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I wear my sunglasses to dream: *Nope*, Black dreaming, and grains of grief

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Abstract

This meditation on Jordan Peele's *Nope* considers its cinematic depiction of Black dreaming, (inward) gazing, and grains of grief. Focusing on different visual and storytelling components of *Nope*, I outline how the film portrays Black interiority and looking relations with care, creativity, and candor. Reflecting on the promises of moviegoing, how *Nope* moved me, and contemplative inquiry informed by my own experiences, I discuss what Black dreaming and grief can mean and involve beyond a spectacularizing societal gaze and prescriptively assumed rituals of loss. Shaped by poignant writing and works on Black dreaming, epistemologies, grief, cosmos, and constellations, I ruminate on how such dreaming and grief emerges in the everydayness of life and on the screens of cinemas. Overall, engaging *Nope*'s exploration of the power of looking at and looking away from something or someone, I ponder over the relationship between shade(s) (aka sunglasses), (day)dreaming, and grieving.

Keywords: ancestral, Black dreaming, film, grief, love, *Nope*

Resonance and remembrance
And the dreams of different lives and loves.
The absurdity and inevitability of loss
And the beauty in being present, and *staying*,
with each other.
The pain of time's passing
And the comfort found in being held,
by loving eyes.¹

Dreaming in the dark

Typically, I am the type of person who likes to gather information about a movie before I see it. Don't get me wrong, I don't want to know every detail of it before I experience it myself, but I enjoy piecing together parts of the movie's narrative from the slivers that form surrounding press and promotional activity. I delight in reading reviews and trying to decipher fan-made digital content that circulates as part of the myth and marketing of a new cinema release. However, when it came to *Nope*, I steered clear of most material that might spoil the surprise of this much-anticipated movie. When sitting in the cinema, waiting for *Nope* to start, I felt particularly open to being carried away by the experience ahead. I was emotionally exposed, excited, and uncharacteristically unmoored as I hadn't guarded myself against what was to come. Instead, I had arrived at this movie filled with the contentment of being there with a dear friend and knowing that whatever happened next, we'd be sharing this audience experience.

¹ Just as dreaming involves forms of wandering *and* wondering, which are far from being mapped out or captured by the linear storytelling concept of "beginning, middle, and end," *Nope* moves, meanders, and meditates in ways that transcend tidy explanations of movies and their meanings. For these reasons, instead of opening this writing with a brief overview of *Nope*, I opted to recall some of the many expressions and emotions that the movie invoked for me when first seeing it.

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Nope is a movie that has sparked many perplexed responses that question its meaning. As such, I am reluctant to describe it in any definitive way. I recognize this might result in many questions, or even confusion, for readers who are unfamiliar with the movie's portrayal of two siblings in their twenties and thirties —Emerald Haywood (played by Keke Palmer) and Otis (OJ) Junior Haywood (Daniel Kaluuya) —who navigate familial loss, love, and friendships, while tackling an extraterrestrial entity in the otherworldly sky above their family's ranch. However, I believe that embracing a sense of opacity and uncertainty is part of what *Nope* invites viewers to do.

My approach to reflecting on dreaming in the dark and writing about *Nope* is inspired by Black and Blaxicana cultural worker and geographer Naya Jones, whose loving articulations of Black dreaming also encompass the collective and ancestral nature of Black epistemologies. Drawing on the pivotal words and works of author and editor Toni Morrison, Jones's 2021 piece, "Prologue: Black dream geographies,"² expresses some of the many different dimensions of Black dreaming and its roots in ancestral presence. By using the phrase black dream geographies, Jones "situate[s] this piece in conversation with scholarship on black interiority," and shares insights on how this is all part of Black epistemologies:

In the dominant milieu – rooted in positivism, white supremacy, and more – mind, body, and spirit are separate; inquiry is confined to the mind; and ancestors are no longer with us. Morrison's "deadly serious" commitment to the "milieu out of which (she) writes and in which her ancestors actually lived" underscores her layered accountability to her craft, to her ancestors, and to Black epistemologies. She alludes to epistemologies that take intuition, dreams, sensing, embodied knowing, and ancestral presence seriously.³

Sitting in the dark, while waiting for *Nope* to begin, little did I know that I would spend the next couple of hours thinking about, and deeply feeling, the relationship between Black dreaming and, in the words of Jones, "ancestral presence."

