"Feenin"

POSTHUMAN VOICES IN CONTEMPORARY BLACK POPULAR MUSIC

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> Book titles tell the story. The original subtitle for *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was "The Man Who Was a Thing." In 1910 appeared a book by Mary White Ovington called *Half a Man*. Over one hundred years after the appearance of Stowe's book, *The Man Who Cried I Am*, by John A. Williams, was published. Quickskill thought of all the changes that would happen to make a "Thing" into an "I Am." Tons of paper. An Atlantic of blood. Repressed energy of anger that would form enough sun to light a solar system. A burnt-out black hole. A cosmic slave hole.
> —Ishmael Reed, *Flight to Canada*

> If you listen close to the music, you'll find . . . my syste-systic humanistic sound to prove you, yeeaah.
> —Zapp, "It Doesn't Really Matter"

This essay takes up N. Katherine Hayles's challenge to seize this critical moment in order "to contest what the posthuman means . . . before the trains of thought it embodies have been laid down so firmly that it would take dynamite to change them," by closely examining her recent text, *How We Became Posthuman*.[1] I do this because Hayles's volume provides the most elaborate history and theory of the posthuman, even while her framework embodies the "trains of thought" she herself queries. In other words, Hayles's own formulations are on the way to becoming hegemonic, at least in the discrepant disciplines in the humanities and social sciences that make up the postdiscipline of cultural studies. I begin with two contentions. The first concerns the literal and virtual whiteness of cybertheory.[2] The second establishes at the very least an aporetic relationship between New World black cultures and the category of the "human." In addition, this essay also seeks to realign the hegemony of visual media in academic considerations of virtuality by shifting the emphasis to the aural, allowing us to conjecture some of the manifold ways in which black cultural production engages with informational technologies.

This is followed by a discussion of the distinct status of the "human" in Afro-diasporic politico-cultural formations. Then my attention turns to the foremost theorist of a specifically black posthumanity: the British music and cultural critic Kodwo Eshun.[3] Eshun's work provides an occasion to imagine alternative stagings of the human and posthuman found in

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the crosscurrents and discontinuities marking the history of African American music and the informational technologies in which they have been embodied over the course of the twentieth century. To this end, my focus will be on the role of the vocoder, a speech-synthesizing device that renders the human voice robotic, in R&B, since the audibly machinic black voice amplifies the vexed interstices of race, sound, and technology. In contrast to other forms of black popular music (jazz or hip hop, for instance), R&B, especially current manifestations of this genre, has received little critical attention. I would like to amend this neglect by insisting on the genre's importance as a pivotal space for the coarticulation of black subjectivity and information technologies. The interaction between the audibly mechanized and more traditionally melismatic and "soulful" voice in contemporary R&B indicates a different form of posthumanism than the one suggested by cybertheory, a posthumanism not mired in the residual effects of white liberal subjectivity, and a subjectivity located in the sonic arena rather than the ocular.

How We Were Never Human: Race and the (Post) Human

It is obviously nothing new to declare that cybertheory has little if anything to say about the intricate processes of racial formation, whether U.S.–based or within a more global framework. While gender and sexuality have been crucial to theories of both cyberspace and the posthuman, the absence of race is usually perfunctorily remarked and of little consequence to these analyses. Critics such as Joe Lockard and Kalí Tal have dealt with the erasure of race from these studies, but their work remains ghettoized rather than integrated into the mainstream of cybertheory.[4] Hayles is no exception in this regard: while gender takes center stage in much of Hayles's discussion of these cultural and technological constellations, her analysis seems to be symptomatic of the field as a whole. Although it is not Hayles's project per se to interrogate race in relation to virtuality, the erasure of race severely limits how we conceive of the complex interplay between "humans" and informational technologies.

Hayles's general argument provides a trenchant scrutiny of "how information lost its body," that is, the manifold ways in which information is thought to transcend materiality, continuing the Cartesian tradition of placing mind over matter, only in this framework the content of techno-informational flows replaces the "human" mind (2). Not only does this particular form of disembodiment extend the Cartesian mind/matter dichotomy, it also preserves the idea of the liberal subject, represented as *having* a body, but not *being* a body (4). Hayles draws her definition of

subjectivity from C. B. Macpherson's classic, *A Theory of Possessive Individualism*, wherein he delineates the liberal the subject as "the proprietor of his own person, or capacities, owing nothing to society for them. . . . The human essence is freedom from the will of others, and freedom is the function of possession."[5] Summarizing Macpherson's take on Hobbes and Locke, Hayles asserts that the liberal subject was thought to predate the market by virtue of wielding ownership over the self (the natural self); such ownership resisted corruption by market forces and was taken to be the unalienable natural right of "man" (3). Still, as both Hayles and Macpherson note, this "human" is very much a product of the market and in no way anterior to its forces, especially in the United States, where citizenship and personhood were, and in some ways still are, predicated upon property ownership, and thus "freedom is the function of possession." Though careful to stress that the liberal version of selfhood is only that—one particular way of thinking about what it means to be "human"—and not wishing to resuscitate this rendition of subjectivity, in the end Hayles unwillingly privileges this modality, for it serves as her sine qua non for human subjectivity. Put differently, Hayles needs the hegemonic Western conception of humanity as a heuristic category against which to position her theory of posthumanism, in the process recapitulating the ways in which the Western liberal theory of the "human," instantiated in the eighteenth century, came to represent "humanity" sui generis.

According to Hayles, the posthuman subject renders this conception of the "natural self" obsolete, since discrete boundaries and unmitigated agency give way to an "amalgam . . . of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction" (3). While I sympathize with Hayles's desire to redraft this hegemonic Western version of personhood, her singular focus on this particular historical composite unnecessarily weighs down her project, since the posthuman frequently appears as little more than the white liberal subject in techno-informational disguise. Even when giving examples of paradigmatic posthumans, Hayles falls back on white masculinist constructions by citing the Six Million Dollar Man and Robocop as avatars of the posthuman condition; at the very least, the category might have been expanded by including the Bionic Woman. Similarly, in the readings of classical science fiction (Philip K. Dick) and cyberpunk narratives (William Gibson and Neal Stephenson) or in the redaction of the history of cybernetics, Hayles reinscribes white masculinity as the (human) point of origin from which to progress to a posthuman state. It seems that one has to be always already "free from the will of others" (or think that one is) in order to mutate into the fusion of heterogeneous agents comprising the posthuman state of being, thereby excluding all

cultural and political formations in which the history of subjectivity is necessarily yoked to the will—and/or the whips and chains—of others.[6] Certainly, New World black subjects cannot inhabit this version of selfhood in quite the same manner as the "white boys" of Hayles's canon due to slavery, colonialism, racism, and segregation, since these forces render the very idea that one could be "free from the will of others" null and void.[7]

Ironically, the specters of race and slavery haunt the margins of Hayles's argument through the use of Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* at a strategic point in her discussion. Here is how she describes her project: "This book is a 'rememory' in the sense of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: putting back together parts that have lost touch with one another and reaching out toward a complexity too unruly to fit into zeros and ones" (13). However, Hayles neglects to explore the implications of this text, especially in regard to notions of humanity as they are refracted through the history of slavery. Morrison's novel highlights both the absence and the construction of what we now associate with the liberal humanist subject, depicting the dehumanizing effects of slavery on particular black subjects and their struggle to reconstruct their fractured bodies and subjectivities in slavery's aftermath. But the novel also insists that there can be no uncomplicated embrace of liberal humanist subject positions by black people after slavery. The literal dehumanization of black people through chattel slavery, as well as the legal, political, anthropological, scientific, economic, and cultural forces supporting and enforcing this system, afforded black subjects no easy passage to the sign of the human. To phrase this conundrum in the spirit of Morrison's narrative, once your animal characteristics have been measured against human ones in the pages of the plantation ledger, desiring the particular image of humanity on the other side of this very ledger seems, to put it mildly, futile. Or as Saidiya Hartman describes the transition from "subhuman" to "human": "the transubstantiation of the captive into the volitional subject, chattel into proprietor, and the circumscribed body of blackness into the disembodied and abstract universal seems improbable, if not impossible."[8] Consequently, the human has had a very different meaning in black culture and politics than it has enjoyed in mainstream America.

