Introduction

WHY QUIET

The story of this moment has been told many times: It is 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, placed 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 OPHR (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, the shoeless feet—details that confirm the resoluteness of the action. Since that day, commentators have memorialized the public assertiveness of Smith’s and Carlos’s gestures. Their paired bodies have become 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. And then notice how the sharpness of their gesture is complemented
Figure 1. Tommie Smith, John Carlos, and Peter Norman, 1968 Mexico City Olympics. Courtesy of AP Photo/File.
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 is to suggest intimacy, and it is a reminder that this very public protest is also intimate. There is a sublime balance between their intentional political gesture and this sense of inwardness, a sublimity that is often barely acknowledged. In truth, the beauty of the protest is enhanced by noting the intimacy, in 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 their humanity on display, the unexpected glimpse we get of the inner dimensions of their public bravery.¹

And yet this interior quality of Smith’s and Carlos’s protest is rarely discussed, even as their gesture has earned a long life as one of the most iconic moments of resistance of the twentieth century. Why is this so? There is certainly no question that their action was an intentional and public demonstration, the most significant of the OPHR’s attempt to organize athletes toward a boycott of the Games. And still, what is moving about seeing them is as much the quality of graceful, lithe surrender in their posture as it is the awareness of the politics that are at stake. Like many other moments from the civil rights movement, their protest is an exquisite balance of what is public and what is intimate. How is it, then, that the intimacy of their fists-in-protest can be overlooked or deferred in our reading, such that the breadth of this moment is commented on only for its publicity? How is it that they are largely icons of resistance, and that vulnerability and interiority are not among all the things we are encouraged to read on their image?²

This book explores what a concept of quiet could mean to how we think about black culture. The exploration is a shift in how we commonly understand blackness, which is often described as expressive, dramatic, or loud. These qualities inherently reflect the equivalence between resistance and blackness. Resistance is, in fact, the dominant expectation we have of black culture. Indeed, this expectation is so widely familiar that it does not require explanation or qualification; it is practically unconscious.

These assumptions are noticeable in the ways that blackness serves as an emblem of social ailment and progress. In an essay from his 1957 collection introduction 3
White Man Listen!, Richard Wright captures this sentiment, noting that “The Negro is America’s metaphor” (109). Wright’s comment might be hyperbolic, but it also summarizes the exceptional role that black experience has played in American social consciousness: Blackness here is not a term of intimacy or human vagary but of publicness. One result of this dynamic is a quality of self-consciousness in black literature, a hyper-awareness of a reader whose presence—whether critical or sympathetic—shapes what is expressed. Such self-consciousness is an example of the concept of doubleness that has become the preeminent trope of black cultural studies. The result is that black culture is celebrated for the exemplary ways it employs doubleness as well as for its capacity to manipulate social opinion and challenge racism.

This is the politics of representation, where black subjectivity exists for its social and political meaningfulness rather than as a marker of the human individuality of the person who is black. As an identity, blackness is always supposed to tell us something about race or racism, or about America, or violence and struggle and triumph or poverty and hopefulness. The determination to see blackness only through a social public lens, as if there were no inner life, is racist—it comes from the language of racial superiority and is a practice intended to dehumanize black people. But it has also been adopted by black culture, especially in terms of nationalism, but also more generally: it creeps into the consciousness of the black subject, especially the artist, as the imperative to represent. Such expectation is part of the inclination to understand black culture through a lens of resistance, and it practically thwarts other ways of reading. All of this suggests that the common frameworks for thinking about blackness are limited.

Resistance is hard to argue against, since it has been so essential to every black freedom movement. And yet resistance is too broad a term—it is too clunky and vague and imprecise to be a catch-all for a whole range of behaviors and ambitions. It is not nuanced enough to characterize the totality of black culture or expression. Resistance exists, for sure, and deserves to be named and studied. And still, sometimes, when the term “resistance” is used, what is being described is something finer. There is an instructive example of this tension in Stephanie Camp’s Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South, a compelling work on the lives of black women during 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 defiance of 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 as (if not more than) in formal planned rebellions or revolts. And 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). The point here is not to dismiss the intensity and vulgarity of slavery’s violence on black people, but instead to restore a broader picture of the humanity of the people who were enslaved. 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.3

