The Electromagnetic Lady:
Janelle Monáe, Sonic Fiction, and Black Feminist Worldmaking

by

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I’ve designed a digital audio-visual appendix containing the Janelle Monáe songs and videos that I “think with” in this thesis: jesstollman.wix.com/electromagneticlady. I hope that readers will consider utilizing this online appendix to engage directly with Monáe’s work alongside my own analysis. Following José Muñoz’s methodological interventions, I’ve intended to think with Monáe on this project and speak to the theory I that read in her work. I do translation work in this thesis in an effort to bridge the formal gap between academic and sonic theorists, who use the expressive modes of writing and music as their respective means of knowledge production. I’ve made efforts at a horizontal translation, as I call it, in order to not privilege one form of theory over another.

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INTRODUCTION

Inducing: The Electromagnetic Lady

So let them say we can't do better
Lay out the rules that we can't break
They wanna sit and watch you wither
Their legacy's too hard to take

- Santigold

Betwixt and between the things that you have not yet discovered
Let it carry you and me over the river then wash us down
Lift us out of this thrashing life
I want out of rat on top of rat
I’ll race you down to the water

- Me’shell Ndegeocello

And if there should be nothing new, might not the same wonders do?
And if there should be nothing old, might not new wonders still unfold?

- Zebra Katz

The Mythography: Janelle Monáe and Cindi Mayweather

Janelle Monáe lives now on Earth, but she hails from a future space. Hurled back in time from the year 2719, Monáe is patient #57821 residing in The Palace of the Dogs Arts Asylum, a federal institution for “mutants, lost geniuses, and savants.” Palace of the Dogs psychiatric specialists have outlined Monáe’s self-report of being kidnapped by bodysnatchers and “deexisted” to our present day. Monáe discloses having been “genoraped,” her genetic code stolen and auctioned illegally at a body farm. She describes how, back in the year 2719, a famous android named Cindi Mayweather was cloned from her DNA. Mayweather is the ArchAndroid, a mythic
figure destined to free the citizens of Metropolis from the Great Divide, an elite secret society that uses time travel as a weapon to “suppress freedom and love throughout the ages.”

Cindi Mayweather is Android #57821, a “custom synthetic” Alphaplantum 9000. She lives in Metropolis, a magnificent city constructed in the wake of Five World Wars that obliterated the Earth. Ruled by the evil Wolfmasters, Metropolis is renowned for “partying robozillionaires, riotous ethnic, race and class conflicts and petty holocausts.” Amidst this turmoil Mayweather is born, custom-made by the city’s android manufacturing corporation, Burnheart Industries. She is a prototype, the first of her kind, equipped with a rock-star package and functioning soul. Built to replicate history’s great musical acts, Mayweather’s novelty derives from her digitized sonic fusion of and her electric soul. Mayweather achieves famed status as the “leading voice of a rebellious new form of pop music known as cybersoul.” She was not built to be capable of love, yet falls for the dashing Sir Anthony Greendown, a robozillionare human, shocking the city. Their mutual, cross-wired love transgresses the most important of “The Rules”: androids must not fall in love, especially not with humans. Metropolis’ policing force, the Droid Control Marshals, sentence Mayweather to immediate disassembly. Celebrity turned convict, she flees through the Neon Valley streets and escapes into the Wondaground. The sovereign Wolfmasters dispatch alien bounty hunters wielding chainsaws and electro-daggers to chase her down. From hiding, Mayweather transmits musical compositions containing hidden frequencies of a “mystical battle plan” to Janelle
Monâe in the present day, making Monâe a prophetic messenger for the future of the present.  

As Vice Chancellor of Palace of the Dogs, Max Stelling, reports in 2010, most of Monâe’s story “does not bear logical sense.” For instance, Monâe claims to have worked at the Palace of the Dogs Musiquarium with Afropunk prophets and production duo Deep Cotton, yet federal records reveal Deep Cotton to have died in 1954. Despite her “[d]ubious claims and inconsistencies,” Stelling finds Monâe’s story “compelling, and on some emotional level, dare [he] say it, believable.” Monâe’s story of violent de-existence, machine manufacture, alien annihilation, and post-apocalyptic resistance is both impossible and plausible.

Just three years later in 2013, Stelling informs us that Monâe has mysteriously disappeared from the Palace of the Dogs, without opening her window or doors. She sends him *The Electric Lady* recording and requests he release it “ASAMP (As Soon As Magically Possible).” Though he remains confused as to the nature of this recording and is thoroughly shaken by his confrontations with the Zoids and Star Senators, Stelling is now convinced that “1954 is not just a year—it is an army.” He suspects that “many things in the ‘real world’ around us are not what they seem” and that “perhaps each and everyone of us that hears and loves and shares these songs is truly already at war, fighting for the freedom of a future age.” As Stelling suggests, the deep listener of Monâe and Mayweather’s music—the individual who “hears and loves and shares” their records—may, in fact, be fighting for her own freedom in the here and now. Perhaps these futurist recordings can provide critical perspective on
the ongoing wars we fight in the present, as we try to imagine ourselves in the future. And so the pendulum swings.

**For the Record: Social Reality and Sonic Fiction**

I have gleaned a composite understanding of Janelle Monáe and Cindi Mayweather’s movements from the liner notes, song lyrics, and music videos of their four albums to date—*The Audition* (2003), *Metropolis: The Chase Suite* (2008), *The ArchAndroid* (2010), and *The Electric Lady* (2013). Monáe’s multimedia music project articulates alien transportations, transmissions, and tyrannies that intertwine temporalities, symbols, and narratives of the future, past, and present. Her Metropolis narrative skips and scratches, skyrocketing ahead in time only to collapse in on itself. The listener is blasted in fast-forward only to realize she was riding a backbeat in rewind. These re-mixed messages scramble sense with a syncopated plotline that provides story and query in equal measure, yet, to borrow Fred Moten’s phrase, this is an “old-new thing.”

Afrofuturist musicians, including Monáe, are the semantic technicians of a New World Disorder. They transmit mixed messages, dislocating logic to recalibrate meaning. Their resignifications fire fluctuating sonic frequencies and stimulate foreign synaptic syntheses. These alien artists are communication recombinators, utilizing digital sound technology to mix music and mythology. They reprogram perceptions of the present and past through the future, hailing their listeners to become frequent flyers to the “Outer Side.”

Afrofuturist sonic theorists seek to cross-wire consciousness by connecting the cables of history with those of the future, sparking new conceptual conceptions of the present in the process.

Monáe theorizes the present and past through the futurist technology of sonic fiction. She creates a mythology of android subjugation, persecution, and revolution, remixing historically situated present-day minoritarian alienations through the alien future. I step aboard the Electric Lady’s spacecraft, following her movement in and outside Metropolis: abduction into the Palace of the Dogs Art Asylum, meanderings through the land of Mushrooms and Roses, flights across the Neon Valley Street district, soaring rides in Sally Ride’s rocket ship, transcendence of Cybertronic Purgatory, and late night wanderings into Wondaland. I read Monáe’s music for the theory it already contains, desiring to hear “its best excesses.” As Eshun argues, music ought to be heard “as the pop analysis it already is.”

There exists a hierarchy of expressive modes that elevates visual over auditory forms, printed over oral histories, and written over musical expression. Musics, and black musics in particular, are often read as though they are awaiting the hands of the theorist to draw forth their meaning into the world, rather than already supplying a critique. In order
to put Monáe’s theory in conversation with the works of other critical thinkers, I attempt a horizontal translation that neither elevates one theoretical practice over another nor prioritizes deconstruction. It is impossible to translate directly between sonic and written forms, as such a translation necessitates moving across planes of intensity; writing and music are not equivalent languages. It is precisely because these forms manifest divergent expressive and affective potentials, and at times contradict one another that I am invested in putting them in dialogue. Contradiction contains tremendous value, for seeking out opposition often exposes supposedly antagonist binaries to be false by uncovering a mutual constitution.

My mission is not to “decode” the Electric Lady, but to dialectically engage Monáe’s sonic fiction with other forms of theory. I aim to synthesize her sonic theory with that of critical race theory, queer of color critique, black feminist thought, cyberfeminism, affect theory, and sound studies. I attempt to think with rather than about Monáe and consider her theoretical insights in relation to other artists, cultural critics, and interdisciplinary thinkers, including Saidiya Hartman, Fred Moten, Patricia Hill Collins, Donna Haraway, Alexander Weheliye, Kodwo Eshun, Frank B. Wilderson, Jasbir Puar, Gloria Anzaldúa, Chela Sandoval, W. E. B. Du Bois, Paul Gilroy, Patricia Williams, Mark Dery, Ytasha Womack, and Greg Tate.

**Black Feminist Worldmaking**

Synthesizing Audre Lorde’s black feminist theory and José Muñoz’s queer of color critique, I assert that we can conceptualize Monáe’s sonic fiction as an example of Black Feminist Worldmaking. Monáe’s android futurity, her science fiction,
exemplifies the critical worldmaking potentiality Muñoz promotes in his book *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009). And the music and lyrics of her “cybersoul” soundtrack demonstrate the radical possibilities of poetry that Lorde forwards in her text “Poetry is Not a Luxury” from *Sister Outsider* (1984). Drawing from the works of Ernst Bloch and Giorgio Agamben, Muñoz asserts that concrete utopias, “the realm[s] of educated hope,” are crucial to imagining a future beyond “the quagmire of the present” for queer people, particularly poor queers of color. Lorde argues that poetry is imagination with insight, “the way we help give name to the nameless so that it can be thought,” specifically for black women. Both theorists understand inquisitive imagination as a vital implement for expanding conceptual capabilities in order to envision new worlds. I consider Muñoz’s affirmation of utopia and Lorde’s advancement of poetry in tandem to develop the fused framework of Black Feminist Worldmaking—Black Feminist and Queer Worldmaking—within which to read Monáe’s sonic fiction.

Lorde and Muñoz are at once acutely critical and urgently optimistic. They both advocate imagination as a means of illuminating alternate possibilities to the intolerable structures of the present for black women and/or queer minoritarian subjects. The forces structuring “the deaths we are expected to live” in this “prison house,” write Lorde and Muñoz, respectively, make our progressive, creative impulses indispensible to our psychological and physical survivals. For black women, poetry is “not idle fantasy,” as for queers the turn to utopian aesthetics is “nothing like an escape.” Rather, these critical imagination practices are rigorously informed by everyday experience. Dreaming provides the revelatory means of
making sense of the nonsensical strictures of the present. It cultivates the immaterial matter which with to articulate our deep-seated desires for something more, something beyond the deadly, inhuman politics of our present and the deadly, inhuman world that they create.

Poetic and utopian aesthetics constitute thinking technologies that enable the expression of longing that resists the violent socializations of black disposability and queer worthlessness. Akin to Muñoz and Lorde, Eshun understands black musicians’ embrace of extraterrestriality, “not so much as escapism but rather as an identification with the potentiality of space and distance.”26 The state has demonstrated its unceasing abhorrence of blackness through the protracted exploitation, incarceration, and annihilation of black life through the economies of slavery, sharecropping, and mass-imprisonment. Modern slave economy and Enlightenment philosophy conflated whiteness and Humanity through the trading of black bodies as property and the idealizing of reason, objectivity, autonomy, and property ownership. As Afropessimist theorists including Frank B. Wilderson, Saidiya Hartman, and Orlando Patterson argue, blackness was rendered the antithesis of the rational Enlightenment subject, outside the bounds of Humanity.

Both Lorde and Muñoz assert poetic and utopian practices as critical, creative ways to articulate the denigrating forces of the present and to anticipate the liberating possibilities of the not-yet-here. They are propelled by the need to demand more than a barren present in which pessimistic acceptance of the state of affairs is preconditioned. We need Wondalands to kick the toxic habit of presentism—to elude entrenchment in the wasteland of a white-washed, strung-out current moment. We
need poetry and utopia to induce a bewilderment of “here and now” and a yearning for the “then and there.” Poets construct the “farthest horizons of our hopes and fears” just as queerness, when turned into an ideality, radiates “the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality.” These thinking technologies structure the perimeters of our conceptual solar systems of possibility; so, they carry our imaginations beyond this earth, to spheres that expand and contract with our relative abilities to reject a rational nucleus and reach for the seemingly senseless. We need “critical hermeneutics” to find our way out to our way in, to co-articulate deficiency and desire, lack and lust, hurt and hope.

**Electromagnetic Lady: Current Fields of Re-cognition**

Monáe’s body of work functions like a magnet between past and future, between human and machine, between reality and fantasy. I argue that Monáe’s alien mythology, embodiment of the android, and “cybersoul” genre fusions demonstrate the contingency and mutability of social reality by recalibrating notions of temporal progress, materiality, and authenticity. Her body of work contains within its structure two opposing poles that produce a field of flowing social concepts and sonic currents that serve to stimulate a shift in consciousness.

The attraction between a magnet’s north and south poles exhibits a strong force known as a *magnetic field*. It is precisely the opposition of these poles, their respective positive and negative charges, that generates the field of flowing magnetic current. We can visualize this field as an expanding sphere of contouring lines along which magnetic charge flows from one pole to the other:
In this current field, we can conceive of “Electric Lady” Janelle Monáe as an “Electromagnetic Lady.” Her innovative project fuses social reality with science fiction and human with alien, seemingly oppositional entities, in a manner that produces a field of potentiality in which to rethink historical narratives and social identities. Magnets move electrically charged particles in a “circular or helical path,” producing magnetic fields that exert force on other magnetic objects that enter the
field. For instance, the needle of a compass lines up in the direction of the field lines. Monáe’s generative fusions create a field charged with the potential to shift one’s perceptual orientation of temporal and social norms. Her sonic fiction brings the listener into the outer space of conceptual binaries, revealing apparent antagonisms, such as reality and fantasy, to be intertwined; each fundamentally is structured and contained by the other. By orienting the listener to both past and future, placing the listener on a field line between the two, the Electromagnetic Lady reveals aliens to be fundamental to our present history.

A crucial stimulus of Monáe’s sonic fiction is a drive to expose of commonly accepted notions of truth to be, in fact, myth. She reveals narratives of emancipation and notions of inclusion to be murderous illusions, window dressing for the decimation, subjugation, and neglect of black, brown, and queer life. When I speak of the alien, I am talking about black, brown, and queer aliens because the reverberations between the poetic, political drives of Black Optimism and Queer Worldmaking resonate strongly, for me. Afrofuturism and Worldmaking echo each other’s critiques of nationalism and assimilation and I feel the precussive interplay between these frameworks produces a rich theoretical tapistry. When the orbits of these paradigms are considered in tandem, the combined force of their creative matter amplifies their rigorously sounded critiques in common.

The Electromagnetic Lady complicates the binary between fact and fiction by interrogating historically situated present-day alienations through an alien future. For instance, in the song “Sincerely, Jane,” Janelle Monáe connects her experience growing up in Kansas City (“Left the city, my momma she said don't come back
home”) to that of Cindi Mayweather in Metropolis (“Five, seven, eight, two, one / It is now time, for you to come home, my dear”). The song’s baroque instrumental arrangement stages a dramatic tragedy while the lyrics sound alarm at the current state of affairs (“We live and then we die and we never know the why”) and reject their brutal conditions (“So down now we go, down underground”). Monáe belts, “Are we really living or just walking dead now?!” alluding to residents of her hometown, who she says have “lost they minds,” describing scenes of gang violence, drug use, teen pregnancy, and poverty. “Sincerely, Jane” is Track 5 on Metropolis: The Chase Suite (2008), played directly after Track 4, “Cybertronic Purgatory”—an ethereal electro-opera depicting android Mayweather in the liminal death-like state after combusting during a coerced performance portrayed on Track 3, “Many Moons.” “Sincerely, Jane’s” album placement narratively links the exploitation and malfunction of androids to the dehumanization and social death of impoverished black communities. Monáe’s co-articulation of social reality and science fiction reveals the conditions of black life already to be post-apocalyptic, stimulating a consciousness shift. The seemingly opposing poles of social reality and science fiction, when fused in The Electromagnetic Lady’s body of work, are exposed to be entangled. The sonic currents of Monáe’s Metropolis flow into our social reality, revealing it to be, for precarious, minoritarian populations, a science fiction.

Differential minoritarian populations are addressed throughout Monáe’s sonic fiction, sometimes in concert, sometimes distinctly, most often something in between. There is a methodological demand on me, in producing a theoretical argument, for clarity; to name specifically which human population and alienation I am referring to
in reference to Monáe’s android futurity. Yet much of what I find generative about
Monáe’s work is precisely its calculated ambiguity, the liminal status of her
worldmaking project between reality and fiction, her temporal melding of past,
present and future, her indistinct performance between human Janelle Monáe and
android Cindi Mayweather, her fusion of sonic influences that necessitates extensive
use of hyphination from the astute listener. Monáe’s sonic fiction is generative
precisely because it retains contradiction in its structure, like a magnet, and
incorporates dissonant alien peoples without insisting upon harmony. It begets a
potentiality that modifies and magnifies perspective by shifting planetary spheres of
temporality, certainty, relationality, and affect. I read the willful ambiguity that
saturates Monáe’s sonic fiction as a black feminist performance strategy that plays a
crucial role in stimulating the generative fusions that I elaborate in each chapter.

In chapter one, I discuss the futurist subjugation of androids in Monáe’s
Metropolis in relation to the historical and persistent present day subjugation of black
Americans. I consider the centrality of android manufacture, commodification, and
exploitation in Metropolis to be an allegory for the imperial mutation of black people
into white property, tradable at the slave market for planation labor, through the
transatlantic slave trade. I read Monáe’s work as dually deploying Afrofuturist and
Afropessimist thought. Afrofuturism and Afropessimism divergent yet related
theoretical paradigms oriented towards temporalities future and past, respectively, to
explicate black alienation in the present. Considering the tracks “March of the
Wolfmaster,” “Metropolis,” and the music video “Many Moons,” I argue that
Monáe’s sonic fiction conceives alien mutations as not only existing in science fiction
fantasies, but rather as foundational to modern slave economy and notions of (white) citizenship—integral to the constitution of our political and social reality. By embodying the posthuman android, I assert, in the sonic vein of Fred Moten, that Monáe renders audible the resistance of the objectified subject. In doing so, she demonstrates subjugation to be never absolute by screaming rejection of the dystopic strictures of black, alien life. Her simultaneous utopic yearning for the freedom of another world provides a rigorous critique of the violences of this one.

