

# “Hear What You Want”: Sonic Politics, Blackness, and Racism-Canceling Headphones

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**SHOT:** A person sits on a couch, book in hand, coffee table at the knees. We have not yet seen their head—the camera has kept their identity concealed, showing only the shoulders down. As the camera slowly pans, and the person carefully turns the page in their book, we hear voices being broadcast from a television. The camera switches gaze, turning to show a sports commentator speaking on screen

*“I think there’s zero threat. My problem is, KG’s a little too ‘over-the-hill’...”*

**SHOT:** The camera returns to the still headless body, slowly panning upward to unmask the secret identity: the body belongs to Kevin Garnett, also known as KG, a long-tenured, well-known professional basketball player in the United States. A well-timed pause shows he is reading Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War*. His dark skin and sharp features are accentuated by the lighting; he appears part man, part shadow. As the TV speakers sound the phrase “over-the-hill,” his eyes shift focus from down at his book up to the television. The on-screen diatribe continues, his nostrils flare, and his eyes burn with the determination of a man seeking retribution. As the verbal attacks continue, their presence fades into the background, being replaced by the sounds of high-pitched strings, ambient noise, synthesizer, and a pulsing sub-bass that sounds much like a heartbeat. Garnett rises from the couch, walks to a small table near the door to his apartment, and picks up three items: his wallet, his keys, and a pair of headphones. As he turns and walks away from the camera, exiting his apartment, we see words emblazoned across the screen.

## ‘HEAR WHAT YOU WANT’

His television remains on.

**SHOT:** The inside of a bus, looking out the window. Cityscapes pass quickly through the frame... a distant skyline, a park surrounded by buildings, a busy downtown street. The musical sounds that overtook the television now give way to road noise. Garnett is sitting in a window seat, wearing headphones around his neck and an ominous look on his face. His team-

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mates are on the bus, but out-of-focus. Suddenly, the distant murmur of a crowd enters the soundscape. It crescendos.

**SHOT:** A security guard pushes back a tall gate, allowing the bus access to a long, concrete tunnel. The tunnel is flanked on both sides by a rabid, angry mob of fans only separated from the bus by a chain-link fence. Reaching a fever pitch, their volume becomes deafening, even from inside the bus. They jump and pull at the fence, reminiscent of zombies in a horror film. The camera zooms in to focus on individuals within the mob, allowing viewers to hear what they are yelling:

*“You’re too old to be playing!”*

*“You big gorilla motherfucker!”*

*“[Get] your black ass back to Boston!”*

Within the mob, people spit and throw eggs at Garnett’s window. He reaches for his headphones, and as he puts them on his ears, the crowd is muffled to a point near inaudibility. He closes his eyes and a song begins to play. “Girl, you can tell everybody, yeah you can tell everybody; go ahead and tell everybody: I’m the man, I’m the man, I’m the man. . . .” Surrounded by chaos, he is at peace. **END SCENE.**

Beginning in 2013, Beats Electronics launched the first in an ongoing series of commercials and internet advertisements promoting their product—Beats Studio Headphones with Adaptive Noise Canceling. Beats Electronics, originally known as Beats By Dre, is an audio company founded in 2006 by Interscope Records chairman Jimmy Iovine and iconic rapper/entrepreneur Andre Young, better known as Dr. Dre. The company debuted its first product, *Beats By Dr. Dre Studio* headphones in 2008. The duo promoted the headphones by claiming that listeners were not able to discern all of the sounds and nuances in a song with most headphones on the market; Beats By Dre Studio headphones would allow the listener to hear what the artists actually intended for them to hear, to “listen to the music the way they should.” With the namesake of an urban cultural icon, and a price tag over \$300, the headphones were highly-valued accessories. The headphones are known for their ability to deliver low frequencies with a lot of power, and this is seen as a negative among many self-proclaimed audiophiles, but an advantage among fans of some popular music styles like hip-hop, pop, and various styles of electronic dance music. They are also known for their look, and are as much a fashion accessory as an audio device; in fact, their look and their marketability as a “bass-delivery system” may be more important to their success than their overall perfor-

mance (Dorris 2013). Though “By Dre” has since been dropped from the product names, they still carry immense value based on their association with Dr. Dre and urban culture. In 2014, Beats was acquired by Apple for the meager sum of \$3 billion dollars; with his earnings, Dr. Dre apparently became “hip-hop’s first billionaire.”<sup>1</sup>

