Trust in These Words”: Vision, Voice, and Black Women’s Ways of Knowing

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Abstract: Under the umbrella of what Brittney Cooper calls “progressive feminist visions,” this article reads Solange’s 2017 essay (“A Letter to My Teenage Self”) and her 2016 album (A Seat at the Table) as part of a Black feminist agenda to unfetter and embolden Black women to affirm their voices, visions, and knowledge(s). In doing this work, Solange makes visible how said voices, visions, and knowledge(s) are not only meaningful but also transformative. “Trust in these words” opens by establishing Solange’s work as progressive feminist visions. It then moves into an analysis of the role of vision and voice in crafting new ways of being and becoming as represented in the epistolary essay, “A Letter to My Teenage Self” and the album A Seat at the Table. The study closes by reflecting on how Solange’s work can be seen as Black feminist epistemologies that allow us to amplify Black women’s humanity.

Keywords: Solange, feminist, resistance, futurism, hip-hop

Solange’s new album, A Seat at the Time, comes as an imperfect yet brilliant love letter to blackness. [It] is a lot more than it seems on the surface. If I’m being honest, I initially wrote the whole thing off the second I saw the album title and a few of the track titles. [They] seemed like cheap attempts to capitalize on black feminism for attention. ...But I was wrong in that regard. – Daren W. Jackson

If I’m being honest, unlike Jackson in the opening epigraph, I had no expectations of Solange’s A Seat at the Table. I did not preemptively write it off as faux-Black feminism, nor did I anticipate it being an underrated masterpiece. What I found was a radiant work of art that also doubles as a formidable epistemological site of Black feminist rhetoric and praxis: a work that underscores the beautiful struggle of affirming one’s humanity in a world that actively seeks to negate you. Now, if I’m being really honest, I initially wrote the previous sentence as a part of a conference paper where the expectation is to not only employ but also embrace disciplinary or academic jargon. Think of it as the Ivory Tower’s cost of admission. Code-switching is nothing new for most Black women in academia. In fact, it is a necessity for survival and success. Yet, as bell hooks articulates, the linguistic gymnastics, racialized maneuvering, and gendered contortions Black women must navigate in order to embark on any self-defined journey goes unacknowledged and under-studied. Disappointing though unsurprising, “[n]ot enough has been written about the transition period women go through when we let go of old agendas for our lives and begin to embark on new journeys” (Hooks ‘Communion’ 15). Solange’s work presents an exciting opportunity to address this dearth.

As I theorize said work, I am reminded that my feminist praxis hinges on two distinct but intersecting questions posed by Barbra Christian and Audre Lorde: first, “for whom are we doing what we are doing” (Christian 61); and, second, do “women in the academy truly want a dialogue about racism?” (Lorde, “Uses of Anger” 279). The ways in which we respond to these questions determine “what orientation we take in our work, the language we use, the purposes for which it is intended” (Christian 61). Like Christian, I find it difficult to separate theory from praxis. Consequently, the orientation of my work is neither academic nor...
popular; that would be akin to asking if I am Black or a woman? Rather, I join the pantheon of Black intersectionists, feminists, womanists, and crunkists whose theorizing(s) have always been intellectual and cultural. It is from this standpoint that I answer Christian’s and Lorde’s respective query: I do this work for Black women because the question before all women today, inside and outside the academy, is what kind of dialogue must we have about racism? The conversation I am keen to have centers on exploring what it means for Black women to be free-ass motherfuckers, to borrow from Janelle Monâe. In seeking liberation, I am speaking with other Black women who also fight for the time, resources, and space to theorize their lives. This essay, for example, is one of the ways in which I aim to amplify Black women’s humanity in all the places we can be found – not just in academia where I currently work, but also in the working-class neighborhood where I grew up.

So, what is at stake with such an undertaking? More importantly, what does freedom look like, truly, for Black women? Is not Janelle Monâe, in her own quest to be free, traversing similar terrain mapped by Christian and Lorde a generation before? The reappearance of these questions makes apparent that, “[B] lack women in America have always had to wrestle with derogatory assumptions about their character and identity. These assumptions shape the social world that [B] lack women must accommodate or resist in an effort to preserve their authentic selves and to secure recognition as citizens” (Harris-Perry 5). I desire to make a significant contribution to the field of Black feminist studies – a contribution that is scholarly and accessible, intellectual as well as popular; a contribution that speaks to a myriad of Black women in America. In fulfilling these desires, I turn to Solange.

Under the umbrella of what Brittnéé Cooper calls “progressive feminist visions,” this article reads Solange’s 2017 essay (“A Letter to My Teenage Self”) and her 2016 album (A Seat at the Table) as part of a Black feminist agenda to unfetter and embolden Black women to affirm their voices, visions, and knowledge(s). In doing this work, Solange makes visible how said voices, visions, and knowledge(s) are not only meaningful but also transformative. “Trust in these words” opens by establishing Solange’s work as progressive feminist visions. It then moves into an analysis of the role of vision and voice in crafting new ways of being and becoming as represented in the epistolary essay “A Letter to My Teenage Self” and the album A Seat at the Table, paying special attention to tracks like “Mad” and “Don’t Touch My Hair.” The study closes by reflecting on how Solange’s work can be seen as Black feminist epistemologies that allow us to amplify Black women’s humanity.

