

- McGarry, Kevin. "The New Queen Bee | Meet Nicki Minaj." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 4 June 2009. Web. 16 May 2013.
- Madonna. "Gimme All Your Luv." Online Music Video. *YouTube*. YouTube, 2 Feb. 2012. Web. 1 June 2013.
- Miller, Monica. *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity*. Durham: Duke UP, 2009. Print.
- Monáe, Janelle. "Tightrope." Dir. Wendy Morgan. Online Music Video. n.d. Web. 1 June 2013.
- Nelson, Alondra. "Introduction: Future Texts." *Social Text* 71, 20.2 (Summer 2002): 1–15. Print.
- Paglia, Camille. "Lady Gaga and the Death of Sex." *The Sunday Times Magazine*. News UK, 12 Sept. 2010. Web. 7 March 2011.
- Redmond, Shana L. "This Safer Space: Janelle Monáe's 'Cold War.'" *Journal of Popular Music Studies*. 23.4 (2011): 393–411. Print.
- Roberts, Dorothy. *Fatal Invention: How Science, Politics, and Big Business Recreate Race in the Twenty-first Century*. New York and London: The New Press, 2011. Print.
- Springer, Kimberly. "Third Wave Black Feminism?" *Signs* 27.4 (Summer 2002): 1059–1082. Print.
- . "Madonna—Finally a Real Feminist." *The New York Times*. 14 Dec. 1990. Web. 7 March 2011.

3 A Window Seat to History: Erykah Badu's Dealey Plaza Remix

Vicki Callahan

From early works such as Andy Warhol's print series *Flash: November 22, 1963* and *Jackie*, Bruce Conner's short film *Report* (1967), Ant Farm's video/performance *Media Burn* (1975) to more recent projects like the mainstream films *JFK* (Stone 1991), *Interview with the Assassin* (Burger, 2002), *Parkland* (Landesman, 2013), and the videogame *JFK Reloaded* (video game 2004), the Kennedy assassination has proved to be a recurrent and resilient iconographic site of cultural exchange (Simon; Anderson). As Steve Anderson notes of the diverse explorations of the shooting from mainstream to alternative media and digital contexts, the result has been less one of "closure" and "certainty" as to the events of the killing, but rather of multiple and divergent possibilities for the incident (34–36; 134–135). In many ways, the Kennedy assassination represents the ultimate intersection of the American twin fixations of media spectacle and violence and the numerous disparate representations have served both to critique and to fetishize these qualities. In this essay, I explore how the artist Erykah Badu transforms this iconic spectacle into an exemplary womanist performative turn with her controversial music video, "Window Seat" (2010), a work that I argue is consistent with her career's larger aesthetic and social practice.

Badu's video is perhaps one of the most unlikely iterations of "Kennedy Death Art." At first glance, her video appears to operate as a cry for personal expression against narrow social conventions, which Badu's disrobing and closing commentary against "group think" seem to reinforce. While this might be one way we should situate and how many have read the video, "Window Seat" is indicative of Badu's larger creative approach, which participates in a far more radical political commentary.

Consistent with previous music, fashion, and imagery selected by the artist, Badu's "Window Seat" engages a strategy of remix, using known historical materials to create an alternative African-American womanist universe.

As Layli Phillips, Kerri Reddick-Morgan, and Dionne Patricia Stephens point out in the essay, "Oppositional Consciousness from an Oppositional Realm: the Case of Feminism and Womanism in Rap and Hip Hop, 1976–2004," female artists have played a crucial and complex role in a musical genre and culture that is often stereotypically viewed as misogynistic and male centered. While Phillips, et al. note the empowering voices across an array of female artists in hip hop, female strength and solidarity is frequently linked at the same time to an understanding and alliance with black men, whose lives have been shaped by the dominant racialized ideology (272–273). The authors use Badu's early songs "Other Side of the Game" (1997) and "Danger" (2003) as illustrative of this social critique since in both cases the lyrics provide a portrait of a black woman supporting a male partner who is on the wrong side of the law. In both songs the woman, a young mother (or in "Other Side . . ." a mother to be), does not judge but rather notes her partner's lack of options (269, 270). This alliance across class, race, sex, and gender expands the cultural context of Badu (and many other female hip hop artists as Phillips et al. detail) from the white privileged perspective of mainstream feminism to the more thoroughgoing and radical *womanist* view as defined by Alice Walker in her book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. Given the discourse that has surrounded Badu's career and her own artistic strategies, it is instructive to review in detail some of Walker's description of what the term designates. Beyond her opening definition of *womanist* as "black feminist or feminist of color" and "usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one," Walker notes the terms designates:

2). *Also*: A woman who loves other women sexually and/or non-sexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as a natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to wholeness of entire people male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist as in: "Mama, why are we brown pink and yellow and our cousins are white, beige,

and black?" ans.: "Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented" (xi).