In chapter two, I consider the significance of Monáe’s materialization of the android as a black woman with queer and working-class sensibilities. I argue that her embodiment of the android and evocations of minoritarian identities, in her lyrics and interviews, intervenes in dominant, white-washed visions of the future. Her android also functions as a heuristic device, a thinking technology, through which identitarian formations are resignified and intersected, yet not conflated. I read Monáe’s android as the vehicle for her personal form of black feminist thought, forging an explicit link between Donna Haraway’s “Cyber Feminism” and the Woman of Color Feminist Theory promoted by thinkers including Patricia Hill Collins, Chéla Sandoval, and Gloria Anzaldúa. Monáe’s black feminist android advocates intersectionality, de-essentialism, and consciousness as a sphere of freedom. By interrelating differential discordant minoritarian affinities through the android body, Monáe fosters a sense of alien relationality by enacting an alien commons. Through Monáe’s song “Electric Lady” and her music video “Q.U.E.E.N.,” I consider Monáe’s android as a conceptual technology through which to conceive a textured network of disparate minoritarian subjects.
In chapter three, I discuss Monáe’s capacious fusion of music genres and influences, including soul, future funk, and psychedelic rock, under the sonic rubric: “cybersoul.” Her amalgamation of musics and use of digital sound technology serves to dislocate notions of racial and social identities as having inherent qualities or as moored to specific genres. I argue that Monáe’s sematic and sonic re-fashioning of “soul,” projects soul into the future for a digitized audience while also asserting soul and funk artists’ foundational contributions to contemporary music. Drawing from thinkers including W. E. B. Du Bois, Fred Moten, Paul Gilroy, Alexander Weheliye, and Kodwo Eshun, I conceive soul as a historically situated affective mode of being that asserts the vitality of black life while exceeding the sociological fixity of racial categorization. I read Monáe’s songs “Mushrooms and Roses” and “Dance Apocalyptic” and her music video “Cold War” to consider how her use of voice modulation, electronic sound, and virtual media disrupt normative notions of fixed identity and cultivate virtual emotional intimacy with the listener. I also argue that Monáe subverts pathologizing narratives of insanity by embracing the “freak out” as an apt affect and response to a world that denigrates black, brown, and queer life.
COMPOSITION 1

“She’s Not Human, Remember:” Alienation and Animation in Metropolis

We take your history
And make it modern mystery

- Erykah Badu\(^{36}\)

Alien can blend right on in with your kin
Look again, cause I swear I spot one every now and then
It's happening again, wish I could tell you when

- Outkast\(^{37}\)

My black story is deeper than the boat ride over

- Azealia Banks\(^{38}\)

The Metropolis: Alienation and Animation

In this first chapter, I argue that Monáe’s sonic fiction utilizes the myth of an alien future to reimagine past and present alienations of black Americans. I read Monáe’s artistic project as reconfiguring the historical reality of the transatlantic slave trade’s through the mythology of Metropolis’s android subjugation. I understand Monáe’s sonic fiction to centralize the production, commodification, and exploitation of posthuman bodies in a dystopics future in a manner that reimagines the dehumanizing social and economic alienation of black Americans engendered by white imperial slavery. Monáe releases and performs her music and alien narrative in the present, re-presenting the socio-economy of slavery to have created a racialized class of alienable people that remains alienated today. I read Monáe’s sonic fiction as
sounding/resounding with slavery’s reverberating discord by allegorically implicating its social organization and economic industry as central to the foundation of the United States. The imagined android futurity of Metropolis thus refutes the whitewashing of slavery and its erasure in the colonial, and capitalist, archive.

I study the relationship between alienability, alienation, and the alien in Monáe’s sonic fiction through the paradigms of Afrofuturism and Afropessimism. Afrofuturism is a critical framework and aesthetic form that reimagines black experiences of marginalization, dislocation, and limitation—particularly those stemming from the Afro-diaspora—as they intersect with gender, sexuality, and class. Afrofuturism provides an optic lens and a phonic amplifier through which to reconceptualize the transatlantic slave trade as a forced alien mutation. I deploy both visual and sonic analogies to unpack how Afrofuturist artists utilize futuristic images and sounds to reconfigure present and historical alienations. Monáe’s Afrofuturist project visually materializes an alien world of androids and sonically produces the alien music of “cybersoul”—alien formations upon which I elaborate in detail in chapters two and three, respectively. By activating both senses, Monáe’s Afrofuturist twinning produces a particularly powerful shift in perspective, which engenders reconsideration of the relationship between the transatlantic slave trade of the past, black alienation in the present, and the persistence of racism into the future.

Afrofuturism is divergent from yet closely tied to Afropessimism, a paradigm and historicizing model that understands blackness as antagonistic to the Human and “freedom” as impossible without the destruction of civil society. Afropessimism conceptualizes blackness in toto as constructed by and for slavery and therefore
inextricable from it. I contend that the turbulent dystopia of Monáe’s sonic fiction expresses an Afrofuturist utopic desire marked by Afropessimist historicizing methods. Monáe’s dual deployment of these frameworks complicates the notion of them as dichotomous by demonstrating the political insight achieved through a political orientation toward both the future and the past.

In the first half of this chapter, I argue that Monáe’s sonic fiction re-produces the alienation of slavery and its enduring effects in the alien-android dystopia of Metropolis through allegory. As one might loop a record sample through a sound synthesizer to distort and refigure it for a new music production, Monáe’s sonic fiction loops slave alienation through the alien future to render audible its reverberating discord for black Americans in the present. The historical dehumanization of the Afrodiasporic populations who were objectified as alienable aliens—foreign bodies that could be bought and sold—is recapitulated through a future characterized by android exploitation, commodification, and annihilation. In the second half of this chapter I discuss the hunting, degradation, and auctioning of androids in three of Monáe’s songs, “March of the Wolfmasters,” “Metropolis,” and “Many Moons,” theoretical aural sites which recall the savage deprecation, monetary valuation, and disposable treatment of black lives aboard slave ships and throughout the Americas. Monáe’s looping effect utilizes science fiction tropes and alien sonic qualities to refigure slavery’s embodied violence, challenging its erasure from the colonial record.

The critical intervention of Monáe’s sonic fiction is its animation of the dehumanized black subject-as-object, resisting the hegemony of slavery’s alienating
forces. By embodying the android in her music and performance, Monáe allegorically animates the black voice silenced during slavery, the voice that continues to be suppressed under different guises today. I think with Monáe to conceptualize her project as activating the potential of futurist mythology to counter and transform the alienation and narrative suppression of black Americans. I read Monáe’s sonic fiction as a transmutation of historical black alienation into an alien, android future.

The slave’s objectification renders her subjectivity silent and negligible, alienated from voice and historical record. Whereas the silence of the colonial archive mutes slave alienation and its reverberating legacy, Monáe’s sonic fiction gives voice to the inaudible by animating the android slave. It centralizes the resilient life force that emanates from the objectified and abjected. Afrofuturist visions such as this are not naively utopian, for they rely upon Afropessimist historical revisions to explicate the roots of the alienated conditions they seek to transform.

**Frictional Paradigms: Afrofuturism and Afropessimism**

In this section, I introduce the paradigms of Afrofuturism and Afropessimism and some of their key artists and thinkers. I consider how they relate to each other, specifically how they both illuminate the present reality of blackness: Afropessimism, by mining the past, and Afrofuturism, by creating future allegories. These two perspectives are frictional, in tension with one another. Yet when fused they ultimately provide a better understanding of the past and present than either could on its own. While each contains some seemingly contradictory standpoints, these
paradigms can reside simultaneously in people’s consciousness and, together, better capture the complexity of social reality.

Monáe is not the first musician to situate her artistry in the future. Prolific jazz artist Sun Ra declared himself to be from Saturn and, with his Intergalactic MythScience Arkestra professed, “space is the place” because “those of the reality have been bruised and beaten by the truth.” Funk godfather George Clinton of Parliament and Funkadelic played the role of intergalactic party host, emerging from a giant spacecraft during live performances to simulate a “mothership connection” and simultaneously “claim the pyramids” while “mov[ing] on light years ahead in time.” Neo-soul queen Erykah Badu spun tales of a New Amerykahn Promise “across space…in a land before time” in the midst of a Fourth World War. Cybersoul “Electric Lady” Janelle Monáe claims that she and Cindi Mayweather share DNA and promises to “reprogram your mind” before her “spaceship leaves.” Each of these artists has maintained an enigmatic persona and has spoken in terms that posit fiction as fact, deploying coded language rife with double-entendres.

Music scholar John Corbett maintains that Afrofuturist musicians create “new discursive galaxies” that utilize science fiction tropes of aliens, outer space, and future times to connect the Afro diasporic experience to ideas of otherworldliness. Corbett argues that we should consider these extraterrestrial assertions as “suggesting the fundamental unreality of existence for people imported into New World servitude and then disenfranchised into poverty.” To become alien is to confront, as Eshun and Corbet would argue, the (un)reality of the black, Afro diasporic experience. The mythologies of artists such as Ra, Clinton, Badu, and Monáe serve as technologies
that link the forgone and the future, subjugation and space, alienation and the alien.

They prompt us to consider not only the plausibility of their worlds, but to reconsider the plausibility of our own world. These artists create and at times exist in seemingly impossible worlds. When juxtaposed with our own world, these alternate existences illuminate its irrationality, “demystifying through remystifying.”45 This method of using future myths to interrogate present “truths” is a staple among Afrofuturist musicians, creators, and thinkers.

Author and filmmaker Ytasha Womack describes Afrofuturism as “both an artistic aesthetic and framework for critical theory,” encompassing a constellation of cultural forms including literature, science fiction, film, visual art, dance, and music.46 These forms range from Ralph Ellison’s foundational American novel Invisible Man to Sun Ra’s cosmic jazz and philosophy to Octavia Butler’s prototypic science fiction to Fatimah Tuggar’s digital “cyborg-realistic” images. Across various mediums, Afrofuturists cultivate social awareness through creative expression, disrupt notions of racial and social limitations, and abandon normative expectations. These works seek to free audiences’ minds such that they recognize the failings of the present moment, the historical roots of those failings, and the individual’s power to demand and create something else—something more than what is given.

Afrofuturism connects science fiction themes of abduction and alien life to the black experience of alienation, dislocation, and estrangement in the past and present.

Cultural critic Mark Dery coined the term “Afrofuturism” in 1992 in his introduction to a series of interviews with Samuel E. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose entitled “Black to the Future” on technoculture, science fiction, and black
culture. Dery describes Afrofuturism as “[s]peculative fiction…African American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future.” He proposed a name for this form of speculative fiction that stretches back hundreds of years but did not conform to established creative categories. By crystalizing Afrofuturism as a genre all its own, Dery provided a context in which these exploratory works across different media could be put in dialogue. This classification stimulated a reframing that inspired new ways to read, listen, and think about technology and futurity in black culture.

Since then, Afrofuturism has emerged as a paradigm to explore and reconceptualize the linkages between technology, futurity, blackness, gender, class, sexuality, and limitless other social dimensions. Afrofuturist artists can be read as theorists and agents of social change with a shared investment in conveying messages of social awareness, affirmation, and transformation. Janelle Monáe both exists within and expands upon this tradition of innovatively deploying technology, science fiction, and fantasy to reconceive black and social identities and project them into the future. Afrofuturists describe the world of tomorrow today, often infusing that world with images of yesterday. Future and historic temporalities are typically blended in Afrofuturist works, as they are in Monáe’s sonic fiction, engendering new ways of understanding the past and present as much as (if not more than) they provide images of the future.

Cultural critic Greg Tate notes that the definition of Afrofuturism varies “because people are trying to draw hard lines around what can be somewhat fuzzy stuff.” The term has been used to reclassify works stretching back hundreds of
years, including negro spirituals, and even to understand the “paralinguistic and transnational communication networks of song, dance, talking drums, and other musical instruments,” which ethnically and nationally diverse Africans advanced in the New World despite colonial dehumanizing efforts. New World Africans necessarily employed a hybrid fusion of rhythmic, phonic, and semiotic communications to correspond across language barriers. Afropunk, as a loose assemblage of countermemories and counterfutures, thus engages in a temporal turn to the future that illuminates the complex expressive forms of the Afro-diasporic past.

Like Tate, Zoé Whitley, curator of the magnificent and collaborative 2013 Afrofuturist exhibition, *The Shadows Took Shape*, understands strict delineations as antithetical to Afrofuturism. She writes, “The absences of boundaries is crucial, I believe, for our understanding of both Afropunk’s legacy and its international appeal; it provides a toolkit for outsiders whether that status is based on race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, or a combination thereof.” Mythology, fantasy, and science fiction are essential implements in this toolkit, their key characteristic being potentiality. These imagination-tools turn away from the constraints of present day identity-conceptions and (im)possibilities, functioning like holographic glasses to illuminate alternate dimensions. Wearing future lenses while gazing upon the present casts reality in a new light, warranting a new kind of vision. Monáe’s future Metropolis is less an illusion than a revelation that unveils contemporary conditions that we are at present too close to see. Our existence in the present makes us far-sighted. Afropunk is re-visioning engendered by the optics of the unreal to re-fashion perspective on contemporary social reality.
Afrofuturists take the minoritarian subject position as their point of origin, centralizing individuals who are relegated to the margins of society. In John Akomfrah’s strange, brilliant docu-drama, *The Last Angel of History* (1996), Greg Tate describes how Afrofuturism considers subjectivity from the point of view of “someone who is at odds with the apparatus of power in society and whose profound experience is one of cultural dislocation, alienation, and estrangement.”

Monáe takes for her protagonist hero the subjugated android. In doing so, Monáe’s *Metropolis* departs from and subversively re-signifies Fritz Lang’s 1927 classic silent film of the same name. Both Lang and Monáe’s *Metropolis* narratives centralize a female android figure, fierce class struggle, and forbidden love. Yet Lang's film positions a member of the elite “thinker” class as the savior of the subjugated “worker” class, who wait longingly for this messianic mediator. Lang’s hero is Freder, a human male and the wealthiest son in Metropolis, a stark contrast to Monáe’s hero, Cindi Mayweather, a female android without inherited resources. Mayweather, a member of the subjugated android race, embodies an oppositional stance to the established order of human domination, while Freder mediates between the stratified classes by virtue of his privilege. Lang’s film ends with a reconciliatory handshake between the thinkers (“the head”) and the workers (“the hands”), presenting no alternate vision of a just society or reparations for the workers. While Freder saves the workers, presented as unable to save themselves, Mayweather inspires a collective android liberation front, empowering the Droid Rebel Alliance to revolutionize for themselves. Monáe positions the oppressed as the
leaders of their own movement for freedom. By embodying the subjugated android
figure, Monáe implements the Afrofuturist principle of minoritarian centrality.

Before I proceed to a discussion of Afropessimism, it will be helpful to
discuss the alienation of the slave trade and the etymology of “alien.” This set up will
help elucidate how Monáe’s sonic fiction re-configures the dehumanization of
African slaves through the alien future. Dery maintains that African Americans “in a
very real sense, are the descendants of alien abductees.”53 The transatlantic slave
trade was a spectacular, gruesome, inhumane abduction. Africans were ripped from
their homes by unfamiliar, light-skinned foreigners, subjected to inconceivable
terrors, crammed aboard vessels transporting them to an unknown place, and
enslaved, with their languages forbidden and cultural artifacts destroyed. A “black
hole” of humanity the Middle Passage, created aliens of Africans through tactics of
physical dehumanization, systematic enslavement, and cultural erasure.54
Afrofuturists understand Africa as both alienated, lost in the past, and as alien,
projected into the future.

In doing so, they draw upon the etymology of the term alien, which according
to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), is derived from the Latin aliēnus, meaning
“of or belonging to others…of another country, foreign…of a different variety of
species, unnatural, unfamiliar…unfriendly…incompatible, distasteful.”55 Alien here
implies both strangeness, and disdain for the unfamiliar. This derivation abjects that
which is foreign—from elsewhere. It assumes the self’s ignorance of the other, and
defines the other as a threat, stemming from the unknown. This loaded etymology
also encompasses a lack of personal possession, and ownership by another.
The *OED* defines the alien subject as a “person or slave belonging to another person, foreigner, stranger, outsider.” An alien subject can be possessed by another person, becoming an object of property. The body of the alien must therefore be *alienable*, legally defined as “capable of being transferred to the ownership of another; able to be sold or given away.” The alien body is one that can be exchanged and by “belonging to others” becomes alien to the subject herself, who is dispossessed of her own body. As these definitions illustrate, slaves were constructed not only as *alien* foreigners, but were also *alienated* from themselves, and made *alienable* as commodities. These definitions suggest that the concept of the “alien” is integral to the histories of slavery and racism: aliens have been living in the United States since 1619 when Dutch traders docked the first slave ship in Jamestown, Virginia. Our history reveals that aliens exist as much in the past as they might in the future.

By situating the subjugation, commodification, and ownership of alien, android bodies as fundamental to Metropolis’ existence, Monáe’s sonic fiction reorients history to amplify the dehumanization and alienation of African slaves essential to imperial modernity. Androids are Metropolis’ principle commodity and industry. Their manufacture, distribution, and sale are the source of the city’s overwhelming wealth: their labor built its skyscraping buildings, magnificent structures and trafficked streets. On the track “Q.U.E.E.N.,” Monáe as Mayweather brings attention to how androids are kept “underground working hard for the greedy,” a lyric that alludes to the Underground Railroad, referenced again in the following verse’s mention of abolitionist Harriet Tubman, evoking connotations of
enslavement, labor exploitation, and fugitivity. The centrality of alien exploitation in Metropolis stimulates a fundamental re-membering of slavery’s position in the history of the present via the imagining of alien devaluation and domination in the future.

The allegorical android population, as “neon slaves” who built, sustain, and entertain Metropolis, (re)centers slavery to the construction of the United States. Neon light is a heightened, artificial form of illumination that construes the overfamiliar—slavery—as strange and unnatural. Monáe’s unnatural counterfuture engenders a countermemory that compels us to de-naturalize our conception of U.S. history. Afrofuturist music scholar Kodwo Eshun terms this manner of recalibrating of what has come to pass “countermemories,” and the (re)imagination what is yet to come “counterfutures.” The “neon” counterfuture of Monáe’s Metropolis calls for historical revision that demands questioning normative U.S. narratives of linear progress and universal equality. Monáe’s sonic fiction engenders a countermemory that insists we consider how the transatlantic slave trade’s fundamental operation to have been generating the merchant capital essential to modern innovation and economy.