**Embodying Crunk and Manifesting Progressive Feminist Visions**

Solange is a neoteric artist whose work can best be understood as progressive feminist visions committed to protecting and celebrating Black women and their culture(s). Born in Houston, Texas, in 1986, a Grammy Award-winning neo-soul singer and songwriter, Solange’s fourth studio LP, A Seat at the Table, reached number one on the Billboard charts. Her emergence as a public intellectual, fashion icon, and burgeoning feminist trailblazer is bolstered by the epistemologies she has produced via her music, videos/films, interviews, and essays. Demonstrating a commitment to challenging the ways in which Black women are politically, structurally, and representationally marginalized, the work examined here contends that Black women owning, embracing, and putting forth their vision and voice are profound acts of love, resistance, and self-preservation. Solange posits,

I am a proud black feminist and womanist and I’m extremely proud of the work that’s being done… I’m a feminist who wants not only to hear the term intersectionality, but actually feel it, and see the evolution of what intersectional feminism can actually achieve. I want women’s rights to be equally honored, and uplifted, and heard… but I want to see us fighting the fight for all women – women of color, our LGBTQ sisters, our Muslim sisters. (Lang)

Solange offers a succinct but power statement on the ways in which she embodies and exercises her feminism(s). Her work demonstrates a commitment to the necessary task of what bell hooks calls oppositional work, that is, countering microaggressions and dehumanization; yet, as hooks also articulates,
correspondingly this work provides an alternative worldview, standpoint, and consciousness, while simultaneously enabling a self-actualization that is both creative and expansive in how it impacts our identity formation(s) (Hooks, ‘Communion’ 15). Solange’s work as progressive feminist visions is a tangible manifestation of the oppositional works hooks evokes.

When I say “progressive feminist vision,” I am speaking of those “new cultural resources, which provide or offer the potential for resistance... that signals the kind of productive dissonance that occurs as we work at the edges of disciplines, on the margins of social life, and in the vexed spaces between academic and non-academic communities” (Cooper n.d.). Solange’s work moves into and between vexed spaces Black women occupy, negotiating conflict so as to forge a more inclusive feminist future. Emanating from and articulated within her new cultural resources, that is, “A Letter to My Teenage Self” and A Seat at the Table, are Solange’s progressive feminist visions. Though not forcibly didactic, her texts intervene vigorously in the discourse on resistance and ask Black women listeners/readers to intently contemplate what it would mean for them to live unshackled, empowered, and free. Progressive feminist visions are the essence of whatBritney Cooper defines as crunkness: “Crunk(ness) is our mode of resistance that finds its particular expression in the rhetorical, cultural, and intellectual practices of a contemporary generation” (Cooper, emphasis mine). More precisely, the term “crunk” has its origins in southern Black hip-hop culture and combines the words “crazy” and “drunk” to indicate a high level of intoxication, of being out of one’s mind. As articulated by the Crunk Feminist Collective, crunk as a feminist positionality reflects a particular consciousness embodied by women of color whose theorizing is crazy, heady, out of their minds – that is, otherworldly. Crunkness is an embracing of Black feminist principles and politics that recognize the power in combining terms like crunk and feminism (and the cultural, gendered, and racial histories signified in each) as a percussive act (Cooper 2010).

As progressive feminist visions, “A Letter to My Teenage Self” and A Seat at the Table picture a “creative diversity of all humankind that provides the source for tolerance, generosity of spirit, forgiveness, respect for the Other, that the new millennium will require if it is to house the brave new world with the human being as centre of the cosmos” (Nettleford 12). For Solange, generosity of spirit starts at home; thus, this brave new world is not merely an external construct but also must be constituted within. In charting her journey toward that authentic Self Harris-Perry evokes, the letter becomes a blueprint for other Black women interested in reclaiming sovereignty over their lives, circumventing misogyny, and reaffirming their humanity. The title of this essay, “Trust in These Words,” is taken directly from Solange’s letter and conveys its message of hope, demonstrating that resistance is nothing if not an act of optimism. Meanwhile, A Seat at the Table embodies a strong sense of love, pride, and acceptance, where blackness and Black people are openly embraced and esteemed. Self-reclamation is difficult work, which Solange acknowledges: “We just have to be sensitive to each other and not criticize people as much as we do because their truth isn’t our truth, or they aren’t in the same place on the journey as we are – that’s kind of irresponsible” (Mistry thefader.com). For those who share the truths located in this essay, I invite you to journey with me.

