The Sovereignty of Quiet
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Beyond Resistance in Black Culture

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The Sovereignty of 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
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.¹

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.

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).

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.

The interest in quiet arrives because of the trouble posed by public expressiveness, particularly the assumption that black culture is predominately 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?  

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.  

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.  

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.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{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 mammys 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
In an 1892 essay, Anna Julia Cooper noted that black people “are the great American fact, the one objective reality on which scholars sharpened their wits, at which orators and statesmen fired their eloquence” (136). At the heart of Cooper’s comment is the idea of black publicness, the reality of race as a concept formed and sustained in public discourse. Black people can be “the great American fact” because their presence as racial subjects influences and reflects the country’s ambition; as a group, black people are essential figures in the national narrative. This equation of blackness and publicness shapes our understanding of black culture as a whole, and the notion of resistance in particular. And yet, as argued in the previous chapter, resistance is too limited an idiom to adequately characterize black humanity. Which leaves the question, is it possible to engage the public discourse of black identity beyond the imperative of resistance? What might it look like to write about race and identity in the context of an aesthetic of quiet, to write about race using the capacities of the interior?

Of all the qualities that could characterize an aesthetic of quiet, it is the idea of surrender that is most compelling. In common usage, “surrender” is a passive term, the counterpart to being conquered, dominated, or
defeated, which is how we would think of it given the prevalence of war. But surrender can also be expressive and active, as in some religious uses or in the surrender to love: It is a deliberate giving up to another, the simultaneous practice of yielding and falling toward what is deep and largely unknowable. Though surrender is not only a conscious process, it does require a certain faith in one’s human capacity. As a term that suggests bounty and unsureness as well as a quality of inwardness, surrender is an apt synonym for quiet.  

The consideration of surrender brings us back to the shortcoming of Du Bois’s double consciousness, and to another writer, Marita Bonner, whose description of black consciousness uses a rhetoric of surrender as a means for engaging the inevitable fact of black publicness. Bonner is not well known today, but she was a celebrated writer in the Harlem Renaissance. Born and raised in New England, she received an undergraduate degree from Radcliffe College in 1922, and though she never lived in Harlem, she was a force in its artistic explosion. Like Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Nella Larsen, Bonner gained early recognition for her writing, winning The Crisis magazine’s short fiction competition in 1924 for the story “The Hands.” She went on to publish three plays as well as at least twenty short stories and essays, the last coming in 1941. She died in 1971, having spent the latter years of her life as a high school teacher, mother, and Christian Scientist.  

Her best known essay is the brilliant “On Being Young, a Woman, and Colored,” published in The Crisis in December 1925, when she was still an up-and-coming writer. The essay is brief—only 1,679 words—but still manages to offer a thoughtful meditation on the consciousness of the black woman in a new era. The title is audacious and bold in its philosophical posture, and in this regard, Bonner’s piece parallels Du Bois’s first chapter of Souls, “Of Our Spiritual Strivings.” In fact, Du Bois himself was editor of The Crisis at the time Bonner’s essay was published, and he must have been taken with this young woman writer whose learned prose seemed to reflect his own dreams about black intellectualism.  

Hence Bonner and Du Bois are contemporaries, which makes her distinct consideration of black consciousness an interesting read. Like Du Bois, Bonner’s essay addresses the aspirations that a young educated black person—in her case, a woman—might have: the desire to be free and
to revel in both the thrills of the modern world and the spoils of her edu-
cation and youth. The essay begins with this eclectic flourish:

You start out after you have gone from kindergarten to sheepskin covered
with sundry Latin phrases.

At least you know what you want life to give you. A career as fixed and
as calmly brilliant as the North Star. The one real thing that money buys.
Time. Time to do things. A house that can be as delectably out of order
and as easily put in order as the doll-house of “playing-house” days. And
of course, a husband you can look up to without looking down on yourself.

Somehow you feel like a kitten in a sunny catnip field that sees sleek,
plump brown field mice and yellow baby chicks sitting coyly, side by side,
under each leaf. A desire to dash three or four ways seizes you. (3)

This opening introduces the idea of a young woman poised to build a life
rich in freedom and describes this ambition as a conflict between the
demands of the exterior world on one hand, and the willfulness of the self’s
desire on the other. While the first sentence speaks to the exterior world,
represented here via education, the next sentence turns immediately to the
interior: “At least you know what you want life to give you.” The use of “at
least” implies that something is amiss, that there is a disconnect between the
aspirations that education is supposed to inspire and the yearnings of one’s
inner life. It is almost as if before the meditation gets too far, the narrator
puts a governor on the expectations of the social world. Notice, for
example, how the description of career, house, and husband is rendered
in whimsical language that is about excitement and agency—intimate lan-
guage. The passage is remarkable for how much it privileges the interior.
For sure, Bonner’s narrative recognizes the encroachment of the world out-
side, represented in the rules of gender and domesticity that prepare young
girls for the limits of womanhood. But these expectations are tempered by
the exuberance of the interior, which is characterized as wild, predatory,
and boundless; indeed, even the potentially sexist connotation of “a kitten
in a catnip field” is transformed into an idiom of female interiority, as a
desire to dash wherever pleasure may be found.

Bonner’s meditation on black female consciousness starts, then, from a
position that recognizes, even reveres, the interior above all else. This rever-
ence is emphasized by the rhetorical intimacy that is created by the direct
address of the essay, the use of the second person. It is as if the essay were a letter of advice from one woman to another, or even a diary entry as a woman speaks to herself about herself in the most private of ways. The speaker never names her addressee, and there is no explicit salutation to substantiate that this essay is a letter, but the direct address certainly assumes a kind of familiarity and suggests a manner of engagement that is consonant with the nature of letters. The intimacy here is essential to how Bonner is able to manage what is essentially a description of double consciousness—the conflict between one’s interior and the world outside—differently from Du Bois. That is, because the narrator’s comments are housed in the intimacy of direct address, the ideas have an aura of privacy, as if they are precious exchanges between speaker and reader. Instead of rehearsing familiar historical or sociological facts about black people and/or women’s oppression—the facts of black publicness—the essay reads like it is exploring the quirky, energetic musings of a beloved.

This is not to imply that the essay is apolitical or ignores the challenges of racism and sexism that may be presumed from its title; in fact, the opposite is true in Bonner’s nimble engagement of the racial and gendered expectations that impose on the freedom that a young black woman might imagine for herself. The speaker moves easily between the assumptions of cultural nationalism (“All your life you have heard of the debt you owe ‘Your People’ because you have managed to have things they have not largely had”) and the prejudices of patriarchy and white supremacy as she outlines the limits—rather than the possibilities—of the modern world. She warns the reader that her ambitions are likely to be shunted aside by the intersecting nature of racism and sexism. But in Bonner’s language, even the warning is engaging stuff:

You hear that up at New York this is to be seen; that, to be heard.

You decide the next train will take you there.

You decide that next second that that train will not take you, nor the next—nor the next for some time to come.

For you know that—being a woman—you cannot twice a month or twice a year, for that matter, break away to see or hear anything in a city that is supposed to see and hear too much.

That’s being a woman. A woman of any color. (4–5)
The effectiveness of Bonner’s prose is not only its brevity, but the way the short sentences mimic the quick progression from excitement to disappointment. In having each sentence stand as a paragraph, Bonner recreates the landscape of the speaker’s thinking, a kind of stream-of-consciousness as the mind flits from one thing to another. It is a dramatic and poetic presentation of the speaker’s most intimate thoughts.

The consequence of Bonner’s syntax is that her argument about racism and sexism—essentially, an argument about the facts of black publicness—is embedded in interiority. In the whimsy of its examples, the essay avoids the language and posture of resistance, and the consciousness it describes acknowledges but is not overdetermined by the exterior world. Unlike Du Bois’s chapter, which is in a tussle with the white world from the first sentence, Bonner’s essay begins by establishing the potency and meaningfulness of the interior.

Key to Bonner’s rhetoric of interiority is her willingness to question the usefulness of race as a social category, a willingness that implicitly demotes the equation of race and publicness from the singular place it holds in how we understand black subjectivity. This is a delicate undertaking, not only because of the broad impact of race in black life but also because of the race-conscious era in which Bonner is writing. For this young woman writer to suggest that the terms of racial publicness were anything other than paramount might be perceived as naïvety at best, heresy at worst. But Bonner’s intellectual skill is up to the challenge: In an early example, the narrator addresses residential segregation, though rather than use this as a moment to recite sociological or legal data, the narrator instead considers how the conversation around living among “one’s own” reflects the heavy burden of racial identity imposed both from within and from outside of the race:

And one day you find yourself entangled—enmeshed—pinioned in the seaweed of a Black Ghetto.