This countermemory requires conceiving of slavery not as a deviation from the script of progress, but as vital to the creation of the U.S. and Constitution of liberal democracy, citizenship, and freedom. It is impossible to take the current State and state of affairs as “natural” when they were fundamentally constituted by the most unnatural, manmade of institutions. U.S. contemporary political and socio-economic order was never inevitable, but rather was stimulated by an imperial thrust.
Monáe’s Metropolitan future refigures slavery in a manner that challenges hegemonic understandings of the “peculiar institution” as an exceptional event by reconstituting colonialism and enslavement as foundational to the architecture of the present. The mythology of Metropolis has a distancing effect that allows us to better conceive of the past—the history of slavery—and the present—its legacy—by re-moving slavery from the antiquity to futurity.

With alien exploitation a central theme, Monáe’s sonic fiction re-sounds the voice of the alienable slave and objectified black body. Android Cindi Mayweather is part human-part machine, mechanically produced from “organic compounds” illegally “cloned from Ms. Monáe’s stolen DNA.” Mayweather’s android body was created from Monáe’s dispossessed flesh. Her existence is contingent upon Monáe’s “[genorape]” and “[de-existence],” the violent extraction of her genetic material by “bodysnatchers” and deportation from her world. Monáe’s evocative neologisms, “genoraped” and “bodysnatchers,” foreground the flesh as a site of violence and abduction, centralizing these mutations to Metropolis’s manufacture of new technology. These evocations produce a countermemory of slavery that centers violations of the black body, specifically the black woman’s body, as constitutive of modern technological innovation.

Not only is the alienation of androids central to Metropolis’s function, but the mutation and (re)construction of bodies—both android and human—catalyze Monáe’s Metropolis narrative. Afrofuturists understand black life to be a science fiction. The reconstruction of slavery as an alien abduction reveals that the characteristics of a close encounter with alien life to have already taken place en
masse. In Monáe’s sonic fiction, Mayweather’s creation is made possible through the abduction and “genorape” of Monáe on her way home from work, characterizing the genesis of the Metropolis narrative as an alien abduction. Mayweather’s organic compounds were harvested from Monáe’s stolen DNA, making genetic theft and human mutation the origin of the Metropolis narrative. Not only is the alienation of androids central to Metropolis’s function, but the mutation and (re)construction of bodies—both android and human—catalyze Monáe’s Metropolis narrative.

I contend that Monáe performs what Eshun describes as a “transvaluation” between black alienation and the android alien. Monáe’s alien-nation of Metropolis reimagines the dehumanized, disposed, black subject position as the not-quite-human, manufactured android. The objectified commodity—the android’s metallic body—is alive in Metropolis, a hyperbole of the black-subject-as-object who resists her objectification. The android figure reimagines, highlights, and materializes the contradiction imposed upon the black body of being both a person and an object of property.

Unlike Afrofuturists, Afropessimists don’t believe it possible to analogize slavery. Hartman, for instance, argues that empathetic identification with enslavement always ultimately functions to erase or eliminate the slave experience. Empathy requires the (white) body to put itself in the place of the slave, to occupy the captive body, such that the slave herself is obscured. Hartman attributes this eradicating identification to the “fungibility of the commodity” whereby slaves were considered to be interchangeable bodies, equivalent brand, akin to the banal substitution of Pepsi for Coca-Cola. This fungible quality renders the “captive body
an abstract vessel vulnerable to the projection of others’ feelings, ideas, desires, and values,” a proxy for the wants of another. The alienated slave body serves as “surrogate for the master’s body,” making invisible the slave’s own suffering and experience. Hartman argues that because blackness is bound up in a politics of domination, identification with the enslaved black body results in her visual and epistemological subjugation.

Extending this line of argument, Alexander Weheliye, who resides somewhere between the Afropessimist and Afrofuturist camps, argues “visual subjection begets sonic subjectification.” Weheliye draws upon Judith Butler’s commentary on the Althusserian instance of interpellation, in which the auditory call of “Hey, you!” depicts a visual scene of subjection. I recall Frantz Fanon’s recollection of a white boy’s pointing and interpellating remark, “Look, a Negro! Maman, a Negro!” This moment explicates the integral visual component of racism: when the white gaze renders the black body an object, something that doesn’t speak but is spoken about and around. Weheliye astutely reads the “white subject’s vocal apparatus” as functioning to “repeat and solidify racial difference as it is inscribed in the field of vision.” He also understands the privileging of the written word in conjunction with black people’s systematic exclusion from it to be a form of visual subjection. The characteristics inscribed in the written word, “of reason, disembodiment, and full humanity,” are the same characteristics attributed in liberal, modern thought to western Man and the same characteristics that have been historically disaggregated from blackness. As such, it is the sonic that has the potential ruptures the object’s presupposed silence, resisting objectification by making blackness audible. It is the
singing voice, Weheliye argues, that has been the main passage through which to make “New World blackness audible from within Western discourses.” Sounding subjectivity thus functions to resist slavery’s total objectification. If blackness cannot be seen, it will be heard.

Cindi Mayweather re-sounds the silenced history of the slave through the revived voice of the object: the alien slave speaks for herself in the future. The (im)possibilities of the subjugated populations speaking from history have been brilliantly explicated by cultural historians including Gayatri Spivak and Saidiya Hartman. In researching *Scenes of Subjection*, Hartman describes her methodology of reading history “against the grain” to gather a crude assemblage of the slave experience given the “constraints and silences imposed by the nature of the archive.” An investigation into slavery is only possible, Hartman writes, because of “the accounts provided by literate black autobiographers, white amanuenses, plantation journals and documents, newspaper accounts, missionary tracts, travel writing, amateur ethnographies, government reports, et cetera,” all sources that remain “entangled in the politics of domination.” Full access to slave consciousness is impossible because it is always already embedded within hegemonic representations. While Hartman’s outstanding project scrutinizes the past to compile relics of slave subjectivity, Monáe’s imaginative work deploys an alternate methodology, turning to future fiction to re-animate the object and re-sound its voice.

Through the lens of Afropessimism, Saidiya Hartman, Fred Wilderson III, Orlando Patterson, and Hortense Spillers, among others, understand slavery as the ontological condition of blackness. In this view, the black body and the slave body
are inextricable, and blackness and humanity are diametrically opposed. Wilderson argues that the pillaging of the African continent, the harrowing Middle Passage, and the ensuing enslavement of black Africans brand genocide as essential to blackness—“a constitutive element.” Borrowing from Hartman, Wilderson claims “the ontological status of Blacks” to be that of “accumulated and fungible objects” that can be owned and traded. He argues that there is no blackness prior to slavery and no blackness distinct from slavery, as opposed to white exploitation, which is experiential and conditional. The structure of blackness as antagonistic to humanity has rendered blackness, to use Patterson’s term, a “social death.”

Blackness as social death views the black condition not as having ameliorated since emancipation, but rather as having been re-elaborated, with plantations replaced by prisons and lynchings supplanted by police brutality.

Afropessimists reorient history to the genesis of anti-black racism, explicating the perpetual reconfigurations of white supremacy and anti-blackness in modern and contemporary systems of racialization and racism. Afropessimists are highly critical of emancipation discourses, which do not address the construction of the (white) human subject position and underlying structures of domination. The western Enlightenment subject, endowed with the capacities for reason, consciousness, and free will, was constituted by positioning the black body—i.e. the captive slave—as its Other. The free man is a subject precisely because he is not a slave, an object of property. Wilderson contends that blackness has retained its absence of a relational position to (white) humanity precisely because the free (white) human-subject is constituted against the shackled (black) nonhuman-object. When ontology constitutes
blackness as the absence of freedom, emancipation must also be ontological and as such is “hyperbolic” and “ultimately untenable,” requiring “freedom from the world, freedom from Humanity, freedom from everyone (including one’s Black self).” For Afropessimists, incremental changes in black people’s legal and social standing do not address the foundational sources of black oppression. Freedom requires no less than the destruction of civil society.

The paradigms of Afropessimism and Afrofuturism are oriented towards different horizons, respectively mining the historical origin of (anti-)blackness and projecting blackness into the future. Afropessimists are critically engaged with historicizing and elucidating black oppression while Afrofuturists creatively negotiate and reconfigure black alienation through mythology and science fiction. Both are engaged in related projects that attempt to make sense of the alienation of black people in the present. These frameworks are frictional—neither wholly complementary nor incompatible; indeed, they might be described as mutually reliant.

In an interview with Wilderson, Hartman describes her book as “an allegory; its argument is a history of the present,” while Monáe describes her sonic fiction as “draw[ing] parallels between the present and the future,” getting at the social issues of today by stepping outside this world. Both projects are thus invested in re-articulating the present moment—how we arrived at here. Monáe understands us as being “so used to hearing that this is what’s happening right now that we become numb to it.” We are desensitized to issues of the present. Hartman describes the ease with which images of slaves suffering are reproduced, arguing that “too often they immure us to pain by virtue of their familiarity.” Both Monáe and Hartman are
propelled, as Hartman astutely puts it, to “defamiliariz[e] the familiar,” construing the seemingly obvious feel strange through methods of creative re-visioning that animate slave and black silences. We can see the Monáe’s Metropolis narrative as being marked by both Afrofuturist utopic desires and by Afropessimist historicizing methods.

“Happy Hunting!”: Announcing the Dystopia of Metropolis

This section introduces the dystopia of Monáe’s sonic fiction and introduces key concepts that I elaborate further in later sections. I introduce Metropolis, a futuristic city characterized by a deep class divide between androids and humans. In Metropolis, the suffering of androids is made a spectacle and their subjugation is foundational to the city’s political and socioeconomic functioning.

Monáe’s sonic fiction takes place in the prosperous capital of Metropolis in the year 2719. While Monáe’s first unofficial album release, The Audition (2003), details aspects of Mayweather’s storyline on the tracks “Cindi,” “The Chase,” and “Metropolis,” her first studio album, Metropolis: The Chase Suite (2008), fully immerses the audience in this dystopic world. Metropolis’ first track, “March of the Wolfmasters,” signals the turmoil of the world we are about to enter.

The listener is marshaled into Metropolis with militant snare drumming played over an ominous string ensemble punctuated by creaks and static interruptions. Rockets take flight and bombs explode in the distance as unsettling low chimes introduce what Metropolis’ liner notes inform us is the “Official Bounty Hunter Broadcast.” This troubling (dis)harmony mixed with sounds of war heralds Metropolis as a combat zone, a site life and death struggle. An enthusiastic female
voice, performed by Monáe, splices the turbulence with an elongated, “Gooooood morning, cyboys and cyber girls!” The announcer’s voice strains with excitement as she publicizes that android #57821, Cindi Mayweather, has fallen “desperately in love with a human” and for this offense has been “scheduled for immediate disassembly!” Mayweather’s crime and punishment are broadcast for all androids (“cyboys and cyber girls”) to hear, amplifying the devaluation of her android life and monetary revaluation of her metallic body as bounty. Androids are interpellated as spectators to an exciting sporting event, forced to bear witness to the annihilation of their own kind.

The announcer’s jubilant eagerness amidst sounds of distressing danger divulges a deep discord in Metropolis. The sounds of bombs and militant marching uncover a sinister message beneath the mask of the voice’s sweet intonation. Her enthusiasm veils the violence in her pronouncement of a death sentence for Mayweather, whom she ironically glorifies as a “winner in today’s heartbreak sweepstakes.” The disembodied voice declares the precise district, building, and floor where Mayweather might be found but stipulates exclusivity (“only card-carrying hunters can join our chase today”) and motivates gore (“no phasers, only chain-saws and electro-daggers!”). The voice prohibits high-tech weaponry in favor of archaic, pain-enhancing methods to devastate Mayweather’s android body, demonstrating the human elite’s desire to make a spectacle of android termination. The broadcast ends with a low, distorted male voice joining the female announcer to wish, “Happy Hunting!” The persecution of Cindi is treated as a game “full of fun,” conflating happiness and hunting in the decimation of android bodies. This
innocuous framing—performed by a disembodied human voice, in contrast to the vulnerable android body onto which violence is plotted—belittles the brutality of the hunt for Mayweather, whose only crime is the demonstration of desire.

In *Scenes of Subjection*, Hartman brilliantly and meticulously details the quotidian terror and domination that characterized slave life. She argues that the spectacularization of slavery, its “obscene theatricality,” served to mask the violence of the institution. As she describes, “the crimes of slavery are not only witnessed but staged,” literally on the slave block. White male slave traders presented captive black people for their economic profit and the viewing pleasure of antebellum slave market patrons. I argue that this conflation of pleasure and profit, which Hartman expertly shows to have branded slave life, provides the foundation for the performance of human (happy) hunter’s pleasurable pursuit of fugitive androids in Monáe’s *Metropolis*. The broadcasting of android destruction, implied to occur regularly given the announcer’s refrains of “remember” and “as usual,” disseminates the slave block throughout Metropolis such that the city itself becomes the stage for android suffering and this suffering becomes normal—the natural state of affairs. The visual of the auction block is not present because it is propagated throughout the city. The physical space of the block re-appears in Metropolis’ Annual Android Auction, a scene I will explore through Monáe’s “Many Moons” short film later in this chapter.

Slavery relied on entertainment and the notion of black enjoyment at the site of pain to disguise its malevolence. Hartman demonstrates how “the simulated jollity and coerced festivity of the slave trade” was “part of a larger effort to dissipate the extreme violence of the institution and disavow the pain of captivity.” Throughout
Monáe’s sonic fiction, we see humans finding inappropriate amusement in the alienation and annihilation of androids. Mayweather’s coerced performance, both as a Metropolis’ budding singer starlet and as hunted bounty, evokes the coerced entertainment of the slave. The conflation of excitement and extermination characterizing android life in Metropolis recasts the “entanglements of terror and enjoyment” that Hartman shows as pervading slave life. This conflation remains a central thread throughout my reading/listening of Monáe’s sonic fiction.88

“Metropolis”: (De)valuation and Desire

In this section I analyze Monáe’s song “Metropolis” and its illustration of how humans distinguish themselves in a manner that devalues the android population.89 This distinction in Monáe’s Metropolis reconfigures our human history of scientific racism. The sexual objectification of androids described on this track reimagines the ways in which black women’s sexualities have been historically distorted and denied, yet in the context of a love song it resists these misrepresentations. Monáe’s sonic fiction imagines as androids potentially have superior capabilities to humans, a hyperbole that provides a historical critique of human assertions of racial superiority. Monáe’s Metropolis demonstrates that white, western dominance was not the result of manifest destiny, but rather a result of colonization and capitalism. Finally, I observe that the paradigms of Afrofuturism and Afropessimism come together in Metropolis, demonstrating the potential for prosperous unities in the realm of the future

In the song “Metropolis,” Monáe—speaking as android Cindi Mayweather—details how the purchase and sale of “wired folk” is a normal, central part of life in 2719 Metropolis.90 The portion of the song shown below is spoken, not sung,
compelling special attention from the listener. The wistful, carousel-like melody all but halts for this verse, leaving only a pulsating vamp to accompany Mayweather’s clear articulation:

> And it’s a common thought
> That wired folk can be sold and bought.
> That we have no feelings no memories or minds,
> That we’re bionic strumpets only worth a dime.\(^1\)

An echo of Mayweather’s words fades in and out, suggesting the repetitive, pervasive nature of this commercial (mis)conception of bodies as commodities—to be bought, sold, and used to the owner’s liking. In Metropolis, androids are commodities traded amongst humans, valued insofar as they can be exchanged for money and used for profit and pleasure. Humans discriminate androids from themselves in order to rationalize this commodification, slandering them as “electric savages.” They claim the faculties of emotion, recollection, and thought as distinctly human. Beings defined as androids are de-valued, and divested of these supposedly uniquely “human” qualities in order to be re-valued or reinvested as electronic chattel—“neon slaves.”

This human assertion of higher intellectual and emotional processes in the future reconfigures the long human history of scientific racism deployed to impose human superiority over animals, maintain gender hierarchies between men and women, and justify the racial, ethnic, and class dominance of one group over another. Race is not a biological reality: humans are in fact among the most genetically homogenous of species.\(^2\) Yet the pseudo-science of phrenology, for instance, calibrated human skull size and resolved that black people had stunted mental faculties, positioning white males as the most highly developed of humans.\(^3\)
Scientists’ understandings of race have been and continue to be informed by their social contexts, rather than being based on purely scientific evidence—and, of course, there is no such thing.

Chattel slavery is human objectification manifested. For almost 250 years black people were considered commodities that could be bought and sold, not people with rights and dignity. The western imperial imaginary constructed black people as mechanistic bodies, destined to perform physical and reproductive labor in the service of white estate holders and the white State. In her foundational text, “On Being the Object of Property” (1988), Patricia Williams argues that when something valuable is not included in the marketplace, it is generally considered to be “too ‘priceless’ to be accommodated by ordinary exchange relationships.”

According to Williams, the Mona Lisa and human life exemplify things we generally understand to be invaluable. Therefore, when black people were bought and sold as slaves, they were priced and thereby placed outside the realm of humanity. Black individuals were paradoxically both objects of property and people. This contradictory dual embodiment has cultivated a tenuous relationship between blackness and the category of the “human,” a (non)relationship Afropessimists describe as fundamentally antagonistic.

Back in Metropolis, Cindi Mayweather describes how androids are abjected, “bionic strumpets only worth a dime.” The juxtaposition of the term “bionic,” suggesting a futuristic fusion of human biology and electronics, with “strumpet,” an archaic term for a prostitute or promiscuous woman, highlights the temporal play in Monáe’ sonic fiction and highlights the sexual objectification of androids as regressive. The conjoining of the futuristic, the outdated, and the monetary in this
phrase further underscores the historicity of a group of bodies being sanctioned the sexual property of another group of bodies, linking future android and past black objectifications. It suggests that the value of female androids is primarily sexual, that they function as cyborgian sex toys whose function is to reproduce an economy of sexual exploitation. The supposition that androids lack “human” capacities for feeling, memory, and cognizance is deployed to rationalize their sexual exploitation, a recapitulation of the scientific racism that served to justify the slave economy.

