“Pick Your Afro Daddy”

Neo Soul and the Making of Diasporan Identities

“Choisis ton afro P’pa”. La néo-soul et la fabrique des identités diasporiques

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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/etudesafraicaines/17888>

DOI: 10.4000/etudesafraicaines.17888

ISSN: 1777-5353

Publisher

Éditions de l'EHESS

Printed version

Date of publication: 5 October 2014

Number of pages: 919-944

ISSN: 0008-0055

Electronic reference

Sarah Fila-Bakabadio, “Pick Your Afro Daddy”, *Cahiers d'études africaines* [Online], 216 | 2014, Online since 21 January 2017, connection on 21 September 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesafraicaines/17888> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesafraicaines.17888>

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The expression “Black music” usually refers to the African American popular music. Each genre appears as the symbol of a time period in the African American history: jazz recalls the 1920s roaring Harlem while rhythm and blues illustrates the 1950s and funk calls in post-nationalist black America. This somehow traditional and simplistic chronology of sound, completed by new publications, regularly ends with the apex of hip-hop by the late 1980s. Past this moment, black musical styles seem to have frozen, apparently not opening up to new genres. Discussions however heightened in the following decade as neo soul emerged, driving sounds from Curtis Mayfield’s romantic ballads, George Nelson’s psychedelic funk while borrowing to Ella Fitzgerald’s skat. Neo soul’s identity was debated (Neal 1998; Rabaka 2011), as it did not represent a recognizable musical pattern. I here contend that, while neo soul has been criticized as a non-existent genre¹, drawing on various identified musical forms like blues or soul, artists labeled as such invent a late 20th century-early 21st century soul which correlates African, African American and diasporan musical traditions. Through sounds, lyrics and rhythms they borrow to black cultures and create a musical style that equally encompasses hip-hop, gospel or makossa. Neo soul could then be envisioned not only as a mere reinterpretation of the 1970s soul, as Philip Lamarr Cunningham (2010) suggests, but as the result of transnational interactions. As jazz premised four decades ago, neo soul intersects the histories and cultures of African Americans, Africans and other black communities worldwide to produce a new sound, confirming Erykah Badu’s, India Arie’s or D’Angelo’s reinvention of themselves as diasporan blacks.

This paper does not state that neo soul should be included in another highly debatable category, world music, but observes neo soul from the perspective of “connected histories”.

1. On the definition of neo soul as musical or a marketing category, see Gail MITCHELL’s article (2002) which reflects the debates of the time.

From the Black Power Mixtape to Post-Soul

In the midst of the Civil Rights Movement, the soundtrack of the black protest gradually shifted from the seemingly race-neutral rhythm and blues of former Chitlin' Circuit singers like Sam Cooke and black divas like Dinah Washington to carry political and social discourses which stemmed from the black urban lower-class. Lyrics, sounds and rhythms replicated the radicalization of speeches and slogans from leaders who, like Malcolm X, and even Martin Luther King Jr, critically considered the efficiency of non-violent strategies. Stokely Carmichael's 1966 "Black Power" cry crystallized this moment later reproduced in James Brown's song "I'm Black and I'm Proud". Music celebrated black pride and meant fighting back the still segregationist white majority. Like other art forms and alongside the Black Arts Movement, music became a tool to forge a counter-discourse on blackness. The political, geopolitical and social turmoil of the mid-20th century during turned into a favorable moment. Like political leaders, artists increasingly considered the African American experience in connection to Third world populations and particularly to newly independent African nations. By the early 1950s, protest had emerged in Africa and Latin America against Western colonialism and imperialism. In 1958, Ghana first gained independence while the future "fathers" of the African nations like Kwame Nkrumah, Jomo Kenyatta called for mental, social and economic decolonization. The idea of shared interests of people from the "Global South" developed through transnational connections that culminated at the Bandung Conference. Anti-imperialist circulations expanded in the Atlantic Ocean. African American artists went to Africa to initiate collaborations while Communist-oriented revolutionary activists were willing expand their ideologies. Simultaneously, African artists traveled to Latin America to learn about salsa and rumba rhythmic patterns (Dorsch 2010: 133). Following the 1956 first Congress of Black writers and artists in Paris, musicians, writers and visual artists discussed and invented the aesthetic forms of a global sense of belonging.

African American jazz musicians engaged in this dialogue and followed Randy Weston in discovering the soundtrack of African independences like "indépendance Cha Cha"². Randy Weston, Art Blakey, John Coltrane and Ahmed Abdul-Malik composed pieces on Africa, connected with African artists like the South African trumpeter, Hugh Masekela or his fellow citizen, the singer, Miriam Makeba and inspired others like the author of "Soul Makossa"³, the Cameroonesse Manu Dibango. Musicians fused influences from Africa and the Caribbean to produce new melodies (Kelley 2012)⁴.

2. Grand Kallé and l'African Jazz's "indépendance Cha Cha", became a symbol of independences in Francophone Central African, 1960.
3. Manu Dibango, "Soul Makossa", *Soul Makossa*, Atlantic, 1972.
4. On the interactions between African American and African jazz musicians see Robin D. G. KELLEY (2012).