Badu's counter vision, as Rana Emerson argues, declares an agency and identity with black experience through a re-imagination of key cultural texts seen in her early music video *On and On* (from *Baduizm* 1997), which remixes *Cinderella* and *The Color Purple* and transforms a Cinderella/Celie figure in the rural south from her farm and housework setting to a singer in an evening "juke joint." Tellingly, the transition from home to club is due to her own creativity and initiative, and not from a Prince Charming (Emerson 125).

In the instance of "Window Seat," Badu's placement in Dealey Plaza and striking shift of gender and racial markers from the original referent, underscored by her slow motion disrobing, situates the historical trauma as an ongoing memory for all Americans, across class, race and gender boundaries, rather than as a nostalgic look backwards at a rarefied and segregated Camelot. In this way, Badu's "Window Seat," along with her larger and generally labeled "neo-soul" music/video catalogue, can be placed within an Afro-futurist context. Here as Alondra Nelson has described, "future texts" are defined not so much by a projection into a solely original and isolated future, but what Ishmael Reed has called a "synchronizing" of past, present, and future (Nelson, 8). Unlike many futurist strategies, which strive to banish or leave behind the past (Nelson 7), Reed sees history as crucial to a reconfiguration of the present and future, a writing process he describes as "necromancy." As Reed notes, "Necromancers used to lie in the guts of the dead or in the tombs to receive visions of the future. That is the prophecy. The black writer lies in the guts of old America, making readings about the future (qtd. in Nelson 7).

Badu's musical and visual presence can be read then not as "retro" or as the *New York Times* labeled it, "[an] appealingly eccentric neo-soul sex goddess/funky earth mama/black power revolutionary persona" (Ryzik), but as a deliberate and focused vision of the artist's stated desire to set out alternative models for female and black identity. As Erykah Badu herself noted in a 2001 *Jet* magazine interview: "I want to be a different example of what a Black woman is, what a Black person is. I wear my headwrap because a headwrap is a crown, and I am a queen. A headwrap demands a certain amount of respect—it just does, and I am always headwrapped" (Waldron 63). Badu explicitly situates her life (e.g., her music and selection of her clothing) as distinctly within Black culture. Her objective

from fashion to art is to be a positive and uplifting force for the community (Waldron, 63). Clarence Waldron notes that even the title of her album, *Mama's Gun*, can be seen as a "weapon of empowerment" but with a positive focus for nurturing, or, here again we might add, as a womanist force (64). As Badu states: "My words and my music are my weapons of choice. And as you grow you need something to go out there in the world to protect you. I urge folks to use my music and my words as they will, as they should, as they see fit" (qtd. in Waldron 64).

It is instructive with Badu to examine the consistent political and cultural strategies throughout her career, as well as the work of her last two albums and their critical reception, to see how one might want to resituate Badu from fairly static labels into a more fluid and indeed interesting account of an experimental Black womanist artist. Her work has repeatedly traversed the terrain of remix and relational aesthetics, with an avant-garde sensibility that the artwork should be shared, collaborative, and with a community-centered focus. In earlier collaborations, Badu lent her voice to collective efforts that foregrounded a shared social experience as particularly evident in her music video "Love of My Life (an ode to Hip Hop)" featuring Common. The video is a loving history of the expanse of hip hop culture from street art to dance and includes a short rap with Badu and the legendary pioneer female rap artist, MC Lyte. A pointed social critique also comes through with Badu's collaboration, along with Cee-Lo and Big Rube, on OutKast's exploration of "Liberation" in the complex context of the black experience. Other examples of Badu's musical associations that attend to societal concerns include her song with Busta Rhymes, "One," the Five Percenters praise of the united black family, and "You Got Me" with The Roots, where the social component looks to break free of a larger community distrust in male/female relationships. There is also the remix of her hit with Common into the almost feminist anthem-like "Love of My Life Worldwide," which features a who's who of female hip hop artists: Queen Latifah, Angie Stone, and Bahamadia.

In her last two albums, Badu's attention to collaboration, an important component in much of contemporary hip hop, is most striking in its range of partnerships. Parts I and II feature an extraordinary group of musicians and producers, Questlove, Madlib, James Poyser, and the group Sa-Ra, whose participation contributes to the unique sound of the work. Part Two collaborators include the group above but also the legendary late producer J. Dilla as well as Georgia Anne Muldrow, an

"underground soul" vocalist and producer whose work is often politically pointed, as co-writer and producer on "Out of Mind, Just in Time" (Cowie). "Gone Baby, Don't Be Long" features Flying Lotus (Steven Ellison) the musician and producer, who works within the genre of experimental electronica music and is connected to a rich musical heritage that includes John, Alice, and Ravi Coltrane as extended family (Ellison is the great nephew to John and Alice Coltrane).

