

# Close-Up: Black Film and Black Visual Culture

## Conscious Quiet as a Mode of Black Visual Culture<sup>1</sup>

Lokeilani Kaimana

### *Abstract*

*This article is attuned to the expressivity of quiet in contemporary Black visual culture. Building on Kevin Quashie's elaboration of the overlooked quiet interiority in acts of Black culture that are also public and political, and deploying Fred Moten's method of digging out pockets of freedom within Black experimental aesthetics, this article argues that the aesthetics of quiet reframe and deepen the meanings of hypervisible Blackness in cultural publics. With attention to the dance film RIP Oscar Grant (2010), the church bombing scene in Ava Duvernay's Selma (2014), and Wangechi Mutu's video installation Amazing Grace (2005), the article traces quiet across the performative, the textual, and the imaginative to elaborate an aesthetic mode and propose that Black quiet calls for a visual cultural studies approach that can consciously reprioritize visual archives of Black culture.*

In recent writing on *quiet* as an overlooked aesthetic quality, Kevin Quashie has taught us that we require new methods to read Black culture without conflating its meaning with acts of resistance. Such methods are needed because the historical realities of the American experience perpetually call forth creative acts that fit the mold of resistance and because our interpretive frameworks are biased to read such acts as always public and political. In the realm of visual culture, this situation is complicated by the operations of representation and the hypervisibility of Blackness. Too often, the image of Blackness<sup>2</sup> is made to carry historical weight on-screen that obscures the interiority it also carries. In this essay, I am attuned to the expressivity of visual quiet and invested in paying attention to instances of quiet in contemporary Black visual culture. As Fred Moten's *break* and Kevin Quashie's *interior expressivity* offer instances of sonic and literary sovereignty in which

hypervisible Blackness is lessened or dispossessed, I consider moments of quiet across visual culture wherein Blackness just *is*. Where the *is-ness* of humanity is enough. Where, in the visible realm that is also the bio- and necro-political stage, Blackness may take up space, may pause, may recede from the knowable.

In his essay “The Trouble with Publicness: Toward a Theory of Black Quiet,” Quashie argues that our collective interpretation of Black culture as resistive (to White culture) is an erasure of the inherent humanity in Black lives. While Quashie recognizes the importance of public protest in Black culture and Black lives, he points out that “black culture is mostly overidentified with an idea of expressiveness that is geared toward a social audience and that has political aim.”<sup>3</sup> This overidentification has left little space for vulnerability, interiority, contemplation, and dignity in the interpretation of Black art and action. Quashie’s recovery of the quiet, in acts that are also public and political, is work toward a method of interpretation attuned to “a black expressiveness without publicness as its forebear, a black subject in the undisputed dignity of its humanity.”<sup>4</sup>

While Quashie’s work deploys, and reconsiders, the interpretive frameworks of literary criticism, Moten’s *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* works from within cultural and theoretical canons to break down received syntax and disrupt taxonomies of terms we are accustomed to positioning together in academic thought. “Black radicalism,” he argues, is a persistent rematerialization of “the ‘ontological totality’ . . . performed in and as the arrival of becoming-social in the vexed and vexing exchange of roles; in and as the differentialized and ensemblic recalibration of the senses.”<sup>5</sup> Here, Moten describes the improvisation of Blackness within the contexts of the public, private, and intuitive realms, and breaks apart the borders of these realms with his description. Moten’s method performs a pedagogical journey through the interdisciplinary archive of “the break,” an improvisational aesthetic operating at various scales and opening up a site at which the strictures of Western thought are ruptured, letting out a momentary billow of a much more universal (Black) humanism. Moten’s work itself achieves a differentialized and ensemblic recalibration of the senses, offering the theoretical tools to ask where freedom can flourish, and where it is overlooked.

