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Breaching bodily boundaries: posthuman (dis)embodiment and ecstatic speech in lip-synch performances by boychild

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ABSTRACT

Employing a sci-fi inspired aesthetic, queer, black, trans artist, boychild presents audiences with a future vision of human embodiment. Strobe lighting makes her appear fragmented or as if she were a hologram. An electronic light flickers behind her teeth. Her eyes are obscured by whited-out contact lenses. boychild's is a body interfaced with technology. She is imaged as non-human, cyborgian. Whilst boychild considers her onstage persona to be female, her body reads ambiguously. Transgressing demarcations between the supposedly polarised categories of organic/machine, male/female, the queer form of embodiment she presents is posthuman. Implementing the theoretical principles of Rosi Braidotti's anti-humanist concept of the posthuman and Donna Haraway's cyborg politics, I argue that boychild's engagement with the posthuman does not end with aesthetics, rather it extends to the plotting of a posthuman politics, posing a radical challenge to heteronormative body politics. Theorising boychild's lip-synch performances, I argue for her style of performance as a technologised form of ventriloquism, as she 'speaks' with the voice of another or the voice of another speaks through her. Using Mladen Dolar's and Slavoj Žižek's psychoanalytical philosophies in conjunction with Steven Connor's literature on ventriloquism, I unpick the intricacies of presence and power inherent to her 'voice' and indicate its broader political implications.

Introduction

Positioned 'on the frontline of enquiries into what our culture is and where it is located … Live Art asks us what it means to be here, now' (LADA 2017). As an oppositional or sub-cultural art form that operates simultaneously within and against the current cultural ecology, live art is an aesthetics of the 'here and now' with a capacity for critical political enquiry. Using the body as site and material, *embodied* performance practices can be used as a means to disrupt bodily boundaries and resist definitions. Indeed, as Deirdre Heddon (2012, 185) claims, 'Politics attaches – sticks – to bodies; bodies reveal politics'. The 'body politics' referred to here are those policies and practices which regulate and impose judgements of (non-)normativity on the body, as exercised by both individuals and societies.

The notion of bodily *extensions* in performance offers further disruptive potential; augmentations unsettle the seemingly given, prompting new ways of seeing and thinking the body. Spurred on by these tenets, this article examines extensions of or beyond the body in the work of one particular performer, a young, black, queer live artist named boychild. Whilst boychild identifies as non-binary trans, she considers her onstage persona to be female. (Since I am writing about her body in performance, I use female pronouns to refer to her throughout this essay.) Staking a claim for the political potentiality of boychild's art, I argue that her practice can be read as critically engaged with the 'here and now', a context of shifting body politics and subjective, corporeal social evolution.[1]

boychild's performances consist of her lip-synching to a recorded backing track comprised of pop song remixes with heavily distorted vocal samples. She performs in darkened settings, semi-nude, her body usually smothered in white paint. Her physicality is muscular and imposing. Her head is shaved, and her eyes obscured by whited-out contact lenses. As she performs, boychild's vocabulary of fluid movements are interspersed with jerky shudders and contortions and her facial expressions flit between pained grimaces and ecstatic grins (see Figure 1).

An interfacing of technology and the body persists in her performance practice: in her re-embodiment of disembodied voices that have been recorded, modified, and mediated through a series of audio technologies, as well as in her use of various lighting technologies. Through stark partial and/or strobe lighting effects, her body appears either fragmented or as if it were a projection or hologram. Such science-fiction-inspired aesthetics image her as a non-human being, either alien or cyborgian. She holds an electronic light in her mouth that flickers behind her teeth as she lip-synchs. When the strobe lighting intermittently stops, her light-engorged mouth becomes the only part of her body that is clearly visible, the rest of her flesh fading into relative obscurity. The staging effect of this light in the mouth amplifies the fact that the voice reverberating throughout the performance space does not emanate from within boychild's body. She channels a disembodied voice, re-embodying it. In the breaks between song lyrics, this effect of channelling is added to performatively, as boychild's mouth gapes open and she stares, transfixed. In these moments, her movements slow and periodically the release of tension causes her body to give way slightly, as if she is collapsing under the strain of the rhythm that courses through her, before becoming reanimated again to synch the next line.

Emotionally charged and viscerally affective, a melancholic tone permeates the performance when boychild's chest heaves and she shudders violently, as if she is sobbing, or when she throws her head back repeatedly in time with the beat of the track, her eyes shut tightly, seemingly caught in the throes of agony. These gestures are performed with an intensity verging on hysteria and, yet, they are interspersed with postures of composure and power, as boychild draws up tall, puffing out her chest. Contradictory modes of being coexist within the work as she flickers from a traumatised disposition to one of empowerment. Her oscillation between these two disparate forms of black queer embodiment is technologically mediated both musically, through syncopated rhythms and chopped vocal samples, and visually via the series of still images generated by strobe lighting.

Raised in Sacramento and now based in Los Angeles, California, boychild initially began performing her lip-synch act on the San Francisco drag scene in 2012. She then took her act into nightclubs and music venues before performing, as she does

now, predominantly in 'high art' settings across Europe and the US. She also has a notable artistic presence online.[2] With the consumption of boychild's act having evolved from the drag scene, to the club, to arts venues, via this process of increasing institutionalisation, a sense of the work's potential as a vehicle for political statements is intimated. By recontextualising the work in an arts space, the programmers of these venues implicitly indicate that there are themes, questions, and points of contention in boychild's work that point towards a politics. One objective of this essay is to attest to that political value.

Figure 1. boychild, *#untitled lipsynch 1* (2013). Arika, Episode Five: 'Hidden in Plain Sight', Stereo, Glasgow. Photo: Alex Woodward.