Before the *Nope* screening started in the charming art deco style cinema that my friend and I found ourselves in, the room darkened and became silent. In the ceremonial manner that is a signature part of many cinema outings, the buzzing sound of settling into this space quickly subsided. I could feel the shuffle of feet and the slight repositioning of shoulders as people did the dance of getting comfortable, immersing themselves in the relative safety of obscurity. I often feel sleepy in that

² Naya Jones, "Prologue: Black dream geographies," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 46(4) (2021): 825–828.

³ Naya Jones, "Prologue: Black dream geographies," 826.

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moment when the light dims and the low hum of people chatting quietens until all that is left is stillness and the sound of your own mind and heart. In some ways, that moment is like the minutes before drifting off to sleep, or the simultaneous awe and comfort that a midnight sky inspires. It is a liminal state and a lullaby that is filled with so much possibility; a rare time when choosing to be and *stay* in the darkness is respected — at least for the duration of the film.

The cinema is certainly not a setting that is completely free from stifling conventions and racist or classist expectations of *how* you should be, or *who* should be there. But sometimes, while in its soothingly unlit space, the cinema can be a bubble that presents a moment of pause, release, and catharsis. It can even be part of how we dream (and grieve) aloud. My eyes may be open when the cinema changes from a brightly lit and empty shell of a space to a comfortingly dark cocoon, but I know that I am often (day)dreaming when the transformation of this environment happens. Much like how pre-movie trailers offer glimpses into different worlds, plots, and places, when the lights go out in the cinema, and I am shielded by the darkness, my mind roams in ways that allow me to dream while awake— to make and take the time to imagine in ways that are only possible when it feels as though nobody is watching.

On the day that I first watched *Nope*, dreaming in the dark meant sitting with grief from the last year, and the enduring love that is part of it. There are many ways that grief can be described and felt, but to me, one of the words that comes to mind is “grains.” Grief can manifest in the granular minutiae of daily life —from a fleeting memory and the wave of sadness that it stirs to the feelings of connection found in a loved one’s eclectic everyday objects. Much like grains, grief can grow in various ways and take different forms, shaped by seasonal shifts and particular points in a person’s life, which mark the passing of time since a loss. Grief cannot be harvested, but, like grains, it can swell in ways that resemble the growth of crops. Reflecting on grief as sometimes being experienced as grains does not detract from the enormity of the emotion and the different ways that it shows up in people’s lives. Grief is far from being something small. Accordingly, my reference to grains of grief is intended to encompass how grief takes shape in the seemingly mundane details of life as well as describing some of the ways that it seeds and reflects feelings —be they remorse, gratitude, love, or everything at once.

Dreaming in the obscurity of the cinema meant grieving aloud while being held by the peace of its darkness and the embrace of ancestral presences. Dreaming in this space meant being soothed by the shade but also enchanted by the warm glow of the screen. It meant feeling free to let my mind wander (and wander some more), knowing that the pressures of the everyday were momentarily suspended during this brief window into a cinematic world. The glimmer of the screen was a reminder of the ways that light still finds a way to be present in the dark. While a patchwork of images flickered across it,

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priming the audience for the film ahead, I found myself comforted by this moment of choosing to sit in the dark and in the company of my friend— an experience that buoyed me. Dreaming in the dark may mostly be associated with the dreams that sleep brings, or the dreams that are felt and find their way to us during night times; however, dreaming in the dark can also be experienced while awake, including when finding stillness and solace in a shadowed cinema theatre. Dreaming in the dark here was both a release and a way of letting the light in. It was a space of gravity and levity, where tears rolled, laughter was shared, and my dreams brimmed in ways bolstered by the beauty of the film and the space of both solitude and solidarity afforded by experiencing it in the dark with my friend.

