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Be Weary: Resistance and Refusal in Black American Music

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Weary bodies are frequently seen as hopeless, withdrawn, or useless. The common understanding is that weariness is uncritical, limited by fatigue, and always politically inactive. In the realm of Black expression, however, the recurring affect of weariness (and its recognition) is one that elucidates an impasse of endurance and resistance. The seemingly diametric theses of Max Roach's 'Members Don't Git Weary' and Solange Knowles' 'Weary' evoke this paradox of survival, bringing necessary complexity to discussions of subjugation, agency, and refusal in the Black American context.

The common understanding of weariness is often tied to the affect of fatigued, political inaction. In the realm of Black expression, weariness is further conceptualized as an exhausted, mournful feeling – a result of legacies that wear individuals down and deplete any capacity for resistance. Any consideration of weary, Black expression, however, must first conceptualize the affective state it produces: a mode of being that is equally reflective of trauma and hardship as it is a scene of endurance, fortitude, and aliveness. For this reason, I would like to consider Black music that deliberately posits weariness as a paradoxical impasse through conflicting sound and lyric. In recordings like Max Roach's 'Members Don't Git Weary' and Solange Knowles' 'Weary', the two songs' seemingly diametric theses both encounter what Elena Gorfinkel calls a "corporeal threshold" (315) by reclaiming recalcitrance and discontent in the face of prolonged violence. While tiredness is an indistinct "strain made manifest" (Gorfinkel 314), the threshold of weariness is additionally and inexorably concerned with "duration" (ibid). My focus on Knowles and Roach's recordings aims to illuminate weariness' import to Black American performance across historical moments. Engaged with weariness as an affective state, Black music is particularly able to enact a bending under weight that stretches, intensifies, and crosses the boundaries of human desire. What interests me here is the possibility for that bending to arch toward refusal through purposeful contradiction, an inevitable breakdown that can found radical change. Weariness

implies survival under the weight of the unimaginable. Its affective paradox thus delineates what can and will no longer be accepted.

First, consider 'Members Don't Git Weary', from composer, drummer, and activist Max Roach's album of the same name, recorded in June of 1968. Recorded in the wake of Black death (the assassination of Medgar Evers in 1963, the assassination of Malcom X in 1965, the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968), 'Members Don't Git Weary' conveys a sense of deep mournfulness but still sounds completely alive, restless even. The song begins with a shimmering of ascending notes on a piano. And then, the brisk crash of a cymbal that punctuates the tumbling phrase like an exclamation mark. A richly toned voice emerges from the foreground of the recording and sings, "Members, don't git weary" (Roach 0:04). Yet at the end of this phrase the voice cracks almost imperceptibly, destabilizing the very message that the voice expresses. More instruments are introduced in the aftermath of this sonic paradox, bending from below to support the melody the way you might apply pressure to a wound. The voice begins again, now with the full support of the band, to sing in a sorrowful yet determined tone: "Members, don't git weary / Members, don't git weary / For the work, for the work 'mos done" (Roach 0:04-0:30). Throughout the recording, staunchly repeated lyrics are unsettled by frenetic instrumentation. It is this incongruity that compels the listener. What theories of Blackness are produced by a lyric proscription of weariness that is undermined by sound?

A turn to 'Weary' by Solange Knowles, from her 2016 album *A Seat at the Table*, produces a similar inquiry. The song begins sparsely with the sound of thumping kick drums, a grooving bass line played by Raphael Saadiq, and contemplative piano chords on the downbeat of each measure. At the end of the drum's pattern, the top note of the piano chord stays the same, but the structure underneath sinks down even further. The leading harmonic voice resolves the melody yet adds a bit of tension, like an unanswered question. The drums sound out one last punch before stopping abruptly, providing a suspended silence just before the progression starts again and Solange begins to sing: "I'm weary of the ways of the world / Be weary of the ways of the world" (Knowles 0:25-0:36). Evoking the near homophone of weary and wary, Solange's

vocals evoke a sense of exhaustion and suspicion, cautioning the listener to do the same. She croons, “I’m gonna look for my body yeah, I’ll be back real soon” (0:49-0:54), distantly expressing a sentiment of alienation from a world that she is weary of. Underneath the plaintive lyrics, however, lies a tone of dissent. The groove is relentless and ultimately expands into layered harmony as she sings, “But you know that a king is only a man / With flesh and bones he bleeds just like you do / He said, ‘Where does that leave you?’ / And do you belong? / I do” (1:11-1:37). Knowles’ expression of disembodiment is answered by a reminder of male authority’s fragility while the percussion and piano step in to affirm that implicit declaration. Her mention of weariness is reproachful and abstract, but the sounds underneath lead the song to a point of assertion, even gesturing towards outright defiance.