In May 2013, I experienced three of boychild's untitled lip-synch performances as part of 'Hidden in Plain Sight', one in a series of Glasgow-based festivals hosted by the not-for-profit community interest company, Arika.[3] Facilitating debate on the shifts occurring in and affecting contemporary body politics, each Arika festival involves a questioning and queering of normative identity categories, not to seek assimilation into an exclusionary system, nor to alleviate its symptoms of heterosexism, homophobia, and transphobia, but to challenge the cause of such symptoms by rejecting social conditioning and radically re-thinking the body/self. This article attempts to situate boychild's practice as contributive to this broader cultural movement, which centres around enabling self-determined bodily presentations. Yet, this political project is not without complication. To locate a direct affirmative politics within boychild's work is problematic, given that her demeanour flickers between defeat and defiance, given that her performance of power is intermittent and transitory. Indeed, boychild's practice is layered, contradictory, and dynamically multiple; it bears a density of eclectic references and mobilises numerous interpretive questions. As Jennifer Doyle might term it, boychild's art is 'difficult'. Perhaps some of the difficulty of the work, in terms of its (in)accessibility or (in)comprehensiveness, stems from an active resistance on its part to be clearly deciphered. Difficulty lies not just in the (in)accessibility of the work's content but also in how it is experienced. In *Hold It Against Me*, Doyle explores the relationship between difficulty and emotion in contemporary art. Writing about art that 'feels emotionally sincere' and 'produces a dense field of affect', she engages with artists that 'turn to emotion because this is where ideology does its most devastating work'. Doyle elaborates: 'The artists that interest me turn to emotion, feelings and affect as a means not of narcissistic escape but of social engagement' (Doyle 2013, xi). I believe that the reason why boychild's work challenges its audiences to think and feel so deeply is because it engages with very real social and body politics, albeit in an abstract way. To my eye, boychild's ambiguous embodiment poses critically provocative questions about gender, queerness, and blackness, and about one's viability as human in view of one's status with regard to these identity differentials. In the analyses that follow, I treat lip-synching, as well as boychild's imaging of her own body as both cyborg and avatar, as performances that blur, breach or extend (beyond) bodily boundaries. Contributing to conceptual readings of body-based live art practices which may have wider socio-cultural implications, this essay examines the cultural and political impacts of those aspects of boychild's performance art which I experienced or perceived as extensions of or beyond the body.

Body politics and (post)human viability

'If I were to identify as any gender it would be trans. Trans as a continually oscillating point on the spectrum, a journey that never stops or ends or lands in one place' (boychild interviewed in Pavel 2014, 14).[4] Though she thinks of her gender as fluid, boychild considers her onstage persona to be female. This ambiguous layering of gender identifications serves to complicate readings of the 'female' body coded in her performances. boychild embodies trans in the sense that she gives concrete bodily form to the experience of being trans; her transness is part of her everyday life. Meanwhile she inhabits 'femaleness' (or at least, in naming herself female, it seems she intends to) in that her 'femaleness' is a persona that she assumes onstage. Rather than a character, boychild's 'female' persona

may well be another facet of herself, an amorphous aspect of her subjectivity that is not divorced from the 'continually oscillating' trans-identified remainder. These identifications are perhaps interwoven aspects of one and the same individual, the aforementioned 'point[s] on the spectrum' that never converge and never settle in one place. Whether or not this is the case, her assumption of a persona has the potential to facilitate the possibility of presenting multiply and representing more than she is; the body in performance can be a space of representation for multiple (gender) identifications and presentations.

In naming herself thus, perhaps boychild means to invoke the politics of otherness and subordination that those marked 'female' have been historically subject to. Her onstage persona would then allow her to be a member of or align herself with the category 'woman' and she could thus speak for, or to the concerns of, these marginalised others. Though, from my own experience of the work, I would argue that it is not immediately obvious that boychild is to be read 'female'. For me, her gender remained ambiguous throughout each of the performances that I experienced. In fact, given the technological augmentation of her body, and the notability of sci-fi inspired aesthetics within the work, the ambiguity of her status as human was of greater prominence to me. Though of course, humanness, or one's viability as human, is not unrelated to sex and gender. As Judith Butler (1993, xii) remarks:

> 'Sex' is not simply what one has, or a static description of what one is: it will be one of the norms by which one becomes viable at all, that which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility.

Whilst hegemonic power dictates systems that govern gender appearances and behaviours, delimiting what counts as viable in terms of sex and gender, those who do not conform are subordinated by these ideas and practices, subject to 'the violence performed by gender norms' (Butler 1990, xxv). Whether physical or otherwise, such violence is enacted out of a will to enforce and maintain dominance, to continually constrain what or who counts as a viably sexed body, a viably gendered subject, or even a viable human being.

Notions of human viability are also related to race. Consider historical conceptions of the human subject. The classical ideal of 'Man' as 'the measure of all things' was first formulated by pre-Socratic Greek philosopher, Protagoras, and later renewed in the Italian Renaissance as a universal model, as represented in Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*. Leonardo's rendering of ideal bodily perfection became emblematic of the values of humanism: its assurance of its own autonomy, its capacities of reason and rationality, its capability of free will, its pursuit of physical and cerebral perfectibility. As Rosi Braidotti (2013, 14) notes, 'this self-aggrandising vision assumes that Europe is not just a geo-political location, but rather a universal attribute of the human mind'. Here, an historical account of humanism becomes a model for civilisation and that model is based on the idea of Europe as both site of origin for humanist qualities and as representative of universal consciousness (13). A paradigm is thus forged, which includes an underlying dialectics of self and other which, in turn, raises issues of power and exclusion. Those who are othered by this Eurocentric, patriarchally biased paradigm are reduced to less-than-human status. Excluded from traditional humanist discourses, the black and/or female (and, I would add, the trans) individual is rendered as constitutive other to the idealised white male heteronormative human subject.