The case for quiet is, implicitly, an argument against the limits of blackness as a concept; as such, this book exists alongside many others that have questioned the boundaries of racial identity. These include recent scholarly work by Robert Reid-Pharr, Paul Gilroy, Thomas Holt, Michelle Wright, Gene Andrew Jarrett, Kenneth Warren, Kimberly Nichele Brown, Hazel Carby, Trey Ellis, Thelma Golden, and especially David Lionel Smith, whose essay “What Is Black Culture?” is dazzling and indispensible. There is also a large body of work by black women scholars, especially since the 1970s, that has posed consistent challenges to the singularity of race. The specific concern about the dominance of resistance as a framework, however, is exposed by black artists who have always struggled with the politics of representation. From Zadie Smith, Afaa M. Weaver, and Rita Dove, to Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, and Ralph Ellison, the black artist lives within the crosshairs of publicness and, if she or he is to produce meaningful work, has to construct a consciousness that exists beyond the expectation of resistance. Inspired by these artists, this argument for quiet aims to give up resistance as a framework in search of what is lost in its all-encompassing reach.4

Resistance, yes, but other capacities too. Like quiet.
The idea of quiet is compelling because the term is not fancy—it is an everyday word—but it is also conceptual. Quiet is often used interchangeably with silence or stillness, but the notion of quiet in the pages that follow is neither motionless nor without sound. Quiet, instead, is a metaphor for the full range of one’s inner life—one’s desires, ambitions, hungers, vulnerabilities, fears. The inner life is not apolitical or without social value, but neither is it determined entirely by publicness. In fact, the interior—dynamic and ravishing—is a stay against the dominance of the social world; it has its own sovereignty. It is hard to see, even harder to describe, but no less potent in its ineffability. Quiet.

In humanity, quiet is inevitable, essential. It is a simple, beautiful part of what it means to be alive. It is already there, if one is looking to understand it. An aesthetic of quiet is not incompatible with black culture, but to notice and understand it requires a shift in how we read, what we look for, and what we expect, even what we remain open to. It requires paying attention in a different way.

This point about how we read is especially relevant to the image in the frontispiece, Whitfield Lovell’s *KIN VII (Scent of Magnolia)*. Lovell is a giant in contemporary art, a 2007 MacArthur fellow whose work has been showcased at the Smithsonian, the Whitney, the MOMA, and in various other locations in the United States and abroad. His most well-known exhibits, Whispers from the Walls and Sanctuary, consist of a series of tableaux and full-room installations that display the daily lives of anonymous African Americans. In these installations, charcoal drawings of posed studio photographs found at flea markets or town archives (largely from the 1900s to the 1940s) are paired with various objects (boxing gloves, a knife, barbed wire, a bucket). The drawings are made on pieces of wood—parts of fences or walls—and seem to bring domestic scenes to life. More recently, in a stunning collection entitled Kin, Lovell has continued drawing portraits of anonymous black people, though this time on paper; these figures are made from identification photographs (headshots from passports or mug shots, for example) and are often paired with an object. Critics note the dignity of Lovell’s figures, which is a tribute to his skill in drawing: His portraits render their subjects in terrific clarity (the intensity in the eyes, the defined neck and cheek, the textured quality of the hair). His use of shadow is astute, and the result is images of people who look like people—not
symbols of a discourse of racism, but people in the everyday, wary and resolute, alive. They look familiar to us even if it is rare to see black faces represented in such a studied, elegant way.

But the dignity is related also to the pairing of image and artifact, the clean juxtaposition of locating each near the other without abrasion or overlap. This doesn’t really create a sense of doubleness because the portrait is intended to be prominent; still proximity is contagion, and the artifact insinuates itself on the portrait. In KIN VII (Scent of Magnolia), the cloth wreath becomes part of the male figure’s body, marking the place where one might expect a shirt collar, a piece of jewelry, the outline of a chest. Localized and domesticated, the wreath’s randomness becomes specific to this bold beautiful black face.

And the subject is clarified by the artifact: Are these flowers from his room, a private and unusual explosion of color? The flowers he gave to a date or the ones he brought to a funeral? A sign of his desire to visit all the world’s spectacular gardens? We might pick up the title’s reference to Billie Holiday’s thick voice on “Strange Fruit” (“scent of magnolia sweet and fresh/the sudden smell of burning flesh”) which might lead to a more ominous reading—his killed body marked by a wreath—but it is unsatisfying to be so singular and definitive with this image. Because of the flowers, he can be a subject more than an emblem; we can wonder if he loved pink and purple tones, without ignoring the possibility of racist violence. Whatever the story, the flowers are a surprise that interrupt the dominant narratives that might be ascribed to the profile of a black man of that age.

