They Can Hear Us: Surveillance and Race in “A Quiet Place”

Justin D Burton

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Abstract

The family in A Quiet Place (2018) lives a life marked by incessant trauma. Invisible to the hunters who are far more powerful than they are, the family remains safe from direct assault as long as they remain unheard by the hunters, who can’t see them.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), American Studies, Article, Film/Movies/Cinema, Listening, Race



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The family in *A Quiet Place* (2018) lives a life marked by incessant trauma. Invisible to the hunters who are far more powerful than they are, the family remains safe from direct assault as long as they remain unheard by the hunters, who can't see them. But that same invisibility means the everyday mundanities of life become a constant struggle marked by the terror of the horrific death that will claim them should they make an errant sound. A trip to the pharmacy could prove fatal; a hungry child could summon the hunters and put in danger the entire family. When sketched out in these broad strokes, *A Quiet Place*, as Kathryn Adams Burton pointed out to me when we left the theater, summons terror from its viewers by depicting the kind of institutional surveillance and violence that endanger Black lives in the US, without *one person of color* in the entire movie. Thinking with Simone Browne's *Dark Matters* (2015), Jennifer Stoever's *The Sonic Color Line* (2016), and Jared Sexton's *Amalgamation Schemes* (2008), I argue here that *A Quiet Place* places white characters in a non-white relationship with surveillance, which they overcome in a way that projects white ingenuity and strength and reinforces the centuries-old notion that those who live under the eye and ear of hyper-surveillance tactics do so because they deserve to and because they are not exceptional enough to evade those tactics.



The *Quiet* family's invisibility is literal: the creatures who hunt them have no sense equivalent to human vision and instead track their prey using hyper-developed listening abilities. They remain vigilant for the audible traces of their victims; sound is the thing that can put the family in trouble. Simone Browne highlights in *Dark Matters* the significance of visibility and invisibility in the history of antiblack surveillance in the US. Lantern laws in 18th century New York City stipulated that enslaved black and indigenous people must carry a lit lantern if they were in the streets after dark, a regulation that Browne understands as an act of "racializing surveillance," a "form of knowledge production about the black, indigenous, and mixed-race subject" (79). Specifically, the knowledge created through the lantern laws marked bodies of color as "*un*-visible," in need of illumination in order to be properly seen. And here "seen" slips into a couple of different meanings, encompassing not only the ocular but also the notion of "seeing" that connotes understanding and discernment.

The early technology of lantern surveillance, as well as the boundaries delineated by sundown towns, marked black, indigenous, and mixed-race bodies as untrustworthy, scheming, and therefore in need of ongoing surveillance that would make these bodies visible to the eye. At the heart of *Dark Matters* is Browne's contention that the history and techniques of surveillance cannot be understood separate from their racializing work: "surveillance…is the fact of antiblackness" (10). So while the *Quiet* family is white, their relationship to the powerful beings that hunt them–an existence unseeable and unknowable apart from heightened measures of surveillance–appropriates signifiers of racialized surveillance in order to heighten the stakes of the movie's characters.



The family walks on sand in order to muffle their footsteps.

While Browne focuses primarily on acts of looking as mechanisms for violently enforcing the color line in *Dark Matters*, Jennifer Stoever traces the history of that same color line through listening practices. Stoever isn't explicitly engaging surveillance studies the way Browne is, but her theorization of the "listening ear"–the social and political norms that shape how we hear race–includes surveillance acts that, like lantern laws, mark voices perceived to be non-white as always already ready to be monitored, bounded, and eliminated should they exceed their boundaries (13). For both Browne and Stoever, the act of surveilling uncovers a racializing sleight of hand: non-Whiteness is held up as that which stands out, though this racialization is proven backwards if we look and listen a bit closer. US looking and listening norms condition people to organize blackness and brownness and noise as aberrations against natural, invisible, inaudible whiteness, but it takes a good deal of white supremacist work to create this illusion (by "white supremacy," I mean the social and political practices and institutions that reify and reward whiteness). Looking through brighter lights and sharper camera lenses at non-White subjects and listening through amplification devices and ubiquitous bugs to non-White subjects are both ways of drawing attention away from whiteness–the racialized construct that fuels US social, legal, and political praxis–and toward non-whiteness.

Stoever opens *The Sonic Color Line* by considering the violence visited upon Jordan Davis, Sandra Bland, and a Spring Valley High School student when each was considered too loud and unruly by white listening ears trained to surveil blackness. The *Quiet* family is listened to in the same way Davis, Bland, and the Spring Valley student were, in the same way non-whiteness has been surveilled in the US: with dire consequences for being too loud. But, by erasing black and brown bodies and histories from the screen, *A Quiet Place* divorces these surveillance tactics from their real-world context, where they work as tools of white supremacist systems to "fix and

frame blackness as an object of surveillance" (Browne 7). Part of the fantasy of *A Quiet Place* involves "fixing and framing" whiteness as the objects of sonic surveillance practices that have historically worked to preserve and reward whiteness, not target it.



While the *Quiet* family is subjected to antiblack surveillance techniques, they are otherwise marked as white–and not just based on what their skin color looks like. Farmers in a rural, hilly region of Upstate New York, the *Quiet* family navigates the apocalypse with a libertarian aplomb. They're stocked and loaded when the government fails to protect its citizens, and they're also aware of but not in collaboration with other survivors in the surrounding area. Operating outside the bustle of urban noise, which Stoever notes is marked as non-White by the listening ear, the *Quiet* family likely boasts generations of working class whites who benefited from the kind of social safety nets built by the New Deal, only to mistake the wealth those social programs built to be fully the fruits of their own hard work.