“Trust in These Words”: Conjuring Constellations and Sowing Seeds of Self

Written in 2017 and addressed to a teenage Solange, the “Letter to My Teenage Self” is very much “anticipatory – imagining who we humans might become when we truly begin to fill out the contours of our expansive humanity” (Rodney). This section of my argument investigates Solange’s “A Letter” by unpacking her deployment of three metaphors – sowing, constellations, and time – that are used to map her journey and craft the contours of Self. “A Letter” inaugurates unfamiliar images to convey that transitional period Hooks speaks of, where Black women cease to fulfill other people’s agendas and instead clear a self-defined path that moves them toward bringing their visions to fruition. Evincing the notion of sowing, Solange paints a picture of a young woman in pursuit of space.
at the time, you are searching, seeking in every corner and pocket of the world for who you are. take your time, baby girl. there’s no rush to get there, you will sow each of these chapters in the land you become. you will see bits and pieces of them scattered into the skin you grow into. you don’t have to figure everything out now. time will reveal itself. i promise you. (Solange, emphasis in original).

Here, Solange conflates her corporeality with her geography, as if to sow herself into the very space she plans to occupy. Grafting land into her skin is tantamount to scribing a new manifesto – she is rewriting racialized representations and gender limitations that undermine or erase Black women’s experiences. Moreover, sowing skin confronts a long history of racialized gender conventions and misrepresentations, which have been utilized to reify and normalize Black women’s subjugation.

Like the remixing that occurs in “Mad: My Fault Remix,” in this aspirant love letter, Solange rewrites social scripts and feels “very justified in being about to exhibit my truth in all spaces and all forms and I’m not afraid of that. There was a time I was afraid of it.” (Solange 2017). While fear may have served previously as a motivator, it is now her Black feminist knowledge that permits her to usher in a new phase in her development. The United States has a long history of institutionalizing misogynoir, which Moya Bailey defines as “anti-Black misogyny that Black women experience” (1) within systems “designed to subordinate Blacks, devalue women’s work, and mollify demands for economic justice” (Roberts 203). Black people constantly find themselves in subjugation’s crosshairs. By claiming an identity, she was taught to despise; to borrow from Michelle Cliff, Solange does not deal in utopias but utilizes her Black feminist identity as a focal point from which we can have larger conversation about racialized gendered discrimination. It is an occasion to address the ways in which “American civic identity and citizenship are founded on and confirmed through the active denial of Black humanity” (Hall 342). In this way, Solange’s feminism solidifies itself as an application that goes beyond the individual as does its significance.

Refusing to acquiesce to representational distortions, Solange’s new script asserts a “creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we [Black women] are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives” (Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic” 55). Taking issue with the idea that the present condition is the only condition afforded Black women, Solange’s assertion becomes a vision that imagines new ways of being: ways that do not succumb to binaries that bolster American racial hierarchies, gender stratifications, and class value systems. Consequently, sowing becomes “a powerful speculative element in the move from deconstructing existing binaries to visualizing – one might even say fictionalizing – how the world might be changed by those binaries subversion or destruction” (Lothian 5). Solange willfully steps into and moves beyond a place of misrepresentation and into a space of possibilities.

“A Letter” creates an ethereal vibe which gives the reader a tactile experience as they imagine Solange moving through different types of spaces, emerging not quite as someone else rather something more. So what do I mean precisely when I say that Solange emerges as “something more?” Because our current articulation is inadequate to describe the new visions, positionality, and subjectivity Solange now embodies, she must also craft a new language to describe what she has become.

As is commonly known, a star is created when atoms of light encounter force strong enough to permit their nuclei to undergo fusion, that is the joining of two or more atoms. Once this amalgamation happens, that pressure is exerted outward and, with the help of gravity, a stabilized star is born. Solange invites us to read her scars as a kind of stellar evolution that forms the basis of her identity and knowledge. In other words, Solange’s teenage experiences illustrate that she, like a star, also went through darkness, turbulence, and collisions before reintegrating into something vibrant, potent, and beautiful. She envisions a comparable future for other young Black women undertaking a similar journey, “there will be constellations you want to reach for but can’t put your finger on. you will trace them like the scars on your body...you will take the long way to get to these Orions. the long way will become a theme in your life, but a journey you will learn to love” (Solange 2017, emphasis in original). The long way offers time and space for reflection and growth, to rest and rejuvenate. Reflection, growth, rest, and rejuvenation amalgamate into “a spiritual practice, a racial justice issue, and a social justice issue” that becomes an impetus for action and a means to embody the work on an intimate level (Hersey). The long way is what Kia M.Q. Hall, drawing on the works of Irma McClaurin, calls an embodied position coupled with an ideological standpoint that “holds Black women’s experiences of simultaneous and multiple oppressions as the epistemological and theoretical
basis of a ‘pragmatic activism’ directed at combating those social and personal, individual and structural, and local and global forces that pose harm to Black (in the widest geopolitical sense) women’s well-being” (Hall 63)

In the same year Solange penned the aforementioned words, she also debuted a new constellation-themed tattoo. As I imagine a tattoo needle literally sewing a constellation into Solange’s skin, I am also drawn to an image of a clear night sky filled with the constellations Solange conjures in her letter. These constellations gesture toward the complexity of undertaking such a journey. What I find most compelling about Solange’s constellation is that unlike others who look to the stars for messages of hope or in anticipation of it guiding their way, Solange literally writes her own narrative and graphs her own path into her skin. Marking her body in this way allows us to “test the interventions, concepts, and approaches that have been developed using these [feminists] critical lenses, allowing us to see what happens when theoretical bodies meet actual ones” (Lane 634). Replete with stories of struggle and joy, Solange presents us with a celestial version of the old African American adage – making a way out of no way. Failing to find a suitable constellation, she created one. The physical nature of the tattoo takes Solange’s journey from symbolic to literal and moves her transformation from metaphorical, to actual. Sewing informs Black women that they possess the power to transform their dreams into lived realities. They determine the contours of their own bright, beautiful, and commanding constellations.

