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The Trouble with Publicness: Toward a Theory of Black Quiet

The story of this moment has been told many times: it was the 1968 Olympics in a volatile Mexico City, and two male athletes, both black Americans, make an emblematic gesture during the medal ceremony for the 200-meter race. One of them, Tommie Smith, has won the race while the other, John Carlos, was third. As the U. S. national anthem plays, both men punctuate the space above their heads with their black-gloved fists, Smith raising his right hand, Carlos his left. Their salute is a Black Power sign that protests racism and poverty, and counters the anthem and its embracing nationalism. The third man on the podium, standing to their right, is Peter Norman, a white Australian who won the silver medal; Norman doesn't elevate his fist but wears an O. P. H. R. (Olympic Project for Human Rights) pin in solidarity with Smith's and Carlos's protest.

The power of this moment is in its celebrated details—the clenched fists, the black gloves, their shoeless feet—details that confirm a resoluteness of action. Since that day, commentators have memorialized the public assertiveness of their gesture. Smith's and Carlos's bodies have become both a precise sign of a restless decade and especially of black resistance. But look again closely at the pictures from that day and you can see something more than the certainty of public assertiveness. See, for example, how the severity of Smith's salute is balanced by the yielding of Carlos's raised arm. Then notice how the sharpness of their gestures is complemented by one telling detail: that their heads are bowed as if in prayer, that Smith, in fact, has his eyes closed. The effect of their bowed heads suggests intimacy, that this very public protest is also private. There is a sublime balance between their intentional political gesture and this sense of inwardness, a sublimity that is often barely acknowledged. The beauty of the protest is enhanced by reading Smith and Carlos not only as soldiers in a larger war against oppression, but also as two people in a moment of deep spirituality, in prayer, as vulnerable as they are aggressive, as pensive as they are solidly righteous. In this reading, what is compelling is that their humanity is on display; what we get are the inner dimensions of their public bravery.

As one of the most iconic moments of the American twentieth century, Smith's and Carlos's protest helps us explore the limits of public blackness. There is no question that their action was an intentional and public demonstration, the most significant of the O. P. H. R.'s attempt to organize athletes toward a boycott of the Games. Still, the moment exhibits and even draws upon deep intimacy, conveying an explicit sense of human vulnerability; what is moving about seeing them is as much the quality of graceful, lithe surrender in their postures as it is the awareness of the politics that are at stake. Like many moments from the civil rights movement, their protest is an exquisite balance of what is public and what is intimate. How then can the intimacy of their fists-in-protest be overlooked or deferred in our reading such that the breadth of this moment is useful only for its public weight? How is it that Smith and Carlos are largely icons of resistance, and that of all the things we are encouraged to read in their image, vulnerability and interiority are not among them?¹

Part of what hinders our capacity to see this quality in their gestures is a general concept of blackness that privileges public expressiveness and resistance. More specifically, black culture is mostly overidentified with an idea of expressiveness that is geared toward a social audience and that has political aim; such expressiveness is the essence

of black resistance. In fact the idea that black culture is both expressive and resistant is now so common that it neither seems insightful nor requires justification. Of course, central to this thinking is the assumption that all expressiveness is necessarily public. This essay, then, explores the uses and limits of black publicness as well as what a concept of quiet could mean to how we think about black culture. Throughout the essay, I use the term “quiet” even though the noun “quietude” might be more grammatically stable. The two words can mean the same thing according to the *Oxford English* and *American Heritage* dictionaries, though quiet is the older and more dynamic of the two, functioning as a noun, adjective, adverb and verb. Indeed, in the most recent *OED*, quiet as a noun has five entries whereas quietude holds only one. Tellingly, among the etymologies of the terms, the *OED* claims that quiet can be personified—as in “her quiet”—though this distinction is not noted for quietude. This seems to indicate a greater historical and lexical flexibility in the meaning of quiet, and to suggest the relative limitation of quietude. Furthermore, “quiet” appeals to me because it is more colloquial. In choosing a word to engage as a metaphor for the expressiveness of the interior, I wanted a term that was accessible and that had enough connotative flexibility to take on one more meaning.²

“I am overdetermined from without”: Frantz Fanon

To explore fully the relationship between black culture and publicness requires a brief consideration of the public sphere as an intrinsic feature of modernity. Jürgen Habermas, in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, first imagined the public sphere as a historical construct. In modernity, Habermas suggests, publicness is analogous to agency and freedom, and to participate in the public sphere is precisely what it means to be a modern citizen.³ Habermas’s argument idealizes the individual and even implicitly proclaims publicness as a *subjectivity*, setting a correlation between free-willed participation in public matters on one hand, and humanity on the other. In this regard, the exemplary human being is expressive and demonstrative and articulate in a public context. This ideal of public selfhood is not available to everyone. Habermas himself cites education and property ownership as necessary criteria for participation in the public sphere, criteria that would have excluded most women, nonwhites, and subsistence laborers. Moreover, the Habermasian idiom of the public sphere depends on the ability to imagine oneself as the universal ideal, as the exemplary modern citizen. This expectation is a further exclusion, since it is nearly conceptually impossible for a racialized or gendered subject to be at once a symbol of difference *and* universality.⁴

It is Nancy Fraser’s classic essay “Rethinking the Public Sphere” that makes clear Habermas’s exclusions and proffers a correction. Fraser argues that Habermas ignores the counterpublic spheres, those sites of publicness that are alternative to and challenging of the bourgeois exclusivity of his ideal. These counterpublics are the domain of marginalized people and reveal subjectivities that are contrary to the ideals of the hegemonic public sphere.⁵ Fraser’s rethinking is astute, though it leaves unchecked the valorization of publicness as an integer of subjectivity. Indeed, to embrace the notion of counterpublics is to accept that the marginalized subject is contrarian—resistant—and that her identity is determined by her publicness (albeit an alternative one). In this context, the idea of counterpublics is not useful in disarming the discourse of publicness.⁶

