White Masks*, and reproduced by R.L. in "Wanderings of the slave: Black Life in Social Death" (2019)

grammar of possibility³. Chicago JB can learn from the greats of the rinks and generate new styles that push forward our skate legacy. Rinks provide us with physical space protecting us from the cruel outside world. The rink is a tabernacle subject to movement.

The world above is characterized by increasing health care costs, corrupt politicians, housing and school divestment, anti-Black policing: policed for playing music while Black, driving while Black, running while Black, resting while Black, and congregating while Black. Skating provides a moment of limited protection from the dangers of being Black in the after-life of slavery.⁴ Skating provides a way to temporarily escape the pain of the outside that is depicted above. The pain of a modern post-racial colorblind slave society. A society plagued with hyper-surveillance, mass incarceration, and domestic militarism targeted at Black and Brown bodies. Our joy and pleasure are what sustain us. We turn to jubilee to offer a moment of freedom from the burden of racial capitalism. Subversive Black joy, the joy that allows Black folk to restore, recreate, and reinvent themselves is how we evade the crisis of social death.⁵ Black expressive practices like roller-skating, funk music, and dancing are what heal us, helping us get through the alienation and exploitation of slavery and its afterlives. Cultural practices help promote, what Ronaldo Walcott refers to as, glimpses of freedom: where Black folk reimagine themselves and create new worlds resistant to the systemic anti-blackness that marks modern slavery.⁶

³Tina Campt, “Black Feminist Futures and Practice of Fugitivity” (Helen Pond McIntyre ‘48 Lecture, Barnard Center for Research on Women, October 7, 2014).

⁴Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along with the Atlantic Slave Trade Route Terror* (2008) “This is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment. I, too, am the afterlife of slavery.

⁵Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

⁶Rinaldo Walcott, *The Long Emancipation: Moving toward Black Freedom* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), pp. 21.

In what follows, I will explore how the cultural practices of roller-skating and funk music create and maintain affective and material space for Black people who dwell within the after-life of slavery. Considering the afterlife of slavery, what does embracing Black joy as a politics look like in Chicago? I will begin with an overview of the history and politics of roller skating nationally. Looking at the History of the Black roller-skating struggle across the U.S., I will show that anti-blackness is constitutive to the systems that Black people struggle against, specifically when looking at the struggle for access to roller-skating. I will then move on to explain the relationship between Chicago and JB's roller-skating culture. JB is the James Brown inspired style of skating that is native to Chicago. By identifying different elements of JB skate culture, we will see that roller skating is a practice of redress.⁷ The different elements that are constitutive to roller-skating culture, render skating an infrapolitical activity, a political activity that is not easily detected or overtly seen as political. Next, I intend to examine the politics of joy within the fugitive space that is the Black roller-skating rink. In closing, I will analyze the role of roller skating as a tool of Black joy that can function as a tool for the unfree to get free, or as a modality for survival.⁸

⁷Here I understand Redress as Saidiya hartman defines it in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* 1997 as “operating in and against the demands of the system, negotiating the disciplinary harnessing of the body, and counterinvesting in the body as a site of possibility” (51).

⁸Dead Prez. 2000. “*Let’s Get Free*.” Loud Records, studio album.

Chapter 1: A literature review of Black Joy and Pleasure

We flourished in the face of abjection, like Nah, we don't do that over here. And we made do, in the simplest of ways.

- Marquis Bey, *Them Goon Rules* (2019)

And no, we can't escape from the realness. Happiness is all in the mind.

- Dead Prez, "Happiness"

Despite the rich literature chronicling Black agency and its limits, Black enjoyment, and pleasure remain an undertheorized element of Africana Studies. Black historians and cultural theorists have documented the ways Black folks fight to create and maintain physical and affective spaces of pleasure since Black people arrived in the Americas. Black people have used joyous spaces to maintain stability and limited autonomy. Black joy can be seen in a myriad of ways from the creation of art and communal relationships to the use and purchase of material possessions. Historically, Black joy is seen in the leisure activities of the enslaved, the fights to desegregate public leisure spaces, and the battles for Black freedom, more generally, in the present. In light of this wide spectrum and the political limits of Black agency, what is Black enjoyment? Is joy a feeling or an action? What are some ways Black people experience joy and pleasure in the face of subjection? Is joy a tool of fugitive politics? The politics of Black joy is the radical and rhythmic contestation of normativity within the constraints of permissible freedom. Black joy is the art of defiance, the evasion of premature death, the reimagining of what it means to be free, and the embrace of flesh and unruliness.

Scenes of Subjection, Sites of Joy: Joy as Ambivalent Practice in Juba

Roller skating in Chicago serves as a site of Black joy and pleasure. Chicago has a history of economic, social, and political subjection against Black folks. How can we begin to make sense of Black joy the constraints under modern slavery? Saidiya Hartman offers a helpful analysis into the politics and role of Black joy during enslavement.⁹ Saidiya Hartman's formative text *Scenes of Subjection: Terror Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (1997), helps us understand joy as not simply a feeling, or affective state, but a right for certain people secured by power.¹⁰ She states that enjoyment is, "an exercise of a right: the promise and function of a right, privilege, or incorporeal hereditament. [sic] comfort, consolidation, contentment, ease, happiness, pleasure, and satisfaction."¹¹ In this definition, Hartman positions joy as a product of the law and, as such, situates it as something impossible for the enslaved, who were mostly objects of the law, and only subjects of the law through the lens of criminality. At the center of her analysis of enjoyment is a critique of the American ethos of the pursuit of happiness.¹² The enslaved were not allowed to pursue happiness, and happiness for white people was ultimately grounded in the fungibility of Blackness. As Hartman argues, "blacks were envisioned fundamentally as vehicles for white enjoyment...it was the excess of enjoyment imputed to the other, for those forced to dance on the decks of slave ships crossing the Middle Passage, step it up

⁹ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford, 1997)

¹⁰ Saidiya V. Hartman, "Innocent Amusements: The Stage of Sufferance," in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 17-25.

¹¹ *ibid.*, 23.

¹² Jefferson, Thomas. 1997. *Declaration of Independence*. Jackson, MS: Applewood Books.

lively on the auction block, and amuse the master and his friends...”¹³ As property, those enslaved were subject to the wills and whims of white people for their enjoyment. Black folks were permitted to use their free time for dancing and release, but often under the surveillance of white masters. This dance and expression of Black joy become subject to the voyeurism of whiteness, or what Hartman calls the “purveyors of pleasure.”¹⁴ Under these abject conditions, autonomy, agency and self-fulfilling enjoyment are impossible for those enslaved. By framing enjoyment as a property right from which Black people were summarily barred in official contexts unless they were heavily surveilled, Hartman forces us to ponder whether experiences of Black joy can be for the sake of Black folk alone during enslavement. Is enjoyment still framed as a right within the present? Against the backdrop of subjection, Hartman reveals an ambivalent relationship between pain, pleasure, and enslaved people’s experiences of joy. What is joy, Black joy, under such routinely violent conditions?

While Hartman conceptualizes enjoyment as a limited right for white people with power and property, Hartman considers Black enjoyment as a part of a system of everyday resistance. Hartman frames Black pleasure in relation to the *practice of defiance* for those enslaved by systems of domination. Hartman sets out to uncover the “subterranean politics of the enslaved,” the underground practices enslaved people engaged, that often remained concealed from those in power. The refashioning of permitted pleasures in the effort to undermine, transform and redress the condition of enslavement was consonant with other forms of everyday practice.¹⁵ I am translating Hartman’s use of permissible

¹³Saidiya V. Hartman, “Redressing the Pained Body,” in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 50-72.

¹⁴Saidiya V. Hartman, “Innocent Amusements: The Stage of Sufferance,” in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 17-25.

¹⁵*ibid.*, 50.

pleasures as a way of conceptualizing Black joy. In this scenario, Black joy is painted as a tool for the refusal of existing within a larger system of domination—a refusal to become completely subject to the violent forces that hold that system together. Black joy acts as a channel towards liberation in the condition of enslavement, according to Hartman, but operates covertly because of the supremacy of whiteness. Hartman considers the significance of the juba dance in relation to systems of everyday practice.

The very designation "juba" refers to a range of practices: the percussive use of the body, slapping out rhythms on the chest, thighs, and knees while tapping or dancing a short step, shuffle, or jig; a circle dance of competition where the dancer pats or those in the circle keep time or create complex rhythms for the central dancer or couple; and a solo performance comprising mainly patting chest, knees, and thighs.¹⁶

The juba, a Black vernacular dance, is an active dance using movement to communicate the rage, frustration, and emotions of Black folks. A juba is a tool of dissent representing a "counter-investment in the body" as both a site of pleasure and as a way to articulate the needs and wants of the enslaved.¹⁷ "...it is clear that juba enacted resistance and foregrounded slave exploitation in the tacitly political content of coded lyrics and covert acts of protest."¹⁸ Here, Hartman pushes us to question the disruptive potential of Black cultural expressive practice and situates pleasure in relation to a politics of

¹⁶ Saidiya V. Hartman, "Redressing the Pained Body," in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 76.