Dreaming with eyes open

I believe that dreaming can be both restful and rousing, expansive and intentional, embodied but also always in the atmosphere. Dreaming can feel like dancing and dialoguing with the unknowable while processing interactions and encounters that, although somewhat familiar, take no discernable form. It is the joyous, creative, collective, comforting, and liberatory capacity of dreaming that fills me with hope, but I also acknowledge the undeniable pain that is part of many forms of dreaming, including the entangled hopefulness and heartbreak of dreaming about, and for, a world that is different than this one. All that is to say: dreaming can involve both a form of inward gazing and a strong sense of connection to other people. Specifically, Black dreaming emerges from, and orbits, within Black interiority, which is also entwined with forms of Black collectiveness and communing— including experiences and remembrance of ancestral love and presence. Thus, dreaming can be understood as a space between here and there as well as a feeling between the fullness of love and the vulnerability that can be intrinsic to intimacies, such as sharing ideas and emotions from a precious place of openness and love. Here, I am reminded of the reflections, writing, and friendship of Katucha Bento and Azeezat Johnson ⁴ as well as their broader extensive work, including the Black geographies scholarship of Johnson and the decolonial studies of Bento.

In “Spoken Gems: When Academia Meets Self-Care,” Bento and Johnson generously share their intimate conversation which “sits with the tension between Black women thinking and creating alongside academic institutions that are, in many respects,

⁴ Katucha Bento and Azeezat Johnson, “Spoken Gems: When Academia Meets Self-Care – A Conversational Piece,” *{retrospect} JOURNAL with RACE.ED presents RACE IN RETROSPECTIVE* 29 (2021): 13–17.

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grounded in the epistemic violence of white supremacy.” As they put it so powerfully :

This piece will frustrate the reader if a traditional academic format is expected. Our positionality is consistently situated in Black feminism as we exchanged voice notes between teachings, hospital visits, research projects, the birth of a family member, and the concomitant possibilities of tearful and delightful moments of our lives.⁵

Drawing on this work , I understand Black dreaming as always existing beyond the “expected”— whether that be beyond restrictive expectations of when and how people communicate or beyond oppressive expectations of what it means to grieve and dream together . Just as the writing of Bento and Johnson affirms “the concomitant possibilities of tearful and delightful moments”⁶ that can be part of life, dreaming is an experience that is filled with possibilities that can be, at once, unsettling and joyful, and, at once, individual and collective in nature.

My thoughts on dreaming are also shaped by the ever-resonant writing of creative researcher, educator, and writer Victoria Ogoegbunam Okoye , whose Black geographies work includes a crucial conceptualization of constellations. In “Black digital outer spaces: Constellations of relation and care on Twitter,” Ogoegbunam Okoye reflects on using “Twitter to build a constellation of connections to Black PhD researchers, academics, and activists to think with and learn.” In the vivid words of Ogoegbunam Okoye :

I found my place in an outer space beyond the boundaries of the academic institution: a boundless, nonlinear Black space- time where we relate across physical distance, discipline, past tweets, real- time interactions, across lived experiences, and toward the otherwise.⁷

⁵ Katucha Bento and Azeezat Johnson, “Spoken Gems: When Academia Meets Self-Care – A Conversational Piece,” *{retrospect} JOURNAL with RACE.ED presents RACE IN RETROSPECTIVE* 29 (2021), 13.

⁶ Katucha Bento and Azeezat Johnson, “Spoken Gems: When Academia Meets Self-Care – A Conversational Piece,” *{retrospect} JOURNAL with RACE.ED presents RACE IN RETROSPECTIVE* 29 (2021), 13.

⁷ Victoria Ogoegbunam Okoye (2021), “Black digital outer spaces: Constellations of relation and care on Black Twitter,” 807.

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While the context of the cinema differs from the digital spaces insightfully explained by Ogoegbunam Okoye , I deem the cinema as being a site that can also be part of “an outer space,” where Black dreaming floats and flies freely and is felt in profound ways.