Because theories of posthumanity are so closely associated with theorizations of cyberspace, computer-mediated communication often appears to be the precondition for becoming posthuman. Even though critics such as Friedrich Kittler, Lisa Gitelman, Sadie Plant, and Steven Connor have cast a wider historical and conceptual net by analyzing film, the phonograph, the telephone, and the radio as informational technologies, these works largely assume the disciplinary guise of media theory and/or history

and not cybertheory.[9] Moreover, cybertheory frequently positions computer-mediated communication as the be-all and end-all of virtuality and informational technologies. To be sure, *How We Became Posthuman* skillfully fuses the scientific and literary discourses of the posthuman, yet save for canonical science fiction and contemporary cyberpunk, the traditional cultural topoi of cybertheory, the book examines little outside of the world of cybernetics. Incorporating other informational media, such as sound technologies, counteracts the marginalization of race rather than rehashing the whiteness, masculinity, and disembodiment of cybernetics and informatics.[10]

In one of the first anthologies specifically concerned with racialized subjects and technology, the editors introduce the volume with the following cogent observation:

> *Technicolor* presents a full spectrum of stories about how people of color produce, transform, appropriate, and consume technologies in their everyday lives. In order to locate these stories, we found it necessary to use a broader understanding of technology, and to include not only those thought to create revolutions (e. g., information technologies), but also those with which people come in contact in their daily lives. For when we limit discussions about technology simply to computer hardware and software, we see only a "digital divide" that leaves people of color behind.[11]

For my own purposes, these alternate configurations are most readily found in the histories of sound technologies and their interaction with twentieth–century black cultural practices. These counterhistories do not adhere to the effacing of embodiment that Hayles exposes in cybernetics and informatics; they gesture toward a more complex interaction between embodiment and disembodiment, the human and posthuman.

If we follow Hayles's notion of the posthuman as an embodied virtuality, then recording and reproducing human voices certainly falls into the force field of the posthuman. Because technologically mediated human voices were considered nonhuman due to their mechanical embodiment, various cultural mechanisms had to be instantiated in order to reinscribe humanness and presence; early discourses on the phonograph testify to this embodied virtuality, picturing the voice emanating from the phonograph as nonhuman and ghostly. This tension between the nonhuman and human, presence and absence, reaches its pinnacle in the traffic between black popular music and the various recording and reproduction technologies it has been transmitted through over the course of the twentieth century. From the onset of the mass production and distribution of recorded sound in the 1920s, black popular music functioned as the embodiment of the virtual voice. Instead of merely producing a disem-

bodied virtuality *avant la lettre*, the phonograph harbors an always-embodied virtuality, particularly in relation to black voices. Paradoxically, black voices are materially disembodied by the phonograph and other sound technologies, while black subjects are inscribed as the epitome of embodiment through a multitude of U.S. cultural discourses.

The Souls of Black Folks

Afro-diasporic thinking has not evinced the same sort of distrust and/or outright rejection of "man" in its universalist, post-Enlightenment guise as Western antihumanist or posthumanist philosophies. Instead, black humanist discourses emphasize the historicity and mutability of the "human" itself, gesturing toward different, catachrestic, conceptualizations of this category.[12] However, wielding this particular and historically contingent classification should not be read, as is often the case, as a mere uncritical reiteration, as if there were such a thing, of humanist discourses. Black discourses have consistently laid claim to "humanity" in multifarious ways, starting with Phyllis Wheatley's poetry at the end of the eighteenth century and continuing throughout the nineteenth century, as exemplified by the works of David Walker, Maria Stewart, Martin Delaney, and Anna Julia Cooper. While invocations of humanism in the twentieth century surely stem from different motivations than those historically preceding them, these ideas are elaborated by such thinkers as W. E. B. DuBois, Alain Locke, Jessie Fauset, Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston, Aimé Césaire, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Frantz Fanon, Audre Lorde, and Edouard Glissant, to name a few. Far from renouncing "humanity," these intellectuals have all focused on this category. Clearly this emphasis on "humanity" results from the histories of slavery and colonialism and the racial, gender, and sexual violence ensuing from these forces. Indeed, as Ishmael Reed's epigraph to this essay conveys, the "middle passages" of black culture to and in the New World are not marked so much by "humanity" as by an acute lack thereof; a "black hole" of humanity, so to speak. Since black subjects were deemed the radical obverse of enlightened and rational "man," various black discourses have sought to appropriate this category. In the words of Frantz Fanon: "We must turn over a new leaf, we must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new man."[13] This new "man" is the subject of Ishmael Reed's "cosmic slave hole," where "humanity" neither begins nor ends with the white masculine liberal subject. Thus, any consideration of the posthuman should contemplate the status of humanity from the vantage point of this "cosmic slave hole."

Afro-Caribbean theorist Sylvia Wynter's attempt to recast the human sciences in relation to a new conception of "man" provides contexts in which to think the "human" that not only bridge the ever widening gap between the cognitive life sciences and humanities but also incorporate the colonial and racialist histories of the "human."[14] Tracing the *longue durée* of Western modernity, Wynter maintains that the religious conception of the self gave way to two modes of secularized subjectivity: first, the Cartesian "Rational Man" and then, beginning "at the end of the eighteenth century, . . . Man as a selected being and natural organism . . . as the universal human, 'man as man'" ("Beyond the Word," 645).[15] In the discursive and material universe of "biological idealism," the second of Wynter's modes of secularized being, black subjects served as limit cases by which "man" could define himself as the universal "human" ("Disenchanting Discourse," 436). Here, "man" appears as "man" via dis-identification, wherein whiteness connotes the full humanity only gleaned in relation to the lack of humanity in blackness. Moreover, "the black population groups of the New World [acted] as the embodied bearers of Ontological lack to the secular model of being, Man, as the conceptual Other" ("Beyond the Word," 641).[16] Because New World black subjects were denied access to the position of humanity for so long, "humanity" refuses to signify any ontological primacy within Afro-diasporic discourses. In black culture this category becomes a designation that shows its finitudes and exclusions very clearly, thereby denaturalizing the "human" as a universal formation while at the same time laying claim to it. Put differently, the moment in which black people enter into humanity, this very idea loses its ontological thrust because its limitations are rendered abundantly clear. Black humanism disenchants "Man as Man," bringing "into being different modes of the *human*" because it deploys the very formulation of "man" as catachresis ("Disenchanting Discourse," 466). Current debates about the posthuman might do well to incorporate these ontological others into their theories in order to better situate and analyze the porous perimeters of the "human."

Black humanism has found one of its most persistent articulations in the vexed discursive entanglements around black people's souls over the course of the last 150 years, most markedly in relation to black popular music. In *Blackness and Value: Seeing Double*, Lindon Barrett holds that the black voice functions as a figure of value within African American culture, particularly as it is contrasted with the lack of value ascribed to blackness in American mainstream culture.[17] In a complex argument, Barrett distinguishes *the singing voice* from the *signing voice* of Euro-American alphabetical literacy, writing that the singing voice "provides a primary means by which African Americans may exchange an expended, valueless self in

the New World for a productive, recognized self" (57).[18] The *signing voice*, on the other hand, represents the literacy of the white Enlightenment subject redacted above. As in Hayles's account of Western thinking, the *signing voice* signals full humanity, whiteness, and disembodiment, where the *singing voice* metonymically enacts blackness, embodiment, and subhumanity. For Barrett the corporeality—"sly alterity," as he terms it—furnishes the black singing voice's most destabilizing feature (58). In this sense, the black *singing voice* suggests a rather different access to the category of "humanity" than the *signing voice* and in the process undermines the validity of the liberal subject as the sign for the "human," providing a fully embodied version thereof. Thus black subjectivity appears as the antithesis to the Enlightenment subject by virtue of not only having a body but by being the body—within Enlightenment discourses blackness is the body and nothing else. But what happens once the black voice becomes disembodied, severed from its source, recontextualized, and appropriated? All these things occurred when the first collections of transcribed spirituals became readily available for public consumption during the Civil War and continued with the recording and reproduction through various media of the black voice in the twentieth century.

