

BLACK GIRL HAPPY: THE VISUAL LANGUAGE OF BLACK WOMEN  
PURSUING AND CREATING THEIR HAPPINESS

by

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## DEDICATION

### Some Life Lyrics

The following are entries of lyrics from my life dedicated to all the Black women who participated directly and indirectly in this thesis research. Inspired by Quinlin B. Messenger 'To Be Just...Steward: Some Life Lyrics.' I share with you as they were written during moments when I started to ask the question, what is happiness? What is Joy? They are my desires, what I want to feel, see, touch, and hear. I resonate with Messenger when she states life has been by design, "a design that was not my own," a system designed on purpose to suppress, while I am standing "at the crossroads of a multitude of cultural vectors." Standing at a crossroads of not being American but American in some ways, a crossroads that has left scars and opportunities.

#### Lyric- Nice to me

I choose not to make plans today  
Choose to listen to my body  
I prioritize my needs  
Cause I want to be nice to me  
Give myself time to breathe  
I give myself just what I need  
Cause I want to be nice to me  
Just want to be kind to me  
I took time off today  
And I'm doing more than okay  
I recharge when I need  
cause I want to be nice  
Give myself time to play  
Watched all my favorite films  
Cause I want to be nice to me  
Just want to be kind to me  
Life is too short to be toiling away  
Gone are the days when you were blue  
and grey  
Just want to be nice to me

#### Lyric- Happy Song

When I don't feel like moving the earth  
I sit on my couch and sing to myself  
When I don't feel like doing the most  
I look at myself and raise a glass  
All that I hear are the sound of the birds  
As I watch the lights go down  
The pictures on the wall, another morning  
Passing by sitting in my quiet time  
Everybody wants a bit of me  
But I can't Give myself away  
resist the urge to say yes ma'am  
For the love of God, reclaim my time,  
Don't be afraid to stop and say  
No sometimes  
And the lovely part of everything is the  
Morning songs that make you feel light  
A bit of love and sweet melodies  
This is just my happy song to sing

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Thank you to my family and friends, especially my mother for the loving support and encouragement as I have completed this chapter of my life. Lastly, I would like to acknowledge myself for completing this chapter of my life.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation	Description
ABW	Angry Black Woman
AR	Augmented Reality
SBW	Strong Black Woman

## I. INTRODUCTION

As 2019 neared its conclusion, I paused to reflect on my life and what I desired entering the upcoming year. I found myself dissatisfied, unhappy, and grappling with mental and physical exhaustion. I noticed many instances where I prioritized supporting others, often at the cost of my own well-being. In 2020, I decided to embark on a transformative journey. I transitioned from holding two jobs to pursuing a career in design and enrolling in graduate school. The year of change that I had been anticipating began to take shape when I transitioned to remote work due to the pandemic. Shifting from working in an office to a home workspace was a welcome relief for me. After working tirelessly for two years where my home was merely a place to sleep, I finally had the opportunity to make it feel like a real home. It was a chance for me to exist and be a part of my own space, rather than being in other people's spaces. As I claimed my physical space, I also got my first pet, bought houseplants, started gardening, revisited childhood hobbies, learned how to set boundaries, and, with time, felt happier and more mentally sound. This transition from traditional work conditions and my self-transformation sparked my interest in happiness. I imagined that others might be going through the same transition, and I wanted to learn how they pursued happiness.

In recent years, the examination of happiness has expanded to include diverse cultural and demographic perspectives. This research seeks to explore the unique context of Black women and their pursuit of happiness, exploring their lived experiences and the visual representations associated with their pursuit. The intersectionality of race and gender plays a significant role in shaping the experiences of individuals, with Black women often coping with countless socio-cultural factors that influence our well-being. The idea of radical self-care and love is not new to the topic of Black women's experience. Black feminist scholars and activists,



like Bell Hooks, have advocated for self-care and self-love as a “tool for Black wellness” (Wyatt & Ampadu). However, in design, the topic has limited exploration. This study aims to address the following research question: How do Black women pursue happiness, and how is this pursuit visually depicted? By combining qualitative analysis of personal narratives and examining visual representations in various media forms, I aim to provide an understanding of the multifaceted ways Black women define, seek, and portray happiness.

The significance of this research lies in contributing to the broader discourse on happiness and shedding light on the nuanced experiences of Black women, who are often underrepresented in scholarly investigations (Park et al.). Through the exploration of visual depictions, the hope is to uncover layers of meaning that may not be captured through traditional qualitative methods alone, enriching our comprehension of the happiness narratives of Black women. I intend to amplify the voices and experiences of Black women, fostering a deeper understanding of the factors that contribute to their pursuit of happiness and examining how these narratives are visually communicated in and to society.

## II. CONTEXT

Black women in the United States have faced systemic barriers in their pursuit of happiness. Although the U.S. promises an unalienable right to the pursuit of happiness, it has historically deprived Black women of equal opportunities to pursue happiness within the system (Anderson 9). Despite this, Black women have intensely advocated for their right to exist and express themselves through multiple generations. However, the constant fight mode has put Black women in a position of being praised for their strength and resilience, which has normalized being a strong Black Woman (SBW) who endures adversity rather than actively seeking and living happily without “unfair burden” (Godbolt et al. 2). While there is nothing wrong with strength, the SBW stereotype can become a burdensome mask that places Black women at a disadvantage, perpetuating a cycle of giving without receiving (White). The label SBW “obscures the reality of the structural forces that keep Black women down,” diverting focus from potential structural and policy solutions to addressing the issues Black women experience and “directs attention instead to Black women themselves (Godbolt et al. 3).

One could argue that the traditional American path to happiness, based on hard work and reaping the fruit of labor, may not work for Black women. This calls for a re-evaluation of what happiness means for Black women and how it can be pursued in a way that acknowledges their unique experiences and challenges. Especially where “there doesn’t seem to be a memory in the collective African American consciousness of a time when Black women didn’t work,” did not give and receive (Karagin).

