

ERIK STEINSKOG

# Analog Girl in a Digital World

Erykah Badu's Vocal Negotiations of the Human

## *Introduction*

The lyrics to the song "... & On" from Erykah Badu's 2000 album *Mama's Gun* contains the line an "analog girl in a digital world," a phrase Marlo David calls "the central metaphor with which to explore humanist and post-human subjectivities."<sup>1</sup> When Badu came on the music scene she was understood in relation to the subgenre of "neo-soul," but, in understanding the analog girl in a digital world, a broader cultural context is important. Technological developments are an integrated dimension of the production of popular music and one key dimension of the discourse from the late 1980s on was the continual process of digitalization. What I mean by the use of the term digitalization is how the digital became ever-present, from the personal computer to the Internet and cell phones, but also as an important tool for the production of music, both with synthesizers and with production technology. In other words, the technological context of a musical artist is part of the background on which she is read and understood. Badu's text-line, however, points to an inherent opposition within this field. The world is a digital one, but the girl mentioned is still analog. What does such an opposition or dichotomy say about the relation between humans and their world in general? The digitalization going on in the world changes the world, and thus our relationship to it, and the interaction with technology also alters human beings' possibilities of engagement on different levels. The ubiquity of technology, in different forms, can lead to us not paying attention to these changes, as they are gradual. As such, Badu's statement points to what could be seen as an unsolved dilemma. If the analog is to be protected in the midst of digitalization, as could be one way of reading her musical statements, this leads to questions of how we relate to technology, including how we resist technology in some determinist sense.

In this article, I want to discuss what I will refer to as "the black posthuman" in African-American popular music, with a particular focus on Badu. Dealing with the posthuman, I will also bring in the discourse on afrofuturism as exemplified by writers and cultural critics Mark Dery and Kodwo Eshun. Particularly in Eshun's version of afrofuturism there seems to be a focus on the posthuman as a way of being "post-

1 Marlo David, "Afrofuturism and Post-Soul Possibilities in Black Popular Music," *African American Review* 41/4 (2007), 695-707, 697.

soul" and thus moving beyond – in some historical sense – the period of soul. Post-soul here could also be seen as being after the Civil Rights Movement, making it a generational marker. This way of being post-soul would include, then, attitudes of blacks born after the Civil Rights Movement, and in some ways also the attitudes of the hip hop generation.<sup>2</sup> Such a generational view stands, in one sense, in contrast to the understanding of afrofuturism, as afrofuturism seems to want to break with linear time. At the same time, historical linearity is very much part of understanding of culture, and one can hardly manage to think without some kind of orientation in time and space. What could, perhaps, be done in relation to Badu, however, is to see the prefixes "neo-" and "post-" as marking different ways of relating to the past, as repetition and moving beyond, or, perhaps even as repetition and difference, as a reiteration of what Amiri Baraka (then LeRoi Jones) called "the changing same."<sup>3</sup>

### *Soul, Neo-soul, Post-soul*

When Erykah Badu made her recording debut, *Baduizm*, in 1997, she was immediately hailed as "the queen of neo-soul." As a category, neo-soul obviously references soul, and thus records a kind of repetition. In many reviews, the sound of neo-soul was described as organic or through the use of other metaphors signifying life, and it could sound as if Badu – and others such as D'Angelo and Maxwell – reinstated life into a musical culture based on machines. That such an understanding is limited, however, almost goes without saying, as neo-soul obviously also related to hip hop, one of the musical styles/genres based, in one sense at least, on machines. From such a perspective one could, perhaps, argue for a relation within neo-soul that is formed from a combination of the human and the machine, for some kind of merger between the two rather than continuing to see them in opposition.

The notion of neo-soul is interesting for a number of reasons. The term is primarily associated to the end of the 20th century and there is a kind of millennial vibe in its reference. This also has to do with the history of black popular music and it is difficult not to hear the term as being in some kind of opposition to both the hip hop and the R&B heard around the same time. As a generational term, however, there are huge similarities between the artists understood as neo-soul and the hip hop generation, perhaps nowhere better shown than in the Soulquarians collective. These similarities are also heard in the music produced and, in that sense, neo-soul continues a tradition found in the 1990s in hip hop and R&B where musical features moved between the two genres. A band like The Roots, for example, could easily be seen as related to the neo-soul movement, as is testified way beyond the year 2000 with Questlove's

2 Bertram Ashe, "Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic: An Introduction," *African American Review* 41/4 (2007), 609-623, Bakari Kitwana, *The Hip Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African American Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

3 LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), "The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music), in *Black Music* (New York: Akashic Books, 2010 (originally published in 1968)), 205-241. Cf. also Paul Gilroy, "Sounds Authentic: Black Music, Ethnicity, and the Challenge of the *Changing Same*," *Black Music Research Journal* 11/2 (1991), 111-136.

presence on albums by both Badu and D’Angelo. Badu’s relationship with André 3000 from OutKast is not only a personal relationship but also points to musical collaborations and, it could be argued, shows one possible entry point to discussing Badu related to afrofuturism – where OutKast often is referenced.<sup>4</sup>