In this article, I follow Moten’s suggestion that we allow for, as he writes, “an immersive lingering that . . . is a necessary preface to action,” because “the occasion for such lingering is the entrance into that scene where the question of being and the question of blackness converge.”<sup>6</sup> I allow myself to linger on performative resistance considered as a wild interior.<sup>7</sup> Quashie writes, “It is indeed the combination of the interior’s expressiveness, the inability to articulate it fully, that makes interiority such a meaningful idiom for rethinking the nature of black expressiveness.”<sup>8</sup> I suggest that visual culture’s primacy

on representation is directly shifted by Black quiet, because the very utility of Blackness has most often been conceived as a form of tangible resistance to white supremacy's hetero-patriarchy. The rhetorical challenge here, then, is to maintain attention to quietness while focusing on moving images. To this end, I attend to the quietness and moving images in the dance film *RIP Oscar Grant* (2010), the church bombing scene in Ava DuVernay's *Selma* (2014), and Wangechi Mutu's video installation *Amazing Grace* (2005). Throughout, I recognize Black quiet as an aesthetic quality that builds opportunity for interiority within images onscreen. This aesthetic quality recognizes the unknowable human capacity for life that continues before and beyond images that conjure or depict violence and its responses. In tracing quiet across the performative, the textual, and the imaginative, I work toward elaborating an aesthetic mode that runs parallel to notions of Blackness as political, publicness, and resistance. I consider how and when being visible is *not* a representational action, albeit a public presence, and what quiet presence strives to accomplish.

### Quiet as Witness

*RIP Oscar Grant*, a collaboration between TURF Feinz dance crew and Yak Films,<sup>9</sup> is a site-specific dance film, shot on location at Fruitvale Station in Oakland, California. The dance style, "turfin'g," is an acronym for taking up room on the floor, in which dancers use "unorthodox movements' based in storytelling and pantomime" to enact moments from "everyday life."<sup>10</sup> TURF Feinz are not actors, but members of the community impacted by state-sanctioned violence. Their project employs dance as an embodied tactic to reclaim space by telling the story of a murder and its reverberations at the location of the crime. *RIP Oscar Grant* opens with a shot of TURF Feinz walking down the mosaicked steps of a Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) station as a police car pulls away. This shot cuts to a close-up on a BART system map at Fruitvale Station. A voiceover from a television news program reporting the murder of Oscar Julius Grant III by officer Johannes Mehrsrl is overlaid on an electronic, piano-driven melody. The dancers begin, one-by-one to dance in the places where Grant was last alive. In their dancing, they never look at the camera, and nearly all dancers wear tinted frames, hats, hoodies, or earbuds. Over the seven minute, thirty-two second video, the only interaction among the dancers is with each other, and rarely. Other writers have noted that *RIP Oscar Grant* is "a contribution to a long tradition of dance that includes social critique"<sup>11</sup> and an opportunity to "think about the ways black and brown people are memorializing and celebrating each other

while resisting brutality.”<sup>12</sup> In her article, “Shot and Captured: Turf Dance, Yak Films, and the Oakland R.I.P. Project,” Naomi Bragin writes, “The videos leave evidence of a death specific to blackness . . . both in terms of its representational capacities and its modes of reception, beginning with the initial scene of policing.”<sup>13</sup> So, what happens when we focus, not on evidentiary events already narrated in the voiceover, but on the quietness of the dancers within the historical frame?

The soundtrack blends electronic piano, beats, and voiceover commentary pulled from local news: “We have to warn you that footage obtained exclusively by KTVU shows the actual shooting. This may not be suitable for some viewers.” Recontextualized in the opening seconds of a moving tribute to the person killed, the phrase “suitable for some viewers” is exposed for its callous absurdity. The claim that this footage may *not* be suitable for some viewers begs the question, for whom may such footage *be* suitable? The nightly news implies that it is suitable precisely for them: to broadcast the videoed murder of an innocent, unarmed young Black man, to preface the broadcast with an audience warning, and to organize representational realism of Black death as a form of respectability. TURF Feinz present an alternative view “suitable” to the people who love Oscar Grant. The dancers move gracefully and quietly despite the incommensurable disquiet of Grant’s untimely death, disrupting violence through performed grace.

