Afrofuturism and Post-Soul Possibility in Black Popular Music

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When incense burns, smoke unfurls
Analog girl in a digital world
The rasta style flower child
Za dip dip dow zip dip dow
The gold tooth smile
Split them vowels
Bling bloom bling
Melanated
I'm bout ta give birth to church
But everybody wanna
Ask this earth . . .
What good do your words do if they can't understand you?
—Erykah Badu, "On&On" (*Baduizm*)

From the outset, this Postsoul Era has been characterized by an extreme indifference towards the human. The human is a pointless and treacherous category.
—Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant Than the Sun*

This essay responds to a challenge posed by Alexander G. Weheliye in his article " 'Feenin': Posthuman Voices in Contemporary Black Popular Music" to "turn the critical dial on our radio to those lower frequencies" found within contemporary R&B music (39). In that article, which appears in a special issue of *Social Text* devoted to the emerging field of inquiry called Afrofuturism, Weheliye makes the important observation that current R&B music garners relatively less critical consideration than other black popular music, such as jazz and blues or even hip hop. Weheliye suggests that contemporary R&B music has suffered as an object of critical inquiry mostly for its association with the devalued site of urban radio—its pop sounds and artistic banality—but also for its tenacious hold on a kind of critically problematic and theoretically passé black humanism. Though black folks have strategically altered humanist rhetoric and ideals in our freedom struggles, humanism has never been a benign sign. It has generally and rightfully come under suspicion for its hegemonic assertion of Enlightenment ideals of the liberal white male subject. As an alternative, the idea of the post-human has been posited as a remedy by those within and outside of black cultural studies, particularly in the space of futurist studies. As some would have it, in a post-human universe governed by zeroes and ones, the body ceases to matter, thereby fracturing and finally dissolving ties to racialized subjectivity, positionality, and "self." The rising specter of the post-human as a theoretical model to explain and analyze past and future black Atlantic experience is connected to the advent of "post-soul" or "post-black" aesthetics, through which contemporary artists and writers strategically reject blackness as a unitary subject position. While the

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post-human has been a useful intervention into humanist discourse, Weheliye suggests that this shift leaves aspects of black expression on the critical dust heap. In other words, as cultural criticism spirals out into a post-*whatever* cosmos and challenges to blackness receive larger audience, we will find ourselves in a future in which it becomes less attractive to engage with black cultural products that fail to abandon humanist claims. In this landscape, R&B becomes a relic of a bygone era. It is your analog television when everything goes digital in 2009. It is an artifact of the Old Ways Of Thinking.

Neo-soul is not dead. It is thriving precisely because black artists like Badu liberate themselves from genre labels, assert individual subjectivities, and complicate the meanings of blackness and black music.

Rather than theorizing himself out of attending to contemporary R&B music, Weheliye instead revises distinctions held among ideas of humanism, black humanism, and the post-human. Black humanism, he argues, has never truly been about the Enlightenment humanist project. The experiences of the Middle Passage, slavery, colonization, and racism have rendered that claim impossible. Humanism, no matter how politically and socially utilitarian it has been to the project of black liberation, has remained a space of "always, but not quite" in black cultural production; it has been a rhetorical and ideological tool in a trick bag of survival. Post-human notions address the issue of black resistance from another angle. Exactly because the experiences of the Middle Passage, slavery, colonization, and racism have worked to exclude black people from humanist claims, music journalist Kodwo Eshun writes that for black people "the human is a pointless and treacherous category" (*Brilliant* -005).[1] Rejection of the category "human" not only repudiates its correlates "subhuman" or "nonhuman," terms employed to strip dignity from black folk, but also it renounces any essentialized claims to blackness at all. Eshun's link of the post-human to the "Postsoul Era," in the epigraph above, is an interesting and important link; his words serve as a point of departure for my look at black popular music. My project seeks to explore the intersections among post-soul and post-human articulations of black subjectivity in the near future and beyond, through a re-imagination of contemporary R&B music, particularly the contested category of neo-soul, within these overlapping discursive planes. Perhaps these concepts can be used to re-invest various popular music styles with critical significance that now appears absent.