Nonetheless, Fraser’s celebration of counterpublics has broad appeal in black culture. As Houston Baker argues, black culture is “drawn to the possibilities of structurally and affectively transforming the founding notion of the bourgeois public sphere into an expressive and empowering self-fashioning” (13). Baker goes on to

suggest that black culture situates its “unique forms of expressive publicity in . . . relationship . . . to the sense of *publicity itself as authority*” (13-14; emphasis added). This authority is founded on the legacy of public discourse as the crucial site of racial formation; that is, since the black subject is made, misnamed, and violated in the public sphere, it is through the public sphere that she can be liberated. Such fidelity in publicness reflects a belief that “the struggle to make something public is a struggle for justice” (Benhabib 79), or at least can be. This conflation of publicness and justice represents the large degree to which publicness is accepted as the defining aspect of citizenship and human agency, even for those marginalized in its wake. In fact, as Baker suggests, the public assertion of alternative narratives to contrast racist discourse is a defining feature of the struggle for black civil rights.⁷

Given the historical intersection between publicness and blackness, the two terms become amalgamated, at least conceptually; as a result, the idea of expressiveness as a feature of black culture is wholly shaped by the discourse of publicness. Specifically, black *publicness* is equated with black *expressiveness*, an equation that is both imposed on and embraced by black culture. Examples of this embrace are evident in scholarly studies of contemporary black culture such as Geneva Gay and Willie Baber’s *Expressively Black*, Shane White and Graham White’s *Stylin’*, Monique Guillory and Richard Green’s *Soul: Black Power, Politics, and Pleasure*, Gina Dent’s *Black Popular Culture*, and in many of the artistic manifestos from the Harlem Renaissance and from the Black Arts/Black Aesthetic movements. Studies of early black culture are also contextualized by a near-essentializing of public expressiveness: for example, in his important work on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century material production titled *By the Work of Their Hands*, John Michael Vlach highlights expressiveness as a black aesthetic that serves as a tonic against obscurity (19). There again is the contrarian impulse, where expressiveness is essentially public as a counter to marginalization.

In this way, expressiveness has been vital to promoting black culture and liberation; in fact it is not an overstatement to say that it is closely linked to *every* black civil rights effort, and is the ultimate archetype of the culture. The case could even be made that black expressiveness, rather than being a function of the public sphere, is an African cultural retention, which is what Robert Farris Thompson proposes in *Flash of the Spirit*. (Vlach himself argues convincingly that the aesthetic expressiveness found in early black folk art is both a retention and a functional reality of enslaved people.) Yet this appreciation leaves untouched the ways that the relationship between blackness and publicness overdetermines how expressiveness is read, what expressiveness means. In light of the discourse of publicness, expressiveness is reduced to being contrarian and resistant. There is little liberty or reason to consider other kinds of expressivities, ones that are animated less by a sense of audience and more by the wide range of human impulses. Indeed this failure to imagine other expressivities obscures and even disavows manifestations of black culture that fall outside the aesthetic that publicness has either made, or made possible.

As a consequence of this historical significance of public expressiveness, resistance becomes the dominant idiom for reading and describing black culture. One result of this dominance is that the major concepts used to discuss black culture (for example, doubleness, signifying, the mask) are engaged largely for their capacity to support the idea of resistance. In this light, these concepts say less about the interior of black subjectivity, and leave us without a general concept that aims to describe or reference the inner life.

Consider the example of doubleness, one of the central idioms of black cultural studies. In terms of articulations of doubleness, there is perhaps no concept more significant than that of W. E. B. Du Bois’s double consciousness. A term of art for the

psychology of the African American codified in the opening chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*, double consciousness describes the experience of having two conflicting identities. In Du Bois's formulation, this split identity is the definitive impact that oppression has on the black subject, who sees himself through the revelations of the dominant world. Double consciousness is based on the general notion that selfhood is achieved through interactions with other people, but when imagined as particular to black identity, the term suggests something more: it describes a black subject whose being is conscripted not only by race but also, especially, by a racist discourse. In short,

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double consciousness conceptualizes black subjectivity as conflict with whiteness and conceives agency only as/in resistance of the public discourse of black inferiority. Strikingly, in Du Bois's enunciation, the black subject seems to possess no genuine interior and therefore, as much as double consciousness is a contemplative idiom, it is insufficient as a concept of interiority (it "yields no true self-consciousness" [11]). This implication is sustained in our contemporary engagement of the concept.⁸

Du Bois's double consciousness is similar to Darlene Clark Hine's notion of dissemblance, which Hine coined to characterize black women's ambivalent relationship to public exposure. Hine argues that black women, in response to how they were negatively constructed in the social imagination as racial, gendered, and classed subjects, "developed and adhered to a cult of secrecy, a culture of dissemblance, to protect the sanctity of inner aspects of their lives. The dynamics of dissemblance involved creating the appearance of disclosure, or openness about themselves and their feelings, while actually remaining an enigma" (915). She goes on to assert that "in the face of pervasive stereotypes . . . it was imperative that they collectively create alternative self-images" (916). Such use of duplicity as a politic of resistance has been well documented by Hine and others.⁹

While neither double consciousness nor dissemblance explicitly dismisses the idea of interiority, each nonetheless suggests that interiority is suppressed and disavowed because of the public dimensions of race and racism (and, in the case of dissemblance, gender and sexism). As concepts of doubleness, both idioms forego the vagaries of the inner life in favor of a notion of selfhood that is calibrated to the exterior world. The withholding or silence that is implied in both concepts celebrates a kind of artifice or performance, and reiterates the centrality of publicness in black cultural identity. The irony here is that, conceptually, rather than reinforce artifice as an essential practice, dissemblance and double consciousness seem primed to help us scrutinize the suppressed textualities of black identity, to touch greater depths of the subjectivities that are flattened by the broad sweep of racism. Yet, more often than not, what we learn from the use of these tropes is not the subtlety of the human subject, but rather the dynamism of concealment.¹⁰

These claims about the aesthetics of doubleness are evident in looking at Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem "We Wear the Mask," a remarkable work of signifying and concealment, and an example of another celebrated idiom of black culture—the idea of masking. First published in 1895, the poem is a technical marvel, sustaining perfect singular rhyme with every line echoing the same final assonance, except in three places—the repetition of the titular "mask" at the end of stanzas two and three, and the use of the word "subtleties" to end stanza one. What is striking about the rhythmic disruption that "subtleties" causes is that visually, the word seems to fit the rhyme scheme—it looks like it should rhyme with "lies," "eyes," or "cries." This is a poetic sleight of hand with which Dunbar seems to play on the tendency of the

mind to want to follow the poem's sing-song rhythm (it is perfect iambic tetrameter, except for this disruption), to force "subtleties" to sound like the words that end the lines before it. Further evidence of the poem's cunning is the slowly revealed truth that the near-perfect rhyme actually turns on the approximate rhyme between two sets of words that have the same long vowel sound but do not rhyme in their consonants: "lies" and "eyes," on one hand; "guile" and "smile" on the other. The poem's mask is not only its subject but its form (it even impersonates the sonnet, intentionally going one line too far in a deceptive act of formlessness), and the doubleness implied in Dunbar's careful diction—cheeks, shades, grins, lies, guile, smile, hides, subtleties—is applicable also to his manipulation of the rhyme.