Enigmatic though unsurprising, Solange has never publicly revealed the name of her constellation. This refusal is reminiscent of a West African tradition, where the Akan people of Ghana refrain from naming new-born infants for the first 8 days of life. Once the allotted time had passed, and the community is confident in the child’s ability to survive, only then is the new-born presented to the community and their name revealed publicly. I speculate something similar is occurring with Solange’s constellation tattoo: after privately birthing and nurturing her authentic Self, then will she divulge the constellation’s name publicly, assured in the knowledge that her communities will welcome that authenticity and that she, too, will survive.

one day you will name yourself, and that name will belong to you. it will not be the ones they ordained: crazy, ugly, attention-seeking, weirdo…. there will be pain, there will be doubt there will be beauty, there will be the unknown. there will be some many moments of joy and delight that the whole universe will feel painted in hues of amber and wonder…but most importantly, there will be you. (Solange 2017, emphasis in original)

When M. Jacqui Alexander asked, “How does it feel to ‘see oneself preserved in the amber of disqualifying metaphors?’ To be made both hypervisible and invisible at the same time?,” (153) what she is really asking is, how do Black women negotiate the very real fact that they are seen only as a facsimile of blackness and womanness? Theirs is not an accurate representation but an act of erasure and replacement, where the images presented do not tell of their lived experiences but serve to uphold narratives put forth in service of “imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (Hooks, “Understanding Patriarchy” 1). Through naming, Solange “seeks to ensure that dispossessed and disempowered groups [have] the means to be self-determining and valued members of society. For too long, Black women’s struggle against the most degrading repression has been left out of the official story” (Roberts 312). These constellations demonstrate what is at stake for Black women, not only in terms of corporeal agency and claiming joy, but also in terms of creating a just world to which they can belong – a world where racialized gendered negotiations of belonging are no longer necessary.

Solange’s use of “time” gives the narrative of becoming a sense of specificity and collectivity, transforming her from a specter in America’s imagination into an autonomous Black woman that can also lay claim to a larger vibrant Black women’s history. The bits and pieces that Solange sows into her skin detail her story; each chapter highlights the sociopolitical, cultural, and regional contexts specific to her journey. Not all black girls/women experience systems of oppression in the same way; their racialized gendered experiences are mitigated by other factors like temporality, locality, color, class, and sexuality. In “A Letter,” as well as in interviews like the one with Mistry, Solange gives us pieces of her Self and her story, and her history: the challenges of becoming a mother while still a teenager; grief of losing a close friend to gun violence; fear of living in a hostile predominantly white environment; separation anxiety and
loneliness due to a cross-country relocation; career disappointments and professional obstacles; and, even, the privilege that comes with growing up upper middle class. The multiplicity of these experiences helped shape the Self Solange presents to us now. These stories demonstrate how “feminist theory and praxis is situated in the particular ways Black women have understood, thought about, and written about problems of racism and sexism across space and time” (Cooper 34).

Rather than essentialize Black girls’/women’s experiences, Solange embraces a collectivity that makes space for individuality. She urges Black girls to study elder Black women and “constantly think of all their stories, their beauty, their stride and their stride. They break down all of the archetypes and stereotypes that you see of black women on TV and in magazines, so you don’t trust those anymore, you thank them for re-writing the script before it was ever etched in your memory” (Solange 2017, emphasis in original). Here, the Black female collective is situated as cultural defenders of Black female adolescence, the path-clearers who shatter limitations and demolish impositions. In this moment, Solange invites the reader to grasp the full significance of Black women’s brilliance and not be limited by stories that focus only on struggle, but to hear also narratives of conviction.

Between the Music and the Madness

Written and produced between 2013 and 2016, Black feminist movements like #MeToo, #SayHerName, and #BlackLivesMatter comprised the sociopolitical backdrop to Solange’s A Seat at the Table. These social justice movements aimed to put an end to racialized and gendered violence against Black people, issues that are also present in Solange’s album. Released 10 days after the 2016 presidential election, A Seat at the Table confirmed what many of us suspected – that the United States had not, in fact, moved beyond race/racism nor gender/sexism into a post-race, prohumanist paradise ushered in by the 2008 presidential election results. Speaking about the album, Solange posits, “I found my voice and it became clearer and clearer through the backdrop of what was happening in the world and everyday life. Lyrically, everything that came to me on this record was directly influenced by my personal journey, but also the journey of so many people around me” (Mistry). A Seat at the Table is bookended by the track Rise, an anthem about self-affirmation, and Don’t Wish Me Well, a farewell to those uninterested in accompanying Solange on this particular journey. Between these tracks, we find narratives of resistance, liberation, and love. In telling this story, the album’s focus oscillates between gender-specific problems impacting Black women, as illustrated by Don’t Touch My Hair and Mad, and larger political issues affecting Black communities as a whole, exemplified by tracks like F.U.B.U. and Borderline: An Ode to Self-Care. Well-received and critically acclaimed, A Seat at the Table is a vital chapter in Black feminists’ narratives and its commitment to telling these stories illustrates the essence of crunkness.