Not a Ghetto, placid like the Strasse that flows, outwardly unperturbed and calm in a stream of religious belief, but a peculiar group. Cut off, flung together, shoved aside in a bundle because of color and with no more in common.

Unless color is, after all, the real bond. (3–4)
The diction here is exquisite as the narrator notices a distinction between a community of people whose relationship is “unperturbed” and “calm” and shaped by their shared beliefs; and a community “flung” together on the basis of nothing but color. The sarcastic tag, “Unless color is, after all, the real bond,” accentuates the point that she has made—that color alone is not sufficient to determine humanity or kinship; certainly, color does not equate to desire and ambition and interior subjectivity. The narrator suggests that the idea of racial difference, which is produced by a racist discourse, is adopted by black cultural nationalism, and that both the racist and the nationalist conventions impinge on freedom. At the heart of this critique is her longing to experience a world, “where you can marvel at new marbles and bronzes and flat colors that will make men forget that things exist in a flesh more often than in spirit. Where you can sink your body in a cushioned seat and sink your soul at the same time into a section of life set before you on the boards for a few hours” (4). It is a lush and human desire the narrator has for herself and for the reader to whom she imparts this advice, a desire that is not merely a naïve rejection of the realities of social inequity but one that holds firm to the right to be human. In moving beyond the social and political implications of the body toward a celebration of spirit and feeling, Bonner’s essay makes a plea for interiority: not a consciousness that is doubled and encumbered, but a consciousness that is free, full of wander and wonder, where surrender—not resistance—is an ethic.\(^5\)

It is important to notice that this argument for a consciousness of the interior is built on an intersectional analysis of identity. That is, unlike Du Bois’s double consciousness which accepts race as the singular and definitive aspect of black life, Bonner’s idiom of consciousness engages both race and gender, and also implicitly addresses age and class. In her narrator’s worldview, the struggle for subjectivity is broader than just a contestation with whiteness, and her arguments challenge racism and cultural nationalism (“shoved aside in a bundle because of color and with no more in common . . . [as if] color is, after all, the real bond” [4]) as well as patriarchy and sexism (“For you know that—being a woman—you cannot . . . break away . . . That’s being a woman. A woman of any color” [5]). Indeed given her gender, the narrator could not merely articulate, uncritically, the tenets of cultural nationalism, just as, given her race, she could not only engage
sexism and patriarchy. She must consider all these and in doing so, her argument recognizes the limits of identity politics and moves closer to the larger issue of humanity that is always at stake.\textsuperscript{6}

This commitment to what is human is not an easy achievement, and even Bonner’s poised narrator falls into a moment of ranting, cataloguing her frustrations with the resilience of the “old . . . outgrown and worthless” stereotypes that affect black women. In response, the narrator exclaims “Every part of you becomes bitter.” When white friends “who have never had to draw breath in a Jim-Crow train” counsel her to be more understanding, the narrator’s anger is especially clear: “You long to explode and hurt everything white; friendly; unfriendly” (\textsuperscript{6}). Here, the speaker imagines, even embraces, what she has been cautioning against—letting the exterior world encroach on one’s interior, orienting one’s self against the world since it is seemingly already and always against you.

But the moment does not hold and in the very next sentence the speaker reminds the reader that “you know that you cannot live with a chip on your shoulder even if you can manage a smile around your eyes” (\textsuperscript{6}). This is a warning against internalizing the dynamics of oppression, and the phrasing is reminiscent of Du Bois’s response to the unasked question, how does it feel to be problem—to smile or nod or say nothing, even as his blood boils inside. For Du Bois, this suppressed frustration is the “prison-house” that corrupts the youthful agency of his peers, who give into “tasteless sycophancy, or into silent hatred of the pale work about them . . . or wasted in a bitter cry” (Du Bois, \textit{Souls}, 10). (Notably both writers describe the experience as being tasteless: Bonner writes that “Everything you touch or taste now is like the flesh of an unripe persimmon” [\textsuperscript{5}]). By and large, Du Bois’s notion of consciousness accepts racial blackness as a prison house of struggle that is internalized. Bonner’s interior consciousness, however, is explicit in its refusal of such imprisonment:

But you know that you cannot live with a chip on your shoulder . . .

For chips make you bend your body to balance them. And once you bend, you lose your poise, your balance, and the chip gets into you. The real you. You get hard.

. . . And many things in you can ossify . . . (\textsuperscript{6}; third and fourth ellipses in original)
This is a gentle caution about the futility and danger of fighting against the exterior world and having one’s whole selfhood shaped—hardened—by the imperative of resisting ignorance and insults. For Bonner’s narrator, the solution is not to privilege racial identity and community; the problem itself is gender and race as social categories, the way they can undermine one’s humanity when they are embraced as sites of resistance.

It is surrender that Bonner’s speaker values, since surrender evidences the agency and wildness of the inner life and is at least as human and as sustaining as any act of protest. At the end of the essay, the speaker says as much in a closing flourish that must be quoted at length:

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 ener-vating 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; ellipses in original)

This breathlessness is an argument for the pleasures and agency of the interior. The subjectivity the speaker offers is that of the black woman as an
infinity of understanding, poised in her knowing and beyond reach or sight of the public’s limited imagination. She is sure of herself, at ease, aware, in the full consciousness of her voluptuous interior rather than choked by a consciousness in persistent conflict with the world and its expectations.

In this closing passage, the narrator is deliberately engaging the sexist idea of the feminine interior—the image of a woman in her sitting room, silent, in waiting while the world happens around her and decides who and how she can be. Bonner’s speaker 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 speaker’s suggestion that the black woman, in her waiting, refuses to waste “strength” learning the boundaries put in place by the ideologies of white supremacy, male patriarchy, or black cultural nationalism. Instead, she has an insight older and deeper and wilder than these. Her waiting looks, as it would to a casual eye, as if it has no motion and no intellect, as if it was provincial, 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 vastness within. In this context, waiting is not passivity but instead is patience, the thoughtful attentiveness of one who is wise. Waiting is the surrender to the interior. The narrator goes one step further in suggesting that it is women, and in particular black women, who realize this consciousness of surrender through their consideration of the futility of publicness.

In describing this consciousness, Bonner uses the word “quiet” as well as “silent.” As noted in the previous chapter, the two terms are sometimes used synonymously, though the idea of quiet as the expressiveness of the interior is distinct from the general connotation of silence as an absence. Bonner’s “silent” seems interchangeable with the notion of quiet, especially when the narrator asserts that the motionlessness on the outside is not reflective of the activity of the inner life. In keeping with the idea of quiet, the silence here is not performative, not a withholding, but instead is an expressiveness that is not entirely legible in a discourse of publicness.7

Also key to Bonner’s description of a consciousness of surrender is the notion of Buddha as a metaphor for the idealized black woman. Buddha is an icon of thoughtfulness, a man whose quiet changed the world as we
know it, and in this regard he is representative of a subjectivity of surrender. Bonner’s argument makes the case that the concept of being a “woman” is also emblematic of surrender, that a woman’s categorical agency is her capacity to wait . . . as if the word “woman” literally means one who waits with knowing grace. It is in this sense that phrase “Perhaps Buddha is a woman” makes full sense, since Buddha’s exemplary mindfulness is compatible with Bonner’s notion of woman. Indeed, the narrator’s identification with Buddha, which transgresses racial, gendered, national, and historical boundaries, is in keeping with the overall argument about the futility of identity. Buddha could be a woman, a black one even, since to be a woman is a habit of consciousness and a practice of a kind of human wisdom. Bonner’s use of identity here is ambivalent and, in its concluding moment, the essay embraces a selfhood that is found in an icon of spirituality (Buddha) and in a practice (waiting). Importantly, neither of these is a category of identity; instead, they represent a state of being and a habit of self.8

If the end of the essay is a grace note on waiting, it is also a rejection of publicness. The very form of the essay—poetic and wandering and elliptical—is askew from the argumentative or polemical rhetoric one might expect. Bonner doesn’t offer a call to arms or a private rant; she doesn’t present her narrator as bothered and bothersome. In this way, the essay does not entirely fulfill its title, in that it does not set forth grievances to elicit guilt or pity. The refusal of the public moment is striking especially because the essay remains feisty and critical. That is, Bonner’s speaker does not back down from the challenges of a racist and sexist culture. But neither does she take up the gauntlet as it is thrown down or fight in the terms that are outlined. Rather than an essay of resistance, Bonner offers a slim, poetic essay, a letter really, that describes subjectivity as a surrender to the interior. In doing so, she constructs the black subject as possessing a consciousness of imagination rather than a consciousness that is doubled. Her essay does not plea for freedom but instead suggests that the freedom worth having is already always present: the freedom of being, innately and complicatedly, a human being.9

That Bonner’s essay so staunchly avoids using the first person, except for one brief clause at the end (“brown like I am”), is an important feature
of its quiet. In fact, this choice of narrative voice is notable because it is
counter to the conventions of the essay genre, for although essays usually
speak to readers implicitly—that is, there is always a sense of direct address
of the reader—it is the use of the first person that generally gives an essay
its rhetorical power. Why, then, would Bonner avoid first-person speech
so explicitly, especially in an essay that seems so autobiographical and so
personal? Why would she adopt a point of view that sidesteps the power
to be had in speaking autobiographically?