¹⁷Saidiya V. Hartman, "Redressing the Pained Body," in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 70.

¹⁸ibid.,71.

constant refusal. The enslaved did not simply just dance, but used dancing as a way to subvert the subjection that slavery produced. Hartman shows us how sound, aesthetics, and movement operate as languages of deviance for the enslaved.

The juba dance is a site of deviance for the enslaved that encompasses the anoriginary drive of Blackness.¹⁹ Like the Brazillian Capoeira artform, juba communicates a body politics of movement, and articulates an implicit “fuck you,” as Marquis Bey puts it, “on some perpetual *Nab*-type shit; a breaking of the regime that tried to fix us but didn’t know that we arose in the breaking, were made by a breakage that generates the refusal to be broken.”²⁰ In Black communal dance, joy stands as an avenue to politically resist the subjection of slavery, rather than communicate uncontested enjoyment. The dance solidified a “subterranean politics”, a concealed politics rooted in the needs of those deemed under, other, and at the bottom.²¹ Hartman writes, “The [juba] song details the cruelties of slavery, the exploitation of slave labor, and the appropriation of the slave’s product by slave owners.”²² Ultimately, Hartman reveals that Black expressive practice is not enjoyment for Black people alone, but expressive practices allow the enslaved to temporarily recreate themselves, to mentally and metaphysically break away from the violence of everyday labor and physical and mental conformity. The enslaved use performance to redress and deviate from the norms associated with whiteness: conformity, submission, and subjection.

¹⁹Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Wivenhoe u.a.: Minor Compositions, 2013).

²⁰Marquis Bey, *Them Goon Rules: Fugitive Essays on Radical Black Feminism* (Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press, 2019), pp. 5.

²¹Saidiya V. Hartman, “Redressing the Pained Body,” in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 50-72.

²²ibid., 71.

It is challenging to address the possibility of Black joy and leisure without addressing the systems of power and modes of subjection that make up the social life of social death.²³ Notably, Fredrick Douglass offers a connection between the use of slave property and leisure time. The troublesome pleasures and concealment of violence were theorized in Fredrick Douglass's, *Narrative of the life of Fredrick Douglass*.²⁴

The days between Christmas and New Year's Day are allowed as holidays; and, accordingly, we were not required to perform any labor, more than to feed and take care of the stock. This time we regarded as our own, by the grace of our masters; and we, therefore, used or abused it nearly as we pleased.

As Douglass reflects on the free time the enslaved people received during Christmas, he reveals that free time is actually a tool to divert from the brutality of slavery and helps in "keeping down the spirit of insurrection." This bestowing of "free time" reveals the limits of Black leisure and the pleasure derived within this "free time" within conditions of unfreedom. Good times become a way of concealing the quotidian abuse of the enslaved body.

Douglass' observations leave us questioning the effects of holidays like Juneteenth today. Does Douglass's observation have any utility, today? Many Black families use the holidays like Christmas and Thanksgiving as a space of relief from the continuous structures of capitalist labor. Holidays stand in as ways to gather and decompress from the realities of the day-to-day, engaging in pleasures like gifts,

²³Jared Sexton, "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism," *In Tensions*, January 2011, <https://doi.org/10.25071/1913-5874/37359>.

²⁴Douglass, F. (1995). Chapter X. In *Narrative of the life of Fredrick Douglass* (pp. 43-46). essay, Dovers Pub.

drinking, and connecting with loved ones, but after a year of exhausting and draining labor. Today, many corporate companies and state businesses honor holidays like Juneteenth, followed by an increase in Juneteenth promotion and gear from corporate giants such as Walmart and Target. These companies commodify both Blackness and pleasure here, profiting by acknowledging Blackness and promoting affinity through a common historical trauma. In 2021, Biden solidified Juneteenth as a federal holiday, allowing time off for celebrating the end of slavery in 24 states. Ironically, employers remain in control of whether workers are free from work, or required to simply just work through the holiday. Here, employers are able to control and dictate spaces of joy and pleasure in a way that is similar to the past, eerily similar to the “days between Christmas and New Year’s Day” that Douglass described. This shows that joy surrounding the holidays is two-fold, and can not simply be reduced to Black joy. As Hartman has states Black joy will always be linked to the purveyors of pleasure and that Black joy is limited under constraint.

Infrapolitics of Joy: Working-class Joy as Infrapolitical Practice

Robin D.G. Kelley offers insight into the entanglement of joy and pain in the early 20th century. Kelley present Black joy as a political tool that helps create communal understanding and reinforcement. In his widely reviewed, “We Are Not What We Seem”: Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South,” (1993) Kelley looks at how joy is used in the social life of Black working-class folks during the era of Jim Crow, focusing specifically on how Black working-class leisure and popular culture generated oppositional communities. Kelley highlights the

collective mentality and growing kinship brought through spaces of celebration like dance halls, blues clubs, bars, barbershops, house parties and the street corner for the working-class in the South..

Moreover for members of a class whose long workdays were spent in backbreaking, low-paid wage work in settings pervaded by racism, the places where they played were relatively free spaces in which to articulate grievances and dreams.²⁵

For Kelley, joy is as much a space as it is a tool for sustaining and replenishing force for those who occupy the subaltern spaces of unthought.²⁶ Kelley is interested in how these spaces of fun are left out of the historical memory of resistance because they do not follow respectable or conventional definitions of opposition.²⁷ While criticizing the wide range of literature on Black revolts, Cathy Cohen states, we must look beyond politically defined spaces and look to the social spaces where most politics live.²⁸

Kelley looks at the relationships between clothing, parties, and mobility in an attempt to demonstrate how spaces of leisure double as spaces for political expression. Are saggin pants possibly more than just a fashion statement and linked to political action and consciousness? Borrowing from James C. Scott, Kelley uses the term “infrapolitics” to highlight the overlooked everyday resistance of the disenfranchised and partially captive. This term is similar to Hartman’s study of subterranean

²⁵ Kelley, Robin D. “‘We Are Not What We Seem’: Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South.” *The Journal of American History* 80, no. 1 (1993): 75. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2079698>. Pp 84.

²⁶Saidiya V. Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson, “The Position of the Unthought,” *Qui Parle* 13, no. 2 (January 2003): pp. 183-201, <https://doi.org/10.1215/quiparle.13.2.183>.

²⁷In a similar fashion Cathy Cohen in “Deviance as Resistance: *A New Research Agenda for the Study of Black Politics*” is interested in looking at politics beyond clearly defined political spaces like churches, civil-rights organizations, and unions.

²⁸Cathy J. Cohen, “Deviance as Resistance: A New Research Agenda for the Study of Black Politics,” *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 1, no. 1 (2004): pp. 27-45, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1742058x04040044>.

politics, but is employed in a way that specifies that resistance sometimes comes in many covert and overt forms. Simply put, Infrapolitics is defined as “the daily confrontations evasive actions, and stifled thoughts that often inform organized political movements.”²⁹ The segregation of the south promoted the growth of these “hidden transcripts” because spaces of Black leisure like gyms, barbershops, and neighborhood hangouts were designated as exclusively Black spaces.³⁰ In these instances of pleasure and leisure, Black folk made room for themselves to resist the status quo and violent reality that was Jim Crowism. While analyzing the utility of Black joy, Kelley reveals a shared grammar of suffering.³¹

They went with people who had a shared knowledge of cultural forms, people with whom they felt a kinship, people with whom they shared stories about the day...people who shared a vernacular whose vocabulary struggled to articulate the beauty and burden of their lives.

Kelley reveals a shared grammar of suffering and struggle revealed in Black joy, a camaraderie in Blackness. Black joy here is a galvanizing force allowing Black folks to gather over shared cultures, troubles, and language. Kelley inadvertently reveals how spaces of pleasure and leisure are infused with the fugitive need to escape from what blues legend B.B. King refers to as “these chains and things.”³² Here, the chains are made ever present through the racially exclusive economy of Jim Crow, and the gendered system of control that impacts Black women globally. While analyzing the infrapolitics of social space Kelley states, “places of leisure allowed freer sexual expression, particularly for women,

²⁹Kelley, Robin D. “‘We Are Not What We Seem’: Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South.” *The Journal of American History* 80, no. 1 (1993): 75. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2079698>.

³⁰James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2009).

³¹Frank B. Wilderson, “Absurd Mobility,” in *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

³²B.B. King. 1970. “Chains and Things”, ABC Records, vinyl, 45 RPM

whose sexuality was often circumscribed by employers, family members, the law, and the fear of sexual assault in a society with few protections for black women.” While considering Black women’s perspective in the South, Kelley forces us to question if pleasure is a vehicle for Black fugitivity or if joy is a fugitive act in itself. The fugitive is a queer figure who is the site of a reimagining of freedom that points the way out of an engendering system.³³ Marquis Bey *Them Goon Rules* (2019) offers a thorough analysis of fugitivity in relation to Black feminism. Drawing from Tina Campt, Bey views fugitive blackness as a “sense of outlawry,” a kind of indiscreet disavowal of and disengagement from the project of hegemony.³⁴ Bey sees fugitivity as a conscious way of engaging with living as otherwise, living in a way that refuses the logic of racial capitalism, gender normativity, and settler colonialism.³⁵ By choosing to actively engage in the rejection and subversion of gender roles Black women embrace fugitive modalities of being. Kelley’s articulation of infrapolitics provides a new historical view of what Hartman identifies within *Scenes of Subjection*.