Noise-canceling headphones work to reduce ambient noise through a method known as active noise control in which the headphones listen to outside noise through the use of a microphone, then produce a sound wave with the same amplitude of the sound that they wish to cancel, in an inverted phase. The original sound wave and the inverted sound wave then combine (interfere) and cancel each other out. Active noise control is most effective at canceling low frequencies of constant ambient sounds, like the hum of an engine. The technology of noise-cancellation has been used for decades in the aviation industry, but was developed for mass production by the Bose Corporation to help clientele reduce ambient noise to focus on work—or, to negotiate conflicts of sound and space in modernity (Hagood 2011). The addition of noise-canceling headphones to the Beats product line is relatively recent, as the company had primarily focused on studio headphones, earbuds, and speakers; noise-canceling headphones from Bose, Sony, Sennheiser, and other popular audio companies had been on the market for years. As Beats entered this market, their website displayed an impressive collection of endorsements by prominent black male athletes including LeBron James, Richard Sherman, and Kevin Garnett. The use of black bodies to sell products has a problematic history, beginning with black people being sold as products, transitioning into a fascination with black bodies as other, primitive, and natural that allowed white advertisers to market their products as natural and authentic (Bristor, Lee, and Hunt 1995). In particular, there is an overwhelming legacy of white fascination with black male bodies as athletic, black men as sexually virile, and black culture as fun that has strong roots in blackface minstrelsy—America’s first widely-popular entertainment form (Lott 1992). The use of black male athletes to sell headphones can be seen as an extension of this legacy. The website also promised consumers the ability to “cancel out the haters,” and implored them to “join the #BeatsArmy,”<sup>2</sup> positioning Beats headphones as some sort of subversive, anti-establishment, righteous weapon in a world full of enemy combatants.

The commercials and internet advertisements deployed by Beats Electronics featured some of the same athletes seen on their website, and the advertising campaign, developed by New York-based creative firm R/GA, was titled “Hear What You Want.” The vision for the ad campaign, as stated on R/GA’s website:

The Beats Studio has become a fixture on the heads of the world's best athletes. Our campaign linked this insight with one of the key features of the headphone: Adaptive Noise-Canceling.

Sports' elite Colin Kaepernick of the San Francisco 49ers, Kevin Garnett from the Brooklyn Nets, and Richard Sherman of the Seattle Seahawks are shown using Beats Studio to escape the intimidation of rival crowds and reporters and get into their zone.

Juxtaposing an uplifting track by Aloe Blacc, now #2 on iTunes, with imagery of fan abuse creates a disarming scene that demonstrates the power combination of noise-canceling and precision sound quality that the Studio brings to your ears.

There is no explicit mention of race noted here, but race is a prominent feature of the commercials. The ads—notably the ads featuring future pro basketball hall of fame inductee Kevin Garnett and pro football all-star Richard Sherman—typically showed black male athletes withstanding, then silencing, a barrage of racially-charged 'noise' with the use of Beats headphones. They displayed the agency these headphones bestowed upon the user: the ability to resist domination, cancel out the haters, and enter a personal, silent safe zone while in a bellicose, racist public space. That noise-canceling headphones could protect their user from sonic violence or deafen them to the world outside is not a preposterous notion; in fact, this was one of the primary objectives of the Bose Corporation in the initial development of noise-canceling headphones for a mass market. That headphones could block out the noise and effect of racism, however, is slightly harder to accept. The use of headphones to create real/imagined personal space is part of a discourse involving the proliferation and intrusiveness of sound in public spaces (Sterne 1997; Corbin 1998; Kahn 1999; Novak 2010; Eisenberg 2013), and the use of mobile music technology to manufacture privacy (Hosokawa 1984; Chow 1990; Bull 2006; Hagood 2011). At the same time, Beats By Dre stands somewhat peripheral to this discourse—a discourse that has not typically focused on race, with a couple of exceptions—through its blatant insertion of 'blackness' into what is assumed to be a racially-neutral [white] technology. In a society that exists under the heel of white dominance, the neutral and unmarked will always signify as white; white people are able to see themselves reflected in technology without having to be aware of their race, or that the technology is raced<sup>3</sup> (Cooks and Simpson 2007; Dyer 1997; Lipsitz 1998; Roediger 1991). While Bose, Sony Walkman, and other mobile sound technologies were theoretically marketed only as technologies, through the Hear What You Want ads, Beats By Dre headphones are unapologetically—and, necessarily—sold as resistant black technology. In this article, I focus on these advertisements

and examine their portrayed use of noise-canceling headphones as a means of investigating a vast matrix containing intersections and collisions between black subjectivity, sound, technology, space, and the neutral consumer. I also challenge the trope of blackness as inherently resistant, offering an alternate interpretation of the advertisements that rests on the ideas of interiority, inwardness, and quiet.