While the characteristic trope of "alien-nation" within post-human thought provides a brilliant explanatory model for Eshun and others to explore black Atlantic experience and, by extension, a number of radical black music styles—electronic music and experimental jazz, for example—it typically leaves mainstream black music behind. In large measure, popular R&B music still trades on the cultural capital of the thinking, desiring, speaking, and embodied black humanist subject. Black popular music remains distinctly grounded in a racial embodiment that, at least on first glance, seems to refuse the promise held within post-human articulations. There is, however, I think, a much more syncretic disposition available to black artists that belies this seeming conflict between the forward-thinking possibilities found in post-human thought and the tenacious humanism of R&B. Even Kodwo Eshun writes that "all music is made of both tendencies running simultaneously at all levels, so you can't merely oppose a

humanist R&B with a posthuman Techno" (*Brilliant* -006). Instead, I want to suggest, as Weheliye does, that "these inscriptions of humanity in black culture provide particular performances of the human—singularities, if you will, that always incorporate their own multiplicities—as opposed to mere uncritical echoes of the white liberal humanist subject" (30). Neo-soul music is one such singularity, which has "reframed the subjectivities" of black people and suggested identities *both* embodied and disembodied, human and post-human (Weheliye 30). I will consider neo-soul singer and performer Erykah Badu as a text that articulates a post-soul sensibility that both relies on R&B's humanist claims to blackness as well as breaks its boundaries. Badu offers herself as an "analog girl in a digital world," which operates as the central metaphor with which to explore humanist and post-human subjectivities. I explore what is practical and useful about the way Badu navigates these humanist claims, as well as how Afrofuturism, as articulated by Weheliye, Alondra Nelson, Eshun, and others, provides a theoretical space to reinvent and reinvest Western humanism and notions of the post-human toward the interests of black people.

Briefly, before engaging with Badu's work, I want to discuss Afrofuturism and the ways it interacts with post-soul thought. Afrofuturist thought posits a reconciliation between an imagined disembodied, identity-free future and the embodied identity-specific past and present, which can provide a critical link through which post-soul artists can express a radical black subjectivity. What is at stake is the way we collectively engage with struggles for social justice in the near future and beyond. As bell hooks asserts in her critique "Postmodern Blackness," the abandonment of identity politics, particularly radical black subjectivity, may subvert any efforts to renew black liberation struggle or create new strategies of resistance (26). To be sure, post-soul gestures have released black identity from the confines of static representation, what Eshun calls a "compulsory black condition" (*Brilliant* -003). Yet, artists within the post-soul moment at the very least have sought to complicate notions of what black cultural production should look and sound like. Like Alain Locke's New Negro of 1925, the new "New Negro" of the millennial age has sought to escape the "shadow, so to speak, [that] has been more real to him than his personality" (Locke 631). Contemporary black artists now possess a relative freedom to "play mas' " with identity, which refers to an Afro-Caribbean cultural retention linked to annual Carnival celebrations, in which revelers don masks and costumes to participate in the festivities. To "play mas' " affords the Carnival reveler the mobility to shift personae in ways that counteract the limitations of identity imposed by the hegemonic gaze of race, gender, class, sexuality, and religion. Coinciding with curator Thelma Golden's evocation of the word "freestyle" in her description of "post-black," this playful impulse "refers to the space where the musician (improvisation) or for the dancer (the break) finds the groove and goes all out in a relentless and unbridled expression of the self. . . . They embrace the dichotomies of high and low, inside and outside, tradition and innovation . . . and speak to an individual freedom that is a result of this transitional moment" (15). Yet, to pick up hooks's important point again, this inventive and exploratory play should not be to the detriment of collectivity and struggle. There requires a recognition that identity, no matter how liberated it is, remains political. Racism and white supremacy continue to overdetermine hopes of black futurity, thereby necessitating nothing less than empowered individuality.

The Afrofuturistic intelligentsia appraises this overdeterminancy of history and memory on black bodies and applies it to specific conceptions of the burgeoning digital age.[2] As critic Alondra Nelson explains in her essay "Future Texts," Afrofuturism "offers critiques of the promises of prevailing theories of technoculture." Afrofuturism challenges the post-human ideology of an imag-

ined raceless future. It recognizes that blackness still has meaning in the virtual age, and it still implies that which is primitive and antithetical to technological progress (8). For example, Adam J. Banks notes that contemporary Digital Divide discourse continues to highlight blacks' lack of access to and facility with technology, rather than our production of it (192). Instead of contemplating black innovations within fields of technology, Digital Divide rhetoric works to marginalize black production of futuristic and speculative texts and technologies (Banks 192). Ron Eglash has written about the so-called "nerd identity" that often associates futurism and techno-literacy with the exclusive spaces of elite whiteness, which severs it from anything deemed "real," "authentic," and black (Eglash 50). Blackness remains impoverished of what Mark Fisher calls SF (science fiction) capital, that valuable and powerful commodity through which narratives of the future are created today (Eshun, "Further Considerations" 290). So, since blackness remains "othered" in futurist projections, Afrofuturist artists and writers have responded by reinventing a visionary discourse that will "reflect African diasporic experience and at the same time attend to the transformations that are the by-product of new media and information technology" (Nelson 9). The fiction of Octavia Butler, Tananarive Due, and Nalo Hopkinson, the funk grooves of George Clinton, Andre 3000, Timbaland, and Missy Elliott stand out as a few examples of this artistic sensibility in the popular realm. What connects these cultural productions are futuristic counternarratives that speak to the intersections of history and progress, tradition and innovation, technology and memory, the authentic and engineered, analog and digital within spaces of African diasporic culture.