For so long, my thoughts on dreams focused on what I felt, saw, imagined, and heard while asleep, or at least, while my eyes were closed. The way I “listened” to my dreams centered on the brief moments I’d spend when waking from sleep and wondering whether what I had dreamt of might symbolize my unsettled subconscious thinking or unresolved ruminations. If the dreams were a cause of discomfort, I would seek to either distance them from me or me from them. If the dreams brought a sense of delight, I tried to stay with them in ways that overlooked the freeing feel of their fleetingness and the fun of the fragments of feelings that they left me with.

Essentially, I wrestled (and sometimes still do) with how my dreams escape my grasp and how they provoke me by resurfacing thoughts and mirages of memories, including some that I have worked hard to compartmentalize. While such feelings and experiences of mine can be part of the process , dreaming is also so much more than all of that and always more than words can ever convey. Therefore, Black dreaming blooms and blossoms in many ways, which include forms of wonderment that are undoubtedly present and unmistakably celestial.

The wonderment of *Nope* and love in grief

Wonderment is a delicious word. It sits comfortably in my mouth in the same way as words such as glow, autumn, and unfurl. I wonder what makes for moments of wonderment, what alchemy leads to stars wonderfully aligning and hearts swelling as they brim with awe. I think I’ve experienced quite a bit of wonderment lately, and I know that when experiencing *Nope*, wonderment is what I felt.

As with any movie, there are many different interpretations of the meaning of *Nope*. However, to me, *Nope* is about the reality of bereavement’s ongoing and everyday impacts, including the seemingly “small” ways that grief shows up and sprouts into different emotions and experiences. In recent personal writing, I explain it in the following way:

... the main character in *Nope* was grief and its shape-shifting yet always present form manifested as fleeting flashbacks, emotional numbness, unspoken words, and the life-altering events that ensue following the death of the father of Emerald and OJ – Otis Haywood Sr. (powerfully played by Keith David).

The opening scene of *Nope* includes minimal dialogue, which quietly focuses on the tight shouldered dynamic between Otis and his son OJ. Brimming with grit and gravitas, their exchange of few words feels filled with a strained sense of love, or, at least, a fragile and

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somewhat mutual respect that rests on their hierarchical roles at the family ranch.

It is in the first few minutes of *Nope*, the audience is confronted by the sudden demise of Otis, whose absence amounts to a hauntingly strong presence throughout the rest of the film. From photos of him that adorn walls to memories – good and bad – shared between Emerald and OJ, the audience is reminded that the death of Otis doesn't mark the end of him. But his death does lead to a new and unanticipated chapter in the entwined lives of Emerald and OJ.

Nope carefully deals with the absence and presence of people and the past even by invoking individuals who go unnamed.⁸

When I left the cinema, *Nope* stayed with me, or maybe I stayed with it. It was there when I closed my eyes, and it made itself at home in my mind in a way that was comforting but also challenging, in terms of how it led me to confront some of my recent experiences and emotions. In the hours after viewing *Nope*, my thoughts on the movie poured out of me— first as scattered notes on my phone and then as a blog piece⁹ that helped me to think through all of what the movie had made me feel. Finally (for now), I arrived at this essay that you are reading, firm in my belief that *Nope* can be understood as being part of what Jones poignantly refers to as Black dream geographies.¹⁰ While writing this piece, I also returned to Jones' resonant reflections on the work of Toni Morrison, who, as Jones powerfully puts it, “refers to epistemologies derived from and through social, historical, spiritual, and geographic lived experience. Elsewhere, she further names unapologetic attention to the cosmologies of ‘discredited’ people.”¹¹

The work of Jones has been central to how my thoughts on Black dreaming and dreamwork have developed in recent years, including in ways that have resulted in me regarding Black dreaming and Black grief as often being interwoven — an interconnected manifestation of Black life, love, and ancestral presence. In *Nope*, this plays out in numerous ways, including a surreal and dreamy scene towards the end of the movie, which journeys through emotions and ideas of grief, love, and family.