Dunbar's poem is brilliant in its technique and powerful in its general theme, but what is also notable is how little it says about the interiority of the masked subject. Other than bold declamations about "tortured souls" and "bleeding hearts," one knows nothing about the "we" whose selves are masked, about the depth or quality of their desires or fears. (Part of this is effected by the use of the first-person plural, in the way the pronoun "we" flattens as much as it unifies.) We learn in depth about the aesthetic of the mask and its value as a ruse against oppression, about the masked persona's awareness of audience and the perils of publicness, but nothing of the subject. Indeed, even as the poem suggests that there is agency in the act of withholding one's true self from being revealed—a claim punctuated by repetition of the title in the poem's last line—the agency does not allow the poem's masked subject to express selfhood beyond the surface of a deceptive smile. There is little quality of an inner life to be found here; at best, one can infer that the wearer of the mask is either pained and rageful, or deceiving—but nothing else. This does not diminish the brilliance of Dunbar's poem, which is peerless for its marriage of form and content, and which, like Du Bois's idea of double consciousness, imagines doubleness as a site of agency rather than only subjection. Nevertheless, the poem evidences that an aesthetic of guile is an inept means for rendering the inner life. Dunbar's poem could have used the trope of masking to tell us something about the edge and pasture of one human's experience, a telling that would have expanded the archive of black subjectivity; instead the poem defers to a broader, less intimate view and characterizes a subjectivity that in its sketchiness feels caricatured.¹¹

The limitations of masking and doubleness are consequences of the way these terms have become part of a larger aesthetic of black resistance. That is, though both are used to support the idea of resistance, the problem is not with the idioms or even with the idea of expressiveness; it is instead the difficulty with the assumption that all black expressiveness is necessarily public. This assumption limits black expression to the discourse of resistance, and without other concepts with which to understand expressiveness, resistance becomes the *lingua franca* of black culture. It is in this regard that the notion of black culture as expressive is an empty assessment, one that is limited in its meaningfulness. And in the face of the strong relationship between publicness, expressiveness and resistance, black cultural studies lacks a metaphor for characterizing the inner life, a metaphor capable of noticing the beauty and intimacy of Smith and Carlos.

What, then, would a concept of expressiveness look like if it were not tethered to publicness? The performative aspects of black culture are well noted, but what else can be said here? Could the concept of quiet help to articulate a different kind of expressiveness, or even stand as a metaphor for the interior?

In everyday discourse, quiet is synonymous with silence and is the absence of sound or movement, but for the idea of quiet to be useful here, it will need to be understood as a quality or a sensibility of being, as a manner of expression. Such expressiveness is not concerned with publicness, but instead is the expressiveness of the

interior. That is, a person's quiet represents the broad scope of her inner life. The quiet symbolizes—and if interrogated, expresses—some of the capacity of the interior.

This notion of the interior is elusive but is nonetheless important to understanding quiet. Most simply, interiority is a quality of being inward, a “metaphor” for “life and creativity beyond the public face of stereotype and limited imagination” (Alexander x). This latter description is from Elizabeth Alexander's collection *Black Interior*, and it captures precisely the value of the concept of the interior—that it gestures away from the caricatures of racial subjectivity that are either racist or intended to counter racism, and suggests what is essentially and indescribably human. The interior is the inner reservoir of thoughts, feelings, desires, fears, ambitions that shape a human self; it is both a space of a wild self-indulgence and “the locus at which *self-interrogation* takes place” (Spillers 383; original emphasis). Said another way, the interior is expansive, voluptuous, creative, impulsive, dangerous, and not subject to one's control—it has to be taken on its own terms. It is not to be confused with intentionality or consciousness, since it is something more chaotic than that; it is more akin to hunger, memory, forgetting, the edges of all the humanity one has. Despite its name, the interior is not unconnected to the world of things (the public or political or social world), nor is it an exact antonym for exterior. Instead, the interior shifts in regard to life's stimuli but it is neither resistant to nor overdetermined by the vagaries of the outer world. The interior has its own ineffable integrity.¹²

There is in trying to describe the interior a predicament of expression since the interior is not really discursive—it cannot be represented fully and is largely indescribable. Furthermore, the interior is largely known through language or behavior, through exterior manifestations, and is therefore hard to know on its own terms. At best, it can be approximated or implied, but its vastness and wildness escape definitive characterization. Yet the interior *is* expressive; it is articulate and meaningful and has social impact. It is indeed the combination of the interior's expressiveness, and the inability to articulately it fully, that makes interiority such a meaningful idiom for rethinking the nature of black expressiveness.

Quiet, then, is the expressiveness of this interior, an inexpressible expressiveness that can appear publicly, have and affect social and political meaning, and challenge or counter social discourse, though none of this is its aim or essence. That is, since the interior is not essentially resistant, then quiet is an expressiveness that is not consumed with intentionality. It is in this regard that the distinction between quiet and silence is more clear: silence, in a purely denotative sense, implies something that is suppressed or repressed, an interiority that is about withholding, something hidden or absent; quiet, more simply, is presence. (One can, for example, describe a sound or prose as quiet.) It is true that silence can be expressive, but its expression is often based on refusal or protest, not the abundance of the interior described above. The expressiveness of silence is often aware of an audience, a watcher or listener whose presence is the reason for the withholding. This is a key difference between the two terms because in its inwardness, the aesthetic of quiet watcher-less. Finally, quiet is not necessarily or essentially stillness; in fact quiet, as the expressiveness of inner life, can encompass and represent wild motion.¹³