Far from being transmitted "in [a] startlingly authentic form," as Barrett will have it, the black singing voice, decoupled from its human source and placed in the context of spiritual collections and subsequently phonograph records, insinuates a much more overdetermined and unwieldy constellation within both black and mainstream American cultural discourses. As both Ronald Radano and Jon Cruz have shown, spirituals, once transcribed and compiled, served both white and black abolitionist purposes as embodiments of black humanity.[19] Black sacred and later secular music took on two simultaneous functions: proving black peoples' soul and standing in for the soul of all U.S. culture, keeping the racially particular and national universal in constant tension. Thus spirituals ushered in a long history of white appropriations of black music, ranging from the "slumming" patrons of the Cotton Club, Norman Mailer's "white negroes," to today's hip hop "whiggers." All of this goes to show that while the black singing voice harbors moments of value, as suggested in Barrett's scheme, it can hardly be construed as a purely authentic force, particularly once delocalized and offered up for national and/or international consumption. The "soul," and by extension "humanity," of black subjects, therefore, is often imbricated in white mainstream culture, customarily reflecting an awareness of this very entanglement.

Taking the negative ontological placement of black subjects in Western modernity as his point of departure, Kodwo Eshun constructs an argument that posits a specifically black constellation of the posthuman in

which New World black subjects have privileged access to the posthuman because they were denied the status of human for so long.[20] Eshun belongs to a growing number of critics exploring the intersections of black cultural production, technology, and science fiction collected under the rubric Afrofuturism, including Greg Tate, Sheree Thomas, Mark Dery, Carol Cooper, Nalo Hopkinson, Paul D. Miller (DJ Spooky), and the many contributors to the AfroFuturism Web site and listserv.[21] Eshun's 1998 volume *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* represents the most extensive manifesto of this movement, tracing different forms of alienness and posthumanity through various genres of post–World War II black popular music, including jazz, funk, hip hop, techno, and jungle, as well as providing a dazzling account of the technicity of black music. Eshun claims that the sign of the human harbors a negative significance, if any, in Afrofuturist musical configurations. In these genres, he argues, shifting forms of nonhuman otherworldliness replace the human as the central characteristic of black subjectivity:

> The idea of slavery as an alien abduction means that we've all been living in an alien-nation since the eighteenth century. The mutation of African male and female slaves in the eighteenth century into what became negro, and into an entire series of humans that were designed in America. That whole process, the key behind it all is that in America none of these humans were *designated* human. It's in the music that you get this sense that most African-Americans *owe nothing to the status of the human.* There is this sense of the human as being a really pointless and treacherous category. (192–93; emphasis mine)

As a result of the dehumanizing forces of slavery, in Eshun's frame of reference, certain kinds of black popular music stage black subjectivity, bypassing the modality of the human in the process of moving from the subhuman to the posthuman. According to Eshun, black posthumanism stands in stark contrast to the strong humanist strand found in a host of black cultural styles, ranging from the majority of African American literature to the history of soul and the blues. Eshun describes these two modes of thinking as Afro-diasporic futurism and the humanist future-shock absorbers of mainstream black culture. Eshun's important work unearths some of the radical strands of black music that refuse to uncritically embrace the Western conception of "the human," are largely instrumental, and therefore do not rely on the black voice as a figure of value.

In Eshun's argument these allegedly black humanist discourses continually appeal to humanity, at the same time positing the "human" as their Platonic ideal: "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" (6). While both of these schools of Afro-diasporic cultural discourses (Afro-diasporic futurism and humanist future-shock absorbers) surely exist, they are not quite as categorically antagonistic as Eshun imagines them to be.[22] If we consider the history of black American popular music, we can see both forces, the humanist and posthumanist, at work. From nineteenth-century spirituals through the blues, jazz, soul, hip hop, and techno, the human and the posthuman are in constant dynamic tension. It is precisely because slavery rendered the category of the human suspect that the reputedly humanist postslavery black cultural productions cannot and do not attribute the same meaning to humanity as white American discourses. These inscriptions of humanity in black culture provide particular performances of the human—singularities, if you will, that always incorporate their own multiplicities—as opposed to mere uncritical echoes of the white liberal humanist subject.[23] Eshun, in his move to polemicize against black humanism, takes the performance of the human in black literature and music at face value, leaving behind its most radical gesture of marking the boundaries and limitations of the human itself.

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Hypersoul

Even though numerous cultural discourses have done their best to authenticate and naturalize the soul of black popular music, the musical practices themselves frequently defy these authenticating mechanisms by embracing new technologies, hybridities, and self-consciousness about the performative aspects of soul. In order to provide more specific examples of how the definitions of the human and posthuman might shift if we look and listen beyond the topical and analytical borders of cybertheory and Eshun's Afrofuturist figurations, I will now turn my attention to contemporary examples of black popular music's engagement with informational technologies. I am most interested in the status of the recorded voice in contemporary mainstream R&B, because this genre, pace Eshun, does not so much absorb the "future shock" of Afrofuturism as reconstruct the black voice in relation to information technologies. While singers remain central to the creation of black music, they do so only in conjunction with the overall sonic architecture, especially in the turn away from the lead singer as the exclusive artist to more producer-driven and collaborative musical productions. This has its scattered origins in music designated by terms such as the Motown or Philly sounds rather than the naming of oeuvres in relation to particular singers. Most Motown artists, for example, collabo-

rated with Dozier/Holland/Dozier, Norman Whitfield shaped the sonic provenances of the Temptations' early 1970s work, and Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff were instrumental in constructing the sound of the O'Jays and other artists on the Philly International label, which ensured that the technological mediation and creation of soul became part and parcel of the musical performance.

Currently the most prominent R&B producers, such as Missy Elliot, Sean "Puffy" Combs, Timbaland, Rodney Jerkins (Darkchild), or the Neptunes, have become omnipresent on the vocal tracks of R&B and music videos for the songs they produce. Jerkins routinely announces his songs as Darkchild "products"; on Destiny's Child's "Say My Name," for example, he states "Darkchild 99" in the opening sequence of the track.[24] Often producers provide guest raps, and the artists themselves acknowledge their production wizards in the lyrics, providing something akin to aural signatures.[25] On Ginuwine's "Same Ol' G," Timbaland half sings and half raps, with the performer constantly sonically inscribing his own name so that the line between performer and producer vanishes into thin musical air.[26] The human voice has signaled presence, fullness, and the coherence of the subject, not only in Western philosophical discourses but also in popular music and popular music criticism. Other genres of popular music attempt to erase their technological mediation and embodiment, remaining mired in the myth of what Ted Gracyk terms "recording realism," which insists on the authenticity, integrity, and naturalness of the recorded performance.[27] But no recorded performances, not even live recordings, are "real"—or even representations thereof. Rather, they are virtual productions created through interactions of musicians and listeners with recording and reproduction technologies. By embracing new technologies such as remixing, scratching, and sampling, black popular music producers and performers persistently emphasize the virtuality of any form of recorded music. Acknowledging the effects of these technologies on these musical practices, black popular musical genres make their own virtuality central to the musical texts. Instead of pulling the strings in the background—that is, being disembodied—these producers, who plug the performers into the technological apparatus, take front and center stage with the artists. This creates a composite identity, a machine suspended between performer and producer that sounds the smooth flow between humans and machines.[28]

Since the early 1990s, R&B has undergone significant changes due to its symbiotic relationship with hip hop, most clearly audible in the numerous guest rappers on R&B records.[29] While guest raps appeared in R&B as early as Melle Mel's stint on Chaka Khan's 1984 Prince cover version, "I Feel for You," or Rakim's on Jody Watley's "Friends" in 1989, these

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collaborations increased exponentially in the following decade; now the majority of mainstream R&B records feature some presence by rappers.[30] Hip hop aesthetics have also exerted an enormous influence on the instrumental and studio production techniques as well as altering the singing styles of current R&B.[31] As R&B producers began to utilize samples of rhythm tracks from old recordings, in much the same way that hip hop records do, singers, in turn, adjusted their vocal styles to the rhythm of the sample rather than the melody. Mary J. Blige and her producers pioneered this trend: her first two albums made elaborate use of samples and Blige's vocals followed suit; she refers to it as singing over beats as opposed to crooning traditional songs. Suspended between the mellifluous R&B phrasing and the rhythmical intonations of rapping, Blige's vocal style has been widely emulated.[32] In some sense, then, this focus on rhythmic dimensions of vocalization moves the R&B singing voice closer to the stereotypically mechanical, since the machinic is often associated with rigid rhythmic structures and not the "human" expansiveness of melody and harmony.[33]