Imagine a society with a repetitive narrative that praises strength and endurance but overlooks the importance of embracing vulnerability. These stories heavily influence our views

on happiness and joy, often crafted by individuals who do not belong to the groups they depict. As Jackson aptly points out, the connection between these portrayals and our perceptions holds significant consequences, particularly when it comes to groups like Black women, who are frequently misrepresented. For example, in the 1950s, the press played a significant role in dehumanizing and humiliating Black women. They achieved this by referring to married Black women by their first names instead of using the title "Mrs.," which undermined the legitimacy of African American marriages. This practice reinforced a racist stereotype suggesting that women of color were morally "loose" and such dehumanization was utilized by Jim Crow society to justify the predatory behavior of white men who sexually assaulted Black women (Staples). Today, it is a prevalent tendency to label any emotional reaction from Black individuals as angry, loud, and with a nasty attitude. Melissa Harris-Perry calls it the "Angry Black Woman (ABW) myth," highlighting how even Michelle Obama faced this stereotype (qtd. in Donnetrice 160). Harris-Perry argues that Black women are often portrayed as aggressive and hostile, lacking in vulnerability or empathy (160–161). This was evident in the media's portrayal of Serena Williams during the 2018 US Open Women's Final<sup>1</sup>. Media headlines and articles branded her as the ABW.

There is a narrow distinction between the SBW and the ABW, and the SBW is often characterized as angry. In television dramas, the SBW is meant to look good and “may also serve to inspire” (Mulata). She is characterized as successful, “independent, hostile, and rarely shows

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<sup>1</sup> In the 2018 championship match against Naomi Osaka, Serena Williams got a warning from the chair umpire for receiving coaching from the sidelines and denied cheating. She then smashed her racket in frustration, leading to a point deduction. When she protested, she was penalized a game (Hajela).

any sign of empathy—another [assumed] characteristic of Black femininity” (Mulata). These portrayals are evident in TV shows like *Girlfriends*, *Insecure*, *Scandal*, and other Black women-targeted media. Despite some influence from Black women on the portrayal of Black womanhood in media, the representation remains “limited to the marginalized perceptions of Blackness because the production companies and networks, which are still primarily owned and controlled by non-Blacks, overly produced racialized images” of Black women (Gammage 135–154). These persistent portrayals lead to Black women being confined within stereotypes that make them “sicker, unhappier, and more exhausted than any other group” (Mulata). A qualitative study published in the *Journal of Black Studies* showed a relationship between the SBW label and eating disorders in Black women (Godbolt et al.). The misrepresentation deprives Black women of control and agency over their narratives and lives.

Drawing from firsthand experiences, including those of my mother and grandmother, it becomes clear that the loss of agency spans generations. However, through dialogues with peers and fellow Black women, a theme emerges: a collective determination to dismantle this cycle and grasp the essence of "freedom to pursue happiness without predefined expectations" (Bradley). In 2022, there was a transformative shift among Black women, transitioning from relentless self-sacrifice to a life of indulgence and joy. Instead of accepting survival as the default way of life, Black women decided it was "worth trying—owning joy and living a bountiful life" (Dirshe). This shift, often called the Soft Black Girl Life<sup>2</sup>, was massively popular on social media in 2022 and 2023, especially on TikTok, where Black women proudly displayed

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<sup>2</sup> A Soft Black Life is a lifestyle that prioritizes ease, comfort, and intentional happiness while rejecting stress, self-sacrifice, and overwork. According to Urban Dictionary, it refers to a time when a woman makes an effort to live in peace, happiness, and calmness.

their newfound focus on self-care and mental well-being (Muir). Aesthetically, it is a display of softness and luxury, but the idea of the Soft Black Girl was more than that. Psychotherapist Oludara Adeeyo describes this take on the #softBlackgirl life as "embracing self-care in every aspect of your life, from home to work to your relationship with wellness and how you manage your relationships" (qtd. in Payton). This transition is not solely about aesthetics but rather "a mentality, one that elevates the importance of mental health" and puts oneself first (Payton). Prominent figures like Yvonne Orji and Taraji P. Henson have openly discussed the importance of embracing vulnerability and prioritizing personal happiness over a facade of constant strength.

This shift from strength to vulnerability offers a chance to redefine the narrative and promote a message of personal evolution, encouraging Black women to prioritize their happiness and well-being rather than constantly putting others before themselves.

### **III. PROCESS AND FORM**

The beauty of design lies in solving problems in unconventional and imaginative ways by combining words, images, objects, and sounds to tell impactful stories. Sometimes, finding a solution necessitates thinking creatively, questioning conventional logic, and pushing oneself to perceive objects and things beyond their typical applications. This type of imagination lies at the intersection of speculative design and Afrofuturism, envisioning new futures through technology and world-building outside the realities of Black struggle. Incorporating these two concepts of imagination shaped both the questions I posed to my audience and the design outcome.

#### **Antithesis**

The first engagement with my topic began with generic forms, starting with a tote bag and a tabletop. Tote bags, commonly used to carry assorted items, lacking internal compartments, resulting in a mix of contents inside. Despite their ubiquity as simple branded gifts that businesses, organizations, and other entities use, they serve as a medium of expression. The tote bag becomes an act of empowerment, providing Black women with a tangible symbol of agency and permission to prioritize their happiness. Additionally, these bags serve as a tangible declaration of boundaries, emphasizing to others the importance of respecting their autonomy and avoiding undue burdens on their pursuit of happiness.