Neo-soul, however, and also, quite literally, references both a seemingly bygone age and its renaissance: “a new soul.” In that sense, the music refers back to the past, as if an important issue is to reinstate something found in soul that, one feels, is perceived as lost. In that sense, there is some kind of repetition at stake. With neo-soul understood as building on musical elements from R&B, hip hop, jazz, and other musical styles, there is an important dimension for interpretations in how aesthetic and cultural contexts seemingly exist beyond or before the different styles or genres. In other words, there is a generalized discourse on black music available. Similar elements are at stake within the afrofuturist discourse, even if there has been a tendency to focus upon a kind of avant-garde lineage of artists and styles. Much of this interpretation is about how to understand “soul.” Kodwo Eshun is probably the writer who is most “anti-soul,” seemingly eager to get beyond soul, or beyond anywhere where “soul” is valued above any other components. In this he uses the notion of “post-soul,” but he takes this notion even further than, for example, Nelson George does, where George primarily uses “post-soul” as a term for art and artists from the time after the Civil Rights Movement as well as, arguably, a particular black form of postmodernism.<sup>5</sup> Such a particular black understanding also makes sense related to Alexander Weheliye’s interpretation of “the posthuman” within black popular music culture. Following Eshun, but also arguing against him, Weheliye claims that, for black artists, “the posthuman” can never mean quite the same as it could within the primarily white cybertheory of the 1980s and 1990s, and this has to do with the contested dimension of the category of “the human” within the history of blacks in the US.<sup>6</sup> Eshun would not necessarily disagree, and also points to how blacks were understood as only 3/5 human, but his solution is different from Weheliye’s.<sup>7</sup> For Eshun, and here he seems to be following Sun Ra, the solution is to bypass the very category of the human, to become superhuman or posthuman, preferably on another planet. Weheliye on the other hand argues that the presence of the human within the black posthuman is not simply nostalgia, but also an affirmation of humanity.

Weheliye’s examples are different than mine, but it makes sense to see Erykah Badu localized in the midst of this, as a singular negotiation between the past, the present, and the future, as claiming her musical and racial heritage while making up-to-date music, as constantly moving between the past and the possible future. In this, she also challenges versions of the afrofuturist framework, especially where that framework is

4 Cf. Howard Ramsby II, “Beyond Keeping It Real: OutKast, the Funk Connection and Afrofuturism,” *American Studies* 52/4 (2013), 205-216.

5 Cf. Nelson George, *Buppies, B-Boys, Baps & Bohos: Notes on Post-Soul Black Culture* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992) and Nelson George, *Post-Soul Nation* (New York: Viking, 2004).

6 Alexander G. Weheliye, “Feenin’: Posthuman Voices in Contemporary Black Popular Music,” *Social Text* 20/2 (2002), 21-47.

7 Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant Than The Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (London: Quartet Books, 1999), 113.

perceived as more science fiction than most of Badu's work would be. Arguably, the most science fiction dimension in Badu's output is the last scene of the video to "Next Lifetime," taking place in a future Africa, but it is precisely the fact that it is set in Africa that distinguishes her work from those artists arguing for the necessity of going to outer space to find a place where black culture can prosper. The story of the video takes place at three different points in time: pre-colonial Africa, referenced as "Motherland 1637 A.D.," the United States in 1968 (called "The Movement: 1968"), and a future space-aged Africa, "Motherland 3037 a.d."<sup>8</sup> Badu is present in all three scenes, as is a man she looks at passionately in the first scene. She is, however, already in a relationship, and thus the "maybe next lifetime" theme is stated. Badu's visual performance is clearly Afrocentric and, in one sense, might thus be seen as challenging notions of afrofuturism. The video, however, underlines a science fiction aspect in that the third chapter is set in the future. That it is a future Africa is important because she seems less occupied with leaving the planet behind.<sup>9</sup> In that sense she is more concrete about the future, less inclined to science fiction so to speak, illustrating that there are indeed blacks in the future.<sup>10</sup> The Afrocentricity, however, seems to suggest that this future is the Motherland rather than a changed USA. In this, too, she is in a long tradition of African Americans, and her utopia is some kind of return. The kind of time-traveling Badu engages with in "Next Lifetime," however, clearly builds on science fiction or afrofuturist tropes and also challenges traditional narrative structures. The Afrocentric dimension of the video points to an alternative history for blacks (African and Afro-diasporic subjects) where the Civil Rights Movement becomes the point from where the future can appear.