As the 1990s progressed, producers such as Missy Elliot and Timbaland, Rodney Jerkins (Darkchild), and She'kespere Briggs increasingly created their "own" adventurous studio sounds instead of relying on prerecorded beats, still emphasizing rhythm first and foremost. The lyrical content of R&B has also undergone major shifts, especially when compared to the late sixties and early seventies, stressing designer clothes, expensive cars, and hypersexuality, among other things.[34] This leads Bat to coin a new term for current R&B: "*Hypersoul*, which is marked on all levels by antagonism towards soul values. Soul's religious and spiritual undercurrent is often pushed aside in favour of brazen aspirational materialism (aka the 'playa' culture). Many tracks flaunt an obsession with hi-tech consumer gadgetry, especially mobile phones."[35] As opposed to most other critics of recent R&B, Bat attempts to take the genre on its own terms, conjecturing its reconceptualization of older notions of "soul." Both the rhythmic singing and the increased attention to material goods render R&B machinic rather than traditionally "soulful" or "human." Thus contemporary R&B suggests a mechanized desire at the cusp of the human and posthuman. Furthermore, R&B's engagement with various technologies, both in its production and its lyrics, provides several avenues to configuring human beings so that they can be seamlessly articulated with (intelligent) machines (Hayles, 3). In the final section, I will examine the general role of informational technologies in current black popular music and then focus on the use of vocoders to better ascertain the specificity of the human-machine interaction in R&B.

To say that communications and other technologies are leading actors on the stage of contemporary R&B would amount to an understatement of gargantuan proportions; lyrically, hardly a track exists that does not mention cellular phones, beepers, two-way pagers, answering machines, various surveillance gadgets, e-mail messages, and the Internet, stressing the interdependence of contemporary interpersonal communication and informational technologies. As a result, these technologies appear both as Brechtian "A-effects" and as sonic "cinema verité" that depict the "reality" of current technologically mediated life worlds.[36] On "Beep Me 911," for instance, Missy Elliot and 702 ask an unnamed lover to beep or call them on the cell phone if she or he still loves them, the 911 functioning here as an indicator of both urgency and monumental desire.[37] Destiny's Child admonishes an unwanted admirer, a "Bug-a-Boo," to stop beeping their pagers, leaving them telephone messages, and sending them e-mail; if this techno-informational terrorism continues, they threaten to block the caller's number, have MCI cut the phone poles, throw their pager out the window, and have AOL make their e-mail stop.[38] In a different vein, the members of Blaque describe their sexual superiority by insisting that their "love goes boom like an 808," a drum machine, used on countless hip hop, house, and techno recordings, that does not mimic "human" capacities but is celebrated for its sonic and rhythmic deepness. Blaque's sexual braggadocio transforms them into "love machines" who can only describe the velocity of their lovemaking via the machinic, thus rendering the TR-808 drum machine more "human" than the human subjects themselves.[39] The increased prominence of these technological artifacts in R&B indicates the enculturation (the ways in which technological artifacts are incorporated into the quotidian) of informational technologies in cultural practices that diverge from Hayles's restricted scientific and literary archive and Eshun's alien otherworlds.

This penchant for the machinic in R&B can also be found in the genre's use of cellular telephones both as a voice distortion mechanism and as part of the sonic tapestry. Ginuwine and Aaliyah's duet, "Final Warning," lyrically not only revolves around phone numbers and cell phones, but their staged lover's quarrel is continually interspersed by sounds of a ringing cellular telephone.[40] This ringing, rather than functioning merely as sonic similitude, forms an integral element of the rhythmic dimension of this already complexly syncopated track. The ringing of the cell phone on this recording, however, is an exception rather than the rule. Generally, cellular phones have entered R&B and hip hop—the informational technological gadget de rigueur in these genres—both as a

textual topic and, perhaps more importantly, as a voice distortion device. Nowhere is this clearer than on rap supergroup the Firm's "Phone Tap."[41] Chronicling the FBI surveillance of the imaginary gangster personas the rappers adopted for this project, the track features a slow beat and a Mexican-style acoustic guitar reminiscent of western film soundtracks. The rappers deliver their lyrics through a muffled microphone approximating voices on a cell phone, which achieves a haunting effect that aestheticizes surveillance practices by incorporating them into the musical text as much as it criticizes their utter infiltration of contemporary social and political formations. Most other uses of the "cell phone effect" are more benign but still noteworthy, in that they have realigned notions of voice and soul within the contemporary black popular musical landscape. Lately, almost all mainstream R&B productions feature parts of the lead or background vocal performance sounding as if they were called in over a cell phone as opposed to produced in a state-of-the-art recording studio.[42] This use of the cell phone has become so ubiquitous that in a recent article in the *Village Voice*, Scott Woods feels compelled to classify all female pop R&B performers as "Cell-Phone Girls."[43]

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."[44] Reynolds's argument regards the overall treatment of the voice in R&B, but the cell phone effect holds a particular prominence in this scheme as an "index of technological audibility."[45] As Jeremy Gilbert and Ewan Pearson explain, in most popular musical genres technology is frowned upon, creating a hierarchy of what counts as technological: "Such distinctions almost always proceed by rendering the technological components utilized in their favored forms invisible as technologies—they are more 'real' or 'natural,' absorbed wholly into those that play them as expressive extensions of the performing body" (112). The cell phone effect resists such principles of the "real," choosing instead to stage voice-distortion devices as both technological *and* "expressive extensions of the performing body." More importantly, the cell phone effect fails to define technological mediation and "realism" as warring opponents; instead, R&B construes these factors as thoroughly interfaced.

The technological demarcation of the voice in contemporary R&B also appears in the revival of the vocoder. Au courant in the early 1980s, this speech-synthesizing device can also be heard on a spate of recent pop and dance music recordings.[46] First used in popular music by such

artists as Kraftwerk and Herbie Hancock, it exploded in the early 1980s, particularly in the electro genre, and today is in many ways a sonic index of the early 1980s' zeitgeist. The vocoder might best be thought of as a "low technology," to use Gilbert and Pearson's phrase, which achieves analog-sounding effects via digital means (122–28).[47] The use of this sonic technology forms a part of a tendency to valorize older and obsolete machinery of musical production because they sound "warmer" and more "human, " which is ironic given that vocoders make the human voice sound robotic, in a now seemingly quaint C3P0 way. Because the vocoder carries undertones of nostalgia for a more "technologically innocent" era (the 1980s), it lends an aura of increased "humanity" and "soulfulness" to the singer's voice. Current invocations of the mechanized voice in black popular music render the vocoder less technological than the cell phone effect, for instance, since it sounds like a historical relic. I would now like to analyze several specific instances of vocoder use in R&B, tracing the shift from analog to digital and its ramifications on questions of soul and virtual embodiment.

Zapp was a late-seventies and early-eighties group associated with George Clinton in its infancy but later making a name for itself by virtue of heavily mechanized funk and extensive vocoder use. In fact, Zapp "embodies" the vocoder like no other musical group, at least in black popular music, since the group's idiosyncrasy was the prominence of this device on all its recordings. Today Zapp is largely known through samples of its funk oeuvre, the group's most widely recognized tracks, "More Bounce to the Ounce" and "Dancefloor," appearing on a number of hip hop tracks. EPMD, for instance, built a career on sampling bits and pieces of Zapp bass lines, rhythms, and vocals; Zapp's leader, Roger Troutman, even lent his mechanized voice to Tupac Shakur's 1996 megahit, "California Love."[48] However, Zapp also left a mark on R&B with two luscious but now somewhat dated-sounding vocoder ballads, "Computer Love" and "I Want to Be Your Man."[49] These two ballads exert a more subtle influence than the hip hop samples redacted above but provide inspiration for the reemergence of the vocoder in R&B.