In that final, memorable scene, having initially appeared to have ridden towards death by trying to bring an end to an extraterrestrial force that lurks in the sky, OJ strikingly

⁸ Francesca Sobande, “On *Nope*, the mundanity of grief, and solace in spectacle.” <https://marginstwenty.home.blog/2022/08/20/on-nope-the-mundanity-of-grief-and-solace-in-spectacle/>

⁹ Francesca Sobande, “On *Nope*, the mundanity of grief, and solace in spectacle.”

¹⁰ Naya Jones, “Prologue: Black dream geographies,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 46(4) (2021): 825–828.

¹¹ Naya Jones, “Prologue: Black dream geographies,” 826.

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emerges amid dust clouds in the near distance, much to the relief of his sister Emerald. Moments before that, OJ is depicted gesturing to Emerald in the signature way that he has on several occasions throughout the film. He points towards his eyes before fondly pointing towards her, an indication that he *sees* (and loves) her. While no words are exchanged, this moment of seeing and being seen is reflective of how Black interiority and inward forms of gazing and self-knowing are also always connected to ways of looking out(ward) at, and for, each other. Although there are undoubtedly spectacular moments in *Nope*, including the movie's exploration of themes related to extraterrestrial forces, its representation of different relationships delves into the details of everyday interactions and intimacies—including familial love and loss. Black dreaming and Black grief can no doubt be painful and bring up emotions that are hard, or even impossible, to name let alone truly look at. But Black dreaming and Black grief can be both an interior and collective love that involves looking out for, really seeing, and staying with each other.

Near the closing of the movie, that mystical image of OJ on horseback—framed by dust clouds and a wooden entrance sign that reads “Out Yonder”—makes a representational nod back to one of the movie's earliest scenes. This depiction of OJ is a reminder of when his father Otis (the family ranch owner) dies after being hit by a flying object while he is on a horse. When accounting for this context within which the film develops, “Out Yonder” takes on a multitude of potential meanings, including allusions to lives and loves that are present here on Earth and those that are part of interconnected constellations¹² out there in an outer space—be that an idea of heavens or otherworldly galaxies. Some viewers may interpret this scene as OJ surviving his face-off with the extraterrestrial force that periodically hovers above the family ranch. Others may regard it as representing that OJ is no longer physically alive and has moved on to somewhere “Out Yonder” but that his presence will always remain with Emerald, who will forever be seen and loved by him.

In the words of Marisa Renee Lee, whose work has involved being called upon to support people coping with grief, “*grief is love*.”¹³ Dreaming is one of many sites where love is expressed and embraced, including love for people who we are (and might always be) grieving. As Lee puts it:

We are taught that grief is something that arrives in the immediate aftermath of death, and while that's certainly true, it's not the whole story. Grief is the experience of navigating your loss, figuring out how to deal with the absence of your loved one forever.¹⁴

¹² Victoria Ogoegbunam Okoye, “Black digital outer spaces: Constellations of relation and care on Black Twitter.”

¹³ Marisa Renee Lee, *Grief is Love* (New York: Hachette Books).

¹⁴ Marisa Renee Lee, *Grief is Love* (New York: Hachette Books), 1.

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Such a process of navigating, figuring out, and, ultimately, grieving, can involve dreaming, including in ways that may be part of the work involved in “new world-makings.”¹⁵ *Nope* is a movie that deals with the granularity of the grieving process without reducing Black grief to a simplistic spectacle for audiences to consume, and without portraying Black grief as something that is solely outwardly expressed as words or public displays of emotion. Put differently, *Nope* nestles into the nuances of Black interiority through its depiction of what seem to be dreams of a loved one in the aftermath of their death and its portrayal of love for one another in a way that points to its continuance “Out Yonder.”

Like *Nope*, the writing, creative and healing practices, and research of Jones, care fully tend to Black interiority and embrace how Black aliveness, knowledge, emotions, and experiences transcend the physical planes of this earth. Jones’ words on Black dreaming invite readers to *feel* in ways that society is often quick to discourage in its efforts to force people to focus on productivity which often demands of them a damaging emotional repression. The expansive ways that Jones describes Black dreaming geographies makes me think of how Black creativity, fiction, film, and the feeling that is at the heart of certain cinematic experiences, can be vital to various dreamscapes and the space within them to both grieve and love.