By inhabiting a persona named 'female' whilst embodying trans, as a non-conformist to hegemonic ideas of sex and gender, boychild is positioned as subordinated other in more ways than one and the viability of her sex, gender, and humanness is called into question. Moreover, the humanist political economy excludes her from traditional discourses of the human on account of both her race and gender. If one does not count as human or is cast as subhuman, where does one go from there? Is there a site of resistance or a critical framework that can be tapped into that might allow one to be seen, heard, valued?

At the opening of her text, *The Posthuman*, Braidotti calls out the human as an ontological given, positing it rather as historically and culturally contingent, a normativising regulatory framework. Refusing to submit to an entrenched, universalised idea of the human, she calls for a more critical engagement with it. Rejecting hegemonic 'truths' – the assumed givens of the traditional humanist subject and his ideologies – her concept of the posthuman is a generative strategy that allows the othered individual the subjectivity that has been denied to them.

Resultant of contemporary society's continually developing scientific and technological advances, Braidotti's posthuman represents a paradigmatic shift in ways of conceiving of bodies and the world in which they function. Her theory rewrites the humanist ideal, reinventing the human in the context of the present condition. Calling for a blurring of the distinctions that constitute the traditional humanist subject, Braidotti's post-anthropocentric ideas of becoming-animal, becoming-machine, and thus becoming-posthuman read almost as a re-formulation of the three boundary breakdowns that form the basis of Donna Haraway's cyborg politics (Haraway 1991). Haraway's cyborg, as both a product of (science-)fiction and a creature of social reality, is a literal embodiment of the hybridised cybernetic organism, but it also provides a metaphorical model for the destabilisation of binary thought and the forging of new political affinities.

Such transgressions across binaries can be identified repeatedly in boychild's work. Throughout each Arika performance, I read her body as ambiguously gendered. Furthermore, in her use of audio and lighting technologies, an interfacing of technology and the body persisted. This was particularly prominent at the outset of *#untitled lipsynch 2*, which I read as an enactment of a technologically enhanced body coming to life. Machine noise juxtaposed with choral harmonies brought an ethereality to the scene, amplifying the effect that this was a moment of creation. In the performance's middle section, boychild crawled on all fours. She mimed bestial snarls in synch with an instrumental soundtrack, which featured whirring noises that resembled animalistic whines and growls. Whilst these are all examples of boychild's technological embodiment, what I also want to draw attention to here is animalistic embodiment.

Breaching the boundaries set out by Western ideology, boychild presents her body in performance as an amalgamation in which the lines of demarcation between the supposedly polarised categories of male/female, organic/machine, and human/animal are blurred and all-encompassed. Through multiple simultaneous identifications and presentations, a recognition of the complexity of subjectivity is at work in boychild's practice, as well as an emphasis on instability and plurality of meaning. Hers is a body that tells many stories at once, a representation of numerous individuals marked as 'other'. Figuring herself as posthuman/cyborgian, she embodies a queer alternative to constrictive conventions and it is this alternative embodiment that posits a critique of the traditional 'human' and destabilises his positioning at the zenith of everything. The multiplicity and fluidity of

boychild's body in performance constitutes a form of bodily extension in the sense that it represents a rejection of and movement beyond the singular humanist definition. With the extension of visibility towards other modes of embodiment comes the possibility of expanding notions of what counts as viable.

Thus far, I have tried to work through the complexities of boychild's practice to explore the possible avenues it offers for alternative and/or future embodiments. Moreover, my focus has been directed towards identifying the work's more positive political potentialities. Though the performance itself, in all its dark and enigmatic ambiance, does not stage an unequivocal critique, I assert nonetheless that boychild's posthuman embodiment can be read as critical and that it suggests a progressive political impulse insofar as it disrupts the regime of normativity by presenting a counterhegemonic alternative. Having established the posthuman as an affirmative politics prompted by a resistance to the anthropocentric hubris of the human and its devastating outcomes, it may appear that the less positively couched aspects of boychild's work – those expressions of melancholia and rage which no doubt seem at odds with such an entirely affirmative reading – have been overlooked. Continuing to theorise the posthuman in boychild's art – her use of sci-fi aesthetics, the technological augmentation of her body, and, most markedly, her technologised 'voice' – this essay's remainder presents a nuanced examination of the contradictions and ambivalences in her performances, and, reflecting on the work's fluctuating emotionality, makes suggestions as to what this tumultuousness might signify.

Disembodied, re-embodied: the politics and poetics of presence and power inherent to the (ventriloquial) voice

Whilst the posthuman can be used as a positive strategy – one that I would argue boychild's work can be read as having deployed – I also think it important to acknowledge her non-eradication of the specificities of the black, trans/female body, and the histories of oppression that such bodies have experienced. Some of boychild's vocal samples suggest this. By appropriating, editing, and recontextualising song lyrics, placing them within a frame of reference that creates a dialogue between body, gender, and race politics, phrases such as 'love me', 'tell me I belong', 'trouble so hard', 'I'm heartbroken', and 'I realise I mean nothing to you'[5] become loaded with socio-historic meaning. In the context of boychild's performances, I read these lyrics as poignant references to the histories of exclusion that othered individuals have been subject to.