The foreboding is there to be read in some of the objects in Lovell’s work—chains, barbed wire, targets, rope—which is as it would be, often is, for a black person in the United States. And still, foreboding is only part of one’s life story, and it should not overwhelm how we think of the breadth of humanity. Lovell seems to aim for a balance between the social or public meaning of a person or object, and its intimacy, its human relevance. Where his earlier work created tableaux using full-bodied figures, the aesthetic of juxtaposition in these more recent pieces is what evokes narrative, as if we are seeing the unfolding of a scene of human life, as if more and more of the image will manifest if you look long enough. (This is especially true of Lovell’s drawings that lack a corresponding artifact.) The key is to let the unexpected be possible.
We might want to read a narrative of resistance on *KIN VII (Scent of Magnolia)*, but there is something else there: a ravishing quiet.

Quiet is antithetical to how we think about black culture, and by extension, black people. So much of the discourse of racial blackness imagines black people as public subjects with identities formed and articulated and resisted in public. Such blackness is dramatic, symbolic, never for its own vagary, always representative and engaged with how it is imagined publicly. These characterizations are the legacy of racism and they become the common way we understand and represent blackness; literally they become a lingua franca. The idea of quiet, then, can shift attention to what is interior. This shift can feel like a kind of heresy if the interior is thought of as apolitical or inexpressive, which it is not: one’s inner life is raucous and full of expression, especially if we distinguish the term “expressive” from the notion of public. Indeed the interior could be understood as the source of human action—that anything we do is shaped by the range of desires and capacities of our inner life.

This is the agency in Lovell’s piece, the way that what is implied is a full range of human life: that we don’t know the subject just by looking at him or noticing the artifact; that his life is wide-open and possible; that his life is more than familiar characterizations of victimization by or triumph over racism. For sure, the threat and violence of racism is one story, as is the grace and necessity of the fight. But what else is there to black humanity, this piece seems to ask. The question is an invitation to imagine an inner life of the broadest terrain.

It is remarkable for a black artist working with black subjects (and in a visual medium) to restore humanity without being apolitical. It is remarkable, also, to make the argument that Lovell makes so well with his work—that what is black is at once particular and universal, familiar and unknowable.

This is challenging territory to navigate, given the importance of resistance and protest to black culture. But the intent here is not to disregard these terms, but to ask what else—what else can we say about black culture, what other frameworks might help to illuminate aspects of the work produced by black writers and thinkers? How can quiet, as a frame for reading black culture, expose life that is not already determined by narratives of the social world? After all, all living is political—every human action means...
something—but all living is not in protest; to assume such is to disregard the richness of life.

In humanity, quiet is inevitable, essential. It is a simple beautiful part of what it means to be alive. It is already there, if one is looking to understand it.

There are many books on black expressiveness and resistance; there will be—and should be—many more. This, however, is not one of them. This book is about quiet.

The first chapter explores the way that public expressiveness has become the dominant framework for understanding texts or moments in black culture. Specifically, the chapter considers the concept of doubleness through a close reading of W.E.B. Du Bois’s notion of double consciousness, Paul Laurence Dunbar’s characterization in “We Wear the Mask,” and Zora Neale Hurston’s representation of signifying in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In noticing the limits of these idioms, the chapter offers quiet as a metaphor for the interior and as a more capable expressiveness. In making this case, the chapter distinguishes between quiet and silence, and discusses Let Your Motto Be Resistance, the inaugural exhibit at the National Museum of African American History and Culture; it also revisits the image of Smith and Carlos.