The Signifying Subject and the Aesthetic of Quiet

The idea of an aesthetic of quiet is foreign to but not incompatible with black cultural studies. For example, the trope of signifying is widely considered distinctive of black cultural expression. Based on the “verbal art of ritualized insult in which the speaker puts down, needles, or talks about someone, to make a point or sometimes just for fun,” the concept of signifying celebrates the use of humor,

indirection, and word play (Smitherman, *Black Talk* 207). Conceptually, verbal signifying has three rhetorical components—what is said, what is unsaid, and the relationship between the two. The piece that is said is often demonstrative, conscious of the listening audience, and contrasts with the silence of what is unspoken. The power of signifying as a rhetorical act lies in the third component—the dialectic produced between what is spoken and what is not—as irony, indirection and juxtaposition coalesce to create meaning that is complicated and subtle, even surprising. In fact, it is never assured that the act of signifying will yield, for the reader or listener, the desired expression. In this regard, signifying is a transcendent expressiveness, relying unreliably on prolific interplay between said and unsaid, public and private; one cannot appreciate it by only paying attention to what is said, explicitly or directly. Nevertheless, the general discussion of signifying as verbal exchange tends to focus on its public dimension, on the demonstrative and cocksure exteriority of the trope rather than its capacity to serve as an idiom of interiority. This emphasis categorizes signifying as an essentially *public* expressivity, for even when the act of signifying is not in reference to a discourse of resistance, the meaningfulness of the signifying act depends on the concept of publicness (*e.g.*, audience).¹⁴

That signifying is considered largely as a demonstrative idiom confirms how ingrained publicness is in black cultural discourse. Still, we can use signifying to explore the idea of an expressiveness that is not public. An articulate example can be found in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a novel that represents Janie's longing for self-revelation as a meditation on interiority. One of the most studied examples of signifying in black literature is the argument between Janie and Jody in the county store after Janie makes a mess of cutting a piece of tobacco for a customer. The customer, Steve Mixon, uses this moment to tease Janie and women as a whole, a teasing that causes great laughter. But Jody does not laugh; instead he gets up, re-cuts the tobacco and then proceeds to curse at Janie in the presence of the other customers. In particular, he comments on her aging body—her “rump hangin’ nearly to [her] knees.” The others in the store, accustomed to spirited teasing, laugh at first and then, as the mean-spiritedness of Jody's comment dawns upon them, they become quiet. Janie, however, for what feels like the first time, speaks back and the two get into a quick exchange, with Jody's cautioning Janie to watch her words and repeating his belief that it is inappropriate for Janie, as a woman, to talk back to him, especially in this public place. Besides Jody's patronizing warning, the rest of the argument consists largely of insults about aging and ends with a terrific final word by Janie:

Naw, Ah ain't no young gal no mo' but den Ah ain't no old woman neither. Ah reckon Ah looks mah age too. But Ah'm uh woman every inch of me, and Ah know it. Dat's uh whole lot more'n *you* kin say. You big-bellies round here and put out a lot of brag, but 'tain't nothin' to it but yo' big voice. Humph! Talkin' 'bout *me* lookin' old! When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life. (75; original emphasis)

This indictment is followed by two quick comments from men in the group that essentially give the verbal victory to Janie, and the narrative notes that “Then Joe Starks realized all the meanings and his vanity bled like a flood” (75).

Janie's response to Jody's verbal assault on her looks goes to the heart of his power, his manhood, and it has such weight that it marks the beginning of his decline toward death. This act of signifying has been read for its public purchase—for the deep laughter it brings to the crowd in the store, for the retributive shame Janie has brought on Jody in a definitive moment of one-upmanship. But the novel seems to suggest that the meaning here extends both before and beyond the sparring and the laughter. Earlier in the chapter, the narrative was careful to describe not only Janie's sense of her repressed voice, but her noticing Jody's aging body. To this point, the story has privileged Janie's interior—what we learn of her is largely through the representation of her thoughts, her interior consciousness, as would be the case

given her marriage to a man who has strong sexist ideas about the minds of women. The meaningfulness of the interior to Janie is amplified in an earlier scene when, after Jody demeans her intelligence and slaps her for ruining dinner, “Janie stood where he left her for unmeasured time and thought. She stood there until something fell off the shelf inside her. Then she went inside there to see what it was” (67). She goes to her interior, this place where time is without measure and where change and stillness cohabit; as she explores it, she finds “that she has a host of thoughts she had never expressed to him, and numerous emotions she had never let Jody know about. . . . She has an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them” (68).

This heightened awareness of her interior—and the repressive, demanding exterior—is the defining idiom of Janie’s journey in the novel. It is in this context that we should read her signifying moment, since her harsh verbal blow to Jody is less about a public performance, less attuned to audience, and instead is an expression of her long-brewing thoughts about herself, her dreams, and her freedom. The deeper value of Janie’s signifying is not public but is found in its connection to the meditation in her interior. When the customers laugh and applaud Janie’s comments, they are responding to the certainty and explicitness of what they hear, to the clarity of Janie’s words. But this clarity, the perceived directness and authority represented by this public moment, is in contrast to the absence of control, the waiting and listening suggested by the novel’s description of Janie’s sense of self: after that riotous scene, which Jody predictably concludes by slapping Janie again, the narrative returns to Janie’s quiet process: “So new thoughts had to be thought and new words said. She didn’t want to live like that. Why must Joe be so mad with her for making him look small when he did it to her all the time?” (77). This comment is also a part of the signifying moment, and the paragraph’s narrative voice appropriately slips from omniscience to Janie’s, to the intimacy of her interior where these “new thoughts” and “new words” are in process—from what is sure and singular and public to what is interior and complicated and dynamic.¹⁵ Reading Janie’s signifying in this way, as a compilation of moments of consciousness, transcends the exclusive focus on public drama and reinforces the importance of the inner life as a part of expressiveness. This re-thinking of signifying is important because it gives attention to what is lost in only reading expressiveness through a discourse of publicness.