### Sonic Politics and Blackness

In the emerging field of sound studies, many scholars have taken notice of and brought attention to issues of human subjectivity through which sound is constantly filtered, always feeding back: gender, sexuality, space, religion, and, most relevant to this article, race. But while there have been quite a few murmurs in the field concerning race, not as many of these murmurs have risen to the level of an audible conversation, let alone a shout. This is not unexpected, as sound is supposed to be an objective, neutral medium. Sound is science. Of course, the ways in which sound is expressed are hardly ever neutral. In his foundational monograph *The Audible Past* (2003), Jonathan Sterne is apt to point out that his history of sound reproduction and listening is informed primarily by the history of white, middle-class culture. Sterne also noted that at the time of his writing, within sound studies, a “history of the collision between a new emphasis on sonic details in predominantly white spheres of cultural practice and white interest in African American musical forms [had] yet to be written” (2003: 158). The charge for studies on sound and race has been taken up in recent years, sounding out in the writings of Regina Bradley, Nina Eidsheim, Gus Stadler, and others. Many of the articles in the 2011 special “Sound Clash” edition of *American Quarterly* deal explicitly with race. Even before the work of these scholars, there have been numerous monographs focused on race and sound in the fields of ethnomusicology, sociology, cultural studies, popular music studies, and others. However, from LeRoi Jones’ *Blues People* (1963) to Josh Kun’s *Audiotopia* (2005), the vast majority of these works are focused on black *music*, white obsession with the black musical voice, black musical agency, black resistance-cum-music. Academic orientations towards blackness and sound are anchored firmly in the discourse of black music; Gus Stadler (2015) emphasizes this point, stating that foundational works in sound studies seem to imply that no sound-related topics other than black music have anything to do with race. This is not to say that scholars should not continue to make efforts to interpret black music; I am merely restating the fact that there is an opportunity to turn the conversation elsewhere.

This article is not about black music. It is not about resistance through

the use of black music, and thus represents a departure and reorientation from the typical narratives on blackness and sound that circulate within academia and within popular music discourse. It is about black technology displayed as resistance technology, the assumption that blackness is inseparable from resistance, and the commodification of this resistance. It is an intervention in the fields of ethnomusicology, musicology, sound studies, and adjacent fields that focuses on race, sound and technology—how sound technology signifies as black. It is about black techniques of listening, black personhood, interiority, black silence, and black quietude. It is about the construction and preservation of a black masculinity that is crafted through both noise and quiet. It is also about the way that multiple facets of black subjectivity are compressed, branded, packaged, and sold as an all-encompassing, easily-controlled blackness to consumers in the US—again, consumers that are assumed white unless difference is specifically notated.

### Sound Policing: Noise, Power, Privacy, and Public Order

Noise is considered an inevitability of modernity. My position within discourses of sound/noise in public/private space begins with Jacques Attali's maxim that noise is a display and a source of power (1977, 6). The exertion of this power typically manifests in two related, but distinct ways. First, who gets to make noise—and when they get to do it—is often overdetermined to the point of being legislated. This display of power takes shape in the form of noise ordinances and noise abatement task forces (Novak 2015), disturbing the peace charges, "Quiet Area" signs in the library, "NO ENGINE BRAKE" signs in residential areas, and so on. Second, sound in many forms is used as a means of announcing authority, exerting force, disabling non-compliant citizens. It is used in military prisons to torture the imprisoned. It is used by the FBI in the form of sonic grenades to disorient subjects, and the form of overly amplified music recordings to disrupt sleep. Emergency vehicles use their sirens to compel citizens to pull to the side of the road. In both cases, the power rests in the hands of those that control sound, whether they are deploying/producing it or keeping it from being produced.

Embedded in the policing of noise-making are the ideas that noise is an antagonist to peace, that it destroys any illusions of privacy that people may have by forcibly penetrating their acoustic space, and that silence—and the illusion of privacy that may come with it—is a human right. Jonathan Sterne theorized that the construction and expectation of private acoustical space developed over the course of the last two centuries with *audile technique*, which he defines as "a set of practices of listening that

were articulated to science, reason, and instrumentality and that encouraged the coding and rationalization of what was heard” (2003, 23). Not only did the tools for listening become more standardized during the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century leading into the next—stethoscopes, phonographs, telephones, radios, headphones—the objectives of our listening became more standardized and coded. Sterne writes:

A new practical orientation toward acoustic space developed alongside audile technique: listening became more directional and directed, more oriented toward constructs of private space and private property. The construct of acoustic space as private space in turn made it possible for sound to become a commodity. Audile technique did not occur in the collective, communal space of oral discourse and tradition (if such a space ever existed); it happened in a highly segmented, isolated, individuated acoustic space. (2003, 24)

Mack Hagood also theorizes the production of and collisions between sonic public and sonic private in his 2011 article “Quiet Comfort: Noise, Otherness, and the Mobile Production of Personal Space.” Hagood is particularly interested in the problematic of noise in an era of Neoliberalism that seems to dictate that human beings are entitled to freedom as “an individual matter, and relations with others that do not result from individual choice are seen to impinge on that freedom” (574). Throughout his writing, we are reminded that noise is heard as *othered sound* by the users of Bose’s noise-canceling headphones, and that to cancel noise is to create privacy while exercising choice and proclaiming individuality, the most powerful expressions of humanity within modernity. Privacy through consumption of noise-canceling technology in the free market becomes the ultimate neoliberal marker of freedom.