The answers might lie in the discourse of autobiography itself, as well as
in the kinds of cultural agency first-person narratives can offer black and
female subjects. Among the assumptions of autobiography is the expecta-
tion of truth and representativeness—that the first-person narrative not
only speaks for its narrator but speaks of his or her condition representa-
tionally, iconically. This dynamic is especially true for marginalized subjects
writing about a topic related to their social identity; for such a writer, the
first-person moment is “a public way of declaring oneself free, of redefining
freedom and then assigning it to oneself in defiance of one’s bonds to the
past or to the social, political, and sometimes even moral exigencies of the
present” (Andrews, To Tell a Free Story, xi). This is how William Andrews
describes the convention of first-person voice in his important work on
slave narratives, and his description makes clear the anxieties and expecta-
tions that are likely to follow any black writer working in the genre. By
avoiding the first person, Bonner bypasses the presumption that the narra-
tor is a representation either of herself or of her social group. Her use of
direct address allows her to avoid being the autobiographical subject on
display as an act of resistance or defiance.

Had Bonner spoken of her own experiences more directly, the essay
would have fallen into the kind of public struggle over identity that she her-
self seems to abhor. It is helpful to remember that the essay was published
in 1925, following the suffrage movement and the continued migration of
African Americans to northern cities; it is also an era characterized by the
literary and social activism of the Harlem Renaissance. Hence the public
conversation about women and black people was at a feverish pitch, and
discussions of race and/or gender were combative and often pivoted on
the issue of representativeness and authenticity. These conversations are
antithetical to the idea of interiority, and Bonner avoids them by utilizing
the second-person voice to create an insulating intimacy between narrator
and reader.

In fact, Bonner’s use of the second person is exceptional for the way it
imagines the reader. Here the reader becomes the protagonist, and there-
fore she is committed by (and committed to?) the intimacy of the conversa-
tion. The construct of the essay assumes closeness between the narrator and
every reader, any reader, which helps to bracket the noise of public dis-
course, since the exchange is between just the two (narrator and reader).
This is all seduction, and the reader is, literally, made to surrender. It also
allows Bonner to take certain liberties; for example, she imposes on the
reader a set of desires and frustrations without regard for who the particu-
lar reader might be. This imposition is based in the assumption of
intimacy—as in, I know who you are and what you want—but might also
be a way for Bonner to imply that her arguments are, at the end, universal:
Every human being knows, to some degree, what it is to want to move
without restriction and what it is to encounter the limitations of the social
world. The intimacy here is the perfect context for having a quiet exchange
about race, gender, and power. Largely because of the direct address, the
essay reads as an intense but affectionate conversation of understanding
and encouragement, letter-like in its coziness and caution: for example,
“You long to explode and hurt everything white; friendly; unfriendly. But
you know that you cannot live with a chip on your shoulder” (6). There is a
certain tenderness here, the sense that the narrator knows and cares for
the reader. In avoiding rhetorical buzzwords in favor of whimsical poetic
phrases (kitten in a catnip field; plump brown field mice and yellow baby
chicks), Bonner sustains the notion that this conversation is on a different
register.

The use of the second person is further notable because it does not rein-
force the narrator’s sense of authority or increase distance between her and
the reader. Indeed, the closeness between the narrator and the reader seems
to facilitate the agency of the narrator to make direct reference to herself
near the end of the essay. It is as if, in being shielded from becoming the
representative of black femininity and establishing a kind of bond with the
reader, the narrator is safe to come into subjectivity. When she says “Like
Buddha—who brown like I am—sat entirely at ease, entirely sure of him-
self,” the narrator slips herself into the very possibility and wonder of the
interior that she has been arguing for. Like her protagonist, the narrator too is poised to go wherever she can imagine. It is a lovely moment of connection, where the reader and narrator—and ultimately, Bonner herself, since the narrator speaks also for her—become bonded through the practice of surrender. If one is inclined to interpret Bonner’s interior consciousness as self-indulgent, this connection between narrator and reader suggests otherwise.¹¹

Imbedded in this consideration of Bonner’s use of the second person and negotiation of publicness is the question of audience that is so critical in black culture. That is, because of the public dimensions of both race as an identity and writing as a profession, a black writer who writes about race is often forced to confront a generic but daunting inquiry: To whom and for whom are you speaking? In regard to this question, a writer experiences a kind of double consciousness where he or she is expected to represent but also transcend race. This ambivalence of representation and transcendence means that the writer has to balance at least three expectations: that she would speak to and about black people, challenge a dominant white audience, as well as stand as evidence of black excellence. Bonner effectively avoids this dilemma of audience by speaking to and about her protagonist, who is ultimately herself. This solipsism—the speaking to the self about the self—makes the subject and object of the essay synonymous, and thereby displaces the audience as a factor. Indeed, the dilemma of audience is undermined further by the essay’s refusal to approach race as if it has to be singularly preeminent in a black person’s humanity.¹² The connection between audience and publicness is an important part of the difference between Bonner’s rhetorical approach and Du Bois’s. Though both are writing about racial consciousness, Du Bois’s position as narrator in the first chapter of Souls seems to be shaped definitively by public discourse, by how he is interpellated. The term “interpellation” has been advanced by the theorist Louis Althusser as a way to describe the dynamic of subjectivity. For Althusser, the modern subject is “hailed” or commanded into subjectivity via social discourses. (He famously gives the example of a policeman calling out to a person on the street “Hey you there,” where the second-person invocation literally arrests the person and makes him capable of being engaged as a social subject.) What is useful about Althusser’s idea of interpellation is the way it explains subjectivity as a social event, as an
experience of being legible and identifiable; subjectivity here is the location of a public and exterior consciousness. But Althusser also suggests that interpellation provides agency, since it is in being named in ideology that the individual comes into being as a subject. Literally, it is in being subjected that one becomes a subject.\(^{13}\) Althusser’s notion is Foucaldian in its recognition of the dialectical nature of power and it works well with Du Bois’s conceptualization of double consciousness: When Du Bois opens his chapter with the unasked question, how does it feel to be a problem, he acknowledges that the black subject is interpellated via an ideology of negation and inferiority. Though Du Bois the narrator refuses to answer the question, it still serves as the foundation of his anger, resentment, and resolve. This unasked question is a salutation, as is the moment when the young white girl refuses his card—they are the coordinates for his theorization of black subjectivity as doubled.\(^{14}\)

This is quite different from Bonner’s engagement of consciousness, which articulates a subjectivity that seems to extend beyond interpellation. That is, in privileging the interior and avoiding the question of audience, Bonner turns the conversation about her subjectivity as inward as possible, as if she is hailed only by her own interior. When the essay cautions against becoming hardened or wearing a chip, it is discarding the subjectivities that are possible via a racialized discourse. Instead, the narrator encourages the protagonist to wait in quiet, ready to go wherever. The essay imagines a human subject called into being not by a social discourse, but by desire, ambition, dreams, by one’s affinity to the “essences, the overtones, the tints, the shadows” of life as one takes it in. Bonner’s is a deliberate conceptualization of subjectivity as being called from within.

The grand fault of Du Bois’s double consciousness is that it is tethered to the notions that publicness projects onto the racialized subject. As Hortense Spillers writes, double consciousness is about “the specular and the spectacular—the sensation of looking at oneself and of imagining oneself being looked at through the eyes of the other/another [which] is precisely performative in what it demands of a participant on the other end of the gaze” (\textit{Black, White, and in Color}, 397). What Spillers captures is the anxiety of publicness that is at the heart of Du Bois’s idiom. Here, the doubleness of black subjectivity is constituted by resistance, and the imperative of black culture is to engage public discourse to counter the racism created by
public discourse. In this way, double consciousness is riddled with the terms of publicness. Bonner’s consciousness of surrender is something else, for though it is engaged with the idioms of publicness, it privileges the interior; indeed, it luxuriates in the wild possibilities that the interior offers. These possibilities are not all positive, nor are they without social relevance, as we shall see later on. And still, it is a remarkably different way to orient one’s self—surrender as an alternative to the anxiety of double consciousness.