Kodwo Eshun's *More Brilliant Than The Sun* was written around the same time as Badu made her debut, and first published in 1998. The ideas he presents, however, are also found in John Akomfrah's movie *The Last Angel of History* from 1996, not only when Eshun is on-screen but in the very script of the movie, and so these ideas can safely be said to have been around in the middle of the 1990s.<sup>11</sup> Writing the history of afrofuturism as a discourse, one needs also to include Mark Dery, Mark Sinker, and Greg Tate, but it still shows that something was building up in the beginning of the 1990s. This, of course, does not mean that the phenomena discussed in this writing as being related to the term afrofuturism began at this time. The music, art, and writing now discussed as afrofuturist certainly goes back further, but the terms afrofuturism, sonic fiction, black science fiction, and the other terms used to get to grips with these

8 In the video it is written "A.D." in the past, and "a.d." in the future.

9 Insisting on a future Africa is also in agreement with Eshun's argument from "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3/2 (2003), 287-302, that: "If global scenarios are descriptions that are primarily concerned with making futures safe for the market, then Afrofuturism's first priority is to recognize that Africa increasingly exists as the object of futurist projections" (291).

10 The question of whether there are or will be black people in the future is key in much writing about afrofuturism, such as, for example Ytasha L. Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2013).

11 Mark Dery coined the term "afrofuturism," of which more below, in "Black to the Future." In addition to Dery's text, other crucial texts in the primal history of the afrofuturist discourse are Mark Sinker, "Loving the Alien: Black Science Fiction," *The Wire* #96 (1992), 30-33 and Greg Tate, *Flyboy in the Buttermilk: Essays on Contemporary America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992).

phenomena opened up and gave different perspectives still discussed today. Already in the introduction to Eshun’s book, however, there are some very interesting passages that are relevant for discussing “soul.” He writes:

At the Century’s End, the Futurhythmachine has 2 opposing tendencies, 2 synthetic drives: the Soulful and the Postsoul. But then all music is made of both tendencies running simultaneously at all levels, so you can’t merely *oppose* a humanist r&b with a posthuman Techno. Disco remains the moment when Black Music falls from the grace of gospel tradition into the metronomic assembly line. Ignoring that disco is therefore *audibly* where the 21st C begins, 9 out of 10 cultural crits prefer their black popculture humanist, and emphatically 19th C. Like Brussels sprouts, humanism is good for you, nourishing, nurturing, soulwarming – and from Phyllis Wheatley to R. Kelly, present-day R&B is a perpetual fight for human status, a yearning for human rights, a struggle for inclusion within the human species. Allergic to cybersonic if not to sonic technology, mainstream American media – in its drive to banish alienation, and to recover a sense of the whole human being through belief systems that talk to the ‘real you’ – compulsively deletes any intimation of an AfroDiasporic futurism, of a ‘webbed network’ of computerhythms, machine mythology and concepttechnics, which routes, re-routes and criss-crosses the Black Atlantic. This digital diaspora connecting the UK to the US, the Caribbean to Europe to Africa, is in Paul Gilroy’s definition a ‘rhizomorphic, fractal structure’, a ‘transcultural, international formation’.<sup>12</sup>

There are many dimensions one could discuss in this quote, but Eshun’s opposition of “the Soulful and the Postsoul” is of interest in the current context. While he claims that “all music is made of both tendencies running simultaneously” and that there thus is not really a sharp opposition, his writing still seems to favor the post-soul – and the posthuman – above the soulful and the humanist. Claiming that the twenty-first century begins with disco, when black music “falls from the grace of gospel tradition into the metronomic assembly line,” there is also a thinking about progress at stake. And moving from a spiritual technology – the gospel tradition – to a machinic technology – the metronomic assembly line – takes the music into a place becoming posthuman, what he calls “an AfroDiasporic futurism,” a term that must be seen as his version of afrofuturism.<sup>13</sup> What happens when reading Weheliye’s answer to Eshun, however, is that the place of Badu – whom none of them mentions – becomes interesting as an answer to an unasked question. This is the question about the possible relations between post-soul and neo-soul, in what sense it is the same understanding of soul that is at stake, and thus whether, or in what sense, neo-soul is a repetition of soul.

12 Eshun, *More Brilliant*, -006. The pagination to Eshun’s book is unusual, as the introduction has negative numbers. This is how it appears in the text. The Gilroy-quote is from *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), 4.

13 Dery is mentioned in Eshun’s book, in the interview beginning at page 178 where Eshun gives his history of afrofuturism, mentioning Dery, but also Sinkler and Tate.

### *Cybertheory and Afrofuturism*

Trying to get to grips with some of the possible understandings of Badu's production, I want to read her as related to two seemingly different threads: firstly to a dimension of cyberculture and cybertheory leading to discussions of the human versus the post-human; and secondly to the discourse referred to as afrofuturism. These two lines of thought are intimately related, and the text where the term afrofuturism was coined, Mark Dery's "Black to the Future," is published in Dery's edited volume *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*.<sup>14</sup> In the 20 years or so since Dery's article, which comprises primarily interviews with Samuel Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose, appeared discussions on afrofuturism have proliferated, with a recent publication, entitled *Afrofuturism 2.0*, marking not only a continuation or upgrade of the theoretical perspective, but also an ongoing conversation about what afrofuturism can be.<sup>15</sup> Arguably, something similar can be said about cybertheory, although notions of cyberspace, digitalization, and so forth also change as formerly new items and gadgets become everyday objects. But the cybertheory of the 1990s is clearly found today in discussions on robots, cyborgs, artificial intelligence, and so on, where some of the foundational questions of cybertheory appear in a partly new light. One key question here is what it means to be human or, even more generally, what the category of "the human" signifies. As such there is a line of thought from the discourse Dery partakes in via N. Katherine Hayles' *How We Became Posthuman* from 1999 to Rosi Braidotti's *The Posthuman* (2013).<sup>16</sup>