The conflation of silence with privacy and personal space is so embedded in modern identity in the US that breaching this silence is seen as a violation of rights. In extreme cases, these violations can lead to physical violence, or even death. In 2012, a black male teenager named Jordan Davis was shot multiple times by an older white male named Michael Dunn in a dispute over how loudly music was playing from the vehicle occupied by Davis and his friends. Davis is dead, and Dunn is currently serving a life sentence with no chance of parole. This shooting happened in the parking lot of a convenience store, an overwhelmingly public place where one would typically not expect to be insulated from the noise of others. Dunn’s decision to shoot Davis displays not only Dunn’s belief that he was entitled to a certain amount of privacy, regardless of his location, but also that he believed in a particular order for society, one in which certain people were allowed to be noisy. Violation of this social order resulted in death.



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I'll now pause for a commercial break.

**SHOT:** The screen is black, save for the words “RICHARD SHERMAN” and “HEAR WHAT YOU WANT” appearing in shaky, distorted white letters. There are many voices speaking at once, and the sound of camera shutters and flashes floods the soundscape. One voice rises above the others and asks a question.

*Richard, the atmosphere was electric, what's it like playing in front of these fans?*

***It's incredible, man. I think we have the most outstanding fans in the world.***

We're at an interview with multiple reporters.

**SHOT:** The black screen disappears. A team locker room. A tightly formed ring made up of bodies, cameras, microphones, outstretched limbs cramped into a relatively small space. Camera flashes erupt in rapid succession illuminating the center of the ring. Peering closely, we see the subject of the commercial, pro football player Richard Sherman. He is surrounded by reporters, each hoping to get the perfect sound bite, the perfect quotable from this gregarious, assumed ostentatious athlete. The camera zooms in and we see Sherman enclosed by this mostly-white mass of reporters and cameramen. His Beats headphones are wrapped around his forehead, like a visor. After another general, innocuous question, the inquiries from various reporters begin to turn extremely personal. His responses are typically cut off by the start of the next badgering question.

*[indiscernible] your trash talk is a distraction to your teammates?*

***It doesn't distract anybody, it motivates.***

A carefully placed black reporter asks:

*What's your responsibility to the kids on the streets in Compton?*

***Well—you try to set an example, you try to be an example—***

*How do you cut down people that say [you and your teammates] play dirty?*

***Well I take exception to that—***

*Do you have a problem with aggression?*

***Uh, not off the field.***



The camera cuts away to a closeup of two media members having a private conversation:

*He thinks he's so fucking untouchable.*

The camera returns to the larger combative scene.

*Did you fight a lot as a kid?*

***Not everybody in Compton is a gang member***

*Have you gone downhill since college?*

***... No!***

A visibly irritated Sherman does his best to deflect the questions, and an off-camera voice asks something that gives him pause:

*What do you think about your reputation as a thug?*

After a long pause, Richard closes his eyes and lets out an exasperated sigh.

***... I don't have that reputation.***

***Richard, do you think you are above the law?***

The noise of the mob rises to an unmanageable level. Sensing his anger rising, Sherman halfheartedly and dismissively thanks the reporters, turns his back to them and faces his locker, closes his eyes, and puts on his headphones. The noise is canceled, and his peace returns. The picture fades.

### ***'HEAR WHAT YOU WANT'***

## Hearing What You Really Want

A vast majority of audio technologies—including noise-canceling headphones—use the terms hearing and listening somewhat interchangeably in their advertising, though they are not the same thing. As Roland Barthes states, “*Hearing* is a physiological phenomenon; *listening* is a psychological act. It is possible to describe the physical conditions of hearing (its mechanisms) by recourse to acoustics and to the physiology of the ear; but listening cannot be defined only by its object or, one might say, by its goal” (1985, 245). In a chapter on “Listening,” Tom Rice also notes this distinction between hearing and listening, finding that the two are not necessarily diametrically opposed, but that listening is marked by more effort and choice than hearing (2015). I find the distinction quite important,

as it points to the fact that the ability to hear what you want is likely not physiologically possible. Listening has a lot more variance, different intentions. Hearing, on the other hand, does not. Hearing cannot be turned off, it can only be redirected. As R. Murray Schafer points out in his book *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and The Tuning of the World*, “There are no earlids.... The ear’s only protection is an elaborate psychological mechanism for filtering out undesirable sound in order to concentrate on what is desirable” (1977). Devices like earplugs, speakers, and headphones, therefore, are all just technologies used to redirect our hearing mechanism to *listen* to something more desirable. So, can we actually hear what we want? Not quite. We can decide what we want to decode as meaningful to us, we can decide what should alert us. We can, theoretically, listen to what we want. In these ads, the headphones are helping these athletes ignore their surroundings, or to pretend to ignore them. However, both of the athletes in the aforementioned ads close their eyes after putting on the headphones. The headphones don’t actually reach their full advertised ability without shutting off other senses. You can’t hear what you want unless you also decide not to look around. The athletes, in a sense, hear what they see.