Despite the diversity of her artistic collaborations and musical styles employed, Badu is typically labeled as exemplary of the "neo-soul" genre, which often stands in as nostalgic but hipper version of the rhythm and blues (R&B) tradition due to its fusion of jazz, rap, rock, and funk. "Neo-soul" is a label that many artists within the "genre" are uncomfortable with, as they see their work as part of a direct heritage from "soul" and R&B and are reluctant to place their expression within the confines of what is essentially an industry marketing term (Mitchell 30). Although some critics do point to "neo-soul" as the more "thoughtful," musically rich (due to the fusion components and diverse African American musical heritage drawn upon), or socially attuned genre, the "social" here is not particularly defined as a critique as much as personal introspection (Cox; Mitchell). While critics point to politically attuned dimensions to R&B, usually noting the work of Marvin Gaye, Curtis Mayfield, and neo-soul artists like Badu and Jill Scott as following in that tradition, these are typically pointed out as a separate musical thread pursued on exceptional instances by artists more attentive to personal relationships in their work (Mitchell, Cox, George). Ignored is the long and connected tradition of socially conscious work from jazz to soul (or rhythm and blues) to neo-soul, from Billy Holiday, Nina Simone, Sam Cooke, James Brown, and Stevie Wonder to the Isley Brothers and many others.

Like rhythm and blues, Badu's music is also framed within this dualistic vision of a personal versus a political focus to the work as if these were two distinctly separate possibilities. Here it is instructive to look at the map of the last two albums as sketched by most critics. *Amerykah, Part I*, (4th World War) had a mixed critical reception, but the work was seen generally as a distinct move away from her earlier earth mother, neo-soul roots, towards a Marvin Gaye and Curtis Mayfield inflected political turn, the inevitable two figures invoked in the socially conscious "soul" music context (Abebe, Guerilla, Butler, Barrett). For some, the supposed shift to politics was too stark or even "unhinged" (Cardace). A *New York Magazine* review of the CD saw it as an "oddball

work more along the lines of dubby, druggy hip-hop than anything resembling neo-soul" that had left her past personal "soul sister meditations" behind (Cardace). Other reviewers pointed to the experimental structure as more along the lines of personal expression or artistic styling, and while the political elements are alluded to, these components essentially remain in the background (McPherson, Lewis). Miles Marshall Lewis discusses the Blaxploitation-like soundtrack of "Amerykahn Promise" and notes Badu's nod to Louis Farrakahn and the Nation of Islam in "Me," but oddly sidesteps these references as politically and socially significant.

The songs throughout the CD continue the remix strategy from Badu's earlier works lyrically and sonically, weaving together well-known political/cultural genres or commentaries with spoken word and lyrics. "Amerykahn Promise," like many Blaxploitation films, is a ruthless critique of the American Dream, which offers (or promises) unlimited pleasures if we just sign away our lives. The song is a remarkable remix that samples the Roy Ayers song "The American Promise" (performed by RAMP) as its core text or backdrop, but builds an elaborate soundscape around it of effects, dialogue, and Badu's singing and speaking voice (at times altered) to underscore the personal cost of the political ideology behind the dream. The grim "Twinkle" is another sonically dense soundscape that points to the longstanding conditions for significant parts of the black community that leave young people cut off from education, their language, culture, and spiritual life and on a pathway "so that they end up in prisons they end up in blood. . . . with no choices there is no hope for us." The last minute and a half of "Twinkle" employs the well-known outburst from the film *Network* (1976), where the newscaster Howard Beale (Peter Finch) recounts the dire circumstances of late consumer capitalism and implores his audience: "you've got to get mad; you've got to say, 'I'm a human being dammit. My life has value.'" The sample from the film is extensive but electronically transformed so that Beale's commentary sounds less hysterical and more calmly prophetic than the original. "Twinkle's" remix becomes not the *Network's* cynical play on Beale and the audience's emotions, but a considered call to action in the context of life for much of the African American community.

While critics did point to shades of Marvin Gaye's "What's Goin' On" throughout the *Amerykah, Part I*, they were suddenly stymied by "Honey," the Isley Brothers-esque bit of romantic pop (Greenblatt). What was that song doing there? Critics found "Honey" as then consis-