The tote bag design uses the Tic-Tac-Toe game and a crisscross puzzle to convey happiness wins. Emojis represent the players in this game of tick-tack-toe. Emojis create a clear visual of an emotional response and state that people are familiar with and often use to evoke feelings without words. Happiness is depicted as a yellow smiling face emoji, while society, external pressures, and anything opposing happiness are represented as sad and neutral emoji

players who lose the game to happiness. Tic-Tac-Toe introduces a concept of a playing field, akin to our real-life society, where individuals face various curve balls. However, to counter and survive, the contrast in scale of the happy emoji players and the bold yellow color emphasize taking up space and a more prominent stance of happiness (Figure 1). The other side of the bag allows the tote owner to sit and explore words that I found essential to the conversation about pursuing happiness selfishly and unapologetically. The clues for the crisscross puzzle introduce Black writers and authors who write about possible Black women's futures and their pursuit of happiness (Figure 2). The tote bags were then distributed, and during the process, I had conversations with other Black women about choosing happiness and the challenges involved (Figure 3).

In Essence magazine, I came across a 2020 article titled "Happy Black Women at Every Age Reveal the Small Acts That Brought Them Big Joy" by Charli Penn. The writer asked Black women aged 23–50 to reveal the simple acts and small steps that began their pursuit of happiness. The responses ranged from ‘learn something new,’ ‘splurge a little,’ ‘say yes to you,’ ‘celebrate your fabulousness,’ and more. Reading the article and identifying the simple things that brought those women happiness, I wondered what other simple objects are tied to the pursuit of happiness. How could I take objects that seem so simple and make them artifacts that “enable speculation and critical engagement with possible futures” of happiness (UTS Design Index)? The simple objects we do not think much of but are part of the happiness journey might hold much power in telling the story of how we pursue it. To activate the power in these objects is to give them space to be present and visible. Using the concept of a tabletop, which refers to a photograph of an arrangement of objects on a table, I curated an arsenal of artifacts that represent my pursuit of happiness (Figure 4). I then asked friends and family to create a tabletop with

artifacts of the little things that bring happiness, joy, and fulfillment to their lives (Figure 5).



Figure 1. Happy Wins Tote Bag Front



Figure 2. Happy Wins Tote Bag Back





Figure 3. Happy Wins Tote Bag in the Wild



Figure 4. Tabletop Artifacts by Chika. O



Figure 5. Tabletop Artifacts by Susan. O

## Playlist

Visual communication sets the mood and atmosphere for musical experiences, whether through album covers or music videos. They also often serve as mediums for personal, cultural, and social commentary. Freedom of expression is a big part of music; the same can be said for how Black women pursue happiness. So, if music were a key to unlocking happiness, what would the playlist consist of, and what would the playlist cover look like? Black artists like Janelle Monáe use music to express or defy societal expectations. An example is Monáe's most recent album, *The Age of Pleasure*, where she bares it all. "With such a sex-positive project, Monáe had to make sure that the cover artwork matched the vibe" (Mendez) (Figure 6).

The vibe of my playlist was an unapologetic expression of self and freedom that brought together different genres of music across the diaspora of Black women singing about navigating struggles, feeling good, being carefree, embracing themselves, and just doing life the way they wanted (Figure 7). It takes the listener from soulful bopping of their head, sipping coffee on the couch, dancing across the room, and affirming in the mirror to connecting with their higher self.

To bring this playlist to life, the cover and title had to embody a broad idea. The playlist's title was inspired by Emelie Sande's song "Breathing Underwater." She described breathing underwater as "the first time I had ever been alone, really. I really felt free. I could do anything I want. I put myself in my own box, and then I suddenly broke free," which aligned with the playlist's intent (qtd. in Songfacts). Creating the final playlist cover art (Figure 8) involved multiple iterations and processes. For instance, experimenting with photographing objects underwater to capture a tranquil feeling of peace, along with exploring various typographic styles and treatments (Figure 9).