Dery's interview begins with him setting the stage, taking as the point of departure the question "why do so few African Americans write science fiction?" From this question comes his definition of Afrofuturism:

Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture – and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future – might, for want of a better term, be called 'Africanfuturism'.<sup>17</sup>

Continuing this line of thought, he also argues that: "African-American voices have other stories to tell about culture, technology, and things to come,"<sup>18</sup> mentioning examples from painting, film, music, literature, and so on. His musical examples are Jimi

14 Mark Dery, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose," in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, edited by Mark Dery (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 179-222. Almost the whole volume was first published as an issue of the *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 92/4, 1993, but this does not take away the intimate relation between afrofuturism and cyberculture at this point.

15 Cf. Reynaldo Anderson & Charles E. Jones (eds.), *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Afro-Blackness* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015).

16 N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).

17 Dery, "Black to the Future," 180.

18 Dery, "Black to the Future," 182.



Hendrix’s *Electric Ladyland*, George Clinton’s *Computer Games*, Herbie Hancock’s *Future Shock*, Bernie Worrell’s *Blacktronic Science*, as well as Sun Ra’s Arkestra, Parliament-Funkadelic, and Lee “Scratch” Perry, all musicians that must be said to have now become part of an afrofuturist canon. Such a canon-formation can be criticized, and has been, but the diversity of these artists still makes the list a good point of departure for discussing music and afrofuturism. Another key-text in establishing this foundation is Eshun’s *More Brilliant Than The Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*. The sonic fiction points to how Dery’s notion of speculative fiction can obviously also have a sonic parallel, and the fiction simultaneously points to how the sounds as such are only one part of the story but where the contextual dimensions, the stories that the music and musicians tell, are important too. From such a point of view, current afrofuturist discourse on music has expanded way beyond the canonic and includes also more “mainstream” music.

Badu’s music continues developments in contemporary black music, but there are simultaneously traits both in her music, lyrics, and visuals that could be interpreted as more conservative. Here, tradition and modernity, the old and the new, intersect in a different way than seen in much afrofuturist discourse in which an avant-garde thinking has dominated. In this context, it becomes important to interpret Badu’s music not only in relation to the category of neo-soul but also in relation to discourses on development or the avant-garde. Both Jason King and Marlo David have criticized afrofuturism for establishing a canon of primarily avant-garde leanings. What is of interest is not so much what is included in this canon but what is excluded and why. King argues that there is an afrofuturist canon “of techno and hip hop” that is “selectively male and heterosexist” and that it excludes music with vocals – particularly female and transgender voices;<sup>19</sup> whereas David claims that, with its focus on “radical black music styles – electronic music and experimental jazz” – afrofuturist discourse “leaves mainstream black music behind.”<sup>20</sup> In this, David argues, “popular R&B” is excluded. One reason for this exclusion, she claims, is that this music still clings to an idea of the humanist subject. And so, while Badu may be less mainstream than, for example, Beyoncé or Rihanna, she is at the same time musically much closer to R&B than the examples more commonly found within the afrofuturist discourse.<sup>21</sup>

Digitalization can be seen as a way of removing the soul from music, if soul is understood as some kind of core value of humanity rather than as a musical genre. As such digitalization replaces humanity, implying that humanity is a thing of the past. Here, another feature of cybertheory appears in which cybertheory develops a posthuman aspect. Discourses on the posthuman are simultaneously utopian and dystopian, and neo-soul arguably participates in the more dystopian aspects in the sense that it struggles to keep humanity as important and crucial within – and against – a process

19 Jason King quoted in Nabeel Zuberi, “Is This the Future? Black Music and Technology Discourse,” *Science Fiction Studies* 34/2 (2007), 283-300, 290.

20 Marlo David, “Afrofuturism and Post-Soul,” 696.

21 For a reading of Beyoncé and Rihanna within a somewhat similar framework, see Robin James, “Robo-Diva R&B: Aesthetics, Politics, and Black Female Robots in Contemporary Popular Music,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 20/4 (2008), 402-423.

of continuous digitalization understood as a gradual removal of the human. In *Neuromancer* (1984), a novel of huge importance for the cyberdiscourse of the 1990s, William Gibson wrote: "the body was meat."<sup>22</sup> This opens up a form of thinking where, in cyberspace, people could move around as disembodied entities – not only as cyborgs with the mixture inherent in the term cybernetic organism (the mixture of cybernetic circuits and organic materiality) but also, perhaps, by simply leaving the body behind.