I borrow from crunk feminist Brittany Cooper to describe A Seat at the Table.

This is an [album] by a grown-ass [Black] woman written for other grown-ass [Black] women. This [album] is for [Black] women who expect to be taken seriously and for [Black] men who take grown-ass [Black] women seriously. This is [an album] for [Black] women who know shit is fucked up. These [Black] women want to change things but don’t know where to begin. (Cooper 1)

Solange’s “Mad” is an excellent place to start. The song opens with an acknowledgment of Black women’s anger: “You got the light, count it all joy/You got the right to be mad/But when you carry it alone you find it only getting in the way/They say you gotta let it go” (0:24–0:53). By means of avouchment, Solange unshackles Black women from the burden of invisibility and creates shelter where they can express an anger that is not only real but also valid. Furthermore, the opening lyrics sets an unambiguous expectation that Black women’s truths are ready to be received by the song’s listeners. In this progressive feminist vision, anger is more than an emotion, or even an action – it is a legacy. Black women’s anger is a cultivated consciousness passed down from generation to generation, where “Black women know what it means to
love ourselves in a world that hates us...We know what it means to snatch dignity from the jaws of power and come out standing. We know what it means to face violence and trauma...and carry on anyway” (Cooper 4). We know also what it means to cultivate an authentic Self from the annals of misrepresentations and distortions. Anger is one way of becoming and it “requires equal parts patience and rigor. Becoming is never giving up on the idea that there’s more growing to be done” (Obama 419). Anger becomes a tie that binds the women together; however, rather than being restrictive, the tie provides enough elasticity that one can expand the discourse on Black women’s becoming. In using anger, Solange creates linkages between Black women that weaves their narratives into a single story without erasing specificity.

A significant aspect of “Mad” as a progressive feminist vision is its ability to take us beyond perceived limitations and binaries. Uninterested in replacing one unrelenting and unhealthy stereotype (e.g., angry Black woman) with another (e.g., the strong Black woman), Solange’s anger allows Black women to do what “Black women do best. [She’s] calling America out on her bullshit about racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and a bunch of other stuff” (Cooper 5). However, anger is also a refusal to allow Black women to be “no more than puppets in a unidimensional plot to control their actions” (Roberts 7). Yes, “Mad” is a manifestation of Solange’s resistance, but it is also a manifestation of Black women’s power, optimism, kinship, agency, and vulnerability. Because the “intersections of race, class, and gender oppression limit the creative options of black women,” Solange’s foray into a myriad of artistic spaces (music, film, fashion) answers the challenge to “transform the roles of black people, especially black women, and other people of color from consumers to participatory producers of culture and communication” (Hobson 144). By producing culture, Solange is not simply breaching limitations; she is also producing and protecting knowledge, increasing the archival offerings on Black women’s histories.

Understanding the multifaceted nature of anger helps us makes sense of “Mad’s” conflation of anger and joy. Solange shares, “Although I wanted the album to have those moments of grief, and being able to be angry and express rage, and trying to figure out how to cope in those moments. I also wanted it to make people feel empowered and [that] in the midst of all of this we can still dream, and uplift, and laugh like we always have” (Mistry 2016). Hence, “Mad’s” inquiry, “Where’d your love go?,” is a complex elucidation on how Black women’s anger can go beyond personal boundaries yet remain rooted in self-love. The emphasis on “you” takes this verse from a rhetoric question to a directive that instructs Black women to find as well as enact their anger. For Solange, anger is a causal act that simultaneously personifies resistance (refusing to be diminished), representation (insisting on authentic presence), and reclamation (owning one’s feminist heritage). Taking on the more complex dimensions of the struggle, “Mad” anchors itself as a long-term emancipation project nestled in the complicated history of Black female liberatory politics.

Utilizing anger the way in which Audre Lorde described in her seminal essay “The Uses of Anger,” Solange’s track “Mad” envisions the kind of conceptual shift crunkism promotes. The voluntary act of letting go becomes a mandate for Black women to recognize the full beautiful breadth and depth of their humanity, without qualifiers or justifications. Solange demarcates letting go as recuperative and protective; thereby giving one’s self-permission to let go is an act of self-love and strength. “Mad’s” conceptual shift is where the responsibility to eradicate heteropatriarchy and misogynoir is, as Toni Morrison articulates in Playing in the Dark, removed from “the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers” (90). Put another way, “Mad’s” characterization of letting go means projecting outwardly and holding white America accountable. This point is forcefully illustrated by the “girl” the speaker encounters in “Mad”:

I ran into this girl, she said why you always blaming
Why you can’t just face it?
Why you always gotta be mad? (be mad, be mad, be mad)
I gotta a lot to be mad about (be mad, be mad, be mad)
Why you always talkin’ shit, always be complaining?
Why you always gotta be, why you always gotta be so mad? (be mad, be mad, be mad)

I got a lot to be mad about (1:12–1:39)

...