Black Joy and Pleasure: Sexual and Gender Politics and Fugitivity

Black feminist scholars have documented how Black women and queer folks have produced joy and found solace in embracing the body. It is important to address the ways that Blackness and queerness diverge through a lived politics. As Hortense Spillers has noted in her 1987 essay, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” because of the wanton use and commodification

³³Stephen Dillon, *Fugitive Life: The Queer Politics of the Prison State* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

³⁴Marquis Bey, *Them Goon Rules: Fugitive Essays on Radical Black Feminism* (Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press, 2019), pp. 16.

³⁵Bey, Marquis. “Black Fugitivity UN/Gendered.” *The Black Scholar* 49, no. 1 (2019): 55–62. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2019.1548059>.

of Black women's bodies perpetuated through domestic work, reproductive labor, and the legal doctrine of *partus sequitur ventrem*, Black women are rendered ungendered.³⁶ When analyzing the commodification of the black body during the middle passage Spillers articulates:

Under these conditions, one is neither female nor male, as both subjects are taken into "account" as *quantities*. Spillers renders the category of gender fictitious and incomplete when analyzing the positionality of Black women with the slavocracy. The female in "Middle Passage," as the apparently smaller physical mass, occupies "less room" in a directly translatable money economy. But she is, nevertheless, quantifiable by the same rules of accounting as her male counterpart.³⁷

In this quotation, Spillers shows that slavery blurs the lines of gender for black bodies because they are ultimately considered fungible property, and forces us to question if desire, pleasure, and womanhood are possible under enslavement. Black women are unique in experiencing queerness because they do not fit into dominant conceptions of both what a woman is supposed to be or what a woman does in terms of the kinds of labor she performs with her body. Queerness is linked to Black womanhood because Black womanhood is rendered sexually deviant or queer by heteronormative standards. Black women and queer folk have historically shared a politics of subverting heteronormative patriarchal gender norms and a shared joy through embracing the body. In *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* 2019, Hartman analyzes the ways that black women practice joy and intimacy in a private bedroom

³⁶Spillers, Hortense J. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe." *Feminisms*, 1987, 384–405. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-14428-0_24.

³⁷Spillers, Hortense J. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe." *Feminisms*, 1987, 384–405. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-14428-0_24, Pp 395

rented by the week in the early 20th century.³⁸ This “revolution in a minor key” allowed black women and queer people to experiment with sex and their body in the ways that they wanted, ways that go against the religious and social restrictions of kinship and desire.

By embracing one's body, and exploring gender fluidity and sexuality, Black queer folks produce a fugitive joy, a joy in spite of lack of full agency a joy moving toward something freer. Black joy is an attempt at reimagining life under subjection by creating radically fugitive possibilities. But, what is fugitivity? Black Fugitivity captures the ways that Black bodies are always moving towards freedom. It can be seen as the ways that Black folk creatively resist, refuse, and undermine systems of domination. Marquis Bey conceptualizes fugitivity as a code in relationship to deviance and queerness. “Fugitivity, y'all, is what it might mean to go by other rules—wildly other and othering rules. Goon rules.”³⁹ Fugitivity is queer folks and women dressing in the ways they feel comfortable that embrace the body, despite disciplinary cries of what is too revealing, too flamboyant, or too closely associated with “street culture.” Fugitivity is about living on the outer plane of normativity that disciplines Black bodies, and Black joy exists and is expressed within this outer plane, in quasi-free spaces. Fugitive Black joy is conceived outside of hegemony and transcends what it means to act “normal.” Black joy, in a fugitive state, articulates a politics of refusal; that running in and out of grandma's house, jumping over the green-line turnstile, risking it all for the feeling of joy, even if that feeling does not, cannot last.

³⁸Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2020), pp. 59.

³⁹Marquis Bey, *Them Goon Rules: Fugitive Essays on Radical Black Feminism* (Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press, 2019), pp. 33.

Black feminists have long theorized the role of the erotic, desire, and pleasure for Black women's sexual agency. As a cis-gendered Black man, I operate within the legacies of feminist writers like Octavia Butler, Audre Lorde, the Combahee River Collective, and adrienne maree brown. Their works on the body, pleasure, and sex are useful for cis-Black men looking to break the cycle of patriarchy that forces us to neglect and evade the desires of our bodies. Pleasure is a part of our collective liberation and is an enlivening force for Black life-worlds. Black queer folks have long embraced alternative ways of being and knowing that break away from the state, the family, and the law.⁴⁰ Most notably, dancing is one of the living methodologies that allow black queer people to break away. Queer dance spaces like the ballroom and the club allow queer folks to use fashion, drugs, alcohol, and movement to articulate and claim their erotic desires of the body, or as Kemi Adeyemi puts it, "(re)theorize, (re)organize, and (re)narrate their relationships to the systems of neoliberalism that shape and overdetermine their lives once the function is over."⁴¹ This radical embrace of the erotic reveals a pleasure politic, a way of living and thinking that allows the body to engage in enjoyment without shame or fear. Feminist scholar and healer adrienne maree brown asks the crucial question, "What would happen if we aligned with a pleasure politic, especially as people who are surviving long-term oppressive conditions?"⁴² brown's collection of essays, poems, and think-pieces in *Pleasure*

⁴⁰Here I understand queerness to be a politics similar to how Cathy Cohen frames queerness in "Deviance As Resistance: A New Research Agenda for the Study of Black Politics." Cathy Cohen defines deviants as those who are constricted by the rules and sanctions of others and actively live in the otherwise. Blackness and queerness are deviant to the rules that are associated with white supremacists' heteronormative cis-gendered patriarchal capitalism.

⁴¹Kemi Adeyemi, *Feels Right: Black Queer Women and the Politics of Partying in Chicago* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022).

⁴²adrienne maree brown, *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2019), pp.8.

Activism (2019) offers a radical look into the ways pleasure is taken up for the good of the collective. For brown, the use of the erotic is centered, and pleasure is on the same level as hunger. Pleasure is about embracing complicated and deeply suppressed sexual desires. brown defines pleasure as, “a feeling of happy satisfaction or enjoyment and to give sexual enjoyment or satisfaction to another.”⁴³ I find this definition useful because it taps into the erotic potential of pleasure and captures the emotional sensation of the experience of joy. brown locates pleasure as a tool of resistance and liberation, a necessity for maintaining critical intimacy and aliveness.⁴⁴ Hip hop feminist Joan Morgan asks the pertinent question “What possibilities can pleasure offer for Black feminist futures?”⁴⁵

Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley offers an analysis helpful for Black feminist futurity by investigating an overlooked Black queer gender, the “party queen.” Tinsley conceptualizes the party queen as a queer figure attempting to escape the entrapment of society’s gender roles by finding joy and pleasure in and at the party. Tinsley examines the double-edged nature of joy and escape, how they are produced through partying and many times lead to addiction. Looking specifically at the complicated lives of pop artists Whitney Houston and Azealia Banks, Tinsley positions partying and addiction in conversation with pleasure and deviance. Tinsley asks why Houston, a gifted singer and creative, needed to escape so deeply into partying. “Giving up Robyn— they’d been inseparable for years— must have been emotionally traumatic. “hitney’s life started going downhill soon afterward. . . . She

⁴³ adrienne maree brown, *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2019), pp.17.

⁴⁴Here I am thankful to Marquis Bey’s conception of critical intimacy. I understand this intimacy as coming out of the underground space. This intimacy is shown in the reimagining of worlds, re-articulation of needs, and through the coming together in struggle.

⁴⁵ Joan Morgan, “Why We Get off: Moving towards a Black Feminist Politics of Pleasure,” *The Black Scholar* 45, no. 4 (February 2015): pp. 36-46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2015.1080915>.

went on drink- and- drug binges— evidence of a troubled personal life and much unhappiness.”⁴⁶ Partying, which for many encompasses the use of substances and the enjoyment of music *at* the party, allows Black queer subjects to slip away from the unabating pressures of patriarchy, white supremacy, and heteronormativity. Tinsley positions Houston’s former partner, Robyn Crawford, as a possible connection to her spiral into party culture.