In contrast to most other tracks in the Zapp canon, "Computer Love" features not only the vocoderized voice of Roger Troutman but also the "human voices" of the Gap Band's Charlie Wilson and Zapp's longtime background singer Shelley Murdock, who enjoyed a brief solo career in the 1980s. "Computer Love" commences with a very deep vocoder vociferation of "computer love," followed by what sounds like simulated scratching and a vocoderized voice in a much higher key intoning, "computerized." Then we hear the higher machinic voice articulating the title in conjunction with Charlie Wilson, creating a dialogue between the two in

which the "human" succeeds the "machinic." Once the verse commences, Wilson and Murdock's voices overlap (although Wilson dominates) until the lyrics make explicit references to informational technologies, such as "could it be your face I see on my computer screen" and "thanks to my technology," which are bolstered by the vocoder in the background, leading to a crescendo in which all three voices grow higher both in pitch and volume. The chorus consists mainly of the Troutman's vocoderized singing of: "Shoo-be-do-bop shoo-do-bop I wanna love you / shoo-be-do-bop computer love," reinforced by the "feminine" "sanging" of "I wanna love you baabeee."[50] The second verse follows the same trajectory as the first until the vocoder interrupts Wilson and Murdock to proclaim: "I want to keep you up tonight / you are such a sweet delight," which gives way to an additional female solo performance telling us that she "will cherish the memory of this night." After another chorus the song eschews "meaning" by simply repeating "computer love" or "digital love" for sonic effect rather than narrative closure; the feminine presence also evaporates from the sonic text. While the title indexes Kraftwerk's earlier cut of the same name, the two aural formulations' sonic similarity is scant. Although both share a slow tempo, Kraftwerk exploits its members' stereotypically Germanic voices to excavate the nonhuman and mechanical dimension of its "computer love," as opposed to Zapp, which wields both the vocoderized and human voices to unearth the "humanity" of machinic affections.[51] The Zapp track achieves this feat by drawing on the traditions of melismatic R&B singing and creating a three-way conversation, albeit an unequal one, between the male, female, and machinic utterances on the vocal track of the song. Overall, the lyrics of the tune fail to provide a clear picture of this computer love, which is so overbearing that it can only be expressed through the combined forces of female, male, and machinic voices. Although "a special girl" appears briefly in the words, mostly the repeated incantations of "computer love" are isolated, decoupled from merely serving as the conduit for anthropomorphic desire. If read/heard solely within the tradition of R&B love songs, "Computer Love" utilizes the vocoder to intensify the longing of the male subject, and even though this current is surely prominent here, the track also suggests desire for the machine itself by deferring a conclusive or coherent identification of its target. We might say by way of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari that "Computer Love" sonically formulates the following dictum: "Desire and its object are one and the same thing: the machine as a machine of a machine. Desire is a machine, and the object of desire another machine connected to it."[52]

Where Zapp employs the vocoder as a forceful and poignant "index of technological audibility," thematizing technology conspicuously in the

lyrics so that the vocoder bears an obvious mimetic relevance to the textual signification of the track, 702's "You Don't Know," emblematic of current vocoder use in R&B, fails to offer any definitive correlation between the vocoder and the textual content of the song.[53] The easy and techno-determinist explanation for this development lies in the large-scale shift from analog to digital technologies in musical (re)production during the fourteen years separating the two recordings. Such technologies enable producers to add "the vocoder effect" without the singers having to physically sing into a vocoder, transforming vocals into a portion of the many "zeroes and ones" that constitute the totality of a digitally produced sound recording.[54] "You Don't Know" comes from the female trio's eponymous 1999 album and encapsulates the sonic provenances of millennial R&B succinctly. Beginning with the obligatory "shout out" to the producers of the song, the Swedish duo Soulshock and Karlin, the mid-tempo cut deploys the cell phone effect throughout and melds musical syncopation with the rhythmic singing so popular in contemporary R&B. The vocoder effect weaves in and out of the sung verses, both in the main and background vocals, without any decisive connection to the signification of the lyrics. Some of the lyrics heard through the vocoder effect during the first half of the track include: "So why won't you tell me / Why you mean so much to me?"; "Now whata girl gotta do / To make you see"; "I want your love"; "Let me down, down (down)." A portion of these lines is repeated in different parts of the recording but not characterized by the vocoder effect, only adding to the indeterminate significance of this technique. During the final two minutes the vocoder effect rears its sonic head only once, supporting the central voice as it declares: "Just don't know." As a whole, the vocoder effect alters the function of the vocoder, even if the former shares a parasitical relationship with the latter, by dispersing the machinic across the musical text rather than giving it an integral and system-maintaining role. The vocoder effect deterritorializes the vocoder, becoming one production among many to process the "human" voice in contemporary black popular music. Ironically, the vocoder effect in black popular music amplifies the human provenances of the voice, highlighting its virtual embodiment, because it conjures a previous, and allegedly more innocent, period in popular music, bolstering the "soulfulness" of the human voice. Here, the "human" and "machinic" become mere electric effects that conjoin the human voice and (intelligent) machines.[55]

Surely desire serves as the central topos for all R&B, even if as in current formations it is desire for material objects rather than human subjects; nevertheless, it is always desire that has no "real" destiny. The vocoder and vocoder effect are literalizations of Deleuze and Guattari's "desiring-

machines" in that they excavate the productive and machinic provenances of desire not chained by lack found in all R&B.[56] This productive force has no object, because the performance of desire in R&B is always one-sided, invariably a rumination by the effect of a desiring subject (the R&B singer) and not the desired subject or object. In addition, R&B desire is always already a desire of the second order: the performance of desire rather than desire as such.[57] Instead, the R&B desiring machine "does not lack anything; it does not lack its object. It is, rather, the *subject* that is missing in desire, or that desire lacks a fixed subject" (*Anti-Oedipus*, 26). In the move from the vocoder to the vocoder effect, the centrality of the human voice dissipates throughout the desiring machine that is R&B. Moreover, other clearly technological treatments of the voice, such as the cell phone effect, the presence of producers in the musical texts, and thematization of informational technologies in the lyrics aggregate to form the R&B desiring machine. The vocoderized voice highlights the machinic dimension of the R&B desiring machine by synthesizing all the other parts into a "sound machine, which molecularizes and atomizes, ionizes sound matter" (*Thousand Plateaus*, 343). Deleuze and Guattari continue this trajectory by claiming that "the synthesizer makes audible the sound process itself, the production of that process, and puts it in contact with still other elements beyond sound matter" (*Thousand Plateaus*, 343). The presence of speech-synthesizing devices in R&B intensifies the technological mediation of the recorded voice per se ("the sound process itself"), since it dodges the naturalism associated with the human voice in so many other popular music genres. In circumventing this naturalism, R&B imagines interpersonal relations and informational technologies as mutually constitutive rather than antithetical foils.

The title of this essay, "Feenin," comes from a 1993 track by the R&B group Jodeci, who were among the forerunners of today's hip hop–inspired black pop. "Feenin" deploys a vocoder to transmit only the word *feenin* in its chorus; the rest of the track is sung in a traditional, "human" R&B singing style. The term *feenin* derives from *fiend*, as in drug fiend, and Jodeci uses it to signify all-encompassing desire. The lyrics suggest an unequivocal link between the desire for a human love object and the feenin of a junkie, in lines like the following: "All the chronic [marijuana] in the world couldn't even mess with you / You're the ultimate high"; "Girl it's worse than drugs / Cause I'm an addict of you"; "Surely girl, without a doubt / You know you got me strung out." Thus desire, in this scenario, refuses to signify any traditional humanist provenances, instead appearing in the guise of a self-generating addiction machine. Moreover, the shift from vocoder to vocoder effect is clearly audible on K-Ci and Jo Jo's 2001 single "Crazy" when compared with the

earlier recording of these two former members of Jodeci.[58] Where "Feenin" wields the vocoder to emphasize one particular aspect of the lyrics, "Crazy" weaves the vocoder effect in and out of the musical text throughout without any particular correlation between form and content, recapitulating the difference between Zapp's and 702's mechanized enunciations. Thus the term *feenin*, as it is sung by a black vocoderized voice, might be more apt vis-à-vis contemporary R&B than *desire*, since it pushes desire to the extreme. In this extreme the human subject stands in for either a mind-altering substance—locating desire for a love object in the realm of neurochemical reactions—or desire is yoked to nonhuman objects such as cars and designer clothes—moving desire from the realm of the ideal to the crassly material. This *feenin* dissolves the parameters of the coherent subject in such radical ways that human—all too human—desire can be represented only in the guise of the machinic, and the human is thus inextricably intertwined with various informational technologies. Taken together, these factors recast the R&B "desiring machine" as a "feenin machine," which explosively sounds the passage from *soul* to *hypersoul*.