tent with the overall tone of the *Amerykah, Part 2*, which was seen by many as a decided shift away from politics back to Badu's earlier attention to the personal only. But the musical track of "Honey" begins with the return of the sampled Ayers song "American Promise," a distinctly political focus, and a spoken word segment that states: "Ladies and Gentlemen you are on your own, *New Amerykah*, Fourthworld war and please stay tuned for Part Two, Return of the Ankh (eternal life)." The spoken segment finishes with a sci-fi countdown to "Honey" and then a clean break with the start of the Isleyesque track. The opening segment to "Honey" not only sounds like a time-travel adventure, but given the references employed from Ayers to Isley to the countdown, implies a journey that moves backward and forward simultaneously. This "synchronizing," as Reed calls it (the merging of past, present, and future), on the audio track is played out for us on the visual track of the music video. As in many of her music videos, "Honey" opens with the title card "A Story by Erykah Badu" pointing to her expansive role in the sound and design of all aspects of her music and performances. Badu walks through a record store while perusing an array of well-known album covers in which she has been inserted in the image, an act which places her directly within a consistent musical tradition; a playful yet culturally significant visual and audio remix. From Chaka Kahn to Diana Ross, Funkadelic, Eric B and Rakim, Ohio Players, Minnie Ripperton, De La Soul, and Grace Jones, there is a clear heritage traced in the video from soul to funk to hip hop with a couple of divergent references to the Beatles *Let it Be* and John Lennon and Yoko Ono's *Rolling Stone* cover for the release of *Double Fantasy* (Butta). The Lennon and Ono citation is particularly interesting given the avant-garde sensibility and performance art forays of the duo beyond their pop culture work (a point I will return to shortly). "Honey" should be seen then not as an aberrant moment in *New Amerykah, Part I* but as a work that situates Badu in a historical and predominantly black musical legacy. Moreover "Honey" thus provides a context for *New Amerykah Part 2*. *Pitchfork's* overall positive review saw *Part 2*, as did many other critics, as the "return" to her past "neo soul" style; that is, focused on personal rather than political issues, especially with regard to romantic relations (Powell, Richards, Gill). The *Pitchfork* review begins with the peculiar comment that "Erykah Badu is a narcissist, but narcissism is her art," and ends with the artistic (and personal) platitude: "Her life is her art and her life—like anyone's—is too messy and varied to contain" (Powell).

To understand Badu's *New Amerykah Part 2*, it is best perhaps to explore the uproar over "Window Seat," which was discussed both as a publicity grabbing stunt and as a courageous personal and artistic expression (Duke; Lori). The video filmed at Dealey Plaza, the area overlooking the Kennedy assassination, sees Badu slowly removing layers of her clothing until nude and completes the sequence by her collapsing on the ground. Many found the video distasteful and offensive, and the song's ostensive topic of a failing romance seemed to trivialize a key cultural moment (Starr). Womanists and feminists were conflicted, worried that this was yet another exploitative use of the female black body (Khan, Hopkinson), while others saw Badu constructing a narrative counter to past voyeuristic practices imposed on African American women through her agency of public disrobing, rather than a socially imposed strip tease (ewwillia). Luso Mnthali explored the video in light of who "owns" the images of the black body and the fixed external coding that comes into play:

I am almost immediately struck by how much it makes me think of Saartjie Baartman. How we don't see black women's bodies in this way, where they are just bodies, just human beings. Everything about us, it seems, has either been demonised or sexualized, and this is a real problem. It doesn't only happen in America, but even in communities you'd think would be more understanding, and loving of black women, yet are not at the point where they should be.

For Mnthali, Badu's "Window Seat" goes a long way toward reclaiming the image of the black body as autonomous subject, and a closer examination of the video provides evidence of her argument. "Window Seat" begins as if we are viewing documentary footage from the Kennedy tragedy by using the voiceover from a newscast of Kennedy's arrival in Dallas as we see a white car, seemingly from the era, pull into the frame. Scratched grey film and projector noise follow with the artist's trademark title card "a story by Erykah Badu," which then shifts back to a film style that employs washed out color, slow motion, and a hint of iris around edges. We see that Badu has been driving the car; she parks, feeds the meter, now surrounded by anachronistic contemporary automobiles, and then she walks and jogs over to the Dealey Plaza area of Dallas, all still in slow motion. Once in the Plaza, filled with people taking in the memorial site, she begins to strip off her clothes, and from behind we see

the words "evolving" written across her back. The video maintains the slow motion effect for the entire work, adding to the documentary feel, which seemingly reenacts an historical event. As she removes her underwear amongst the crowd, the image is strategically pixilated over her nude body. Suddenly we hear a gunshot and Badu drops to the ground as if shot and as she falls the words "group think" appear on the sidewalk next to her. This is where most discussion of the video usually ends, but the video features a voiceover addendum where Badu states, as the text spills out by her fallen body,

They play it safe, are quick to assassinate what they do not understand. They move in packs ingesting more and more fear with every act of hate on one another. They feel most comfortable in groups, less guilt to swallow. They are us. This is what we have become. Afraid to respect the individual. A single person within a circumstance can move one to change. To love herself. To evolve.