Consider the manner in which these words were 'voiced'. Owing to boychild's skilful performance, my affective reading as she lip-synched to *Moments in Heartbreak* was that the voice she mouthed expressed her own feelings. Of course, I did not believe that she was producing the voice I was hearing but, ensnared by the synchronicity between boychild's mouth and the voices heard, I collapsed the distinction between performing subject and subject performed; I attributed the voice heard to the body before me and projected a certain authenticity onto it. I read boychild as voiced by others, as if *she* was begging to be loved, to belong, as if she was speaking of *her* troubles and *her* heartbreak at the realisation that *she* means nothing. When she performed to a remix of Destiny's Child's *Say My Name* she rendered herself as powerful and I felt heartened by that. Meanwhile, I was also aware that boychild was orchestrating everything, that she

was 'speaking' through others, appropriating their words and using them to convey emotions. She was both passive mouthpiece and active agent. boychild's positioning of herself in these paradoxical roles of ventriloquised and ventriloquist, coupled with her performance of defeat and defiance, suggest to me that her references to histories of exclusion functioned multiply within the work. She expressed lamentation towards them as well as anger and frustration, and meanwhile, she also presented a resistant self-assured alternative. It could also be argued that, in channelling multiple voices, boychild 'spoke' not just for herself, but on behalf of many marginalised others. Indeed, the work encompassed an entire dialogue about co-existence, (in)equality and the value (or lack thereof) attached to gender, blackness, and human beings. It also revolved around voice and voicelessness both in terms of ability to speak out and potential to be heard. All this conjecture as to whom the voice belongs in boychild's performances points to the ambiguities of the ventriloquial voice.

When one hears a voice, one logically seeks to ascribe it to a body (the body from which it came) by means of sight and associative cognitive function. But if a voice cannot be ascribed to a body and thus rationalised by verification of sight, it remains mysteriously unlocatable. With 'verification of sight', I do not mean to suggest that seeing is infallible; the eye can be deceived just as easily as the ear. But when a sound can be matched with a corresponding sight, as when a voice synchs with a mouth, an effect is created such that the seer/hearer can potentially be satisfied that the eye confirms what the ear hears. Both ventriloquism and lip-synching revolve around a play on the voice's ambivalent relationship with sight and sound. The ambiguous nature of the unlocatable voice is thus a constant feature of both practices.

Mladen Dolar (2006, 60) defines the voice of unidentifiable origin as the 'acousmatic' voice. He describes it as 'a voice in search of an origin, in search of a body'. Composer and theorist of sound in film, Michel Chion names this process of attaching the acousmatic voice to a body as 'disacousmatisation'. With the ventriloquist's dummy and via the lip-syncher's mouth, a visible 'source' for the unlocatable acousmatic voice is supplied, affecting a supposed disacousmatisation of the acousmatic voice. Yet, as Dolar argues, 'even when [the acousmatic voice] finds its body, it turns out that this doesn't quite work, the voice doesn't stick to the body, it is an excrescence which doesn't match the body' (60–61). This is exactly the case in ventriloquial and lip-synch acts. Audiences to these performances know the visible source before them to be a surrogate rather than the actual or authentic source of the voice heard. As such, the voice does not 'stick' to its ascribed body. This effect is amplified by instances when the movements of the puppet's or lip-syncher's mouth are off-cue. As a separate entity, an object in and of itself, the ventriloquial voice highlights the impossibility of disacousmatisation. Appearing in the void from which it is supposed to have originated but which it does not fit, the ventriloquial voice is 'an effect without a proper cause' (70). By that rationale, if the voice does not stick to its body, it remains unlocatable. Existing as soundwaves free-floating in a third space – one that is distinctly not-body – it manifests as both an extension of and beyond bodily boundaries.

Going one step further, Dolar deduces that in no situation can such a thing as disacousmatisation exist because we cannot ever see the source of any voice; we cannot visually penetrate the body's interior and even if we could, we still could not *see* voice. He explains:

> Every emission of the voice is by its very essence ventriloquism … the voice comes from inside the body, the belly … – from something incompatible with and irreducible to the activity of the mouth. The fact that we see the aperture does not demystify the voice; on the contrary, it enhances the enigma. (70)

Dolar's sentiments echo those of Slavoj Žižek (2001, 58):

> An unbridgeable gap separates forever a human body from 'its' voice. The voice displays a spectral autonomy, it never quite belongs to the body we see, so that even when we see a living person talking, there is always a minimum of ventriloquism at work: it is as if the speaker's own voice hollows him out and in a sense speaks 'by itself', through him.

Dolar's acousmatic voice and Žižek's notion of the voice-as-object are taken up by Steven Connor and expanded upon in his conception of what he terms the 'vocalic body'. For Connor (2000, 41), as it is for Dolar,[6] the voice is immaterial – it is energy, not substance. And yet it is 'a raw, quasi-bodily matter', 'full of the sense of the body's presence' (2000, 31, 41). Having issued out from within, it crosses the border from bodily interior to exterior, out into the surrounding space and only becomes sound(ed) through the presence of some other body (human or otherwise). Always on the border between body and not-body, the voice is both bodily process and product. Connor's ruminations offer ideas similar to Dolar's and Žižek's until he writes the following:

> Voices are produced by bodies but can also themselves produce bodies. The vocalic body is the idea – which can take the form of dream, fantasy, ideal, theological doctrine, or hallucination – of a surrogate or secondary body, a projection of a new way of having or being a body, formed and sustained out of the autonomous operations of the voice. The history of ventriloquism is to be understood partly in terms of the repertoire of imagings or incarnations it provides for these autonomous voice-bodies. (35)

Whereas Dolar's and Žižek's theorisations concern the ascription of a voice to a body already in existence (a process which they claim will always fail), Connor's formulation shifts focus to the voice's ability to produce a body. According to his principle of the vocalic body, the 'autonomous operations of the voice' confer shape upon a speaking object/subject. That is, the voice, as autonomous object, animates and thus produces a speaking body.