Monáe’s “bionic strumpet” lyric alludes to the history of violently (mis)construed black female sexuality. Colonial narratives and slave societies conceived the “alleged unrapability” of black women. This (mis)conception was supported by the fact that, since they were not protected under the law, slaves were not legally protected from actual or attempted rape. Hartman demonstrates how the law regarded the rape of black women as “negligible injury” and therefore as a legitimate use of property. The legislatively sanctioned inability of black women to refuse sexual advances engendered them as both “will-less and always willing,” confusing coercion and consent. Under these conditions, desire was indiscernible from domination, the voice of the black female subject distorted by her simultaneous status as a person and an object of property. A black woman’s “maternal function” was “indistinguishable from the conditions of enslavement and its reproduction.” Sexual exploitation was foundational to the reproduction of the slave economy.

Monáe’s implicit evocation of the historical memory of sexual violence against the black female body historicizes her future vision, creating linkages between past, present, and future embodied exploitations and violent misconceptions. The
recall takes place in this “Metropolis” love song, juxtaposing Mayweather’s longing desire with the degradation of her sexuality. Mayweather maintains a utopic Afrofuturist desire within a dystopia thoroughly colored by the Afropessimist historical strokes. Mayweather sustains a “dream to find another world / where a cyborg can love” despite being degraded a “bionic strumpet.” Her longing for love provides a critique of a world in which this is not conceived of as possible. This utopic strain is both an expression of desire and a critique of the savage social structures of Metropolis that negates and mutates this desire.

The wistful, carousel melody of “Metropolis” soon returns with forceful insistence, as Mayweather describes how some humans believe that “love is too deep/it's too wide to feel/when your soul is a button/and your foot glows in heels.” The melody’s revived force accompanied by high-pitched violin strings suggests Mayweather’s resistance against these constraining notions even as she recites them. The humans in question wonder how Mayweather as a “wired thing” could possibly experience the profound depth and feeling of love. Their doubt targets the specifically bionic ways that Mayweather as an android differs from humans, just as scientific racism claimed to establish anatomical proof of racial difference and white male superiority. Mayweather’s presumed deficit of faculties is seen to be intrinsic to her nature, or rather, codified in her programming, reflecting the prevalent (white) human impetus to reify racial difference in genetics. Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray exemplify this dogmatic trend in their book The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life (1994) in which they assert that genetics can at least in part explain racial differences in IQ. Their argument relies on several unfounded
notions, including that intelligence is an inherited, immutable, and quantifiable trait, and ignores the significant racial, gender, and socioeconomic biases in IQ testing. As theoretical psychologist Thomas Teo (2011) argues, these uncritical assumptions, or “adherence to naïve empiricist philosophy of science,” propagate epistemological violence against minoritarian racial groups by construing them as inherently inferior. While phrenology may be a defunct methodology for essentializing racial difference, efforts to classify and rank racial groups remain prevalent in the present. Monáe’s android future orients us toward this reality.

Metropolis’ Droid Control criminalizes Mayweather for her sentience, indicating that there is something about androids desiring that threatens the city’s established order. Love, widely considered the deepest of emotions, is claimed as a distinctly human facility. As we learn in the track “The Chase,” when android manufacturer Burnheart Industries customized Mayweather as an android who “has it all,” they codified falling in love to be “the only thing she can’t do.” The capacity for love is maintained to be uniquely human, a faculty to discriminate humans from androids. This distinction allows Metropolis’ elites to insist, “she’s not human, remember” but rather a “custom synthetic”—a man-made artificial body, a copy, something fake. Mayweather’s breaks this coding, countering absolute human domination by demonstrating that humans do not have the uncontested power to make androids what they are, nor can humans claim superior faculties. The possibility of an android desire that does not service the elites refutes the conception that androids function exclusively to reproduce human capital and pleasure, and therefore combats her alienation.
The potential for android desire may also be particularly threatening because androids may be superior to humans in certain ways. Monáe has described in interviews her belief that artificial intelligence will at some point surpass human intellect and her Metropolis draws upon the science fictions of Isaac Asimov and Philip K. Dick. Prolific author of the *Foundation* trilogy and numerous other works, Asimov writes in the cyberpunk genre in which machines rebel against their makers and uncover capabilities not coded in their programing. In Dick’s cult classic *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*—explicitly referenced on Monáe tracks “Make the Bus” and “Q.U.E.E.N.”—androids are manufactured out of biological matter and are indistinguishable from humans except, supposedly, in their capacity for empathy. Yet protagonist and android bounty hunter Rick Deckard struggles to distinguish humans from androids, questions the morality of android hunting, and ultimately falls in love with an android. Both Asimov and Dick play off of fears of maintaining a particular human distinctiveness and superiority and the threat of the unknown, subjugated, and manmade Other. Monáe toys with notions of android superiority on tracks such as “Oh Maker” where Mayweather “hear[s] the colors in the flowers,” evoking synesthesia in a manner that connotes a heightened awareness of the world. This line is a metaphor for the depth of her feeling for Anthony: their love will “burn yellow,” then “becoming orange,” before “explod[ing] from grey to black then bloody wine.” Mayweather’s potentially enhanced sensation would then pose a threat to the human rationale of superiority. These enhanced android capacities, which exceed normative human abilities, reasserts the biological
equivalence of black and white human capacities, distorted by slave owners’ agenda, through hyperbole.

The placement of misconceptions about androids, in a love song where Mayweather professes her utopic longing for an alternate reality, resists their degrading forces. The insistent hopefulness of the cyclical melody aids Mayweather’s in demonstrating the depth of her desire. Mayweather yearns for another world where she and Anthony Greendown can love each other free from Metropolis’ domineering social norms and legal decrees. Mayweather vows that a “chariot will arrive” and deliver them to a place where “there’s no call from Droid Control / warning [her] against this disease in [her] heart / freeing her soul.” The “chariot” is a vehicle of departure to a place and time where Mayweather’s sexuality will not be policed and her desire not criminalized. Monáe draws on the trope of the chariot, amongst the most common in slave spirituals, harnessing their historical power and the legacy of slave resistance to her future vision. Music scholar Samuel Floyd’s extensive survey of selected anthologies of spirituals found eleven spirituals with “chariot” in their titles and twenty-three more that included the word in their texts. The chariot promises deliverance to home, heaven, or Jordan, the overarching desire being transit from the current place and time. Mayweather’s utopic desire functions as a refusal of a dystopic present that is lethal for androids. An Afrofuturist drive for freedom is paired with an Afropessimist radical negation of the sociopolitical structures of contemporary black life.

The desire for deliverance to a utopia is enmeshed in the desire for departure from the dystopic, impossible condition of being a living body conceived of as a
thing. Mayweather dubs Metropolis, “one nation, under a microchip.” It is not God or divine right that produced the wealth of Metropolis, but the “neon slaves” who constructed, and generate capital for, the city. “Metropolis” comes from the ancient Greek μητρόπολις meaning “mother city of a colony” or “capital city.” Thus, the very precondition of a metropolis is colonization, and that which is colonized generates the capital of the city. The Metropolis is inconceivable without the colony. Androids are conceived as capital, brought into the world as bodies to serve, strengthen, and sustain Humanity. They are produced as fungible commodities, interchangeable and exchangeable for profit, in service of the Capital. They are manufactured in a corporation; there is nothing natural about this origin story. Objectification is the ontological condition of android existence as android creation and commodification are inextricable. As Afropessimists argue blackness is bound to slavery, the android is bound to capitalism. Race and blackness were constructed to justify slavery. The android was generated to in turn generate capital, produced to be productive—to reproduce capital and the Metropolis-as-capital. The constitution of Metropolis as “mother” casts the exploitation of androids as a form of maternal care for “electric savages” who require civilizing.

Monáe’s sonic fiction creates a dystopia from within which utopic desires emanate. The conjoining of Afropessimist ontologies with Afrofuturist aspirations allows for the reorienting of slavery as foundational to the history of the present, and in so doing re-sounds the alienated voice of the subaltern slave and objectified black body. These frictional paradigms come to a head in Metropolis and their differential orientations spark a historical re-visioning on two fronts. Afropessimist historicizing
re-centers slavery to modernity while Afrofuturist amplification re-animates the alienated voice. These crucial reconfigurations are only dually (im)possible in the realm of the not yet here.

“Many Moons”: Spectacle and Sufferance

The analysis of the previous track demonstrated how Monáe’s Metropolis recenters slavery to the history of the present. The short film the song “Many Moons” (*Metropolis: The Chase Suite*, 2008) re-imagines the slave market conditions, the denial of slave humanity, and the distortion of slave feeling and emotion. It captures how these circumstances, in a different form, endure to the present, revealing our image of equality and liberty to be myth.

Monáe’s “Many Moons” short film depicts the purchase and sale of androids during Metropolis’s Annual Android Action.\(^{109}\) While the *Metropolis* plot initiates with Mayweather’s persecution by Droid Control, this clip is something of a prequel, depicting Mayweather as still in the possession of her manufacturers/distributors. Monáe’s intentionally nonlinear plot—as her liner notes detail, it “does not bear logical sense”—grants her artistic flexibility and freedom to take her narrative in multiple directions.\(^{110}\)

In this short film, auction hostess Lady Maxxa stands on a runaway to introduce the “finest fashions of androids money can buy” to Metropolis’s elite robozillionaires. The robozillionaires, humans who have profited from Metropolis’s booming android industry, sit in chairs lining the platform like an audience at a fashion show. Cindi Mayweather, the new android prototype and “toast of the town,”
touches a glowing button on her temple, transforming her white metallic shell to
appear as Monâe’s black body before jumping on stage. A tuxedo-clad Mayweather
sings and performs for an ecstatic crowd while elegantly adorned androids, also
embodied by Monâe, strut the catwalk. A woman whispers to her male partner, “I
want one” as the elites bid for their favorites. The current bid for each android
flashes beside them as they pose at the end of the runway before a definitive
“SOLD” flashes to indicate a winning bidder. This retailing of androids is a
spectacle, fully equipped with live music, elaborate staging, and fashion stylists
backstage to ensure the androids are properly adorned for the occasion.

The visual spectacle of the android auction along with an emphasized
“blackening” of the android body evokes a comparison to the antebellum slave
auction. Hartman demonstrates how the theatricality of the slave marketplace served
to mask the brutality of slavery, the pain of being sold, the despair of families torn
apart. Entertainment and music were integral to the slave auction. Slaves were made
to dance, sing, joke, and perform merrily for the crowds. These attractions served as
distractions that veiled the violent conditions of slavery. The coerced performance of
jollity also bolstered the racist fixation of black nature as cheerful, immature, and
untroubled. The prevalence of coerced black song in the marketplace, on the coffle,
at minstrel shows, and on the plantation, operated to corroborate whites’ ignorant
belief in “blacks’ restricted sentience and immunity to sorrow.”

Forced to ‘step it up lively,’ slaves were prohibited from emoting the despair
and anguish that could not have been more appropriate under the circumstances,
alienated from their emotional and psychological state. One slaveholder’s assistant
noted that he commanded slaves to dance when tears were still wet on their cheeks.\textsuperscript{112} Obligated to appear enthusiastic and facilitate their own sale, slave bodies were made to disavow their torment and “speak the master’s truth.”\textsuperscript{113} One of the most significant determinants of a slave’s purchase and the price procured was how convincingly she performed her merriment and fitness. The conditions of domination forced a slave to be forsaken by her own body and actions, a self-betrayal necessary to survival. Slave amusement was a proxy for the master’s own desire and profits “underscor[ing] the affiliation of spectacle and sufferance.”\textsuperscript{114}

The spectacular music and fashion of Metropolis’s Annual Android Auction reconfigures the coerced jollity of the slave auction and shrouds the fact that bodies are being purchased and sold for the utility and pleasure of elites. Androids on stage strut like models on a catwalk: poised, fierce, and dignified. Yet backstage we sense
apprehension and anxiety from the androids whose darting eyes and longing stares plead for help from the viewer. On stage, in the public eye, the androids appear unperturbed, yet in the privacy of the dressing room their disposition is troubled and tense. Backstage, one woman brushes an android’s silk straight hair as the android sings along with Mayweather “you’re free but in your mind.” A man tightens the corset of another android, who concludes, “your freedom’s in a bind.” Long straight hair is a tenet of idealized white female sexuality while the corset was used in during the Victorian era to narrow women’s waistlines (side effects included constricted breathing and fractured ribs). These normative and archaic markers of (white) femininity stand in stark contrast to Monáe/Mayweather’s tuxedo uniform, which presents a gender-queer aesthetic. Within a scene of performative exploitation, these stylistic symbols indicate and interrelate the restrictiveness of normative femininity for many women and the bondage of the android’s objectified position.

Android emotion is confused by the fact that we cannot be sure what affective capacity they possess nor whether other androids share Mayweather’s sentience. These ambiguities convolute any clear understanding of what manner of exploitation, if any, is taking place at this auction. Is harm being done to these androids? After all, they are not human. How can injury be done to something that isn’t human? They’re so glamorous and cheerful on stage, surely nothing can be wrong here. They can’t feel like we do, right?

The confusions experienced by the viewer of this flooding visual and sonic spectacle—in Metropolis’s audience or at home on her laptop—functions to highlight the conflation of “spectacle and sufferance” in the slave market. Hartman describes
the logic by which the slave’s pain was negated by a purported predisposition for
pleasure as follows:

The terms of disavowal are something like: No, the slave is not in
pain. Pain isn’t really pain for the enslaved, because of their limited
sentience, tendency to forget, and easily consolable grief. Lastly, the
slave is happy and, in fact, his happiness exceeds ‘our’ own.¹¹⁶

This denial of slaves’ pain and intensification of pleasure at the site (and sight) of sale
reconciled their status as objects, symbolically rendering them inhuman in order to
condone the chattel economy. The pageantry of the slave auction and distortion of
slave sentience disguised the violence of this commerce in bodies. In instances of
coerced amusement, pain and pleasure are not easily discernable. The extravagance
of the android auction, staged akin to a fashion show, shrouds any concrete
conception of android sufferance.

In Hartman’s view, the dehumanization of the slave is grounded in her
fungibility, as “replaceability and interchangeability [are] endemic to the
commodity.”¹¹⁷ As the slave body is valued in its capacity for production and
reproduction, one body can easily stand in for another. In the “Many Moons” video,
we see Monáe/Mayweather’s body as mass-produced merchandise in the Metropolis
marketplace. While audience members may have their eye on a particular android,
their disappointment is fleeting and distracted as soon as another desirable android
walks on stage. This momentary bitterness is less attributed to the loss of a favored
android than to bruised pride. For instance, Mousey, Neon Valley’s Crime Lord,
turns around frustrated at having been outbid by woman a few rows back. The
purchase of androids, the ability to possess these alien bodies, is a marker of power
and prestige.
Hartman helps us to understand the way in which for slaves, “the coerced performance” nevertheless “becomes a veiled articulation of the sorrow denied the enslaved by the demand for song.” Song functioned as a covert vehicle to resist from within the matrix of domination. We see the resistance to android subjugation through Mayweather’s ecstatic cybersoul performance. Mayweather sings, “we dancing free but we’re stuck here underground,” indicating that despite her inspiring performance and staged glamour, the android position is one of oppression. Her entertainment, her “dancing,” is not hers alone, but belongs to her manufacturer. Yet the non-elite crowd of Mayweather fans jams with uncritical exuberance, unaware of the resistant sorrow and yearning for freedom in her song. Mayweather harmonizes with the other androids, “broken dreams, no sunshine, endless crimes, we long for freedom,” demonstrating their collective pain and longing through song. Hartman argues, “it is the insistent and unceasing expression of black need that largely defines the critical labor of the performative and subordinate politics.”

The circumvention of black agency and exclusion from citizenship and normative personhood begets forms of resistance that do always look like revolution in the traditional sense.

Self-described black optimist Fred Moten theorizes sonic forms of the resistance of the object. In his poetic analysis, Moten theorizes the “convergence of blackness and the irreducible sound of necessarily visual performance.” He revisits the famous 1845 passage from Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass where Douglass recounts his introduction to slavery through the beating of his Aunt Hester. This is the same passage Hartman tactfully avoids in her introduction to Scenes of Subjection to elude the “benumbing spectacle” of slave suffering. Moten argues
that a sonic interruption to the reading of Aunt Hester’s beating disrupts the utter visual domination of this primal scene. Even before reproducing the scene, Moten resounds it in the title to his introduction, “Resistance of the Object: Aunt Hester’s Scream.” By employing a phonic analytic, Moten suggests that it is Aunt Hester’s scream—the agony and fortitude of her resistance—that shrieks from the pages and ruptures her absolute objectification. By amplifying the phonic substance already contained in the scene, he disrupts the totality of the scene’s subjection. The auditory scream breaks open the object’s visually imposed silence; it is the “surplus” of value that projects from the objectified, the “freedom drive that animates black performance.”

Mayweather’s subversive song of being “in a bind,” and revolutionary call to howl “like a panther,” is the break in her subjugation, the surplus of vitality emanating from and animating that which has been rendered object, yet refuses to be objectified. Subjection is never total and the sonic interruption, with its capacity for rupture, is a particularly resistant force.