This *feenin* dissolves the parameters of the coherent subject in such radical ways that human—all too human—desire can be represented only in the guise of the machinic.

The virtual embodied in contemporary R&B follows neither the orbit of those that usually populate the annals of cybertheory nor Eshun's Afrofuturist ruminations; instead, R&B desiring and feenin machines reticulate the human voice with intelligent machines without assuming that "information has lost its body" or that any version of black posthumanism must take on an alien form. Because, for reasons I have outlined above, black cultural practices do not have the illusion of disembodiment, they stage *the body* of information and technology as opposed to the lack thereof. Where Eshun zeroes in on the antihumanist cultures of Afrofuturism, Hayles discusses the history of cybernetics and informatics as well as classical science fiction and cyberpunk narratives. Eshun provides a singular account of nonhumanist black popular music as it explosively interfaces with sound technologies, but in doing so he fails to take in the ramifications of these discourses in genres that do not explicitly announce themselves as Afrofuturist, such as R&B. Hayles's conclusions seem indicative of numerous studies of virtuality and/or cyberspace, where race is heard in a minor key, and computer-mediated communication is the sole melody of the song we know all too well: the virtual. I hope I have shown that any theory of posthumanism would benefit from making race central to its trajectory, not ancillary, as well as venturing beyond purely visual notions of subjectivity. At the very least this would diversify the purview of this newly burgeoning line of inquiry while rendering this field more interesting and less myopic. We could do far worse than turn the critical dial on our radio to those lower frequencies, where the sounds of black popular music, in

the immortal vocoderized words of Zapp, are "still bubbalistic, realistic, supalistic / whatever is right for you / you can find it all on your radio."[59]

While both Hayles and Eshun seek to venture beyond the category of the human as personified by a white liberal humanist subject in order to advance versions of the posthuman, I think the historical and contemporary practices of the seemingly humanist strands of black popular music and their relation to informational technologies not only expand these two notions of the posthuman but are at the forefront of coarticulating the "human" with informational technologies. These segments of mainstream black popular music, particularly in regard to the status of recorded voices and the representations of soul and subjectivity they harbor, provide different circuits to and through the (post)human. Instead of dispensing with the humanist subject altogether, these musical formations reframe it to include the subjectivity of those who have had no simple access to its Western, post-Enlightenment formulation, suggesting subjectivities embodied and disembodied, human and posthuman. My final claim is modest, but I hope no less consequential: in proclaiming the historical moment of the posthuman, we might do well to interrogate "other humanities," and not just discard this category wholly, as Eshun does, or equate humanity with the white liberal subject, as in Hayles.[60] This way, we might actually begin to ameliorate the provinciality of "humanity" in its various Western guises as opposed to simply rehashing the same old stories ad infinitum.

Notes

An earlier version of this essay was presented at the conference Singing the Body Electric: Music, Multimedia, and Digital Technologies at the Humanities Institute, State University of New York, Stony Brook, March 2000. I would like to thank the organizers and participants for their comments. I also extend gratitude to Kevin Bell, Jillana Enteen, Sharon Holland, Jules Law, Ira Livingston, and Alondra Nelson for providing me with the transhuman exchanges on the path to clarity. Of course, any shortcomings and errors remain my own.

1. N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 291.
2. If anthologies geared toward undergraduate syllabi are any indication, then *The Cybercultures Reader* seems typical in the field of cybertheory, as only three of the forty-eight articles included address racial difference (David Bell and Barbara Kennedy, eds., *The Cybercultures Reader* [New York: Routledge, 2000]).
3. Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (London: Quartet, 1998).

4. See Kalí Tal, "The Unbearable Whiteness of Being: African American Critical Theory and Cyberculture," www.kalital.com/Text/Writing/Whiteness.html; and "Duppies in the Machine, or, Anybody Know Where I Can Buy a Copy of the Upnorth-Outwest Geechee Jibara Quik Magic Trance Manual for Technologically Stressed Third World People?" www.kalital.com/Text/Writing/Duppies.html; Joe Lockard, "Virtual Whiteness and Narrative Diversity," darkwing.uoregon.edu/~ucurrent/uc4/4-lockard.html. The fact that both Lockard's and Tal's important interventions have thus far been accessible only on-line and not in traditional academic anthologies or journals only magnifies their marginalization within cybertheory. See also the essays collected in Beth Kolko, Lisa Nakamura, and Gilbert B. Rodman, eds., *Race in Cyberspace* (New York: Routledge, 2000). Thomas Foster argues—somewhat haphazardly, I might add—that African American culture prefigures cybertheory, which suspends black culture in a pretechnological bubble instead of making it central to contemporary technoinformational ecologies (Thomas Foster, "The Souls of Cyber-Folk," in *Cyberspace Textuality: Computer Technology and Literary Theory*, ed. Marie-Laure Ryan [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999], 137–63).

5. Macpherson, as quoted in Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 3.

6. Furthermore, Hayles seems to endorse the Cartesianism she finds deplorable in cybernetics when she writes, in a sentence that reads like a paraphrase of Descartes's famous *cogito, ergo sum* formula, "people become posthuman because they think they are posthuman" (6).

7. While the designation "white boys" might sound flippant, I think it provides an apt description of the white techno-geek tradition Hayles draws on to construct her argument.

8. Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 123.

9. Steven Connor, "The Modern Auditory I," in *Rewriting the Self: Histories from the Renaissance to the Present,* ed. Roy Porter (New York: Routledge, 1997), 203–23; Lisa Gitelman, *Scripts, Grooves, and Writing Machines: Representing Technology in the Edison Era* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999); Friedrich Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, trans. Michael Metteer and Chris Cullen (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1990) and *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999); Sadie Plant, *Zeros and Ones: Digital Women + the New Technoculture* (New York: Doubleday, 1997).

10. Hayles's critique and theory only "work" because she positions her own insights against the retrograde impulses of cybernetics and informatics as opposed to writing about more contemporary discourses that already incorporate notions of informational embodiment. In contrast, Donna Haraway's hugely influential "Cyborg Manifesto," far from renouncing embodiment, is almost singularly concerned with questions of technology as they connect with the corporeal. Moreover, Haraway also makes race central to her interpretive endeavor (Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* [New York: Routledge, 1991], 149–82).

11. Alondra Nelson, Thuy Linh N. Tu, and Alicia Headlam Hines, "Introduction: Hidden Circuits," in *Technicolor: Race, Technology, and Everyday Life*, ed. Alondra Nelson, Thuy Linh N. Tu, and Alicia Headlam Hines (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 1–12; 5. This sentiment echoes Samuel Delany's dif-

ferentiation between "the white boxes of computer technology" and "the black boxes of modern street technology," in which the former appear as more technological than the latter. According to Delany this hierarchical division is often racially color-coded (Mark Dery, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose," in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, ed. Mark Dery [Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1994], 179–222; 192).

12. On catachresis, see Gayatri Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 137, 161–62; and Jacques Derrida, "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy," trans. Alan Bass, in *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 207–71.

13. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove, 1991), 316.

14. Sylvia Wynter, "Beyond the Word of Man: Glissant and the New Discourse of the Antilles," *World Literature Today* 63, no. 4 (1989): 637–47 and "On Disenchanting Discourse: 'Minority' Literary Criticism and Beyond," in *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse*, ed. Abdul JanMohamed and David Lloyd (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 432–69. Wynter characterizes her disciplinary strategy, situated at the interstices of the humanities and cognitive sciences, as "a science of the human, which takes as its objects of inquiry the correlation between our rhetorical-discursively instituted systems of meaning and the neurochemical signaling field that they orchestrate" ("Beyond the Word," 646).

15. At a different point in the article, Wynter explains the "selected" in the quote above: "the human as an evolutionarily selected natural organism now differed from other forms of organic life only by the fact that it created 'culture'" ("Beyond the Word," 640).

16. Wynter also lists the native, woman, worker, mad, and unfit as further ontological others; however, she insists that the designation "nigger" holds a particularly volatile position in the "Man as Man" configuration ("Beyond the Word," 642).

17. Lindon Barrett, *Blackness and Value: Seeing Double* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999). 18. Although I endorse Barrett's astute and useful differentiation between the *signing voice* and the *singing voice*, at times it runs the risk of configuring the black singing voice as always already embodied, rather than as a series of strategies and/or techniques of corporeality.