Figure 6. Janelle Monáe: The Age of Pleasure Album Cover



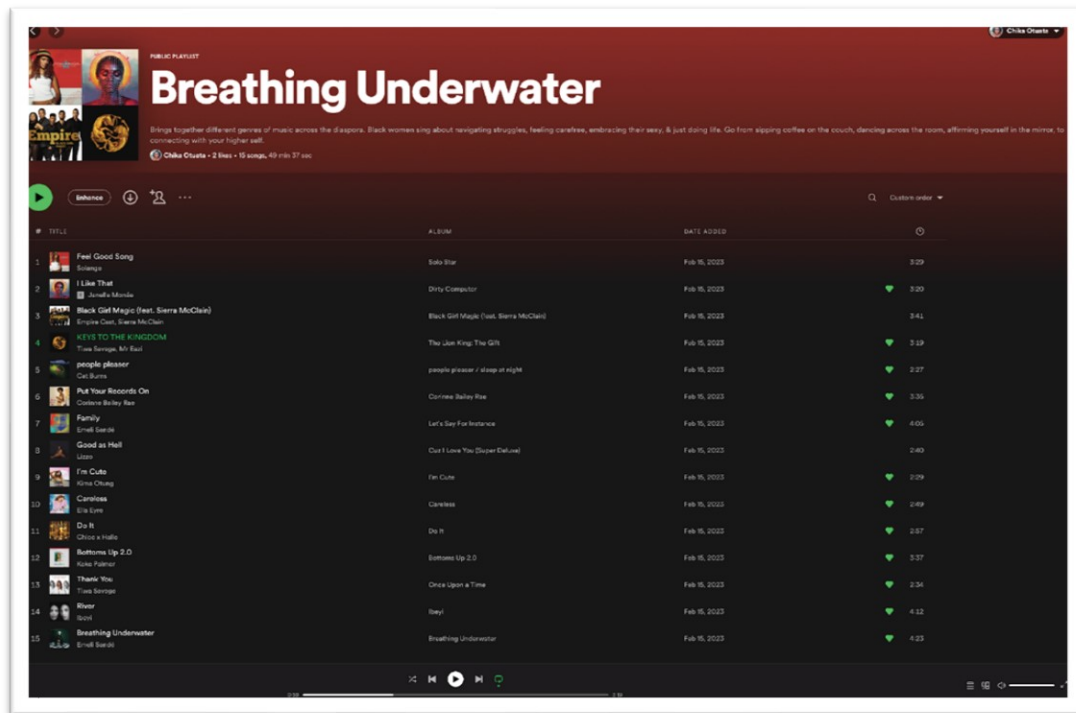


Figure 7. Breathing Underwater Playlist



Figure 8. Breathing Underwater Playlist Cover Art

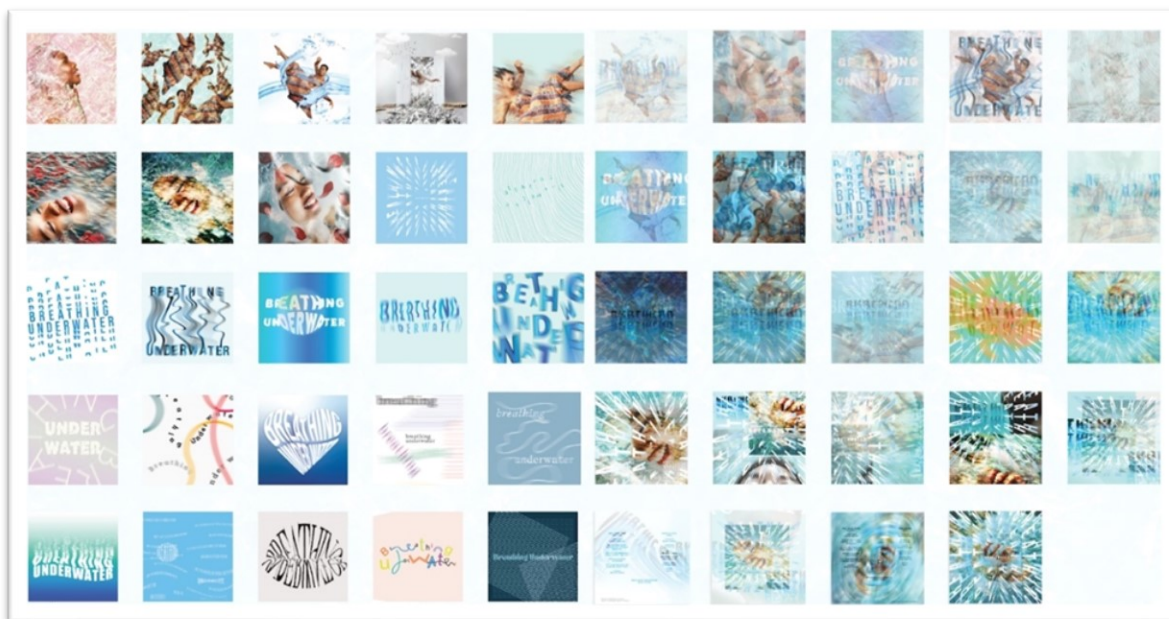


Figure 9. Iterations of Playlist Cover Art

## Black Girl Happy Archive and Catalog

Archives, with their traces, have the power to disrupt historical narratives, emphasizing that even the insignificant can hold value. Considering this, I questioned how my work could challenge the established histories of Black women—contemplating what a Black girl or woman in 2044 might encounter when learning about the history of Black women. Drawing inspiration from Toni Morrison's *The Black Book* and other Black women's archives, I initiated the Black Girl Happy Archive.

The Black Girl Happy Archive captures memories and imagination, documenting the pursuit of happiness among Black women. It is a web-based archive of sound bites, books, movies, and TV shows, aiming to evolve into a crowdsourced archive (Figure 10). The archive is a single-scroll website that begins with a portal-like animated image. It includes soundbites from Instagram reels, books by Black authors, and Black TV shows. Clicking on an entry takes the

user to the content's original source. Also, inspired by postmodern graphic design, which amplifies unconventional voices and uses disruptive elements, the project contributes to rewriting the narrative of Black women prioritizing themselves and renegotiating their chosen way of life. Visually, the archive diverges from the rigid confines of modernist design, opting instead for a dynamic and fluid layout. The content layout avoids the constraints of a fixed grid system, granting elements the freedom to organically move on the screen. This archive embraces a diverse array of sources, incorporating audio from platforms like Instagram reels, which may not conventionally be considered archival material. However, as Merewether aptly notes, "the lowliest thing could be precious" (11). By embracing such unconventional sources, the archive amplifies a multitude of voices, recognizing the inherent value in every expression. In the future, the plan is to facilitate submissions from the broader community, like The People's Graphic Design Archive, thereby enriching the archive with an even broader spectrum of perspectives. This inclusive approach aims to highlight the diverse narratives of Black women in pursuit of happiness, ensuring their stories are preserved and celebrated for generations to come.

The Black Girl Happy catalog was an extension of the archive. Drawing inspiration from vision boards that use collage and visual journaling to express goals and desires, I crafted this catalog's style by combining my manifesto (Figure 11) with personal and sourced images like a vision board. The catalog is a spiral-bound 5.5 x 8.5 book, created in this size to look, feel, and read like a journal (Figure 12). This design choice offers a portable, easily duplicable alternative to the typically large, static traditional vision boards. Inside the catalog are 'I am for', 'I must be open to', and 'I will' deceleration statements, followed by images and blank pages to add more images and affirming I am, will, and open statements (Figure 13).

