

Unlearning Black Sound in Black Artistry: Examining the Quiet in Solange's A Seat At the Table

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Blog post published May 22, 2017 in *Sounding Out!*

<https://doi.org/10.59350/jekrt-td558>

Abstract

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Keywords

Music (Subfield), Article, Black Studies, Diasporic Sound, Hip Hop, Identity



Recommended citation

knw8433. (2017, May 22). Unlearning Black Sound in Black Artistry: Examining the Quiet in Solange's A Seat At the Table. *Sounding Out!*. <https://doi.org/10.59350/jekrt-td558>

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Editors' note: As an interdisciplinary field, sound studies is unique in its scope—under its purview we find the science of acoustics, cultural representation through the auditory, and, to perhaps mis-paraphrase Donna Haraway, emergent ontologies. Not only are we able to see how sound impacts the physical world, but how that impact plays out in bodies and cultural tropes. Most importantly, we are able to imagine new ways of describing, adapting, and revising the aural into aspirant, liberatory ontologies. The essays in this series all aim to push what we know a bit, to question our own knowledges and see where we might be headed. In this series, co-edited by Airek Beauchamp and Jennifer Stoeve you will find new takes on sound and embodiment, cultural expression, and what it means to *hear*. **–AB**

On May 18th, 2017, Solange Knowles took viewers on an expedition as she glided, danced and “agonized” in a “joyful praise break” on the floor of New York City’s Guggenheim museum. Drawing from the museum’s narrative of introspection and multi-sensory connection, Solange’s performance of “An Ode To. . .” prompted viewers to relearn and reorient the melodies of *A Seat at the Table* (2016). Solange’s performance in this setting hearkened listeners to [new concepts and emotions in the record](#) they didn’t catch before as they consumed it. This begs the question– what other sonic elements have we neglected to identify in *A Seat at the Table*? And why?

A Seat at the Table integrates topics like race, depression, and empowerment. Although the younger sister of powerhouse Beyoncé Knowles, Solange has managed to carve out her own legion of dedicated listeners from her infusion of Minnie Ripperton-esque vocals, hip-hop production and Gil Scott-Heron storytelling. Thematically, the album incorporates issues of Black Lives Matter and cultural self-preservation. However, Solange weaves personal elements such as vulnerability, futurism and paternity throughout the record as well, which buoy the album to praise but are hardly discussed in the album’s many reviews. Instead, writers and listeners have largely focused on resistance, anger and reactionary concepts.



Image of Solange at Boston's Calling Music

Fest 2013 by Flickr User Jessy Gonzalez, (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Because Solange is a black woman, historical signifiers of black embodiment influence both the listeners' senses and consumption of her album. Solange's intimate moments and reveals are shrouded by the limitation of black sound to the disruptive, angry or depressive. Such masking demands a listening praxis akin to what sound artist [Christine Sun Kim](#) describes as "unlearning." "I'm trying to unlearn what I've been taught by others," [she said in an interview about her work](#), "and trying to find my own definition of both sound and silence." This unlearning and re-imagining of sound is a difficult transformation considering how sound is influenced by our racialized, gendered, and religious histories.

Consider the contemporary rhetoric of [black sound](#). Black outcry and screaming is a banal American, banal soundscape. Blackness is grieving. Blackness tiptoes near death. Captivity is a breath away. Black Lives Matter leans on the Civil Rights Movement often sonically. [Dr. J Marion Sims](#), both his medical torture of enslaved women and the widespread belief that black people [are inured to pain](#), still haunts our research methodologies, medical practice and our daily lives. This ushering of strife consumes black life into a sound that bleeds—an aural transfer both material and metaphoric—black sound is never personal, individualized or singular, and such historical misperceptions influences black sound studies. The Western artistic critique of black sound and black artistry overwhelmingly focuses on the reaction of whiteness, black resistance, and little else—because supposedly—there is nothing notable about blackness in and of itself.

For example, revisit the 1968 Olympic photo of Tommie Smith, John Carlos and Peter Norman as they stand on the platform with their medals. What do you see in this photo? Perhaps nationalism, masculinity, aggression, or anger from their bodily gesture to the Black Panther Party Movement? What do you hear in the photo—what is its decibel? An outcry? A rebellious yell? desperate scream?



(l-r) Peter Norman, Tommie Smith, and John Carlos during the award ceremony of the 200 m race at the Mexican Olympic games. (creative commons, Wikipedia)

But what other nuances are in the photo? What other critiques are masked by this proscribed sound? In *The Sovereignty of Quiet* (2012), Kevin Quashie invites us to:

Look again, closely, at the pictures from that day and you can see something more than the certainty of public assertiveness. See, for example, how the severity of Smith's salute is balanced by the yielding of Carlos's raised arm. And then notice how the sharpness of their gesture is complemented by one telling detail: that their heads are bowed as if in prayer, that Smith, in fact, has his eyes closed. The effect of their bowed heads is to suggest intimacy...How is it that they are largely icons of resistance, and that vulnerability and interiority are not among all things we are encouraged to read on their image? (Quashie 2-3).