Insofar as Afrofuturism casts its gaze forward into the post-human/post-black future and back into the black humanist past simultaneously, neo-soul music does the same aesthetically. As its name denotes, neo-soul is new—innovative, different, unique—but also rooted in the black "soul" aesthetic of the recent past. In the case of Erykah Badu, the artist casts her backward glance farther; into the imagined spaces inhabited by precolonial African spirituality. She splices ancient Egyptian symbolism and Nile Valley mysticism with atomic theory and allusions to space travel to give birth to an unashamedly hybrid, self-created version of black humanity that gestures toward the Civil Rights and black nationalist era values that were integral to "soul" music.

Neo-soul is dead. –Erykah Badu, *Worldwide Underground*

For Badu to declare the demise of a young musical genre seems not only premature, but also self-indulgent. Her claim hardly seems warranted considering that music journalists, arguably, cite the release of D'Angelo's *Brown Sugar*, debuting in 1996, as the beginning of neo-soul as a genre. Regardless, even if one were to locate its inception earlier, perhaps with the emergence of the Oakland (California) trio ToniToneTony in the late 1980s, neo-soul performativity emanates out of the fledgling post-black, post Civil Rights moment in US culture. While those same music journalists attempted to name this emerging field of sonic expression—other names include "alternative" or "progressive soul," "rare groove," "real R&B," or "retronuevo"—D'Angelo and other musicians resisted the naming (Ratliff 40, George 186). From the outset, then, the refusal of classification—the postmodern rejection of definition—distinguishes neo-soul identity. Put another way, neo-soul resists a strictly aural reading; it is both a style of music and a self-conscious site of identity production.

With that in mind, Badu's declamation that "neo-soul is dead" indulges her neo-soul desire for self-definition and participates in a careful rearticulation of

her personal philosophy, Baduizm. Her gesture recalls a similar move by the "alternative" hip-hop trio De La Soul. After the 1989 success of their debut album *3 Feet High and Rising*, De La Soul returned in 1991 with their sophomore effort *De La Soul is Dead*, an edgier rejection of their "hippie" rap image.[3] Literally, the title of their second album translates into " 'of the soul' is dead," which bears an important similarity to the phrase "neo-soul is dead," Badu's pronouncement on the cover of her 2004 release *Worldwide Underground*. Both comments conceal the respective artists' true intent; their creation of soulful music maintains sonic significance in both cases. However, by proclaiming the death of a musical movement that clearly continues to shape their cultural production, Badu and De La Soul signify on the phenomenon of categorization and commodification of black music and style. Paul Gilroy explains this antagonism toward confining labels:

> The fragmentation and subdivision of black music into an ever increasing proliferation of styles and genres which makes a nonsense of this polar opposition between progress and dilution has also contributed to a situation in which authenticity emerges among the music makers as a highly charged and bitterly contested issue. (96)

Genre labels facilitate increasing market consumption of stratified music types and financially support music corporations, radio conglomerates, and consumers that look for packaged products targeted to specific demographics.[4] Neo-soul is not dead. In fact, it is thriving, but precisely because black artists such as Badu work to liberate themselves from genre labels, assert their individual subjectivities, and complicate what it means to be black and to make black music.

Therefore neo-soul cannot be extracted from its participation in the identifiable tradition of late-century American soul music. Exemplified by the lush production values of Detroit and Philadelphia, melismatic vocals, the overarching theme of desire, and groove to spare, soul music from the 1960s and 1970s imprinted its listeners, especially the young, with a craving for a well-timed wail or a properly executed tambourine tap. These children are Mark Anthony Neal's "soul babies," who were "cradled by the sounds of soul that dominated the era, a sound that allowed me to eavesdrop on the already blatant romanticism of the period" (Neal 100). So ubiquitous was this sound, already a hybrid blend of blues, swing, and gospel forms, that for many "soul babies," this music continues to represent the definitive link to authentic, organic blackness, and also provides the aural link to the social movements that characterized the Civil Rights era. Experientially, soul music serves, as Gilroy notes, "as the primary means to explore critically and reproduce politically the necessary ethnic essence of blackness" (100).