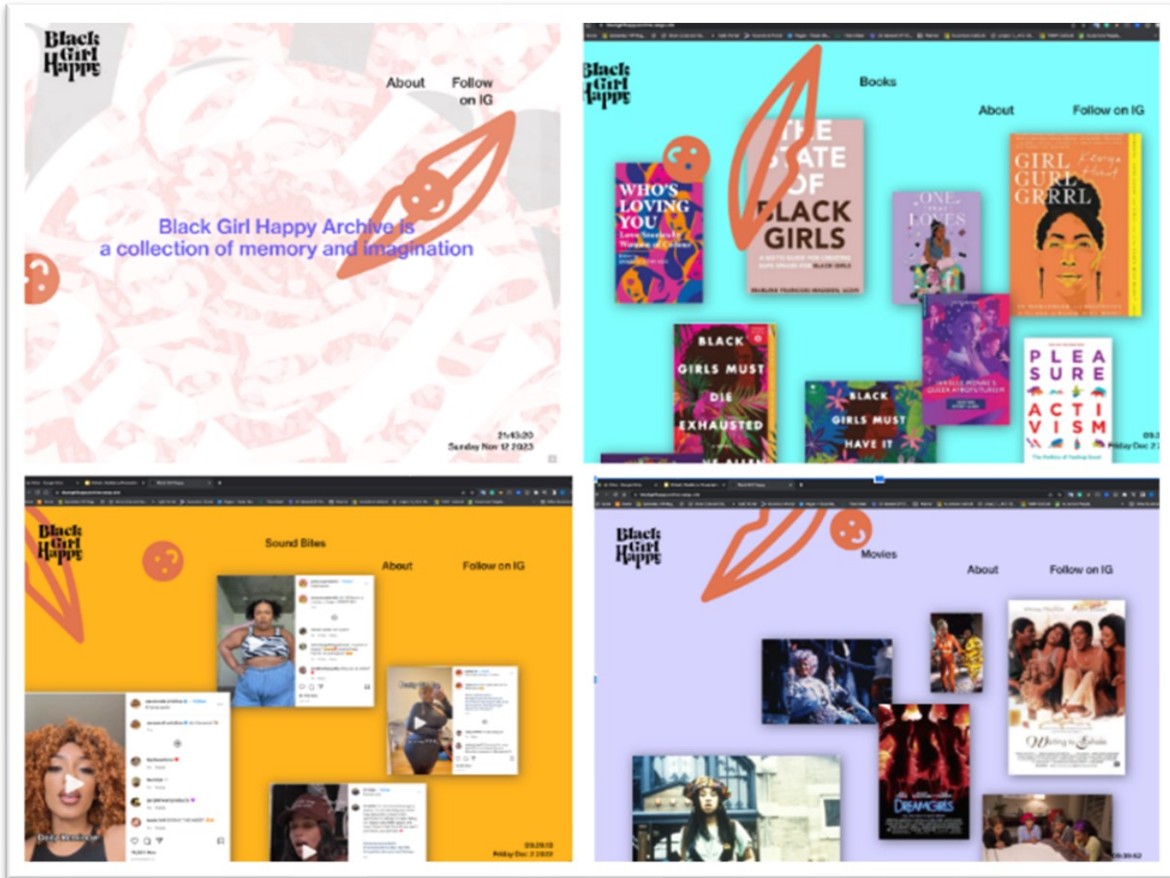


Figure 10. Black Girl Happy Archive

This is a declaration to take up space in my life and society.  
To encourage other black women to take up space in their lives and the community.

I am for living life unapologetically  
I am for living wholeheartedly  
I am for prioritizing the present  
I am for dreaming an equitable world  
I am for art and expression that challenges what is the norm for black women  
I am for pursuing happiness and pleasure selfishly and unapologetically  
I am for going against the strong black woman trope  
I am for living a soft life  
I am for an inclusive and engaging form of action  
I am for time and space that defies the norm  
I am for setting boundaries and respecting boundaries

**As a designer, my work should be understood by all people and not  
safeguarded in the guise of academia. My skills will be put towards the  
improvement of a better society.**

I must be:

Open to self-reflection  
Open to new experiences  
Open to embracing the journey  
Open to rejection  
Open to dreaming big even if the dream might seem unattainable

**Happiness, joy, and fulfillment come from the little things in life, sometimes  
invisible to the eye.**

I will cherish the small things and small moments  
I will get in the habit of documenting those small moments of happiness and joy  
I will give myself the grace to fail and process all emotions as I understand life is like torn  
on roses.

**I only have one life to live. You only have one life to live**

Chika otuata

Figure 11. Manifesto





Figure 12. Black Girl Happy Catalog



Figure 13. Black Girl Happy Catalog Blank Pages

#### IV. RESEARCH AND DATA

Understanding the impact of world-building<sup>3</sup>, I saw the power in actualizing new Black futures and physical spaces with messaging that negates the overwhelming portrayal of SBW with a new narrative that shows and encourages the pursuit of happiness. Using world-building to imagine and construct a physical space wherein Black women experience freedom and are empowered to pursue and create their happiness, actively countering existing narratives.

I used imagination and the foundational learning approach through our five senses to engage research participants. Drawing from Maryville University's article highlighting the connection between senses, memory, and retention, I acknowledged how senses shape our experiences and aid in bridging the physical and mental spaces. Recognizing the significance of the five senses coupled with imagination, I introduced a new question to my audience, aiming to delve into the core of how Black women conceptualize and actively pursue their happiness.

Using these two methods, I asked participants in a pop-up participatory activity at The Bloom Conference by Black Girl Think Tank to envision their happiness by gazing into a mirror that acted as a doorway into the dream space (Figure 14). Participants were encouraged to imagine a dream space about their happiness using their five senses—sight, hearing, touch, taste, and feel—and to actualize it by writing it down and adding it to a symbolic collective tree display (Figure 14). The exercise of stepping out of reality into a blank canvas was an eye-

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<sup>3</sup> An element of Afrofuturism that “functions to foster realized physical spaces that develop and nurture Black creative and activist expression” (Afrofuturism: A History of Black Futures)

opening moment for the participants because, in that space, they started to reflect on what happiness meant to them and what having complete agency could look like.



Figure 14. Participants at the Bloom Conference's "Black Girl Happy Pop-Up" event

## **Participatory Research Data**

The analysis incorporated responses from 38 participants out of 40. Among these participants were 38 adult women, 1 minor child, and 1 adult male. Participants' responses were categorized based on the senses they most frequently used to visualize their happiness, which included see, feel, hear, touch, smell, and taste (Figure 15). In response to the question "Picture your happiness, what do you see, feel, hear, touch, and taste?" the participants were more likely to imagine what they could see and feel as opposed to what they could touch or taste (Figure 17). Their responses were also categorized into 10 groups (Figure 16). Overall, the responses indicated that Black women find happiness in a combination of personal, sensory, and culturally relevant experiences, as well as in positive connections with others and themselves.