As the camera tracks out from the Fruitvale Station sign, we see the first dancer, Will, clasp his left wrist in his right hand behind his back. He spins on his toes and heels, gliding from the right side of the screen to the left as the camera tracks the smoothness of his movement. After a cut, Will freestyles, popping and then miming on the right side of the screen. The Fruitvale Station sign occupies the majority of the frame. In the third cut of his solo, Will, in a controlled fall, allows gravity to pull his body down a structural beam. He mimes the impact of being shot, then glides across the floor and spirals back into a standing position. As he returns to a vertical stance, more dancers enter the scene.

In the quietness of their performances from within the strictures of profound annihilation, the markings of place can take up the work of memorialization. In other words, because the place—Fruitvale Station—is already an overdetermined location that serves as memorial site and crime scene, the bodies of the dancers can serve in another capacity—including the capacity of quiet. The interior realm, Quashie writes, is “an inexpressible expressiveness that can appear publicly, have and affect social and political meaning, and challenge or counter social discourse, though none of this is its aim or essence.”<sup>14</sup> Interior expressiveness is not essentially a challenge to public discourse. TURF Feinz make no challenge to the scene. They move across the

space of the screen with quiet grace and athleticism, reaching up and out of the gravity of place. The place stays, the place holds time. And they dance, inserting everyday gestures that are remnants of Oscar Grant's last night of celebration. Their movements are meditative, focused, and conjuring. What quietness conjures, here, might be something akin to peace, something next to bending chronological time that allows the community to dance at once with Oscar Grant and into the present moment. And in this present, it is quietness that draws us into the frame.

### Quiet as Prayer

The quietness of Ava DuVernay's film *Selma* is profound. Domestic scenes between Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King are shot with the slow camera pans and tilts of classical Hollywood melodrama, a 1950s and 1960s genre that dramatized and sensationalized interior psychic phenomena. But these moments are counterpoints to the scenes of protest and brutal violence that DuVernay invests with an even more poignant quiet. What does quiet look like, not in proximity to violence, but in its representation? Through the color design, pacing, and blocking of violent scenes, DuVernay shifts the impact of anti-Black violence by replacing historical realism with the spectral. Here, I turn to the most graphic and surprising scene in the film: the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist church in Birmingham, Alabama. Depicted in the film's opening sequence, the KKK's bombing of the church and resulting murders of Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, and Carol Denise McNair occurred in 1963, two years prior to the four-month period that *Selma* historicizes. The event—out of the frame of the film's narrative order but ideologically driving its action—marks the reverberations of the moment that pulse into the current day.

In an interview with Melissa Harris-Perry, DuVernay notes the importance of aesthetics and depicting violence. She says, "For me it was a question of, how do you approach these violent acts in a way that allows people to look past the impact and look into the emotion of it? I wanted to get beyond the physicality of a blast, the physicality of a hit, the physicality of a gunshot. . . . And so each time we did this, we slowed the film down and we force you to watch it, to honor it by bearing witness to it."<sup>15</sup> As the scene opens, the interior stairwell of the Baptist church is lit with a warm glow. Sunlight shines through the ornate windows as five children walk down the stairs. A voiceover from Dr. King's speech in New York carries into the frame: "I accept this honor for our lost ones, whose deaths pave our path." As

the children, dressed in their Sunday best, continue to descend the warmly lit stairwell, they talk about how their hair might approximate the curl of Coretta Scott King's. "I know how she do it," says one, launching into a lesson for the other girls. The audience settles into the intimate moment, then an explosion blasts through the scene. Then the film slows down, and the audience bears witness.

What happens when we are forced to witness the aftermath of the blast that breaks, in midair, the bodies of young Black girls? It is a representation of violence. It is slow. It is quiet. After the blast, the moment lingers, as elements move through the frame in a floating momentum akin to a snow globe. Pieces of the church wall become the size of glitter specks on the screen amid dust. And then a very small Black hand clutching a purse joins the fray. The color in the frame remains warm, a glowing coral tone, like the color one might see raising closed eyes to the sun. It is the color of heartbeats. And then the torso of a frilled dress and stockings legs with black shoes, and then stockings legs with white patent leather shoes, and then dust, and then darkness. After two seconds of darkness, a bird's-eye view of the wreckage fades in. Pieces of ash and building remains fall delicately over the dusty scene. The color in the frame has changed. It is now lit with a bright white light. In the lower left of the wreckage one can barely discern the bodies of two Black girls holding each other. The scene is full of dust. There is no blood.