They turned jazz into a symbol of postcolonial and black nationalist⁵ discourses celebrating black creativity in the United States and abroad. As Amiri Baraka recollected in his seminal work, *Blues People*, music mapped routes “to negotiate blackness” (Weheliye: 2005: 149) in a pan-African⁶ perspective and opened to a positive exploration of cultural commonalities and particulars from both sides of the Atlantic Ocean (Baraka 1963). As Robin D. G. Kelley (2012: 56-65) notes, Randy Weston’s (1960) “Uhuru Africa” epitomizes this encounter. In 1959, he gathered the musicians from Africa, Latin America and the United States to play this five-movement piece. It opens with a poem from Langston Hughes in English and Swahili that refers to an imaginary Africa “where the great Congo flows” and “where a young nation breaks”. In the following sections, piano, trombone and saxophone melodies mingle with West African and Caribbean percussions. Max Roach played marimba, Charlie Persip played “jazz drums” while the Nigerian Babatunde Olatundji played “African drums” (Weston 2010: 94) and invent Weston’s dreamed continent.

By the mid-1960s, such collaborations were frequent in the jazz milieu but not in the emerging soul one. Soul appeared in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement as young African Americans questioned Martin Luther King Jr. and the SCLC’s non violent strategy towards segregation and racism. The gospel and freedom songs were mixed with rhythm & blues lyrics and tempo. Soul was caught between integrationist and separatist calls. It was an African American construct that expanded what Mark Anthony Neal (1998: x) defines as a foundational triptych of the African American popular music in the 20th century: “power, politics and pleasures”. It articulated community identity and the struggle for equality while entertaining the audience (Ongiri 2010). It did not originally address black people worldwide but African Americans.

Synchronically the black music industry expanded thanks to black-owned companies Stax and Motown which economic competition⁷, soul music followed two directions which have furrowed today’s criticisms of neo soul.

5. The expressions “black nationalisms” and “modern African American nationalisms” here refer to African American protest groups like the Black Panther parties, the Organization Us or the Nation of Islam which emerged along or in the footsteps of the Civil Rights Movement and voiced separatist claims. As William L. VAN DEBURG (1997: 4) explains, their leaders “equate[d] racial’ with national’ identities and goals. Bound together by ties of history, culture, and kinship, they conceptualize[d] themselves as being differentiated and (at least potentially) separated from competing social and ethnic groups”.
6. I here use the term “pan-African” following the still accurate definition from Peter Olanwuche ESEDEBE (1982: 3) that posits “Pan-Africanism as a political and cultural phenomenon which regards Africa, Africans and African descendants abroad as a unit. It seeks to regenerate and unify Africa and promote a feeling of oneness among [them]”.
7. In 1959, an ex-boxing promoter, Berry Gordy, founded Tamla Motown which became a prominent black music record company. It soon battled with Stax, another company founded in Memphis by a sister and a brother, Jim Stewart and Estelle Axton over the control of the soul music market.

One prorogued a nationalist orientation and conveyed overtly political messages. It developed as the black protest radicalized, sliding from the Civil Rights Movement to modern African American nationalisms. Soul echoed the political messages of the struggle for equality and the deconstruction of racial stereotypes. In “Say It Loud (I’m Black and I’m Proud)”, James Brown accounted for African-Americans’ past discriminations and called for immediate change⁸. This song resonates as the soul follow-up to Sam Cooke’s “A Change Is Gonna Come” and a prelude to Nina Simone’s (1970) “To Be Young, Gifted and Black”. The spasmodic tempo, stentorian chords and brass backed Otis Redding and James Brown’s vocal riffs and recalled Huey P. Newton’s infuriated cries or Malcolm X’s impassionate speeches. It raised racial consciousness and affirmed black pride. Not only the lyrics but also the erupted rhythm cut by dominant brass were meant to be more than “a crude reification of black spontaneity”, precisely going beyond the sole predicament that soul reveals “the enduring belief that all real black music must be visceral rather than cerebral character, springing from the instinctual needs of the body, rather than the intellectual or meditative workings of the mind” (Ward 1998: 265). The “Black Power Mixtape” (Olsson 2011)⁹ articulated African Americans’ African and American histories, using music to represent Black Power calls for self-determination. In 1973, Aaron Neville’s “Hercules” denounced the “competitive, individualistic, often brutally exploitative society generated by poverty and racism” (Ward 1998: 216), while Donny Hathaway (1971) and Stevie Wonder (1976) described the hardship of life in “The Ghetto” and “Village Ghetto Land”. But for most soul singers, Black Power rarely constituted a definitive artistic guideline but rather a regular reminder of their commitment to the community’s ongoing struggle. One may refer to Marvin Gaye’s groundbreaking “What’s Going On” (1971) that contrasted with his gentle duets with Tammi Terrell. “What’s Going On” pointed out the social and political invisibility of inner-city blacks who faced with poverty, drug dealing and a loss of spirituality which undermined the cohesiveness of the African American community.

Motown artists like The Jackson Five, Smokey Robinson or The Temptations personified a second direction. As Suzanne Smith (1999) and Robert Fink (2011) describe, Motown had an ambivalent attitude towards the Civil Rights Movement and later to the black nationalisms. Indeed, “[t]hroughout the civil rights era the company wavered between willingness and caution when asked to produced recordings—musical or spoken word—

8. “We’ve been bucked and we have been scorned / We’ve been treated bad [...]. Brother we can’t quit until we get our share / [...]. Now we demand a chance to do things for ourselves / We’re tired of beatin’ our head against the wall / And workin’ for someone else”, James BROWN (1968).

9. The footage in “The Black Power Mixtape” documentary was done between 1965 and 1976 while the editing was done by the Swedish director.

that involved overt political or racial messages” (2011: 18). Its founder, Berry Gordy Jr., turned Motown into a black popular music business in the early 1960s and modified the sound of soul music (Ward 1998: 262-266). Gordy was a businessman who conceived soul as a “combination of wised-up materialism with barrelhouse rhythm & blues” (Fink 2011: 179) that regularly left aside community calls to address to all audiences¹⁰. Gordy softened hard-driving gospel beats with prominent strings and muted brass, slowed down the tempo of rhythm and blues and filled songs with doo-wops and breathy vocals from singers epitomized by The Supremes’ “Baby Love” (1964). Melancholic melodies from short-lived groups like The Miracles or The Vandellas, turned soul into a mass-consuming product. For producers like Gordy, the apparent absence of political stance in soul meant moving away from the “race music”¹¹ label to become a global genre topping in the pop charts worldwide.

