

Allen-Golder Carpenter

Same Things Make Us Laugh, Make Us Cry Pt. 2, Witness, Act 1: Black Noise

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When I was young...well I'm still young, I'm 25, but more like when I was little, I would watch my older brother play video games. To this day it is still one of my fondest memories. And one of those games, the first ever game I played, was *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* by Rockstar Games. A game partially set in Los Angeles during one of the most turbulent periods of Black American history, the crack cocaine epidemic of the late '80s and early '90s where you play a black gang member named Carl "CJ" Johnson. Looking back on the game now as an adult I can now see the sociopolitical implications of such a game, made by a white company, for profit. One of the focal points of the plot is CJ, coping with, navigating through, and ultimately out of those harsh circumstances by any means necessary—something I have witnessed in my own community first hand. For better and for worse.

In the center of the room are two black folding chairs, each cradling a PlayStation 2 setup for someone to play *San Andreas*, with each system's controller modified. One has all of its buttons and controls removed except for the combat button, lacking any ease of movement, allowing you only the ability to directly aggress whatever is directly in front of you. Your only ability to move is through the slight lunge forward every time CJ throws a punch. The other system's controller has all controls left intact except for one: the combat button has been removed, and you have full "agency" and freedom of movement, but lack any meaningful way to defend yourself. The former being an allegory for the lack of social movement and circumstance that traps my people in the hood, and causes us to fight each other instead of the powers that be in such a place. And the latter being an allegory for how people strip parts of themselves, self-censor and submit themselves in exchange for access to "higher" parts of society. It's like sacrificing your arms to summon the rain, just to end up drowning in the flood it creates.

Of these circumstances, one of the coping mechanisms most highly associated with the Black community is that of its deep and rich musical traditions, that which with every new innovation in sound, it again has to fight for its legitimacy—throughout the last century, from jazz to drill music—always being initially relegated to being just "noise."

That got me thinking about noise, and about what "black" noise would actually be. If white noise is passive, abstract, shapeless, placating noise that blends into the background, and if black noise is the opposite, then it would be objective, attention grabbing, disruptive and potentially harsh (but that's relative). By that definition, you could classify drill music, a fast paced sub-genre of rap as "black noise," a sound that I remember disrupting the spatial order within the carceral architecture of my public high school. Alternatively, you could classify something like the sound of helicopters as black noise, like the army helicopter that flew so low over my neighborhood just outside of Washington DC, that it made my walls shake. Because DC at the time of writing this is under occupation by national guard forces that have been given police authority in the city.

Behind the PlayStations is a monitor playing two video works. One video, *Black Internet*, an ever evolving capsule of black memes, originally formed as a response to the viral video (and subsequent memes) of a brawl on the riverside in Montgomery, Alabama, where Black people essentially fought off racist white attackers, one of them with a folding chair. The folding chair has since become not only a meme but a symbol of black self-defense. The presence of the folding chairs in the exhibition are essentially covert weapons, representing the balancing act of being black in white spaces, having to speak a certain way and all that. The chair exists between rest and action, between action and bearing witness, between the viewer and the subject. When to witness, when to act, what is a witness, we witnessed that chair beatdown video, people acting. But in that position, how would you act?

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The other video is titled *Black Noise*, which is composed of cut together found videos, including an interview with DC drill rapper Skino in his neighborhood while surrounded by national guard patrol and federal agents, alongside videos of him flexing his watch in front of the soldiers. The videos are centered around a screen recording of me watching music videos by several DC area drill artists, drowned out by the sound of three helicopters hovering over my neighborhood, interspersed with my own original noise music production. This recording of helicopters long predates the occupation, my area is already just kind of like that. I live in Prince George's County Maryland, and grew up in the parts of the county that borders DC's 5th and 7th wards, an area of the county that lies in the intersection of two major airports and a military base, as well as multiple large highway junctions and hospital centers, so air traffic is constant, and noise is common. I learned from the film *The Diary of a Sky* by Lawrence Abu Hamdan of the long term health effects of prolonged exposure to jet engine noise. Jet engine noise spikes your cortisol levels, and that over time hardens the blood vessels, causing heart disease. My area has the highest rates of heart disease in the metro area, likely caused in tandem with a lack of access to higher quality nutrition, circumstances like those exemplified by the broken PlayStation controller. The sound from the video has been burned onto corresponding CDs and placed within the space. Reminiscent of local rappers handing out their mixtapes, it's about harnessing the bad to make some good, turning noise into music, circumstance into art.

Several works in the show reference the late Maryland street rapper Goonew who tragically passed away after being gunned down in his own neighborhood. Upon his wishes, his wake was held on stage at a DC nightclub, where instead of being in a casket, his body was stood up on stage in a designer outfit with his family partying next to him. This drew a lot of controversy, but only because it defies the typical western ideas around death. I honestly commend Goonew for how he took control of his own death, to go out the way he wanted. Pictures of him from his wake have been placed in the provisional casket placed standing up in the gallery.

There have been parallels made between gangsters and samurai, as they both live in a stoicism stoked on the edge of their own demise, and from that relationship to death and the harnessing of it through music, a kind of life is created. *Black Noise* ends with a clip I took at a show by late DC area artists Goonew and Lil Gray, where even though someone set off the fire alarm, they kept on performing, because despite the blaring noise of helicopters or otherwise that drown out the streets of DC, the people still persist. And like Skino's watch, they still shine. As a people, as black people, we turn water into wine, we turn our deaths into life, and that's why I put a damn casket in the space. Amen.

— Allen-Golder Carpenter

Allen-Golder Carpenter (b. 1999, Washington, D.C.) is a gender-nonconforming interdisciplinary artist, designer, poet, author, and activist. Drawing from rap culture, found objects, writing, film, and performance, Carpenter's work interrogates memory, systemic violence, and cultural erasure—especially as experienced by Black communities in the United States. Recent solo exhibitions include Tick Tack, Antwerp, Belgium (2025); 032c Gallery, Berlin, Germany (2025); Harlesden High Street, London, UK (with Emmanuel Massillon, 2025); Förderverein Aktuelle Kunst, Münster, Germany (2025); No Gallery, New York, NY (2024); Galerie Kandlhofer, Vienna, Austria (2023); and von ammon co, Washington D.C. (2022). Select group exhibitions include Derosia, New York, NY (2025); Silke Linder, New York, NY (2025); Mery Gates, Brooklyn, NY (curated by Jay Payton, 2025); 032c Gallery, Berlin, Germany (2025); Tick Tack, Antwerp, Belgium (2024); Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin, Germany (2024); von ammon co, Washington D.C. (2023); and White Columns, New York, NY (2023). They've held performances, lectures, and screenings at Schinkel Pavillon, Berlin, German (2025); Kunstakademie Münster, Germany (2025); Drop City Centre for Architecture & Design, Milan, Italy (2025); Printed Matter, New York, NY (2024); Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz, Berlin, Germany (2024); and Galerie Kandlhofer, Vienna, Austria (2023).