Where’d your love go? (1:43–1:47)

...

I ran into this girl, I said I’m tired of explaining

Why you can’t just face it?

Man this shit is draining

But I’m not really allowed to be mad (3:36–3:45)

Now, the “girl" whom Solange ran into is not identified as white in the track. I imagine her to be white because unlike my experiences with men of all races and ethnicities, I have never been asked by another Black woman or any woman of color why I am mad. Black women and women of color colleagues have not warned against becoming the “angry Black woman” when I have highlighted injustices or microaggressions. I have had such encounters with white women. So, for the sake of this essay, I will work from the presumption that the “girl" is white. Thus, Solange’s “Why you?” demonstrates a long-standing chasm between Black and white women that has yet to be bridged. The fact that this refrain is repeated no less than nine times throughout the song speaks to its ongoing significance.

For example, Audre Lorde encountered a similar problem in 1984:

A White woman asks me, ‘Are you going to do anything with how we can deal directly with our anger? I feel it’s so important.’ I ask, ‘How do you use your rage?’ And then I have to turn away from the blank look in her eyes, before she can invite me to participate in her own annihilation...[W]omen work on expressing anger, but very little on anger directed against each other. (Lorde, “Uses of Anger” 279)

More than four decades later, Brittney Cooper details comparable encounters: “I, too, have experienced white women become aggressively angry at public lectures when I give talks” (Cooper 173); however, Cooper is not deterred by this hostility because she has “too much feminist shit to do to spend my time hating white women” (Cooper 35). Yet, Black women are constantly “being asked to stretch a little more, to bridge the gap between blindness and humanity” (Lorde 284). As Joni Acuff tells us, the constant stretching coupled with the continuous negotiations of identity and belonging “directly influences the development of an affliction called racial battle fatigue (RBF), defined as exhaustion and ‘stress associated with racial microaggressions [that cause] African Americans to experience various forms of mental, emotional, and physical strain” (174–175). When Solange says, “But I’m not really allowed to be mad,” her conjunction operates similarly to Cooper’s – that is, rather than joining two contrasting ideas, it severs them. Solange’s “but” is akin to Lorde averting her eyes, it removes Black women from the equation, while simultaneously leaving white women to face the harsh reality that, contemporarily and historically, white western feminism has failed to fulfill its long-standing promise of cross-racial solidarity. Adding to these complications, “but” reveals how “[w]hite feminism has worked hard to make the world safer for white women, but it has stridently refused to call out the ways that white women’s sexuality and femininity is used not just as a tool of patriarchy but also a tool for the maintenance of white supremacy” (Cooper 184–185).

“But” is the ultimate clapback against white aggression, indifference, inaction, and tears. Originating in hip-hop culture, a clapback is a lyrical return of fire and, like Juvenalian satire, is grounded in moral indignation. A biting, edgy, withering, and provocative retort, clapback also involves holding-up a symbolic mirror to one’s attackers and forcing them to face themselves. Once again “Mad” remixes a historical script and drops a new narrative. So, when Solange proclaims, “I ran into this girl, I said, ‘I’m tired of
explaining’/Man, this shit is draining/But I’m not really allowed to be mad,” she is turning her anger into what Lorde calls, “fire in the ice zone of uncomprehending eyes of white women who see in [Black women’s] experience... only new reasons for fear or guilt. And [her] anger is no excuse for [white women] not dealing with [their] blindness, no reason to withdraw from the results of [their] own actions” (Lorde, “Uses of Anger” 284). Picking up where Lorde left off, Solange cultivates a consciousness for the next generation of Black women by affirming their right to be tired, drained, and mad as hell, while also reminding them to use their anger in the service of Black women’s humanity.

Policing “Bad” Black Hair and the Women Attached to It

When Kimberly Wallace-Sanders (4) posited that “Black women are trapped by this externally imposed second skin of misconception and misrepresentation,” she was not lying. The constant demand made by various entities that Black women capitulate to particular “standards” that are not placed upon other women shows how Black women’s bodies are unrelentingly policed. A wide range of entities like the military (Army and Navy), national retail stores (Banana Republic), news outlets (ABC’s affiliate KTBS and NBC’s affiliate The Weather Channel), restaurant chains (Hooters), and the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) have engaged in anti-Black discrimination against Black women with natural hair. These examples illustrate how institutional racism brings together seemingly divergent entities that then intersect, intercept, and fortify one another, making it nearly impossible for vulnerable and marginalized populations to escape this panoptic exertion of power. Reading Solange’s “Don’t Touch My Hair” as a progressive feminist vision, I investigate America’s complicated and problematic relationship with Black women’s natural hair. For some people, Black women’s natural hair symbolizes defiance and thereby represents a threat; for other folx, natural hair signal liberation.