The camera tracks up towards the sky and around the space, then circles back with Badu reappearing and walking toward the camera smiling as the last part of the spoken segment is heard: "To love herself. To evolve." The video ends with Badu in a tight close-up before she exits the frame.

The lyrics of the song, dealing with a difficult personal relationship, employ the "synchronizing" strategy of merging time's tenses at the level of cultural reference (from Lightnin' Hopkins to *Star Trek*) as well as mentally. The song notes the desire of being elsewhere physically and psychologically ("So can I get a window seat? Don't want nobody next to me. I just want a ticket outta town. A look around and a safe touch down"), while also trying to resolve a quarrel with a demanding lover at present. The song continues this back-and-forth between the seemingly fixed or present time and the drift beyond, and at one point, notes: "I don't wanna time travel no more, I wanna be here, I'm thinking." But ultimately, the relationship and time move on and the lyrics conclude with "I just need a chance to fly. A chance to cry and a long bye-bye."

Badu, an active user of Twitter, used the site to comment on the controversy and point us to a productive line of inquiry regarding the video: "I would never disrespect JFK. His revolutionary thinking is my inspiration. My performance art has been grossly interpreted by many" (Armenian News—Tert). While it is sometimes risky to interpret an artist's words or indeed someone's Twitter feed in literal fashion, Badu in

an interview at the Tobago Jazz Festival claimed her video was “performance art in the tradition of Josephine Baker or Yoko Ono or any other brave woman who took a stand for something” (Flow and Mugs). The opening title card for the video (before any images or sound) states that the video is “Inspired by Matt and Kim,” a reference to a similar public art event staged by the indie rock duo for the video “Lessons Learned.” In their video, Matt and Kim both strip while walking down a busy daytime sidewalk in New York’s Times Square, surrounded by crowds of people but mainly dwarfed by images and advertising.

Similarly the examples of the “Kennedy Death Art” noted earlier, Andy Warhol’s *Flash: November 22, 1963* and *Jackie*, along with the Ant Farm’s *Media Burn*, are questioning the media spectacle surrounding the event (at the time and with repeated viewings over the years) and the account of the news and media more generally. It is not the “truth” of the event that is revealed, but rather the staging of spectacle via the media’s coverage that encourages viewers to buy into the media’s *own* authenticity and the viability and veracity that accrues to the narrative surrounding the event (Rushton). As Steve Rushton argues, pseudo-events such as press conferences, congressional hearings, etc. are in fact a (quoting Foucault) “discourse produces objects,” or rather a mechanism to authenticate “facts” as seen in the case of the US government’s “proof” of weapons of mass destruction through a “feedback loop of legitimacy.” Ant Farm’s video *Media Burn* offers precisely the same critique (Rushton). At one point, before driving a car through a wall of television sets, the Kennedy-like “artist-president” holds a news conference and asks: “Who can deny that we are a nation addicted to television and the constant flow of media, and not a few of us are frustrated by this addiction. Now I ask you, my fellow Americans, haven’t you ever wanted to put your foot through your television screen” (qtd. in Rushton).

The impetus in Badu’s “Window Seat,” following Matt and Kim, works much the same, regardless of whether or not Badu was specifically quoting Ant Farm’s *Media Burn* (although she might well have been). In both “Window Seat” and *Media Burn*, the videos function as a revolt against the established order and ruling discourse by claiming our public space, placing ourselves in a specific historical time and place, and stripping it of the controlled circulation of signs by creating our own space, writing our own history. We might reconsider Badu’s opening remarks of “Honey,” remixed with the Blaxploitation “Amerikan Promise” funk sounds: “After this ladies and gentleman you are on your

own.” Re-contextualized, the words call not for despair and hopelessness, but are instead more in line with *Part I*’s earlier invocation, by Howard Beale, for us “to get mad” in the track “Twinkle.” Like Ant Farm’s *Media Burn*, “Window Seat,” along with “Honey,” “Twinkle,” and Badu’s larger remix strategy, tell us that the tools are such now that we can make our own media events, destroy television/institutionalized media, critique our news, make our own programs, make our own history. In “Window Seat,” history cannot be passively received but situated, and we must enter, embody, and inscribe ourselves in that place as Badu writes herself into that history.

But again, why invoke the Dallas scene and the explicit assassination reference for “Window Seat?” Here, the well-known national trauma is invoked to help us connect the personal and political. It is a distinction that Badu blurs consistently in her music and interviews and is consistent with her ongoing womanist aesthetic and philosophy. In a conversation with Christopher Farley, Badu notes that the *New Amerykah, Parts I and II* were created as one piece looking at both social and emotional elements important to her, and these were divided into two parts mainly due to the volume of the material. The assembly of the two CDs, she notes, was done *sonically*, rather than on the basis of content, with darker elements placed in Part I and with more melodic materials in Part II. As she discusses the controversy around the video for “Window Seat” with Farley, she begins by framing the concept for the video as “liberation” and the need for “shedding baggage” to prevent group think. Although she explores the idea of “liberation” through the lens of the “individual” and “non-conformism” she concludes by placing the discussion within an ethical frame: “I think it was Martin Luther King that said ‘I don’t want to save the world, I just want to be its moral compass’” (Farley).