Motown and Stax artists led the way to neo soul. Curtis Mayfield’s shrill cuts in “Right On For the Darkness” (1974) influenced Maxwell’s vocal falsettos in “Woman’s Work” (2001) as much as D’Angelo’s gospel shouts recall Donny Hathaway’s. The vocal whirling sounds express emotions from love to hate and desire. From spoken words to slammed melodies, the lead and the multi-tonal background voices guide the listener through the history of African American popular music. The voice recapitulates this heritage and sometimes adds a soul flavor to folk or pop songs as Lauryn Hill (1998) did in her 1998 reinterpretation of Franki Valli’s “Can’t Take My Eyes off You”. Besides, while in the 1990s, electronic sounds flowed in many genres from techno to R&B and rap, neo soul artists insisted on band sound and acoustic instrumentations (guitar, brass or harmonium), sometimes using 1960s-1970s recording devices to produce a LP-like sound as in “The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill” or D’Angelo’s *Brown Sugar*. Neo soul obviously owes a lot to soul whether in the instrumentalization or in vocal techniques. However, the prefix “neo” carries more than nostalgia in the “golden age of soul and funk” (Maxwell cited in Rabaka 2011: 171) or “cultural amnesia” (Weisbard 2004: 104) but it opens to a discussion on the significance of the soul label beyond the 1960s and 1970s.

10. “[Soul] has also been, in retrospect, an irresistible emblem of Gordy the impatient hustler, whose ruthless avarice and sharp business practices would soon become legendary both inside and outside the black music world.”

11. The expression “race music” was used to define African American popular music which developed as a community market. For in-depth analysis, see Guthrie RAMSEY (2003).

Neo Soul: Styles and Status

In 2007, Bertram Ashe seemed to end debates about the meaning of neo soul when he edited an issue of the *African American Review* dealing with what the contributors called “post-Soul aesthetic” encompassing music, visual arts as well as literature. Among other forms of arts, Ashe mentioned, though not clearly naming it, what is commonly defined as “neo” or “new” soul, a musical trend which appeared in the early 1990s, stringing the rhythms and vocals of the 1970s soul and mixing them with black sources such as South African gospels or afrobeat.

Neo soul appeared in the multicultural American society as black people, among others, adhered to a hyphenated self-definition calling themselves African Americans to stress their African and American cultural background. Soul remained popular though it competed with other forms of urban music like rap, R&B and the recently created new jack personified by singer and songwriter R. Kelly and the late Aaliyah¹². For black youth, soul represented a moment in history: the 1970s, the black power ideology and the emphasis on blackness as a foundational and positive element in the making of the African American identity. Soul was the soundtrack of their parents’ struggle, a struggle shaped in terms of white majority and black minority.

Between 1997 and 2000, a dozen artists labeled “neo soul” appeared in mainstream media. From Erykah Badu, to Maxwell or Rahsaan Patterson, all presented compositions mixing 1960s-1970s soul with rap, rock or poetry. This sudden upsurge was pushed by international music companies like Columbia, Arista or Universal which expanded new types of black musical genres worldwide. The national press and music magazines like *Time* or *Vibe* captured the expression “neo soul” and initiated debates about its meaning: is it a genre or a late 20th century reinterpretation of soul? Artists, who never clearly considered labeling their works, had to posit themselves compared to “classic soul” (Rabaka 2011: 145-220). Many refused to enter such debates but still, the question remained¹³. Music critics proposed competing denominations from “new soul” to “nu soul”—in a transcription of oral phrasing—to neo soul and post-soul (Nelson 2004: 105). Some favored “new soul” or “nu soul” to emphasize the connection with an original, well-defined genre of black popular music. Neo soul then

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12. “New jack” or “new jack swing” was born in the late 1980s. It combines various African American musical genres like hip-hop, R&B, funk and soul whether in romantic ballads as R Kelly’s *R* album or dance-oriented salt n’ pepper’s “Whatta Man”. R Kelly and Aaliyah symbolized of this moment.
 13. Erykah Badu never identified as a neo soul artist. “[Neo soul] was constructed outside of us. I think titles in music are mainly constructed to categorize things to sell units. [...] It doesn’t really matter. I don’t have one song that sounds like another one in my entire catalog. It only sounds alike because I’m present in all of it” (FENNESSEY 2011), <<http://www.gq.com/entertainment/music/201111/erykah-badu-gq-music-issue>>.

appeared as an avatar of soul, which rhythms and vocals made it identifiable. It was deemed to be a subgenre (Ehrlich 2002) or some “hype” version of soul (Weisbard 2004: 104) that did not bring anything “new under the sun” (Cunningham 2010). At worse, it was considered as a “boho style” of music (Als 2012) not supposed to last longer than any other marketed trend. Others referred to neo soul as a true genre which tonality, rhythm and vocals are not only drawn from soul but also from gospel, jazz, rap or folk (Mitchell 2002: 30, 36). Christopher John Farley (1998: 85), a journalist from *Time* magazine, defined neo soul as a new genre that “blend[ed] 1960’s and 1970’s soul with the 1990’s sonic”. He identified neo-soul as unique compared to other contemporary styles:

“Neo-soul describes artists—like song-stylist Erykah Badu—who combine a palpable respect for and understanding of the classical soul of the 60s and 70s with a healthy appetite for 90s sonic experimentation and boundary-crossing. [Neo-soul artists] tend to create music that’s a good deal more real, a good deal more edgy than the packaged pop of, say, teen-oriented groups like the Spice Girls or Cleopatra. And they tend to write lyrics that are more oblique and yet more socially and emotionally relevant than those of gangsta rappers.”