Perhaps the defining difference between Bonner’s and Du Bois’s idioms of consciousness is in their faithfulness to the politics of identity. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois sets out to mobilize race in a way that will serve black political needs. As such, he not only embraces race but also works to articulate—even celebrate—racial differences. For Du Bois, race is a “meta-language,” a towering doubled-discourse that requires an awareness of what is exterior to the subject himself.\(^1\) Bonner’s consciousness of surrender, on the other hand, seems to work to undermine the meaningfulness of race (in its intersectionality and its critique of cultural nationalism). Indeed, if there is an identity that her narrator seems to engage, it is the notion of a woman’s particular capacity. But even here, Bonner’s idiomatic use of “being a woman” seems intent to evade essentialism: Starting with the stereotype of women as the second and fairer sex, of women as passive and domestic beings—notions which are already racialized—Bonner fashions a notion of waiting as wisdom and agency. This is her subjectivity of the interior and it is not necessarily exclusive to women, since Buddha himself is referenced as an icon of a consciousness of waiting. Bonner’s finessing of the politics of identity is terrific because it refuses to ignore the impact of race and gender but also refuses to give up humanity in the face of stereotypes or the effort to fight them.\(^2\) Whereas Du Bois sees liberation in the idioms of publicness and wants to rehabilitate notions of blackness to this end, Bonner wants to surpass not only racial stereotypes but the dynamics of race itself. And one could argue that with the surrender she proclaims at the end of her essay, she achieves exactly that.

So much of Bonner’s consciousness of surrender is related to the concept of imagination. The act of imagining is the practice and willingness to dream,
speculate, or wonder, and it helps us to move beyond the limits of reality. Imagination is the landscape of such dreaming, what educator Harold Rugg describes as a place and process of magic that is also a particular human capacity (Imagination, xii). In this latter context, imagination is an interiority, an aspect of inner life that constitutes an essential agency of being human.

The concept of imagination is useful in thinking about the balance Bonner tries to strike between the politics of identity and the wild vagary of inner life. Implicit in Bonner’s arguments is the idea that the main goal of cultural nationalism—freedom for black people—cannot be achieved without a consideration of the interior. In his book Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination, the historian Robin Kelley seems to understand how essential dreaming is to achievement of social change—that there is an important need for the whimsy of and surrender to the imaginative interior. Early on, Kelley notices that his mother

has a tendency to dream out loud. I think it has something to do with her regular morning meditation. In the quiet darkness of her bedroom her third eye opens into a new world, a beautiful light-filled place as peaceful as her state of mind. She never had to utter a word to describe her inner peace; like morning sunlight, it radiated out to everyone in her presence. (1)

This description of seeing with a third eye is emblematic of possibility, of the invention of a world that happens in the interior. But Kelley is clear that the “bliss” of his mother’s imagining, though otherworldly, was not bereft of political reality: “Her other two eyes never let her forget where we lived. The cops, drug dealers, social workers, the rusty tapwater . . . were constant reminders that our world began and ended in a battered Harlem/Washington Heights tenement apartment” (1). And still, the imagination’s agency doesn’t merely have to succumb to the reality of the exterior world. Its fancifulness engages the overtones of the world outside, but then invents its own habitat:

Yet she would not allow us to live as victims . . . So with her eyes wide open my mother dreamed and dreamed some more, describing what life could be for us . . . She dreamed of land, a spacious house, fresh air, organic food, and endless meadows without boundaries, free of evil and
violence, free of toxins . . . free of poverty, racism, and sexism . . . just free. She never talked about how we might create such a world, nor had she connected her vision to any political ideology. But she convinced my siblings and me that change is possible (1–2).

There is good balance in Kelley’s description between an awareness of the exterior world, and a self authorized by an agency that extends beyond that world. His mother’s vision is political and is shaped by social realities, but it also is her own vision of possibility. This is an example of imagination as “a means . . . of mediating between the domestic and that which lies at and beyond the limits of knowledge” (Lively, Masks, 2). Indeed, Kelley’s characterization of his mother’s consciousness highlights imagination as the capacity to call one’s world into being; it is imagining as an act of deliberateness and self-making. 17

As a discourse, imagination has played a notable role in black cultural history, evident by the popularity of literary magical realism as well as the general colorfulness that characterizes black cultural aesthetics. This imaginativeness is related to the contemplative tradition noted earlier, and can be seen in iconic examples of enslaved peoples singing spirituals about far-off lands and experiences of freedom, or in the inventiveness of quilts, or in culinary adaptiveness. Some scholars have even argued that imagination is relevant to the achievement of a positive sense of racial identity, especially in terms of the capacity to envision blackness outside of the binary logic of racism, where it is aberrant and inhuman. 18

The meaningfulness of imagination to Bonner’s consciousness of surrender is evident in the way her argument is built on hypothesizing and fanciful metaphors; the prose itself is also populated with ellipses, as if to imply the spontaneity of invention. But it is the relationship between the reader and narrator, formed via the direct address, that most reflects the quality of imagination. The intimacy between narrator and reader is hypothetical, and through it the narrator presumes to speak for the reader’s desires. Moreover, the essay’s end is an imagined sequence that includes Wisdom, Infinity, and Understanding as classical goddesses, and concludes with a magical invocation to flight. Bonner’s narrator is able to balance social realities with the vision of her imagination, and when she cautions the reader against “wasting strength in enervating gestures as if two hundred years of
bonds and whips had really tricked you into nervous uncertainty” (7), it sounds a lot like Kelley’s comment on his mother. The narrator is well aware of the legacy of slavery, but this does not override the vision of her third, creative eye. She dwells in possibility and conjures up a world where Buddha waits with the agency of a black woman, where waiting is a state of knowing and grace. The narrator’s consciousness of surrender and her capacity to envision her subjectivity different from the exigencies of the outer world, is an engagement of imagination. In this way, imagination is “consciousness as a sphere of freedom” (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 103), rather than consciousness as deficit or imposed doubleness. And there is a lovely synchronicity between the instruction of the narrator at the close of the essay and the lesson Kelley remembers from his mother’s dreaming: “She simply wanted us to live through our third eyes, to see life as possibility” (2).

The notion of imagination helps us to remember the scope and breadth of the interior, for although the interior is, tautologically, interior, it is not small; like imagination, the interior is boundless. Such breadth is noted in Bonner’s essay when the narrator warns against misreading motionlessness or silence, and projects onto her reader a cosmos of an identity: “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 to yourself” (7). Here the narrator envisions the reader as the watcher of life, the perceiver, one who takes in all its wonders and horrors. One who is in the world, but also of it, and then, beyond it: “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” (8). In this characterization, the quiet subject is active and embodied, full of agency and capacity; the diction, especially “ripe,” “swoop,” “full height” and “single gesture,” implies preparedness but also potency. The interior, this practice of waiting and stillness, is a vision of a human being ready to move divinely. Bonner’s final characterization disturbs all of the ways that waiting and interiority get rendered as merely domestic, or feminine, or enfeebled. Instead, waiting is without limit and is truly cosmopolitan. It is also important that the essay does not end in triumph, as if the reader or narrator has overcome the exterior world. No, since this articulation of the interior is quiet, it ends in possibility rather
than achievement. There is no triumph to be had, especially since the self is not calibrated against an external measurement. There is just the work of being complicatedly human. And in this work, the compass for subjectivity is the interior. Even Bonner’s construction of the reader to reflect the narrator’s ambition and anxieties—that manipulation of direct address—contributes to this sense of self-ordination. For the narrator, there is no other measure but herself, for as flawed as this might be, it is a better compass than to give in to what is exterior. She, this person who is black and female, measures herself by herself, by her capacity for quiet; she surrenders to her interior as a location of agency. “My intimacy is in silence” (81), Trinh T. Minha writes in her elegant Woman, Native, Other, and indeed the narrator’s intimacy, her awareness of herself, happens in the quiet of her interior and her imagination. This interior self-measure is an articulation of what it is to be sovereign.20

The quiet subject is a subject who surrenders, a subject whose consciousness is not only shaped by struggle but also by revelry, possibility, the wildness of the inner life. Quiet is not a performance or a withholding; instead, it is an expressiveness that is not necessarily legible, at least not in a world that privileges public expressiveness. Neither is quiet about resistance. It is surrender, a giving into, a falling into self. The outer world cannot be avoided or ignored, but one does not only have to yield to its vagaries. One can be quiet.21
Notes

INTRODUCTION

1. The bowed heads were probably in part an attempt to look away from the American flag, similar to Vera Caslavska’s own silent gesture of turning her head slightly to the right and slightly down during two medal ceremonies, in protest of the Soviet Union’s invasion of her country, Czechoslovakia.

