

Review Essay

The Neo-Soul Vibe and the Post-Modern Aesthetic: Black Popular Music and Culture for the Soul Babies of History

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WHAT THE MUSIC SAID: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture. By Mark Anthony Neal. New York: Routledge. 1998.

SOUL BABIES: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic. By Mark Anthony Neal. New York: Routledge. 2002.

Mark Anthony Neal's *What the Music Said* and *Soul Babies* are very similar in their subject matter and approach; both are interdisciplinary examinations of Black expressive art intended for mass distribution and consumption. While *Soul Babies* primarily concerns itself with postmodern interpretations of the Black aesthetic in various forms of Black popular culture, *What the Music Said* situates Black popular music genres within twentieth-century cultural politics and postmodern interpretations of history. Taken together, the two books carve out a well-defined intellectual and theoretical space for the post-soul generation—the *soul babies* of history.

What the Music Said uses the conceptual framework of the Black public sphere to explain how Black popular music became a voice to express, among other things, urban blight, gender anxieties, and class instability. Neal's adoption of the public sphere as a primary mode of analysis departs from the Habermasian concept of the public sphere—an arena where white, bourgeois men discussed and disseminated discourses in critique of the nation-state—to situate Black popular musicians and music within the working class, Black public life and politics.¹ For Neal, *what the music says* is that Black popular music, e.g., rhythm and blues, funk, rap and hip-hop, arose out of resistance to, and often times in opposition to, middle-class sensibilities of respectability.

Rhythm and blues music in the twentieth century, argues Neal, became an instrument of struggle in the mid-century civil rights movement through its polytonality (i.e., the multiple meanings expressed through varied vocal tones) and protest lyrics. Yet, in its most commodified forms, as in the case of Motown recording artists Diana Ross and the Jackson Five, rhythm and blues embraced middle-class narratives of upward mobility and race-neutral lyrics of romantic love. Thus by the mid-to-late seventies, rhythm and blues record labels and their recording artists relinquished their potential power to *say* something progressive to the masses in order to increase profit margins and appeal to mainstream audiences and the Black middle class. According to Neal, recording artist Marvin Gaye encapsulated rhythm and blues' most unfortunate political decline. Gaye abandoned his prolific protest of war, his inner city blues as articulated on the album *What's Going On*, and his instrumental and voice innovation on the soundtrack for the film *Trouble Man* in favor of commercially minded music of sexual prowess and conquest.² Gaye's follow-up albums *Let's Get it On*, *I Want You*, and, roughly a decade later, *Midnight Love*, show the transition of *soul for real* in the early seventies to *soul for sale* by the decade's end.³

Neal's most engaging analysis in *What the Music Said* is his discussion of producer and recording artist George Clinton. Clinton's music consortium Parliament/Funkadelic and his invention of P-funk (also known as technofunk), a hybrid form of soul, rap, and rock was unintelligible to mainstream audiences, but embraced by urban youth as a nationalist voice that sounded different and attempted to say something new. Drawing from the work of Cornel West on the unique qualities of technofunk and Paul Gilroy on the less-romantic possibilities of utopias,⁴ Neal argues that Parliament/Funkadelic's space odyssey persona, visionary, futuristic sound and progressive politics "fashioned a self-sustaining musical movement, not beholden to record sales and chart positions, but aimed at bringing the black community together"(114). Although there were other significant exceptions, such as the sexual defiance present in feminist and queer interpretations of the early days of soul disco, Black popular music's political element metamorphosed into an element of style, and was eventually truncated

by softer pop tunes embraced by and validated by the “Quiet Storm” format of Black radio in the 1980s.⁵

Not until the emergence of rap and hip-hop, with their concentration on post-industrial urban realities, did the political tenor of Black popular music reinscribe itself back into Black public consciousness. As Neal writes, for youth in particular, hip-hop and rap became a “consecrated effort by young urban blacks to use mass culture to facilitate communal discourse across a fractured and dislocated national community” (136). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the outwardly political defiance of Public Enemy on race relations, the anti-police anthems of the G-Funk/gangsta group NWA, and the womanist politics of Queen Latifah, YO-YO, MC Lyte, and in some instances Salt ‘N’ Pepa, represented a new oppositional politics, which showcased the social struggles and economic marginalization of urban communities. The contradictory narratives of “good weed,” lascivious women, and “Sapphires” of rap and hip-hop aside, the counter-discourses disseminated by rap and hip-hop artists translated into what Neal refers to as “digitized town meetings,” that is, a public forum for debate and critique of the conditions of Black life, the nation-state, and its institutions.

What the Music Said is a postmodern critique of moments when recording artists and their music, in spite of the constraints of the music industry and its leaning towards an easy buck and high profit margin, offer glimpses of political advocacy. Neal’s numerous examples of recording artists, their albums, and the relationship between cultural turmoil and musical expression are both the book’s strength and its weakness. It is clear from Neal’s analysis that Black popular music acted as a conduit of struggle in the Black public sphere. Unfortunately, just when Neal engrosses the reader in an enlightening analysis of one textual example, he too quickly digresses in another direction, thereby undermining the potential fruit that fewer textual examples and a firmer historical context might bear. Furthermore, his propensity towards a declension narrative and distinctions of musical taste close off the possibilities of thinking through the cultural work of Black popular music not easily characterized within the realm of overt political protest.