In Houston’s case, addiction and partying may have served as a means of survival. Pleasure stands in here as a temporary experience allowing Houston, and in turn, many other queer people to escape the pressures of heteronormative penetrative patriarchy.⁴⁷ Houston is rendered a queer figure for not only her relationship with Robyn, but because she also resembles the party queen. A Black queer figure who engages in parties to experience more fluid and freeing gender expression. In a 2002 interview with Diane Sawyerr, Houston states, “‘Now I’ll grant you, I partied,’...(she explained) she liked to get high on cocaine, marijuana, pills, and alcohol.”⁴⁸ This expression of the desire for embodied release is laced with the pains of unprecedented rates of addiction that affect “Black women who love women.”⁴⁹ A queer joy that takes the shape of the pleasure of the party stands in as a vehicle of survival but is inextricably linked to the gratuitous violence constitutive to deviating from the prescription of whiteness and gender.

⁴⁶ Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, “It’s A Party,” in *Ezili’s Mirrors: Imagining Black Queer Genders* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), pp. 146.

⁴⁷Rinaldo Walcott, *The Long Emancipation: Moving toward Black Freedom* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).

⁴⁸Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, “It’s A Party,” in *Ezili’s Mirrors: Imagining Black Queer Genders* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), pp. 136.

⁴⁹ibid., 137

Partying has long been a Black vernacular tradition from the clandestine juba get down, to the dancehalls of civil rights, and the city club culture of the present. Black people carve new modes of being, and through movement expose the limits placed upon Black life. In *The Long Emancipation* (2001), Rinaldo Walcott explores the Black vernacular through funk and fashion, as a sovereign site of Black expressivity and creativity in relationship to policing, commodification, and potential freedom.⁵⁰ When analyzing sagging pants Walcott contends, “Black public masculinities use fashion and style to re/design the Black body in an economy that might and does otherwise render that body useless and/or waste.”⁵¹ Like partying and hip-hop culture, Black fashion, another cultural art form, is constantly under scrutiny, yet Black folk continue to resist total subjection and subordination. Walcott states, “once Black people move, the limits of freedom and autonomy announce themselves.”⁵² Movement in this work is material and metaphorical: it is a movement across borders, dancing, style, language, and all the various ways Black people express themselves as they move closer to freedom. Walcott paints culture as a radical tool that helps Black people resist rules and structures associated with white supremacists’ heteronormative patriarchal cis-gendered Judeo-Christian capitalism. James Brown (JB) Skating is a form of black cultural practice that embodies the politics of movement, and provides a space for Black flesh to move away from the confines of an anti-black world. Walcott considers funk music and dancing as a site of Black expression as well as a communication of refusal. Black expressive practice becomes becomes a practice of Black joy, a way of merely glimpsing and a way of reclaiming

⁵⁰Rinaldo Walcott, *The Long Emancipation: Moving toward Black Freedom* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).

⁵¹ Rinaldo Walcott, *The Long Emancipation: Moving toward Black Freedom* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), pp. 89.

⁵² Rinaldo Walcott, *The Long Emancipation: Moving toward Black Freedom* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), pp 14.

one's body from the oppressive system of racial capitalism.⁵³ Walcott's work forces us to ask, what is the utility of Black culture in relation to joy?

Centering on the afterlife of slavery, the remainder of this thesis analyzes the relationship between Black cultural expressive practice (BCEP) and Black joy. Critical Race scholar, David Stovall, believes "Joy is a transgressive practice, a way of doing and acting. Joy is keeping us alive. Joy is a venture into possibility, the alleviation of suffering"⁵⁴ I will explore BCEP as a form of pleasure for Black folk in contemporary Chicago, looking specifically at JB-inspired roller-skating culture. I explore the ambivalent relationship between pleasure and pain, first by looking at the history and politics of the Chicago style of roller skating commonly known as jb, and skating rinks as spaces of liberation on Chicago's south side. Centrally I will examine the role of skating in facilitating Blackness and generating Black pleasure in the ongoing conditions of the afterlife of slavery. Lastly, I will analyze funk music as a site for revealing relationships between political consciousness, police violence, and the politics and meaning of what Frantz Fanon has called "the fact of blackness."⁵⁵

⁵³ *ibid.*, 12. Walcott states, "Forms of Black creativity are central to any considerations of Black freedom because, as I will argue, this is where we glimpse the possibility of Black freedom; those forms emerge at moments when Black people are responding to themselves, unintruded upon by the white male gaze."

⁵⁴ David Stovall, conversation with author, September 26, 2022.

⁵⁵ Frantz Fanon, "From 'the Fact of Blackness,'" *The Body*, 2005, pp. 98-109, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-230-21336-4_10.

Is it possible for justice and pleasure to feel the same way in our collective body

adrienne maree brown, *Pleasure Activism*

Raise up, get yourself together and drive your funky soul

James Brown, "People Get Up And Drive Your Funky Soul"

Chapter 2: Black Roller Skating as Practice

A Short Political History of Roller Skating

Created in 1735, Roller skating became an American pastime at the turn of the 20th century. Roller skates continued to innovate with the enhancement of wheels and trucks, and skating rinks began popping up around the country. At this time, skating was not accessible for Black Americans because of the way racial segregation permeated the infrastructure of the United States. It was not until desegregation began in the early 60s that Black folks began protesting for access to public amenities like buses, pools, and skating rinks en masse. Skating rinks were a crucial site for social struggle and cultural expression for Black people in many cities across the country like Boston, Los Angeles, and Chicago. Black people fought for access to spaces of recreation and ultimately for access to spaces of leisure and enjoyment.

The earliest account of the political struggle in skating rinks begins in Boston, MA. Historically, Boston was a major site for abolitionists like David Walker, Maria Stewart, Lewis Hayden, Eliza Ann Gardner, and William Lloyd Garrison, and Frederick Douglass. In January of 1885, Richard Brown, a local Black Bostonian, attempted to enter the Boston Roller Skating Rink, owned by Frank Winslow, with his two grandchildren.⁵⁶ The owner and a few locals violently removed him on the account that people of color were not allowed inside. Ten years before *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), the Massachusetts Supreme Court upheld that business owners had the right to exclude persons of color,

⁵⁶Millington W. Bergeson-Lockwood, “‘We Do Not Care Particularly about the Skating Rinks’: African American Challenges to Racial Discrimination in Places of Public Amusement in Nineteenth-Century Boston, Massachusetts,” *The Journal of the Civil War Era* 5, no. 2 (2015): pp. 254-288, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cwe.2015.0040>.

and that segregation was permissible in Massachusetts. As a result of Black community protests, the only Black congressman, Julius C. Chappelle, proposed legislation that would penalize those participating in racial discrimination in Boston. Chappelle hoped that the legislation would decrease discrimination against Black Bostonians in public spaces, more specifically the skating rink. This incident is symbolic of the way that systemic racism has played a role in marginalizing Black people by keeping barriers in place to their access to public and private spaces. This is one of the instances in which pleasure and politics converge. While fighting for access to a potential place where he could experience joy, Brown was met with anti-black violence that has been characteristic of the collective racial ethos of the United States since slavery. Black folks have systematically been kept out of spaces of leisure, forced to fight for belonging and access to these kinds of spaces. Skating reveals that it is through movement, whether social, political or physical, that Black unfreedom is exposed and the limits of freedom become conveyed.⁵⁷ This is one piece of a decade-long battle for human rights as millions of Black people fled the south from racial terror and economic exploitation. Chicago is a critical site in the fight to end roller-skating segregation.

⁵⁷ Rinaldo Walcott, *The Long Emancipation: Moving toward Black Freedom* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).



58

The White City Roller Rink in Chicago was one of the domains of struggle that Black Chicagoans chose to fight against racist discrimination. White City was an amusement park created in 1905, in memory of the World Columbian Exposition held in Chicago in 1893. The amusement park, located on 63rd and King Drive, went bankrupt during the Great Depression, leaving only the White City Roller Rink. In 1949, the Chicago Committee of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) organized protests outside of the rink to demand access to it. The roller rink officially closed in 1949, and in 1950 the Parkway Gardens housing projects were created. Here, skating rinks served as a tool that allowed CORE to galvanize people around joy.

In the above photo, you see both joy and frustration on the protesters' faces as they fight for access to a place of leisure and pleasure. The protestors inherently present something kin to *politics of refusal* as they refuse to accept the inequitable conditions that makeup Chicago's hyper-segregated communities. During this time, the great migration brought in a wave of Black people looking to go

⁵⁸White City Roller Rink Demonstration, 1949. Encyclopedia of Chicago. Accessed March 8, 2023. <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/3825.html>.

beyond the Black Belt that would eventually become the neighborhood of Bronzeville. According to the Chicago Sun-Times, the protests lasted 2 months, and after the club lost 50% of its revenue and received an injunction from the city, it eventually opened its doors to Black patrons before being closed.⁵⁹

As skating rinks were desegregated, Black communities were given specific nights where they could listen to their music in Chicago. They were often given “soul night” or “adult skate night.” Some areas continue this tradition today, as many skating rinks look different in the daytime than they do at night. Black protestors fought for roller-skating access only to be segregated again through separate skate nights. This practice has an ambivalent nature because it provided a “semiprivate/semipublic” space for Black people to enjoy their culture while also pushing Black folks to the margins of overall skate culture.⁶⁰ In areas with low Black populations, finding a skating rink with Black music was nearly impossible, forcing skaters to wear headphones. This limited acceptance reveals that roller-skating in Chicago is as closely connected to race as it is to political organizing across the country. Roller-skaters like Calvin Small fought so skaters like me could have our own spaces to express our creative passions. Black skating rinks have helped produce a shared grammar of struggle and galvanize the Black community to fight racial discrimination in recreational spaces. Black skating rinks are more than a site of joy, but also are a site of geopolitical struggle. In turn, leisure and joy are also apart of this overall Black political struggle. When considering roller skating, leisure and pleasure become the social terrain

⁵⁹Alison Martin, “This Week in History: White City Roller Rink Desegregated,” *Times* (Chicago Sun-Times, April 3, 2021), <https://chicago.suntimes.com/2021/2/4/22263165/white-city-roller-rink-desegregated-chicago>.