At the heart of the second chapter is the concept of quiet as surrender—the idea that human subjectivity is not tethered to fighting the social world, but instead could be imagined as the agency to be had in surrendering to the wildness of one’s inner life. The discussion here uses Marita Bonner’s little-known essay from 1925, “On Being Young, a Woman and Colored,” a poetic 1,679-word treatise that serves as a counterpoint to Du Bois’s famous idiom: not a consciousness that is irrevocably doubled, but one of surrender. The third chapter considers this consciousness of surrender through Gwendolyn Brooks’s slim novel *Maud Martha*. The chapter wonders what quiet looks like in an everyday life, and engages these questions: How does interiority inform interactions with other people? How does the quiet subject negotiate moments of subjection and power? What is the action that quiet motivates, or how does it shape behavior? Simply, what does a quiet life look like? The chapter also studies Rita Dove’s “Daystar” from *Thomas and Beulah*. 
The fourth chapter moves away from the consideration of quiet through constructs of individuality, as in the second and third chapters, and wonders if quiet is possible in collectivity. Necessarily, the chapter looks at nationalism and its centrality to black culture, as well as its perils to a notion of interiority. Thinking through representations of the civil rights movement, especially James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time*, the chapter tries to understand how the terms of quiet—surrender, interiority, and especially vulnerability—can be meaningful to collectivity. In this exploration, the chapter revisits Elizabeth Alexander’s reading of her inaugural poem, “Praise Song for the Day,” and engages Alice Walker’s definition of “womanism” and Marlon Riggs’s documentary on black identity, *Black Is . . . Black Ain’t.*

The last two chapters are closely connected in that they take on quiet’s expressiveness. In the fifth chapter, the concepts of prayer and waiting are used to expose expressiveness that is not public and that is not only urgent. The chapter also considers the importance of form to understanding the figurative capacities of language. Key texts here are poems by Natasha Trethewey and Dionne Brand, and Lorna Simpson’s visual piece *Waterbearer.* The concluding chapter relates quiet to the notion of “oneness,” the energy of the inner life that constitutes a person’s being. Conceptually, quiet is the subjectivity of the “one” and is equivalent to wandering. This case is made by reading two key scenes from Toni Morrison’s *Sula* as well as the title poem from Ruth Ellen Kocher’s *When the Moon Knows You’re Wandering.* Finally, the chapter considers the particular contributions that black women have made to the ideas that inform quiet, and offers brief snapshots of other examples and dimensions of quiet that are not explored in this book. The chapter closes with a reconsideration of the ineffability and essentiality of quiet.

Inevitable, essential, sovereign; expressive and lush; a little foreign to our thinking on black culture, but there all the while: quiet.
Look again at that image of Tommie Smith and John Carlos from the Mexico City Olympics: Part of what limits our capacity to see their fuller humanity is a general concept of blackness that privileges public expressiveness and resistance. More specifically, in most regards, black culture is 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. That public expressiveness and resistance are definitive of black culture is an effect of the role the public sphere has played in making, marking, and policing racial difference. Indeed since ideas about white racial superiority are formulated and articulated in public discourse (literature, art, science, medicine, law) and are enacted in public spaces (neighborhoods, schools, parks), it makes sense that publicness, as both an act and a location, would be integral to the struggle for racial equality. As a result, black culture has been characterized largely by its responses to racial dominance, so much so that resistance becomes its defining feature and expectation. In this context, black culture is or is supposed to be loud, literally as well as metaphorically, since such loudness is the expressiveness that articulates its resistance. These notions inform how we think about black subjectivity, which is necessarily contrarian and seemingly lacking an inner life.

Resistance, then, is the dominant framework for reading 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 and less about the interior of black subjectivity, and leave us without a general concept that can characterize the inner life.

Consider closely 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 notable than that of W.E.B. Du Bois’s notion of double consciousness. A psychological term codified in the opening chapter of his *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 descriptive of the general notion that selfhood is achieved through interactions with other people, but when the term is used in specific regard to black identity, it suggests something more: a black subject whose being is conscripted not only by race but also by a racist discourse. In short, double consciousness conceptualizes black subjectivity as conflict with whiteness and imagines black agency only as/in resistance.²

From the first sentence of the first chapter, even before he uses the term “double consciousness,” Du Bois’s argument pivots on the idea of a subject ensnared in a racialized discourse: “Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question . . . How does it feel to be a problem?” (9). In this sentence, the narrator, Du Bois himself, suggests that this question is the one that is always on the minds and lips of white people when they engage a black person, though the directness of the question changes from moment to moment. Writing at the turn of the twentieth century and in the midst of profound questions about race and the implications of the end of the Civil War, Du Bois rightly contextualizes the black subject as a problem in the white imagination. His black subject is defined by race, and particularly by this racial formulation of being a problem.