Theoretical discourses following the definitions of cyberspace have been criticized for being blind to the privileged position from which they were written. In order to keep the body in the equation, however, criticism has been directed to embodiment within techno-utopian theories. N. Katherine Hayles stresses this in *How We Became Posthuman* when drawing attention to how gendered embodiment continues to be important and, simultaneously, how theories of disembodiment tend to remove any thought of gender, thus ending up with an abstract notion of "Man" – a notion understood more often than not as a white, heterosexual, middle-class male. In this, even the techno-utopia of cybertheory is in danger of reestablishing an older, patriarchal and heteronormative world, where the so-called liberal subject becomes the model for humanity at large. Whereas Hayles emphasizes the importance of thinking of gender (and sexuality) in relation to developments in cybertheory and theories of the post-human, Alexander Weheliye and Thomas Foster argue against the "literal and virtual whiteness of cybertheory."<sup>23</sup> In these intersections, however, between the cyborg/robot, its gendered as well as racialized status, a complexity of reading arises. As Weheliye makes clear, also following Eshun's discussions, in interpreting "black posthumanism" the very notion of "human" is contested. But Weheliye's boundaries between musical genres are less categorical than Eshun's: "If we consider the history of black American popular music, we can see both forces, the humanist and the posthumanist, at work."<sup>24</sup> With this argument, R&B and soul become more important for Weheliye's argument than these genres are for Eshun, simultaneously opening up for what could be termed a more mainstream posthumanism. His examples impinge, to a large extent, on the uses of vocoders and other voice-altering technologies, and these lead to a kind of black cyborg, exemplified by Zapp. While the cyborg is not the same as the posthuman there are, on a general level, similarities, not least in interpreting the relations between human and machine. A classic text is Donna Haraway's "A Manifesto for Cyborgs" (first published in 1985), where she argues that women of color can be understood as cyborgs. Her understanding of the cyborg as having no origin story in the Western sense could be seen as problematic from an African-American perspective, but is simultaneously inscribed in a breakdown of the understanding both of "Man" and of "Western."<sup>25</sup> In another vein, one could even expand on Haraway's

22 William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (New York: Ace Books, 1984).

23 Weheliye, "Feenin'," 21. Cf. also Thomas Foster, *The Souls of Cyberfolk: Posthumanism as Vernacular Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

24 Weheliye, "Feenin'," 30.

25 Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s," in Haraway, *The Haraway Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004) 14.



understanding of the cyborg as related to women of color by seeing how African Americans – including men, but not excluding women – have been understood in relation to “the human.” As slaves, as subhumans, as workers, they are also close to the classic understanding – or definition – of the robot. What comes across in Haraway’s reading is the possibility of understanding the cyborg in less obvious technological terms than those often found in cybertheory. Compared to Hayles’ arguments, there is no reason to claim the necessity of disembodiment; the gendered and racialized identities establish a kind of technologized understanding of embodiment too. Black subjectivity is, thus, also an answering back to the understanding wherein the slaves were objects or things, or the more current understanding of blackness as a technology.<sup>26</sup>

### *Posthuman Voices*

With the understanding of the posthuman as closely related to questions of embodiment versus disembodiment, one key feature from a musical point of view is obviously the singing voice. David argues for Badu’s “dominant voice” as referencing a tradition including both Chaka Khan and Billie Holiday and as working across musical genres. But she also underlines how the sonic context, with “bleeps and glitches reminiscent of any sci-fi film,” at the same time opens up for a number of voices. Her example is Badu’s current (at the time) album, *New Amerykah: Part One (4th World War)* (from 2008). These different voices David interprets as pointing to a multiplicity of interests for the discussion of subjectivities:

Through this multifaceted vocal instrumentation, other-worldly production, and digital sampling, Badu articulates her constructed aural subjectivity, which simulates a profound engagement with the boundaries between past and present, as well as authentic and engineered. Where does Badu’s ‘real’ voice begin and end?<sup>27</sup>

The visual material published in relation to *New Amerykah: Part One* also showed how her body was imagined as merged with sonic technology, as such her body and technology fuse into a version of the cyborg. Perhaps, in one sense, the same could be said about her musical sound. “Cyborg” is short for cybernetic organism, and as such the electronic or technological on the one hand and the organic on the other are merged into an entity. Following Weheliye, one could argue that the black cyborg would be somewhat different from the white one if not for any other reason than the exclusion of blacks from the category of the human throughout white history. Whether this is what Badu is striving towards is another question but, as David makes clear, there is rich potential for interpreting different versions of negotiations of subjectivity. David references Evelyn McDonnell’s interview with Badu from 2008 where Badu says: “*New*

26 For blackness and blacks understood as objects, see Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetic of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); for blackness as technology see Womack, *Afrofuturism*, 27.