A subtle mystical harmony [:45-:47] almost inaudible through the screams of the crowd introduces Mayweather’s song, indicating some form of spirituality to follow, before the Phantom Piano joins in. The song’s prelude, sampling The Pointer Sister’s 1976 “Pinball Number Count,” is a series of Voodoo Doo Wopps amongst the androids, visualized as a call and response. These “voodoo”s recall the religious tradition West African slaves carried with them to Haiti and New Orleans, which remains prominent in those regions. Merriam-Webster defines “voodoo” as “a person who deals in spells and necromancy.” Necromancy is the practice of talking to the dead and reviving lost spirits. If we understand androids as socially dead
commodities, the voodoo hailing must be an incitement to life. During slavery in pre-Haiti Saint-Domingue, French colonizers intermixed West African slaves with the intent that their different languages would prevent them from communicating to organize resistance. Voodoo was one of the few commonalities amongst these slaves and, despite the colonizers’ attempts to quash the religion, slaves continued to practice in secret, often disguising voodoo by fusing it with Christianity. A deeply spiritual practice, voodoo provided psychological refuge from bondage and is cited as an vital force that united and strengthened slaves in the 1804 Haitian Revolution, the only successful slave revolt to date. Yet in “Many Moons” the “voodoos” could be heard as simply a nonsensical vocal prelude, disguising the android’s resistant evocations of animation and revolution.¹²⁵

Midway through her electric performance, Mayweather breaks into the stream of consciousness “Cybernetic Chantdown” [3:39-4:41]. She recites a long string of fragmented, politically charged words and nonsensical phrases conjoined with a fusion of Monáe’s personal history, black female stereotypes, and Mayweather’s android narrative. This portion of the track in particular evokes a comparison to the slave song and dance of Juba that Hartman describes as a “coded text of protest” that “utilized nonsense words as a cover for social critique.”¹²⁶ Through lyrical and rhythmic cyphers slaves articulated their exploitation and political desires. These songs “enacted resistance and aired dissent in the guise of play and sheer nonsense,” acquiescing to (mis)conceptions of slave jubilance while collectively expressing the cruelties of slavery and longings for freedom.¹²⁷ Below is a section of a Juba song,
reproduced by Hartman, which demonstrates the alienation of slaves from their
products of labor:

We raise de wheat,
Dey gib us de corn;
We bake de bread,
Dey gib us de crust;
We sif de meal,
Dey gib us the huss;
We peel de meat,
Dey gib us de skin;
And dat’s de way
Dey take us in.\textsuperscript{128}

This expression of hunger provides a coded critique of the slave owner’s
appropriation of slave labor. In Monáe’s Cybernetic Chantdown, the stream of
consciousness listing presents enduring issues and stereotypes black women and other
marginalized groups face despite their supposed legal gains. The first quartet is
reproduced below:

\textit{Civil rights, civil war}
\textit{Hood rat, crack whore}
\textit{Carefree, nightclub}
\textit{Closet drunk, bathtub}\textsuperscript{129}

The first couplet splices “civil rights, civil war” with “hood rat, crack whore,” in a
matter of eight words linking the two most historically prominent movements of U.S.
black liberation with the still pervasive cultural images of black women as
impoverished and sexually depraved. This simple yet complex connection reflects an
Afropessimist understanding of the failures of emancipation to produce a truly free
black existence when no restitution has been made for having been systematically and
collectively disenfranchised into poverty and sexually exploited.
The following couplet, “carefree, nightclub” alongside “closet drunk, bathtub” evokes two images of alcohol consumption, one jubilant and untroubled, the other sullied and tragic. The parallel between this couplet and its predecessor might be that freedom at face value does not inherently result in the lived experience of emancipation. The proximate evocation of “civil rights, civil war”—two struggles that brought about the greatest legal victories for blacks—with “carefree, nightclub”—unrestrained celebration—conjures an ideal of liberation. However, the relation between the lines “hood rat, crack whore” and “closet drunk, bathtub” connote indolence and injury, suggesting an unsuccessful liberation.

The viewer is not given time to sit and ponder each phrase or image of this minute-long evocative Chantdown. The accelerated pace of the chant and flashing historical images, which remain for seconds (if we’re lucky), invite subsequent reading, listening, and viewing. This pace, in addition to the brevity of each phrase and lack of semantic context, allows Mayweather’s words to remain coded. The lines are evocative, “breast cancer, common cold / HIV, lost hope,” and visually stimulating, “Street fight, bloody war / Instigators, third floor,” yet are also perplexing, and impossible to interpret with absolute conviction.

Mayweather ends the Chantdown, “White house, Jim Crow / dirty lies, my regards,” just prior to her levitation and subsequent electric end. The parallel between this closing couplet and the opening lines of the chant suggests that government intervention to rectify black oppression has been futile. “White house,” representing the seat of power in the United States capital, is linked to “dirty lies.” These lies could be the litigation that de jure rectified the separate-but-equal doctrine
of Jim Crow, even though *de facto* black people are still disproportionately residents in substandard housing, students at inferior schools, targets of police persecution and victims of a corporate-sponsored incarceration industry. The “dirty lies” might be our Declaration that “all men are created equal,” despite the fact that black people and women have been and continue to be structurally excluded from this notion of equality and hu/manity. Whatever the interpretation, this Afropessimist historicizing reflects the understanding that “freedom” and “equality” in the present are myths. Mayweather leaves us with her regards, before combusting in what appears as a malfunction. Might it be that the memory of such suffering causes her hardware to overheat under the burden of recollection? Or perhaps the feeling of futility in the face of such incredible systemic failures that are overshadowed by purported social gains?
It is only in the moment before Mayweather’s death, when she short-circuits, that the elite audience members turn their heads to look at her. It takes electricity erupting from her body and shooting into the heavens for them to consider that something might be amiss. Despite the fact that the entirety of her song has been a call for freedom and cry against injustice, it is only in malfunction, when mortality is imminent, that Mayweather is acknowledged as a potential life. Mayweather’s body levitates, emanating electric energy to the sky. Her life force is made visual, to be viewed by everyone present. Humans are forced to see Mayweather as someone other than an entertainer, as something other than a body. Mayweather emanates resistance through her subversive song and formidable dance to the other androids, but she must render her suffering visual for humans to take note.

It is only in the proliferation of death that #BlackLivesMatter. The visualization of mass brutality and burial are required for the All-American abhorrence of black bodies to be become suspect. Even when this abhorrence is condemned, the individuals who not only abhor but kill black bodies are not indicted. It has been asked for centuries, yet no answer has been provided: How high must the corpses pile for black life to be seen? The system is incapable of this vision because the system is working. What is to be done when injustice is invisible to the justice system? Where might we go given the fundamental univablility of the present for black people? The spectacle of suffering endures and the problematic of empathy remains.

**Alien Consciousness: Potential of the Myth**
From within an utterly corrupt and toxic present, Sun Ra’s proclamation that Space is the Place resonates. In the science fiction mockumentary *Space Is the Place* (1974), Ra materializes in a black youth community center adorned in a metallic golden headdress and long shimmering robes holding a scepter and small crystal orb. He pronounces himself, “Sun Ra, ambassador from the Intergalactic Regions of the Council of Outer Space.” He is met with laughter and confusion as a chorus of youth queries, “What are you?” and “How do we know you for real?” Ra responds:

> I’m not real. I’m just like you. You don’t exist in this society. If you did, your people wouldn’t be seeking equal rights. You’re not real. If you were, you’d have some status among the nations of the world. So we’re both myths. I do not come to you as a reality. I come to you as the myth. Because that’s what black people are—myths. I came from a dream that the black man dreamed long ago. I’m actually a presence sent to you by your ancestors. I’m gonna be here until I pick out certain ones of you to take with me…How do you think you’re gonna exist? The year 2000 is right around the corner.131

The myth is urgent. The myth hails. The myth transports. Sun Ra motivates black people to recognize themselves as myths. To paraphrase Ra, the truth is rotten, yet the myth is potential. To embrace the unreal is to confront oneself as an unreality. Sun Ra’s call to identify with the myth is a wake up call to conceive of yourself as a myth such that you might reconceive what you might become. Recognizing one’s alienation is not submissive fatalism, but a conscientizing, a refusal to foster ignorance about how one is positioned in reality. The myth is a push for reconception, the drive reproduce as something else, the demand for more. The alien music of Sun Ra and Janelle Monáe activates an alien consciousness that engages with reality through an identification with unreality. Alien consciousness is a desire to change the
established order through disorder—to demystify by remystifying. Sonic fiction is an investment in a new way of being, of hearing and seeing, of engaging with worlds past, present, and future.
COMPOSITION 2

“My Black Metal Ass”: Black Feminist Android

Conceived under the influence of toxic wasted doctors
Computer buggin debuggin device-a and vice versa
And various viruses

- George Clinton\textsuperscript{132}

Enter the new round
Enter the next phase
Enter the program
Techno your mind

- Cybotron\textsuperscript{133}

I’m the spark, make the world explode
I’m a man-eating machine, I’ll make the world explode

- Grace Jones\textsuperscript{134}

Monáe and Haraway: Posthuman Body as Hybrid Technology

In this chapter I explore the hybrid potentiality of the android figure in Monáe’s sonic fiction. Monáe’s android is a fusion of human and machine, a posthuman being. By embodying android Cindi Mayweather, Monáe materializes the android body as black and woman. She also performs in a tuxedo, which I demonstrate visualizes both a queer and working class aesthetic. She consistently foregrounds these affinities in interviews and lyrics and thereby situates the intersecting minoritarian subjectivities of blackness, womanhood, working-class-ness, and queerness in relation to her futurist narrative of android subjugation and resistance. The android operates as a heuristic device, a thinking technology, with the
potential to resignify social identity, intersect communitarian formations, and imagine networks of association among differentially alienated peoples. Through her identitarian evocations and her performed android embodiment, Monáe centralizes the affinities and bodies of individuals normally rendered invisible, particularly in depictions of the future. Her posthuman heuristic operates as a technology for critiquing western, singular conceptions of the Human by arguing for a reconception of humanities, plural. By bringing overlapping yet disparate communities into contact with one another, without conflating them, Monáe’s android has the potential to foster connections among differentially alienated groups; for when people are brought into relation with one and other, they are changed.

I argue that by embodying the android as a woman of color and deploying a Women of Color (WOC) feminist epistemology, Monáe re-contextualizes the political potential of the posthuman. Android Cindi Mayweather functions to disrupt disembodied, whitewashed conceptions of technology and futurity. Monáe remixes race, gender, class, and sexuality through the android body, deconstructing and reconstructing notions of minoritarian identity and relationality. Her android is electric with connective potential. When put in relation to one another, different configurations of minoritarian identities reveal different aspects of how oppression functions. Hegemonic power produces a wide range of alienations and it perseveres, in part, by cultivating animosity between minoritarian populations. The connective capacity of the android body can help change how we conceive of our relationship to other “others.” This can also complicate our understandings of hegemonic power, which, in fact, would serve to clarify its multifarious mechanisms. By putting
discordant minoritarian peoples in relation to one another, the heuristic of the android helps to enact an alien commons, both imaginary and real, opening possibilities to transform these alienations into something else.

The visualization of the android as a black woman in Monáe’s sonic fiction materializes an explicit link between Donna Haraway’s “Cyborg Feminism” and WOC Feminism. Haraway’s iconic text “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century” (1985) addresses the future of socialist feminism in the regressive context of Regan era conservatism. Haraway’s cyborg politics rejects universal knowledge claims and seeks to foster partial connection among plural others. Haraway derives her conception of the cyborg’s radical hybrid potential from WOC feminist epistemology, a theoretical discourse which emphasizes knowledge to be embodied and experienced, and understands identities to be intersectional. Having read Chêla Sandoval, Patricia Hill Collins, Gloria Anzaldúa, Alexander Weheliye, and Jasbir Puar, I argue that these WOC origins, while present in Haraway’s writing, are often lost when “cyborg consciousness” is taken up by other academics, a whitewashing that ironically reproduces the marginal status of WOC theory in the academy despite its foundational importance to Haraway’s seminal work. The suppression of the ontology of Haraway’s cyborg perpetuates the disembodied, raceless, genderless impetus that dominates much of cybernetic and posthuman theory.135 Ignorance of the racializing, gendering, sexualizing, and classing assemblages that construct our respective social realities begets a negligent and violent assumption that human experience is uniform.
While Monáe uses the “android” and Haraway uses the “cyborg” in their respective critical projects, both theorists define their posthuman bodies as machine-organism hybrids. Each author/programmer deploys the epistemological potential of this hybrid body to problematize dominant worldviews and query normative narratives of truth. Haraway describes the cyborg as an “imaginative resource” that reveals distinction between reality and fiction to be precarious; as Haraway writes, “the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion.”^136 The revelation that social reality is constructed does not make it unreal or fake, but rather invites critical interrogation into historical processes of social construction, the stories we tell about those constructions, and whom those stories benefit. This insight demonstrates social reality to be “in motion,” not stagnant and immutable, but rather to be a perpetual process, “a world-changing fiction.”^137 Haraway’s approach to the cyborg enables it to function as a “fiction mapping our social and bodily reality,” an extended not-quite-metaphor that demystifies the constitution of social reality and power relations through science fiction.

Like Haraway, Monáe also posits the android as a tool to reconceptualize dominant narratives of truth. As I argued in chapter one, Monáe’s sonic fiction is dialectically engaged with both the past and present, re-imagining historical alienations through the alien future and revealing their relevance to contemporary times. I read Monáe’s multimedia mythology as making the androids’ manufacture and commodification central to the future’s Metropolis. In doing so, her sonic fiction produces new perspective on the transatlantic slave trade and reorients the audience to the enduring effects of the dehumanizing socioeconomic system. This futurist
reimagination refutes the erasure of slavery’s dehumanization from the colonial archive and recognizes slave economy as constitutive of the modern nation-state. Monáe’s sonic fiction reconceives black alienation as it intersects with gender, sexuality, and class through the alien future. By embodying and animating the android, Monáe performs a vitality that demonstrates objectification to be never total, even in its most extreme forms. Monáe’s sonic fiction demonstrates the transatlantic slave trade to have been an alien mutation, demystifying this historical reality through slavery’s remystification in an android mythology.

Both Monáe and Haraway’s techno-futuristic projects contend that dominant, universal truths are manmade narratives, constructed to present particular viewpoints that serve to elide a history of mutation and mutilation. Their respective works reveal the ways in which “common sense” logics, such as the belief in linear human progress, universal human freedom, equality, and opportunity, are imbued with white, masculinist, heterosexist ideologies. In doing so, Monáe and Haraway the ways in which dominant worldviews privilege the lives of particular groups at the expense of others. This recognition begs a couple of questions: What knowledges and ways of knowing have been eclipsed by the imperial white imaginary? What epistemic possibilities emerge if we not only make room for, but advantage subjugated knowledges and deploy them to reconceive social reality?

**Android Alien Affiliations: Black Feminist Thought and Subjugated Knowledges**

Black feminist theory has been integral to the recognition of epistemology as an embodied project by refuting the presumption that theoretical knowledge can be
separated from personal experience. In her foundational work, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990), sociologist Patricia Hill Collins argues that knowledge is situated, meaning it is particular to the sociocultural context of the person(s) producing it. Understanding epistemology as inextricable from social location clarifies the role of perception in mediating all knowledge construction; our particularly marked bodies arbitrate our interaction with physical and social worlds. Perceptive reflexivity is crucial to comprehending the complex workings of power, privilege, and oppression in epistemic production.

Black feminist thought is a form of subjugated knowledge because it is produced within a context characterized by domination. Collins argues that the suppression of black women’s ideas “has stimulated African-American women to create knowledge that empowers people to resist domination.” Her “matrix of domination” emphasizes forms of oppression to be interconnected, inextricable, and mutually reinforcing. While black feminist thought represents a specialized form of knowledge, Collins argues that it might prove a particularly insightful lens through which to view the matrix of domination. Given black women’s interconnected experiences of racist, sexist, and classist oppressions and the persistent marginalization of knowledge produced by black women, black feminist epistemology is “less likely than the specialized knowledge produced by dominant groups to deny the connection between ideas and the vested interests of their creators.” Black feminist thought problematizes hegemonic worldviews, recognizes ideologically embedded forms of privilege, and questions accepted
methodologies of knowledge production. It is a paradigm through which we might disrupt the omneity of singular, western Man and cultivate expansive understandings of humanities as necessarily plural.

Monáe’s incarnation of the android and her identification with various minoritarian groups foregrounds these identities in her rendering of the future. Through her creation and embodiment of Cindi Mayweather, Monáe materializes the android as black, woman, working class, and queer. Monáe has described obstacles she has encountered as a black woman and a woman of color. She uses both terms, though not interchangeably, to express her experience of specifically racialized and gendered forms of discrimination and to voice her success in spite of this discrimination.

Donning her signature black and white tuxedo, Monáe presents her android as having working class and queer sensibilities. She describes her tuxedo as a “uniform” she wears to pay homage to her working class parents—her mother worked as a janitor and her father as a trash collector—as well as her own employment background in the service economy as a maid and Office Depot employee. Her black and white suit signals sophistication and wealth, yet retains the aesthetic of workers in upscale service industries (i.e. restaurant business and hospitality). With these dual evocations, high class and low class fold in on themselves. Her garb evokes a sense of distinction and respectability and aligns those sensibilities with the working class, fashioning notions of “high class” and “working class” as synonymously “classy.”

Her androgynous style is unconventional for a female musician and model for CoverGirl cosmetics. With it, Monáe fashions an artistic and economic version of
gender, sexuality, and success lacking in mainstream media. Her tuxedo evokes the mid-twentieth century aesthetic of U.S. black male musicians and her coifed pompadour tributes soul godfather and foundational funk artist James Brown. Her garb conjures an image of black musicianship that links her future funk sound and science fiction vision to a history of rigorous black musical production. This aesthetic memory is fitted to Monáe’s frame. Monáe wears tuxedos tailored to have a feminine cut and tends to accessorize her look with bold red lipstick and nail polish, and heavy black mascara. She coopts and resignifies the tuxedo, which has long been utilized by black male musicians as cultural symbol of authority. She imbues the tuxedo with femininity and queerness, characteristics that are legitimized by the suits’ symbolic power. Monáe’s styled self-presentation disrupts normative conflations of “high fashion” with “high class.”

While Monáe’s aesthetic may read as queer, she dismisses efforts to brand her sexual orientation. She identifies with her sonic fiction to playfully dodge pointed questions, telling RollingStone, for instance, “I only date androids.” Why might Monáe refuse to identify as heterosexual, as queer, as straight, as lesbian, as bisexual? Why refuse this subject position while emphasizing and embracing others? We can only address these speculations by placing Monáe’s tactful strategy within a genealogy of black women’s sexuality in the United States. The ways in which the U.S. has overburdened the sexuality of black women—as detailed by authors such as Angela Davis in Women, Race, and Class (1981), Hortense Spillers in “Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book” (1987), Dorothy Roberts in Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty (1998), and
Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (2005)—contextualizes Monáe’s tactful choice and marks its specificity to black women’s cultural history. The context of the music industry, a business in which bodies of work and performers are commodified, is intertwined with a history of black bodies being purposed for entertainment and pleasure. These contexts of mass marketing clarify Monáe’s calculated decision to embrace ambiguity.