As a result, neo-soul artists continually turn back to old sounds and old themes. They figuratively dust off their parents' 45s as well as the political and social values that characterized the late Civil Rights moment. In the process, neo-soul artists participate in a meta-critique of other contemporary popular R&B music broadcast via the monopolized site of urban radio. This "hypersoul," characterized by half sung, half rapped vocal performances, glorifies materialism and "playa culture" (Bat). Neo-soul resists this dogmatic evocation of debased street credibility that permeates much of contemporary popular R&B tracks. Instead, neo-soul singles typically reference "da hood" through nostalgic visions of black love, familial unity, and community.[5] Artists such as Kindred the Family Soul, Donnie, and Jill Scott participate in this soul tradition. Scott's image, particularly, situates itself within the "round the way girl" discourse; her music videos are often shot in the Philadelphia neighborhoods where she grew up and fans call her "Jilly from Philly" as a nod to the specificity of her locality (Chan). Neo-soul artists speak of figurative, and often literal, return to their roots.[6]

Nevertheless, neo-soul music and identity self-consciously draw on influences from the stereotypically nonblack camps of rock, electronica, and folk music. Identity "play" expresses itself through genre surfing along the conceptually antagonistic boundaries drawn among these styles. Artists such as M'Shell N'degeocello, Res, Bilal, Lenny Kravitz, D'Angelo, and India Arie weave in and out of these perceptual limitations. As artists, their gaze remains attuned to the retrospective aspects of soul music, all while they "play mas' " as alternative rock stars, corn-rowed thugs, coffee house folk singers, or, in Badu's case , Afrocentric New Age goddess.

The era of naïve faith in individualism is over. –Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*

In January 2000, *New York Times* music writer Ben Ratliff, like a number of music critics who have taken note of neo-soul gestures, tries to forge the link between neo-soul music and Trey Ellis's notion of the New Black Aesthetic. It is a common, but all too easy reading of neo-soul, which requires a more critical look at the cultural moves and meanings associated with the New Black Aesthetic. In his provocative and groundbreaking essay, Ellis describes a flourishing artistic movement in which artists and cultural consumers posit a black subjectivity that breaks ossified notions of blackness. Ellis is correct in claiming that during the late 1980s and early 1990s, blackness had been liberated—for its middle-class subjects, at least—from the shackles of essentialist rhetoric tied to rigid notions of black authenticity.

Neo-soul certainly communicates with this sort of post-black/post-soul impulse; its rejection of categorization and its playful crossing of ideological borders support this basic proposition. Still, no matter how much neo-soul participates in the New Black Aesthetic, the former differs from the latter in that it does not eschew black/African diaspora positivity and does not seek to parody black nationalism, but rather it reflects on both for the advancement of a progressive sociopolitical agenda. Ellis denies the possibility of this kind of empowered individuality when he writes: "A telltale sign of the work of the NBA (New Black Aesthetic) is our parodying of the black nationalist movement. . . . NBA artists aren't afraid to flout publicly the official, positivist black party line" (Ellis 236). Where the New Black Aesthetic revels in the alternative identities available to post-Civil Rights bourgeois blacks, it also mocks the kind of celebratory Black Pride utterances found in 70's soul and contemporary neo-soul recordings, such as Donnie's "Welcome to the Colored Section," Angie Stone's "Black Brotha," India Arie's "Brown Skin," or Bilal's "Soul Sister."

As anachronistic as these esteem-focused songs may seem, they approach the kind of neo-soul engagement with Afrofuturism suggested by Kodwo Eshun, when he writes that "Afrofuturism's first priority is to recognize that Africa increasingly exists as the object of futurist projection" ("Further" 291). This claim revises Eshun's earlier post-human declarations in *More Brilliant than the Sun*, and illustrates what I think is the evolution of Afrofuturist thought. In the case of the "Black Is Beautiful" theme prevalent in neo-soul music, prioritizing Africa and black people within futuristic spaces of desire often expresses itself in the reification of the black body, which operates as a counternarrative to popular visual imagery that depicts "black bodies in pain" (Alexander 91). Of course, I make this corporeal connection with the awareness that its application may not be Eshun's literal intent, in light of his earlier advocacy of disembodied

post-humanity as an alternate articulation of black subjectivity. Weheliye thoughtfully critiques Eshun's premise, and argues, like Nelson, Kali Tal, and others, that black humanist gestures are "not quite as categorically antagonistic" toward the singularities rendered important via white, liberal humanist discourse (Weheliye 30). In other words, black cultural production does not have to reject humanist impulses *in toto* to critique and resist their hegemonic influence. With Weheliye's suggestion in mind, then, we can read Eshun's call to prioritize Africa as retaining its promise for theorists of Afrofuturity and post-soul identity around sites of humanistic longing and embodied blackness.

Interestingly, it is precisely this embodied vision of black beauty translated into the visual representation of metamorphosis, transformation, potential, and possibility that initially led me to associate Badu with Afrofuturism. Badu and Afrofuturist cultural production connect under the digitally manipulated sign of the butterfly. The home page for the Afrofuturism website, afrofuturism.net, features the image of a standing, male black body sprouting wings from his back, which recalls the art on the liner notes for Badu's *Live* recording. On the front of the liner notes, Badu's head and upper torso appear in profile, with a pair of black and yellow wings appearing from behind. On the back cover, she is shown sitting partially clothed on a muddy patch of dirt and leaves, this time with brown moth-like wings appearing behind her.