Badu’s Tobago Jazz Festival interview takes these ideas and a blurring of the personal and political even further. She begins by talking about her individual need to have the courage to make the video and move past group think, but as she develops her point regarding “non-conformism,” again she attaches these quickly to larger issues of race and gender. As she explores issues of body image, the movement back and forth between the personal and political is seamless: “It was, like I said, petrifying. I was horrified to do it [the video], because I don’t love my body . . . I think we as women have been put in such a position or predicament to try to fit a criteria that we would never fit into physically, you know. I am a mother of three, I am forty years old, and I am also beautiful and also relevant.”

Significantly, she continues by noting that female nudity was especially threatening when not “packaged” according to dominant imagery:

What I really learned was that when it was packaged the way I was with no high heel shoes, or long hair, or spinning around a pole, or popping it, people have a hard time processing it when it is not packaged for the consumption of male entertainment. So they don't know quite what to do with it, or how to place it, or what to say. Because surely, a woman couldn't be intelligent enough to be making a point. It has to be for publicity or for some kind of sales. . . . I don't make money from records selling . . . I make money from performing and I don't need help for that. I have been doing that for many, many years.

Badu's clarity on the exploitation of women's bodies in the context of music video imagery explains her anger over the lascivious use of her nudity in the Flaming Lips 2012 video, “The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face.” The video, posted without Badu's prior agreed upon approval, included shots of Erykah Badu nude in a bathtub intercut with additional images of her sister Nayrok, also nude, with glitter and fluids resembling blood and semen covering her (Fitzmaurice and Phillips; Davies). The edits were made in such a way that one might easily assume that this was Erykah and not her sister in the more offensive imagery. Using Twitter to protest, Badu minced few words:

As a human, I am disgusted with your what appears to be desperation and poor execution. . . . As a director, I am unimpressed. As a sociologist I understand your type. As your fellow artist I am uninspired. As a woman I feel violated and underestimated (Davies).

The Flaming Lips' video had violated Badu's understanding of the black woman as regal and dignified so it is probably not coincidental that her recent collaboration with Janelle Monáe returned to more empowering images with the music video “Q.U.E.E.N.” The voiceover introduction to the video describes Monáe and Badu (as Badoula Oblongata) as frozen time-traveling rebels “who launched a musical weapons program Q.U.E.E.N. in the twenty-first century.” The narration continues that “researchers are still deciphering the nature of this program and hunting the freedom movements that Wondaland disguised as songs, (e)motion pictures and works of art.” The frozen rebels then come to life and sing

and dance to lyrics that highlight a nonconformity with ruling models of race, class, and gender. As Monáe announces “I will love who I am” Badu enters and the music shifts from funk to jazz with a more minimal instrumentation and mellow vibe. Badu sings “baby, here comes the freedom song” and follows with the lines that link the political, the aesthetic, and the body:

Too strong we moving on
Baby this melody
Will show you another way
Been trying for far too long
Come home and sing your song
But you got to testify
Because the booty don't lie.

After a short musical interlude, Monáe closes the song with a lengthy and intense spoken word segment while dressed in her usual tuxedo in homage to her own past background as a maid and her family's working class heritage (Rivas). Her commentary and dress make the racial, class, and gendered politics explicit, and she at one point states: “I'm going to keep leading like a young Harriet Tubman.” Remixing musical genres, history, and cultural artifacts in the science fiction setting, Monáe and Badu claim Afrofuturism for a womanist agenda.

Badu's YouTube channel is called, “Analogue Girl in a Digital World,” and one might yet again be tempted to limit Badu by seeing her name as a “nostalgic” turn back to the past if you have not been following her “synchronizing” and time travels closely. Alexander G. Weheliye argues in the article, “Feening Posthuman Voices in Contemporary Black Popular Music,” cyber theory is not only overwhelmingly white, but moreover, bereft of a body (21-22). The black subject stands outside of this future as a body and indeed a voice too much. Moreover, the recognized signs of their humanity within white establishment is then through their “authentic” and soulful voices (Weheliye 27-28). Hence, if we consider the critical reception of *New Amerykah Part 2*, it becomes clear that the efforts to understand Badu's later work as a return to her “neo-soul” roots is actually part of a failure by the imagination of white culture. It is a failure to imagine an “analogue girl,” as a black human being in a digital world and in a diverse and collective future. With “Window Seat” and “Honey,” and her many other creative works, Badu rewrites history with black women's bodies and voices as subjects with agency.