⁶⁰Kelley, Robin D. “‘We Are Not What We Seem’: Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South.” *The Journal of American History* 80, no. 1 (1993): 75. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2079698>. pp 79.

and the reason for fighting. Joy and leisure provide a common language that can energize and organize people for a common goal. The Black social struggle after all is waged in large part because of our need to pursue autonomy, so that we can begin to fully embrace joy and pleasure. Joy and pleasure are the fuel for political struggles against anti-blackness, and skating rinks become both overtly political and infrapolitical spaces.

Making it Funky: JB Roller Skating in Chicago



61

Growing up in Chicago during the early 2000s, skating was one of the few things that parents would allow their kids to do, as the streets were becoming increasingly dangerous, and playing outside became a risk. Many Black families, like mine, would go skating after going to church on Sundays for the adult skate night. I was 12 years old when I had my first skate party at the Rich City skating rink in Richton Park, Illinois. It was a Saturday afternoon. On Saturdays, the skating rinks always had a vivacious warmth as families brought their kids out for family skate sessions. The thing I remember

⁶¹This photo comes from Rich City roller rink's Facebook page.

most about Rich city was its arcade-like aesthetic and walls that were filled with colorful lights, birthday celebrations, and black history posters. I remember always hearing producer Keezo Kane's iconic "Ga Ga Ga" stepping mix. The song was a fusion of bass and funk that I would soon learn was a Chicago music tradition called the JB's. At the time, I had no clue that this song held the history and culture of Chicago's James Brown-inspired skate scene. To tell the truth, growing up I barely knew anything about JB roller skating at all. I thought it was just the way everyone skates. JB Skating was inspired by the funky groove and footwork put forward by James Brown. Brown's iconic cries and moves would come to define years of skating culture in Chicago. Songs like "Make it Funky" allowed Black Chicago skaters to create smooth moves that blend Chicago footwork with energetic horns and dynamic screams. At the time when JB was created, skaters were skating at rinks like North Avenue, The Loop, North Avenue, Rainbo, Skate-City, and Tri-City skating rinks, none of which still exist. While I was growing up, there were about five skating rinks that were convenient for those who still lived on the South Side of Chicago: Markham Roller Rink (Markham), The Rink, Martin Luther King Skating Rink(MLK), Rich City, Glenwood Roller Rink (Glenwood), Lynwood Roller Rink(Lynwood). I had become a frequent flier at Glenwood and Markham, and on special occasions, we would go to Rich City when it was time to visit my brother in Richton Park. Markham was the place where kids went to parties while the adults went skating. Most Chicagoans my age have a memory of going to Markham for the juke parties held in the backroom. But me? No. I was ignorantly attracted to the skate floor and trying to learn the moves of the adult and teen skaters ahead of me. I wanted to learn the Ga Ga and the Big Wheel more than anything. More than that I wanted to get out of the rentals and into some skates of my own. The skating rink was becoming my home and was giving birth

to a new generation of roller skaters trying to push forward Chicago's skate legacy. Unfortunately, there is some ambivalence when considering the relationship of Black folk to the skating rinks that we support.

Because there is not an extensively documented history of JB skating, I was unable to locate a precise date for JB skating, but it is speculated that JB skating has been around since the late 60s, arguably the peak of James Brown's career. James Brown's dynamic leg movements on stage during performance provided the template that many skaters would use for years to come. Brown's epic emotion-filled cries provided the release that Black Americans needed during a time of boiling social struggle over economic divestment and institutional racism that impacted the daily lives of Black Chicagoans. Funk music blends both social commentary and emotional expression creating a form of music that served as a relief for Black Americans. As Rinaldo Walcott asserts, "Funk is not love. Funk is the practice of love."⁶² Bands like Fred Wesley and the J.B.s provided music that could be felt as well as heard. Funk is a hybrid music aesthetic that takes from rock, gospel, rhythm and blues, latin percussion, and soul to produce an urban music that captures the disillusionment and political attitudes of Black working class people.⁶³

Funk is as much a feeling as it is a music genre. In the late 1960s, Funk was popularized by James Brown and Sly Family Stone. Albums like the J.Bs, *Funky Good Time: An Anthology*, and James Brown's *Make It Funky the Big Payback: 1971-1975* provided a soulful anthology of Brown and the

⁶²Rinaldo Walcott, *The Long Emancipation: Moving toward Black Freedom* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), pp. 26.

⁶³Burnim, Mellonee V., and Portia K. Maultsby. *African American Music: An Introduction*. New York: Routledge, 2015.

J.B.'s. full of social commentary and dance provoking music.⁶⁴ Songs like “Give Me Some More” and “You can have Watergate, but gimme some bucks and I’ll be straight” reveal that the Black struggle was an economic struggle and that more than anything we needed money to help meet our material needs. Along with funk music, JB skating is characterized by a catalog of skate moves. According to JB elite member D-Breeze, there are pretty much two types of skating in Chicago: the majestic figure skating style and the unique JB (James Brown) style skating.⁶⁵ For the purpose of this project, I will only be discussing the JB style of roller skating. JB roller skate culture is made up of groove-based music, stepping-influenced skate moves, a group-oriented culture, and funk-influenced skate DJs. Many skaters will tell you JB skating is more than just a skate style, “it’s a way of life.” JB Skating is about feeling the music, isolating yourself, and letting out all of the tension and bad energy on the floor. JB skating is a form of self-care that allows us to sublimate our pain, problems, and frustrations from the world to the wood, opening a space to physically meditate on our struggles and provides a temporary mode of transformation for Black roller-skaters. When watching others skate, I notice that many skaters lock in and feel the music. Feeling the music is one of the central factors of JB Skating because it is key to unlocking a smooth meticulous flow. When skating, one hears the bass thumping in the heart, the singing, and the vocals—ultimately embracing all of the sounds together. Feeling the music allows you to block out the trauma of the world while expressing joy in movement. The music has an affective role, moving the skater and providing energy for the skate routine. It is about staying on beat, and

⁶⁴ *Funky Good Time: An Anthology*

⁶⁵ Jozo, Jose. “JB Skating History Lesson.” Vimeo, March 9, 2023. <https://vimeo.com/59233625>.

moving your feet to the rhythm and melody of horns, screams, and bass. Feeling the music entails entering another world, a world not plagued by nominal freedom, but characterized by the groove. Skating as a living methodology that allows us to connect our erotic desires. In her Iconic Essay “Uses of the erotic: Erotic as power” Audre Lorde mediates on the power of the erotic, “In touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial.”⁶⁶. Embracing the music requires becoming erotically aware, coming into an aliveness in your senses that is quite beyond the material world.⁶⁷ The erotic functions as a place to share joy, and sharing power deeply with one another. Skating allows us to tap into this erotic politics of feeling good, and give in to the needs of the body through movement. Skating unlocks the form of pleasure adrienne maree brown writes in *Pleasure Activism*, “Pleasure is not one of the spoils of capitalism. It is what our bodies, our human systems, are structured for; it is the aliveness and awakening, the gratitude and humility, the joy and celebration of being miraculous.”⁶⁸

While JB Roller skating has been around for over half a century, it is vastly understudied and there is practically no written history documenting its politics or cultural significance in Chicago. Despite its political foundations, skating is infrapolitical, and invisibilized in the struggle for Black autonomy and Black joy. However, in the last 4 years, Black roller skaters have made roller skating popular through social media sites like Tik Tok, Instagram, and Youtube. Some Chicago skaters like

⁶⁶Audre Lorde and Mahogany L. Browne, *Sister Outsider* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2020).

⁶⁷adrienne maree brown, *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2019), pp.12.