The debates and the consequential misapprehension some critics had, was to seek a well marked musical pattern that would differentiate neo soul from existing and clearly identified genres. But the very identity of neo soul—or contemporary soul as some may call it—comes from the multiplicity of its sources and its forms. One reason is that the artists tagged as neo soul propose highly diverse types of music: Macy Gray’s hectic rhythm, changes in tonalities and shouts have little in common with Amel Larrieux and Goapele’s sweet whispering ballads. Similarly, D’Angelo’s secular gospel instrumentation and sexually explicit lyrics in “Brown Sugar” has little to do with Maxwell’s concept album, *Embrya*. However all refer to soul as the backbone of their art. Then one may talk about neo soul as a meta-genre, crossing musical borders and still being recognizable as soul music (Demers 2010: 135-153). In 2002, Dimitri Ehrlich (2002: 72) correctly described the paradoxical nature of neo soul:

“By definition, neo-soul is a paradox. Neo means new. Soul is timeless. All the neo-soul artists, in various ways, perform balancing acts, exploring classic soul idioms while injecting a living, breathing presence into time-tested formulas. They humanize R&B, which has often been reduced to a factory-perfect product.”

A Geography of Sounds

Neo soul is a patchwork musical style in which the listener can recognize jazz instrumentations in Badu’s “Rimshot”, slammed poetry in Jill Scott’s “Crown Royal” and “Epiphany”, rap cuts in Bilal’s “Fast Lane” or scratch in Musiq’s “Scratch Introlude”. As Tricia Rose (1994) analyzed for rap,

neo soul artists work on the structure of music—cadence, vocal intonations, resonance, tone, etc.—and deconstruct musical patterns, searching for unheard assemblages. Pieces of funk or classical music and day-to-day sounds are superposed. Maxwell introduces and closes *Embrya* with the noise of boiling water combined with a violin melody while a synthesizer strain livens the sound a microgroove stylus on a 33-rpm. Jill Scott's "Warm Up" begins with a tune coming from a radio channel while a child is bubbling and Scott is humming in the background. Neo soul is a sound collage. It means collecting sounds from different genres that eventually contribute to produce a new one identifiable as the artist's style. It implies experimenting sound using soul as a bottom score to produce new sounds.

Moreover, neo soul artists share a transnational vision of African Americanness shaped on American blacks' connections with other peoples, spaces and cultures. The world and the African diaspora become crucibles to invent multi-layered music. Going beyond the international circulation and credit of African American popular music, neo soul artists decenter from the United States and focus on their connections with African and Afro-descendant musical styles. Erykah Badu looks at Africa's ancient past while Me'Shell Ndegeocello explores African traditions in "6 Legged Griot (Weariness)" and India Arie celebrates black men in "brown skin". Each artist inscribes neo soul in a global context, moving back and forth from the local to the continental and the transnational scales. Neo soul could then be envisioned not in terms of genre but in terms of connections between peoples as it becomes "a means of transcending the limitations of our own place in the world, of constructing trajectories rather than boundaries across space" (Stokes 1994: 4). Though this is not specific to neo soul, the circulation of musical forms and traditions to and from the United States, to and from Africa and the African diaspora, enables artists to work on the hybridity of sounds and not on the preservation of an identified style reflecting the identity of an ethnic minority.

Connecting

A rather traditional connection routes back African Americans' trajectory to Africa. In 1997, the "neo soul queen", the Texan Erykah Badu, set the line when she released her first album, *Baduizm*. Badu not only appeared as an Afrocentric figure because of her stylized kente outfits and wax head wraps but also because she proposed a hybrid soul combining Ella Fitzgerald's skat with rapped lyrics to talk about the greatness of ancient Egypt. She gathered pieces of a global black heritage that each song distilled to form a narrative of the black experience (Hartman 2011). While recalling the African American history of struggle for racial emancipation, she celebrates the "Afro". "Afro" refers to the African cultural roots common to African and Afro-descendant peoples, a celebration of blackness

and an emphasis on the mixed nature of contemporary black cultures. In the song bearing this title, her jazzy freestyle praises hairdos as the symbols black pride throughout history: the Afro represents the 1970s “Black is beautiful” era, braids for early and contemporary Africa and cornrows¹⁴ remind African American and Caribbean people of their childhood:

“You need to pick your afro, daddy / [...]. So I braided my hair, yes, I did, corn roll and everything, baby” (Badu 1997).

For Badu, connecting not only means searching for short and long-term historical and cultural continuities that bond African Americans and black people together but it is celebrating “commonalities”. She emphasizes an enduring kinship between past and present Afro-descendants and inserts the African American history in a timeless chronology, in which the transatlantic slave trade is not a disruption but a bifurcation of a single narrative. Badu here follows Afrocentric representations of a global black history as the history of an African people. Besides, Africa appears as a land of origins free of Western influence, visible in snapshots. The lyrics refer to the “motherland” or to Egypt—as in *New Amerykah Part Two: The Return of the Ankh*—, to Egyptian symbols (Ankh, Ma’at)¹⁵ and evoke an original “African society” marked by human, environmental and even spiritual harmony. Badu materializes this vision in the video of “Next Lifetime”. It opens with the image of a factitious straw African village located in “1637 A.D.”. Badu walks around, greets hunters with Zulu shields and drum players, kneels before the elders and goes to the market. Badu later contrasts this “African life” to an urban American one she locates during the Civil Rights Movement. The video ends with a last reference to a “traditional” African social life punctuated by rituals that tighten family and community bonds. In a timeless space, villagers organize a choosing ceremony. Each male chooses a woman as his partner for life. Badu and the man she met in 1637 and later in 1968 are reunited. The whole village gathers around the lovers in a timeless place to greet this family to come. Badu (2007) does not ignore the “Middle Passage” and its consequences but, as in this excerpt from “The healer”, she merges the African American history in a single chronology of people of African descent:

“We ain’t dead said the children don’t believe it
We just made ourselves invisible
Underwater stovetop, blue flame, scientists come out with your scales up

14. For many African Americans, cornrows are an African hair grooming style. The hair is braided along the scalp, to form rows. African American children regularly wear some as they are considered to be easy to deal with at a young age.

15. Ankh is an Egyptian cross. In the Afrocentric literature, *Ma’at* defines given the philosophy developed by Ancient Egyptians based on harmony between men, the environment and the cosmos.

Get baptized in the ocean of the Hungry
 My niggas turn into gods
 Wall come tumbling [...].”

Badu’s videos reveal an apparently understated historical meaning of lyrics that primarily deal with love. She frequently uses the iconography of plantation life to exemplify black people’s struggle for equality and presents herself as an heir of nationalist-oriented soul music. In the first minutes of the “On and On” video, she appears in a 1940s Southern plantation as a housewife cleaning a shanty home while others go to church. The lyrics evoke the daily life and hardship of a single mother who fights to meet ends and hopes for the better for her children. Similarly, Jill Scott’s “Honey Molasses” (2000) refers to the ordinary work of slaves while Me’Shelle Ndegeocello uses the past to talk about contemporary issues. In “Mary Magdalene” (1996), she calls upon slaves’ social uses as she “imagine[s] [...] jumpin’ the broom”¹⁶ to talk about contemporary social issues like the representation of lesbians in the American society and call for the legalization of same-sex marriage.

Badu, Scott and Ndegeocello’s connections to time periods and places of the African American memory are not merely negative and distressing journeys back to a lost past or to an unachievable motherland but they are a celebration of the transnational nature of African Americans’ trajectory. They propose multilocal narratives based on a chronology beginning with ancient Africa going through slavery, the Civil Rights Movement or the African independences. But this chronology is not a linear account of African and Afro-descendant experiences. Rather, it is a rhizomatic framework that connects histories shaped by the travels and encounters of black populations worldwide (Deleuze & Guattari 1980: 13). History becomes a “mobile and bifurcating series of lines” (Marks 1998: 45) each artist can piece together to represent his/her narrative. Amel Larrieux’s “Congo” (2003) exemplifies this perspective. She remembers the “human bodies sold”, a “freedom that was not [their] own” or “the sound of an old pain [that] became a new music of hope”. The term “Congo” personifies homeland Africa but it also refers to Congo Square in New Orleans that Larrieux selects as a symbolic encounter between past and present, between African migrants and African Americans. It is a creole space reflecting the hybridity of the African American identity and culture.

Beyond a salient nostalgia and the making of imaginaries illuminating the experience of black people in the United States, neo soul artists take pieces of African and Afro-descendant histories to complement their cultural heritage and develop a global sense of belonging. As Alexander Weheliye (2009: 161) notices, thinking black music in global terms implies deconstructing and “deemphasizing [the] specificities [of an ethnic ascription]” as soul

16. Jumping over a broom was a form of unofficial wedding ceremony for slaves.

exalted, “in the embrace of transnational frame of references and return of the said particularities via the comparison of black populations that differ in nationality”.

Neo soul artists adhere to a global frame and insert the African American experience in a world timeline. Songs, lyrics and sounds represent renewed articulations between histories and cultures long seen as disconnected. They reflect an African past through percussions, acoustic drums, syncopated beat or polyphonic background vocals and refer to an Afro-descendant present thanks to soul samples or beat box. Cultural continuity is emphasized as a creative impetus generating interaction between black musical traditions. Specifically, neo soul superposes soul and local musical styles to refer to a place, a historical moment or a people. D’Angelo’s *Voodoo* album is a telling example of this structural interaction. First song, “Playa Playa” (2000b), begins with *voodoo* incantations that introduce D’Angelo’s funky phrasing and jazzy instrumentation dominated by bass and trumpet framing the melody. *Voodoo* appears as a sign of africanity retained by other Afro-descendants, Afro-Brazilians, who, out of a similar experience, managed to create an African-based American culture. D’Angelo appropriates *voodoo* as part of his heritage and recomposes a collective black past in which each can look for pieces of his culture and identity. The last song, “Africa”, which serves as an outro, confirms this posture. It begins with drumbeats, and as the sound gets louder, D’Angelo (2000a) praises “motherland” Africa, reject America as homeland and voice the effects of his double consciousness:

“Africa is my descent
And here I’m far from home
I dwell within a land that’s meant
Meant for many men not my tone.”

He then evokes a glorious African past:

“From kings 2 queens
Becomes a prince
Knowledge wisdom is
Understanding what we need.”

Before directly addressing to the “Continent”:

“U and my soul are 1
Through all the time and history”.