27 David, “Afrofuturism and Post-Soul Possibilities,” 702.

*Amerykah* is a statement that simply says, 'This is the beginning of the new world' – for both slaves and slave masters," and where she also adds that "I claim to be an analog girl, so I'm in this new world, invading its space."<sup>28</sup> The new world, the new America where Erykah is inscribed, is thus a contemporary space where Badu both fits in and does not fit in at the same time. Here, a dimension of the analog is underlined, pointing to the presence of different layers of subjectivity.

For Eshun the use of technologies such as the vocoder alters subjectivity radically and installs a different kind of entity. One of his examples is the Jonzun Crew's album *Lost in Space* (1983), in particularly the track "Space Is the Place." With this title, the Sun Ra reference is obvious, but Eshun's focus is the alterations of the voice: "On Jonzun Crew's *Space is the Place*, the Arkestral chant becomes a warning blast rigid with Vadervoltage. Instead of using synthesiser tones to emulate string quartets, Electro deploys them inorganically, unmusically."<sup>29</sup> The point with the vocoder-voice, for Eshun, is that the voice is turned into a synthesizer and thus, one could argue, dehumanized. What terms to use questions how one understands a number of categories, such as "music," "voice," "subjectivity," and so on. When Eshun claims that the synthesizers are used inorganically, it is not necessarily a negative judgment. Rather, it should be seen as a prolongation of Eshun's writing about the movement from the human to the posthuman. In that sense, "dehumanizing" would be wrong too as, in relation to black music, the notion of "the human" is very much at stake. Weheliye takes the focus on the vocoder and its relation to black posthumanism further. Criticizing the then emerging theories of the posthuman, he argues for engaging black cultural production, not only to contest "the literal and virtual whiteness of cyberspace," but also so as to "realign the hegemony of visual media in academic considerations of virtuality by shifting the emphasis to the aural."<sup>30</sup> This focus on the aural, he argues, "counteracts the marginalization of race rather than rehashing the whiteness, masculinity and disembodiment of cybernetics and informatics."<sup>31</sup> Thus blackness, femininity, and embodiment might enter the discourse on different levels and, as such, qualify the discourse on posthumanity. It is through sound technologies that this change becomes most obvious, and Weheliye too explores the vocoder in this context, defining it as "a speech-synthesizing device that renders the human voice robotic, in R&B, since the audible machinic black voice amplifies the vexed interstices of race, sound, and technology."<sup>32</sup> These interstices – the place where race, sound, and technology meet – at the same time question the place of blackness within cybertheory. On the other hand there is a resemblance to George E. Lewis' focus on what sound can "tell us about the Afrofuture," where his focus is on what he describes as a "triad of blackness, sound, and technology."<sup>33</sup> Lewis' argument is

28 Evelyn McDonnell, "Erykah Badu," *Interview* (2000): <http://www.interviewmagazine.com/music/erykah-badu/>

29 Eshun, *More Brilliant*, 80.

30 Weheliye, "Feenin'," 21.

31 Weheliye, "Feenin'," 25.

32 Weheliye, "Feenin'," 22.

33 George E. Lewis, "Foreword: After Afrofuturism," *Journal of the Society for American Music* 2/2 (2008), 139-153, 142.

an expansion of Dery’s definition. Where Dery writes about “a prosthetically enhanced future,” Lewis, following a distinction he takes from Doris Lessing, discusses the “prosthetic” and the “incarnative,” thus opening up for other relations between technology and the body.<sup>34</sup>

The vocoder is a part of this triad in a particular sense, given that the technologization of the voice, even when done with analog technology, contributes a different take on “the human.” In Eshun’s reading there is a connection between the subhuman status of the slave and the posthuman status in the now or the near future, and these are both related, in a sense, to the notion of soul. As slaves, African Americans were excluded from the category of the human and the time since the end of slavery until the end of the Civil Rights Movement might be understood as a continuous fight to be included in this category. With the Civil Rights Act of 1964, one could argue that this was achieved, although later history is more than open to questioning this. In Eshun’s reading of Sun Ra it seems that leaving the idea of the human behind is the solution and, following Sun Ra’s example, going to outer space to colonize a planet for black folks, as found in the opening to the movie *Space is the Place* (1974) where music is used as a means of transport to outer space and the colonization of a planet. For Eshun, Sun Ra is the opposite of soul, and his argument is based on the Southern gospel tradition, where both soul and the Civil Rights project is understood to be based in Christianity. This, he argues, Sun Ra breaks with. In a section titled “The Posthuman,” he writes:

Soul affirms the Human. Ra is disgusted with the Human. He desires the alien, by emphasizing Egypt over Israel, the alien over human, the future over the past. In his MythScience systems, Ancient Africans are alien Gods from a despotic future. Sun Ra is the End of Soul, the replacement of God by a Pharaonic Pantheon.<sup>35</sup>

While Badu’s music and aesthetic is different than Sun Ra’s there are arguably some similarities between what she calls “Baduizm” and Ra’s “MythScience.” In David’s reading, “Baduizm” is Badu’s personal philosophy, “in which she revitalizes essentialized African ideology through a syncretic blend of Motherland symbolism, Nation of Islam and Five Percent theology, ancient Egyptian esoterica, and southern black American folk traditions,” thus having in common with Sun Ra both a focus upon Africa and a different spirituality or religion than the Christianity of the gospel tradition.<sup>36</sup> While these differences are more obvious in the lyrics and visual dimensions of Badu’s oeuvre, there is also the possibility of hearing her negotiation with different kinds of subjectivities in her voice.