Inward gazing and looking out (for each other)

When thinking about *Nope* and the work of Jones, I began to think of the different ways that looking at and looking away from something or someone can be part of Black dreaming and grief, including experiences of looking inwards in a world that often discourages dreaming and grieving aloud, especially when this is experienced by Black people. Relatedly, in my previous writing on *Nope*, I wrote that:

On the surface, the tragic death of Otis takes up very little space in *Nope*, but it is precisely the limited time spent explicitly focusing on it which forms a key part of the plot. Specifically, the film does not portray grief in a cloying way that might have betrayed the mundanity that can be part of grieving. Instead, *Nope* offers viewers a “show, don’t tell” experience that addresses the granular details of grief through its portrayal of the everydayness, crisis, and spectacle of life immediately after a familial death— including the omnipresent and overwhelming reality that life will never be the same again.¹⁶

¹⁵ Katucha Bento and Azeezat Johnson, “Spoken Gems: When Academia Meets Self-Care – A Conversational Piece,” 13.

¹⁶ Francesca Sobande, “On *Nope*, the mundanity of grief, and solace in spectacle.”

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Among *Nope*'s most impactful qualities is its ability, at least to me, to depict experiences of love, grief, and dreaming without suggesting that such experiences look and feel the way that society often expects and demands. While gazing at the fictional life of the Haywood family, particularly how Emerald and OJ found their feet in a changed (and *constantly* changing) world, I also looked inward and was reminded of the many people who have been, and still are, there for me as I figure out life following loss.

There is a scene in *Nope* when a character named Angel (no relation of Emerald, OJ, or Otis) is driving in a car while the 1980's track "Sunglasses at Night" by Corey Hart eerily plays. *Nope* is a film that oscillates between the lightness of day and the darkness of night. Sometimes it happens so quickly that if you blink, you might miss it. The way the film seems to cycle through time resembles how seconds can quickly morph into minutes, and minutes into hours, and hours into days, when experiencing loss and the turmoil that it sparks. In the *Nope* scene featuring this song, unsurprisingly, it is indeed nighttime. The scene has a foreboding feel which makes the song's lyrics about wearing sunglasses at night feel sharp-edged and unnerving. However, while absorbing the tenor of this part of the movie, I thought of the relationship between sunglasses (also commonly referred to as shades), dreaming, and grief.

Depending on the context in which they are worn, sunglasses may be viewed as shielding someone's eyes from the light, or hiding tears and masking an unmistakable expression of sadness and grief. Put simply, sunglasses, and shade(s) are often associated with a form of protection— be it from the sun or the potential of being perceived by others. Sometimes, I guess you could say I wear my sunglasses to dream, or that the soothing shade the cinema offers can be a source of peace within which I can dwell with my dreams and the people who are part of them.

When sitting in the darkness before, during, and briefly after watching *Nope*, I reflected on how the promise of moviegoing may be similar to the potential offering of sunglasses and different spaces of shade from the world's glare. In the darkness of that cinema where I felt a precarious protection from the watchful eyes of others, and where I was bathed in the warm glow of the screen, and comforted by the closeness of my friend, I got to look directly at both the light and shade of Black dreaming and grief. In turn, I experienced the infiniteness of love— for my father, for my friends, and for so many others who we grieve but whose presence is always felt.

I may have been looking at a cinema screen, but, in doing so, I was also momentarily turning away from the demands of the everyday and towards feelings of remembrance, connection, pause, and presence. This shift reminded me of the possibilities presented by (day)dreaming. The dark of cinema experiences can yield a shielding and protective function that is comparable to peering from behind a pair of sunglasses. Being cloaked in the shade of the cinema, while enveloped by the love of

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those (t)here, was a remedy and balm. Ultimately, it brought me to a space of wonderment and stillness in which to sit with grief and never-ending love, while daring to dream with each other .

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