WORKS CITED

- Abebe, Nitsuh. "Erykah Badu: New Amerykah Part One: 4th World War." *Pitchfork*. Pitchfork Media, 6 June 2008. Web. 20 Dec. 2013.
- Anderson, Steve F. *Technologies of History: Visual Media and the Eccentricity of the Past*. Hanover, N.H.: Dartmouth College Press, 2011. Print.
- Antfarm. *Media Burn* 1975 ed. Online video. *Media Burn*. Media Burn Archive, n.d. Web. 1 Jan. 2014.
- Armenian News-Tert.am. "Erykah Badu's 'Window Seat' Video: Too Far, or Artistic Expression?" *Tert.am*. TERT AM, LLC., 4 Feb. 2010. Web. 31 Dec. 2013.
- Badu, Erykah. "On & On." Online Music Video. *YouTube*. YouTube, 16 June 2009. Web. 27 Dec. 2013.
- . "Love Of My Life (An Ode To Hip Hop)" Music Video. *YouTube*. YouTube, 18 Oct. 2013. Web. 28 Dec. 2013.
- . "Window Seat." Online Music Video. *YouTube*. YouTube, 2 Apr. 2010. Web. 1 Jan. 2014.
- Barrett, Sian. "New Amerykah Part One (4th World War)." *Socialist Review* Apr. 2008: n. pag. Web. 28 Dec 2013.
- Butler, Nick. "Review: Erykah Badu—New Amerykah Pt. 1 (4th World War)." *SputnikMusic*. Sputnik Music, 27 Feb. 2008. Web. 30 Dec. 2013.
- Butta. "'Honey' Video: The Original Album Covers." *Video Soul Bounce*. *SoulBounce*. SoulBounce.com, Feb. 2008. Web. 9 Mar. 2011.
- Cardace, Sara. "Way Off the Deep End." *New York Magazine*. New York Media, LLC, 3 Mar. 2008. Web. 30 Dec. 2013.
- Compton, Josette. "A Few of Roy Ayers' Favorite Things." *Entertainment Weekly*. Time, 3 Nov. 2008. Web. 31 Dec. 2013.
- Cowie, Del F. "Georgia Anne Muldrow's Family Ties" *Exclaim!* Ontario Media Development, August 2009. Web. 31 Dec. 2013.
- Davies, Madeleine. "Erykah Badu to Flaming Lips Frontman: 'Kiss My Glittery Ass.'" *Jezebel*. Gawker, 7 June 2012. Web. 15 May 2013.
- Dery, Mark. "Black to the Future." *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*. Durham: Duke UP, 1994. 179–222. Print.
- Duke, Alan. "Singer Erykah Badu Strips at JFK Assassination Site in New Video," *CNN*. Time Warner, 29 Mar. 2010. Web. 1 Jan. 2014.
- Emerson, Rana. "'Where My Girls At?': Negotiating Black Womanhood in Music Videos." *Gender and Society* 16.1 (Feb. 2002): 115–135. Print.
- ewwillia. "Erykah Badu's Window Seat: The Scary Black Body Strikes Again." *Feminist/queer/troublemaking*. *feminist/queer/troublemaking*, 5 Apr. 2010. Web. 1 Jan. 2014.
- Farley, Christopher John. "Erykah Badu on Her Controversial 'Window Seat' Video and New Album." *The Wall Street Journal*. News Corp., 29 Mar. 2010. Web. 1 Jan. 2014.
- Fitzmaurice, Larry, and Amy Phillips. "Erykah Badu Is Super Pissed at the Flaming Lips Right Now, About That NSFW Video." *Pitchfork*. Pitchfork Media, 6 June 2012. Web. 23 Dec. 2013.
- Flow, Sista and Phil Mugs. "Window Seat: Erykah Badu's explanation (Tobago Jazz Festival Interview)." Online Music Video. *YouTube*. YouTube, 26 Apr. 2011. Web. 26 Dec. 2013.
- George, Lynell. "Pop Music; Socially Conscious Neo-Soul and a Plan; Donnie's Music Has a Message, but He's Not against Selling Records, Especially via Grass-Roots Publicity: [HOME EDITION]." *Los Angeles Times*. Tribune Co., 2 Mar. 2003. Web. 30 Dec. 2013.
- Gill, Andy. "Album: Erykah Badu, New Amerykah Part Two: Return of The Ankh (Island)—Reviews, Music" *The Independent*. Independent Print Limited, Mar. 26, 2010. Web. 6 Mar. 2011.
- Greenblatt, Leah, and 2008. "Music Review: New Amerykah, by Erykah Badu." *Entertainment Weekly*. Time, 3 Mar. 2008. Web. 31 Dec. 2013.
- Hopkinson, Natalie. "Freeing the Black Woman's Body." *The Root*. The Slate Group, 30 Mar. 2010. Web. 1 Jan. 2014.
- Lewis, Miles Marshall. "Erykah Badu: The Plebeian, Militant Homegirl." *Village Voice*. Voice Media Group, 4 March 2008. Web. 31 Dec. 2013.
- Lori. "Erykah Badu's New Video for 'Window Seat': Feminist Art or Shameless Publicity Stunt?" *Feministing*. Feministing, 30 March 2010. Web. 31 Dec. 2013.
- Mitchell, Gail. "Soul Resurrection: What's So New About Neo-Soul?" *Billboard*. Prometheus Global Media, June 2002. Web. 30 Dec. 2013.
- Mcmurray, Anaya. "Hotep and Hip-Hop: Can Black Muslim Women Be Down with Hip-Hop?" *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism* 8.1 (2007): 74–92. Web. 30 Dec. 2013.
- Macpherson, Alex. "Erykah Badu, New Amerykah Part One (4th World War)." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media Ltd., 13 Mar. 2008. Web. 31 Dec. 2013.
- Matt and Kim. "Lessons Learned." Online music video. *YouTube*. YouTube, 21 Apr. 2009. Web. 1 Jan. 2014.
- Mnthali, Luso. "Erykah Badu's Nude Video: Leaning Too Far Out The Window or Seated Just Fine?" *The Huffington Post*. The Huffington Post Media Group, 31 Mar. 2010. Web. 31 Dec. 2013.
- Monáe, Janelle, Erykah Badu, and Alan Ferguson. "Janelle Monáe—Q.U.E.E.N. feat. " Online music video. *YouTube*. YouTube, 1 May 2013. Web. 2 Jan. 2014.
- Nelson, Alondra. "Introduction: Future Texts." *Social Text* 71, 20.2 (Summer 2002): 1–15. Print.
- Phillips, Layli, Kerri Reddick-Morgan, and Dionne Patricia Stephens, "Oppositional Consciousness within an Oppositional Realm: The Case of Fem-