2. The image is engaged most commonly as a piece of “social movement photography,” in the way that Leigh Raiford uses the term; see especially pages 225–226 of “Restaging Revolution.” For an excellent discussion of Smith and Carlos, see Amy Bass’s Not the Triumph but the Struggle: The 1968 Olympics and the Making of the Black Athlete. 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.

3. 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. I thank Elizabeth Pryor for alerting me to Johnson’s work.

4. There is such a rich body of work here that it is almost impossible to cite completely. Some recent useful references in terms of studies of the limits of blackness include Reid-Pharr’s Once You Go Black, Gilroy’s Against Race, Holt’s The Problem of Race in the Twenty-first Century, Wright’s Becoming Black, the introduction of Jarrett’s African American Literature beyond Race, Warren’s survey of the historical discussion of activism and black intellectualism in “The End(s) of African American Studies,” Brown’s Writing the Black Revolutionary Diva, Carby’s Race Men, Ellis’s “The New Black Aesthetic,” and Golden’s notion of post-black in Freestyle. The point about the specific contributions of black women studies is addressed in chapters 2, 4, and 6, though one could call up the names of Susan Willis, Hortense Spillers, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Cheryl Wall, bell hooks, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Barbara Smith, Ann DuCille, Farah Jasmine Griffin, Mary Helen Washington, Barbara Christian, Patricia Hill Collins, Mae Henderson, Nellie McKay, Claudia Tate, and
Gloria Hull as a start. The list of black artists would be even longer, though it is important to notice Ralph Ellison’s excellent and still relevant “The World and the Jug” (which makes the interesting claim that the black novel is always “a public gesture, though not necessarily a political one”) and James Baldwin’s “Everybody’s Protest Novel” (where he describes black culture as being imagined as a “counter-thrust” to the “thrust” of dominant culture); particular references to other artists can be found in the body and notes of the pages ahead. Finally, there have also been works by more conservative writers, like John McWorther. What makes his arguments distinct from the one above is that McWorther implies that racism and a discourse of resistance is no longer relevant; the argument in quiet is to ask what other capacities, besides resistance, inform black culture—a very different question.

CHAPTER 1 — PUBLICNESS, SILENCE, AND THE SOVEREIGNTY OF THE INTERIOR

1. This claim about the relationship between publicness and black culture is based on reading publicness through Jürgen Habermas’s notion of the public sphere, articulated in his classic The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, as well as Michael Warner’s and Nancy Fraser’s engagement of Habermas in Craig Calhoun’s edited volume, Habermas and the Public Sphere. For a fuller explication of this claim, see my essay “The Trouble with Publicness: Toward a Theory of Black Quiet.” Also see Houston Baker’s essay “Critical Memory and the Black Public Sphere,” which argues that 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).

2. Du Bois’s use of double consciousness is cited often, but it is Ernest Allen, Jr.’s “Du Boisian Double Consciousness: The Unsustainable Argument” that takes a broad historical look at the term. In this work, Allen makes an excellent and well-researched argument that the term is not crucial to Du Bois’s ideas; indeed, Allen argues convincingly that the specific notion of a black double consciousness was generated from critical misinterpretation of Du Bois’s first chapter of Souls. As good as Allen’s argument is, it misses the ways that a notion of double consciousness is engaged in the opening passages of the chapter—how those opening passages expound on Du Bois’s definition of the term. Further, that so many scholars have found the term to be useful in describing black experience is reflective of the general power of doubleness as a characteristic of racial blackness; it matters less if they extrapolate more from Du Bois’s chapter than he himself might have intended. For examples of the lasting significance of the idiom of doubleness in Du Boisian scholarship, see Dolan Hubbard’s introduction to The Souls of Black Folk: One Hundred Years Later (especially pages 5–7 and 12–13) as well as essays in that collection by Keith Byerman, Amy Kirschke, Shanette Harris, Carolyn Calloway-Thomas, and Thurmon Garner. Also see work by Paul Mocombe (The Soul-less Souls of Black Folk) and especially Dickson Bruce, Jr. (“W.E.B. Du Bois and the Idea of Double
Consciousness”) and Bernard Bell (“Genealogical Shifts in Du Bois’ Discourse on Double Consciousness”) that trace the evolution of the concept in Du Bois’s work. For a more general engagement, see Gerald Early’s Lure and Loathing. Finally, for an extended and excellent consideration of the limits of Du Boisian double consciousness in relationship to works by black women, see Kimberly Nichele Brown’s Writing the Black Revolutionary Diva, especially chapter 1.

3. It is important to keep in mind that The Souls of Black Folk is one of the early examples of black public intellectualism, perhaps along with Booker T. Washington’s Up from Slavery and Anna Julia Cooper’s A Voice from the South. Unlike Washington’s immensely popular work, Du Bois’s collection, though often narrated in the first person, abandons the aesthetic of memoir in favor of an interdisciplinary mix of history, sociology, and literature. This approach, similar to Cooper’s, is not accidental: for one thing, it mirrors his Atlanta University Studies from a few years earlier. More important, it works against the expectation that the story of black people be told through autobiography. Souls is a decidedly scholarly version of the story of black experience. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Terri Oliver suggest in the introduction to the Norton edition of Souls, the book emerges as a result of the battle for public visibility between Du Bois and Washington. This argument is given full life in Hazel Carby’s excellent chapter “The Souls of Black Men” in Race Men, and is corroborated by Dolan Hubbard in the introduction to The Souls of Black Folk: One Hundred Years Later. For further consideration of the public dimensions of Du Bois’s book, see Robert Stepto’s From Behind the Veil, which characterizes the composition of Souls as Du Bois’s attempt to gain “greater authorial control of what is, in effect, not simply a single volume but a major portion of his canon up to that time” (53). Stepto also describes Souls as a quest narrative of racial self-authentication, as Du Bois writing a “generic narrative” that positively represents the race’s doubled self-consciousness (pages 53–54, 61–66). Also see Nellie McKay’s “The Souls of Black Women Folk in the Writings of W.E.B. Du Bois,” which addresses the binary of public-private.

4. In addition to Hine’s “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West,” see Evelyn Higginbotham’s notion of a “politics of respectability” in Righteous Discontent. Also see Tricia Rose’s Longing to Tell and Evelynn Hammonds’s “Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality”; both address the way a discourse of Victorian femininity mixes with racism to produce a code for black female behavior.

5. Hine notes a similar irony in her essay; see page 916. There is a long intellectual history that explores the implications of disguise, ruse, and doubleness in black culture, or marginalized cultures in general. The most thorough consideration is in James C. Scott’s argument for a hidden transcript and for the idea of infrapolitics in Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts. Scott does well to give attention to the potent “discourse that takes place ‘offstage,’ beyond direct observation of power holdings” (4), exploring the articulate ways in which ruse and disguise can affect the public, official realm. This interest in the role of doubleness in black culture is also at the center of works as varied as Henry Louis Gates’s The Signifying Monkey, Houston Baker’s Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature,
John L. Gwaltney’s *Drylongso*, and Robin Kelley’s *Yo Mama’s Disfunktional*. Although each of these texts acknowledges ideas that seem similar to quiet (Scott even has a section on quiescence), their arguments ultimately emphasize and privilege what is public.

6. These concerns about the mask could also be raised of the notion of invisibility; see Todd Lieber’s “Ralph Ellison and the Metaphor of Invisibility in Black Literary Tradition,” which links the two idioms. For a general discussion of masks, see Adam Lively’s *Masks: Blackness, Race and the Imagination*. Though he does not cite Dunbar’s poem, Lively explores the mask as a way to understand how race functions, including how it serves as a meaningful concept of white engagement of racial blackness. In relationship to black culture, Lively argues that the mask is a trope for “attacking and subverting white values. In the face of white surveillance, blacks’ principal weapon in this cultural war was humour, and the indirection allowed by disguise or mask” (5). He goes on to say that “for a whole series of twentieth-century writers, blackness has been expressive of the sense that one must wear a mask before the world” (283). For a specific engagement of the mask in Dunbar’s work, see John Keeling’s “Paul Dunbar and the Mask of Dialect” and Daniel P. Black’s “Literary Subterfuge: Early African American Writing and the Trope of the Mask.” Also see Rafia Zafar’s *We Wear the Mask: African Americans Write American Literature, 1760–1870*, where the concept is linked to issues of mimicry and invisibility for the early black writer, though not specifically to Dunbar’s poem.

There is a larger conversation here about performance and publicness. For further study, see Michael Warner’s argument about the performative expectation that is a part of engaging the public sphere in “The Mass Public and the Mass Subject”; Nancy Fraser, who writes in “Rethinking the Public Sphere” that “participation [in the public sphere] means being able to speak in one’s own voice, and thereby simultaneously to construct and express one’s cultural identity through idiom and style” (126); Houston Baker, who argues in “Critical Memory and the Black Public Sphere” that blackness is often negotiated through the performative; and Monica Miller’s discussion of performance, publicness, and black representation in *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity*.