As both Weheliye and Eshun make clear, the vocoderized voice is the most obvious take on a posthuman voice within contemporary popular music, and the vocoder be-

34 In another article, about Pamela Z, he writes: “Z’s strategic placement of BodySynth electrodes – eight small sensors that can be positioned practically anywhere on the body – moves past the prosthetic readings envisioned by the technology’s creators towards the dynamics of the incarnative, the embodied, the integrative.” George E. Lewis, “The Virtual Discourse of Pamela Z,” *Journal of the Society for American Music* 1/1 (2007), 57-77, 59.

35 Eshun, *More Brilliant*, 155.

36 David, “Afrofuturism and Post-Soul Possibilities,” 703.

gins a tradition leading up to the use of auto-tune within the 21st century, where the sound of the voice is explicitly technologized. That auto-tune also could be used in a hidden sense, that is as pitch-correction but where the point is that the technology should not be heard as such, does not take away the fact that already from Cher's "Believe" (1998) a focus upon technologized sound is found. When dealing with the vocoder it is different, as the technology, by necessity, points toward its own sound. This use of technology, however, seems to be more a way of illustrating the robotic rather than an enhanced human. Autotune, on the other hand, has a certain invasive dimension to it, altering the voice differently, and also changing the carrier of the voice (that is, the singer). Arguably the same could be said for the vocoder, but there are degrees, and the result is about the levels of enhancement versus incarnative, to use George Lewis's conceptual differentiation. What I called invasive above is a version of the incarnative, where the technology is not added onto the body, but where the intimacy with the body is of a different degree, where the body is changed radically, and not only with a prosthesis. The singing voice within popular music is obviously always technologically mediated, at least since the introduction of the microphone. The naturalization of this mediated voice is a part of the contract between singer and listener, where even a so-called acoustic live-event employs electronic technology. The technology, that is to say, is only supposed to help the singer with volume, for example, not to help the singer's voice in any distinctive sense. Even a limited use of technology related to the voice thus opens up negotiations of subjectivity, where a purer voice is often understood as human and the distorted voice as non-human or less human.

### *Telephones*

But there is another technology used in much of the R&B Weheliye discusses where the voice distortion feels more like an everyday event: the use of telephones, in particular cell phones. Introducing the cell phone into the discussion, Weheliye explicitly criticizes the focus upon cyberspace in the discourse of the posthuman. Instead he discusses communication related to the history of analog media, such as the phonograph, the telephone, and the radio. In these older technologies, voices are heard as disembodied, but not necessarily as posthuman. The historical change introduced with the cell phone does not take away the historicity of the phone and the experience of it as an everyday technology. Weheliye's argument about the enormous presence of the cell phone in R&B, "both as voice distorting mechanism and as part of the sonic tapestry" and as "textual topic," leads him to propose a "cell phone effect":

The "cell phone effect" marks the performers' recorded voices as technologically embodied. Instead of trying to downplay the technological mediation of the recording, the cell phone effect does away with any notion of the selfsame presence of the voice, imbuing, as Simon Reynolds points out, the production of the voice in contemporary R&B with a strong sense of "anti-naturalism."<sup>37</sup>

37 Weheliye, "Feenin'," 34.

To phrase it somewhat differently, hearing the telephonic voice is part of a sonic fiction where the singer underlines the fact that she is singing thereby highlighting the voice. The so-called natural or pure voice risks this dimension being too vaguely communicated, as if singing simply is a natural form of communication and as if the voice is the direct sound of the subject. By distorting the voice, ever so slightly, the act of singing, the act of vocal production, is communicated along with both the sounds and the words being communicated. And, perhaps somewhat paradoxically, this also enables listening to the body from where the voice emerges, since the technological voice implies another kind of body. The analog girl in a digital world might point to this too, but arguably with a focus upon a voice understood as analog within digital surroundings.

When it comes to musical production, Badu’s presence is primarily staged by way of an interaction with computer-based music, where the voice becomes the human or analog presence in a machine-line or digital context. On some tracks, however, her voice changes radically, thus opening up for another way of reading the voice. And this is nowhere as clear as when comparing her different takes on the telephone. What stands out is the song “Telephone” from *New Amerykah Part One (4th World War)* and her recent mixtape *But You Caint Use My Phone* (from 2015). *New Amerykah Part One* has a certain 1970s feel to it, but “Telephone” also references J Dilla’s 2006 album *Donuts* and even opens with what sounds like sirens, a sample from Mantronix’s “King of the Beats” (from 1988). Thus, what David refers to as “bleeps and glitches reminiscent of any sci-fi film” is combined with a voice sounding intimate. The telephone effect here is not in the voice distortion, but in the lyrics, but there is a longing in the text, and the telephone seems to stand for the impossibility of communication rather than as a means to enable it.