- nism and Womanism in Rap and Hip Hop, 1976–2004,” *The Journal of African American History* 90.3 (Summer 2005): 253–277.
- Richards, Chris. “Click Track—Album Review: Erykah Badu, ‘New Amerykah, Part Two: Return of the Ankh.’” *The Washington Post*. Graham Holdings Co., Mar. 30 2010. Web. 30 Dec. 2013.
- Rivas, Jorge. “Janelle Monáe On Being a Former Maid and Why She Still Wears a Uniform.” *Colorlines*. Race Forward, 5 Nov. 2012. Web. 4 Jan. 2014.
- Rushton, Steve. “They Came to See Who Came.” *Closed Circuit*. Rod Dickson, n.d. Web. 30 Dec. 2013.
- Ryzik, Melena. “The Mind of a One-Woman Multitude.” *The New York Times*. The New York Times Co., 2 Mar. 2008. Web. 30 Dec. 2013.
- Simon, Art. *Dangerous Knowledge: The JFK Assassination in Art and Film*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1996. Print.
- Starr, Colleen. “Erykah Badu ‘Window Seat’ Video Unedited Version Is Too Risque or Just Bad Taste?” *Examiner.com*. Clarity Digital Group, LLC., 31 Mar. 2010. Web. 31 Dec. 2013.
- Waldron, Clarence. “Cover Story, Erykah Badu.” *Jet*. Johnson Publishing Co., 8 Jan. 2001. Web. 30 Dec. 2013.
- Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose*. Orlando: Harcourt, 2004. Print.

4 The Possibilities of Liminality: Black Women’s Future Texts as Productive Chaos

Nina Cartier

INTRODUCTION

Post-modern. Post-soul. Post-black. We have numerous appellations for our current moment in black popular culture. With help from mass media, popular US culture transforms into black popular culture, especially if we consider the immense popularity of hip hop as an international force, as well as the continual appropriation of other black artistic practices and modes of being. Versions of black vernaculars and fashions top the list of these practices and modes of being, of which hip hop has become the dominant example. However, as we re-imagine the trajectories of “black” in American black popular culture, it becomes helpful to consider how we might shift our understanding of representations of black women in mass media, since the media tend to blur the line between mainstream pop culture and black pop culture.

Towards this aim, *future texts*—representations with freely floating signifiers—proffer new paradigms for black women to re-present and create anew the “black” in popular culture, as well as new reading strategies by which to understand black women’s representation. In this essay, I consider how pop-culture screen figures such as Nicki Minaj and Zoe Saldana, in their roles as the Bride of Blackenstein and Lieutenant Uhura respectively, problematize black female subjectivity today, as well as in the multiple time-spaces they embody. These figures manifest some of the possibilities of the future text as a paradigm. I also track the future