7. Signifying is largely studied as a verbal practice, even though its rhetorical implications extend to literary examples. For a consideration of signifying, see Geneva Smitherman’s *Talkin That Talk: Language, Culture and Education in African America*, especially pages 26, 138, 220, and 255. Smitherman repeatedly explains that signifying is based on indirection and subtlety as much as it is on public expressiveness (indeed, she makes a distinction between the performativity of the verbal sparring of “the dozens” and the more general indirection of signifying). Also see Robin Kelley’s discussion of the public dimensions of signifying in “Looking for the Real Nigga” in *Yo Mama’s Disfunktional*.

8. The secondary 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, for example, Barbara Johnson’s classic “Metaphor, Metonymy and Voice in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*,” her essay with Henry Louis Gates, Jr., entitled “A Black and Idiomatic Free Indirect Discourse,” and Carla Kaplan’s
The Erotics of Talk. Of particular note is Maria Racine’s “Voice and Interiority in Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God,” which reads Janie’s coming to voice as a process that includes this public moment with Jody. Racine’s essay is notable because it does not overprivilege the publicity of this scene.

9. The case could be made that black expressiveness, rather than being a function of the public sphere, is an African cultural retention. But even these examples of expressiveness, as discussed in work by John Michael Vlach and Robert Farris Thompson, for example, read expressiveness for its public capacities, for its resistance to white cultural dominance and as a tonic against obscurity (Vlach, By the Work of Their Hands, 19). The case that public expressiveness is a feature of black culture has been made in various studies, including Geneva Gay and Willie Baber’s Expressively Black, Shane White and Graham White’s Stylin’, Monique Guillory and Richard Green’s Soul, even Gina Dent’s Black Popular Culture, and is also evident in the many declarations of black aesthetics from the Harlem Renaissance or from the black arts/black aesthetic movements.

10. The use of “quiet” here is not intended to resonate with the term “quietism” as used in philosophy or in theology.

11. 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, the interior is gendered female and is private, which also means it is politically irrelevant, whereas the exterior is male, public, and politically relevant. For example, Tamar Katz, in Impressionist Subjects, argues that femininity and domesticity are the ideological twins of interiority (see especially pages 4–7, though the entire book is an excellent consideration of the gender politics of the public sphere and the idioms of domesticity). But this easy conflation of the interior with a binary of public/private or male/female is dangerous, because it elides some of the complicated realities of Victorian domesticity. Nancy Armstrong, in Desire and Domestic Fiction, rightly suggests that interiority figures as both masculine and feminine; that is, as the idea of subjectivity becomes a valued idiom in modernity, the characteristics of interiority and domesticity—introspection, thoughtfulness, emotional competence—become applicable to men also. And yet Armstrong is clear to note that, despite this elasticity, the politics of gender leave women’s interiority as a less political trait—confined to the domestic or private sphere. It is this collapsing of the interior with the private that makes interiority a disfavored concept, at least politically. See especially Lauren Berlant’s The Queen of America Goes to Washington City on the dangers of privacy; Seyla Benhabib’s “Models of Public Space,” which asserts that “whereas questions of justice were from the beginning restricted to the public sphere . . . the private sphere was considered outside the realm of justice” (92); and Angela Davis’s “The Legacy of Slavery: Standards for a New Womanhood” for a discussion of this binary in regard to black female identity.

The use of interiority in this book is intended to reflect a mode of subjectivity that is not synonymous with the idea of an intimate or domestic or private sphere; in this regard, this use of the interior earns from Elizabeth Grosz’s Volatile
Bodies and “Refiguring Lesbian Desire,” as well as Galen Johnson’s “Inside and Outside: Ontological Considerations” and Dorothea Olkowski’s “The Continuum of Interiority and Exteriority in the Thought of Merleau-Ponty” (especially page 2). 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).

For further consideration of interiority, see the preface and introduction of The Black Interior, where Elizabeth Alexander describes 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). Also see Hortense Spillers’s definition of interior intersubjectivity, a common psychoanalytic term; Spillers quotably proclaims that the subjectivity of the interior “is not an arrival but a departure, not a goal but a process, and it conduces to neither an answer nor a ‘cure,’ because it is not engendered in formulae and prescriptions. Moreover, its operations are torque-like” (Black, White, and in Color, 383).

The term “selffullness” is described in my book Black Women, Identity, and Cultural Theory: (Un)Becoming the Subject.

Much work has been done to explore the politics/aesthetics of noise as well as to deconstruct silence—see, for example, Jacques Attali (Noise), Fred Moten (In the Break), and John Cage (Silence). 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; Evelyn Hammond, “Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality”; Marlene Nourbese Philip, She Tries Her Tongue, Her SilenceSoftly Breaks; bell hooks, Talking Back; and especially King-Kok Cheung, ArticulateSilences, and Patricia Hill Collins, Black Feminist Thought. As these works notice, silence can be expressive and nuanced, so although this book prefers “quiet” as a term for clarity’s sake, the distinction between the two is not always necessary or possible. A further discussion of silence occurs in note 7 of chapter 2.

It is helpful to remember the case already made about resistance in the introduction, especially note 4.

The term “irreverent” echoes Alexander’s argument about the urgency of rescuing blackness from the limits of publicness and the expectations of nationalism; see her discussion of the burden of authenticity on pages 5–8 of Black Interior. 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.” This is in keeping with Hurston’s characteristic anxiety about the expectations and limits of racial identity.

See Leigh Raiford’s brief but astute discussion of the power of lynching photographs in “The Consumption of Lynching Images,” especially page 272. Also see David Marriott’s important chapter on photography and lynching in On Black Men. Thanks to Nikky Finney for a conversation that helped make this point clearer.
16. The same is true of much of the civil rights movement, which is remembered for its publicity, though it also has quiet and reflectiveness at its heart; see chapter 4 for a further discussion of this point.

17. For a consideration of existentialism in black culture, see Lewis Gordon’s *Existentialia Africana*, especially chapter 1. The larger point here is that blackness exists as a concept and as such, it is explored, argued, engaged, rejected, and theorized, especially by people who seem to embody its identity. This contemplative dynamic is evident in much of the work by black writers and artists, from Fanon and Du Bois and Anna Julia Cooper, to Langston Hughes and Kara Walker and Toni Morrison. (This is part of the self-reflexiveness of race as Lively discusses it.) Existentialism is explored further in chapter 3.

18. For a broad discussion of the nature of photography, see chapter 1 of Liz Wells’s *Photography: A Critical Introduction*, 2nd edition. This sense of photography’s ambivalence and multiplicity is argued in Susan Sontag’s *On Photography* and Roland Barthes’s *Camera Lucida*. The expressiveness of photography is multiple and exuberant, and in this regard it is similar to the characterization of the expressiveness of the interior.

19. The quotation is from the end of Afaa M. 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.”

20. I am borrowing language here (and in the beginning of the paragraph) from Anna Julia Cooper’s statement 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’” (*A Voice from the South*, 31).

CHAPTER 2 — NOT DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS BUT THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF SURRENDER

1. The comment is from an essay in *A Voice from the South* and reflects Cooper’s overall argument about the importance of black people to discussions of American national culture. Cooper’s work is especially important because it reflects the racial and gendered anxieties of a postwar America in the 1890s, where the role and potential of black citizens was a question linked to larger concerns about technology, civil rights, and modernity.

2. The term “surrender” is used often in religious discourses, but for the concept of quiet, the more compelling use is in psychoanalytic writing; see especially Dennis Miehls’s “Surrender as Developmental Achievement in Couple Systems” and Emmanuel Ghent’s “Masochism, Submission, Surrender.” I am grateful to Miehls for the references here.

3. Not much has been written about Bonner’s connection to Du Bois, though her work, especially this essay, is often characterized as being immersed in his notion of
the “talented tenth.” And yet many of Bonner’s plays and stories deal with the experience of working-class people, as Judith Musser astutely notes. For further discussion and a good general introduction to Bonner, see Joyce Flynn’s introduction to Frye Street and Environ: The Collected Works of Marita Bonner.

Bonner’s essay is similar to others written during the Harlem Renaissance that assert the idea of a “new negro” but that also note the contradictions between the promises of modernity and the realities of black life, although Bonner is particular in her attention to sexism. For example, see Alain Locke’s “The Negro Takes His Place in American Art” as well as his anthology The New Negro, James Weldon Johnson’s Black Manhattan, Du Bois’s “Criteria of Negro Art,” and especially E. Franklin Frazier’s “La Bourgeoise Noire.”