For whatever reason, around 2010 TSA began searching Black women’s hair at an alarming rate. Having personally experienced this hair-search on many occasions, I, like Solange, was initially puzzled as to how our hair posed a threat to national security. However, soon enough many other Black women would have similar experiences and ask similar questions.

In 2011, a hairdresser in Dallas said she was ‘humiliated’ after TSA officials demanded to search her afro. Similarly, MSNBC host Melissa Harris-Perry has also spoken openly about her own experience getting her hair searched in airports.

In 2013, she recounted an instance when TSA officials pulled her aside and ran their fingers through her braids. ‘I was sent on my way feeling a little violated and unclear about why, exactly, that intrusion was necessary,’ Harris-Perry wrote at the time. ‘Because if your $170,000 machine can see under my clothes, but can’t figure out I’m not hiding a bomb in my braids, maybe it’s time to recalibrate the machine.’ (Culp-Ressler)

Solange’s TSA hair incident is endemic of lager sociopolitical issues around race and gender that are often played out publicly on Black women’s bodies. In exposing this subjugation, Solange took to Twitter and tweeted: “Discrim-FRO-nation. My hair is not a storage drawer... Lets (sic) play a little game called: “What did TSA find in Solange’s Fro?”” (@solangeeknowles). Although Solange uses humor to underscore the absurdity of this incident, the pain, frustration, and anger in her tweets reveal an acute awareness that this experience is not anecdotal but historical. TSA represents just one of many ways in which America seeks to ostracize Black women and deliberately reinforce the misconception that they are threatening and unbelonging. The emphasis on the word “fro” and its incorporation into the word “discrimination” stresses the dire nature of this reality. Whether under the guise of assimilationist practices or respectability politics, Black women’s hair is used as the barometer of belonging. It has become a measuring stick deployed against them in order to “remove their humanity. After all, they are Other, so their skin is foodstuff, the space between their thighs is mysterious, and they have never, ever been innocent” (Kendall 86). Solange ends her tweets with, “Ok. Game over.” Although she is referencing her need to board her flight, this signoff
can also be read as foreshadowing future resistance, where she and other Black women put an end to the
game of convert racism.

Despite settling a lawsuit in 2016 brought against them by the human rights organization American Civil
Liberties Union, TSA’s policing of Black women’s bodies has left a lasting and traumatic impact. Such
policing speaks to America’s Jim Crow nostalgia, a nostalgia that seeks to physically and psychologically
obliterate blackness. Unlike other observable physical characteristics – width of nose, eye color, fullness of
lips, and skin color – hair is relatively easy to change. Consequently, Black women’s refusal to alter their
hair from its natural state is often perceived as threatening and militant; so “[w]hen Black women don
Afrocentric hair, it may cause the stereotypes associated with Black people to become particularly salient”
(Opie and Phillips). Black women’s cultural memories are rooted in their hair and tells a precolonial story of
freedom, independence, and autonomy. Reifying hair styles which dates back centuries reminds Black
people that their history does not begin with slavery and they too were creators of vast civilizations and
complex cultures. In its refusal to be tamed (and I use that word deliberately), natural hair undermines the
Western notions of Black inferiority. In so doing, “black hair [becomes] a unique site of analysis for
transgressions of socially appropriate interpersonal interaction...[and] illuminates the physical and psychic
intrusions that black women with natural hair undergo as narratives of black female availability and
inviolability collide in the realm of the everyday” (Morrison 83).

Nowhere in our quotidian lives is this collision made more evident than in the passing of a law known
as the CROWN ACT. Proposed by California State Senator Holly Mitchell, the “Creating a Respectful and
Open World for Natural Hair” is a law that “prohibits race-based hair discrimination, which is the denial of
employment and educational opportunities because of hair texture or protective hairstyles including
braids, locs, twists or bantu knots” (JOYCollective, emphasis in original). A few years after Solange told
white people to keep their hands to themselves, the CROWN ACT has become law in nearly a dozen states
and over 20 cities and counties, with legislation pending or prefiled in 28 states and the district of Columbia.
The absurdity of needing such a law is quintessential Americana. It also is an unwavering symbol of the
work that lies ahead.

If the track “Mad” tells us that Black women must make something out of nothing, then “Don’t Touch
My Hair” shows us how Black women do this work. Coupled with recouping Black beauty standards, “Don’t
Touch My Hair’s” lyrics convey an unmitigated pride in Black women’s culture, intellectual traditions, and
everyday ways of knowing. When I was growing up, like most Black girls, getting my hair “did” was a rite
of passage. I recall learning about family history, romantic entanglements, neighborhood shenanigans, and
navigating racism, all while sitting on the front stoop as my older sister wove intricate and precise cornrows
into my hair. These were early lessons in Black girl magic. So, when Solange alternatively refers to her hair
as feelings, pride, soul, crown, glory, and my shit (which, in Black American parlance, is used to denote an
intimate connection to something one deems of deep and personal importance), it indicates that these are
not just similes offered to counter dominant stereotypes. The lyrics are an affirmation of the ways in which
Black women “begin to make meaning of their lives and bodies and how those meanings manifest them-
selves culturally” (Rooks 21). I place “Don’t Touch My Hair” alongside Audre Lorde’s “Uses of the Erotic,”
Alice Walker’s “Everyday Use,” and Kimberlé Crenshaw’s (149) concept of intersectionality to encourage
Black women to mine the quotidian – they are a significant aspect of Black women’s ways of knowing and
Black feminist praxis.