Because of racialized history, we have limited our conceptualization of blackness in literature, film and other mediums. We only hear blackness as it pertains to resistance, grief, and anger—the reaction to whiteness. Black people are verbs instead of nouns. The '68 Olympic photo is particularly special as it captures the steadfast Western influence that infects our synesthesia

because of political and social histories. Moreover, such defects are even internalized in the black artist. As an identity, Quashie argues that “blackness is always supposed to tell us something about race or racism, or about America, or violence, struggle and triumph or poverty and hopefulness (4). Sonically this means blackness in contemporary discourse is critiqued by its decibel of resistance. We cannot read or hear blackness without integrating white pain.

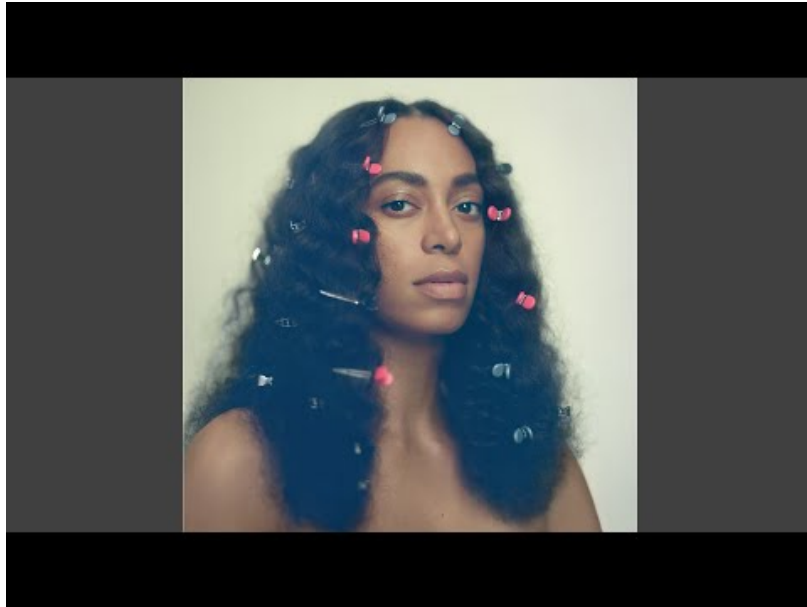
Much like typical readings of the '68 olympic photo, Solange's album cover might elicit themes of self-esteem, black-nationalism or even aggression. However, Solange quietly sounds her life [transition](#) and personal vulnerability, via her photo, if we would hear it.



But confining view of blackness as pain and resistance prevents us—including those who are black-identifying—from noticing and celebrating vulnerability, grace, and the *interiority*. Quashie describes interiority as the “inner reservoir of thoughts, feelings, desires, fears, ambitions that shape a human self. . .[it is] expansive, voluptuous, creative; impulsive...more akin to hunger, memory forgetting, the edges of all the humanness one has” (20-21). It's the tender part of identity shown through subtlety—the desires and dreams spoken through prayer. It's Martin Luther King Jr. [tapping his feet](#) to Coltrane or Tupac Shakur watching dancers to perfect his [plié](#)—it's the soft falsetto Solange uses in her album that bolsters emotional healing and draws avian imagery.

Asking what quiet can bring to our personal, cultural, historical and political understandings of blackness does not signal the imposition of [respectability politics](#) or desire for post-racialism. Rather, Quashie's theory considers how whiteness has constructed and limited our senses as it relates to blackness. Blackness will remain in resistance because of systemic oppression but there is so more to black life. The element of analysis and the sensorium itself needs expansion.

Subsequently, Solange Knowles' recent album innovatively captures resistance but centers other aspects of black sonic experience: individualization—the nuances of interiority regarding mental health, paternity and forgiveness.



<https://youtu.be/tyRYwXHWAtM>

The first track of the song, "[Rise](#)," flutters an anthem of well-being:

Fall in your ways so you can crumble.

Fall in your ways so you can sleep at night.

Fall in your ways so you can wake up and rise

Her tone and pitch is sweet, light and matter-of-fact. The repetition and delivery is similar to a lullaby —reminiscent of Langston Hughes's poem "[Mother to Son](#)"—a soft plea to rest, welcome weariness and any conflict with authenticity but to also travel with a straight back and head looking forward. *Fall in your ways...* At the 1.11 mark, there is a break of silence in the song; thereafter, the synthesizer yawns into melody with a futuristic twang. This Afrofuturistic moment—the study of blackness as it relates to space, technology, art and futurism— continues later with the production and lyrical content with "[Borderline \(An Ode To Self Care\)](#)." Notably, "Rise" introduces the sonic atmosphere of the record through Solange's honeyed tonal drops and leaps when she sings "So you can sleep at night." Her delivery mimics a bird within a thermal lift—her voice calling the plight of the [Flying African](#)—the myth that Igbo people escaped slavery by flying back to Africa at night. "Fall in your ways" whispers the discovery and preservation of one's interiority. *Rise* emphasizes inner, restorative practice.