When it comes to the Black cultural imagination, the word “weary” is often evoked by music and protest, especially given the term’s frequent appearance in Black spirituals. Songs like ‘Walk Together, Children’ and ‘Keep Your Lamp Trimmed and Burning’ specifically contain mentions of weariness in the lyrics, while songs like ’I’m So Glad (Trouble Don’t Last Always)’, ‘Steal Away’ and ‘Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen’ reflect themes of endurance and faith in the face of immense hardship. Solange Knowles’ ‘Weary’ and Max Roach’s ‘Members Don’t Git Weary’ were recorded almost fifty years apart and with opposite directives, but nonetheless demonstrate the potential of Black music to “resist containment but hold history” (Haley 212). Both songs produce intentionally blurred genre boundaries, but affirm their genetic kinship with jazz, gospel, and the spirituals that are antecedents to many forms of Black American music, being one of the largest and most significant forms of American folksong. Saidiya Hartman’s seminal study of the quotidian terrors of slavery, *Scenes of Subjection,* describes song in that context as an “emblem of oppression” (27). A focus on Black sound and music is therefore critical to our understanding of weariness that configures the contours of desire. Within the framework of enslavement, weary bodies are most often seen as hopeless, withdrawn, or useless. In song, however, weariness also implicitly conveys a capacity for endurance. Drawing on the work of Sianne Ngai, we can perhaps categorize weariness as an “ugly feeling”, a feeling with a “morally degraded and seemingly unjustifiable status” (10) that tends to “produce an unpleasurable feeling about the feeling”

(ibid). As an ugly feeling, weariness resides at a crossroads between labor and fatigue (Barthes 20). This complicates binary categorizations between feelings we *should* and *should not* have. If we take a step further and consider weariness as a Black epistemology, this gesture brings a necessary complexity to discussions of subjugation and agency. The violence of American slavery cannot be said to ever end or have ended, even if we manage to clumsily isolate the event of slavery and delineate its beginning and conclusion. Black American subjectivity is necessarily connected to legacies of enslavement by the very nature of this shared history, and weariness exists as a knowledge-producing framework that refuses to view contemporary injustice in isolation.

Considering the radical potential of weariness, we might first turn to its relation to time and temporal domination. Temporal domination is essential to slavery, which has the purpose of disorienting, objectifying and terrifying the captive body, as Calvin Warren writes in *The Psychic Hold of Slavery: Legacies in American Expressive Culture* (60). An enslaved person is seized from their "motive will" (Spillers 67) and denied knowledge of where they are, how long they've been there, how long their suffering will continue, and if it will ever end. This domination is perpetuated through asymmetrical knowledge of time and is one of many factors that separates the enslaved person from the enslaver. In addition to seizing the captive body as property, slave owners seized the time of enslaved people, "reifying it into a commodity of exchange and an instrument of torment" (Warren 61). Stealing away, showing up late, quitting early, working slowly, or refusing to wait deferentially could result in being punished violently until an enslaved person matched the slave owner's measurement of progress and appropriate daily rhythms. However, against the idea that Black people are disoriented within metaphysical time and therefore "temporally homeless" (Warren 61), I contend that weariness embodies the flaw of forced disorientation. The affirmation of bodies that tire proves an immediacy and legitimacy to the desires of enslaved people, thus affronting temporal apathy and denial. In a practical sense, weariness affirms the necessity of rest. Psychically, it keeps its own time. As a "corporeal threshold" (Gorfinkel 315), weariness might then be a step toward redressing and bearing witness to the broken body. To conceptualize weariness as registering one's own denied physical

boundaries demonstrates the importance of any performance that externalizes that interiority. Bodies can be weary at rest, but they are always restless.