The interest in quiet arrives because of the trouble posed by public expressiveness, particularly the assumption that black culture is predominantly resistant. This characterization is so ordinary that it ends up simplifying blackness. Furthermore, because the characterization is supported by the political and historical reality of black people—for example, the important role expressiveness plays in the struggles for civil rights—it goes largely unchallenged. The problem here is not expressiveness *per se*, but that black expressiveness is so tethered to what is public and to a discourse of resistance. As it is engaged, this concept of public expressiveness presumes to know and to say everything, clearly and definitively. This is why it is useful to political discourse, because it can allow a group to speak with a sense of singular purpose. In this regard, public expressiveness is the workhorse of nationalism, and is vital to any marginalized population. Perhaps this makes sense, since there is no question about the meaningfulness of race and especially racism in American culture, the way racism influences and shapes black culture; there is also no question that resistance, as individual and collective action or as an aesthetic, is a meaningful part of black culture, historically and in the present. But there is still an important question about the other qualities of black culture that are overwhelmed by the dominance of resistance as an aesthetic. Simply, what else beyond resistance can we say about the shape and meaning of black culture and subjectivity?¹⁶

The contention is in the way publicness has a chokehold on black culture and identity. It is hard to imagine a conceptualization of blackness that does not already envision itself—and the humanness of its struggle to be free—within the context set by publicness: as a subjectivity whose expressiveness is demonstrative and resistant. Hortense Spillers is right when she notes that “every feature of social and human differentiation disappears in public discourses regarding African-Americans” (224). This is precisely the need for a concept of interiority, so that it may support representations of blackness that are irreverent, messy, complicated—representations that have greater human texture and specificity than the broad caption of resistance can offer. We should be wary of the dominance of expressiveness as a black aesthetic and of the easy conclusions that it makes possible.¹⁷

This interior expressiveness is already present in Smith’s and Carlos’s protest, if we can remember to ask questions about their hearts in excited flutter, their heads bowed, the inwardness of their bodies in prayer. Part of what makes their protest so striking is its stark contrast with another iconic image of black publicness—the black body hanging from a tree. The magnitude of the contrast is heightened by the aesthetic similarity between photographs of their 1968 protest and images of lynched bodies. But even at its most horrible, the image of the lynchee is one of silence and speaks through the alphabet of violent repression. Smith’s and Carlos’s image, on the other hand, is alive, is articulate in its quiet; though they do not speak, their language is a generous vocabulary of humanity. In this context, Smith and Carlos are a triumphant, beautiful alternative.¹⁸

But there is also a danger in only reading their moment for the way it counters the violence of white supremacy, as an alternative—to do so is to disregard the evidence of their humanity for its own sake, that they are strong but also vulnerable, two people in a moment of grace, all thrill and tremble and loveliness. It is not only the explicit public argument that they are making about racism and poverty that should be important to us, or even their implied contrast with untold numbers of murdered others. What must also matter is the argument announced in their posture of surrender, the glimpse of their exquisite interiors. Their protest is more fluent because of this expressiveness that is not dependent on publicness; they are compelling as much for their quiet as for the very publicity of their expression.

The aesthetic of quiet humanity found in Smith’s and Carlos’s protest is similar to a moment at the end of Marita Bonner’s “On Being Young, A Woman and Colored.” Published in 1925 and at only 1,679 words, the essay is a commentary on challenges of being a “race woman,” a colorful take on the kind of treatise that Harlem Renaissance literati were inclined to write. Though it is concerned with the twinned assault of racism and sexism, Bonner’s piece does not rehearse the familiar public dimensions of arguments about identity. (For example, the essay does not rant or argue and maintains a poetic, stream-of-consciousness quality.) Instead, the narrator begins by noticing the conflict between what the world expects of an educated black woman, and what that black woman desires and longs for; in this way, the essay characterizes and privileges interiority from the start. Shortly thereafter, the narrator criticizes the “world that stifles and chokes; that cuts off and stunts; hedging in, pressing down on eyes, ears and throats,” a criticism not only of patriarchy and white supremacy but also of the black cultural nationalism that tries to counter oppression with its own binding repressiveness. With broad humanity in mind, Bonner’s essay closes with a description of a woman’s freedom as a subjectivity of interiority:

You see clearly—off there is Infinity—Understanding. Standing alone, waiting for someone to really want her.

But she is so far out there is no way to snatch at her and really drag her in.

So—being a woman—you can wait.

You must sit quietly without a chip. Not sodden—and weighted as if your feet were cast in the iron of your soul. Not wasting strength in enervating gestures as if two hundred years of bonds and whips had really tricked you into nervous uncertainty.

But quiet; quiet. Like Buddha—who, brown like I am—sat entirely at ease, entirely sure of himself; motionless and knowing, a thousand years before that white man knew there was so very much difference between feet and hands.

Motionless on the outside. But inside?

Silent.

Still . . . “Perhaps Buddha is a woman.”

So you too. Still; quiet; with a smile, ever so slight, at the eyes so that Life will flow into and not by you. And you can gather, as it passes, the essences, the overtones, the tints, the shadows; draw understanding into your self.

And then you can, when Time is ripe, swoop to your feet—at your full height—at a single gesture.

Ready to go where?

Why . . . Wherever God motions. (7-8)

This breathlessness is an argument for the pleasures and agency of the interior. Bonner envisions the black woman as infinity and understanding (earlier in the essay, she is also wisdom), poised and beyond reach or sight of the public’s limited imagination. In this way, her waiting is not passive but patient, the thoughtfulness of one who is wise and reflective. Bonner is engaging, deliberately, the sexist idea of the feminine interior—the image of a woman in her sitting room, silent, while the world happens around her and decides who and how she can be; this is a woman in waiting, passive and silent. But Bonner reforms this notion of waiting, first in claiming it as a woman’s particular condition and agency (“So—being a woman—you can wait”), and then by arguing that waiting is a location of intelligence and insight. This second argument is achieved by the suggestion that the black woman “waits” like Buddha, refusing to waste “strength” learning the boundaries of a discourse of white patriarchy or black cultural nationalism. She has, instead, an insight older and deeper and wilder than both. To the casual eye, this woman’s waiting appears as if it has no motion and no intellect, but she knows differently. She, this woman who is also black, waits like Buddha; she is not merely oppressed from the outside but is also humble and knowing from the indescribable within.¹⁹

In choosing Buddha as a category of self, Bonner affiliates her essay’s subject with an icon of thoughtfulness, a man whose quiet changed the world as we know it. She furthers her argument about the limits of categories through this cross-racial and cross-gender identification without disavowing identity completely (Buddha is “brown like I am” and is re-signed as female). The referentiality of the narrator here is the only time that first-person is used in the essay, and it stands as an exuberant proclamation of the interiority of the subject. She, the narrator, has given up publicness and its troubles and has become, like Buddha, a human, almost like matter. She is a world within herself and is ready to embrace the massive freedom that is her right. She is waiting.