Beyond the silencing of the outside world in the advertisements is the silencing of black voices, a policing of what can be sounded and in what space. Kevin Garnett remains silent throughout his entire commercial, and this is compelling as he is known not only for his adeptness at playing basketball, but also for being quite boisterous. In the commercial featuring Sherman, the headphones don’t just silence the outside world—they also silence the user. But this silencing cannot only be viewed as an act of violence imposed by some oppressive force. For black people, silence can be a survival technique. The self is one of the only locations that can be controlled and possessed.<sup>4</sup> Headphones, then, can act like a hoodie or a hat; they are more than fashion, they are a means of self-containment and maintenance of personhood; they are a tool to help resist white dominance. The ad spotlights Sherman becoming more and more agitated as he fights off an oppressive, racially-coded line of questioning.<sup>5</sup> Eventually, his frustrations run so high that he *must* turn to the headphones as a means of escape from the scene. Richard Sherman has to keep his accused untouchability, his reputed thugginess, his *blackness*, internalized, so as to not play into an “angry black male” stereotype like the media wants (and like the audience assumes). The headphones are necessary because in Sherman’s life, you can’t “Say What You Want.” Through the manipulation and application of sound technology, he is able to resist the oppressive sound of whiteness.

The brilliance of these advertisements is that they convince the consumer, regardless of race, that these headphones will give an ability that

no other headphones will. In reality, noise-cancellation technology is not necessary to block outside noise if a person is listening to music—earbuds and any over-ear headphone will perform this same function if the music is turned up loudly enough. Music can also be externally sounded via speakers to block outside noise, assert individuality, and create space, as seen in the use of boomboxes,<sup>6</sup> or Jamaican sound systems (Veal 2007). And if no music is to be played, but the dampening of sound is desired, earplugs are a much less expensive solution. The marketing campaign also convinces consumers that Beats can provide, or at least enhance, an ability people already possess: the ability to ignore things. As noted previously, the primary reason Beats can do this successfully is that there is an extensive history of white fascination with black bodies that has been particularly amplified and proven to be successful in commercial advertising. These commercials play specifically on historical tropes of black masculinity that have been used to sell countless products that came before and after—Uncle Ben’s Rice, Colt 45 Malt Liquor, Old Spice Deodorant, and so on. Richard Sherman appears as animalistic, surrounded on all sides by an angry mob, yet still able to gain the upper hand in the situation, because of the headphones. Within capitalism, every consumer wants to feel victorious.

### The Sounds of (Cultural) Capitalism

Beats Headphones come in just about any color you can imagine,<sup>7</sup> and they’re just as often seen around people’s necks or atop their heads like crowns as they’re seen on people’s ears. It is obvious that the visual aspect of the headphones, both how they look and how you look while wearing them, is an important feature to consumers, perhaps more important than how well they perform their primary function as headphones. To quote Beats Electronics President Luke Wood, “If you’re wearing a pair of Beats, it says, ‘Music’s really important in my life.’” Along with the high fashion sense associated with the brand, another type of visibility contributes to Beats’ appeal: celebrity endorsements. A successful form of advertisement throughout history due to their widespread visibility (and due to the aura and cult of celebrity), it is no coincidence that Beats Electronics is interested in being seen on successful athletes and generally appealing pop stars. It is also obvious why the headphones are still associated with Dr. Dre, though the company is now owned by Apple and Dr. Dre has no involvement with the company itself. His blackness, celebrity, and his “urban” reputation sell.

Beats Electronics has also paved the way for the once disparate world of athlete endorsement and sound technology. However, the wearing of Beats in the NFL has become complicated, due to the NFL signing an