The fusion of the fleshy wholeness of the human to the exoskeletal segmentation of the insect typically suggests the grotesque in popular culture and the catastrophic in science fiction narratives. Within the African diasporic imagination, however, this bond represents the emerging potentiality of recognizable beauty and flight toward freedom suggested in the song "Black Butterfly," performed by R&B and gospel singer Deniece "Niecy" Williams. In her stirring soprano, Williams sings: "Black butterfly / set the skies on fire / rise up even higher / so the ageless winds of time can catch your wings" (leoslyrics.com). In this song, flight represents for the black body an opportunity for hopeful escape toward the future that can only be accomplished by catching hold of "the ageless winds of time." Within this conceptual space, history and progress coexist and actually engage in a symbolic symbiosis that informs a proleptic version of black identity.[7]

In addition, the *way* butterfly imagery appears in these visual texts is as important as its existence. In both renderings of Badu the butterfly, there is little effort to conceal the digitally constructed nature of the illustration. The technique of computerized collage, which drops a photograph of Badu onto a pixilated image of wings, intervenes at the border between real and hyperreal. By calling optical attention to the juxtaposition of the digital and analog, Badu acknowledges the engineered nature of her "authentic" or "natural" body and, by extension, her neo-soul identity. Like Carnival revelers dancing in winged costumes, Badu celebrates her ability to "play mas.' " Visual markers aid in channeling her multiplicity of persona. However, unlike the physical transformations seen in other contemporary female performers—Lil Kim comes to mind—Badu never restricts her ability to shape shift at will. New York hip-hop performer Lil Kim uses her body to critique aspects of "respectable" black female identity, but articulates her critique via permanent, radical, and invasive manipulation of the body—plastic surgery, chemical treatments to her hair, and the insertion of colored contac lenses. In comparison, Badu performs a significantly less violent strain of aesthetic critique. She changes wigs, hats, jewelry, and clothing. For the most part, she does not compromise the integrity of her "natural" body. On the cover of her first CD, *Baduizm*, she appears as an Afrocentric earth goddess, head piled high with fabric, arms adorned with Egyptian ankhs. On the cover of *Mama's Gun*, she appears sleepy-eyed and

intoxicated. She wears a crocheted hat and false dreadlocks suggestive of a Rastafarian identity. The liner notes and promotional materials for her latest release *New Amerykah: Part One (4th World War)* showcases provocative drawings of her body fused with stereo speakers and a turntable or a boom box as her womb; here, she seems to identify with the technology that brings her music to the world.[8] She has been known to sport a removable gold crown on her teeth or psychedelic platform moon boots, but a description of Badu's multiple articulations of self is not the point here. What stands out, however, is the fact that through her style and visual presence, Badu repeatedly enforces a complex signification on concretized notions of embodied blackness through a series of reversals and ruptures while she simultaneously invokes a natural, authentic, essential black humanity that resonates within spaces of neo-soul identity.[9]

In *The Black Atlantic*, Gilroy addresses the kind of gestures that I see being executed by Badu and other neo-soul artists. Gilroy qualifies the nature of what he calls "anti-anti-essentialism:"

> In the black Atlantic context, [the signifying gestures] produce the imaginary effect of an internal racial core or essence by action on the body through the specific mechanisms of identification and recognition that are produced in the intimate interaction of performer and crowd. This reciprocal relationship can serve as an ideal communicative situation even when the original makers of the music and its eventual consumers are separated in space and time or divided by the technologies of sound reproduction and the commodity form which their art has sought to resist. (102)

Here Gilroy describes the anti-anti-essentialist impulse as an affected, self-conscious, and intentional move by black artists to generate fictional identity markers that take reflexive action on the idea of racial essence. These artists acknowledge through their identity play the constructed performativity of blackness, and through that recognition they still posit blackness as a "real" experience insofar as its manufactured imagery exerts "real" power over those in the audiences who identify themselves within its limits. Anti-anti-essentialist performers and audiences—those "soul babies" about whom Neal writes—participate willingly at the crossroads of illusion and essence.

The mothership can't save you, so your ass is gone git left. –Erykah Badu, "On&On"

Badu's music—sonically as well as lyrically—engages with this signifying on and celebration of soul essence. Badu uses her powerful, almost brassy, voice in a way that immediately reminds listeners of the vocal style of Chaka Khan or even Billie Holiday. While this is what I would call Badu's dominant voice, she often manipulates her sound into more lush and velvety cadences or mimics horns and flutes, which demonstrates a sort of synthesized potential for her voice. She also draws on classic jazz phrasings and scat techniques; yet another blend of distinct black music traditions. Her songs are piled high with bleeps and glitches reminiscent of any sci-fi film, particularly on the CD *New Amerykah*, which she composed with a group of noted producers who she refers to as "some really twisted scientists" (McDonnell 33). Through this multifaceted vocal instrumentation, other-worldly production, and digital sampling, Badu articulates her constructed aural subjectivity, which simulates a profound engagement with the boundaries between past and present, as well as authentic and engineered. Where does Badu's "real" voice begin and end? How are we supposed to know?