4. Letters have long been considered a gendered form, and even the literary and cultural domain of women. See various discussions in Elizabeth Cook’s Epistolary Bodies (especially chapter 1 on letters as a negotiation of the gendered binary of public/private), Rebecca Earle’s edited collection Epistolary Selves (especially Carolyn Steedman’s broad-minded “A Woman Writing a Letter”), and Caroline Bland and Máire Cross’s Gender and Politics in the Age of Letter Writing. Sharon Marcus’s discussion of letters in Between Women (especially pages 32–43) offers conceptual support for thinking of Bonner’s essay as a diary entry, as if the narrator is speaking of herself explicitly in the second person. The fact that the essay’s epistolary nature avoids the first person except on one occasion will be addressed later in the chapter.

5. Since Bonner’s essay is not well known, it is important to be careful in characterizing the nuance of her arguments, especially when working with excerpts. For example, in critiquing the capacity of people to judge not on the basis of color or gender, but of something finer, something more astute, Bonner writes, “And what has become of discrimination? Discrimination of the right sort . . . [that] weighs shadows and nuances and spiritual differences before it catalogues . . . that looks clearly past generalization and past appearance to dissect, to dig down to the real heart of matters” (“On Being Young,” 5). This passage, when isolated, might suggest that Bonner is ignorant of the material consequences of racism, or for that matter, sexism, which is hardly the case.

6. This is the essence of intersectionality, as first described and defined by Kimberlé Crenshaw; see her essay “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color.” Lorraine Roses and Ruth Randolph, in their essay that considers many of Bonner’s unpublished works between 1941 and her death in 1971 (“Marita Bonner: In Search of Other Mothers’ Gardens”), note the intersectional character of her ideas; see especially page 179 as well as their entry on Bonner in Harlem Renaissance and Beyond: Literary Biographies of 100 Black Women Writers 1900–1945.

7. Patricia Hill Collins makes an attempt in Black Feminist Thought to recover silence from its pejorative and enfeebled position: “Silence is not to be interpreted as submission in this collective, self-defined Black women’s consciousness” (98). Collins then goes on to cite the end of Bonner’s essay, writing that “U.S. Black women intellectuals have long explored this private, hidden space of Black women’s consciousness, the ‘inside’ ideas that allow Black women to cope with and, in many
cases, transcend the confines of intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality” (98). Also see Evelynn Hammonds’s discussion of a politics of silence and a politics of articulation in “Black (W)holes.” It is notable how much the concept of silence has been a part of black women’s cultural work, particularly the consideration of voice.

Bonner’s use of silence in this essay has garnered some scholarly attention. Zetta Elliott (“Writing the Black [W]hole: Facing the Feminist Void”) wants to make a distinction between silence and quiet, though she claims quiet as a synonym for decorum. Cheryl Wall reads the essay’s ending as “a cluster of images of silence, entrapment and paralysis” (Women of the Harlem Renaissance, 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 as well as the motion and agency of her use of stillness. In one of the only other scholarly comments on the essay, Joyce Flynn compares its ideology to Bonner’s other early piece, “The Hands: A Story,” noting that “in ‘The Hands’ Bonner seems to be expressing skepticism about romantic racialism of either kind” (introduction to Frye Street and Environs, xiv). Flynn goes on to argue that “On Being Young” “explores a dichotomy seen in many works by Afro-American writers: the dichotomy between inner reality and socially sanctioned racial and gender roles” (xv). Also see Margo Crawford’s essay in The Cambridge Companion to the Harlem Renaissance, which notes Bonner’s use of Buddha as a location of agency.

8. Bonner’s use of idioms of domesticity and femininity, noted by most scholars who have written about this essay, can be somewhat perplexing, given her critique of identity as a whole. Part of her argument engages the principles of womanhood that are embedded in a Victorian gender binary and that still shape our common stereotypes about gender. In phrases like “the softness that makes you a woman,” Bonner is engaging this binary deliberately, using the notion of women’s inherent interiority as a location of agency, even using the category of woman as a metaphor for the interior. But it is interesting to note that Bonner’s argument here is about wisdom and understanding—about people’s capacity to experience each other not through categories of identity, but through paying attention. She notes that despite all of the progress civilizations have made, there remain profound gaps in the capacity to understand the humanity of another person. For Bonner, this intimate and simple practice—the capacity to pay attention to another—is the real gauge of social progress, and in this regard, it is women’s assumed attentiveness that gives them access to this insight. Bonner is keen to elevate woman’s insight to the level of social meaningfulness, personifying their particular “understanding” as the snubbed twin sister of “wisdom.” And as she describes the failure of civilization since the Greeks to appreciate the wisdom that comes from being a woman, she maintains the sense that being a woman is, or could be, the location of considerable power.

9. This refusal of the terms of publicness is especially notable. Bonner’s stance is not a moment of “Diva Citizenship” which, as Lauren Berlant defines it, is “when a person stages a dramatic coup in a public sphere in which she does not have privilege” (Queen of America, 223). Berlant goes on to comment that “the centrality of
publicity to Diva Citizenship cannot be underestimated” (223), and her arguments make sense as a timely critique of the way that a politically conservative discourse of privacy and intimacy overshadows a consideration of the public dimensions of citizenship. But imbedded in Berlant’s comments is an unquestioned celebration of the liberating potential of publicness, a potential that is counter to the case that Bonner’s essay makes. In fact, against Berlant’s larger claims, one could argue, as Robyn Wiegman does, that “to be excluded from the public sphere of citizenship [is] not to be uniformly cast as inhuman” (American Anatomies, 45). Also see Kimberly Nichele Brown’s arguments about the “revolutionary diva,” which include a consideration of audience and publicness as a part of the dynamic of Du Boisian double consciousness.

10. For a general discussion of the limits of autobiography, see especially Paul Jay’s reading of the anxiety of the autobiographical subject (“Posing”) and Sidonie Smith’s discussion of the trouble of the body (“Identity’s Body”). Both Jay’s and Smith’s works are part of a larger body of criticism that explores the politics of representation and truth in autobiography, including work by Leigh Gilmore (especially the introduction and chapter 1 of The Limits of Autobiography, chapters 1 and 2 as well as the conclusion of Autobiographics, and her discussion of the “mark of autobiography” in the introductory essay in Autobiography and Postmodernism); see also Paul John Eakin (Fictions in Autobiography) and Timothy Dow Adams (Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography). There is also a useful analysis of “the politics of representative identity” in Robert Levine’s book on Martin Delany and Frederick Douglass (see especially the introduction). Part of what is being engaged here is the way that autobiography, as a public genre, replicates the same troubling capacities of publicness as discussed in chapter 1. And yet another aspect is the way that the dynamics of race impose an expectation of truth or authenticity on the representations of black subjectivity, even in fictional genres; see Robin Kelley’s Yo Mama’s Disfunktional (especially chapter 1), bell hooks’s “Postmodern Blackness,” and Ann duCille’s Skin Trade (especially “The Occult of True Black Womanhood”).

More specific to Bonner is Judith Musser’s essay on Bonner’s response to the “talented tenth” (“African American Women and Education”). Though Musser’s essay is about Bonner’s fiction, it is valuable in thinking about the use of voice in “On Being Young.” Musser argues that Bonner “avoids any autobiographical elements from her distinctive childhood” (73). While “On Being Young” is clearly autobiographical, it is interesting that Bonner resisted the imposition of autobiography in her writing in general. Finally, to consider Bonner’s biography in relation to the essay, see Roses and Randolph, “Marita Bonner: In Search of Other Mothers’ Gardens.”

11. Elizabeth Hardwick makes a keen argument about authorial agency in letters; for her, the “letter is, by its natural shape, self-justifying; it is one’s own evidence, deposition, a self-serving testimony. In a letter the writer holds all the cards” (Seduction and Betrayal: Women and Literature, 198). Hardwick is talking about Samuel Richardson’s Clarissa, but her insights here are applicable to Bonner’s narrator (and perhaps even to Bonner herself). Certainly, Bonner’s narrator is
controlling, narrating her anxieties as if they are precisely those of the reader. But this exchange is part of the intimacy that is so fascinating in the essay, that the narrator uses this control to create an argument that sustains interiority. It was bell hooks’s essay “Writing the Subject: Reading The Color Purple” that led me to Hardwick’s book.