Elsewhere Connor states that a recorded voice is 'a voice amputated from its body' (11). He still regards the recorded voice as imbued with vitality but finds its 'continuing power to animate, in the absence of a body which it should both be animating and be animated by' to be 'distasteful and unnerving' (12). The effect is one of disturbance deriving from the disruption of seen space; the eye is disrupted because it sees a mouth moving, but the voice it synchs with is unlocatable in that the body from which that voice had originated is absent. Whether live or recorded, Connor is able to theorise the voice as disembodied, autonomous object. Meanwhile though, the voice is the manifestation of presence; 'it is implicit that to speak is to exist absolutely for the other' (Fanon 1967, 17). Connor (2000, 25) continues: 'The power of a voice without a visible source is the power of a less-than-presence which is also a more-than-presence'. The unlocatable voice is 'less-than-present' because there is not a body to support it and thus explain away its presence. Yet its apparent transcendence from the corporeal suggests a 'more-than-presence', a free-floating omnipotence which cannot be rationally explained. Impervious to the substantiation of vision, the unlocatable voice is instilled with a sense of power by dint of

its inexplicability. Such enigmatic utterances are evocative of that which is other than or more than human: the supernatural, the spiritual, the prophetic, and the divine.

If the acousmatic voice cannot be disacousmatised, that is, if it cannot be pinned to a body (which, according to Dolar and Žižek, no voice ever can), then it remains a free-float-ing object, an autonomous voice-body. In its apparent autonomy, perhaps we can con-sider boychild's 'voice' as having produced her, as in the principle of the vocalic body. In its unlocatable omnipresence, perhaps her 'voice' can be read as having extended beyond the corporeal towards the supernatural, spiritual, prophetic, divine. If, through the practice of ventriloquism or lip-synching, the disembodied voice is pregnant with rein-carnative or re-embodiable possibility, in the case of boychild's performances, who is the subject reincarnated through the ventriloquised voice? And what is that subject giving voice to? If, as Connor argues, the history of ventriloquism is to be understood partly in terms of the repertoire of incarnations it provides for the vocalic body, then, perhaps a brief look at this history can help to substantiate these claims and answer these questions.

Before twentieth-century stage acts popularised ventriloquism as an illusory interaction between performer and puppet, the practice was related to mystic experiences of ecstatic speech, with the ventriloquial voice acting as a mediator between the secular and spiritual worlds. Ventriloquism, in its earliest form, had its origins in classical Greece. The word 'ven-triloquist' is a Latin translation of the Greek *engastrimythos*, from *en* (in), *gaster* (the stomach), and *mythos* (word or speech). Referring to a particular manner of speech which gave rise to the illusion of a voice proceeding from elsewhere than the person utter-ing it, *engastrimythos* was employed both as divinatory practice and as a form of entertain-ment (Connor 2000, 49–50). Engastrimythic divination entailed a supposed channelling of spirit voices through the stomach. Of these so-called gastromancers or belly-talkers, E. R. Dodds (1951, 71) writes: 'they had a second voice inside them which carried on a dialogue with them, predicted the future … ' Consumed by an ecstatic trance, the engastrimythic subject thus became a prophet via their act of mediumship.

Voice channelling; a sense of spirituality and ritual; ecstatic trance; an emphasis on futurity; the power of the unlocatable voice; and the open to interpretation, enigmatic nature of words spoken are all key aspects of engastrimythic divination which speak to the dynamics at work in boychild's performances. A detailed examination of these themes as they appear in boychild's performances is therefore productive to my analysis of her 'voice' and the politics and poetics of bodily extension and/or disembodiment that pertain to it.

An evocation of spirituality was clearly discernible in boychild's practice: in her assump-tion of cruciate poses, in the choral melody woven into the soundtrack, in her repeated utterances of 'God' and 'Lord' via her sample of Vera Hall's *Trouble So Hard*. Furthermore, ritual, possession, and ecstatic trance were equally discernible aspects of the work. Voice channelling and/or spirit possession are powerful ritualistic traditions in some non-Abraha-mic polytheistic religions and re-presentations of these mystic practices recurred through-out boychild's performances. For example, worship of the spirits of family ancestors; the ceremonial use of singing, drumming, and dancing to connect with divinity and the spirit world; and a belief in possession by immortal spirits are all core beliefs foundational to the practice of Voodoo. Giving a personal account of having witnessed the Voodoo (also spelled Vaudou) 'dance of possession', folklorist, Alan Lomax (1959, 11) writes:

> A vaudou ceremony is devoted largely to … singing, dancing, and drumming … while the gods are called one by one to visit the dancing ground. A god shows his presence by 'mounting the head' of [possessing] one of the worshippers, who then … takes on the legendary characteristics of the deity.