This characterization of waiting as a quiet expressiveness is a rejection of publicness, a decided step away from the tone and topic and advice that one might expect of an essay on being young, a woman and colored.²⁰ Bonner doesn’t offer a public call to arms or a private rant; she doesn’t present her protagonist as bothered and bothersome. Instead, her subject is free, or wants to be, and her freedom informs the narrative choices of her poetic and wandering essay.

The terms Bonner uses to describe her fictional protagonist—“still” and “motionless on the outside”—echo the quality of Smith and Carlos on that podium in 1968. In this similarity, all three are subjects of quiet. They remind us that we should be suspicious of the singular dominance of public expressiveness as *the* black aesthetic, of the easy conclusions that such dominance makes possible. This dominance is an inheritance from the flawed assumption that publicness is essential

to and definitive of freedom. In truth, publicness is, for black folks, at least as much trouble as it is useful, and what is surrendered in the wake of a fixation on publicness is the meaningfulness of interiority as a textuality of selfhood.

Exploring the connection between the discourse of resistance and the notion of publicness is important to understanding how it is that resistance manifests as both the (sole?) subject and intent of black aesthetics. None of this is intended to dismiss the importance of resistance in black culture. The point is more simply that resistance alone is not (or is no longer) a sufficient frame for understanding black culture. Black culture, and the lives it represents, is richer, fuller, more complicated than a discourse of resistance can paint.²¹

Hence quiet, this thing that is sublime—inexpressible, thunderous, full of awe. In humanity, quiet is inevitable and essential—it is our dignity. It is represented by our interior, that “place in us below our hip personality that is connected to our breath, our words, and our death” (Goldberg 28). In its magnificence, it is an invitation to consider cultural identity from somewhere other than the conceptual places that we have come to accept as definitive of black culture—not the “hip personality” exposed to and performed for the world, but the interior charisma, the reservoir of human complexity that is deep inside. Quiet compels us to “explore the beauty of the quality of being human,” not only our “lives weighed down by the suppositions of identity,” and in doing so, honors the contemplative quality that is also characteristic of black culture.²² It is this exploration, this reach toward the inner life, that an aesthetic of quiet makes possible. It is this that is the path to a sweet freedom: a black expressiveness without publicness as its forebear, a black subject in the undisputed dignity of its humanity.²³

I wish to thank Elizabeth Alexander for reading an early draft of this essay and for her essay, “Can You Be BLACK and Look at This?,” which years ago inspired my interest in blackness and the public sphere. I also wish to thank the two anonymous reviewers whose excellent and thorough engagement of this essay had significant impact on its shape. I also thank Nadia Cannon, Kathleen Daly, Caroline Rex Waller, and Chelsea Williams for research assistance; Dan Horowitz for his smart suggestions; Nathan Grant for his editorial thoroughness; and Nikky Finney and Peter Riedel for many good things.

Notes

1. The image is engaged most commonly as a piece of “social movement photography,” in the way that Leigh Raiford uses the term in “Restaging Revolution: Black Power, *Vibe* Magazine, and Photographic Memory,” in *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*, Renee C. Romano and Leigh Raiford, eds. (Athens: U of Georgia P, 2006), 220-49. For an excellent historical discussion of Smith and Carlos, see Amy Bass, *Not the Triumph but the Struggle: The 1968 Olympics and the Making of the Black Athlete* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2002). Notably, in Smith’s autobiography *Silent Gesture*, he briefly talks about a range of thoughts while in the blocks at the start of the race (22); he also repeatedly describes himself as a quiet person, especially in regard to Carlos’s more exuberant personality. It is worth noting that Smith’s and Carlos’s bowed heads were probably part of an attempt to look away from the American flag, similar to Vera Caslavská’s own silent gesture of turning her head slightly to the right and slightly down during two medal ceremonies (also in 1968), in protest of the Soviet Union’s invasion of her country, then known as Czechoslovakia.

2. See, for the importance of vernacular, Smitherman, *Black Talk, passim* and Clarence Major, *Juba to Jive: A Dictionary of African-American Slang* (New York: Viking, 1994).

3. Calhoun, in his introduction to *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, highlights the public sphere as an idealization. The idea that Habermas’s concept defines a subjectivity is largely implied in the scholarship. The exception is Warner, whose deeply provocative “The Mass Public and the Mass Subject” makes evident that the public sphere is not just a subjectivity, but an ambivalent one.

4. Warner explores the relationship between individuality and universality in the public sphere (especially his idea of a “rhetorics of disincorporation” [382]). The problem of individual universality for black and/or female subjects is readily apparent in trying to imagine Saartje Baartman, the so-called Venus Hottentot, as the idealized subject of modern Europe. Also see Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993).

5. Fraser arrives at the concept of counterpublics by considering the place of women in Habermas's public sphere. See also Marilyn Ryan, Nicholas Garnham, Benhabib, and Geoff Eley who discuss exclusions in the Habermasian public sphere (all in Calhoun's collection), and Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002).

6. In effect, the marginalized subject is known for and by her difference—in some ways, she is her difference. As such, the black subject is the counterweight to the free will of Habermas's model. In this way, black subjectivity is at once contrary and essential to the modern public ideal. For further consideration, see Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1993); Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1997); Robin D. G. Kelley, *Yo Mama's Disfunktional: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon, 1997); and Spillers, especially in her discussion of "Africanity" as "the essence of visibility" (379).

7. Baker's essay does a great job showcasing this allegiance to publicness in his reading of the aesthetic of Martin Luther King, Jr., especially King's relationship to a culture of voice, agency and civil rights. For further discussion of blackness and the public sphere, see Elsa Barkley Brown, "Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere: African American Political Life in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom," in *Black Public Sphere Collective* 111-50; Paul Finkelman; David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2001); and Mark Anthony Neal, *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1998). For specific consideration of publicness in the post-civil rights context, see Stuart Hall, "What is the 'Black' in Black Popular Culture," in Dent 21-33; Mark Anthony Neal, *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Dent; Guillory and Green; Cornel West, "The New Politics of Cultural Difference," in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, Simon During, ed. (New York: Routledge, 1999), 256-69; bell hooks, "Eating the Other," *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End, 1992), 21-39; and Trey Ellis, "The New Black Aesthetic," *Callaloo* 12.1 (Winter 1989): 233-43.