exclusive deal with Bose in 2014. Bose is now the “Official Sound of the NFL.” The headsets worn by referees and coaches now prominently display the Bose logo for all cameras to see. Because of this official deal with Bose, players like Richard Sherman, who have endorsement deals with Beats, now incur \$10,000 fines if and when they are seen wearing Beats on camera, further complicating the tangled web of professional sports, corporate money, race, and society that exists in the US (a proper critique of this web is far too grand to fit into this article). Beats Electronics pays the fines for these athletes, and now wearing Beats can be seen as even more subversive, even more defiant, all the more able to help you hear what you want. In an interesting attempt to counter the highly-effective Hear What You Want ad campaign, Bose Electronics began a campaign in 2015 titled “Music Deserves Bose,” an obvious jab aimed at the assertion of Jimmy Iovine and Dr. Dre that consumers weren’t hearing music the way it is intended without the assistance of Beats Headphones. Bose spokesperson Joanne Berthiaume states that the campaign’s goal is to “break through the cluttered media landscape and emotionally connect with consumers” (quoted in Duffy 2016). In a highly problematic commercial, viewers witness moments from a day in the life of professional quarterback Russell Wilson (a teammate of Richard Sherman) in his home. The popular US rapper Macklemore is also present in Wilson’s home, though Wilson doesn’t see him—he is there for the audience to see. Wilson remains silent throughout the commercial, while Macklemore narrates his life. Put differently, Wilson, a black man, is silent in a commercial about sound while his subconscious is represented and sounded by a white man.<sup>8</sup> At the end of the commercial, as Wilson sits at the edge of his pool, headphones suddenly appear on his ears and Macklemore’s body fades away, though we still hear his voice—now in musical form. Bose is attempting to exploit the appeal of athletes like their competitor, but is not interested in presenting their products as resistant, rebellious, or black, even when a black body is used in their advertising.<sup>9</sup>

To further contrast the overt blackness attached to Beats headphones, I to turn to the opening description from Mack Hagood’s article on Bose headphones, “Quiet Comfort: Noise, Otherness, and the Mobile Production of Personal Space.”

A series of white male faces appears on-screen, business “road warriors,” men of action facing the camera in their natural domain—the airport. With enthusiasm tempered by an almost solemn sense of wonder, each offers a one-word testimonial between crossfades: “Fantastic.” “Quality.” “Wow.” The object of their admiration, and the product on display in this advertisement, is the Bose QuietComfort Acoustic Noise Cancelling Headphones. Cut to another white businessman as he leans back in his

airline seat, headphones on, eyes closed. The other passengers fade into nothingness, dematerialized by the magic of QuietComfort phase cancellation. (573)

Through this artful description, and as Hagood is apt to point out throughout his article, the faces in Bose advertisements are typically white, male, suit-clad, and in need of some peace and quiet so they can continue with their important work. But through the act of using Bose headphones, these business men are not just producing personal space—they are converting the entire space around them into an office. This is the neoliberal paradise, a world in which one can engage in capitalism without having their personal space disturbed. Hagood also identifies a gendered, ageist world among the consumers of QuietComfort headphones—through reading their customer reviews, he illuminates salient moments in which people note the types of noise they are successfully canceling: chattering women, nagging wives, crying babies (584). When the white bodies of these Bose ads are conflated with the black bodies in Beats Electronics advertising, what is revealed is two companies creating and perpetuating a discourse about raced sound technology. In Hagood's article, we learn that in putting on Bose noise-canceling headphones, diverse people can put on the neoliberal, Western subjectivity that has been built into their technology, one that attempts to construct an on-off interface with the aural environment and the space one shares with others (586). This reading can be mapped onto Beats to account for their success through advertising using black male athletes. Consumers—and to reiterate, the assumed neutral consumer is white—are able to put on what is most likely an unobtainable subject position not just through the act of putting on Beats, but also through the very act of consumption. Though we see black resistance through sound technology in the ads, they are about capitalism, about consuming resistant black subjectivity in a world dominated by white noise.

### From Silence to Quiet

I conclude by presenting alternative readings of the advertisements and the technology that have been at the center of this article. In this writing, I found it necessary to focus on the consumption of blackness and the muting of black subjectivity that seems to appear so prominently in these ads. However, I would be remiss if I did not note that it is equally important to see that my critique, and a majority of the discourse involving race and sound, is difficult to mount without relying on some fairly large essentialisms. In particular, the assumption of blackness and facets of black culture as disempowered and inherently resistant are necessary

to analyze Beats in the way that I have. However, this assumption, often taken as fait accompli and left uncritiqued, allows for one particular reading of the advertisements. In fact, these very assumptions are *necessary* for Beats to sell headphones using black male athletes, as they are shown as helpless and disempowered without the technology. In order to resist a white fantasy version of racism,<sup>10</sup> noise-cancellation becomes a technique of resistance. Black sounding and silence as resistance *is* a valuable framework with which to critique old dominant discourse concerning African Americans being a people without a culture and without a voice. In addition to this, resistance is often used as a shorthand way to explain the (generally musical) innovations made by black people. If black people are assumed to be oppressed, disadvantaged, disempowered, any innovation made is out of necessity for survival. This has led to some common narratives: Black people didn't get access to the same food as white people, so they learned how to clean pig intestines and cook them in a palatable way. Black kids didn't have access to "real instruments," so they started messing around with their parents' record collections, and the scratch DJ/hip-hop were born. "Poison turns into medicine."<sup>11</sup> The use of noise-canceling headphones can easily be placed into this narrative. However, the work of Stephanie Batiste and Kevin Quashie allows us to pose different questions concerning the commercials, and the use of noise-canceling technologies: what if these athletes, fully aware of their roles as actors in these commercials, are performing a different side of blackness—one of quietness and interiority?