Women and specifically women of color are oversexualized in large segments of popular music, depicted lyrically and visually as sexual objects, accessories, and conquests. As a consequence of histories of being identified as fundamentally sexual and/or reproductive bodies, women are overidentified with and by sexuality. Black women, black men, people of color, women of color, and white women are overdetermined by histories of racial, gender, sexual, and class oppressions that operate by imbuing their bodies with negative characteristics. For instance, the prevalence of police brutality against people of color and of sexual violence against women, achieves a normalized status when certain bodies are always already overdetermined as violent and/or promiscuous. Women of color experience the assault of overdetermination on both fronts, which is manifest in intersecting forms of these violences: for example, the racist disbelief attributed to women of color who survive sexual assault or the sexist inattention given to police brutality perpetrated against women of color. Monáe’s refusal to grant critics and audiences the satisfaction and comfort of a defined sexual orientation intervenes in these preconceived notions. Her suggestion of android sexuality cunningly diverts attention away from her own body and onto the android body, circumventing the
overdetermined by introducing the undetermined. When the medium is the message, Monáe’s refusal to embrace a definitive sexual orientation might be read as a strategic performance, carving out space for an alternate representation of gender and sexuality applicable to both queer and heterosexual girls and women of color. Monáe’s performance of ambiguity allows for an effervescent enactment of sexuality, maintaining the possibility of performative flirtation with both men and women.

Given that dominant visions of techno-futurity depict gender, race, sexuality, class and other identitarian formations as inconsequential or nonexistent, Monáe’s portrayal enacts a critical intervention into the imperialism of whitewashed imaginings. Monáe’s viewer/listener is confronted with an android manifestation that interrupts the invisibility of women and/or people of color from accounts of the future. The importance of this intervention must not be understated. We need images of our future selves in order to imagine ourselves inhabiting future spaces. If I am repeatedly confronted with images that depict me as inconsequential or nonexistent in times yet to come, I am met with my erasure. Minoritarian futurities such as Monáe’s sonic fiction combat this invisibility, calling on alienated peoples to see and hear themselves in this world as people who matter.

Monáe utilizes the android as a theoretical vehicle for her personal form of WOC feminism, somewhat of an inverse of Haraway’s theoretical process in which the cyborg is derived from WOC feminism. The centrality of WOC feminism to the formation of the Cyborg Manifesto represents an important departure from postmodern methodological practices that continue to privilege the works of white male thinkers as essential reference points for contemporary theoretical production.
Haraway strives to bridge the disciplinary divisions between postmodernism and WOC feminism in order to combat the pervasiveness and near universal application of western worldviews. Yet as post-colonial theorist Chéla Sandoval describes, the cyborg is often “utilized and appropriated” in academic writings “in a fashion that represses the very work that it also fundamentally relies and draws upon.” I argue that the cyborg must materially re-present minoritarian subjectivities in order to intervene in the pervasive, singular conceptions of Man as a rational, autonomous, master of destiny, both in and outside of academia. For the cyborg to produce subjectivities that displace universal Man and reconfigure humanities as plural, she must depict the minoritarian subjects obfuscated by Man’s long shadow.

**Android Synthesis and Intersectionality**

In her thorough ontologizing of Haraway’s manifesto, Sandoval skillfully demonstrates that “cyborg consciousness” is a “differential postmodern form of oppositional consciousness.” Sandoval argues that through the experience of multiple, simultaneous oppressions, women of color have innovated ways of seeing and navigating the world that contest hegemonic worldviews. Forms of differential consciousness have been articulated by a range of women of color theorists, including Gloria Anzaldúa on “mestiza consciousness,” Patricia Hill Collins on “black feminist consciousness,” and Sandoval on “U.S. third world feminism,” among others. Modes of differential consciousness allow us to conceive of sociohistorical constructivism and the selective omissions in dominant narratives by presenting an alternate view.
For instance, one of the key tenets and indispensable theoretical contributions of WOC feminism is intersectionality, most notably advanced by Kimberle Crenshaw in “Demarginalising the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Anti-Discrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Anti-Racist Politics” (1989). Intersectionality articulates systems of domination, which include but are not limited to racism, sexism, heterosexism, and classism, as operating simultaneously, overlapping and mutually reinforcing one another. Haraway’s emphasis on the confusion of boundaries, rejection of essential taxonomic criteria, and desire for politics of joint kinship stem directly from this black feminist principle.

People impacted by the interlocking, mutually fortify matrix of domination derive their theoretical insights from their lived experiences. The Combahee River Collective, a 1970’s Boston-based black lesbian and feminist organization, exemplifies the inextricable relationship between theory and experience. In “The Combahee River Collective Statement,” first published in 1982, the collective writes that the “synthesis” of racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression “creates the conditions of [their] lives.” They assert their “particular task” to be “the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking.” Like the Combahee River Collective, Collins understands black feminist thought as “foster[ing] a fundamental paradigmatic shift that rejects additive approaches to oppression.” Both insist upon conceptualizing forms of domination as interrelated. Rather than positing that black women experience sexism on top of racism, WOC feminist thought understands that black
women experience racist sexism or sexist racism, particular forms of racialized
gender oppression or gendered racial oppression.

For black women, systems of racial, gender, and class oppressions have
interacted to construct various stereotypes. Ronald Regan projected the pejorative
phrase “welfare queen” into the American lexicon during his 1976 presidential
campaign in which he frequently referenced a woman from Chicago’s South Side
supposedly leaching off the U.S. welfare system.\textsuperscript{149} This idiom grossly misconstrued
poor black women as a group that is a major monetary burden. Yet welfare cheats
simply do not exist as a category of people. There are individuals who game the
system, but rogue instances of fraud do not constitute a collective and, in fact, most
people on welfare are white. Moreover, welfare is simply an investment in people
\textit{faring well}. The concept of general wellbeing, then, has been mangled to abject
people, and poor black women in particular, as societal parasites.

The manifestation and endurance of the phrase “Welfare Queen” represents
how racism does not simply layer on top of sexism, or vice versa. Rather, these
oppressions interact and reinforce one another in a manner that marginalizes black
women and negatively impacts both women and black people as groups by
constructing connotations of dependency and deceitfulness. By demonstrating how
intersectionally minoritarian groups face oppressions that cannot be reduced
exclusively to racism or sexism or classism, black feminist thought demonstrates the
inextricability of these systems. This insight further reveals that social justice
projects and critical thinkers cannot treat forms of oppression as distinct if they hope
to devise effective strategies of resistance. Activists will be most successful when
they conceive of individuals as intersectional beings and oppression as interlocking systems.

Monáe commits her android to the project of fostering connection and interrelation between differential minoritarian groups and forms of oppressions. When Monáe discusses the android, she speaks of it as the “new other,” which she told the Huffington Post one “can parallel…to the gay community, to the black community, to women.”¹⁵⁰ The exclusion of an ampersand in her listing engages the android’s potential for connection to be expansive, and these communities to be non-distinct and overlapping. Monáe told Motherboard, a website targeting the intersection of technology, science, and humanity, that the android parallels “African-Americans, women, gays, lesbians, immigrants, and so on and so on,” extending her argument for the android’s minoritarian applicability. In an interview with ELLE Magazine, Monáe expressed her desire to use the android to “bring awareness to the working class, the have-nots, and those who are discriminated against.” She goes on to describe how android Cindi Mayweather and human Anthony Greendown’s love is “considered to be queer” in Metropolis because it is forbidden and transgresses accepted boundaries, a circumstance she compares to “Muslim families who don't want their loved ones marrying Christians” and vice versa.¹⁵¹ In different interviews, Monáe employs different evocations of identity descriptors in comparison to the android’s “otherness.” Her capacious naming strategy interpellates differential and intersecting oppositional identities. Monáe presents the android as flexible in its ability to represent different contemporary minoritarian identities and serve as a material site of intersection.¹⁵²
Monáe’s articulation is not merely liberal, rhetorical diversity, but a multiplicity her mythography puts into play and practice. In Monáe’s sonic fiction, the android moves through various futuristic contexts that articulate differential present-day identitarian formations. Given the ambiguity of the android body and her teleportations through and beyond the incongruent sites of Metropolis, these formations are not reified but rather become exciting sites of exploration. On the song “Sally Ride,” Monáe pays homage to the first American woman and lesbian to fly in space, and youngest astronaut to date, who she imagines moving to the moon “where there are no rules” with her lover Mary. On The Electric Lady interlude, “Our Favorite Fugitive,” radio host DJ Crash Crash chastises and embarrasses a male caller who pejoratively declares on the program, “Robot love is queer!” A subsequent female caller mocks the policing force of Droid Control, telling them to “kiss the rust of the left and right cheek of my black metal ass.” Monáe pays tribute to her mother on the track “Ghetto Woman,” recalling her mother’s “eyes too heavy from working nights as a janitor” and declaring her “the 7th wonder” of the world and “the reason I believe in me.” On “Dance Apocalyptic” she laments the socioeconomic situation of many people “working 9 to 5 / just to make enough to pay [their] rent.” In the electric overture “Suite IV,” Mayweather, surrounded by fourteen soldiers, laments, “I don’t wanna be a slave again!” This overture leads directly into the track “Given Em What They Love,” on which Monáe proclaims, “They want me locked up in the system,” a reference to the U.S. prison system and mass-incarceration of black people. A critique of the devaluation of black life also surfaces on the track “Locked Inside” on which she grieves, “The color black means
it’s time to die / And nobody questions why / ‘cause they’re too scared to stop the Man.”

A theme of fugitivity reigns throughout Monáe’s records. For instance, on “Neon Valley Street” Mayweather teases Metropolis’ policing force, Droid Control, dubbing herself “an outlaw outrunning the law, ha.” The selves that Monáe constructs and performs both inside and outside her music centralize subjectivities that work to disrupt the conflation of humanity with Enlightenment and western conceptions of Man.

On the empowerment anthem “Electric Lady,” Monáe, potentially performing as Mayweather, addresses a techno-body designated “lady,” an honorific title that connotes both authority and adoration. She tells the Electric Lady that she’s “a star” who’s “got the look” whether she’s “wearing tennis shoes or in flats or in stilettos” or residing “in Savannah, Kansas, or in Atlanta.” Monáe/Mayweather celebrates multiple gender expressions of a self-empowered lady who “knows just who [she is].” She names three cities she’s lived in that also have high populations of people of color and references her own androgynous style, further confusing the distinction between herself and her android, her reality and her mythology. She describes the Electric Lady as a “classy,” “sassy,” “sofista[ted],” “electro[nic],” and “funky” individual with a “classic kind of crazy.” These characteristics link the pejorative stereotypes of the “crazy” or “sassy” black woman with notions of class and sophistication. Monáe’s reclamation of these terms resignifies them with a positive connotation, reimagining “class” and “sass” as compatible qualities. Monáe describes both the “girls showin’ love” to the Electric Lady as well as the “boys (sic) catchin’ feelings,” signaling that the Electric Lady’s “magnetic energy” flows across circuits.
Monáe plays with sexual ambiguity, inviting both men and women to feel a connection to the Electric Lady. The ascription of electricity and funk to the Electric Lady signifies her vitality and pleasure, as an elegant woman animated with life and joy. The Electric Lady “can fly you straight to the moon or to the ghettos,” transcending spatiality and socioeconomic class. The refinement and social capital ascribed to the Electric Lady is not attached to her economic capital.

**Alien Remix: Anti-essentialism and Border Crossing**

Haraway’s cyborg project is deeply committed to combatting essentialism, the notion that certain characteristics are inherent to particular bodies or identities. As a product of “imagination and material reality,” both an invention of fiction and a military technology, the cyborg mechanistically unmoors conceptions of identity from nature. She invites an interrogation of “the natural,” of what, exactly, the inherent qualities of a particular identity might be. How do we understand race and gender and sexuality when re-mixed through the android’s alien body? Questions such as these demand critical inquiry into the constitution of identity categories—i.e. what is race/gender/sexuality—and “[undermine], probably fatally” any “certainty of what counts as nature.”161 Theories that work to de-essentialize identity are prevalent in WOC feminism. In her manifesto, Haraway quotes Sandoval who affirms the “lack of any essential criterion for identifying who is a woman of color.”162 This womanist emphasis on self-selection and affinity over individualistic identity claims provides an anti-essentialist intervention that constructs identity as an open political project with the potential to foster community.
The insistence on “non-essence” by WOC feminist theorists has raised the awareness of many white and/or male activists and social thinkers to the violences and exclusions enabled by classifying practices. In the context of women’s liberation, as Haraway aptly puts it, “[w]hite women, including socialist feminists, discovered (that is, were forced kicking and screaming to notice) the non-innocence of the category ‘woman.’”¹⁶³ In their desire for a unified women’s resistance, many white feminists sought to solidify the identity, construction, and genealogy of “woman” in order to combat her discursive erasure. However, this drive for unity obscured the myriad of standpoints and disparate histories of over half the world’s human population. Any totalizing account of “woman” is a fiction. Haraway’s emphasis on the cyborg as a transgressive border-crosser originates in the womanist episteme that understands people *themselves* as fusions of multiple, overlapping identities that unfold distinctive experiences in their interactions with the world. She advocates a coalitional politics of affinity where self-selecting individuals unite by choice, rather than through a presumption of inherent biosocial commonality.

The de-essentializing component of WOC feminism is closely related to its emphasis on dissolving boundaries. Haraway describes her manifesto as “an argument for pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and for responsibility in their construction.”¹⁶⁴ The crossing and complicating of racial, gender, and sexual categories, among others, represents not only a conscious political action, but also provides an accurate portrait of many minoritarian people’s lived experience. In her groundbreaking work *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), Gloria Anzaldúa theorizes the U.S.-Mexico border as both a physical and an imaginative site
of transition, synthesis, and invention. “A borderland,” Anzaldúa writes, “is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary” [my emphasis]. Anzaldúa revisits the history of Northern Mexico’s absorption into the United States via the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, when European settlers annexed over half of Mexico’s territory. She presents the “unnatural” border between the U.S. and Mexico as the arbitrary result of war and genocide justified by the imperial ideology of Manifest Destiny, which claimed westward expansion as a divine right. Anzaldúa’s Chicana/o counter-history problematizes the foundations of the border, de-stabilizing the presumed legitimacy of nation-state territories. In doing so, she demonstrates the “unnatural,” imperial origins of Chicana/o alienation.

Anzaldúa recovers a Chicana/o cartography and genealogy produced through the displacement, transition, and merging of peoples native to the Americas. She describes the borderland’s residents as a motley crew, recalling the minoritarian multiplicities Monáe addresses in her interviews and lyrics:

The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. Los atravesados live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the “normal.” Gringos in the U.S. Southwest consider the inhabitants of the borderlands transgressors, aliens—whether they possess documents or not, whether they’re Chicanos, Indians or Blacks [emphasis in original]

Anzaldúa explains the borderland as a community of alienated peoples for whom neither Mexico nor the U.S. is truly home. From this condition of national homelessness, she maintains that there emerges “una cultura mestiza,” a culture that embraces the ambiguity and contradiction unique to the borderlands. La mestiza possesses a “consciousness of duality” given her liminal location on the threshold
between cultures, recalling Du Bois’ explication of the “double consciousness” of black Americans. Anzaldúa stresses the mestiza’s need to remain flexible and adaptable as a matter of survival, for “[r]igidity means death.” In her perpetual motion, traversing of intersections, and breaking down of boundaries, la mestiza develops “a new consciousness” that engenders transformations in her perception, self-awareness, and behavior. Likewise, by putting various minoritarian identities in conjunction, the android “Electric Lady” adopts an alien(ated) community of funky freaks.

**Women of Color and Women of Color Feminist Theory: Hyperembodiment and Disembodied Resista**

The borderland Anzaldúa describes is an example of hybridity as well as a theory of hybrid potentiality. Semiotician and literary theorist Walter D. Mignolo understands Anzaldúa’s “greatest theoretical contribution” to be her creation of “a space-in-between from where to think rather than a hybrid space to talk about.” Mignolo hints at the pervasive analytic conflation of the descriptive category of woman of color with the criticism generated by women of color. Addressing this point as it applies to the Cyborg Manifesto, Chéla Sandoval argues,

Ironically, U.S. third world feminist criticism, which is a set of theoretical and methodological strategies, is often understood by readers, even of Haraway, as a demographic constituency only (“women of color,” a category that can be used, ironically, as “example” to advance new theories of what are now being identified in the academy as “postmodern feminisms”), and not as itself a theoretical and methodological approach that clears the way for new modes of conceptualizing social movement, identity and difference. Sandoval understands Haraway’s cyborg heuristic as a “transcoding device” that translates the key tenets of U.S third world feminism into a language more
“comprehensible” in academia. She acknowledges Haraway’s subsequent mindfulness of how her own work perpetuates the aforementioned conflation by identifying “women of color” as a “cyborg identity” [my emphasis], rather than explicitly stating that woman of color critique or theory is constitutive of her cyborg model. Six years after the Cyborg Manifesto’s publication, Haraway stated that were she to rewrite her work she would “be much more careful about describing who counts as a ‘we’ in the statement, “We are all cyborgs.’”

Alexander Weheliye’s book *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (2014) serves as an exemplar of academic work that builds upon woman of color theory. A critical race and sound studies theorist, Weheliye grounds his theoretical inquiry in the black feminist epistemologies articulated by Hortense Spillers and Sylvia Wynter. Weheliye understands Spillers and Wynter to envisage black studies as an intellectual project “whose principal goal is to disrupt the governing conception of humanity as synonymous with western Man, while also supplying the analytic tools for thinking the deeply gendered and sexualized provenances of racializing assemblages.”

Throughout *Habeas Viscus*, Weheliye foregrounds their black feminist epistemology as vital to the theory of humanities (plural), that he develops. His methodology combats the marginalization of criticism produced by women of color and, as Patricia Hill Collins also does, demonstrates the potential of black feminist thought to intervene in the claims to universal application embedded in dominant worldviews. He utilizes black feminist theory to deconstruct and reconstruct modern selfhood, aiming to divorce humanities from western Enlightenment Man through an
intersectional analysis of the “sociopolitical processes”—racializing, sexualizing, and gendering assemblages—“that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans.”

Weheliye’s approach demonstrates how a rigorous deployment of black feminist thought adds crucial insights to the formations of humanities and possibilities for freedoms.

If we consider Monáe’s sonic fiction in light of Collin’s Black Feminist Thought, it becomes clear that Monáe’s music and message promote key tenets of a black feminist epistemology. We might read Monáe’s android as her theoretical vehicle. Monáe’s android mythology deploys, for instance, the black feminist principle of valuing individual consciousness as a domain of resistance. Black feminist thought “speaks to the importance African-American women place on consciousness as a sphere of freedom.”