Participants response	See	Feel	Hear	Touch	Smell	Taste
Feelings of security and protection. Smell of vanilla words of affirmation.		Security/protection	Affirmation		Vanilla woods	
Success, blessings, growth						
Love and connection and service						
Far islands call breeze my kids laughing		Breeze	Kids laughing			
My black, beautiful skin is all I need						
See the beach. I hear the kids laughing. Feel grateful I can feel my tone kin. I smell Amber resin oil.	Beach		Kids laughing	Laughing	Amber resin oil	
My perfect world, I see myself, chilling, big, relaxing in a villa in Italy, eating the best pasta in the world	Italian villa	Relaxed/chilled		Food		
Love, peace, the beach and melanin growth, pink floral, scents, smooth food	Pink, beach, melanin				Floral	
Peace, love, wealth, international speaker, God faith	Wealth	Peace, love,				
Take time to reflect reset rest self care		Rest				
My happy. I am here at peace, full of love, and surrounded by love I am healed, forgiven strong, have a positive impact on everyone and everything touch		Peace, love				
Success						
Freedom trust a flows everything I am		Freedom				
My home girls healing	Healing					
My happiness as a black woman is the smell of fresh pound cake, cupcakes, and protection from the world. I love our people.		Protection			Pound cake	
Happiness is on the beach, warm, so soft ways, sea salt air with my head in a margarita	Beach				Sea salt	Margaritas
My black girl happy is walking in my God-given, purpose, unbothered unapologetically and with boldness, royalty, joy, and peace						
Living in my truth, unafraid unashamed unapologetically		Unafraid, unashamed	Truth			
Smell fresh, picked flowers. I feel a cold, brisk wind I see my beautiful mile. I hear peace through God.		Cold brisk wind	Peace, God		Fresh flowers	
Ocean my perfect happiness feels like a night of good sleep, feeling refreshed energized. I smell of lavender, mint, vanilla I'm tasting margaritas. am surrounded by the sound inside of the ocean.	Ocean	Good night sleep. Refreshed	Ocean sounds		Lavender. Mint, vanilla	Margaritas
Smell a fresh breeze open space I feel softness I see creative materials like yarn paint a stage of microphone	Yarn, paint	Breeze, open space, soft				
Happiness feels free		Free				
Handelions, roses, chrysanthemums them yes musk perfume, citrus sense leethoven and Mozart I feel joy			Music(Beethoven, Mozart)		Citrus	
Happiness is joy in my heart time in my life, for all my passions, and my friends and partner, and showing giving and bringing love	Friends	Give/bring love				
Fountains and waves old books, a joint, a candle a hug music on shrooms sleeping, at my hotel, reading carrots for strangers, writing, serving my community	Mountains, waves		Music			
True freedom to do whatever without expectations achieve or be anything but a happy black girl to be on a beach daily	Beach	Freedom without expectation				
My happiness is bringing joy to others through music			Music			
Security, warm, God-fearing, unconditional love		Security, warm, love				
Ill in my feels, happy is knowing my kids will experience the joyful and healed version of me		Healed				
Don't have to choose peace or stability happiness						
Happy smells like joy and Arizona green tea					Joy, Arizona green tea	
We increase dollar signs	Money increase					
Love and charm and smiles	Smiles					
Black girl joy being one with yourself and God, I feel at peace and love		Love, peace				
Turtles on the sand waves crashing, the shore is happy with who I am feel happy, thankful and joyful	Sand, shore		Waves crashing			
Healing and love, self and growth, God	Self growth	Love,				
I am at my best when I am working on my own creative projects what I see in me at a desk or table creating, making with my hands what I smell is paper and ink	Creative desk			Making with hands	Paper and ink	

Figure 15.Participatory Research Data 1

### Participatory Research Results

**Total Participants:** 40

**Race:** Identified as Black/African American

**Gender:** 38 Women\*, 1 Man\*\*, 1 Girl\*\*

- Summarized categories of participants' responses to the question: Picture your happiness; what do you see, feel, hear, touch, and taste?
  - **Sense of Security and Protection:**
    - Words like "feelings of security and protection" and references to "God-fearing, unconditional love" indicate a strong sense of safety and comfort.
  - **Connection with Nature:**
    - Several mentions of the beach, ocean, waves, and natural elements like fresh breeze, flowers, and sea salt air suggest a deep connection with nature.
  - **Cultural Identity and Empowerment:**
    - References to "Black, beautiful skin," "melanin growth," and expressions of happiness as a Black woman highlight a sense of cultural identity and empowerment.
  - **Sensory Experiences:**
    - The text is rich in sensory details, including smells (vanilla, Amber resin oil, fresh pound cake, lavender, mint), tastes (best pasta, margaritas), sounds (kids laughing, waves crashing, music), and visuals (beautiful smile, creative materials).
  - **Positive Affirmations:**
    - Positive affirmations are present throughout the text, such as "I am healed, forgiven, strong" and "I am at my best when I am working on my own creative projects."
  - **Aspirations and Dreams:**
    - Expressions of a perfect world, chilling in a villa in Italy, achieving success, and being an international speaker reflect aspirations and dreams.
  - **Emphasis on Love and Joy:**
    - Love, peace, joy, and positive impact are recurring themes, emphasizing the importance of emotional well-being and positive relationships.
  - **Self-Care and Reflection:**
    - The text emphasizes the importance of taking time for self-care, reflection, and rest.
  - **Freedom and Unapologetic Authenticity:**
    - Statements like "true freedom to do whatever without expectations" and "living in my truth, unafraid, unashamed, unapologetically" convey a sense of freedom and authenticity.
  - **Creative Expression:**
    - The mention of creative projects, working at a desk or table, and engaging in activities like music, writing, and serving the community reflects a desire for creative expression.