DuVernay says that "foremost in my mind around every act of violence was reverence, reverence for the life lost. And that approach informed my aesthetic sensibilities. . . . It was always about reverence for the life lost and the broken body, usually a broken Black body, and what that looks like and what it means. What it means."<sup>16</sup> In the structure of her film, the lives of Addie Mae, Cynthia, Carole, and Denise mean everything. As they discuss hair and walk down the stairs, we are drawn into their banter. We are about to learn how to make our hair look like Coretta Scott King's. The lives of these girls were teaching us something in a very short two minutes. DuVernay wants us to sit with the idea of such a loss, in quiet, throughout the duration of the film. Another way to say this is that the deaths of Addie Mae, Cynthia, Carole, and Denise are the inciting incident that plunges the film forward. Another way to say this is, their lives are the lives that we might ponder past the time frame of this particular representation of violence. We are given just over two minutes to learn from their brilliance, to witness an act of violence upon their bodies, and to imagine forward how we might live in their warmth. Through a visual aesthetics of quiet, DuVernay invites the viewer to bear witness to scenes of spectacular violence in such a way that the spectacle is surpassed and outlasted by the contemplation of the life, unknowable yet intriguing, that kindled before it was taken.

## A Wild Conclusion

Quietness, like stillness, is nonreactive without implying inaction. It is an unknown capacity, a human given, an epistemological register that might facilitate other attachments. Quietness, like possibility, is pressed from all temporalities into moments that have meanings. For instance, we might look to moments in *RIP Oscar Grant* and *Selma* as reminders of the present stakes in Black Lives Matter. Amid current struggles to name and extinguish anti-Blackness, we can concentrate on the routes of retelling that each of these artworks uses to give us pause, so that we, as viewers, revisit sites of annihilation and witness historic retellings of the past.

While *RIP Oscar Grant* is an embodied response to the past, and *Selma* is a reenactment of the past, Wangechi Mutu's short video *Amazing Grace* is much more ambiguous. The only body on screen is Mutu's own, which is at once herself (the artist) and not herself (a universalized embodiment of woman). The video draws us into the frame as she walks into the ocean. The seven-minute, nine-second video on loop is in color and includes the occasional sounds of a cappella voices singing the hymn "Amazing Grace." The vocal track is the only sound in the video. Silence occupies most of the duration, forcing the viewer to focus on the image itself, to dive in. The ocean surf and seaweed-strewn beach come into focus as Mutu's feet are followed in close-up. When she wanders out of the frame, there is a cut, as if her physical body stitches each moment of the video together. When the waves tumble toward the shore they do so in silence, then they cross-dissolve into the detail of white lace on the bodice of her dress. Mutu says of her video performances that "if it's done the way it should be, you feel it. It communicates beyond language, and it touches people from really different worlds and places—because everyone has a body, this is one of the things that we share."<sup>17</sup> The body, the ocean, the sand, the surf, the sound; Mutu is at once becoming each of these elements in the frame, existing among them and us.

The visual stakes in *Amazing Grace* are high. The eager tide and waves that sometimes look like the sky capture every tangential imaginary we might relate to the Middle Passage. Mutu performs as a female figure, rolling in the water, stepping at the shoreline. She is a Black woman in white at the water's edge, and a viewer's historical associations can run wild. Ibo Landing, transatlantic crossing, Yemaya. Mutu's moving image employs a familiar frame that teeters on historiography but refuses straightforward narrative. We are drawn into our own interior world as Mutu slows down the image, caught between what we see and what we know. The filmic speed is slowed down, and the sound, motion, and image resonate with a shared frequency. The

body on-screen is representational, but not oppositional: a Black woman at the edge of a historically overdetermined ocean, or, a body in the water, contemplating the familiar feeling of the tide.