Though the narrator claims to offer no response to the question, his refusal is not characteristic of interiority, since he is already overdetermined by the unasked and unanswered (perhaps even unanswerable) question: “At these [the questions that are posed] I smile, or am interested, or reduce the boiling to a simmer. . . . To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word” (9–10). Notably, Du Bois represses whatever
he is feeling, performs a smile, but does not engage the question explicitly. Instead, the “answer” seems to come in a reverie that describes a young Du Bois’s early encounter with race and racism:

In a wee wooden schoolhouse, something put it into the boys’ and girls’ heads to buy gorgeous visiting-cards—ten cents a package—and exchange. The exchange was merry, till one girl, a tall newcomer, refused my card,—refused it peremptorily, with a glance. Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others. (10)

This memory of coming to consciousness is offered, in some ways, as an emphasis to and clarification of the unasked question in the opening paragraph of the chapter; that is, this is the articulation of the interior that is repressed or silenced in the adult Du Bois. But the interior here is not a place of surrender and exploration where Du Bois can engage a range of feelings and thoughts and desires. Instead, this interior is under the command of rejection that comes from the outside. Having experienced rejection, the young Du Bois develops a growing contempt for his white peers: “That sky was bluest when I could beat my mates at examination-time, or beat them at a foot-race, or even beat their stringy heads” (10). It is not only the competitive aspect that is fascinating here, or even that Du Bois imagines himself to be singularly consumed by this moment, but also that the elegant and studied language of his prose gives way to the vernacular “beat their stringy heads.” Of course, the narrator recovers from this eruption of the repressed and starts the next sentence with a statement of composed resignation: “Alas, with the years all this fine contempt began to fade.” What does not fade, however, is the sense of being shaped by race and racialization; the Du Boisian subject is “overdetermined from without,” as Franz Fanon might say, compelled to either accept or defy the prognosis of white culture. In short, Du Bois depicts a subject who is haunted and animated by doubleness.

The narrator describes his determination to resist the idea that the best of the world belonged only to white people; he resolves to achieve success by “reading law, by healing the sick, by telling the wonderful tales that swam in [his] head,—some way” (10). But even this determination does not temper the reality that he is irrevocably tethered to what white culture says of him. This is, in essence, double consciousness, and Du Bois captures it perfectly.
when he describes the impact of racism on other boys like him: “With other black boys the strife was not so fiercely sunny: their youth shrunk into tasteless sycophancy, or into silent hatred of the pale world about them and mocking distrust of everything white; or wasted itself in a bitter cry” (10). This description reiterates the sense of black identity as “strife,” of being in an unending struggle with racism. In this regard, the options are few—accept the racist characterization and become all the inferiority it imagines you to be, or resist it fiercely.

What follows next is the passage where Du Bois uses the term “double consciousness,” though he has already described the context for understanding the black person as one “born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world” (10–11). One could read the possibility of agency in Du Bois’s ironic phrase “gifted with second-sight,” though it is clear that whatever additional insight the black subject has is linked to his being the other—this subject who is revealed via the consciousness and imagination of the world around him, as well as via his response to and resistance of such imagining. In double consciousness, the twoness of black subjectivity does not represent another consciousness that is free and wild; instead, the twoness is a kind of pathology, a fractured consciousness that is overdetermined by a public language of black inferiority. The black soul is measured “by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (11). In this characterization, agency is limited to resisting public discourse, and the black subject seems to possess no interior worth speaking of.

That Du Bois would conceive of black subjectivity in such bleak terms is unsurprising, not only because of the era in which he wrote but simply because racism is a profound phenomenon—it has material and psychological impact, and it is institutionally and individually unrelenting. Indeed, Du Bois’s overall thesis is intended to give attention to the unique profundity of racism. But what is striking is that his notion of double consciousness does not characterize the inner life of the black subject, at least not an interior that has its own sovereignty—that is, Du Bois does not offer a description of the black subject as having access to his selfhood beyond the public discourse of race, access that is unfettered and unrestricted, even if only in his own mind. Instead, the argument of double
consciousness imagines that black subjectivity is without escape from the publicness of racialization—that blackness is always faithful to or in resistance of the projections of white culture. This description over-privileges race as a part of subjectivity and, in this regard, as much as double consciousness is a contemplative idiom, it does not fare well as a concept of interiority.\(^3\)

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 in response to how they were negatively constructed in the social imagination as racial, gendered, and classed subjects, “Black women, as a rule, 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.\(^4\)

Although neither double consciousness nor dissemblance explicitly dismisses the idea of the interior, each nonetheless suggests that its presence 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 forgo the wild vagary of the inner life for what is calibrated and sensitive 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 is gained in using these tropes is not the subtlety of the human subject, but the nuances of the act of concealment.\(^5\)

These claims about the aesthetics of doubleness are evident in looking at Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem “We Wear the Mask,” a tour de force of signifying and concealment, and an example of another celebrated idiom
of black culture—the idea of masking. First published in 1895, the poem reads:

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be overwise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask!

