

November 19, 2020

# Sent

## *Derrais Carter*

This essay explores a nostalgia that is and is not my own. It asks after the ways we listen to album covers and hold music quietly. It is a reflection on Black interior life that honors the slow sway you do by yourself when only you can hold you. This is an essay for that self-embrace that sustains you, especially when the world cannot.<sup>1</sup>

---

*Quiet registers sonically, as a level of intensity that requires focused attention.*<sup>2</sup>

---

### 1.

Somewhere, in the faded and worn sleeves of vinyl albums my father gave me, rests a version of myself that I'm still dreaming up. If I comb through the collection, I just might find it. So many of these records and their covers prompt the question: Can you listen to an album cover? I believe Tina Campt when she writes about the affective dimensions of photography, when she argues that we hear photography. And I can't help but impose that thinking/feeling/hearing onto this archive of sound and feeling that lives in my family's basement.

In descending the stairs, I'm unburdened by the protocols of entry. This archive isn't tucked away in a historical society, library,

or university campus. No registration is required or appointment necessary. I need not anxiously write my name in a visitor log. There is no workshop for how to handle these LPs, no carefully thought out procedure for holding histories and tending to their preservation is asserted, no specially-selected lighting or tables are arranged for private viewing. I don't nervously look over my shoulder as I take snapshots of items. There is no finding aid; curious fingers are more than enough.

It is the subtle give of the stairs; the way muscle memory veers my body to the right to avoid stumbling over objects tossed on the last two steps that assures me. In the middle of the night, when the lights are out, alarm engaged, and most everyone has turned in, my body knows how to amble about so as not to disturb. The certainty of these movements, the sound and choreography of it all, welcome me.

Staring at this collection, I know that we live with these objects, not with a reverence reflected in an unwillingness to touch them. We touch, hold, and preserve them as best we can. They survive moves, relationships, and floods. Sometimes they survive us.

Much like stories whispered at family functions, they also are the unofficial custodians of our memories. In dust, mildew, faded jackets, and worn sleeves lie stories of care packages, friendships, religious conversation, clubs, parties, betrayal, regret, hoe shit, and flights of fancy.

*Reach for the LP. Grip the spine with your thumb and pointer finger. Gently pull the album from the shelf and spend some time with the cover.*

To stand before this collection and its attendant listening devices transports me to various childhood moments. There is the sixth grade, when Pops grants my brother and I the distinct honor of sifting through the entire collection and removing all records released between January 1970 and December 1979. He planned a '70s-themed retirement party, and we are stewards of the sound. Although we cannot attend, he trusts us with some of the night's most important tasks: preparing the meatballs, organizing the albums, and watching our cousins' kids.

The vinyl promotional single for a Zhane song is encased in a black jacket. The round, pupillary sticker in the center holds the title: "Sending My Love." [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kxzy4bOLuoA>] The intimate dispatch cradled in cardboard conjures a late '90s adolescent life in Colorado. My mom sends my brother and I care packages from the South. Werther's hard candies, ombré FUBU football jerseys, Walter Dean Myers paperbacks. Moms sends love to her Black boys.

Some days, we arrive home not to a package but a small piece of pinkish orange cardstock, care of the USPS. Delivery attempted. Love not received ... yet. Crestfallen and anxious, we busy ourselves until the next delivery date. With each package's arrival, a ceremony of sorts. Steal away to our room. Place the box in the

middle of a twin bed. Peel and claw at seams, letting our frenzy distract us from the practicality of scissors. Open the box. Slow down. Carefully remove every item and lay it before us. Read the note. Call Moms.

Love sent unceremoniously. No ask. No expectation. Just a display of affection and care.

2.

*"I want you."*

That three-word spill, that declaration, admission even, confirms what you feel so intimately. Three monosyllables voice the urgency of your longing. And that moment of proclamation, that tense, bracing sensation gripping your sternum, we'll call it vulnerability, is only relieved afterward in the accompanying exhale.

*Say the words aloud and let them fall on your ears. Embrace them.* [[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gjRLbzxz\\_3Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gjRLbzxz_3Y)]

The release carries you back to a balmy moment in a Midwestern university library when the force of your becoming brims with nervous energy. There, in the stacks, you thumb through a book of essays that speak to you, viscerally. You don't know what queer studies is, but years later, when you find out, you know that their language fails your expression. At that point, your *want* is a trembling lip and a throat full of words. You cling to artistic expressions that emotionally hold you. You come to appreciate that tightness in your chest and

the tending it requires. The halting apprehension tampers your bouts of Icarian flights of fancy. So, a twelve-inch vinyl record anchoring you to this realm of understanding is welcomed. Be still, and sway ...

In 1976, Marvin Gaye gave us permission to linger in our overflowing *want*. He gifted us *I Want You*, an album that is as lusty and dreamy as he. An album "rooted to the sway of the grind."<sup>3</sup> An album that lets us eavesdrop on the romance between Marvin and Janis Hunter, an affair forged during his marriage to Anna Gordy.

Holding this record, I'm called into the scene on the jacket:

A bar full of Black folk dance ... our bodies, bending and bowing, are tactile, fleshy ... eyes closed and limbs stretched ... mouths tight, twisted, agape ... a chorus of moans and howls ... we gyrate ... but nobody sweats ... we reach inward and somehow toward each other ... some search; some have long been found ... together, we make this space possible.