In *Darkening Mirrors: Imperial Representation in Depression-Era African American Performance* (2011), Stephanie Leigh Batiste remains highly critical of two modes of understanding racial identity and power. First, Batiste rebukes the notion that "African Americans as a subaltern population raced by a dominant white population, by virtue of a history of oppression in the US, inherently and necessarily disidentify with oppressive modes of power" (3). Black people are not always already resistant, though they descend from a legacy of oppression that still haunts everyday life in the United States. Additionally, there is no innate need to exist solely as a member of a resistant counterculture. Second, the notion that "the disempowerment resultant from racial oppression keeps people from imagining or, more important, enacting themselves as empowered subjects" (3) is dismantled by Batiste. Aside from the painfully-obvious yet rarely-acknowledged fact that black people are complex individuals capable of independent thought and imagination, Batiste's careful, yet radical, analysis and critique reveals that it was possible for black people to be "invested in or complicit with" imperialist power structures (3–4). She

notes that “African Americans ironically maintain[ed] a national identity that figures them as empowered on the global stage, particularly, but not solely, in relation to diasporic black populations” (4). Black people possess agency, and it is naïve to assume that all decisions are resistant in nature; in fact, some decisions are made with full intent to participate in dominant culture. This is not to say that black people are not oppressed and not disempowered, but to say that those forces do not remove the possibility of imagining and enacting oneself as empowered. Acknowledging the myriad of agential possibilities possessed by the black subject is crucial for an alternative reading of the Beats commercials.

Complementary to Batiste’s views on black agency, Kevin Quashie examines what the concept of “quiet” “could mean to how we think about black culture” in his 2012 monograph *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture*. He writes that blackness is typically understood as outwardly expressive, public, or loud, and that this reflects societal expectations—and impositions—of black culture as resistant. Perhaps globally, but certainly in the United States, blackness is intensely public, formed in the crucible of a white gaze, and it is always considered communal. This always public form of blackness appears antithetical to modern articulations of neoliberalism in the US, in which individuality, freedom, and privacy are axiomatic; quiet seems to be the furthest thing from blackness. Yet Quashie’s conception of quiet reveals the existence and importance of a blackness that is inward, interior, divorced from outward, public, expressive life. Quiet refers to “the full range of one’s inner life—one’s desires, ambitions, hungers, vulnerabilities, fears” (6). It offers a solution to the problem of a limiting, simplified view of blackness as always-resistant; black expressiveness can be inward, not handcuffed to public life.

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. (24)

By reading black culture through a frame of quiet, we make space for black subjectivity without assuming that it is always subaltern and that all actions are in protest. Quiet exposes beauty, power, joy, fear, chaos, and peace. It demonstrates an expressiveness that is not subject to the pub-



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lic, and herein lies the sovereignty to which Quashie refers. The athletes become quiet, empowered subjects, able to express a subjectivity that the public cannot mold and cannot control.

Given this important take on the concept of quiet, my deliberate shift in words from “silence” to “quiet” is necessary. Silence, as a verb, implies dominance. To silence a subject is to take away their voice, their identity, their political power and presence; silence imposes a limit (Ochoa Gautier 2015). In extreme cases, silencing enacted by the state can result in “disappearances,” the complete loss of a citizen’s social and political identity, the elimination of any record of those citizens, the destruction of the physical body (Taussig 1992; Gordon [1997] 2008). Quiet is self-active, an empowered move towards full realization of subjectivity that can exist in many modes—not just a mode of resistance. Quiet is dignified and human. Returning now to the first commercial, quietly:

**SHOT:** Kevin Garnett sits on his couch, reading a book that inspires him as a voice on the television asserts that his talent has faded. He has heard this critique before, and it did not stop him from winning a championship. Though he is visibly irritated, he calmly rises from his couch, picks up his keys, wallet, and headphones, and heads out the door. Perhaps he is leaving the privacy of his own home, but he carries this privacy with him, quietly. Public be damned.

**SHOT:** Garnett is seated near the window on a bus as it heads through the city on the way to work. Ever quiet, he gazes out the window, thinking of his existence, reminiscent about his path to success, and focusing on his ambitions for the evening. He is centered. Quiet.

**SHOT:** The bus arrives at the basketball arena and a throng of unruly fans is there waiting behind a fence. The bus drives down the gauntlet and the fans erupt, some throwing objects at the bus, some spitting, some hurling racial epithets in Garnett’s direction. He is annoyed not just by the rowdy scene of “haters,” but by the extreme publicness of his life, his blackness, his humanity. Seeking to reconnect with himself, he resorts to putting on his headphones, as maybe a reduction in noise will allow him to refocus on his humanity. This move does not close him off to the world outside, as he remains fully aware of the scene. In fact, in putting on the headphones, he may have just exposed himself as vulnerable to attack. But, he doesn’t mind showing his humanity. He closes his eyes and smiles, as there is once again space for him to imagine himself as a human who can exist without having to resist.