⁶⁸ibid. 23

producer Reggie Premiere Brown and visual artists Malik Thomas have been documenting the history of Chicago roller skating online.⁶⁹



JB skating at its heart is a funk-infused style full of energetic splits, smooth crossovers, and unmatched leg rhythm. It is simply funk on wheels. In the late 60s and early 70s, Roller-skaters from the first generation of JB like Stan, Bucky, and Calvin, invented the “steps” that would come to make up JB Roller-Skating.⁷⁰ Some common skating moves associated with JB skating are the “Stan-the-man”, the Bucky walk, the Monkey walk, the big wheel, the sissy strut, and most notably, the James Brown inspired crazy legs. These skate moves are a part of intricate routines and are often put together to create a JB choreography. These styles have lasted over 50 years, and many of us skaters are still learning today. JB skating is more than a skate style. It is a lifestyle. A lifestyle of redress. Redressing the pained body encompasses ‘operating in and against the demands of he sysm, negotiating the disciplinary harnessing of the body, and counterinvesting in the body as a site of

⁶⁹ See @therealjbkater on Instagram and watch *Legends of the Wood (A Short Documentary)*. *You Tube*. YouTube, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kq2A6EVXZ5k&t=2417s&ab_channel=MalikThomas.

⁷⁰*The New York Times* (The New York Times, 2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/video/style/100000005093121/dancing-chicago-james-brown-skates.html>.

possibility. operating in and against the demands of the system, negotiating the disciplinary harnessing of the body, and counterinvesting in the body as a site of possibility”⁷¹

When traveling at different skate events it becomes easy to notice who is from Chicago based on style. While skating in L.A., I noticed that there were few people who skated in the style of JB. However, the two individuals who do skate instantly accepted me into their community because of our common understanding of the JB style. I noticed that their style was smooth and controlled as JB skating requires. They were very far removed from the sliding and spinning styles that are associated with California. These skaters focused on making their movements crisp and simple, and revealed that they were trained in a JB condition. They were practicing the crazy legs, and focused on making smooth crossovers that no one but a Chicago skater could master. Finding a skate community can be a very nerve wracking experience, but having them there was a very joyful experience. Having someone that understands my style, someone to compete with, someone who knew the same styles as me was a breath of relief. Hartman offers an intervention on communal pleasure, “ The pleasure associated with surreptitious gatherings was due, in part, to the sense of empowerment derived from collective action and the precariousness and fragility of “community.”⁷² There was joy in finding someone outside of Chicago that was from my community. Having someone that you can connect with simply because of skate style is a feeling of relief and enjoyment. The emotional sensation of knowing that someone skates in your style produces a collective joy.

⁷¹ Saidiya V. Hartman, “Redressing the Pained Body,” in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 51.

⁷² *ibid.*, 60

These skate styles hold the intricate history of roller skating in Chicago. Our history transcends the past and lives on through our continued movement and growth of the Chicago skate scene. The skate community is full of teachers like Calvin and “Smooth Goddess” Myesha McCaskill. Teachers are willing to take the time to help newcomers learn the craft and preserve JB history. Skating is a communal activity and, while night skating has historically been a “Black thing,” the Chicago skate community accepts everyone with open arms. It is through teaching that joy is shared, and cultivated. Through practices like teaching, skaters share skills that will ultimately lead to the creation of a stronger skate community. The skate community is emblematic of what Hartman calls “a community among ourselves,” a community that reckons with difference and death, and attempts to disrupt this constant cycle violence through counterinvestment in the body by gathering together.⁷³ Collective gatherings reveal the conditions of possibility for Black people, allowing us to embrace the communal need for escape and self-rediscovery. Through building community, we create joyful experiences with others and share a positive camaraderie and shared grammar of struggle and aliveness.

The Chicago skate community is diverse racially, sexually, and generationally. Through teaching, skaters are able to bend the generational gap and connect with skaters across generations. In this regard, skating becomes pedagogical and is advanced through a consistent cycle of growth and uplift. In Chicago the skate generations are considered “old-school” meaning those who have been skating for 40 plus years, middle school being those who have been skating for more than 5 years, and the new school being the newer skaters on the scene. Many of these skaters hit the wood at least twice a

⁷³Saidiya V. Hartman, “Redressing the Pained Body,” in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 60.

week at different locations to practice their craft and to develop new skills. This communal structure allows skaters to come together and collectively learn from each other across generations. When skating in any community it becomes easy to find someone willing to teach and help improve the skating craft. The skate community sits on a foundation of mutual support and community uplift. JB Skating is a language that provides a way of communicating struggle across generations. People of all ages come in wanting to take part in funk skate culture, and a gap is bridged. Through skating as a Black youth are able to make friends with a 40 year old, and likely even a 60 year old. A new village is created through a shared grammar of refusal and protest.

Skate Families: Roller Skating Crew Culture

Another unique aspect of Black skate culture is the creation of new lines of kinship and new personalities. The skating rink allows people to create new names, but not just nicknames. These names allow Black skaters to (re)invent themselves and create new personalities. These personalities allow us to create new histories and memories that are not linked to the outside world. This renaming provides a hidden transcript, a new story to conceal oneself from outsiders as a means of protection.⁷⁴ This new name allows skaters to develop new personas beyond the limits of the outer-world. Along with new names, roller skating also opens new lines of kinship. Skaters create groups with names like JB Elite, Jb Legacy, and JB Assassins, and build their own individual skate families within the skating rink. This practice allows skaters to develop group routines and allow for healthy skate competitions at skate parties. They also allow groups to develop a skate identity and give recognition to specific state

⁷⁴ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2009).

teams at skate parties. Similar to ballroom culture's houses, skate families "remake the relationships on which family is based through a flexible and overlapping kinship structure" helping each other across age hierarchies and biological ties as Marlon M. Bailey notes.⁷⁵ The relationships forged within skate communities serve to motivate and assist Black skaters who may not have stable relationships within their own families. These fictive families provide material resources and mental security while reinforcing the communal relationships within the skate community.

Skate groups practice together and ultimately create new relationships with each other over the love of roller skating. These skate groups travel nationwide to participate in national skate parties. National skate parties like Atlanta's Jive Biscuit, Skate Barcelona, Chicago's Independence Roll, and allow skaters across the globe to connect with each other. Often, these national parties are followed up with a plethora of events to allow skaters to get to know each other outside of the skating rink. Through gathering with other skaters across the country, Black skaters get the opportunity to learn new styles and develop relationships with skaters across state lines. Rollers get the opportunity to expand their skate community and bridge different communities creating and reinforcing the larger skate community. Many of these skate parties in Chicago, are used to generate mutual aid and build support for those suffering from economic divestment. Organizers use skate parties as a way to generate funds for homeless communities, a way to get items for toy and food drives, and a way to promote uplift of the community. This subtle form of mutual aid can be understood as a contemporary

⁷⁵ Marlon M. Bailey, *Butch Queens up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2013).

manifestation of Hartman's notion of a "subterranean politics of the enslaved."⁷⁶ Joy, in this case, is linked to communal support and community work, and serves as a tool for financially supporting those with economic hardship. Building intimate and economic relationships is essential to how the roller-skating community has thrived for so long, and it sits on a foundation of mutual support and community uplift, that goes back to the period when Black people were enslaved and relied on these types of affective and material bonds. In states like California and Virginia, these skate communities are being challenged because of the decrease in skating rinks across the country.

Ambivalent Pleasure: Violence and Cultural Policing in Skating Rinks

While skating rinks are spaces of leisure for many prominent Black communities they are still ambivalent spaces where Black people are forced to deal with racialized adversity. DJ CJ, the prince of JB, agrees that skating is central to keeping Black youth safe, "It's just something to keep a nigga off the street, you heard me." DJ Cj reveals how skating manifest itself into a counter-investment of the body and provides a moment for redress.⁷⁷ According to a recent skate documentary, *United Skates*, skating rinks served as neutral territory for gang members in Southern California. As a result, many skating rinks adopted policies that contribute to the policing of Black bodies. Many skating rinks across the country like The Rink in Chicago and Skate Express in Chino utilize metal detectors and security as a means of protecting the skate community from outside gun violence. Skating rink owners were forced

⁷⁶Saidiya V. Hartman, "Redressing the Pained Body," in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 76.

⁷⁷Hartman defines redress in *Scenes of Subjection* as a remembering of the social body that occurs precisely in the recognition and articulation of fevestation, captivity, and enslavement. She goes on further to state, that redress is a limited form of power that aims to mediate on the pain of the body through redemption of the body as flesh. Thirdly, redress articulates the needs of the body and the endeavor to meet them.

to find methods to keep skate communities safe so they adopted policies preventing people from wearing specific colors that were affiliated with gang culture. In Los Angeles, skating rinks like World on Wheels and Skate Depot served as spaces where skaters cross gang boundaries and participate in roller skating. The roller skating offered a moment of peace, but was still subject to a large police presence. While providing limited autonomy and expression, skating rinks serve as limited spaces of joy plagued with routine Black violence.