Slavery is not the only way to understand Blackness or Black music, and yet its traumatic memory haunts Black American culture. Returning to Black expression during enslavement takes us to the very beginning of what Hortense Spillers clarifies as "a rupture and a radically different kind of cultural continuation" (68). To white observers, the music of the enslaved could often be misunderstood as evidence of enslaved people's happiness. But as Fredrick Douglass remarks in his 1845 memoir, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, enslaved people sang the most when they were unhappy (15). Critically, Douglass describes their tones as breathing both "prayer and complaint" (13). Song conveyed the sorrows of unrelenting atrocity, but still attempted to answer questions about liberation; what it could feel like if your access to freedom was not only based in imagination and what miracles might be necessary to get free. Expressions of weariness implicitly refused the enslaver's definitions of reality—that enslaved people were immune to tiredness, were incapable of emotion, and were subhuman. Song could provide a psychic space for this denied weariness.

And yet, while the ideas and emotions expressed in Black spirituals are a valuable way to understand the interiorities of enslaved people, our knowledge of spirituals is, in truth, reliant on translation and interpretation. Music historian Guthrie P. Ramsey Jr. writes that Black cultural practices – slave songs in particular – invited new sites for "scientific objective inquiries into the souls of black folk" (105). If notation served to distill Black music in the interest of comprehension, Guthrie argues that the act of notating Black spirituals might have inevitably "divorced them from black culture" (108). Furthermore, Blackness is a positional framework through which both objectivity *and* humanity are performed. We have to ask, as Fred Moten does in *In the Break,* whether "performance in general is ever outside the economy of reproduction" (4). Our engagement with weariness as an affect of Black performance is inseparable from these limitations. This, in turn, generates a crisis of methodology. Should we trace expressions of

weariness through melody or lyrics? Voice or instrumentation? Notation or collective memory? Put simply: when we hear weariness in a song, what are we *actually* hearing?

It might be best to begin with the elements of weariness that resist our inquiry in the first place. Roland Barthes articulates weariness as an endless process of ending that brings us to the limits of our capacities, what he describes as a "paradoxical infinity" (Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcàzar 158; Barthes 18). His theory draws from Maurice Blanchot, who turned to weariness as a landscape for study and gave it a name: *le Neutre* (the Neutral). Weariness, Blanchot admits, makes for difficult communication, but ultimately offers something otherwise uncommunicable (Teeuwen 3; Blanchot xxi). Barthes later cites Blanchot's idea that weariness does "not impede the work, but the work demands this being weary without measure" (Gorfinkel 316; Blanchot xvii). Gorfinkel also draws from Barthes, suggesting that weariness is "coextensive with labor, a condition for its continuity" (316) because one completes the task through weariness. This is compatible with Barthes' explanation of fatigue as being, in one sense, the opposite of death, since death is an unthinkable definitive while fatigue represents the infinite "but livable in the body" (Barthes 20). But Rudolphus Teeuwen identifies a critical difference between Blanchot and Barthes' engagements with *le Neutre.* Blanchot defines weariness as a state in which the weary subject does not reflect, strive to solve problems, or demonstrate any interest beyond weariness (Teeuwen 4). Barthes' interpretation of *le Neutre*, on the other hand, digresses in its exemption from struggle and is posited as "recalcitrant, rather than heroic, a matter of sabotage rather than revolution" (Teeuwen 7). It would seem that Black expressions of weariness produce this recalcitrant affect by remaining active in their unplaceability.

From post-emancipation nineteenth and twentieth-century civil rights movements, we see the denial of weariness as a primary method of resistance. The traditions arising out of Black churches and leadership included narratives of social uplift and pragmatism that influenced the activism of the time, and throughout the twentieth century (Butler 346). Spirituals certainly influenced these movements, beginning as expressions of faith that proliferated in the last few decades of the eighteenth century leading up to the abolishment of legalized slavery in the 1860s

(Library of Congress). Certain spirituals, such as 'Walk Together, Children' and 'Steal Away' can be regarded as codified protest songs that emphasize perseverance with calls to "not get weary" and statements that the speaker "ain't got long to stay here". Paying attention solely to the text of these spirituals might conceive of weariness as a mere obstacle to deliverance or liberation, or both. But if we turn to expressions of weariness beyond lyric, we might consider 'We Shall Overcome', a gospel song that became a key anthem of the twentieth-century American civil rights movement. The lyric ancestry of 'We Shall Overcome' is commonly attributed to the hymn 'I'll Overcome Someday' written by Charles Albert Tindley, a Black American minister and composer (Bobetsky 26). In original publications of the text of Tindley's 'I'll Overcome Someday', the hymn bears the epigraph "Ye shall overcome if ye faint not" (26). This epigraph is closely related to the Bible verse Galatians 6:9, "And let us not be weary in doing good, for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not". In Tindley's hymn, the "world is one great battlefield" (line 1) and overcoming "someday" requires an unyielding heart (lines 7-8). This message carries through to the hymn's adaptation in 'We Shall Overcome', a song that includes verses like "Black and white together someday" and "We'll walk hand in hand someday" and "We shall all be free someday" (Marable and Mullings 373).