The father, played by John Krasinski, looks over their plot of land.

The independence and autonomy that the *Quiet* family demonstrates is not on its own a marker of whiteness, but the kind of wealth accumulation that makes non-collaborative survival possible is the kind that's historically been more readily available to white folks in the US. It's a

history that is flattened, as is the history of the surveillance that shapes their lives. Their wealth simply exists, and viewers aren't meant to wonder where it came from or at whose expense. Likewise, viewers learn very little about what the hunters are, where they came from, and why they're here. The hunters just appear, terrifying sonic surveillers who carry signifiers of antiblack listening practices but who remain detached from the antiblack history of surveillance.

The racialized terror at the heart of *A Quiet Place* grows from the fear of being denied one's whiteness, being subjected to the same controlling surveillance measures that have helped maintain the color line for centuries in the US. It's a standard white sci-fi nightmare scenario where technologies spin out of control and subjugate all of humanity, white people included. It's also a white exceptionalist fantasy, where whiteness–not just white people but the wealth and freedom created for white people by white supremacist systems–conquers the unconquerable. Jared Sexton's *Amalgamation Schemes* can prove helpful here, as he outlines the way racial ideology has shifted in recent decades to permit multiculturalism *so long as it preserves whiteness*. While systems like slavery and segregation were buttressed by explicit white supremacy, where whiteness = good and non-whiteness = bad, contemporary racial hierarchies are maintained by conceding that multiculturalism = virtuous and race-based solidarity = problematic. Here, white supremacy cloaks itself in diversity, hybridity, mixedness and points to any group that coheres around racial identity as regressive.



Flattening history is crucial to that ideological shift. In order to maintain a racial hierarchy that tips in favor of whiteness, past violence and kleptocratic seizures of money, resources, and lives must be removed from the equation so that the kind of multiculturalism that Sexton critiques can proceed as if all who participate do so on a level playing field. Whiteness becomes "something equivalent to the…*ethnicities* and *cultures* of nonwhite immigrants and American Indians" (Sexton 66). The field, of course, isn't level when white supremacy has funneled centuries of ill-gotten gains to whiteness, so this kind of multiculturalism is a way of gaming the system, mixing up racial signifiers so that white folks can take on just enough racial signifiers to blend into a racially diverse society without giving up the power and privilege that continues to give them a leg up.

***A Quiet Place* follows a calculus similar to the multiculturalism Sexton describes. First, the movie extracts emotional responses of terror and dread through a mixture of racial signifiers, subjecting white characters to forms of surveillance rooted in antiblackness. With no historical context to explain the forms of surveillance the hunters use or the characters' previous relationships to surveillance, the *Quiet* family's whiteness becomes just another ethnicity, a flattened way of being in the world divorced from the white supremacist context that funnels resources their way. Their privilege and power become as invisible to viewers as they are to the hunters. By masking that privilege, *A Quiet Place* clears space for a fantasy world where the white heroes have survived by virtue of being simply more clever, more resourceful, more brave,**

more everything than all the black and brown people who have, by implication of their absence from the film, been killed off by the hunters.



***A Quiet Place*, then, takes a family of multiculturally white characters and positions them in roles white characters have become accustomed to occupying: that of world saviors–some of them even martyrs. Here, hyper-surveillance is simply a fact of life, and those who are able to live life free of the dire consequences of that hyper-surveillance are able to do so because they are exceptional. By this logic, what protects you from the police is either your innocence or your guile, not your whiteness. What guarantees your safety when you publicly challenge government policies is the righteousness of your cause, not your whiteness. What allows you to move in the dark without a lantern or to listen to your music loudly in public spaces without being shot or to cross borders without fear is your inherent virtue, *not your whiteness*. And when surveillance is positioned as a fact of life, and when those who avoid the crushing consequences of surveillance are understood to do so because they are virtuously exceptional, then those who are targeted, hunted, and killed using hyper-surveillance tactics are understood to be deserving of their fate because they are not virtuous or exceptional enough to avoid it. This is the logic that frames slavery as a choice, that cages children at the border, that influences and fixes elections across the globe but takes umbrage when subjected to the same tactics.**

One terrible irony of a movie like *A Quiet Place* is that its flattened hyper-surveillance context makes it incapable of seeing and hearing the deep and rich history of black and brown evasion of hyper-surveillance. There's an ingenuity coursing through activities of evading surveillance–"looking back," marronage, and fugitivity chronicled by writers including Sylvia Wynter, Franz Fanon, Katherine McKittrick, and Simone Browne, among others–an ingenuity that evades hyper-surveillance and simultaneously exposes hyper-surveillance as antiblack while arguing against the notion that it is simply a fact of life and signalling avenues to freedom. Instead of those stories, though, the white *Quiet* family whispers to us a familiarly unsettling refrain: the white *Quiet* family, alone, can eradicate these terrors. The white *Quiet* family, alone, can fix this. The white *Quiet* family, alone, are exceptional.

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Featured image, and all images in this post are screenshots from "A Quiet Place ALL TRAILERS – Emily Blunt & John Krasinski 2018 Horror Movie" by Youtube user Flicks And The City Clips.

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Justin Adams Burton *is Assistant Professor of Music at Rider University. His research revolves around critical race and gender theory in hip hop and pop, and his book,* Posthuman *Rap, is available now. He is also co-editing the forthcoming (2018)* Oxford Handbook of Hip Hop Music Studies*. You can catch him at justindburton.com and on Twitter @j_adams_burton. His favorite rapper is one or two of the Fat Boys.*

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