In a 2016 interview with Anupa Mistry, Solange remarks, “We, as black people, have historically not
been represented as regal beings in society” (Mistry 2016). I position “Don’t Touch My Hair” as a retort to
this absence and show how “images produced by African-Americans [can] be taken up and understood in a
way that mediates the power of dominant discourses” (Rooks 36). While the phrase “controlling the
narrative” has become cliché, in this instance, its presence is appropriate. Solange’s A Seat at the Table,
and especially “Don’t Touch My Hair,” is interested in telling what Bridgett Davis calls a textured story,
“with a Black woman at its center, a context for her complex life, and a multilayered plot... exploring the
humanity (rather than pathology and stereotypes) in contemporary Black life” (333). Appropriately, “Don’t
Touch my Hair” is not merely a song – it is a proclamation, an autobiography, and a manifesto. It is a work
of art and a political doctrine that fiercely protects Black women’s humanity, while simultaneously embrac-
ing their textured history and all it embodies.
Unlike the tentative teenager we encounter in “A Letter to My Teenage Self,” the adult Solange of A Seat at the Table has confidently come of age, and “Don’t Touch My Hair” represents the culmination of her journey. As a grown-ass woman firmly rooted in her Black woman’s humanity, Solange’s testimonial/lyrics demonstrate a keen understanding of who she is, from whence she comes, and the knowledge(s) she has inherited. The brief refrain, “They don’t understand/What it means to me/Where we chose to go/Where we’ve been to know,” signifies that Solange has become one of the elder Black women she once sought (0:42–0:52). Moreover, her pointed reference to “they” indicates she is free of societal constraints and expectations; she no longer seeks approval of nor offers justification for her existence. At this point, she is practically daring America to challenge her right to belong. In other words, “Don’t test [her] mouth/They say the truth is [her] sound” (1:58–2:09). Here, Solange’s earlier fears are supplanted by a ravenousness desire to claim truths that are both corporeal and epistemological. “Don’t Touch My Hair” is a radical act of self-preservation, self-affirmation, self-erudition, and self-love. It is both essence and history.

Conclusion: Wake-Up and Rise

Often in our Black feminist explorations, we are looking for “indisputable signs that marginality is at least beginning to end” (Burton 267). In true Pavlovian fashion, we repetitively gaze outward in search of this evidence. The remarkable thing about Solange’s work is its power to turn our vision inward; it demands that Black women become the marker of progress. In A Seat at the Table’s opening track, “Rise,” Solange invites Black women to “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” (0:01–0:23). Typically, the act of falling is involuntary and can symbolize failure, mistakes, or danger; correspondingly, the notion of crumbling entreats images of rupture, where things are literally falling apart. Solange’s work, however, rejects such constricts and delineates these acts as recuperative and protective. In this way, falling represents an opportunity for self-reflection and growth, while crumbling can be seen as a regenerative undertaking of strength. Both are acts of knowing and surviving. Akin to the academic code-switching mentioned previously, here Solange discards cultural code-shifting. Shifting, as Cristina Cruz-Gutierrez explains, “is a survival mechanism for Black women who have to ignore racist comments, alter their speech tone and appearance, and even relax their hair so as to be deemed not aggressive, but professional and feminine” (62). Regrettable, we often forget the insidious nature of racialized gender subjugation and that Black women are not immune from and often internalize these damaging representations. Code-shifting is one way to cope; Solange’s progressive feminist visions, however, chart a different way out.

A mosaic of stories, bodies, and knowledges, A Seat at the Table and “A Letter to My Teenage Self” are suggestive, not prescriptive, progressive feminist visions situated within a Black female heritage. Solange’s work illuminates the various means by which Black women can and do contest the ever-changing nature of anti-Black subjugation, without losing sight of Black women’s humanity. Through this illumination, A Seat at the Table and “A Letter to My Teenage Self” remind us that resistance, while critical, is not emblematic of a holistic Black experience. Solange is equally interested in the latter as she is the former. Countering representational distortions, Solange’s progressive feminist visions reaffirm her identity on her own terms: “There would be no hesitation should I be asked to describe myself today. I am a Black woman. A woman yes, but a Black woman first and last. Black womanhood has been at the root of my entire existence since birth” (Solange 2017). Akin to Britney Cooper, Solange reintroduces her Self – “not merely a feminist who happens to be Black [but] a Black Feminist, capital B, capital F” (Cooper 34, emphasis in original). In these two feminist visions, Solange has mapped a brilliant constellation. Now, it is up to other Black women to add their own stars and become free-ass motherfuckers.

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