Mutu's video is intimate in scale and mood, and yet grandiose interpretations attach to it as they do to much of her work. In this interpretive impasse, there is an ambiguity that gives us pause. We need art, specifically moments of ambiguity in art that give us pause. In these moments, we have the opportunity to break with interpretive frameworks that foreclose the possibilities of art, and to rediscover aesthetic modes that enable freedom. As we well know, evidentiary realism isn't doing it. And if realism is not what moves us (in the contemporary United States), and if sensational violence is not what haunts us, then it will be our imagination of the possibility that does. An aesthetics of Black quiet creates moments out of which we may imagine otherwise. These works are not art as act of political resistance but art as the subtle intimation of another political present, past, and future. As an aesthetic mode, quiet grants its audience a new capacity for consciousness, by calling on its audience to grant it the same. A visual cultural studies attuned to moments of quiet Black expressiveness might prioritize different dimensions of the visual archive and elaborate other dimensions of meaning in Black culture.

**Lokeilani Kaimana** is a doctoral candidate in the department of Radio-Television-Film at the University of Texas at Austin. Their research has been supported by the Moody College of Communication at UT Austin, the Five College Fellowship Program at Smith College, and UCLA's Film and Television Archive's Research and Study Center. They believe in love and wildness and that queerness is not yet here.

## Notes

1. Versions of this work were presented at the 2015 annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Art in the Present, and at the University of Tennessee Knoxville under the auspices of the Contemporary Arts and Society Research Seminar. I am grateful to my colleagues for their engagement with this work at all stages and want to especially thank Kevin Everod Quashie, Michael B. Gillespie, Amy Elias, Christine Holmlund, Jonathan W. Gray, Tiffany Barber, and Stephanie Rosen.

2. In this essay the image of Blackness refers to a visual representation of the raced Black body that, within hegemonic heteropatriarchal white supremacy, is often rendered superficial or one-dimensional. Blackness, as a cultural expression and experience, may therefore be represented by making visible, or calling explicit attention to in order to deepen, the visual dimension of Blackness.

3. Kevin Quashie, "The Trouble with Publicness: Toward a Theory of Black Quiet," *African American Review* 43 (2009): 329.
4. *Ibid.*, 339.
5. Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 253.
6. *Ibid.*, 85–86.
7. Kevin Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012) 20–24.
8. Quashie, "The Trouble with Publicness," 331.
9. The TURF Feinz Dance Crew features Will, P. Styles, Looney, Danny Silver, Kash Gaines, No Noize, Eric "E-Ninja" Davis, Denzel "Chonkie" Worthington, Joyntz, and Gudda, Yak Films is comprised of Kash Gaines and Yoram Savion; TURF Feinz and Yak Films, "RIP Oscar Grant." YouTube, December 31, 2010, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=atyTZ8prhCg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=atyTZ8prhCg) YouTube, accessed May 18, 2016.
10. Naomi Bragin, "Shot and Captured: Turf Dance, YAK Films, and the Oakland, California, R.I.P. Project," *TDR: The Drama Review* 58, no. 2 (2014): 99–114.
11. Brandon Brown, "BOOM! Turfing Against the World," *Open Space*, September 15, 2014, [opensource.sfmoma.org](http://opensource.sfmoma.org).
12. Aracelis Girmay, "A Tending," *Americans for the Arts*, November 18, 2014, [blog.americansforthearts.org](http://blog.americansforthearts.org).
13. Bragin, "Shot and Captured."
14. Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet*, 22.
15. "'Selma' Director Ava DuVernay Visits #nerdland," *The Melissa Harris-Perry Show*, MSNBC, January 1, 2015, <http://on.msnbc.com/1B69jBI>.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Trevor Schoonmaker, ed., *Wangechi Mutu: A Fantastic Journey* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 106.

Copyright of Black Camera: The New Series is the property of Indiana University Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.