The staging of *#untitled lipsynch 1* presented the most conspicuous manifestation of boychild performing as deity. Standing on a pedestal, she wore a long white skirt that draped over the plinth and spilled onto the stage. With her skirt enswathing the podium, her figure was elongated. Naked from the waist up, her muscular body smeared with white paint, her physicality was imposing. The stage was blanketed by an opaque darkness, which was incised by two bright shafts of strobing white light positioned in front of and on either side of boychild, projecting up at her. When she stood tall, the beams crossed at her chest, illuminating her with a stark chiaroscuro that dramatically modelled the contours of her upper body. She had staged herself in such a way that she took on the likeness of a sculpturally rendered religious icon (albeit re-aestheticised in a posthuman, cyborgian mode) and yet, simultaneously, her physicality appeared less permanent than that, the strobing light lending an ephemeral flicker to her monumental form. Furthermore, she was animate; she twitched out a contortive dance in synch with the drum beat of the backing track. The light that glowed from within her mouth as she lip-synched exaggerated the fact that the voice heard was not issuing out from within her body; it seemed to enter her from elsewhere and course through her. As befitting the iconography of the possessed body, the whites of boychild's eyes were made prominent, her irises obscured by whited-out contact lenses.

I am not arguing here for exact replication of the Voodoo dance of possession, rather that boychild's performances *reference* it. I indicate these similarities so as to argue for boychild's highly stylised lip-synch performances as re-presentations of the ritual practices of spirit possession/voice channelling (re-aestheticised via the sci-fi inspired visual language of the posthuman), and to reinforce my argument for the sense of spirituality that permeates the work (a spirituality which is layered with both Western and non-Western religious references). I keep spirituality at the forefront because it conjures forth the idea of that which is other-than- or more-than-human, that which is powerful by fact of its unknowability, and I want to argue that this is, in part, how boychild's disembodied–re-embodied ventriloquial voice is affectively powerful.

During her performances, boychild does not produce a voice in a literal, laryngeal sense, rather she 'speaks' through or is spoken by the recorded voices of others. These disembodied, perpetually unlocatable, seemingly autonomous voice-objects find an incarnate host in or take host of boychild's posthuman body. In performance, her body balances precariously on the blurry boundaries of virtual and physical reality. Through the aesthetics of sci-fi fantasy, her body is imaged as avatar. Besides referring to a virtual embodiment, a graphical alter-ego or screen persona, as in computing, the term 'avatar' can also be defined as the incarnate form of a deity on earth, as in Hindu mythology. Given her apparent in-performance holographic embodiment and the sense of spirituality/incarnate deification in her performances, in a further representation of bodily extension, boychild can be said to embody these multiple avatar forms.

In performing a re-conceptualised version of lip-synching – a posthuman, cyborgian re-presentation of voice channelling/spirit possession/deity incarnation – boychild's agency (the fact that she is as much the ventriloquist as the ventriloquised) is placed at one

remove. As an audience, we are fully aware of boychild's role as ventriloquist, and yet we willingly embrace the artifice of lip-synching. That is, we embrace the ambivalent unlocatability of the ventriloquial voice. In this sense, then, boychild's 'voice' can be considered an 'autonomous voice-body', as per Connor's conception of the vocalic body, and she can be interpreted as incarnate surrogate or host, as a fantastical bodily projection formed out of the autonomous operations of that voice. Rather than use her own voice, performing as channeller of an 'autonomous' voice-body presents boychild with the opportunity of exploiting that voice's more-than-present power.

In conventional ventriloquist-dummy performances, the difference between the ventriloquist's 'real' voice and the voice devised for their puppet signifies the latter's autonomy as a speaking subject; it is the signifiable difference between these voices that breathes life into and animates a formerly inert object. Similarly, the difference between the 'authentic' voice of the medium and their voice in the moment of their 'possession' signifies that the words spoken in that moment are no longer the medium's own, that their voice has been commandeered by an external force. Given that we do not ever hear boychild's 'own' voice during her performances, a rendering of the voice heard as ontological 'other' is not achieved through difference in this manner – though a signifiable difference of sorts is deducible given that the vocal samples which comprise the 'other' voice in boychild's performances have clearly been transformed through remixing and music production techniques; pitch-shifted, passed through a distortive relay, and loaded with reverb effects.[7] That said, I would argue that it is through the notion of the vocalic body that the ontological status of the voice is most clearly conferred in boychild's performances.

If the voice-as-object appears like an 'autonomous' entity, then it appears to have a life of its own. Such a reading is arguably reinforced by the mouth's intermittent appearances as a partial object that 'speaks'. When the strobe lights trip off and all that can be seen of boychild is her light-engorged mouth floating in the darkness, this spectral apparition becomes part object, an organ seemingly separate from its bodily support (see Figure 2). It appears as an organism in and of itself and thus 'the subversive potential of an object starting to speak is unleashed' (Žižek 2004, 154). The mouth which free-floats independently from its bodily support and is animated by a voice that insists despite the absence of a body, gains power through its disturbance of reality, through its sheer uncanniness. The affective power of both the disembodied, unlocatable voice as 'autonomous' part object, as well as that of the partial object that begins to speak, thus lends greater weight to boychild's 'voice'. This, coupled with the evocation of spirituality in her work, causes the voice heard in her performances to register as if it had issued from an unknown place of origin beyond human rationality.