Neal’s *Soul Babies* makes no traditional claims to the discipline of history, yet he does make a significant theoretical contribution to the existing intellectual work on Black popular culture. In *Soul Babies* Neal examines music recordings, music videos, film, television, and cultural criticism through what he theorizes as a “post-soul aesthetic.” A post-soul aesthetic consists of a Black aesthetic center impacted by the changed social relations after the end of the civil rights and Black power movements, which Neal refers to as the “post-soul era.” Although Neal does not mention Stuart Hall’s seminal essay-length description of what defines the Black in Black popular culture, Neal’s theoretical approach is akin to Hall’s. Hall cites the rich attention to speech, counter-narratives, style, orality, vernacular, and local struggles as the components that constitute Black

popular culture.⁶ Neal describes his exploration of the Black in Black popular culture for the post-soul generation as a *re-membering* process, where the legacies of early soul music, civil rights, and Black power movements are found in the artistic cultural expressions of the neo-soul generation.

Neal begins his argument about what the post-soul era owes to the classic soul music of the past, and the ways in which it informs the social ambiguities of crass materialism and potent sexuality in the present, with singer R. Kelly's soul, hip-hop, and occasionally gospel-inflected style of R&B. Kelly's music acts as a jumpstart for Neal to consider the contradictory nature of Black popular culture representative in the film and music examples he entertains later. Neal shows how Kelly's desire to remain rooted in urban realities, Black consciousness, and previous musical forms mark the post soul aesthetic of his work. Similarly, for Neal, late seventies films of the comedic team Bill Cosby and Sidney Poitier conjure up previous, though transformed stylistic conventions of early seventies Blaxploitation films, as seen in Cosby's and Poitier's *Up Town Saturday Night*, *Let's Do It Again*, and *A Piece of the Action*. For Neal, these music and filmic examples represent the anxieties of economic instability among the Black middle class while making claims to authentic forms of urban, Black culture.

Neal also explores televisual fantasies of the absent Black father, suffering matriarch, and welfare mother in the TV shows "Good Times," "What's Happening," and "That's My Momma" as a post-soul drama of pathological gender relations. He titles these gender relations as "baby's momma and baby's daddy drama/trauma," because they (mis)represented and caricatured the single Black woman on government financial assistance (often referred to as the Black welfare queen) and the Black male as sexually irresponsible in matters of procreation. "In a society and culture historically obsessed with identifying lineage, particularly in relation to property rights, inheritance, and the ownership and control of family names and legacies," writes Neal, "typology of '[baby's mamma and] baby's daddy' helps to link the off spring of unwed and often casual sexual encounters [to Black men and women]" (73). The cumulative effect of the gender representations in the three shows and other shows like them affirm what Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Feminist Thought* identified as "controlling images." As Collins argued, these stereotypes or controlling images of people of African descent take hold in the popular imagination and reflect the interests and biases of the dominant culture.⁷ Neal's close, and often times strongly feminist readings of television sitcoms act as a companion to recent case studies on Black television shows, most notably Herman Gray's *Watching Race* and Krystal Bent Zook's *Color By Fox*.⁸

Soul Babies provides insightful interpretations of feminist critic Joan Morgan's manifesto of third-wave feminism, heterosexual courtship, and Black popular culture, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: My Life as a Hip-hop Feminist*,⁹ and the feminist and womanist declarations present in the neo-

soul of Jill Scott. Regrettably, there are some moments where Neal seems to conflate Morgan's more serious feminist analysis of Black popular culture and gender relations with her sardonic musing. Thus he too quickly concludes that the contradiction between her feminist consciousness, desire to inhabit the world of an *around-the-way* (read everyday) girl, and assumed compliance with debilitating forms of Black patriarchy are a result of her "own conflict over her middle-class status" (156). Neal's analysis of Jill Scott's 2000 debut album, *Who Is Jill Scott?* illustrates how Scott's music invokes feminist critiques of police brutality, cultural surveillance, and racial profiling on influential tracks such as "Watching Me," while mixing the polyrhythms of jazz, hip-hop, and spoken word. Neal makes connections between the latter artist's music and "sistergirlisms," (phrasing Neal borrows from Scott) described as a discourse of everyday life, working class consciousness, and sexual autonomy. Both textual examples—the cultural criticism of Morgan and the music of Scott—create "spaces within mass and popular culture that serve to address the concerns of not only black women but the larger black community" (163). While the well-argued example of Jill Scott's music makes sense for the theoretical considerations of a post-soul aesthetic, his lengthy discussion of Joan Morgan's cultural criticism and an even lengthier detour into what Neal sees as the attributes and shortcomings of the contemporary Black intelligentsia (named the "post-soul intelligentsia" by Neal) seem off track for the book's overall intended purpose.