For the 21st century listener, each repetition of "someday" almost comically flattens the hopeful sentiment it attends to. The song's sonic ancestry, on the other hand, starkly contrasts the adapted text. Note that the melody of 'We Shall Overcome' was derived from the "slave song" 'No More Auction Block For Me'. The lyrics of the latter contrastingly reflect a deeply-held temporal certainty, refusing the auction block and the driver's lash – not someday, but right now. While 'We Shall Overcome' textually places the prospect of change within an ambiguous, open-ended horizon of future time, its melody betrays that message in its relation to immediacy. In similar contradiction, the staunch verbal commandment of Max Roach's 'Members Don't Git Weary' is expressed mournfully, weighed down by the same kind of palpable exhaustion it disallows and intertwined with the band's frenetic, rageful accompaniment. Solange's charge to "be weary" on the second track of *A Seat at the Table* is given with a gentle touch, but floats above a drum pattern that is anything but tired, pressing forward *just* ahead of the beat. These

varying paradoxes of sound and word evoke the affect of weariness from different positions but are alike in their conflicting engagements. Where resistance defines itself consciously, sound possesses the ability to embody something more than resistance: refusal.

Weariness characteristically expresses refusal when the body is compelled otherwise. But as an affect, it occupies a puzzling position: is one to desire weariness, desire the feelings of unprocessed denial? Even in forms of Black expression that call for a lack of weariness, the affect of listening remains a reminder of how weary we really are or could be. Barthes acknowledges this bind when referring to *le Neutre*, but also states that *le Neutre* "is not an objective, a target: it's a passage" (Barthes 68). That passage emphasizes desire, not the object. In this manner, Teeuwen notes that Barthes gives his utopia of *le Neutre* a "gestural and yearning indeterminacy" (15). Even so, we must be careful not to envision the passage of weariness as a temporary sojourn that only delays eventual refusal. From this perspective, weariness has radical potential, but only as a temporary state that precedes action. To the contrary, weariness is not intrinsically a path to overcome. Anyone who labors has a "right to be weary" (Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcázar 163) that is independent of when, where, or how that weariness manifests. The right to weariness engenders new things out of being "fed up". When and where weariness corporeally and metaphysically recognizes the threshold of what we can endure, it indicates a threshold that has already been exceeded. Recognizing the threshold asserts loss, which Hartman describes as a crucial element in redressing the breach introduced by slavery (74). Weariness remembers the captive body in its captivity and insistently proves violation in the fullness of its radical potential. By complicating binaries of endurance/weakness, pleasurable/non-pleasurable, moral/immoral, and justifiable/unjustifiable, the affect of weariness remains alive to the unfinished project of redress and liberation. What the "ugly feeling" of weariness indicates is a strain and resistance that exists *now*.

In an American culture that is continually confronted by ghosts "it can neither spit out nor swallow" (Cheng 58), the turn to weariness shifts critical attention from the question of what we *should do* with these ghosts (introject or eject, swallow or spit) to the question of *how* and *why*

we long for introjection and ejection in the first place. What if we understood weariness as an affect that holds the unpalatable ghost in the mouth? Weariness therefore materializes as neither accepting or denying what's within us and is definitionally legible on the body. The paradox of weariness refuses to place the object of Black trauma in any foreclosed or idealistic linear schema of time and instead recognizes the perpetually regenerated violence of enslavement. Until that violence ceases to reinvent itself, expressions of weariness affirm the weight we bear, the weight we have survived thus far, and the weight we refuse to bear any longer. We recognize our individual and collective struggle and feel the strain of a system of oppression that works against itself, pushing the limits of its own fragility with every passing moment and every bit of weight that is added and denied. That system holds and holds against revolution, but it can't hold forever. And we all know what happens to things that don't bend.

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