Through these voices, Badu shares her personal philosophy that she calls Baduizm, in which she revitalizes essentialized African ideology through a syncretic blend of Motherland symbolism, Nation of Islam and Five Percent theology, ancient Egyptian esoterica, and southern black American folk traditions; what Kodwo Eshun would call "vernacular futurologies" ("Further" 297). Her reference to "the mothership" creates an intertextual dialogue with a number of Afrodiasporic expressions of spirituality and creativity. Elijah Muhammad, leader of the Nation of Islam from 1934 to 1975, taught his followers about the existence of the "mother plane," an intricate extraterrestrial vessel composed of spheres within spheres, which was similar to an object described by the ancient prophet, Ezekiel. The "mother plane" turns up in other incarnations as the mothership, a symbolic element in the music of Sun Ra, George Clinton, and Afrika Bambaataa. These Afrofuturists link black music to both precolonial African cultural retentions as well as a futuristic disavowal of essentialism (Eshun, "Further" 294).

With that in mind, Badu's first single "On&On," released in 1997, offers the possibility of a speculative, futuristic reading of a neo-soul articulation. While her song is typically read in the context of the teachings of the Five Percent Nation, a Nation of Islam offshoot group established in the 1960s, I would like to re-imagine the lyrics for this song, her most popular and successful single to date, as an embedded Afrofuturist text. Bringing these two readings into alignment is not difficult, considering that the basic tenets of Five Percenters, who refer to themselves as "scientists," employ scientific and mathematical theological symbolism.[10] Reading the lyrics of this Badu song within the context of sci-fi projection relies on Eshun's theoretical work, which posits alienation as a fundamental inevitability of Afrodiasporic modernity ("Further" 297). If slavery is envisioned as alien abduction, as Toni Morrison also suggests, then Black Atlantic identity and cultural production necessarily situates itself with respect to this original site of fracture, this break with one's sense of origin. There are, I think, visionary texts that circulate commonly within contemporary black cultural production, particularly in mainstream R&B music, that belie their futurist sensibilities; Badu's "On&On" is one of them. There may be new ways of envisioning what futurist texts look and sound like, thereby complicating prevailing theories of the post-human and infusing those theories with an African diaspora sensibility.

The very notion of "on and on" insinuates futurity in this song, the cryptic lyrics of which have both enticed and baffled listeners. Nevertheless, the perpetuity of the phrase "on and on" does suggest a message of endurance and soul survival. Badu sings throughout the song "On&On, On&On / My cipher keeps moving like a rolling stone." The image of the cipher, a circular, interconnected loop connects to the circular, revolving motion of a rolling stone. This rolling motion is the symbolic expression of progress and futurity. So, it becomes clear that Badu situates her vision for blackfolks in a futurist projection. It is a future, however, that refutes post-human articulations that suggest racially, historically neutral identities. Badu's future as expressed in this song is one that allows for the embodied signal of difference provided by blackness. Badu touches on the soul of black folk when she sings, "We were made in his image / then call us by our names." The phrase "his image" suggests a connection to a higher spiritual power. Whether this connection encompasses a formal dedication to Jesus and Christianity or a secular-spiritual version of the "most high," Badu makes the important link between spirituality and black culture; "soul" remains a defining aspect of blackness. Therefore, for Badu to assert that "we" were made in "his image" is for her to describe a "soul" aesthetic. Camouflaged within this song is her very determined effort to ground her progressive futurist project within a historically contingent, "soulful," and humanist view of blackness.

In keeping with the alien tropes identified by Eshun, the lyrics of Badu's song can be imagined as her exhortation to a group of futuristic blackfolk, seeking to escape from an alien plan(e)tation to which they have been abducted somewhere in a future time and future space. Fashioning herself as a resistance leader in the liberation movement, Badu sings to her audience to clarify the necessity of flight from their captors:

> Peace and blessings manifest with every lesson learned
> If your knowledge were your wealth then it would be well earned
> Since we were made in his image, then call us by our names
> Most intellects do not believe in god, but they fear us just the same

Here, she first greets her group with "peace and blessings," the English language equivalent of *A Salaam Alekum*, the Muslim greeting that has come to characterize the Nation of Islam within urban black communities. Within those spaces, Muslims and non-Muslims alike intone the idea of "peace," which often represents within African American communal spaces an effort to retain positive "African" cultural modes of address. Badu opens her lyrics with this important communal greeting.