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 word “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 where 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), and thereby 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; for example, its fifteen lines is one line longer than a traditional sonnet, a fact which reads like a performance of formlessness. Furthermore, the playfulness in Dunbar’s
manipulation of the rhyme is applicable also to his careful diction—cheeks, shades, grins, lies, guile, smile, hides, subtleties, all words that connote doubleness.

Dunbar’s poem is brilliant in its technique and powerful in its general theme, but what is notable is how little it says about the interior 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 the use of the plural first-person, the way the pronoun “we” flattens as much as it unifies.) For sure, we learn 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. 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 the emphatic 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 furtive smile. There is little quality of an inner life to be found in the poem’s response to racism and, at best, one can infer only that the wearer of the mask is either pained and rageful, or deceiving. 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 double consciousness, imagines doubleness as subjection but also agency. And still, the poem illustrates that an aesthetic of guile is inept at rendering the inner life. Indeed, 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.⁶

The limitations of masking and doubleness are a consequence of the way those terms have become part of a larger notion of black resistance, such that the intent of black subjectivity is always toward a political discourse of oppression, and never toward its own human vagary. This overlooking of interiority in favor of what is publicly expressive is also applicable to the idea of signifying: 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 and dramatic, and it plays to the listening audience; this 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 extraordinary expressiveness, relying unreliably on interplay between said and unsaid, public and not; one cannot appreciate it by only paying attention to what is explicit. And yet the general discussion of signifying as verbal exchange tends to focus on its demonstrative quality rather than its capacity to reflect what is unsure and interior. This emphasis suggests that the meanings of signifying are only legible through publicness (for example, audience).⁷

That signifying is considered primarily as a demonstrative idiom confirms how ingrained publicness is to black cultural discourse. Still, because signifying is complicated and nuanced, it is worth trying to understand its expressiveness beyond the limits imposed by publicness. An articulate example can be found in Zora Neale Hurston’s masterful *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 her husband 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 from the other customers. But Jody does not laugh; instead he gets up, re-cuts the tobacco and then proceeds to curse at Janie in the presence of everyone. In particular, he comments on her aging body—her “rump hangin’ nearly to [her] knees.” The customers, accustomed to spirited teasing, laugh at first and then, as they notice the mean-spiritedness of Jody’s comment, they go quiet. Janie, however, for what feels like the first time, speaks back, and the two get into a quick exchange of words, Jody cautioning Janie to watch her words, 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 it ends with a hot 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 ’taint 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)

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.”

Janie’s response to Jody’s verbal assault goes to the heart of his perceived power, his manhood, and it has such weight that it marks the beginning of his declining health and then his death a few pages later. This act of signifying in the novel has been read for its public demonstrativity—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-uppance. But the novel seems to suggest that the meaning here extends 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. In fact, to this point, the whole story has privileged Janie’s interior—we largely learn about her through the representation of her thoughts, as would be the case given her marriage to a man who believes deeply 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). This is her interior, this place where time is without measure and where change and stillness cohabitate; 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,
then, in this context that we should read her signifying moment, since her harsh verbal blow to Jody is less about a public performance that is attuned to audience, and instead is an expression of her long-brewing thoughts about herself, her dreams, her freedom. The deeper value of Janie’s signifying is found in its connection to this 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 in Janie’s words. But this clarity is in contrast to the absence of control, the waiting and listening, suggested by the novel’s description of Janie’s sense of self. In fact, after that riotous scene, which Jody predictably concludes by slapping Janie again, the narrative returns to Janie’s interior: “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 could be read as if it were a part of the signifying moment in the store, 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.