12. The issue of audience is one that every writer faces, yet it manifests as a particular issue for the black writer. The debate about audience is central to the discourse of the Harlem Renaissance (and it is from here that we get Langston Hughes’s defining essay on the topic, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”) as well as the black arts/aesthetic movement (for example, the aesthetic declarations by Amiri Baraka, “Black Art” and “The Revolutionary Theatre”; Hoyt Fuller, “Towards a Black Aesthetic”; and Addison Gayle, “The Black Aesthetic”). The matter of audience is most often framed as an anxiety of what it means to write “for” a white audience or readership; see Sherley Anne Williams’s Give Birth to Brightness and John Young’s Black Writers, White Publishers. It is worth noting that Young’s title and premise borrow somewhat from another iconic Harlem Renaissance essay, Zora Neale Hurston’s “What White Publishers Won’t Print,” though Hurston’s argument is more dynamic than Young’s.

But, as Hughes notes, there is also the anxiety caused by the expectation that black writers will write for black readers and in service of the ideas/arguments of cultural nationalism and civil rights. Perhaps the best scholarly discussion of these matters of audience is in Hazel Carby’s Race Men, particularly the introduction and first chapter. Carby is right to consider audience alongside the notion of the (black) public intellectual. Similarly, Eric Lott, in The Disappearing Liberal Intellectual, is astute in noting the “double consciousness” of audience for the black public intellectual; also see Thomas Holt’s “The Political Uses of Alienation,” Robert Reid-Pharr’s Black Gay Man (especially chapter 2), Corrie Claiborne’s “Quiet Brown Buddha(s),” William M. Banks’s Black Intellectuals, Elizabeth Alexander’s The Black Interior (especially the introduction), Shelley Eversley’s The Real Negro, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s “The Black Man’s Burden” and “Criticism in the Jungle.” In terms of gender as a part of the discussion of audience and black public intellectualism, see Carby (Race Men), Kimberly Nichele Brown (Writing the Black Revolutionary Diva), Susan Willis (Specifying), and Marlene Nourbese Philip (She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks). Finally, many black writers have spoken eloquently about this dilemma; see M. Afaa Weaver’s “Masters and Master Works,” Earl Ingersol’s Conversations with Rita Dove, and Carl Phillips’s Coin of the Realm, as three quick examples, as well as David Lionel Smith’s astute essay “What Is Black Culture?” which explores the impositions that nationalism makes on the black artist.

13. In his famous essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” Althusser offers this efficient summary of the dynamics of interpellation: “The subject acts insofar as he is acted on by the . . . system” (170). Many scholars have engaged Althusser’s notion, especially to consider the limits of identity, most famously Judith Butler in Bodies That Matter.

14. Carby, in her chapter on Du Bois in Race Men, makes a very convincing argument about his engagement of the dynamics of public intellectualism: “Within the
opening pages... Du Bois establishes his ability to speak as a race leader and grants himself the authority to evoke a convincing portrayal of the black folk by integrating his own commanding narrative voice, as a black intellectual, with the life of the folk (20–21). This point is enhanced by Holt’s argument that Du Bois’s ideas in “The Conservation of the Races” seem to be recalibrated for a white audience when the essay is revised as the first chapter of Souls (see especially 238–239 of “The Political Uses of Alienation”). Emily Bernard, in Remember Me to Harlem, captures the issue of public intellectualism and its importance to Du Bois: speaking in regard to his stewardship of The Crisis, Bernard notes that “The Crisis was his pulpit... No word was published in The Crisis that didn’t meet Du Bois’ standards. Because art has the potential to liberate black people from social bondage, Du Bois believed it should be approached with gravity, even reverence. Every time a writer put pen to paper, he was taking the future of the race in his hands” (xvi).

The case for the public-mindedness of Souls is also supported by Robert Stepto’s chapter in From Behind the Veil, especially pages 53–66, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Terri Oliver’s introduction to the Norton edition of The Souls of Black Folk. None of this attention to publicness as a valence of Du Bois’s work is intended to dismiss the way that Souls is also introspective (as Arnold Rampersad terms it in The Art and Imagination of W.E.B. Du Bois); in fact, Nellie McKay goes as far as celebrating Du Bois’s engagement of idioms of the private sphere in his writings. Still, the larger point is the way that the exigencies of being a public intellectual manifest in Du Bois’s articulation of black consciousness, and how this sits in contrast to Bonner’s idiom of consciousness.

15. I am using the term “metallanguage” after Evelyn Higginbotham to refer to the ways that race becomes its own language system and accrues totalitarian significance, even to the exclusion of other aspects of identity. This claim about Du Bois’s thinking in Souls (and elsewhere) is intended to support the idea that Du Bois was committed to racial difference in a way that Bonner was not; as Holt notes, “the utility of racial difference for social progress [is] a theme to which Du Bois would frequently return” (“Political Uses of Alienation,” 237). K. Anthony Appiah, in “The Uncompleted Argument,” goes further, arguing that Du Bois’s ideas are marred by their acceptance of race as a biologically meaningful construct. Appiah’s claim has been contested by many scholars, notably Lucius Outlaw (“‘Conserve’ Races?: In Defense of W.E.B. Du Bois”), Robert Gooding-Williams (“Outlaw, Appiah, and Du Bois”), and Bernard Boxill (“Du Bois on Cultural Pluralism”). What is clear, and largely undisputed, is that Du Bois was interested in race as a political and social construct, that he was committed to exploring the way that a notion of race and racial difference could be used to mobilize black progress (this is Holt’s point and it is supported by Bernard W. Bell’s essay tracing the evolution of double consciousness in Du Bois’s thought, “Genealogical Shifts in Du Bois’ Discourse”; also see Dickson Bruce, Jr., “W.E.B. Du Bois and the Idea of Double Consciousness”). Feminist scholars like Darlene Clark Hine have noted the limitations of Du Bois’s idea because it is so singularly focused on race; see her essay “In the Kingdom of Culture.”

16. See Joyce Flynn (introduction to Frye Street and Environ), Will Harris (“Early Black Women Playwrights”), and Judith Musser (“African American Women and Education”) for a discussion of Bonner’s nuanced engagement of race,
a consideration that foreshadows the ideas of black women in the 1970s and 1980s (for example, the Combahee River Collective) as well as the articulations of a postmodern blackness or a new black aesthetic in the early 1990s (for example, Trey Ellis, Nelson George, Greg Tate).

17. Imagination is often described as a balance between the interior (internal acts, deliberations, constructions) and external objects, behaviors, states of affairs: “the power of forming mental images or other concepts not directly derived from sensation” (Manser, “Imagination,” 596). In philosophy, the term is also discussed in relationship to aesthetics and phenomenology (see, for example Sartre’s Imagination). More specific to black culture, Elizabeth Alexander sees imagination as key to thinking about black interiority, asking “Where is our abstract space?” (Black Interior, 7).

18. This is the argument that many scholars make about black identity; see, for example, Michele Wallace, “Variations on Negation and the Heresy of Black Female Creativity”; Evelyn Hammonds, “Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality”; Hortense Spillers, Black, White, and in Color; and Corrie Claiborne, “Leaving Abjection: Where ‘Black’ Meets Theory”; as well as Roderick Ferguson’s discussion of aberration. This is also implied in Du Bois’s double consciousness—that the black subject is not recognized as a human being—and is the motivation for his gathering evidence of aspects of black life that had previously been understudied or unacknowledged (in Souls but also in his Atlanta University Studies). The idea of “blackness as negation” is also legible in Avery Gordon’s study of ghosts and the phantasmic (Ghostly Matters), Sharon Holland’s Raising the Dead, as well as novels like Morrison’s Beloved and Ellison’s Invisible Man.

19. This notion of consciousness as a sphere of freedom has been central to my very early thinking about black women’s contributions to cultural studies, and eventually to the concept of quiet.

20. The point about triumph is echoed in Judith Musser’s essay on Bonner’s fiction, “African American Women and Education”; Musser writes, “Although [Bonner] follows the African American women’s writing tradition in portraying women as her main characters, these women are not independently strong, nor individualized and not triumphant” (73). The idiom “self-measure” is influenced by Nikki Giovanni who, in Gemini, notes “I think it’s been rather unconscious but we [black women] measure ourselves by ourselves” (144).

21. Jamaica Kincaid has a lovely passage in her novel The Autobiography of My Mother that resonates with the idea of quiet: the protagonist Xuela is remembering her father’s death and notices that “then a great peace came over me, a quietness that was not silence and not acceptance, just a feeling of peace, a resolve. I was alone and I was not afraid . . . The man to whom I was married, my husband, was alone, too, but he did not accept it, he did not have the strength to do so. He drew upon the noisiness of the world into which he was born, conquests, the successful disruption of other peoples’ worlds . . .” (223–224).

CHAPTER 3 — MAUD MARTHA AND THE PRACTICE OF PAYING ATTENTION

1. This era of writing between 1940 and 1960 has been called urban or social realism, though Ellison is most often described as being modernist and the terms