Participants' responses show that Black women find happiness in a harmonious blend of personal, sensory, and cultural experiences. As well as in positive connections with others and oneself.

\* Over 18 Participants.

\*\* Excluded from analysis due to not meeting the research criteria based on age and/or gender.

Figure 16. Participatory Research Data 2



- When the participants pictured their happiness using the five senses, their responses showed that they wrote down more about what they saw and felt than touch and taste.

Points scored

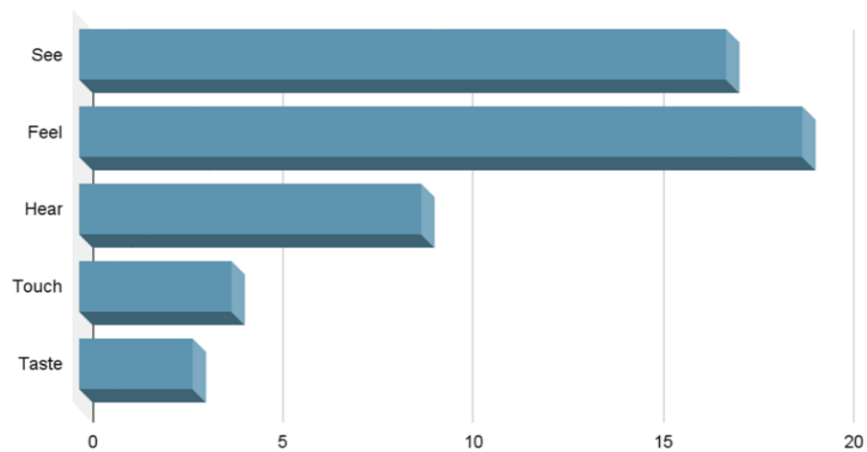


Figure 17. Participatory Research Data 3

## V. CREATIVE OUTCOME

This participatory activity was the concluding element in constructing the final creative outcome of this thesis exploration. I examined the interplay between dreams (imagined futures) and reality. The dream space represents the fictional realm where 'Black Girl Happy' thrives—a space free from conventional constraints, encouraging limitless imagination. In contrast, reality is constrained by systems that limit alternative modes of thinking.

The result of investigating the visual representation of how Black women actively pursue and create happiness is a space that transforms the dream space into a realized physical realm. This realm aims to shed light on the journey of Black women as they actively seek and create their happiness. This space considers aspects of Black women's happiness that emphasize and prioritize softness<sup>4</sup> over the SBW trope, the importance of community for staying committed to choosing happiness, fostering more conversations, and increasing visibility of Black women actively pursuing happiness.

Black Girl Happy: Where Dreams and Reality Meet is an interactive exhibition crafted to give vitality to the dreams and aspirations of Black women in their pursuit of happiness. It bridges the gap between the dream world and reality, providing a sanctuary for the imaginations of Black women to thrive without societal constraints. This space, where happiness takes root, nurtures healing, growth, and freedom.

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<sup>4</sup> In reference to Soft Black Girl.



To realize this new Black woman's future space inspired by Afrofuturism and speculative design, the exhibit utilizes augmented reality (AR)<sup>5</sup>, soundscapes, and tangible objects, creating a seamless fusion of dreams and reality for a captivating journey (Figure 18). AR elements bridge the gap between the physical and dream realms and amplify the immersive nature of the exhibition. In the center of the space is a bean bag that is placed on a reflective surface to encourage guests to relax and take a break. The wall features three poster designs that represent healing, growth, and freedom. These posters are brought to life with the use of AR and are paired with audio snippets from interviews and sound bites of Black women discussing their relationship with happiness. The space is adorned with vibrant, cascading floral arrangements that add color and life to the room. Floating clouds also grace the ceiling, not only providing security but also creating a feeling of freedom. The flowers' reflection on the reflective floor surface further enhances the dream-like atmosphere, making the space feel boundless and full of endless opportunities. In addition to the reflective floor surface, there is an affirmation mirror on the wall, which serves as a self-affirmation portal. The mirror encourages visitors to write their happiness affirmations and self-proclaim their goals for their happiness journey. Typographically, the design features a combination of handwritten type and a carefully selected font that embodies softness, confidence, and playfulness. The use of handwritten elements injects a sense of humanity, telling personal stories of real people and their experiences, adding an individualized touch to the design. In addition, visitors leave the exhibition with a community-generated digital Black Girl Happy guide. This guide is filled with tips, tricks, and resources that Black women can use in their daily lives to prioritize their happiness. Black women can take

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<sup>5</sup> AR is an interactive experience that combines computer-generated content with the real world.

steps towards actualizing their dreams of happiness and creating a space that encourages them to prioritize their well-being every day.

Black Girl Happy: Where Dreams and Reality Meet elevates happiness through its immersive storytelling. Engaging the audience through multiple senses, creating a stimulating environment that redefines what happiness looks like for Black women in a realm free from constraints. The exhibit is a dreamscape, weaving together the threads of healing, growth, and freedom. As the space transforms into a celebration of Black women, it leaves an indelible mark, inspiring joy, softness, and a sense of connection within every visitor (Figure 19).