D’Angelo’s sound and word collage reflects a second type of connection: a synchronic one. Neo soul artists borrow to contemporary black cultures to create sound fusions. References to “the homeland”, “the African tradition” or “the African culture” are mixed with hip-hop, West African drumming techniques or South African gospels to reinvent the soundtrack

of their Afro-descendant culture. This sonic eclecticism merges the African American culture into a global one: an “Afro” one which articulates commonalities and diversities. The point is not only to account for African retentions in the New World, like call-and-response or polyrhythm but to insert African Americans in a global world shaped by the encounters between people of African descent. Neo soul artists move away from soul as they leave aside a racial self-ascription and call for a sense of cohesiveness among black peoples worldwide. They work on an “Afro-based” cultural identification defined by a common African past, an African “cultural capital”, a celebration of their hybrid identities and renewed ties with other African-descendant peoples. The prefix “Afro” sums up past and present interactions between black expressive cultures and not an imaginary African authenticity. Neo soul symbolizes the reunion of time, places and spaces African Americans have long been looking for. Marlo David (2007: 705) confirms the importance of this diachronic and synchronic articulation in the emergence and existence of neo soul:

“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.”

Like jazz, neo soul works over the notion of “collective destiny” while stressing the diversity of black cultures. Then, our perspective on neo soul should move away from a 1970s soul-based political interpretation of music, looking for signs of resistance to oppression that is “not beholden to record sales and chart positions” (Neal 1998: 114). Rather, it should explore how neo soul’s message lies in “aiming at bringing [a global Afro] community together” (*ibid.*). The political stance of neo soul consists in producing a musical aesthetic that tells us about the late 20th century bonds between African, Afro-American, Afro-European and Afro-Asian musical traditions.

Soundscape

Neo soul is defined by the notion of assemblage: cultural, historical and geographical. This assemblage relies on two features.

The first one is hybridity. Neo soul artists use hybridity as a tool to represent African and Afro-descendant communities “in relation” (Glissant 1990). “Relation” here means mapping contacts between cultures, inventing connections between discontinued histories, exploring cultural commonalities and differences to produce new sound assemblages.

Though, like diaspora, *créolité*, *métissage* or transculturalism—hybridity entails many tropes (Prabhu 2007: 1-18), it can be a useful to discuss how “cultures that have been embedded in social/historical constellations characterized by violent displacement and replacement of peoples, are cast now

in a hybridity owed to the Middle Passage and colonialism" (Broeck 2007: 43). Hybridity sheds the light on the "knots" (Labbé 1998) between "afro" identities and cultures that shaped the Atlantic as a space of creation and not as an in-between two territories. In that respect, numerous scholars including Paul Gilroy (1993), Homi Bhabha (1994), James Clifford (1997), Neil Lazarus (1999), Avtar Brah (Brah *et al.* 2000), Stuart Hall (2006: 362) brought theoretical frameworks to artists to think the African American history as a "connected" narrative. It no longer is a minority's history subdued to the American national narrative but is an Afro-descendant one growing out of movements, changes, migrations and the travels of people in and out of the United States (Kelley 2002).

Several artists followed that path. Maxwell, Goapele, Amel Larrieux only to mention three, searched their direct Porto Rican, South African and French backgrounds to invent a sound reflecting their Afro-Atlantic identities. Born in Porto Rico and raised there as well as in East New York (Brooklyn), Maxwell intertwines references to both cultures he has been living in for more than 40 years. In "Arroz Con Pollo", he refers to the Porto Rican national dish while each line of the lyrics goes from English to Spanish. Goapele, an Oakland-born singer of South African and Israeli descent, combines musical traditions that, to her, "have always been there" (Anonymous 2010). In her last album, *Break of Dawn*, she refers to her South African origins, imitating in a groovy way, the *mbube* embodied by Miriam Makeba¹⁷. As Amel Larrieux (2006) does with French, Goapele mixes languages. Her 2010 single "Victory"¹⁸ is sung in English, Setswana and Xhosa and includes Zulu traditional breathing and humming techniques (Malkin 2005: 201). For Maxwell, Larrieux, and Goapele, music does not recompose a past or a dreamed essentialized African self but it expresses their multi-located identities spreading over different continents. In fact, this is a dividing line between singers like Erykah Badu or India Arie who use the past to expunge the enduring effects of the transatlantic slave trade while artists carrying a double identity only want to account for it.

Despite these diverging interpretations, all neo soul artists think music in terms of travels in a global space in which soul and a common "afro" origin are the starting points for encounters. The Atlantic Ocean becomes a place of circulation between the United States and Africa and it allows detours in the Caribbean, Latin America, Europe or Asia to celebrate mixed and creole identities. Then, neo soul is not bound to a place, a history or

17. Mbube is acapella singing developed by migrant Zulu workers as they were living in male hostels away from their families. It is characterized by a four-part vocal harmony pattern ranging from very a high voice leads and bass voices. Mariam Makeba released a song and an album entitled *Mbube* replicating this singing now representative of the Zulu culture.

18. This opus was composed to celebrate the first world soccer cup occurring in Africa.

a community. It does not represent a voice from “the interior” of a nation-state which borders are not contested. It is a “black Atlantic sound” which offers “non linear identifications of cultural flow that connect at the same time disarticulate locations” (Phillip 2010: 81-82).

This combination of sounds and words echoes a double consciousness. It does not imply a choice between lands and cultures and therefore appeals to artists worldwide. The Nigerian-German hip-hop singer, Nneka, and her compatriot, Asa, the Ethiopian Wayna, the British Hil St. Soul, the Irish Laura Izibor or the French-Cameroonesse, Les Nubians also mix original soul with African and African American musical genres and their culturally-mixed backgrounds to shape their neo soul¹⁹. Soul becomes a common ground to reconfigure their historical and cultural trajectories by elaborating their own geographies of sounds reflecting real and chosen places of identification.