8. There is a longer reading one could do of the way that the narrator's interior is described only in relationship to racism. Of course, given that his overall thesis is to point attention to the profundity of racism, it makes sense that Du Bois would conceive black subjectivity in such stark, narrow terms. On the term itself, see Ernest Allen, Jr., "Du Boisian Double Consciousness: The Unsustainable Argument," *Black Scholar* 33.2 (Summer 2003): 25-43. Allen argues that the specific notion of a black double consciousness generates from critical misinterpretation of *Souls*. And yet the term has enduring significance as an idiom of doubleness; see Hubbard's introduction to *The Souls of Black Folk: One Hundred Years Later* (also see essays in that collection by Keith Byerman, Amy Kirschke, Shanette Harris, and Carolyn Calloway-Thomas, and Thurmon Garner). To trace the evolution of the concept of double consciousness in Du Bois's work, see Dickson D. Bruce, Jr., "W. E. B. Du Bois and the Idea of Double Consciousness," *American Literature* 64.2 (June 1992): 299-309; and Bernard W. Bell, "Genealogical Shifts in Du Bois's Discourse on Double Consciousness as the Sign of African American Difference," in *W. E. B. Du Bois on Race and Culture: Philosophy, Politics, and Poetics*, Bernard W. Bell, Emily Grosholz, and James B. Stewart, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1996), 87-108. My reading of Du Bois's idiom in regard to publicness is made with the awareness that *Souls* is one of the early examples of black public intellectualism; see Dolan Hubbard, "W. E. B. Du Bois and the Invention of the Sublime in *The Souls of Black Folk*," in *The Souls of Black Folk: One Hundred Years Later*, Dolan Hubbard, ed. (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 2003), 298-322; Hazel V. Carby, *Race Men* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998); and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Terri Hume Oliver, Introduction, in Du Bois xi-xxxvii, who all acknowledge that the book emerges as part of a battle for public visibility. On the composition of the work, see Robert B. Stepto, *From behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (1979. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1991), esp. 53-54, 61-66. On the public/private binary, see Nellie Y. McKay, "The Souls of Black Women in the Folk Writing of W. E. B. Du Bois," in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed. (New York: Meridian Books, 1990), 227-43.

9. In addition to Hine and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993), see Tricia Rose, *Longing to Tell: Black Women Talk About Sexuality and Intimacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2004) and Evelyn Hammonds, "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality," *differences* 6 (1994): 126-45. Both address the way a discourse of Victorian femininity mixes with racism to produce a code for black female behavior.

10. Hine notes a similar irony in her essay (916). There is a long intellectual history that explores the implications of doubleness in marginalized cultures. The most thorough consideration is James C. Scott's argument for a hidden transcript and for the idea of infrapolitics in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1990). Though Scott has a section on quiet, his arguments reinforce the idea of counterpublics, and is therefore different than my own.

11. These concerns about the mask could also be raised of the notion of invisibility; see Todd M. Lieber, "Ralph Ellison and the Metaphor of Invisibility in Black Literary Tradition," *American Quarterly* 24.1 (March 1972): 86-100. For a general discussion of masks, see Adam Lively, *Masks: Blackness, Race and the Imagination* (New York: Oxford UP, 1998). Lively does not cite Dunbar but explores the mask as a way to understand how race functions. For a specific engagement of the mask in Dunbar's work, see John Keeling,

"Paul Dunbar and the Mask of Dialect," *Southern Literary Journal* 25.2 (Spring 1993): 24-38; and Daniel P. Black, "Literary Subterfuge: Early African American Writing and the Trope of the Mask," *CLA Journal* 48.4 (June 2005): 387-403. Rafia Zafar links the concept to issues of mimicry and invisibility (though not specifically to Dunbar's poem) in *We Wear the Mask: African Americans Write American Literature, 1760-1870* (New York: Columbia UP, 1997).

12. The interior is a complicated term because it is used varyingly by different disciplines (for example, philosophy, psychology, psychoanalysis). Most relevant might be the uses of interiority as a term of Victorian notions of domesticity and the private sphere. Here, in a binary calculus, the interior is gendered female and is private, which also means it is politically irrelevant, whereas the exterior is male, public and politically relevant. But this easy conflation of the interior with a public/private (and male/female) binary is dangerous because it elides some of the complicated realities of Victorian domesticity; for further discussion, see especially Tamar Katz, *Impressionist Subjects: Gender, Interiority and Modernity Fiction in England* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2000) and Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York: Oxford UP, 1987). This erroneous collapsing of the interior with the private makes interiority a disfavored concept, at least politically; see Berlant and Benhabib on the dangers of privacy as a gendered concept.

The use of "interiority" here is intended to reflect a mode of self that is not entirely collapsible into the public/private binary, and certainly is not synonymous with the idea of an intimate or domestic or private sphere; in this regard, my use of the interior earns from Elizabeth Grosz, "Refiguring Lesbian Desire," in *Time, Space, Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 173-86, and Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994), as well as G. Johnson's and Olkowski's essays on Merleau-Ponty. G. Johnson's essay is especially useful not only because it argues against the "philosophical privilege" of the exterior, but for this passage defining the interior: "There is an inner life. It is the life of thought, the life of the heart, the life of dream and memory. These are interiors that encounter lines of exterior force that shape, fold, or break them. . . . It is philosophically difficult to speak of interiority in light of the weight of the outside" (26). Also see Alexander's description of the interior as an "inner space in which black artists have found selves that go far, far beyond the limited expectations and definitions of what black is, isn't, or should be" (5), and Spillers's definition of the subjectivity of the interior as "not an arrival but a departure, not a goal but a process" (383).

13. The use of "quiet" here is not intended as a synonym of the term "quietism" as used in philosophy or theology. It is hard to maintain a distinction between quiet and silence since the two terms get used interchangeably. Indeed, much work has been done to explore the politics/aesthetics of noise as well as to deconstruct silence—see for example, Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (1977), Brian Massumi, trans. (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1985); Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2003); John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writing* (Cambridge: MIT UP, 1961); and more recently in popular works, George Foy, George Prochnik, and Garret Keizer. Also much has been written about the role and nature of silence in black or minority cultures; see Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1997); Evelyn Hammonds, "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality," *differences* 6 (1994): 126-45; Marlene NourbeSe Philip, *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* (North York, ON: Ragweed, 1989); bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston: South End, 1989); and especially King-Kok Cheung, *Articulate Silences: Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1993). As many of these works notice, silence can be expressive and nuanced, so though I prefer quiet as a term for clarity's sake, the distinction between the two is not always necessary or possible.