Not what is sure and singular and public, but what is interior and complicated and dynamic: Reading Janie’s signifying as a compilation of moments of consciousness transcends the focus on public drama and reinforces the importance of the inner life as a part of expressiveness. This rethinking of signifying is important because it points to what is lost in understanding expressiveness only through a discourse of publicness. The concern here is that the ways we interpret these central idioms of black culture—doubleness, signifying, dissemblance, double consciousness, masking—assume that black expressiveness is exclusively public. This assumption is troubling because it ties black expression to the discourse of resistance; that is, without other concepts with which to understand expressiveness, resistance becomes the lingua franca of black culture. And in the face of the inviolable relationship among 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 about how we understand blackness? Could the notion of quiet help to articulate a different kind of expressiveness, or even to 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. This expressiveness of quiet is not concerned with publicness, but instead is the expressiveness of the interior. That is, the quiet of a person represents the broad scope of his or her inner life; the quiet symbolizes—and if interrogated, expresses—some of the capacity of the interior.\(^{10}\)

As a concept, the interior is slippery, but it can still be useful to our understanding of 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” (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 that it 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 wild selffullness, a kind of self-indulgence, and “the locus at which self interrogation takes place” (Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color*, 383). Said another way, the interior is expansive, voluptuous, creative; impulsive and dangerous, it is not subject to one’s control but instead 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, more akin to hunger, memory, forgetting, the edges of all the humanness 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 and it is a stay against the social world.\(^{11}\)

There is, in trying to describe the interior, a predicament of expression, since the interior is not really discursive—it cannot be represented fully (or even fully accessed) and is largely indescribable. Furthermore, the
interior is mostly known through language or behavior, through exterior manifestations, and is therefore hard to know on its own terms. For sure, the interior can be approximated, hinted at, implied, but its vastness and wildness often escape definitive characterization. And yet the interior is expressive; it is articulate and meaningful and has social impact. Indeed, it is the combination of the interior’s expressiveness and the inability to articulate it fully that makes interiority such a meaningful idiom for rethinking the nature of black expressiveness.

Quiet, then, is the inexpressible expressiveness of this interior, an expressiveness that can appear publicly, have and affect social and political meaning, challenge or counter social discourse, yet 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, at least in regard to resistance. It is in this way that the distinction between quiet and silence is clearer. Silence often denotes something that is suppressed or repressed, and is an interiority that is about withholding, absence, and stillness. Quiet, on the other hand, is presence (one can, for example, describe prose or a sound as quiet) and can encompass fantastic motion. It is true that silence can be expressive, but its expression is often based on refusal or protest, not the abundance and wildness of the interior described above. Indeed, the expressiveness of silence is often aware of an audience, a watcher or listener whose presence is the reason for the withholding—it is an expressiveness which is intent and even defiant. This is a key difference between the two terms because in its inwardness, the aesthetic of quiet is watcherless.12

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 commonsense, so totalitarian, 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. And perhaps this is as it should be, since there is no question about the meaningfulness of race and especially racism to black life; there is also no question that resistance, as individual or collective action or as an aesthetic, is a meaningful part of black culture. But there is, still, an important question about the other qualities of black culture that are overwhelmed by resistance’s status as the predominant or even solitary cultural framework. Simply, what else beyond resistance can we say about black culture and subjectivity?13

The quarrel is with the way publicness has a chokehold on black culture. 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” (Black, White, and in Color, 224). This is precisely the need for a concept of interiority, that it can 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 the easy conclusions that it makes possible.14

This interior expressiveness is already present in Smith 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 compositional similarity between photographs of their 1968 protest and images of lynched bodies. But at its horrible best, the image of the lynched body is one of silence and speaks through the alphabet of violent repression. Smith 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.15

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, to disavow 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 countless killed others—no, what must also matter is the argument announced in their posture of surrender, the glimpse of their exquisite interior. 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.16

Quiet is the expressiveness of the inner life, unable to be expressed fully but nonetheless articulate and informing of one’s humanity. As a concept, it helps us explore black subjectivity from beyond the boundaries of public expressiveness. That image of Smith and Carlos in Mexico City is in need of a framework that allows us to see it more fully. For sure, they make a gesture of resistance, but the meaning of their bodies, standing there, is not captured entirely by a notion of resistance. They are resistant in context, but not in essence.