Neal ends *Soul Babies* with a valuable discussion on how the politics of Black popular culture play out in the classroom, which would serve as an excellent reading selection for an advanced undergraduate seminar on popular culture. He shows how hegemonic ideology of heterosexism, homophobia, and inclinations towards an essentialized Blackness is not easily worked through in the undergraduate classroom. But as Neal reveals, the study of Black popular culture acts as a starting place to debate the conditions of Black life, of which Black popular culture is a refraction. Neal's timely narrative of the politics of the popular in the classroom illuminate the study of Black popular culture's greatest potential: the chance to engage critically with students about everyday tastes, pleasures, and politics. In the sustained intellectual space of the classroom, teachers of popular culture sometimes become learners, wherein our own students' assessment of the expressive arts takes our discussion of popular culture and its effects farther than where we began.

Insofar as textbook adoption is concerned then, *What the Music Said* may hold more staying power than *Soul Babies* for use in the undergraduate classroom. The former does show breadth in covering the cultural impact of Black music artists and genres throughout the latter twentieth century. Chapters in *Soul Babies* are useful for undergraduate classrooms because of their contemporary focus, but in theorizing a post-soul aesthetic, the opening chapters will likely work best alongside other theoretical essays on Black popular culture for graduate

level courses on media and popular culture. Perhaps the proof of this is in practice: I used chapters of both of Neal's texts this past semester in my undergraduate senior seminar in Black popular culture. Students found portions of *What the Music Said* instructive and productive for their own writing and thinking about the commodification and cultural meanings of Black popular music. *Soul Babies*, on the other hand, discussed examples students could relate to through their own consumption of Black popular television, film, and music, but they felt distanced from many chapters because of Neal's perceived reliance on technical language (a graduate course would likely respond differently, and more positively, to the latter). Nevertheless, the seminar agreed that reading both allowed them to examine critically Black popular culture, thus validating Neal's intellectual and practical contribution to the fields of popular culture and Black cultural studies.

Notes

This review essay is dedicated to the students who took my course American Studies/Africana Studies 355L: Black Popular Culture, at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, in the Fall semesters of 2001 and 2002.

1. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into Bourgeois Society*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995). Neal also seems to depart from the ways in which the Black public sphere is argued to function by the Black Public Sphere Collective, that is, as a site of "critical and visionary politics, in which intellectuals can join with the energies of the street, the school, the church, and the city to constitute and challenge the exclusionary violence of much public space in the United States." On theories of the Black public sphere see: The Black Public Sphere Collective, "Preface," in *The Black Public Sphere: A Public Culture Book*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

2. Neal does mention Marvin Gaye's rearticulation and "African Americanization" of the National Anthem at 1983 all-star baseball game as an exception to this and as musically transgressive. Yet he overlooks the opportunity to critically examine Gaye's late-seventies album *Here My Dear*, a concept album rich with polytonality and the ambiguities and complexity of Black masculinity. Neal acknowledges *Hear My Dear* as a concept album in passing, but closer attention and reading of this musical text might have led Neal to different conclusions about Gaye's post-soul influence and the assumed political decline of R&B.

3. In addition, Neal argues that the less-celebrated blues woman Ester Phillips and the queen of soul and gospel, Aretha Franklin, serves as another example of rhythm and blues' decline. He argues that Phillips' uncompromising chronicle of drug abuse and domestic violence on *From a Whisper to A Scream* and Franklin's politically infused *Live at the Fillmore* and gospel album *Amazing Grace* eventually gave way to pop-inspired music and sexualized marketing strategies.

4. See Cornel West, *Prophetic Fragments*, (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1988). As Neal writes, Paul Gilroy provides a concrete definition of utopia that is useful to think through the influence of what Neal names a "Black Nationalist Urban Utopia" produced in George Clinton's Parliament/Funkadelic. For example, Gilroy explains the idea of utopia as not only a "counter-discourse," but also a potentially transformative "counterculture," where "new desires, social relations, and modes of association within a racial community" may emerge in contest to oppression. See Paul Gilroy's work on utopias in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1993), 37.

5. Neal's declension narrative misses the opportunity to think through the cultural work of rhythm and blues in the 1980s. His discussion of the "Quiet Storm" radio format reduces it to soft middle-class music. He thus leaves much unsaid about the possibilities of musical forms that may have latent rather than obvious political usage. Angela Davis' work on the "love" songs of Billie Holiday, for example, revealed that lyrics and music carry more complex meanings when one theorizes their implication through the framework of performativity. In other words, depending on how a given song is performed and the context in which it exists or is heard, its meaning may transform. See Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997).

6. See Stuart Hall, "What is this 'Black' in Black Popular Culture," eds., David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen. *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, (London: Routledge, 1997).

7. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, (New York: Routledge, 1991).

8. See for example Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1996) and Krystal Bent Zook, *Color By Fox: The Fox Network and the Revolution in Black Television*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

9. Joan Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home To Roost: My Life as a Hip-hop Feminist*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999).