Continuing to theorise on the part object that speaks, Žižek (2004, 155) writes: 'It is not that this object is subjectless but that this object is the correlate of the "pure" subject prior to subjectivisation.' Subjectivisation, as I understand it from Žižek's framing, is what makes a subject 'human'. In defining subjectivisation proper he writes: 'what makes me a "human subject" is the very fact that I cannot be reduced to my symbolic identity, that I display a wealth of idiosyncratic features' (159). He cites the example of an author's biography printed on a book cover, which is followed by a line stating that the author enjoys a leisure pursuit of some description in their spare time. This supplement, he claims, 'subjectivises the author, who would otherwise appear as a monstrous machine' (159). Thus, the term 'subjectivisation' refers to the 'whole person', whereas the 'pure' subject refers to the
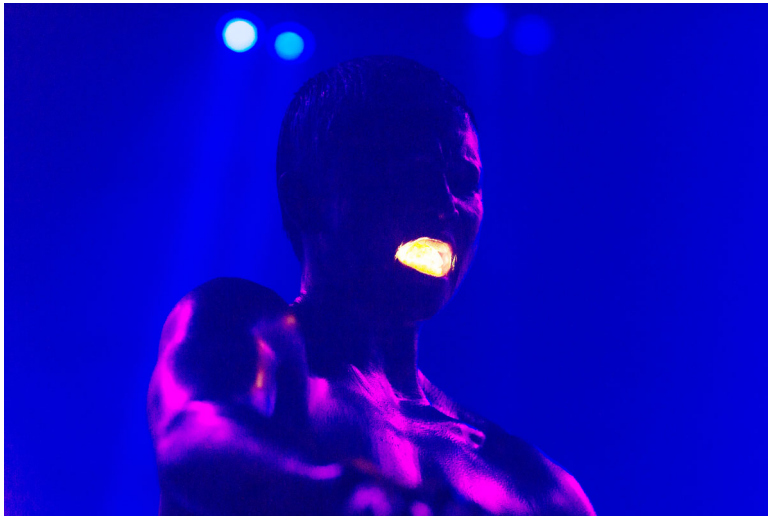
Figure 2. boychild, *untitled lipsynch* (2016). We Will Rise fundraiser club night at Arika, Episode 8: 'Refuse Powers' Grasp', The Art School, Glasgow. Photo: Alex Woodward.

partial object alone and when that object speaks, what is heard is the voice of the monstrous, machinistic subject that does not yet involve subjectivisation.

boychild's posthuman figuration and her use of sci-fi aesthetics bear a strong relation to Žižek's ideas of that which is 'prior to subjectivisation'. Her cyborgian body/self does indeed read as a machinistic 'pure subject', prior to or not fully 'human'. In terms of her 'voice'/mouth as part object, keeping in mind Connor's (2000, 39) formulation that 'the voice separated from its source is an object of perception which has gathered to itself the powers of a subject', what we are left with is something that, in its apparent autonomy, is not fully integrated into the whole. Furthermore, boychild's appearance as a projection or avatar confers upon her a sort of ontological ambiguity. As an alternately blue, red or green plasm partially subsumed by darkness (affected through strategic stage lighting), boychild presents as what Žižek (2004, 143) would term 'a protoentity, not yet ontologically constituted in full'. If her body reads as a protoentity, prior to or not fully 'human', in re-imag(in)ing embodiment thus, does boychild become nobody rather than somebody? What are the broader political ramifications of this? If one's body is not recognised as a body by those who have the power to delineate or designate what counts as a body, does it still exist? Does boychild, as a queer, black, trans person performing as ephemeral hologram/fragmented part object, thus reaffirm the dissolutive effect of her own marginalisation? Or, in 'becoming no-body', does she offer a different political approach? What could it mean politically to be and/or to have no body? Could this be a position of power?

My questioning and use of terminology here is informed by Denise Ferreira da Silva's ruminations during Arika episode six (the episode after the one at which boychild performed) when she asked whether it was preferable to be 'some-body under the state or no-body against [it]'[8]. To be against the state is to occupy a place of resistance and refuse to submit to dominant ideology. If one is deemed to *be* nobody by somebody under the state, then to be 'no-body against the state' suggests that one is overlooked

or regarded as non-threatening to the established order. Or if one *has* no body (according to somebody under the state), then one also passes under the radar. This is not to say that the body is obsolete, rather that the body is not registering as such, because it does not conform to the hegemonic schema. Nor is it to say that one's resistance is insignificant. Indeed, whilst being/having no-body could be construed as a position of impotence, it could equally be regarded as empowering, for, if one is situated outside a constraining system, then one holds a potentially generative position from which to challenge that system's ideologies and politics. Furthermore, if the reason for one's exclusion from that system is because one 'has no body', then one such challenge might be to develop new, alternative ways of being.

Conclusion

Via theoretical analysis, I have tried to explicate the socio-cultural implications of boychild's performances of fluidity, multiplicity, bodily fragmentation, and extension. My analyses have attended to: boychild's layering of gender identifications, the technological augmentation of her body, her cross-species boundary-breaching, and embodiment of multiple avatar forms, before focussing on her use of an acousmatic ventriloquial voice, a voice (and mouth) which appears as part object, not fully integrated into the bodily whole. Identifying references to the ritual practices of spirit possession and voice channelling, I have argued that aspects of boychild's practice extend out into the unknown, beyond the rational boundaries of the material, corporeal world. It is my contention that these examples of bodily extension in boychild's performances have a potentially disruptive and expansive effect. The work demonstrates potential for exposing and resisting dominant oppressive constructs and systems relating to the body, working against categories assumed to be fixed. boychild's posthuman practice also suggests the viability of a subject position outside the dominant ideology that supports these categories. As such it has the capacity to open minds to different ways of being by identifying, imagining, and imaging forth new possibilities.

Earlier I stated aims: to examine the contradictions and ambivalences in boychild's performances and to understand her flickering back and forth between a traumatised disposition and one of empowerment. As I read it, boychild's posthuman performance of melancholic lamentation relates to the dehumanising and alienating exclusions, past and present, of queer, black, trans and female bodies. As noted earlier, when edited and reframed within the context of boychild's work, the song lyrics that she lip-synched to ('love me', 'tell me I belong', 'trouble so hard', 'I'm heartbroken', and 'I realise I mean nothing to you') become imbued with a socio-historic poignancy. They suggest reference to the exclusion and degradation that othered individuals have experienced, and boychild's expressions of pain, frustration, and rage articulate a range of emotional responses to those experiences.[9] Meanwhile, throughout her performance of *Say My Name*, for example, and intermittently during her performance of *Rude Boy*, boychild conveyed a retaliatory politics. She assumed postures that exhibited her physical prowess and were connotative of power and strength. Her self-deifying stage presence commanded visibility. She enacted a refusal to be dominated. I would argue therefore that the emotional charge of boychild's practice is closely bound with its potential social references.