The idea of an aesthetic of quiet might seem foreign or counterintuitive to black culture, but it is not. In fact, there is a strong contemplative tradition in black culture, a tradition inspired by the existential struggle of living with the confines of racial identity. The earliest writings by black Americans exemplify this capacity to question not just the imposition of identity but also the very meaning of human existence; this self-reflexiveness is evident through almost every form of black art. And yet this existential consciousness is often read through the discourse of resistance and therefore is reduced to what it says about the nature of the fight with publicness.17

The command (and limits) of resistance as a discourse is evidenced in the inaugural exhibit showcased at the National Museum of African American History and Culture in 2007, an exhibit that has been preserved partially online and in a catalog. A stunning collection of one hundred photographs of African Americans, the exhibit was titled Let Your Motto Be Resistance after an 1843 speech given by Henry Highland Garnet, the abolitionist and clergyman. The photographs cover about 150 years and include every notable figure in black history and many that people would not recognize by name or image. Among these is one of Duke Ellington laughing...
modestly in a dressing room; Gordon Parks as subject of the camera he wielded so masterfully; Diana Ross with Mary Wilson and Florence Ballard in a Detroit studio, each woman in elegant motion (and Ross signally in the center); Booker T. Washington tall and aware, poised, before a large crowd.

One understands why resistance was chosen for the exhibit’s title, not only because of Garnet’s powerful words but also because the presence of this breadth of black humanity is in fact a contradiction of the stereotypes of racism. The people in these images are not mammies or jezebels or bucks; they are human beings who worked and laughed and loved and made mistakes and had quirks, and the collection showcases that. Even more than this is the fact that many of the figures in the exhibit were activists, explicitly or by the nature of their willfulness to pursue a particular career or ambition. Many of them were the first African Americans to achieve excellence in a particular arena, which surely meant that conflicts with racism were a part of their lives and careers. In fact, some of the images capture moments of resistance—Jesse Owens in the starting blocks at the 1936 Berlin Olympics; Malcolm X offering copies of a newspaper on the street, the headline telling of seven black people killed in Los Angeles, as a white woman and then a white man walk by undeterred; a headshot of Angela Davis before a single microphone, eyes engaged and directed not to the camera but to whatever audience she was addressing. Even the image of Marian Anderson performing with Leonard Bernstein in 1947 gestures toward her battle with the DAR in 1939 for the right to sing at Constitution Hall. There is the poignant photograph of a slain Martin Luther King, Jr. in an open casket, and the youthful shock of his five-year old daughter, Bernice, as she watches her father’s still body; the magnitude of recognition in her face speaks for a whole nation of people.

And still, looking at these images, it is clear that resistance as an idiom is not sufficient to capture the breadth of what is represented here. If we read these images only through the catch-all of resistance, searching for and noting the ways that each person existed in a public battle with white racism, we miss all the other loveliness that is to be had in such a collection of images. We miss the airy, angelic quality of Sarah Vaughn’s closed eyes, the way this matches the lightness of her hands; or the dramatic staging of softness in James Baldwin’s image, an almost campy rendering of him as a religious icon with his head nearly covered in cloth and his hands nearly
prayed . . . and how gentle and fiery his eyes look. Resistance alone is not capable of taking the viewer through all one hundred images, of pointing attention to the shape of Anderson’s mouth as she sings, the sureness in her eyes that seem to speak both of utter mastery and deep pleasure. As a concept, resistance is not capable of helping a viewer to notice all this beauty, all this heart-stirring loveliness. Even the very medium of the exhibit, photography, is compromised by the idea of resistance. That is, photography is, in a way, quiet—its expressiveness is always a little more ambivalent and less definitive than prose, for example. Rare is the photograph that offers a single, sure narrative; instead the medium flourishes on the tension between definitiveness and uncapturability, how what cannot be captured is and then, as one looks beyond the frame and image, is not.18

Resistance may be deeply resonant with black culture and history, but it is not sufficient for describing the totality of black humanity.

In humanity, quiet is our dignity. This quiet is represented by our interior, that “place in us below our hip personality that is connected to our breath, our words, and our death” (Natalie Goldberg, *Wild Mind*, 28). In its magnificence, quiet is an invitation to consider black cultural identity from somewhere other than the conceptual places that we have come to accept as definitive of and singular to black culture—not the “hip personality” exposed to and performed for the world, but the interior aliveness, 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.”19 It is this exploration, this reach toward the inner life, that an aesthetic of quiet makes possible; and it is this that is the path to a sweet freedom: a black expressiveness without publicness as its forbearer, a black subject in the undisputed dignity of its humanity.20