With *But You Caint Use My Phone*, on the other hand, all kinds of voice distortions are used, both related to Badu’s own voice and her guest rappers/singers. The album’s title is taken from the lyrics to Badu’s “Tyrone” which ends “But ya’ can’t use my phone.” “Tyrone” was recorded on Badu’s *Live* from 1997, the same year as the release of *Baduizm*. Quoting this earlier song, she thus points back to the very beginning of her career. This is also of interest for the very medium of the mixtape. Referencing other tracks opens up negotiations of history, in a generalized sense, similar to remixes and copying. At the same time, it is of interest in relation to the topic, in this case the telephone. Pointing back to the telephone being present already in one of her 1997 songs, the topic of *But You Caint Use My Phone* is timely while simultaneously referencing the past. The telephone is not only a topic, however, it is also a sound, or rather several sounds. Hearing the sounds of ringing, of the phone being occupied, of answering machines, there are the technological sounds as such. But there is also the possibility of recording the voice through the telephone (or as if through a telephone), leading to a certain distortion. The telephone is also a relational technology, as is clear in “Tyrone” where some kind of conflict is to be solved by making a call. On *But You Caint Use My Phone*, on the other hand, there are, in the lyrics, several very different references to the uses of the phone. From before calling “You can call her, but you can’t use my phone” (“Caint Use My Phone”) to the act of calling “Hello, hello, hey, hello, hello” (“Hi”), to

"something wrong with my line" ("Mr. Telephone Man"), to the absence of the phone "I can make you put your phone down" ("Phone Down"), to "you used to call me" ("Cel U Lar Device"), as if something has come to an end. There are also some texts expanding on the topic, first on "Cel U Lar Device" where an answering machine tells that we have reached "the Erykah Badu hotline" giving different options: "If you're calling for Erykah, press 1. If you're calling to wish her a happy birthday, Kwanzaa, MLK, Black History Month, Juneteenth, or Hanukkah, press 2," and so on. It is joking and serious, it is fun and references the life of a musician, it illustrates a telephonic practice, and it points to black lives. As such, she demonstrates the potential for expanding from the telephone as an everyday technology to it signaling interpersonal relationships, interactions between humans and technology, and so much more.

"Cel U Lar Device" is also Badu's answer to Drake's "Hotline Bling" (2015) and the answer should here be taken also in the telephonic sense of the word. It is, of course, also a remix, and the answering-machine dimension mentioned above is inserted into the song, contributing more than a little difference, but underlining the theme of the telephone. It also distorts the voice, making it a telephone voice, here, in the extreme sense, that it sounds like it is a machine speaking. As an answering machine (or voice-mail) it also opens another temporal layer, a sound from the past, potentially ghostly, and in principle closer to the gramophone than the telephone in its relation to the voice.<sup>38</sup> As such, the song opens up to an understanding of the voice within a continuum moving from a speaking machine via a telephone call to the "acoustic" – pure or clean – singing voice. Understanding this as a continuum rather than as distinct boxes, however, also allows for a gradual understanding of the relation between the human and the posthuman. Perhaps posthumanity is not to be seen as a totally new entity, but as a continuation of the human, where different forms of intersection between the body and technology equals the gradually machine-like dimension of the voice. On the other hand, a speaking machine could also be seen as a totally new entity, as humans making machines in their own image and adding elements previously understood as primarily human – here not least the voice, speech, and singing. The telephone decreases distance. Speaking on the telephone, the other is brought near, in principle so near that the technology short-circuits the distance between the mouth and the ear. In principle we can whisper to the other no matter how far away s/he might be. In that sense there is an intimacy, or even eroticism, inherent in the telephonic technology. Here then, embodiment and disembodiment come in contact, both between the singer and us as listeners, and within the narrative of the mixtape as such. In this, the voice functions as a marker, not necessarily of subjectivity, but for a vocal negotiation of a number of subjectivities.

The telephone thus comes to stand for a site of negotiation, by underlining vocalicity in different forms. The distortion of the direct voice, pointing to the voice as mediated,

38 Cf. Steven Connor: "The Machine in the Ghost: Spiritualism, Technology and the 'Direct Voice'," *Ghosts: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, History* edited by Peter Buse & Andrew Stott (London: Macmillan, 1999), 203-225 and Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriiloquism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).



opens questions to how subjectivity is mediated. Badu may not go all cyborg, but in pointing out the analog girl in the digital world, the different dimensions partaking in the negotiation of subjectivity come to the fore and, as such, both the relation between culture, technology, and things to come, as well as the question of the human, are put forward. There is no easy answer, but, instead, an insistence on an agency where the telephone stands out as the carrier of voices and thus where the merging of human and technology is a kind of future.