Badu goes on to explain the fundamental problem with their existence on this alien world. First, she explains in blues fashion that "my money's gone, I'm all alone," which speaks to the economic and social isolation experienced by the captives. Then she describes the psychospiritual violence they must endure among the planet's inhabitants, known as "Intellects." The Intellects refuse the idea held by the captive blackfolk that there exists any spiritual connection with a universal creative force, which Badu refers to as "God." The Intellects do not believe in this creative energy, and therefore can not understand the captives' creative potential, which she represents as a circle, made up of a complete 360 degrees. The Intellects have marginalized their captives, refusing to acknowledge their creative force or their spiritual essence. Of course, because the meeting is a clandestine affair, Badu must use veiled language to obscure her true meaning. She expresses this idea of wholeness, represented by the "cipher," singing, "I was born under water with three dollars and six dimes / Oh you may laugh, 'cause you did not do your math." Three dollars represents the number 300 and six dimes represents the number 60. If one does the math concealed in these lines, one reveals the 360 degrees, the circular representation of the cipher, which again symbolizes not only progress and futurity, but also wholeness and completion.

Nevertheless, Badu expresses the hope to flee the plan(e)tation via a mothership, which will return her to whatever is left of her home space, her motherland. This prospect creates a crisis for blackfolk who "did not do [their] math," and thus have not comprehended the 360 degrees of the cipher. Perhaps they have been too influenced by the presence of the Intellects or are hopeful of their possibility for integration into the foreign world. They refuse to board the mothership to escape from the world that "keeps burning," and Badu informs them that they "ass is gone git left." Regardless, even if she must leave alone, Badu is determined to go. Like a fugitive slave, Badu needs provisions for her travels, saying both, "I am feeling kind of hungry," and "I need a cup of tea," but she is reluctant to take victuals from those she does not trust. Those blackfolk who refuse liberation via escape on the mothership are not to be trusted. After she asks for food, she quickly recants: "Don't feed me yours, 'cause your food does not endure." Badu is suspicious of blackfolk who do not seek freedom for themselves, and so their food—intellectual and spiritual—cannot nourish her.

Badu's future orientation extends through another one of her most popular songs. The single "Next Lifetime," also recorded in 1997, appears on the same CD as "On&On." In the song, Badu explains to a potential lover that she will not

be able to pursue their intimate connection because she is already in a relationship with another person. She explains to the potential lover, "I guess I'll see you next lifetime." Badu couples this future projection of potential love that is both entangled in embodiment and disembodiment. While the idea of a "next lifetime" certainly suggests a spiritual or soulful connection that transcends embodiment, it is in the video for the song that Badu provides a clearer vision of what "next lifetime" means. The video shows images of Badu and her lovers in precolonial Africa and in the Black Power-era United States, and finally imagines them far in the future in a space-aged African village. In the African village, men and women paint their faces with metallic paint and perform a ritual to choose their partners. Badu, who is credited with the video concept, ends up selecting a man (portrayed by hip-hop artist Method Man) who appears as a futuristic Egyptian pharaoh. The wide-shouldered gold-and-jewel encrusted robe is reminiscent of the costumes worn by hip hop pioneer Afrika Bambaataa, whose style has become a signature blend of the ancient and futuristic. The bonding of men and women at the end of this video suggests a continuation of black families that will extend beyond the imagined temporal location of 3037 A.D. The video's profound insistence on the vitality of blackness in the future goes against almost every kind of popular sci-fi image and narrative we have to date because it imagines whole and intact groups of blackfolk thriving in the future. Lyrically, Badu complicates the blurring between embodiment and disembodiment as she improvises within the chorus at the end of the song: "I guess I'll see you next lifetime. Maybe we'll be butterflies." Butterflies return again as a symbol of black flight, metamorphosis, transformation, and survival.

Through her transformative visual style, her soulful, visionary lyrics, and aural flexibility Badu performs in the breaks, in the gaps between essentialized blackness and post-soul possibility to project forward into future blackness. She says of her 2008 release: "*New Amerykah* is a statement that simply says 'This is the beginning of the new world'—for both the slaves and the slave masters. . . . This new world moves much faster. We don't even realize how fast we're moving" (McDonnell 33). Within this communal projection, she articulates her "self," aware of the treacherousness of this location with its requirements to be black, to be woman, to be other, even in this "new world." Instead, she shape-shifts as an "analog girl in a digital world" and delivers her version of "alien music," which Eshun describes in *More Brilliant than the Sun*:

> Alien Music is all in the breaks: the distance between Tricky and what you took to be the limits of Black Music, the gap between Underground Resistance and what you took Black Music to be . . . and crossing all thresholds with and through it, leaving every old belief system: rock, jazz, soul, Electro, HipHop [*sic*], House, Acid, Drum'n'Bass, electronics, Techno and dub—forever. (-002)