The Beats ads are intent on displaying the use of noise-canceling headphones as a means of empowering the self via resistance. Reading the commercials through the invaluable frames provided by Batiste and Quashie allows for a powerful interpretation of the use of noise-canceling headphones for non-resistant personhood, for the enactment and expression of an empowered interiority that is so central to humanity, regardless of race. They are existing, not always resisting, and it is naïve (and racist) to assume that there cannot be space for their own articulations of self and identity. Kevin Garnett and Richard Sherman, through their portrayals of self, are able to present a quiet blackness that is contrary to typical narratives of blackness and loudness.

In the end, we can take these narratives of resistance and existence to form a useful dialectic with which to investigate black life and black sound. Again, in the lens of resistant blackness that is being exploited and sold through the commercials, the headphones are necessary to create a distance that is needed for existence in a place and space that seeks to marginalize. The would-be consumer must then attempt to put on a resistant black subjectivity which they cannot truly occupy, or translate the verbal attacks on black ears into an attack on themselves from whatever noise exists in their life. This noise-cancellation speaks to a need for survival, a need to extinguish the Other, a need to hear what we want. Alternative readings show that while the headphones may be used to maintain the self, it does not necessarily have to be done out of resistance. There is a sovereignty in quiet that the headphones may help some users achieve.

It seems appropriate, or perhaps just jocular, in closing to briefly return to the science behind active noise canceling headphones. Basically, they work by listening to external sound waves, then creating sound waves that match and replaying them in an inverted phase as a means of destructive interference. In the Hear What You Want ads, then, the noise-canceling headphones work by generating white noise to cancel out white noise. Perhaps there was more truth in Beats advertising than I initially realized!

#### *Notes*

1. In a video posted to Facebook but subsequently removed, Dr. Dre and actor/model/singer Tyrese Gibson boast that Dr. Dre is hip-hop's first billionaire, and that the "Forbes List just changed." It is unconfirmed what Dr. Dre actually earned from Apple's acquisition of Beats By Dre.
2. Though the Beats Electronics website no longer mentions canceling out the haters, the call to arms is still there, soliciting consumers to enlist by entering their email addresses for important updates from Beats Headquarters. This displays the perverse normalization of military aggression in the life of US Citizens, that conscription metaphors would be used as selling points for a pair of headphones.

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3. Band-Aids and “nude” or “flesh” colored pantyhose are prime examples of neutral technologies that are intensely obvious if one does not have white skin.
4. Historically speaking, this was not always the case for black people, and often, it still is not.
5. Professional football broadcasting mimics this coding in the way white athletes vs. black athletes are described. White athletes are often referred to in cerebral, mindful terms while black athletes are noted for their bodies, their athleticism.
6. In the introduction to his 2015 monograph *Sounding Race in Rap Songs*, Loren Kajikawa delivers a compelling analysis of some moments in Spike Lee’s (1989) film *Do The Right Thing* involving the character Radio Raheem and the use of his boombox to constantly sound his blackness and his identity through the constant playing of Public Enemy’s anthemic “Fight The Power.”
7. In extremely stark, monochromatic, but ironic contrast, one would be hard-pressed to find the headphones of Beats’ primary competitors in many colors besides black.
8. The use of Macklemore is even more problematic than many other white people would be. Bose likely included him because he is from Seattle, and Russell Wilson is the quarterback for Seattle’s professional football team. However, as a rapper, Macklemore has often been accused of appropriating hip-hop from black musicians, and of stealing song ideas from black musicians. There has also been controversy over his success in popular music, the argument being that he was able to ascend to the “top” so quickly, and win so many prestigious awards in the music industry, because of his whiteness.
9. Bose also launched a campaign called “Better Never Quits” in 2015. So far, Russell Wilson is the only black athlete featured in a commercial. The other commercials feature a white football player, a white football coach, and a white golfer.
10. I maintain that the racism displayed in the advertisements is the creation of a white imagining of racism. In fact, a glance at the Staff page on the website for the creative firm responsible for the commercials shows that with the exception of a few people (a few white women and perhaps an Asian-American male), the staff is entirely made up of white men. Those who have experienced systemic disenfranchisement, disproportionate incarceration for equal or lesser crimes than their white counterparts, oppression, would likely not represent racism as name calling. However, name-calling often gets miscategorized as racism itself, and not a byproduct of larger racist structures. Therefore, I refer to it as a white fantasy in that it reads as racism to those who do not experience racism, and that it can somehow be counteracted by covering one’s ears. This is similar to assuming that the way to stop racism is to stop talking about racism.
11. This statement has been attributed to many speakers, but it seems to date back at least to a 3<sup>rd</sup> century Buddhist philosopher/poet named Nagarjuna.

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