For over 50 years, skating rinks have served as safe havens from the pressures of the outside world. Black skating rinks provide a space of common understanding where people go to escape the anti-Blackness and oppression that is the everyday life of Blackness. Black skating rinks serve as fugitive spaces, spaces where non-normative behavior like Black joy is allowed to flourish. Spaces where Black people fight and refuse. Black fugitive space is spaces where we can name our conditions and actively work to counteract them. Black joy is the goal of this fugitive plane that is the skating rink. Unfortunately, many Black skating rinks also face institutional racism and pressure from local politicians and police. As United Skates has documented, skating rinks like LA's World on Wheels and Chicagoland's Rich City have closed down because of predatory taxes. Property taxes for these large spaces can cost around a million dollars, and with this, the cost of skating has increased over time. As Rich City's former owner Buddy Alexander notes, "It takes a lot of \$10 to reach a million." Skating rinks around the country have been victimized by a lack of community support. In my experience skating at Skate Express in Chino Hills, municipal officials have threatened to close the rink due to activity in the parking lot after skating. Government officials police the enjoyment of Black skaters and force skating rink owners to in turn police their own skaters. This is just one piece of the ambivalence

that is produced when Blackness becomes linked to joy. Even when spending time enjoying Black fugitive spaces, Blackness is policed and institutionally regulated.

In Chicago, many skating rinks are still trying to recover from the decline in roller skating that was caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. During COVID many skaters like myself returned to skating, but in turn, many skaters also left the skate community. During the pandemic, we also saw the growth and creation of alternative skate spaces outdoors. In Chicago, skaters utilized the city lakefront as a place to practice and build their skate skills. In Southern California, community businesses like DJ Wayne D and Hazels's Sk8 Pop Up provided several event spaces outdoors like ice skating rinks to provide a space for Black skaters to enjoy Black community and music. The skate pop-up provides Black autonomus zones where Black skaters can safely gather without the constraints of roller-skating rink owners. Spaces like these exists because of the policing of Black skate styles that occurs in white owned skating rinks. As United Skates notes, some skaters are policed for wearing fiber wheels as opposed to traditional roller-skating wheels. Even in spaces of joy, Blackness is marginalized because of its difference in style and behaviors. This makes the organization of spaces like the sk8 pop-up a site of politics without a proper locus, or infrapolitics.⁷⁸

Rather than constantly be segregated to adult skate nights, skaters set out to create mobile Black skating spaces that provided the safety and security of Black music and Black spaces. This creation of alternative spaces was one method that allowed the skate community to remain intact. While dealing

⁷⁸Saidiya V. Hartman, "Redressing the Pained Body," in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 61.

with a global epidemic that disproportionately impacted Black and brown people, created new spaces for rejuvenation and collectivism.

When the pandemic began, I had no clue that I would be returning to the skate scene. I spent months trying to convince my friends to go skating with me. I finally gave in and decided to go to the rink alone. Soon after I became a regular at “The Rink” and got the opportunity to see skate legends like Calvin Batsmoke, D-Breeze, and Liltwin Giggs. Many skaters in Chicago, have been taught by Calvin and Calvin expects nothing but the best. I became enrolled in lessons where I soon realized that what I thought I knew was nothing compared to the knowledge and experiences of skaters like Calvin. When teaching skaters to t-stop, Calvin jokingly stated, “ Stop! Remember, you’ll still get a ticket if you go past the stop sign.” It took almost ten years, but I as an adult had officially joined my first skate community at the Rink. The rink was one of Chicago’s only Black-owned skating rinks left as Markham and Rich City closed, and MLK lost customers as violence on the southside only increased.

Skate Music Culture: Chicago Djs and the JB Experience

Black skating rinks remain a symbol of nostalgia, unity, and struggle for many Black skaters in Chicago, doubling as spaces of both leisure and love. They promote unity, exercise, and generate a sense of love, unity, and culture through producing distinct Black music. During the 80’s and 90s hip-hop era, skating rinks served as spaces for local artists to present their craft to the skate community. On the east coast, artists like Slick Rick, LL Cool J, Queen Latifah, and Salt-n-Pepa were able to gain their reach by performing and going to local skating rinks like Laces in New York City.⁷⁹ The rinks

⁷⁹Alex Samuels, “Roller Skating, Civil Rights, and the Wheels behind Dance Music,” Telekom Electronic Beats, March 15, 2022,

were spaces that would put artists on and introduce them to the local community. Skating rinks served as performance spaces where the community could analyze and enjoy new local talent and gave local artists a platform to engage new audiences. In Chicago, skating rinks have also aided the growth of skate producers and DJs looking to preserve Chicago stepping culture.⁸⁰ Skating rinks also served as sites for young people to practice foot working in the early 2000s and doubled not just as spaces for skating, but also sites to create new dances with Chicago's juke and footwork styles. Skating rinks like Markham and The Rink provided an outlet for young Black folk to exert their energy and a communal space where they could practice dances that are rooted in the community. Juke music, an upbeat offspring of house music, came to prominence in Chicago because of DJs like DJ Spinn, RP Boo, Traxman, Dj Gant Man, Tha Pope, and many others. Many of them grew up within the skating rinks on Chicago's southside and were able to use skating rinks as a testing ground for their music. Juke music is complex consisting of polytonal sensibilities combining high hats, afro futuristic sounds rooted in technology, and distinct base. The music that they were able to produce captures the spirit of freedom forcing dancers to move and release the energy that is pinned inside.

As a working Chicago Dj, the skating rink has reinforced my catalog of soulful stepping music and provided me with a new genre of stepping music: JB. JB is as much a music genre as a skate style. Jb combines the sounds of horns and bass produced in-house to create a new hybrid genre. Music that is grounded in traditions of funk, house, and rhythm and blues communicates working-class struggles through its cries to make it look funky. Similar to Mark Anthony Neals's articulation of bebop JB

⁸⁰Christian K. Lee, "A Chicago Steppers Competition Shows a Different Side of the City," *Vogue* (*Vogue*, October 5, 2022), <https://www.vogue.com/article/chicago-steppers-competition>.

articulates a new working-class Blackness for the 21st century.⁸¹ Skate Djs like Dame-O, T-Rell, Moneymike, Suave, BC, and Larro all grew up as roller skaters and chose to embark on their own journeys of music production. DJ Veterans like DMC are veterans in the skate community. Having experienced the joy of skating makes it easier to translate the JB tradition in ways that embody the history of JB. Almost all DJs in the skate community were raised in the skate community themselves. In an interview Chicago local Dj ShaProStyle discusses the beginning of the JB sounds:

My production of new JBs remixes started together with my friend Keezo Kane, who was on Kanye West's G.O.O.D. Music label for a while, where his track "Ga Ga Ga" saw new school JBs music crossing over to bigger audiences. Of course, there is a long history of people skating to the JBs, but back in the day, beginning in the seventies, it was only the original James Brown tracks—that is before we took it to the next level....In the beginning, we were kind of battling without really knowing each other, but without thinking about it, we formed what's known as the "new school" JBs sound.⁸²

There is not a more iconic new wave JB sound than Keezo Kane's "Ga Ga Ga" and ShaProStyle's "I Love You Marvin," both of which are emblematic of the sound prevalent on Chicago's skating scene. The songs capture the spirit of backyard barbecues and have become classics throughout the nation in many different skate communities. These two songs preserve the tradition of Chicago stepping and capture the energy of roller-skating in the process. Chicago DJs analyze the original James Brown tracks, remix them creating a new wave of funk-infused music. More specifically,

⁸¹ Mark Anthony Neal, "Legislating Freedom, Commodifying Struggle: Civil Rights, Black Power, and the Struggle for Black Musical Hegemony," in *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 27.

⁸² Alex Samuels, "Roller Skating, Civil Rights, and the Wheels behind Dance Music," Telekom Electronic Beats, March 15, 2022,

the DJs analyze and strip funk songs of the horns, drums, cries, vocals, and screams repositioning them in ways that provide a rhythmic groove by placing them over already existing instrumentals or simply reinventing new songs entirely by isolating and looping specific aspects of songs. Remixing allows Chicago DJs to create music that bridges together generations for the skate DJ, sampling allows skaters to infuse Black music cultures past with the bass and stepping influences of music presence. Notably, Reggie Premiere Brown's "Whenever I'm Down" has become a national skate anthem turning Brandy's original "Best Friend" (1994) into a Chicago-style bass-filled classic. Chicago skate music goes beyond the confines of the Chicago area and is actually becoming embraced at skating rinks around the country. Chicago skaters and DJs are Djing and leading workshops across the globe from New York to Amsterdam. The skate Dj is central to the skate community because they are responsible for creating a vibe for the community to enjoy and preserving the JB Chicago skate culture. They are the vibe curators and are responsible for maintaining the energy within the rink.

Conclusion: JB as Communal Praxis

Black joy is an ambivalent political practice central to Black life; not simply about enjoyment, it is a tool for healing and preservation, keeping us alive and moving. Black joy is a subversive and fugitive practice allowing Black people to grapple with the everyday realities of divestment, devaluation, and subjection and allows us to craft new ways of relating to and being in a world marked by anti-Blackness. Black joy is not simply linked to articulations of pleasure, joy, and happiness but is also embedded within a larger system of anti-black violence. Black joy like funk music is emotionally polyrhythmic, possessing conflicting measures of joy and pain. Black joy and its negation is the pulse of Black struggle and the reason for organizing and fighting. In Chicago, Black joy undergirds the creative practice of JB skating, connected to a larger history of roller-skating struggle. Black expressive practices like roller-skating, and black popular music help us redress our pain, and challenge the afterlives of slavery. It is through expressive practices and affective and material spaces that we see Black folk create new grammars of struggle that help move us closer to freedom.