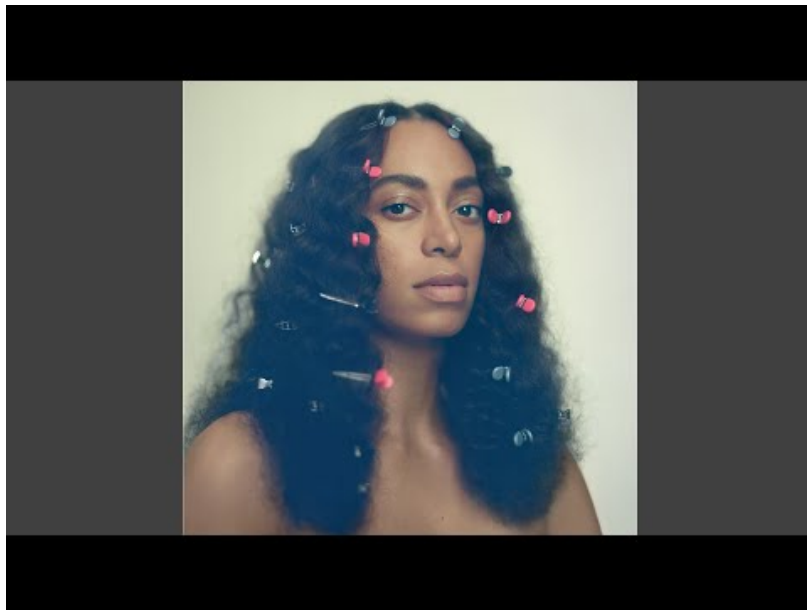


Charles Dickson's "Wishing on a Star" at the California African American Museum, Los Angeles, image by Flickr User [ATOMIC Hot Links](#) (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Solange also highlights interiority through her album interludes, mostly narrated by Master P, rapper and owner of No Limit Records. This also relates to her inclusion of paternity alongside maternity—a bright distinction considering her identification with black womanhood and the historical racist exclusion of black fathers in the home (e.g. the [Moynihan Report](#) and [welfare polices](#)). Solange notes the importance of her father and Master P's presence with [an interview](#) with her sister:

I remember reading or hearing things about Master P that reminded me so much of Dad growing up. And I wanted a voice throughout the record that represented empowerment and independence, the voice of someone who never gave in, even when it was easy to lose sight of everything that he built.

Thus the precursor to each song draws from Master P's embodiment of kinship, lineage and esteem, traits the teenaged-Solange admired and later internalizes into her interiority.



<https://youtu.be/HQW5TGvEI0g>

Through these interludes, Solange redresses Master P's sonic history, particularly his famous rap catch phrase. As he explains in the interlude "Pedestals":

I never cried or nothing, and that's where the, 'Make 'em say uhh uhh,' that's like my pain...that's my battle cry.

Solange spotlights Master P's quiet—and accompanying tonal signature—while showing its relation to "louder" elements of masculinization and coping. P's insoluble moan is a staple throughout his songs and a signature in other No Limit artists's songs as well.

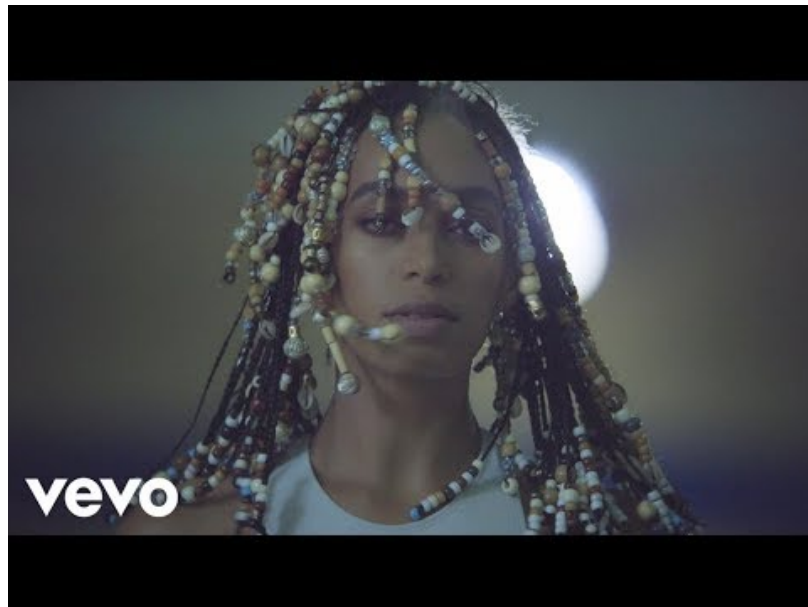
<https://youtu.be/vCHslR29o9E>

No longer limited to its "loudness" or flattened to party anthem accompaniment—as this song and sound has all too often been characterized—P's "battle cry" calls out, sounding a communal harkening of empathy and relation.