14. Signifying is largely studied as a verbal practice, even though its rhetorical implications extend to literary examples. Smitherman repeatedly explains that signifying is based on indirection and subtlety as much as it is on public expressiveness (she in fact makes a distinction between the performativity of the dozens and the more general indirection of signifying); see especially *Talkin that Talk* 26, 138, 220, and 255. On signifying, also see Robin D. G. Kelley, *Yo Mama's Disfunktional: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon, 1997), and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1988).

15. The scholarship on this novel is prolific, especially on the topic of silence and voice. Specifically, many scholars have noted the use of free indirect discourse in relation to interiority; see Barbara Johnson, "Metaphor, Metonymy and Voice in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," in *Black Literature & Literary Theory*. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed. (New York: Routledge, 1984), 205-20; Barbara Johnson and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "A Black and Idiomatic Free Indirect Discourse," in *Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Harold Bloom, ed. (New York: Chelsea House, 1987), 73-85; Carla Kaplan, *The Erotics of Talk: Women's Writing and Feminist Paradigms* (New York: Oxford UP, 1996); and Maria J. Racine, "Voice and Interiority in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," *African American Review* 28.2 (Summer 1994): 283-92. Racine's article is notable for its nuance on publicness.

16. The argument against the limits of racial blackness has been around as long as race has been used to categorize and marginalize people. Some of the most recent of these works include Robert Reid-Pharr,

Once You Go Black: Choice, Desire, and the Black American Intellectual (New York: New York UP, 2007); Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000); Thomas C. Holt, *The Problem of Race in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000); and Gene Andrew Jarrett, ed., *African American Literature beyond Race: An Alternative Reader* (New York: New York UP, 2000). Indeed the argument about the dominance of resistance has been made by many black writers, most notably Ralph Ellison (“The World and the Jug”) and James Baldwin (“Everybody’s Protest Novel”). There have also been works by more conservative writers, like McWhorter. What makes his arguments distinct from the others above—and from mine—is that he implies that racism (and a discourse of resistance) is no longer relevant; my own argument is to ask what other capacities, besides resistance, inform black culture.

17. The term “irreverent” echoes Alexander’s argument about the expectations of nationalism and the burden of authenticity. Of the many black writers who have argued for a black interior, it is Zora Neale Hurston who makes the case most plainly and directly in “What White Publishers Won’t Print” (1950), in *I Love Myself When I’m Laughing . . . and Then Again When I’m Looking Mean and Impressive: A Zora Neale Hurston Reader*, Alice Walker, ed. (Old Westbury, NY: Feminist, 1979), 169-73.

18. For a discussion of photography and lynching see Leigh Raiford, “The Consumption of Lynching Images,” in *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self*, Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis, eds. (New York: Harry Abrams, 2003), 267-73; and David Marriott, *On Black Men* (New York: Columbia UP, 2000).

19. Wall reads this ending as “a cluster of images of silence, entrapment and paralysis” (8), a reading that makes sense in the context of Wall’s larger argument about the second-class status of women in the Harlem Renaissance. But one is hard-pressed to miss the wild and reckless arrogance implied by Bonner’s Buddha metaphor, and the motion and agency of her stillness. Flynn confirms that Bonner explores “the dichotomy between inner reality and socially sanctioned racial and gender roles” (xv).

20. Interestingly, Bonner’s essay is an alternative to Berlant’s idea of Diva Subjectivity, which celebrates “when a person stages a dramatic coup in a public sphere in which she does not have privilege” (Berlant 223).

21. I want to be careful not to disregard the meaningfulness of resistance in black culture, even given its limitations. There is an instructive example of this tension in Camp’s *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South*, a terrific study of black women’s lives in slavery. As Camp’s title suggests, the frame for the book is resistance, the ways that black women’s everyday lives (“private, concealed, and even intimate worlds” [3]) constitute a resistance to the vagaries of enslavement. Like Deborah Gray White and others before her, Camp notices how black women’s acts of resistance appear in day-to-day activities as much (if not more than) in formal planned rebellions or revolts. Yet even Camp realizes that the meaning of black women’s everyday lives was not shaped entirely by their engagement with and resistance to the institution of slavery—that black women and men who were enslaved grew gardens and decorated their living spaces and organized parties in the woods (the chapter “The Intoxication of Pleasurable Amusement: Secret Parties and the Politics of the Body” is beautifully imagined and written). None of this is to dismiss the intensity and vulgarity of slavery’s violences on black people, but it is to restore a broader picture of the humanity of the people who were enslaved as if they were inhuman. Under Camp’s careful eye, these women’s everyday lives are brought into fuller relief, and even if Camp reads these lives as moments of resistance, their aliveness jumps out beyond that equation to offer something more. In this regard, Walter Johnson’s thoughtful essay “On Agency” is instructive in the way it cautions social historians against the pitfalls of the concept of resistance. See Walter Johnson, “On Agency,” *Journal of Social History* 37.1 (Autumn 2001): 113-24.

22. The quotation is from the end of Weaver’s stirring “Masters and Master Works: On Black Male Poetics,” where he makes a call for a new aesthetic, claiming that “the choice now for black male poets is to embrace this space where they can ask themselves this question of what constitutes beauty and ask it in terms of their own lives, and not those lives weighed down by the suppositions of identity. . . . black male poets must explore the beauty of the quality of being human” (n. pag.). Weaver’s is an astute example of the contemplative tradition in black culture, a tradition inspired by the existential struggle of living with and within the confines of a racial identity. The earliest writings by black Americans exemplify this capacity to question not just the imposition of identity, but the very meaning of human existence, a self-reflexiveness that is evident through almost every form of black art. And yet this existential consciousness is often read through the discourse of resistance, reduced to what it says about the nature of the fight with publicness. For a consideration of existentialism in black culture, see Lewis Gordon, *Existential Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000), esp. chapter one. Also see Dolan Hubbard, “W. E. B. Du Bois and the Invention of the Sublime in *The Souls of Black Folk*,” in *The Souls of Black Folk: One Hundred Years Later*, Dolan Hubbard, ed. (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 2003), 298-322, has been especially helpful to my consideration of the sublime, which is engaged more broadly in a longer iteration of these arguments.

23. I am borrowing language for this paragraph from Anna Julia Cooper’s statement in *A Voice from the South* that “only the BLACK WOMAN can say ‘when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me’ ” (63).

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