Robin Kelley, Cathy Cohen, and Saidiya Hartman all push us to look in non-traditional political spaces and affective states like joy and pleasure for political expression, and as I have argued in this thesis, politics must be located within skating rinks. Spaces of leisure and joy like blues clubs, dancehalls, and skating rinks illuminate the ways people have cultivated a shared grammar of suffering and struggle through the affective experiences of joy within creative expressive practices. The joy found within these sites are infused with infrapolitics, emotional power that is not easily traceable, but informs struggles for survival waged by Black people across space and time. Enslaved people danced, sang, cooked, and practiced many non-direct oppositional methods of subversion to mitigate and mediate the routine pain and violence that the system of chattel slavery warranted. Nevertheless, even

subject to constraint and subjection, Black people were able to realize a modicum of joy, even if it was only in the moment.. While this joy was produced by the enslaved it was often co-opted as entertainment and property for white people. Through making Black joy a political practice the enslaved were able to in Hartman's view redress their pain and provide a counterinvestment in their own bodies, enabling Black people to covertly resist the systems of enslavement and subjection. In looking at spaces of "fun and frolic," Black skate culture in Chicago extends as a manifestation of the political praxis, "ubiquitous fun and frolic that supposedly demonstrated slave contentment and the African's suitedness for slavery were mirrored in the panic about idleness, intemperate consumption, and fanciful expressions of freedom~ all of which justified coercive labor measures and the constriction of liberties."⁸³ Hartman was able to uncover a political praxis of the enslaved through which they subtly (if incompletely) resisted the violence of racial domination. Across time and space where a radical politics of the body emerged, and Black joy stands as a form of refusal helping wage the ongoing struggle for access to places of leisure and practices that bring about Black joy. This historical struggle has enabled a shared grammar through which Black folk restore, recreate, and re-envision joy, exploring what a politics of pleasure can look like based on the way antiBlackness functions.

Roller skating is a mode of critical praxis. It is a tool helping Black folk undermine the systems of injustice and anti-blackness that are central to late-stage capitalism. Black joy goes by "goon rules" to use Marquise Bey's words, deviant rules not restricted by the powers of normativity and the hold of the state. Black folk wear what they want, engage with who they want, and openly express what they want,

⁸³ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford, 1997). Pp. 7.

and this is an articulation of Black joy that we see shot through JB skating and the funk music that provides the bass line to it. JB enables people to reimagine themselves and create new worlds, possibilities, and conditions for surviving and thriving in our unfree world. In Chicago, a militarized predominately Black city, roller-skating allows us to express our joy and create new personalities and lives. Through riding the funky downbeat we contest the holds placed on our lives by anti-blackness.

Becoming a part of the skating community in Chicago, I created a new life. Entering into a new world on wheels I constantly reinvent myself and grow under the guidance and support of the skate community; skating is an art that allows many Black people to establish new kinship while also refashioning the self. Skaters take on new names and join groups creating new families and relationships. These families go on to form lifelong connections and relational bonds, through teaching each other and fostering collective growth. Joy in the skating rink is transgressive, as David Stovall says, allowing us to move forward collectively toward something beyond feelings of confinement, alienation, and cynicism. Black skate culture is geographically specific and varies depending on which city and part of the country you originate from. What I find consistent in all skate communities are the ways that we create new selves, teach and learn collectively, celebrate being in community with each other, and, if nothing else, feel the music rather than just listening to it. When we feel the music we block out the world and focus only on the floor and our craft. We engage in a form of self-care crucial to renewing us in the continuous fight for survival. JB skating is one of the ways that as Chicagoans we communicate this struggle. Our skates are our pen and funk music is our muse, and at the rink we write our own futures.

Works Cited

- Adeyemi, Kemi. *Feels Right: Black Queer Women and the Politics of Partying in Chicago*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2022.
- Bailey, Marlon M. *Butch Queens up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2013.
- Bergeson-Lockwood, Millington W. “‘We Do Not Care Particularly about the Skating Rinks’: African American Challenges to Racial Discrimination in Places of Public Amusement in Nineteenth-Century Boston, Massachusetts.” *The Journal of the Civil War Era* 5, no. 2 (2015): 254–88. <https://doi.org/10.1353/cwe.2015.0040>.
- Bey, Marquis. *Them Goon Rules: Fugitive Essays on Radical Black Feminism*. Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press, 2019.
- brown, adrienne maree. *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good*. Chico, CA: AK Press, 2019.
- Brown, James. *Make It Funky the Big Payback: 1971-1975*. CD. Polygram international, n.d.
- Burnim, Mellonee V., and Portia K. Maultsby. *African American Music: An Introduction*. New York: Routledge, 2015.
- “Cathy J. Cohen Punks , Bulldaggers , and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential O F Queer Politics?” *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*, 2012, 92–113. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203720776-11>.
- Cohen, Cathy J. “Deviance as Resistance: A New Research Agenda for the Study of Black Politics.” *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 1, no. 1 (2004): 27–45. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1742058x04040044>.
- Dead Prez. 2000. “Let’s Get Free.” Loud Records, studio album
- Dillon, Stephen. *Fugitive Life: The Queer Politics of the Prison State*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018.
- Fanon, Frantz. “From ‘the Fact of Blackness.’” *The Body*, 2005, 98–109. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-230-21336-4_10.
- Harney, Stefano, and Fred Moten. *The Undercommons Fugitive Planning & Black Study*. Wivenhoe u.a.: Minor Compositions, 2013.

Hartman, Saidiya V. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. Oxford University Press (1997).

Hartman, Saidiya V., and Frank B. Wilderson. "The Position of the Unthought." *Qui Parle* 13, no. 2 (2003): 183–201. <https://doi.org/10.1215/quiparle.13.2.183>.

Hartman, Saidiya V., *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux (2008).

Hartman, Saidiya V. *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2020.

Jozo, Jose. "JB Skating History Lesson." Vimeo, March 9, 2023. <https://vimeo.com/59233625>.

Kelley, Robin D. "‘We Are Not What We Seem’: Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South." *The Journal of American History* 80, no. 1 (1993): 75. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2079698>.

King, B.B, and Dave Clarke. *Chains and Things*. MP3. *Chains and Things*. Bill Szymczyk, n.d.

Lee, Christian K. "A Chicago Steppers Competition Shows a Different Side of the City." Vogue. Vogue, October 5, 2022. <https://www.vogue.com/article/chicago-steppers-competition>.

Legends of the Wood (A Short Documentary). YouTube. YouTube, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kq2A6EVXZ5k&t=2417s&ab_channel=MalikThomas.

Lorde, Audre, and Mahogany L. Browne. *Sister Outsider*. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2020.

Martin, Alison. "This Week in History: White City Roller Rink Desegregated." Times. Chicago Sun-Times, April 3, 2021. <https://chicago.suntimes.com/2021/2/4/22263165/white-city-roller-rink-desegregated-chicago>.

Morgan, Joan. "Why We Get off: Moving towards a Black Feminist Politics of Pleasure." *The Black Scholar* 45, no. 4 (2015): 36–46. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2015.1080915>.

Neal, Mark Anthony. "Legislating Freedom, Commodifying Struggle: Civil Rights, Black Power, and the Struggle for Black Musical Hegemony." Essay. In *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture*, 27. New York: Routledge, 2009.

The New York Times. The New York Times, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/video/style/100000005093121/dancing-chicago-james-brown-skates.html>.

Patterson, Orlando. *Slavery and Social Death*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982.

Quashie, Kevin. *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2021.

Samuels-, Alex. "Roller Skating, Civil Rights, and the Wheels behind Dance Music." Telekom Electronic Beats, March 15, 2022.
<https://www.electronicbeats.net/roller-skating-civil-rights-and-the-wheels-behind-dance-music/#:~:text=Behind%20Dance%20Music-.Roller%20Skating%2C%20Civil%20Rights%2C%20and%20the%20Wheels%20Behind%20Dance%20Music,Chicago%20and%20New%20York%20City>.

Scott, James C. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2009.

Sexton, Jared. "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism." *In Tensions*, 2011. <https://doi.org/10.25071/1913-5874/37359>.

Stovall, David. "Schools Suck, but They're Supposed to: Schooling, Incarceration and the Future of Education." *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy* 13, no. 1 (2016): 20–22.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15505170.2016.1138252>.

Tinsley, Omise'eke Natasha. "It's A Party." Essay. In *Ezili's Mirrors: Imagining Black Queer Genders*, 135–66. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018.

Walcott, Rinaldo. *The Long Emancipation: Moving toward Black Freedom*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2021.

White City Roller Rink Demonstration, 1949. Encyclopedia of Chicago. Accessed March 8, 2023. <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/3825.html>.

Wilderson, Frank B. "Absurd Mobility." Essay. In *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.