For the growing number of neo-soul artists this litany of musical styles that have been previously disassociated with blackness becomes a way to fill those breaks—an imagery echoed in the words of Golden and Gilroy. Neo-soul performers aesthetically and theoretically attempt to situate the idea of the eclectic individual as a laudable, liberatory end, but not without recognition that there will always remain a link between individual action and collective destiny. Taking up ideas expressed by Eshun, Golden, Weheliye, and Gilroy, I find that Badu articulates the generative function of neo-soul identity in the post-soul moment, one that takes advantage of the breaks and interruptions of self and continues to "suggest that the invocation of tradition may itself be a distinct, though covert, response to the destabilizing flux of the post-contemporary world" (Gilroy 101).

Notes

1. The pagination in Kodwo Eshun's *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* is unusual. I have cited the page numbers as they appear in the text.

2. I refer here to a collective of artists named in Nelson, including cultural critics Beth Coleman, Kodwo Eshun, Leah Gilliam, Jennie C. Jones, Raina Lampkins-Fielder, Kobena Mercer, Tracie Morris, Erika Dalya Muhammad, Alondra Nelson, Simon Reynolds, Tricia Rose, Franklin Sirmans, and Reggie Cortez Woolrey, who organized in September 1999 and devoted themselves to articulations of blackness in the future (Nelson 12).

3. The smash hit on De La Soul's first album was "Me, Myself, and I," a likely candidate for the anthem of the New Black Aesthetic, which hinged on a wail from avid Afrofuturist George Clinton's "Knee Deep."

4. Media conglomerate Viacom, which owns MTV, VH-1, Nickelodeon, Comedy Central, and a number of other cable networks, launched VH-1 Soul in 1998 to tap into this R&B demographic. The cable channel, which offers a primarily neo-soul playlist, is now picked up in at least 13 million homes.

5. Of course, neo-soul artists are not immune to the rhetoric of 'hood authenticity. On at least two occasions–Erykah Badu's "Tyrone" and Jill Scott's "Getting in the Way"–neo-soul artists mediate the politics of black love with street sensibility. For example, in "Tyrone," Badu berates a cheap, inattentive lover with the admonition, "I'm getting tired of your shit. You don't never buy me nothing." The invocation of the stereotypically "triflin' black man" as well as the distinct use of triple negation found in black vernacular speech situates the song outside of typical neo-soul offerings. Scott's "Getting in the Way" lyrically recounts the confrontation between a man's new girlfriend and his ex. At one point, Scott, who assumes the persona of the new girlfriend, prepares to go "to the middle of the street and whoop yo ass." For both artists, these songs have typically been their most successful commercial singles and received copious airplay on urban radio stations at the time of their release.

6. Music critics have heralded the return of regional "sounds" that reflect the identifying markers of 1970's soul music. For example, Mitchell points to the growing contingent of neo-soul artists emerging from Philadelphia, including Jill Scott, Bilal, and Musiq Soulchild. They do not share record labels, but do, to some degree, suggest a reincarnation of Philly's earlier soul music preeminence. For a considerable portion of the 1970s, producers Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff were responsible for hits such as "Love Train," by the O'Jays, and "If You Don't Know Me By Now," by Harold Melvin and the Blue Notes Featuring Teddy Pendergrass. Other Philadelphia notables include Sister Sledge, McFadden & Whitehead, Evelyn "Champagne" King, and Patti LaBelle.

7. Flight figures as a leitmotif in African American literary and vernacular traditions to symbolize escape from bondage and unfettered freedom. See, e.g., Hamilton's folktales in *The People Could Fly*, Ellison's short story "Flying Home," and Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon*.

8. An image from the liner notes that does not depict Badu herself, but is worth noting within the discussion of Afrofuturism, features two cyborgs inside a space craft. From the window, an Earth devastated by bombs and pollution can be seen. Inside the vessel, one cyborg stands giving the other a tattoo on its back that features a lush, blue-and-green earth and the words "Old School." The image seems to serve as a warning about a possible dystopian future, a day when the world as we know it now is only an old-school memory. Illustrations for the CD were produced by EMEK Studios, with art direction by Badu and Kyledidthis.

9. In an interview in *Trace* magazine, Badu says she was surprised to learn during a visit to South Africa that headwraps were called "The Badu." This anecdote reveals the extent to which Badu's visual presence evokes a belief that her style is authentically African to blacks throughout the diaspora and even on the African continent.

10. Badu returns to Five Percent philosophy in her 2008 release *New Amerykah* in the song titled "Master Teacher," a term borrowed from the sect's teachings. The infectious chorus of the song, which asks listeners to imagine a "beautiful world," pleads: "What if there was no niggas only master teachers?"

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