The cover art is a version of the Ernie Barnes painting *Sugar Shack* (1971). Depicted are histories of willful Black disgrace, mundane life, and so much that rests in-between and beyond language. These are the folks *too* vernacular to do the work of representation. *Too* worldly to be saved. *Too* unruly for our elegant regimes of ideological and civil domination. These folks are *too much*, living in ways that feel unintelligible to others but deeply familiar to us.

*Sometimes we lie ourselves into relation.*

I feel the painting-turned-album cover through details that I remember as vignettes. There is Frances, the short stout Black woman who unabashedly waves her switchblade at disgruntled card players who think they're gonna take her winnings. *You found the wrong one on the right night!* There's Danny, who arrives every Friday and pays his ten cents to enter the dance contest. Nothing would make him feel better than the \$20 prize and the free chicken dinner from Elvira's. Beulah, wearing her sister's yellow dress, stuns and swirls before Big Daddy Rucker. Their backs arched, her dancing and him singing, they seldom (if ever) make eye contact. They don't need it. Their bodies know. Next to Big Daddy Rucker, Jermaine breathes his song into a saxophone. Eyes closed, shoulders back, gut forward, this is his haven. This is the world I inhabit before singing along with Marvin.

I grew up around these folks. Vacuumed their living room carpets for \$2 and a soda. Sat quietly in the backseats of their cars as they ran errands. Watched them avoid photos to preserve their souls. I didn't want to be an adult, but they made me want to be grown, and country. And I can't help but see them in Barnes's painting. It is the closest I'll ever come to kickin' with them on some grown shit. All memories ain't lived, but this painting provides a repository for real and imagined Black life.

At some point the record plays. I often begin with "Soon I'll Be Loving You Again." The song opens with a conga run and strings. It feels like emerging from the haze

of a dream. With a slow fade-in, Marvin's silken voice enters.

Dreamed of you this morning  
Then came the dawn  
And I thought that you were here with me  
If you could only see  
How much I love you  
You'd want to trust me

His voice stridently advances as he expresses his desires, his yearnings. Lush and explicit, "Soon I'll Be Loving You Again" is not just about his desire to perform oral sex for the first time, it's about how love, lust, excitement, and desire show up in a willingness to be taken over. The possibility of physical pleasure is approached with a full-bodied, pulsing zeal, a yearning for the moment when his tongue will touch her.

*Our desire tends to be deeply uncivil.*

### 3.

Album covers hold impressions: memories, facts, gossip, and daydreams. One such combination of all of these things informs my fascination with Betty, a Southern Black woman who wrote songs and danced with a certain soul singer in the 1970s. Betty is not her government name.<sup>4</sup> It is one of many aliases she used when she was arrested on grand larceny charges back in the day.

I've told my friends about her for years. She came up in the South. Preacher's kid. One could say that despite her numerous arrests, she is skilled in thievin'. She is also a muse, friend, mother, songwriter, assault survivor, and assisted living facility resident.

Supposedly, when she was locked up in a women's penitentiary, a friend of her uncle, who just so happened to be a soul singer, wrote a letter to the warden. The letter stated that should Betty be released and a job would be waiting for her.

*The state loves a productive carceral (non)citizen.*

She was released. As promised, the soul singer provided a job. Betty would become a friend and trusted confidant to the singer. They shared an appreciation for music, style, and the South.

A few years ago, I reached out to a music critic who had written a book about the record label where Betty had been a member. I asked why she wasn't included in his book. He said he didn't have money to pay her. She is rarely, if ever, mentioned in liner notes. She is not mentioned in *official* histories. But every time I hold a certain soul singer's album in my hand, I retreat into myself and fantasies about how Betty lives now. I wonder about how she fills her days, who she thinks about, and whether she continues to steal. There is also a deep concern about who takes care of her, a level of consideration that I've held for some time.

Because *quiet registers sonically, as a level of intensity that requires focused attention*, I spend more time thinking about my encounter with LPs beyond their function as vessels for listening to music. I turn to them because of the attention they demand, the stillness they encourage, and the interiority they allow me to wade in.

And I feel the poet Elizabeth Alexander when she theorizes the Black interior "as 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."<sup>5</sup> This interior both contains and exists beyond the cavernous emotional and psychic place of my longing. And through some kind of alchemy, albums feverishly take me there. While the physicality tethers me in space-time in ways I deeply appreciate, it isn't merely the object; it's the occasion for stillness that enunciates how human-made structures, social expectations, and governing logics fail. This encounter is where the unofficial thrives. This is where the intensity of my quiet registers most fervently. This is where I hear the visual.

---

*Derrais Carter teaches courses in Gender & Women's Studies at the University of Arizona and is working diligently to complete two books currently underway. The first, Obscene Material, narrates a 1919 obscenity scandal involving Black girls who survived the vicious advances of a Dutch man who posed as an anthropologist to access, photograph, and assault them. The second book, co-authored with Andres Guzman, is titled Patriarchal Blackness. The book critiques how patriarchal thought—with a supposedly progressive racial politic—centers cisgendered, heterosexual Black men in contemporary Black popular culture.*

1. The "I" used throughout this text, along with the stories shared, are a combination of approximated fact, gossip, family lore, fantasy, and (im)possibility.
2. Tina M. Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2017), 6.
3. Richard Torres, "Romantic Obsession," liner notes for the Marvin Gaye album *I Want You* (Deluxe Edition), Motown, 2006 (Originally released in 1976).
4. Last I heard, she is still living. We haven't met, yet. And I'm not putting her business out there. She deserves privacy.
5. Elizabeth Alexander, *The Black Interior: Essays* (Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf, 2004), 5.

# GEORGIA