In the song “Many Moons,” discussed at length in chapter one, Monáe repeats the refrain “you’re free but in your mind / your freedom’s in a bind,” affirming the metaphysical mind as a potent site of freedom within physical conditions of bondage. Collins describes how black women theorists understand the matrix of domination as not only externally imposed, but as having the capacity to colonize a person’s mind. Monáe also speaks to the threat of internalized oppression in “Locked Inside” where she condemns “the writers and the artists” of Metropolis for their negative depictions of androids, having been “paid to tell us lies / to keep us locked inside.”

On “Cold War,” Monáe sings, “I’m trying to find my peace” having been “made to believe there’s something wrong with me” in a murderously unequal world that thrusts her into “a cold cold war” of “fighting for [her] sanity.” The songs “Locked Inside” and “Cold War” both speak to the
psychological battle black women and other minoritarian peoples fight against oppressive forces that function to foster self-hate and notions that one is less than human. In “Dance or Die” Monáe advocates the need to “protect the mind from degradation” and “sow in the seeds of education” as primary means of resisting the physical and psychological “war” being waged “in the streets” and by “ignorant men.” From within the context of android commodification and persecution, the mind is positioned as a potential sanctuary from bondage and/or a first site of resistance. Collins understands consciousness as a means of “sustained resistance,” even when freedom seems an impossibility.

By promoting black feminist principles such as intersectionality, de-essentialism, and consciousness-raising via the figure of the android, Monáe creates a break in the conflation of women of color as people with women of color feminist theory. By embodying the android in her project, Monáe performs a partial distancing from the oversaturated human categories of minoritarian gender, race, sexuality, and class. Her enactment of black feminist thought while performing as a non-human android partially disembodies her theory. While one of the principles of black feminist thought is that all knowledge is situated, Monáe’s performed embodiment of the posthuman rebels against the hyperembodiment—being treated as only a body—that is specific to black women’s cultural history. By partially disembodying herself with an android mythology, Monáe also begins to disembody her theory in a manner that challenges this hyperembodiment yet does not divest black feminist knowledge of its situated particularity.
Partial, Plural Perspectives and Electric Connections

Haraway’s cyborg and Monáe’s android are electric with connective potential. A primary reason Haraway gives for writing the Cyborg Manifesto is that the “need for unity of people trying to resist world-wide intensification of domination has never been more acute.” While this claim undoubtedly resonated with the socialist-feminists she was addressing during the Regan era, the sense of urgency evident here and throughout the piece, for me, is in many ways a prerequisite for projects of resistance. This propulsive energy posits coalition building as a political strategy both to resist against and to survive within the matrix of domination. When envisioning her sonic fiction, Monáe explains wanting her protagonist to be a “uniter” as well as “someone who doesn’t fit in.” She describes Metropolis’ population of subjugated android as representing the constellation of subjugated humans that she accurately labels “[t]he minority and the majority—the one that does not have equal rights as normal human beings.” Monáe’s android provides a framework through which to consider the coalitional potential among various minorities.

A trap that coalition-building projects must be wary of is homogenizing various forms of otherness, intentionally or unintentionally. The drive for solidarity based on shared experiences of marginalization too often lends itself to a form of identity politics in which only particular peoples’ oppressions are legitimated as authentic and only particular social issues are deemed political priorities. Unity too often dissolves into uniformity when power is misunderstood as a binary comprised of privileged and oppressed peoples. Conceiving of identity and oppression as intersectional constructions engenders the recognition that, as Patricia Hill Collins
articulates, the “matrix of domination contains few pure victims or oppressors” but rather individuals who belong to “multiple dominant groups and…multiple subordinate groups.” Shared experiences of oppression can be an important part of consciousness raising and community building efforts, yet a coalition politics seeking to avoid flattening the complex workings of systems of domination cannot be organized around unitary identity.

Haraway’s cyborg politics employs this understanding through its embrace of “permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints” as strengths, not weaknesses. As a hybrid being, the cyborg is necessarily divested from holistic vision and uniform identity. Rather, the cyborg is materialized as an intersection—a site where manifold identities and standpoints may come into contact and co-operate. A plurality of critical perspectives is needed to counter the hegemony of universal knowledge claims that expunge, distort, and alienate minoritarian humanities. The erasure engendered and perpetuated by “[s]ingle vision produces worse illusions than double vision or many-headed monsters.” While looking at the world through a kaleidoscopic lens may be dizzying, one is able to perceive a spectrum of colors, light waves, and happenings invisible to the primitive two-eyed creature. That primitive two-eyed creature is the individual who is not part of a collective.

Collins also advocates a commitment to “partial perspective” because “no one group has a clear angle of vision.” The matrix of domination thrives on oppression that fragments, and as a consequence differentially marginalized peoples have different relationships to power, and develop different perspectives of the matrix. While group standpoints may at times contradict one another, this plurality of
perspectives ultimately provides a clearer vision of the matrix and might therefore offer more dynamic strategies of resistance. As vision is always mediated by life experience, no one group can claim access to absolute “truth.” Unveiling the matrix is a task for many hands.

Transnational queer theorist Jasbir Puar’s call to supplement the analytic model of intersectionality with the concept of (queer) assemblage provides further insight into the potentials of partial, plural perspectives. Puar understands the union of intersectional and assemblage paradigms as frictional; they are in a tension with one another in a manner that “may not be reconcilable” yet “need not be oppositional.” While each paradigm is problematic on its own, when deployed in conjunction, their generative friction produces a theoretical spark that opens up new possibilities for thinking about identity, affinity, and movement.

Puar historicizes intersectionality as a significant black feminist intervention into white hegemonic feminist frameworks that neglect analyses of class, race, and other dimensions of social reality. Intersectional analyses importantly deprioritize and complicate identity classifications by conceptualizing all forms of domination as interconnected. Yet this analytic model tends to reproduce additive ways of thinking about oppression and often essentialize identity categories by conceptualizing them as distinct entities. Puar suggests that we complicate our understanding of intersectionality through the notion of (queer) assemblage.

Assemblage rejects fixed identity categories, permitting (loose) organization around “events, actions and encounters, between bodies.” This model understands any representation of identity as temporally contingent, like a photograph, time
stamped and archived. A photograph captures a fleeting moment, the ephemera of a cast shadow specific to the sun’s exact location in the sky in relation to an individual’s exact motion at the exact time the photographer snapped the shot, an image’s display dependent upon on shutter speed, camera settings, and stable hands. Assemblage understands identities, peoples, power, social reality, and natural matter to be in perpetual process as non-stagnant, ever mutating mobilities. This framework focuses “not on content, but on relations,” understanding connections between and among concepts as producing meaning instead of a concept’s supposed “essential” quality. Assemblage’s emphasis on interaction, connection, and amalgamation provides a model to reconceive identity and consider new formations of collectivity. However, by de-privileging how subjects are signified and seen, assemblage does not adequately account for how bodies are marked and subjected to disciplinary power. While intersectionality is too easily appropriated as identity politics, assemblage neglects the extent to which identity matters.

Puar’s re-reading of Kimberle Crenshaw’s explication of intersectionality provides critical insight into how we might think intersectionality-as-assemblage. Puar revisits Crenshaw’s primary example of the street intersection to demonstrate how this representation “actually situates intersectionality as an event.” An intersection is a location of traffic, motion, accidents, comings and goings. At any given moment there may be any number of cars, buses, trams, bicycles, pedestrians coming from any number of directions. Puar’s reproduction of Crenshaw’s analogy of a traffic accident helps tremendously to understand the multifarious natures of identity and discrimination:
Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them...But it is not always easy to reconstruct an accident: Sometimes the skid marks and the injuries simply indicate that they occurred *simultaneously,* frustrating efforts to determine which driver caused the harm. In these cases the tendency seems to be that no driver is held responsible, no treatment is administered, and the involved parties simply get back in their cars and zoom away.193 (my emphasis)

By recalling Crenshaw’s primary example, Puar demonstrates that in its very inception, the intersectional model stressed motion. The analogy of an accident exemplifies the violence of being forced to locate moving components, as well as the substantial challenges involved in identifying precisely how these moving components interact or, in the case of discrimination, smash. Just as bodily matter and social dynamics are transient, unstable, and shifting, likewise identities cannot be disaggregated from one another. Puar’s re-reading of Crenshaw stresses all notions of identity to be “multi-causal, multi-directional, liminal.”194

The paradigm of assemblage on its own is too ambiguous to describe how bodies are marked and subjected to disciplinary power. Likewise, it does not capture the importance of identity to individuals’ self-definition and the cultivation of community. Assemblage can homogenize individuals and groups of differential social locations, erasing the profound complexity of identity, affinity, and relations to power. Yet the manner in which intersectionality has been deployed produces identity as rigid. The act of naming identity itself—whether individual or collective—is never innocent for it necessarily excludes by requiring some binding characteristic to claim the name. How can we conceive of the particularities of differentially situated subjects yet capture the dynamicism of identity? What form
might collectives take if they reject identity as a unifying force yet respect identity’s prominence in people’s lived experiences?

Through the android body, Monáe creates a material site of intersectionality that articulates the specificity of particular identities and differentially marked bodies. Because the android is an allegorical body it is able to interpellate a plethora of identities without reifying them. As such, audiences can identify with various aspects of the android without the necessity of seeking “full” representation. The re-imagination of identities through the posthuman body unfixes them from unfounded notions of the “natural.” When we take identities out of this world, we gain a different perspective not so much on what identities do mean, but more so on what they could mean. The android heuristic helps us think otherwise about selfhood and community.

The android’s allegorical quality accords her an openness that creates a forum through which various identities and affinities can come into contact and thus be put in relation to one another. Through this relationality, new forms of kinship and alliance between differentially alienated peoples might be imagined. Thinking intersectionality-as-assemblage—as Puar advocates through writing and Monáe, as I discuss below, performs through sonic fiction—conceptualizes the individual and her specific identities as part of a capacious collective that rejects exclusivity. The android manifests rich possibilities for both identity and affinity, for she cultivates the partial, plural perspectives promoted by both Haraway and Collins. This coexistence and potential cooperation of might coalesce multiple subjugated knowledges in a manner that produces a clearer picture of the matrix of domination than any one could
alone. This potential collaboration thereby might enable novel prospects for political and aesthetic projects of resistance and empowerment.

“Q.U.E.E.N.”: Am I a Freak?

Monáe’s song and music video for “Q.U.E.E.N.” featuring Erykah Badu enacts Puar’s intersectionality-as-assemblage framework. In describing this track, Monáe states that she created “Q.U.E.E.N.” for the marginalized and ostracized, “for people who feel like they want to give up because they’re not accepted by society.” The broad scope of this statement invites anyone who feels like an outsider to identify with the song. Yet Monáe also explains “Q.U.E.E.N.” as an acronym, stating that, “‘Q’ represents the queer community, the ‘U’ for the untouchables, the ‘E’ for immigrants (sic), the second ‘E’ for the excommunicated and the ‘N’ for those labeled as negroid.” These enunciations create “Q.U.E.E.N” as a forum where various formations of “otherness” interact and intersect.

Yet the initials of “Q.U.E.E.N.” are incommensurate. The terms signify disparate communities: “queer” names an identitarian group, “excommunicated” and “immigrant” describe social groups, and “undocumented” and “negroid” illustrate imagined and anachronistic groups. An individual belongs to the “queer” community on the basis of identification, while a person is classified as an “immigrant” based on her mobility across national borders. Many but not all queer people consider their queerness to be biosocial in nature, with sexuality influenced by a combination biological and social factors and community built through social networks. Immigration on the other hand constitutes a social movement with no basis in the
biological. This mobility is often contingent on identitarian privileges as people are often compelled to immigrate by poverty and persecution, yet there is agency in seeking increased socio-economic security. The “excommunicated,” on the other hand, are individuals who have been acted upon, cast out of a group due to some manner of wrongdoing by that group’s standards. Religious organizations, familial institutions, and tribal groups come to mind.

Monáe’s “untouchables” and “negroids” depict imagined communities. The United States has no (official) caste system, so we are left to speculate who might be accommodated or feel addressed by the term “untouchable.” Who in our society is so invisibilized and abhorred that they could be marked “untouchable?” Who is not reachable, grimy and immaterial, outside of functional society? I’m compelled to meditate on which groups are not central, not peripheral, but all together outside the human imaginary. I consider homeless queer youth, sex workers, incarcerated trans* people, low-income female workers of color. I wonder who I am leaving out, who we cannot see, name, realize as “here”—part of the U.S., part of “us.”

No check box labeled “negroid” yet exists on the census forms. The neologism “negroid” combines the antiquated “negro” with the futuristic “android,” integrating the historical and the fictional. The term “negro” was commonly used to refer to black people from the 17th century through mid 20th century until displaced by the Black Power movement in the 1960s for its pejorative use by whites and connotations of enslavement. Amalgamating “negro” with the high-tech “android” resignifies the term through a recall that maintains the relevance of racism as it has persisted through the present. “Android” is also resignified through racialization,
positing that race and blackness will continue to be relevant in times yet to come.

“Negroid” also re-members the “negro” human body as an “android” posthuman body, figuring the alien into black history and futurity. Monáe explicitly links her android future to “negro,” black, and slave history, racializing her future black and interpellating her audience to read her future as such. By placing the imaginary designations of “untouchable” and “negroid” in a context with other identitarian and social categories, Monáe posits these imagined communities on the threshold between reality and fiction. She articulates them in a liminal state that stimulates thinking about unmarked and overmarked identities in infrared and ultraviolet shades.

In Monáe’s music video for “Q.U.E.E.N.,” a televised museum curator welcomes us viewers to the Ministry of Droids’ “living museum, where legendary rebels from throughout history have been frozen in suspended animation.” This introductory sequence recalls both science fiction and scientific usages of the phrase “suspended animation.” In Afrofuturist writer Octavia Butler’s post-apocalyptic Xenogenesis trilogy, humans are held for over one hundred years in a state of “suspended animation” while an extraterrestrial “Oankali” species studies and experiments upon them. Butler so happens to be one of Monáe’s favorite authors. Scientist Mark Roth describes “suspended animation” as an arrested state in which the body’s energy consumption and production is halted or dramatically reduced.197 Both science fiction writing and scientific discourse represent “suspended animation” as a condition of putting life on hold. In Butler’s novels, “suspended animation” is used by the Oankali to study humanity and cure their diseases. The condition is induced without harming the human subjects, yet also without their consent. Humans
become objects-of-knowledge to the Oankali species that seek to comprehend human intelligence and fuse with the human race so as to evolve their own species. Likewise, in Monáe’s Metropolis, the Ministry of Droids archives the Wondaland collective, displaying them in a museum as objects to look at and study. These transgressive members of society are imprisoned as artifacts of radicality. They are not physically harmed, yet their lives are objectified, paralyzed in time. The choice phrasing of “suspended animation” evokes a sense of captivity and objectification. Wondaland’s subsequent rousing, singing, and dancing is thus framed as rebellion against these conditions of stasis and domination.

Museums collect, curate, and care for important artistic, scientific, cultural, and historical objects. They provide source material for researchers and diversion for the general public, institutional amenities also found in Metropolis’ “living museum.”
There is violence of imperial conquest in the acquisition of artifacts. The Egyptian Museum of Berlin, for instance, houses the largest collection of Egyptian artifacts, including its most famous piece, a bust of Queen Nefertiti, acquired by Prussian excavation in the 18\textsuperscript{th} century.\textsuperscript{199} Yet museums can also be sites of radicalism, housing art that critiques socially accepted norms by experimenting with form and violating imposed boundaries. We see both violent and violating strains present in Monâe’s enactment of the art gallery.

Our exhibit of interest features members of Wondaland and Janelle Monâe alongside coconspirator Erykah Badu, or “Badoula Oblongata.” Their bodies are displayed for museumgoers, alive yet immobilized as punishment for commencing “Project Q.U.E.E.N.” This advanced “musical weapons program” has stumped researchers who have been unable to decode the “nature” of these revolutionary “songs, emotion pictures, and works of art.” Wondaland and affiliates are named “rebels,” dissenters exhibited as societal outliers, cultural rarities. Their capture and display recalls the modern fascination with “exotic” art and culture that reminds the viewer how “normal” she or he is by contrast, recalling antiquated freak shows. Yet these bodies resist their objectification, animated from stasis by the playing of a “Q.U.E.E.N.” vinyl recording two Wondaland allies place on a turntable adorned with a gold-toothed skull. A funk baseline vitalizes Monâe and company who come alive one static twitch at a time. The track’s syncopated guitar rhythm and synthesizer accompaniment are reminiscent of the electro-funk stylings of the George Clinton classic “Atomic Dog” (1982), the most sampled record in hip-hop.\textsuperscript{200} The reverberation of funk through contemporary hip-hop and rhythm and blues music
speaks to the reproduction of black sound as it relates to the recurrent reanimation of black life.

In the first verse Monáe expresses disbelief over the assumptions people make upon her entrance,

I can't believe all of the things they say about me
Walk in the room they throwing shade left to right
They be like, "Ooh, she serving face"
And I just tell 'em cut me up and get down
They call us dirty cause we break all your rules down
And we just came to act a fool, is that all right? (Girl, that's alright)
They be like, "Ooh, let them eat cake."
But we eat wangs and throw dem bones on the ground

She describes individuals “throwing shade” when she “walk[s] in the room,” using a phrase particular to black and Latino drag queen and ball culture that describes the subtle communication of disapproval through physical gesture, posture, and expression. Monáe receives this negative energy because “they” (the universal “they” that stands in for universal “truths”) assume she’s “serving face,” giving them attitude simply by arriving. The stereotypical ascription of “bad attitude” and pervasive reproach towards black women and girls is tired and nonsensical. Monáe rejects this weary designation, telling the universal “them” to “cut [her] up.” Another phrase specific to ball culture, “cutting up” can mean to severely criticize, indicating that this unwarranted disapproval is trivial. To “cut someone up” can also mean to “size someone up,” to study them, by which Monáe implies that “they” could learn a thing or two about how to “get down”—to dance and enjoy oneself—from her. In granting the people/powers that be license to scrutinize her, Monáe discards normative dis/approval as inconsequential. By refusing to appeal to the legitimating authority, she divests the “normal” of its power to determine her worth.
Monáe references Marie Antoinette, signing sings in a mocking tone, “they be like, ‘Ooh, let them eat cake.” She reiterates Antoinette’s supposed response upon being informed of the bread famine plaguing French farmers and the working class. The flippant suggestion of cake as solution in response to news of widespread hunger demonstrates profound condescension and aristocratic ignorance of the lived conditions of poverty. The social stratification and classism evoked by this phrase is conjoined with the racialized denigration Monáe articulates in the opening verse, linking these experiences of discrimination and gross ignorance. Again, Monáe performs a refusal stating, “But we eat wangs and throw dem bones on the ground.” She enunciated “wings” as “wangs” and “them” as “dem,” intentionally emphasizing a black vernacular pronunciation absent the previous line: “let *them* eat cake.” This deliberate code switching highlights Monáe as bidialectal and toys with perceptions of (im)proper pronunciation. By enacting a linguistic flexibility reminiscent of Anzaldúa’s Chicana “wild tongue,” Monáe expresses the performative, relative, and absurd nature of “proper” diction.