19. See Ronald Radano, "Denoting Difference: The Writing of Slave Spirituals," *Critical Inquiry* 22 (spring 1996): 506–44; Jon Cruz, *Culture on the Margins: The Black Spiritual and the Rise of American Cultural Interpretation* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999);

20. The following discussion of Eshun draws on my review essay of his book (Alexander Weheliye, "Keepin' It (Un) Real: Perusing the Boundaries of Hip Hop Culture," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 1 [fall 2001]: 287–306).

21. The listserv can be accessed at groups.yahoo.com/group/afrofuturism. The Web site's address is www.afrofuturism.net. Sheree Thomas's edited anthology *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora* (New York: Warner, 2000) contains mostly fictional pieces but also includes some essays about black science fiction by such authors as Samuel Delany, Walter Mosley, and Octavia Butler. See also Diedrich Diedrichsen, ed., *Loving the Alien: Science Fiction, Diaspora, Multikultur* (Berlin: ID Verlag, 1998). One might also consult John Akomfrah's film *The Last Angel of History* (Icarus Films, 1995), which transacts the musical and literary provenances of Afrofuturism by way of both fictional narrative and documentary means.

22. Eshun himself recognizes that the opposition between Afrofuturism and black humanism is far from absolute, but he insists on constantly invoking the split as a heuristic device throughout the text: "At Century's End, the Futurhythmachine has two opposing tendencies, two 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" (*More Brilliant Than the Sun*, 6).

23. This is a reference to Jean-Luc Nancy's conception of "being with," in which singularities such as the "I" or the "event" always harbor multiplicities rather than standing on their own (Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert Richardson and Anne O'Byrne [Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000]). Thanks to Kevin Bell for bringing the question of singularity to my attention.

24. Not only does Jerkins proclaim his musical "property," his voice also forms a crucial component in the call and response part later in the song. In general, numerous R&B songs are identified with the producers, not primarily the performers; and most high-profile R&B and hip hop producers also record and perform in their own right (Destiny's Child, "Say My Name," *The Writing's on the Wall* [Sony Music, 1999]). Jerkins makes his presence felt vocally on the tracks he has produced for Brandy, Toni Braxton, and Whitney Houston as well.

25. These aural signatures should be distinguished from "the sound" associated with particular producers since they do not unabashedly and unmistakably imprint the name and subjectivity of the producer. Rather, the producer's "sound" leaves room for the performer's vocal signature, which in these cases becomes secondary to the producer's aural presence.

26. Ginuwine, "Same Ol' G," *100% Ginuwine* (Blackground/Sony Music, 1999).

27. See Theodore Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise: The Aesthetics of Rock*, (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996), 53.

28. A recent issue of *Vibe* magazine, the most successful mainstream hip hop and R&B monthly, features a special section on producers. Craig Seymour introduces the section: "[m]aybe it dates back to Dr. Dre's smokin' The Chronic. Or perhaps it began when self-enamored Sean 'Puffy' Combs started giving himself shout-outs on the records he produced. . . . But whatever the catalyst, the effect is clear. Somewhere along the knotted and often intertwining time lines of hip hop and R&B, the producers of songs became as important—if not more so—than the artists they produced" (Craig Seymour, "The Producers," *Vibe* [May 2001], 123). I would locate the "origin" of this trend in modern R&B a little earlier, in Janet Jackson's work with Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis. The duo, which has worked with Jackson collaboratively on all her albums since 1986's *Control*, appeared in several of the videos for singles from that record, adding a visual presence to the already sonically inscribed one.

29. I am using "symbiosis" in the manner suggested by Keith Ansell Pearson, where hitherto separate life-forms and/or technologies contaminate each other to form a new, albeit unstable, entity that is integral to both biological and technological "development" rather than auxiliary (Keith Ansell Pearson, *Viroid Life: Perspectives on Nieztsche and the Transhuman Condition* [New York: Routledge, 1997], 132–34).

30. The prime example of this development is SWV's very underrated final album, *Release Some Tension* (RCA/BMG, 1997), on which eight of the twelve

tracks sport either raps by producers (Sean "Puffy" Combs and Missy Elliott) or rappers (Redman and Lil' Kim).

31. Although I focus on the impact of hip hop on R&B, this relationship should not be construed as a one-way street, especially since hip hop's immense popularity would be unthinkable without the infusion of R&B. In the early nineties hip hop producers, especially those from the West Coast like Dr. Dre, started to incorporate melodies into their heretofore primarily rhythmically oriented tracks. Also, in much the same way that R&B records started featuring guest raps, hip hop cuts routinely employ R&B singers to sing choruses and hooks. Today, most hip hop hits, by Jay-Z, Lil' Kim, Nelly, and Ja Rule, for instance, would not be possible without sung rather than rapped choruses. Kelefa Sanneh, in an article about the "rebirth" of R&B, measures how this genre has been impacted and revitalized by hip hop but falls short of ascertaining the reciprocal consequences of this symbiosis (Kelefa Sanneh, "Responding to Rap, R&B Is Reborn," *New York Times*, 8 April 2001). Ja Rule's collaboration with Lil' Mo serves as a good example of this trend, where Rule's rapping/singing seamlessly blends into Lil' Mo's sung vocal parts, blurring any steadfast distinctions between rapping and singing (Ja Rule [featuring Lil' Mo and Vita], "Put It on Me," *Rule 3.36* [Murder Inc./Def Jam, 2000]).

32. This is not to argue that melody disappeared from the R&B landscape, or that rhythm did not form an indispensable component of earlier permutations of R&B, but that the emphasis shifted radically toward the rhythm (Mary J. Blige, *What's the 411* [Uptown/MCA, 1992] and *My Life* [Uptown/MCA, 1994]). Both Missy Elliott and Lauryn Hill smoothly navigate back and forth between singing and rapping in their work.

33. The difference between the clipped angularity of rhythmic singing and the effusive, mellifluous intonation of traditional R&B can best be heard on Destiny's Child's "Say My Name," where the rhythmic verses stand in unequivocal contrast to the balladlike chorus. The main reason for this transmogrification, I would venture, is the increased amount of syncopation and other more adventurous rhythmic arrangements on contemporary R&B records, which summon the voice to take on a more mechanical character.

34. In his recent work, Paul Gilroy has addressed these shifts, bemoaning the disappearance of freedom as form of transcendence in R&B. In this way, Gilroy is not all that far from most critical writings about R&B that read more like nostalgic eulogies rather than intellectual engagements with current manifestations of the genre. See Richard C. Green and Monique Guillory, "Question of a 'Soulful Style': Interview with Paul Gilroy," in *Soul: Black Power, Politics, and Pleasure*, ed. Richard C. Green and Monique Guillory (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 250–65; Paul Gilroy, "Analogues of Mourning, Mourning the Analogue," in *Stars Don't Stand Still in the Sky: Music and Myth*, ed. Karen Kelly and Evelyn McDonnell (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 261–71; and Paul Gilroy, *Against Race: Imagining Politics beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000). Other critics who lament the demise of soul in contemporary R&B, if they write about the current moment at all, include: Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues* (New York: Plume, 1988); Gerri Hirshey, *Nowhere to Run: The Story of Soul Music* (1984; reprint, New York: Da Capo, 1994); Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). Although Michael Hanchard does not write about the sonic provenances of R&B,

he does take in the recent changes in the genre without the same value judgments as the other critics (Michael Hanchard, "Jody," in *Intimacy*, ed. Lauren Berlant [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000], 193–217). In general, the critical literature on R&B is rather scant, particularly when compared to such young genres as hip hop or electronic dance music.

35. Bat, "What Is Hypersoul?" www.hyperdub.com/softwar/hypersoul.cfm, 1.

36. I owe the cinema verité reference to Ira Livingston.

37. Missy Misdemeanor Elliot (featuring 702), "Beep Me 911," *Supa Dupa Fly* (Elektra, 1997).

38. Destiny's Child, "Bug-a-Boo," *The Writing's on the Wall* (Sony Music, 1999).

39. Blaque, "808" (Trackmasters/Columbia, 1999). The TR-808 is a drum machine produced by Roland. As Tricia Rose explains, "the Roland TR-808 is a rap drum machine of choice for its 'fat sonic boom,' because of the way it processes bass frequencies" (Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* [Hanover, N.H.: New England University Press, 1994], 75). Rose cites several hip hop producers, who describe "the boom" of the TR-808 as its capacity for detuning and thereby distorting the bass sounds to make them more intense.