...uhh uhh...

In tracks such as *Don't Touch My Hair*, Solange makes Black Lives Matter a key sonic element in her album, but as with her rendering of Master P, in a way that "unlearns" previous assumptions and limitations and reveals how the Black Lives Matter Movement and network is pigeon-holed by American racial ideology and its accompanying sonic constriction. While the catalyst for the movement was white supremacy and police brutality, the movement's [guiding principles](#) also highlight interiority-infused concepts of loving engagement, empathy, and restorative justice. [Patrisse Cullors](#), co-founder of the network, has been [vocal](#) about the movement's integration of the arts and the reimagination of blackness. The focus on black outcry and white sirens muffles the movement's quiet. The consequences of ignoring the interiority dismisses the whole, black self.

Belying a similar dynamic, many listeners have pinned “Don’t Touch My Hair” as a declaration to whiteness, but considering Solange’s point of view, lyrics and gentle sonic value, makes the meaning of the stretch far wider.



<https://youtu.be/YTtrnDbOQAU>

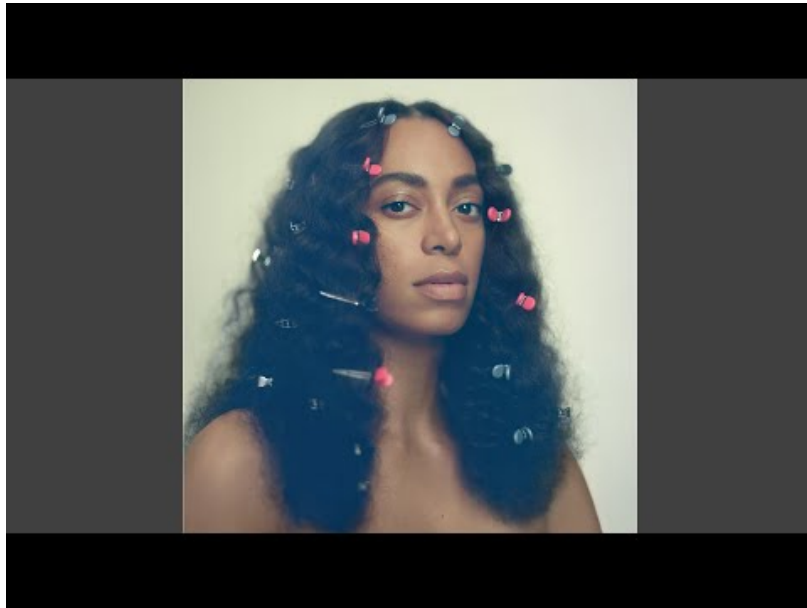
As Solange divulges through the sound of the Mardi Gras trumpet that blares throughout the chorus and changes in volume and texture after the quiet interlude ends at 3:34, black hair is [spiritual](#). As the trumpets blasts in hosannas in gospel celebration, the track also sounds honor, adoration, tribute and [preservation](#) in the thick of American, racialized fixation.

The unlearning of confined sensory orientation that Solange’s *A Seat at The Table* and “An Ode To. . .” demands unveils a progression to time travel, what Michelle Commander’s recent book calls [Afro-Atlantic Flight](#). Solange further incorporates such spiritual, diasporic flight with her [homage](#) to Parliament-Funkadelic artist [Junie Morrison](#)—who passed just a few months after the record came out—in her futuristic track, “Junie,” punctuated with the light, avian melisma, one of her sonic signatures on the record:

Let’s go to moonlight, then they will never find

Let’s go to home, free from the mother mind.

Come on along, along, along, along, along, along, along



<https://youtu.be/eURQLyfw0Ms>

Featured Image of Solange by Flickr User [Greg Chow](#) (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Kimberly Williams oversees a Black Cultural Center at Virginia Tech where her work includes advocacy, policy, programming and bloodletting. She received her M.F.A. in poetry at Cornell University where she also became a Callaloo Oxford University fellow. Her thesis studied the sonic flight from the Stono Rebellion into contemporary dance and household rhythm. You can find her work in Gulf Coast, Callaloo, Drunken Boat and more. At night, you can catch her watching 90s live performances of Michael Jackson or Nine Inch Nails.



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