As argued, the posthuman can be used as an affirmative strategy, a framework with a resistant politics, a reinvention of rather than an escape from the human. boychild's posthuman figuration presents a radical subjectivity which challenges trajectories and paradigms that reiterate the heteronormative white male human as dominant and oppressive. The ontological ambiguity of her body in performance speaks to the denial of subjectivity imposed upon non-white, non-male, non-heterosexual bodies – all those excluded from the humanist political economy. The intricacies of her ambivalent and unlocatable ventriloquial 'voice' relate to the sense of voicelessness that these othered individuals experience or how their voices have gone unheard. Both boychild's performance of fractured (or partial dis)embodiment, and her use of a seemingly autonomous voice-object in place of her own voice, can be understood as an expression of these fates. But equally, these devices can be read as a subversive play on the debilitating impositions of being/having no-body and lacking an audible voice. Arguably, she uses those conditions of voicelessness and a denial of hegemonic subjectivity which are imposed upon her black, queer, trans/female body and subverts them via the posthuman in such a way as to resist against her marginalisation. The implications of her ontological ambiguity and voicelessness can thus be read both positively and negatively in ways that reflect her enactment of flickering emotions.

Notes

1. This article works with a definition of 'politics' as an ongoing process in which power relations are (continually re-)negotiated, rather than from an understanding of 'politics' as it pertains to a formal, constitutional edifice. That said, these denotations are, of course, entwined. Hence, when writing about 'the system', I am referring to a symbolic structure of signification but one that has real effects on real bodies in the material world.
2. boychild uses Instagram as a channel through which to disseminate her photographic/GIF work. Most of these images are self-portraits, comprising a portfolio of multiple cyborgian selves, onscreen personae or avatars (https://www.instagram.com/boychild/). Similarly, boychild's embodiment is re-imagined in a cyborgian mode in film works that pre- and post-date the performances discussed in this article. See *DLIHCYOB* (2012), directed by Mitch Moore and presented by MOCAtv for the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ll5lfTIyGgw). And an excerpt from the sci-fi film, *A day in the life of bliss* (2014), directed by Wu Tsang with boychild as the protagonist, is also available online (https://vimeo.com/100686105).
3. Performance documentation is available online (http://arika.org.uk/archive/artists/boychild).
4. These words represent boychild's definition of what trans means to her, based on her own personal experiences. Other trans people may not share in the sense of oscillation that boychild describes. As such, this is not a broadly applicable determination of trans.
5. These lyrics are extracted from the following songs: Rihanna's *Rude Boy* (the line 'love me, love me' was given prominence through repetition in the remix that boychild synched to by an artist called nknwn); Burial's *Archangel*; Vera Hall's *Trouble So Hard*; and *Moments in Heartbreak* mixed by LOL boys.
6. Dolar critiques Roland Barthes for corporealising the voice, for writing of the materiality of the body as woven into it (see Barthes 1977, 179–189). Dolar's (2006, 70, fn. 10) qualm with Barthes' idea is that 'the voice cannot be pinned to a body, or be seen as an emanation of the body, without a paradox.' It is precisely this paradox that is played upon in ventriloquial and lip-synch performances.
7. Subjected to multiple forms of digital manipulation, the resulting voice, the 'other' voice, is stripped of Barthes' 'grain of the voice'. It is roboticised, mechanised, recoded in terms of the posthuman. This reinforces its status as an object separate from the body.

8. Ferreira da Silva attended episode six as an audience member and posed this question. Arika then invited her to think further on this question in a conversation titled 'Standing in the Flesh' with Hortense J. Spillars on 19 April 2015 at Tramway, Glasgow, as part of episode seven's programme.

9. Haunted by the spectres of race-related oppressions, boychild's works include latent references to slavery both in her vocal samples and in the visual language of her performances. For a detailed examination of these allusions, see my PhD thesis (Riszko 2016). Using afrofuturism (an offshoot of posthuman theory centred on race politics), my analyses of the music and vocal samples that comprise boychild's technologised 'voice' conclude with the suggestion that her 'voice' imparts prophetic visions about the future of gendered and racial subjectivity, visions that, in their very unknowability, oscillate ambivalently between utopian and dystopian outcomes.

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Leila Riszko completed an AHRC-funded PhD across the subject areas of History of Art and Theatre Studies at the University of Glasgow in December 2016. Her thesis, titled 'Breaching Bodily Boundaries: Transgressive Embodiment and Gender Queering in Contemporary Performance Art', presents analyses of specific artistic practices that pose challenges to existing social norms through various strategies of queer intervention and subversion. She is currently teaching undergraduate History of Art courses at the University of Glasgow.

Note of Correction

In a number of previous publications by other authors, boychild's onstage persona has been written about as female. In such texts the artist's work has also been discussed using the term 'black' and with reference to the politics of blackness. The author followed these precedents in the writing of this article. Since its publication, however, the artist has clarified the following points regarding correct usage of terminology when referring to them and their work. Firstly, the artist identifies as a person of colour, not as black. Secondly, whilst it is appropriate to use female pronouns to refer to boychild's onstage persona, the artist considers this persona to be gender ambiguous, not female.

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