The second defining feature of neo soul is space. Neo soul originates from the circulation of sound between places and continents. Its sound “is fashioned by space and vice versa” (Weheliye 2005: 109) and, conversely, the sound moving within the African diaspora shapes neo soul. Like other musical styles too easily classified in the world music category because of their migrant identities, neo soul connects, intersects and superposes multiple spaces (local, regional, global). It mediates “transnational Afro-diasporic conversations” (*ibid.* 2009: 163) between people of close and distant African descent in the Atlantic Ocean and beyond. Neo soul artists rediscover and create links between black communities worldwide as they enhance common rhythmic patterns or similar vocal harmonies. By doing so, they also tone down the role of the United States as the center of gravity of black music to inscribe it in a borderless space, the African diaspora. The articulation between place and music (Leyshon *et al.* 1998) is questioned and music is elaborated not as the expression of a history, a collective identity or a community’s trajectory but in terms of movement. This movement from place to space develops owing to cross-genre collaborations. Neo soul artists reach for other styles which have also turned global. Gospel, jazz or hip-hop appear thanks to sounds, instruments—*e.g.* brass and rhythmic patterns cuts, beat box, etc.—but also thanks to featurings²⁰. Beyond any artist’s legitimate will to expand collaborations, this sound collage posits neo soul as a musical “forum”, born out of a series of crossings, not compelled to be the “changing same” (Baraka 1967: 120) soul. Following that line, in 2007, Jill Scott designed a complete album upon collaborations with past and present stars of soul, rap and gospel. Al Jarreau, The

19. Listen to NNEKA’s album *No Longer at Ease* (2008) which title is borrowed from Chinua Achebe’s 1960 book. Nneka mixes Igbo language and cultural references to 1980s hip-hop rhythm.

20. Amel Larrieux did the background vocals for Stanley CLARKE (2003), a renowned bass player along with R&B singer Glenn Lewis.

Isley Brothers, Kirk Franklin, George Benson appear along with Will.i.am and Mos Def. Scott blurs the lines of artistic genres by mixing slam, poetry, rap, gospel vocalizing and pop references. Words, rims and tonality bridge people and places in a collective celebration of an Afro-based music. Badu also is a leading example for that matter. Along her 20-years career, she worked with a number of hip-hop artists and groups like The Roots (1999), Common, Outkast or The Wu Tang Clan. She also mixed her African American soul with the British one on a duet with Omar (2000) and turned back to jazz when she joined rapper Q-Tip and the renowned trumpet player Roy Hargrove (2003) on "Poetry". Inserting rap in neo soul also means recalling its urban origins. In "Left and Right", D'Angelo (2000c) refers to inner-city life and inserts cuts from Redman and Method Man that echo those of rappers from Philadelphia to Dakar or Soweto.

These collaborations open to another type of circulation: a black Atlantic one. Neo soul artists invite African and Caribbean artists who already mix national, regional or community musical traditions to African American music. This triple circulation—from Africa to America and back to Africa—draws sounds from leading African musical trends like makossa or highlife, later are mixed with hip-hop before being merged in contemporary neo soul. A notable example is Fela Kuti's Afrobeat. This post-independence Nigerian funk was shaped as Kuti first traveled to the United States in 1969. While Miles Davis, Jimi Hendrix referred to Africa, introducing African drumming in their pieces, Kuti listened to soul singers like James Brown and thought he had to invent a new style mixing his Nigerian roots with already global musical forms like funk and jazz to represent his experience of post-independence West African man. This feverish music turned popular among African Americans in the 1970s who depicted Fela as a nationalist figure, voicing the black man's struggle against "white supremacy" and raising a global black consciousness²¹. Songs like "Buy Africa" or "Black Man's Cry" (Olaniyan 2004: 76-77) topped billboards along Miriam Makeba's "Pata Pata" to symbolize a counter-hegemonic discourse. Afrobeat has influenced African American artists up to today. Afrika Bambaataa like Stevie Wonder refer to Kuti with percussions or bass lines, sometimes directly naming him. Neo soul does not escape this African/African American interaction. Afrobeat can be heard in some of MeShell Ndegeocello's or Badu's works. Others invite African, Caribbean, Afro-European rappers and musicians. Goapele featured the South African rapper hip hop Pantsula for "Victory" and was joined by the South African jazz singer, Labella. Goapele's music exemplifies how neo soul can be shaped by transatlantic interactions. In "Love Me Right", she evokes Africa

21. See Tejumola OLANIYAN (2004). Olaniyan explains how the 1970s precluded a racist and cultural turn in Fela's nationalist ideology that echoed African Americans.

appears through a bass *ramkie*²² setting the score for a three time-tempo soul recalling the 1960s Motown love songs. The same goes for Erykah Badu who collaborated with the French-Caribbean funk group, Zap mama (2004) or did background vocals for Sergio Mendes's (2006). Like "Victory" and Nneka's "Africa", many pieces, celebrate the liveliness of contemporary Africa.

Sound creates space, communities and artistic kinships. It overcomes social, political and economic entities and ties up histories, territories and cultures, downplaying time and geographic distance. The identification to continents and countries fades away and is substituted by flux, travels, networks and multiple ascriptions. The tension between the national and the transnational also dissolves as the transnational becomes a "new site of creativity" (hooks cited by Yeoh *et al.* 2003: 211) where "the actions of historical subjects", Afro-descendants (de Certeau 1984: 118) generate new sonic compositions. Going beyond rooting and routing American Africanisms, the dominant/dominated dialectics or the center/periphery paradigm, neo soul emphasizes cultural *métissage* as their common defining feature of African and Afro-descendant communities.