40. Ginuwine and Aaliyah, "Final Warning," *100% Ginuwine*.

41. The Firm, "Phone Tap," *Nas Escobar, Foxy Brown, AZ, and Nature Present The Firm: The Album* (Aftermath/Interscope, 1997).

42. Destiny's Child, Joe, TLC, Aaliyah, Janet Jackson, 702, Jamelia, Kandi, Mya, Craig David, and Missy Elliot have all used this cell phone effect on recent recordings, as have teen pop acts N'Sync, Britney Spears, and the Backstreet Boys.

43. Scott Woods, "Will You Scrub Me Tomorrow," *Village Voice*, 13–19 December 2000 (villagevoice.com/issues/0050/woods.shtml). Woods focuses mainly on pop R&B artists; however, these technological tendencies can also be found in the more traditional strand of R&B, usually designated as "neoclassical soul," which summons the golden age of soul music. Maxwell, for instance, uses a voice distortion device on "Submerge," and at the end of D'Angelo's most recent album blips of all the preceding tracks are played backward so as to remind us that we are indeed listening to a technologically mediated recording (Maxwell, "Submerge," *Embrya* [Columbia/Sony Music, 1998] and D'Angelo, *Voodoo* [Virgin, 2000]).

44. Reynolds holds that R&B producers employ "anti-naturalistic studio techniques, . . . digitally processing vocals to make them sound even more mellifluous and diabetically ultra-sweet" (Simon Reynolds, "Feminine Pressure: 2-Step Garage [The Director's Cut, Plus Footnotes]," members.aol.com/blissout/2step.htm, 4). The main thrust of this article concerns the sonic permutations of the British genre known as 2-Step Garage or UK Garage, which often combines U.S.–style R&B and House with the speed and syncopation of Jungle. The vocally oriented spectrum of UK Garage pushes the uttered sensibilities of U.S. R&B to its provisional conclusion by dissecting sampled and/or sung vocal parts, radically recombining them in relation to the rhythm as opposed to the melody. Adopting a term by Bat, Reynolds calls this messing up of the vocals "vocal science" (3). For an introduction to this particular strand of UK Garage, hear Artful Dodger's mix CD *Rewind* (London/Sire, 2001).

45. This phrase comes from Jeremy Gilbert and Ewan Pearson. I have

changed the wording somewhat—they use "index of visibility"—but only in the spirit of their ideas concerning the interdependence of music and technology (Jeremy Gilbert and Ewan Pearson, *Discographies: Dance Music, Culture, and the Politics of Sound* [New York: Routledge, 1999], 112).

46. Cher's ubiquitous "Believe" (Warner, 1998) and Madonna's "Music" (Maverick/Sire, 2000) have made extensive use of the vocoder effect. In Cher's case, much of the success of the biggest hit of her thirty-year career was attributed to the vocoder. Janet Jackson, Kandi, 3LW, Dream, and N'Sync, among others, have all produced tracks that utilize this effect. Some electronic musicians, such as IB or Console, use voice-generating software that emulates "human" speech instead of processing "human" voices and credit these on their CDs. IB, for instance, attributes the vocals to several of the tracks on his *Pop Artificielle* album (Shadow, 2000) to the *raw*™ software.

47. The cover of Herbie Hancock's 1978 album *Sunlight* (CBS), includes a special note on his VSM 201 Sennheiser vocoder, explaining that "the voices you hear are entirely synthesized." Kraftwerk's many uses of the vocoder can be heard on the greatest-hits CD *The Mix* (Elektra/Warner Brothers, 1991). For a general overview of electro classics, consult the compilations *Street Jams: Electric Funk*, parts 1 and 2 (Rhino, 1992). As an idea, synthesizing human voices can be traced back as far as the late eighteenth century, when Austrian phonetician Wolfgang von Kempelen constructed a device that mechanically approximated the human vocal apparatus. See James Lastra, *Sound Technology and the American Cinema: Perception, Representation, Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 16–60; and "Wolfgang von Kempelen's and Subsequent Speaking Machines," www.ling.su.se/staff/hartmut/kemplne.htm. Twentieth-century speech synthesis took a big leap in 1939 when Homer Dudley, a research physicist at Bell Laboratories, developed two devices—Voder and Vocoder—that analyzed and synthesized human speech by electronic means. Later, these contraptions were further developed and linked to computer technology; however, it was not until the late sixties and seventies that they found their way into the musical productions of experimental artists such as Wendy Carlos and popular musicians like Kraftwerk. See "Homer Dudley's Speech Synthesizer," www.obsolete.com/120_years/machines/vocoder; "Multimedia Communications Research Laboratory,"www.bell-labs.com/org/1133/Heritage/Synthesis; "Vocoder," www.Riteh.hr/~markb/who/jmbg/vocoders/vocoder.htm.

48. Commencing with EPMD's first hit, "You Got's to Chill," in 1986 this development continued through most of the duo's recorded output, wherein most albums contain one or more tracks that obviously sample Zapp.

49. Zapp, "Computer Love," *The New Zapp IV U* (Warner Brothers, 1985) and Zapp and Roger, "I Want to Be Your Man," *Zapp and Roger: All the Greatest Hits* (1988; Reprise, 1993). Tricia Rose briefly glosses the difference between Zapp's vocoder use on these two ballads and its deployment by producer Dr. Dre on the Tupac track "California Love," which featured Roger Troutman's vocoderized presence. About "I Want to Be Your Man," she writes: "Troutman is using the vocoder on top of what some might consider to be pre-high-tech narratives of 'whole' 'unmediated' human relationships." Conversely, Dr. Dre uses "the vocoder (and sampling equipment more generally) to narrate mediated and fractured relationships" (Tricia Rose, "Sound Effects: Tricia Rose Interviews Beth Coleman," in Nelson, Tu, and Hines, *Technicolor: Race, Technology, and Everyday Life*, 142–53; 147).

50. “Sanging,” as opposed to just singing, emphasizes the highly performative and “emotional” vocal styles of black musical genres such as gospel or soul that underscore the physicality of “human” voice production. The distinction is crucial here, because the affective labor is carried out by the female voice in one of the only instances where Murdock’s vocal apparatus does not merely serve to prop up the masculine and machinic voices but sounds by itself. This affective excess of the black female voice can also be heard in a crucial moment of “I Want to Be Your Man,” the other well-known Zapp vocoder ballad, where the male voice sings: “Words can never say how I feel.” This crisis in linguistic meaning making is followed by a vocoderized “it’s too intense,” heightening the way in which desire disrupts the flow of language. Finally, we hear the female voice, in her only solo performance on this track, cooing, “oohooo ohooo oooooh,” in effect eschewing linguistic meaning altogether. The female voice represents the nonlingual sonorousness needed to carry out the affective labor, which neither the male nor machinic voices can. Thus the female voice becomes the channel for the sonic representation of unmitigated desire.

51. Kraftwerk, “Computer Love,” *The Mix* (Elektra/Warner Brothers, 1991).

52. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 26.

53. 702, “You Don’t Know,” *702* (Motown, 1999).

54. The vocoder effect, in contradistinction to the vocoder as a material entity, is indicative of the wider popular music landscape where most recordings apply this effect in similar ways.

55. See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). Here is how Deleuze and Guattari imagine sonic deterritorialization: “It seems that when sound deterritorializes, it becomes more and more refined; it becomes more specialized and autonomous. . . . When sound deterritorializes, it tends to dissolve, to let itself be steered by other components” (347).

56. This is a reference to Deleuze and Guattari’s anti-Freudian conception of desire that is not framed by a primary lack in the subject but functions as a productive force that brings the subject into being and fuels the social machine (*Anti-Oedipus*, 1–50).

57. Here I am not suggesting that desire can ever be formulated without being mediated by a host of material and discursive forces but that this particular machination of desire incorporates its own performativity.

58. K-Ci and Jo Jo, “Crazy” (MCA, 2001).

59. Zapp, “Radio People,” *The New Zapp IV U.*

60. I am borrowing the phrase “other humanities” from the title of Lisa Lowe’s talk delivered at the Humanities Institute, State University of New York, Stony Brook, March 2000.