Figure 18. Black Girl Happy: Where Dreams and Reality Meet concept mockup

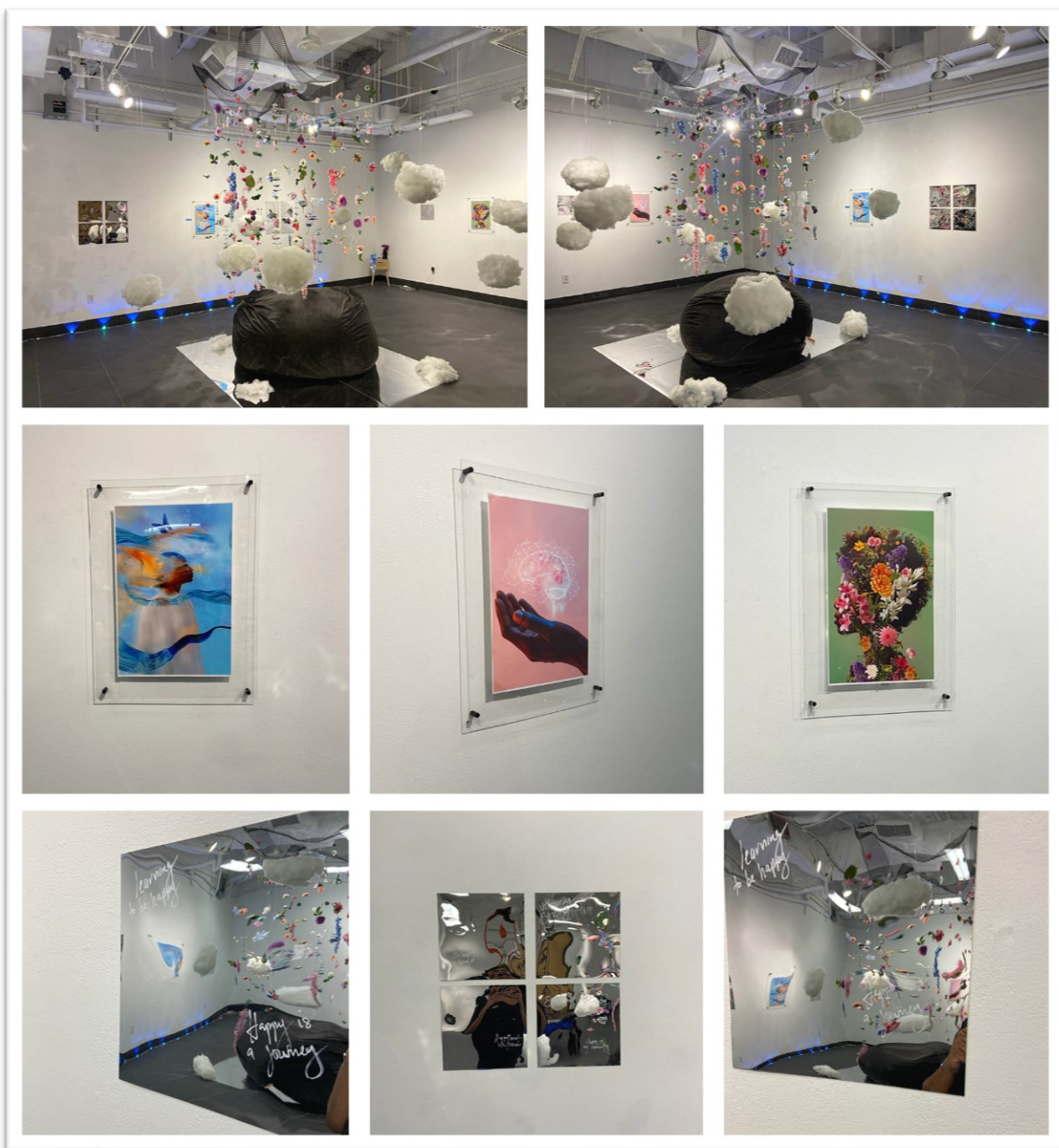


Figure 19. Black Girl Happy: Where Dreams and Reality Meet at Texas State University FLEX Gallery

## VI. CONCLUSION

The Black Girl Happy research delves into the multifaceted exploration of Black women's pursuit of happiness, offering a transformative narrative that challenges stereotypes and encourages a shift toward better well-being. Through various design solutions, this work exemplifies the potential of design to convey powerful messages and contribute to broader social and cultural conversations. The tote bag and tabletop designs serve as tangible expressions of the pursuit of happiness, transforming everyday objects into speculative artifacts that invite conversation, remind us daily, and give us the power to choose happiness. The playlist curation demonstrates the intersection of visual design with multimedia expression, creating a space for personal, cultural, and social commentary. The Black Girl Happy archive challenges traditional notions of history, providing a platform to document and share Black women's stance on happiness through the lens of Black women in a nontraditional manner. The immersive exhibition brings alternative, plausible spaces that support the needs of Black women.

These design elements, whether tangible or digital, contribute to the rewriting of narratives surrounding Black women, prioritizing joy, softness, and authenticity over entrenched stereotypes. This research displays the dynamic role of graphic, visual, speculative, and experience design in shaping and amplifying narratives. It moves beyond aesthetic considerations to actively engage with social issues, breaking away from conventional design norms to create spaces that challenge, inspire, and celebrate. The fusion of visual elements with personal stories and technological innovation underscores the potential for design to be a powerful force in advocating for Black women.

In conclusion, this research endeavor has yielded tangible outcomes in the form of the Black Girl Happy Archive and Black Girl Happy Guide, both serving as practical tools for empowerment and representation. Looking ahead, my commitment lies in enhancing the functionality of the archive to foster community engagement, with the aim of evolving it into a comprehensive repository of resources accessible to individuals, communities, and researchers alike. Furthermore, I am dedicated to expanding the reach of the Black Girl Happy Guide, extending its accessibility beyond the confines of my immediate community of Black women. Moreover, I aspire to bring the vision of the Black Girl Happy: Where Dreams and Reality Meet exhibit to public spaces, weaving this reimagined narrative into the fabric of Black women's everyday lives. By transforming public spaces into vibrant centers of empowerment and affirmation, the goal is to instigate a change in thinking towards prioritizing happiness, representation, and celebration of Black women.

Looking forward, this work advocates for a reevaluation of societal norms and spaces, championing the universal right of Black women to pursue happiness free from preconceived expectations or stereotypes. Through harnessing design's transformative potential, we can contribute to a more empathetic society that recognizes and embraces the diverse narratives and experiences of Black women. By normalizing the pursuit of happiness for Black women, we take a significant step towards fostering a more inclusive and equitable world for all.

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