This emphasis on circulation and space confirms the unclassifiable nature of neo soul. For that matter, it prevents most artists from steadily entering the music market. Jill Scott, Erykah Badu, India Arie and Maxwell's popularity is fluctuating. It depends on the music industry's funding of an album and/or a tour. The changing nature of their works, moving from soul, to funk or folk is not easily categorized. Therefore, despite notable breakthroughs like Lauryn Hill's *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, Maxwell's *Urban Hang Suite*, India Arie's *Acoustic Soul* or D'Angelo's *Brown Sugar*, neo soul has remained a rather confidential market, soon overwhelmed by commercial R&B embodied by Beyoncé or Rihanna. Its experimental nature, added to a diasporic identification celebrating hybridity, sends a complex message. Until now, large record companies would rather promote easily consumed musical styles than reflect on artists' practices. Then, neo soul singers like Res, Ledisi, Rahsaan Patterson, Raheem Vaughan or Sy Smith remain invisible to large audiences.

Outro: Post Soul Aesthetic and the Diaspora

By the early 2000s, the classifying trend continued. A new expression appeared: "post soul". As Mark Anthony Neale explains, it was meant to "describe the political, social, and cultural experiences of the African-American community since the end of the civil rights and Black Power

22. The *ramkie* is a homemade guitar composed of a wood stick, three cords and usually of a water bottle. Listen to GOAPELE (2005).

movements” (Neale 2002: 2)²³. This new expression again characterized the 1960s-1970s as a founding moment and placed later musical forms in its aftermath. But musical practices rather show that artists move away from such an internalist perspective that only depicts them as the heirs of soul. Neo soul bridges African American, Afro-European, Afro-Caribbean and African experiences. It reflects black polycultural subjects whose identities emerge from “cross-cultural identification” (Stewart 2010: 340) to different places and cultures. It articulates a common need to “[reinvent themselves] in the context of multiple overlapping influences and needs” (Ward 1998: 11).

Thus, thinking neo soul in terms of hybridity and circulation between the local and the global, between musical traditions, cultures, histories and identities allows us to understand how the African diaspora has become a space of expression for artists whose music pieces together various traditions.

This concept became popular among black populations because it is flexible. It is timeless and borderless. It encompasses local and community practices, revives past practices and opens to future intertwining. While in the academia, the African diaspora is a debated and “crowded space” (Campt 2002), in which some scholars interrogate its significance and relevance (Butler 2001; Edwards 2001; Okpewho *et al.* 2001) and others develop it as an area study (African diaspora studies, journals on black and African diaspora, etc.) (Harris 1994; Manning 2009), many African and Afro-descendant communities have appropriated it to talk about their real or dreamed commonalities. They wish to represent their experiences through encounters, cultural migrations and the recomposition of their traveling identities (Zezeza 2012). In that respect, Paul Gilroy, James Clifford and Stuart Hall’s models focusing on mobility and multi-localized identities²⁴ remain landmark propositions.

Neo soul artists follow Stuart Hall’s definition of a hybrid diaspora and avoid focusing on racial kinship. They work on the musical commonalities—rhythmic patterns, vocals—and particulars to create music. They do not celebrate the racial unity of people of African descent but explore and account for contemporary cultures. It never is a way to essentialize identities or to tie them to a place. On the contrary, it is a tool to dissociate belonging and locality. Applying what Paul Gilroy premised in “Sounds Authentic” (1991) and expanded *Darker than Blue* (2010), neo soul artists focus on the travels from one space to another, from local to global, and celebrate the new musical connections they create. They do not forget about their original cultures but they account for their transnational nature: the African American culture and history could not be encompassed without considering its connections to other lands and continents. Neo soul artists

23. See also B. ASHE (2007).

24. For comments on these models, see Christine CHIVALLON (2002: 52). See also Paul Tiyanbe ZEZEZA (2005).

furrow these connections and value the circulation of sounds as a defining element of their creations. What Marlo David (2007: 705) defines as part of Badu's skills sums up the hybrid and indefinable identity of neo soul:

"[...] 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 1993: 101).

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ABSTRACT

In the early 1990s, neo soul appeared as a "post-soul" genre whose leading artists (Erykah Badu, Amel Larrieux, D'Angelo or Jill Scott), recalled Marvin Gaye's languid slows as much as Stevie Wonder's funk. While, in the 1970s, soul meant affirming blackness and maximizing ethnic difference (Gilroy 2000: 252) in the tumultuous political and social context of the United States, neo soul today embodies African Americans' attempt to connect to a larger space: an Afro-descendant world usually named the African diaspora. This paper explores how neo soul sounds, rhythm and lyrics reflect a global "afro" musical aesthetic that stresses a diasporan belonging rather than a black and African American identity.

RÉSUMÉ

"Choisis ton afro P'pa". La néo-soul et la fabrique des identités diasporiques. — Au début des années 1990, est apparue la néo-soul, définie comme un style/genre « post-soul » dont les principaux artistes (Erykah Badu, Amel Larrieux, D'Angelo ou Jill Scott) rappelaient les slows langoureux de Marvin Gaye autant que le funk de Stevie Wonder. Alors que dans les années 1970, la soul servait à affirmer l'identité noire et à maximiser la différence ethnique (Gilroy 2000: 252) dans le tumulte social et politique des États-Unis, la néo-soul incarne aujourd'hui l'effort des Africains-Américains de se connecter à un espace plus grand: un monde afro-descendant communément appelé la diaspora africaine. Cet article explore comment les sons, les rythmes et les paroles de la néo-soul reflètent une esthétique globale « afro » qui souligne une appartenance diasporique plus qu'une identité noire et africaine-américaine.

Keywords/Mots-clés: afro, Black Atlantic, diaspora, neo soul, post-soul/afro, *Atlantique noir*, *diaspora*, *néo-soul*, *post-soul*.