The caricature of aristocratic excess is juxtaposed with a playful reclaim of stereotype. The declarative statement “we eat wangs” recalls the debasing stereotype that associates black people and fried chicken. Monáe deploys this stereotype as disruption to refuse the offering of “cake,” which from the hands of the state might represent assimilationist handouts. Rather than being thankful for what little is offered, Monáe calls upon the “we”—portrayed as black and Latina/o, queer, woman, and poor through her prior cultural references—to “throw dem bones on the ground,” rejecting elite condescension and alms. A racialized classist stereotype deployed to
dehumanize black people is redeployed against the oppressor. A tool of oppression is refashioned into a tool of resistance.

The chorus progresses with a barrage of questions that are repeated throughout the song:

*Am I a freak for dancing around? (queen)*  
*Am I a freak for getting down? (queen)*  
*I'm cutting up, don't cut me down*  
*Yeah I wanna be, wanna be (queen)*

Monáe does not provide a “yes or no” answer to the query, “Am I a freak?” Rather, the background vocals, Monáe’s own voice digitally multiplied into a chorus, sounds a breathy “queen” in response. This question asks for one of two answers, yet “yes” and “no” are bypassed as the reproduced voices of Monáe select an unprovided third option—“queen”—crafting choice where there was none before. The question “am I a freak?” is thus semantically answered, “you are a queen.” The “freak” and “queen” bump together in a grind against the simplistic, reductive logic of the “yes or no” question. They revel in the muck of convolution, tossing grim and glitter to muddy the state supplied water source, though truly these pipelines are already contaminated the toxins of white supremacy. Freaks and queens clarify the poison of benign appearance by sullying the seemingly—though untruthfully—transparent surface.
This chorus is accompanied by the visual of Monáe in a crisp white blouse and black pants alongside six other women dancing against a black and white horizontally striped background. Each woman wears the same horizontally striped dress with black and white stripes the same width as those in background. This lined, black and white aesthetic recalls a graphic of imprisonment, a visual then associated with the earlier evocations of racial, gender, sexual, and class discriminations as well as the black female bodies dancing in the foreground. While the women’s clothing blends their bodies and the black and white barred background, their movement confuses the straightness of these lines. Their motion—their propulsion and energy—become necessary to circumvent their incarceration into the incomprehensibility imposed upon them by their specific context.

The women’s joyful dance blurs the lines of a background that would swallow them, visualizing a performance of anti-linear disorder. Afropessimist Frank B.
Wilderson III argues that the black subject’s “presence works back on the grammar of hegemony and threatens it with incoherence.” As I discussed in chapter one, Wilderson theorizes from the understanding of the anti-analog of blackness—that this nation’s accumulation of capital and structure of citizenship was organized by the exploitation of black labor and negation of black subjectivity. Black humanity is historically structured as an impossibility, yet the structuring of blackness as outside of liberal humanity also positions blackness as humanity’s undoing. It has the potential to radically disrupt western, singular notions of Man and reproduces humanities as something else.

Monáe’s lyrical references to various minoritarian groups in “Q.U.E.E.N” makes the song a forum in which various formations of “otherness” interact and intersect. “Q.U.E.E.N” contains a range of specific and/or subcultural allusions, including nods to black and latino ball culture—“serving face,” black American vernacular—“cutting up,” cyberpunk science fiction—“electric sheep,” New Orleans hip-hop ‘Bounce’ dance—“twerk,” black women’s queer attraction—“am I a freak because I like watching Mary?” renowned musical production—“Bernine Grundman,” Egyptian royalty—“Queen Nefertiti,” and revolutionary black women—“Harriet Tubman,” to name just a fraction. Monáe also asks “are we a lost generation of our people?” deploying a phrase often used to describe the black community’s “lost generation” of young men, incarcerated whom the U.S. education and employment systems have failed. The human allusions provided in Monáe’s music prevents the android body from whitewashing identitarian differences, while also highlighting the commonalities of alienation among minoritarian groups. While the
song remains expansive to many potential Q.U.E.E.N.s, it also provided specific allusions to prevent conflation of minoritarian identities. The android heuristic invites playful interrelation at overdetermined intersections. Monáe’s android articulates the connective potentiality of a “cyborg consciousness,” which is indispensably bolstered by the posthuman’s materialization as a woman of color.

The crosscutting identitarian forum Monáe enacts through “Q.U.E.E.N.” recalls Muñoz’s discussion of annihilation and innovation in the Punk Rock Commons through the figure of Darby Crash. He reads the queerness of these commons as:

> a mode of “being-with” that defies social conventions and conformism and is innately heretical yet still desirous for the world, actively attempting to enact a commons that is not a pulverizing, hierarchical one bequeathed through logics and practices of exploitation.²⁰⁴

Through Monáe’s sonic fiction, we get a sense of various human identities moving through the android’s body. But because of the android hybrid programing—a fantastical fusion part human and part machine—these identities do not stick to any essential characteristic. We glean a sense of black womanhood, black/latina queerness, working-class-ness, and other affinities from the android body and her movements in and outside of Metropolis. Yet the liminal status of the android, as a creature of both social reality and science fiction circumvents their reification. As Muñoz describes the queerness of the punk commons as a mode of “being-with, in difference and discord,” I argue that Monáe enacts an alien commons, providing a space for minoritarian identities to coalesce without conflation.²⁰⁵
COMPOSITION 3

“I want her cybersoul”: Digital Funk, Virtual Freak Out

I got mind control when I'm here, you gon' hate me when I'm gone
Ain't no blood pumpin' no fear, I got hope inside of my bones
This that life beyond your own life, this ain't physical for mankind

- Flying Lotus feat. Kendrick Lamar

Let's sail it to a new frequency
I left the graveyard selling full of fancy
Bring your homie with transparency
My blood type is no negative
But I'm positive the dark ain't deep

- M.I.A.

You've got to act to get the facts
Living in a world that's kind of wack
Move your groove thang
To keep your soul intact

So whatever you do
Don’t funk with my groove

- THEESatisfaction

Monáe’s alien soundtrack amalgamates soul, future funk, and psychedelic rock under the sonic rubric: “cybersoul.” Her use of digital sound technology and fusion of musical influences function to de-essentialize and transform racial and social identities. She reproduces traditional soul music for a twenty-first century, digitized audience while paying tribute to twentieth century soul classics, asserting soul’s enduring relevance in, and foundational contributions to, contemporary music. I argue that by semantically and musically re-fashioning “soul,” by melding it with
the “cyber-” prefix and digitally mixing it with other sonic forms, Monáe projects soul into the future.

**Soul and Blackness: Affective Modes of Being**

Monáe describes her genre of music as “cybersoul,” yet does not explicitly define this terminology. Let’s break it down, starting with “soul.” The *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* defines “soul” as “an essential principle or attribute of life,” indispensable to the condition of being alive. In the modern sense, “soul” is understood as “consciousness as a whole, including emotions, hence merging with sense” and as “the essential, immaterial, or spiritual part of a person or animal, as opposed to the physical.” “Soul” is conceived as a metaphysical spirit and sentience, a non-corporeal entity that is distinct from the body yet beheld by the senses. It is both a disembodied abstraction as well as an “essence” of human life. In many religious traditions, the soul is considered the immortal part of a living being, enduring after death, yet also integral to the life of the human body. While secular modernity makes something else of “soul,” the word continues to call up powerfully the religious register of its history.

When asked in a 1968 interview to define soul, Aretha Franklin stated, “Soul is black.” In this concise reply, Franklin articulates the tenure of soul in black culture as well as the tenor of black artists in soul music. But what does the Queen of Soul mean by black? Monique Guillory and Richard C. Green state in their excellent anthology *Soul: Black Power, Politics, and Pleasure* (1998), “we remain unswervingly romantic about the concept of a common black experience,” though
they doubt that there is or ever existed such a thing.\textsuperscript{212} Guillory and Green expand on this point:

\begin{quote}
We cannot even be certain of who or what is meant by the term “black.” Nonetheless, how blacks have come to recognize themselves as a distinct group within the context of America surfaces from an almost ineffable sense of perseverance and vitality in the face of adversity.
\end{quote}

The authors understand black group identity as having emerged from “an almost ineffable sense of perseverance and vitality in the face of adversity,” linking soul to a near incomprehensible notion of tenacity and vital force. Guillory and Green conceptualize soul and blackness as senses, something that one perceives or feels deeply but is intangible. As something that exceeds the bounds of expressible language, soul is a surplus of life that occludes the finitude of concreteness and the delimitation of definition. If we pursue Guillory and Green’s suggestion to conceive of both blackness and soul “senses,” then these entities are not reified as inherent to certain bodies; rather they are conceptualized as products of experience, as is sensation. With this understanding, I register soul to be an affective mode of being—not intrinsically black, but historically situated in the black American experience. Soul is thus connected to blackness, but exceeds the sociological fixity of racial categorization.

Blackness and soul have been intertwined in the U.S. since Anglo-imperial sixteenth century slavery. Slave spirituals were foundational sites for their mutual articulation. Anti-slavery activists as well as pro-slavery proponents deployed the songs sung by slaves as evidence for their respective aims. Activists, including sociologist, scholar, and NAACP co-founder W. E. B. Du Bois, cited slave spirituals
as assertions of black humanity. In his classic work *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Du Bois proclaims “the rhythmic cry of the slave” to be “the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side [of] the seas.”^{213} It is music that articulates life as “joyous” and “happy” yet this music is also that “of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment;” these songs tell of “death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world.”^{214} As Du Bois dubs them, these “Sorrow Songs” express sublime beauty as well as profound agony. They rendered audible the human, black life force of the objectified slave body-as-property. They express hunger, literally for food, but also for the sustenance of a livable life, to borrow from Judith Butler’s lexicon, that the unbelievable reality of slave life (as death) utterly lacked.^{215} Sorrow Songs were expressions of the black subject’s vitality rupturing the object’s dehumanization, a life force piercing this slavery’s objectification with the cry of song that is spirit that is scream that is soul.^{216}

The entangled expressions of life, death, pleasure, and pain in these songs were often misunderstood by white listeners. Slave spirituals were consistently misheard by white ears, caricatured at minstrel shows, or forgotten completely.^{217} Saidiya Hartman speaks to this misinterpretation. She details how proponents of black enslavement claimed that slaves’ proclivity for song “reflect[ed] a disposition for servitude.”^{218} Hartman cites a Georgia man who claimed, “Negroes possessed a sixth sense—a musical sense” because “the Negro has music in his soul.” (Hartman writes that, apparently, this man “fancied himself a physiologist of culture,” throwing some well-deserved, anachronistic shade).^{219} Reflecting prevalent white misconceptions, he described enslaved blacks as “full of fun and frolic,” asserting the
paternalistic proslavery perception that black people had a childlike proclivity to serve and a limited capacity for pain.\textsuperscript{220} These qualities were determined natural for the black person, inherent “in his soul.” The dynamic, multidimensionality of Sorrow Songs was flattened; proslavers cited the music of slaves—misinterpreting them, whether intentionally or ignorantly—as demonstration of a black predisposition to endure and enjoy hard labor. They ostentatiously misrecognized black pain (and the pleasure that can exist alongside pain) as blithe play, deploying this gross misread as proslavery rationale.

Black soul and soul music are thus enmeshed in a context of subjugation. Yet together they also represent a vitialism that marks subjugation as incomplete, never fully accomplished. In an interview on “Soulful Style,” sociologist and author of \textit{The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness} (1995), Paul Gilroy, contends with the complicated linkages between blackness, soul, and a sense of suffering. He postulates that soul reflects “ambivalence about the memory of slavery” and vacillates with how to attend to historical circumstances that have positioned black pain as an ineluctably constitutive element of black life.\textsuperscript{221} Soul is a contentious category given its prominence in black U.S. history—a history of anti-origin shaped by the sail of white slave ships across the “black hole” of the Atlantic and the subsequent sale of black bodies at white slave markets. Yet soul is a particularly powerful concept precisely because it has the capacity to convey “those communicative qualities that exceed the power of language to recapture.”\textsuperscript{222} How do you express life lived as social death? What does it sound like?
Soul’s power, as a political language and sonic, spiritual force, lies in its ability to represent the unrepresentable. Gilroy understands soul as “a sign that the axiology of the market does not work.” Finance capital evaluates worth on the basis of resource accumulation and property ownership—a problematic calculus given capitalism’s predication on labor exploitation, economic inequality, and social stratification. Soul, as an expression of the vitality of black life, exposes capital to be an inapt/inept rubric of value. Soul is an idea, a practice, a sensation that disrupts normative ways of determining worth, expanding the potential for new conceptions of value. Gilroy expands upon this idea:

[For] me, the value of soul and the idea of soul is that they mark that realm which resists the reach of economic rationality and the commodifying process. Soul is a mark of how that precious, wonderful, expressive culture stands outside of commodification, how those cultural processes and the history in which they stand have resisted being reduced to the status of a thing that can be sold.

Soul is important in that it cultivates senses of value—statements of a community’s love and beauty—beyond the reach of capitalist mechanisms. It stands for a “black sublimity” that works in opposition to the fragmenting processes of commodification: the sale and purchase of black bodies. Soul does not does not abolish the institutions of slavery or capitalism but it “at least” diminishes “some of their totalizing power.” It has the capacity to convey a sense of worth that exceeds modes of valuation possible under capitalism. Thinking with Fred Moten and Gilroy, we can conceive soul as a surplus of value that surpasses (or undercuts) the logic of the market. The force of soul demonstrates rational language and capitalist calculus to be an insufficient mean of depicting the realities and meaning of black life.
This understanding of soul elucidates for me why activists and thinkers who work within the broad framework of black studies turn to music, visual art, and science fiction as potent sites for analysis. The rise of Afrofuturism demonstrates that, for peoples whose experience is one of profound cultural dislocation and alienation, creative forms are crucial to articulating and interrogating experiences of neglect, marginalization, and de facto non-existence. Ralph Ellison’s novel *The Invisible Man* (1952), for instance, is saturated with musical metaphors and encounters. Music, the art of sound and sonic emotion, can be elucidated but not contained by the written word. This expressive form is crucial to articulate the experience of being underknown, unknown, and invisible.

**Technologies of Black Sound: Re-skilling, Genre Fusion, and De-essentialism**

Speaking in 1998, Paul Gilroy laments his impression that soul is being lost. He understands soul and funk—as genres, affects, and movements—to be mostly gone, “killed by the technology and de-skilling process instituted by digital technologies.” 227 Gilroy blames digital technologies for what he hears as the degeneration of soul and funk, musical styles that evolved in relation to each other and exist “in a kind of contingent equilibrium.” 228 While I agree with Gilroy’s genre analysis on this front, it is reductive to fault digital music exclusively for this, as he understands it, “de-skilling process.” Advances in digital sound technology, a stimulus that catalyzed hip-hop and rap, must be placed in a larger sociopolitical context. Furthermore, digital sound technology now allows for music producers and DJs (disc jockeys) to be major creative forces in the music making process,
developing composite sonic identities and expanding upon the inventive musical traditions of mid-twentieth century soul artists. The phonic reconfigurations enabled by synthesizing, scratching, looping, and sampling technologies opened up possibilities to refigure racial and social identities and engender emotional intensity in novel ways.

Regan-era budget cuts to school music programs greatly diminished the ability of black youth to receive musical education and access instruments. Given scarce access to music training and equipment, “turntables became instruments and lyrical acrobatics became a cultural outlet” from within a context of crisis.\(^{229}\) The 1980s neo-liberal restructuring of U.S. capitalism (including industrial privatization, economic deregulation, and cuts to social services) increased levels of poverty and unemployment, disproportionately affecting low-income communities of color.\(^{230}\) These and many other factors—including racialized police brutality, Reagan’s contrived and massive war on drugs, and enduring discrepancies between black and white public education—exacerbated already oppressive circumstances for black Americans, creating the conditions for a cultural and political outcry in response. Black urban communities innovated with digital sound technology, sampling and reworking funk, soul, and jazz records of the previous decades to produce a new form of music and a new form of politics through music. The “cost-efficient production and performance of rap,” dubbing lyrics over a sampled beat, allowed for rap and hip-hop’s proliferation in urban communities denied access to conventional instrumentation.\(^{231}\)
While Gilroy argues that digital music technology precipitated a “de-skilling process” and the decline of soul and funk, it is more accurate to consider the emergence of digital sampling and synthesizing techniques as a process of “re-skilling” whereby members of impoverished communities who were deprived access to more traditional forms innovated a new style of music. Furthermore, hip-hop sampling drew extensively from funk and soul. James Brown (“Soul Brother No. 1”) and George Clinton (“Godfather of Funk”) with Parliament-Funkadelic are the two most sampled artists of all time, providing the baselines, hooks, and rhythms for myriad foundational hip-hop artists.232

Yet a ghost of Gilroy’s concerns remains. Have the technological advances that enabled sampling, mixing, and complex percussive interplay engendered an overreliance on digitally produced sound? Has instrumental musicianship declined and, with it, certain critical elements of soul and funk? Gilroy understands souls’ power as being its ability to represent that which exceeds the logics of capital—“black sublimity.” Therefore, what might be the potential of digitized sonic mediation for disorienting normative logics and asserting the vitality of black life?

The digital manipulation of sound allows for the re-articulation of the relationship between expression and embodiment, between voice and body. To be black, as critical race and music scholar Alexander Weheliye notes, is not simply to have a body, but to be “the body and nothing else.”233 This modern conception essentializes blackness as physical embodiment in opposition to whiteness as physiological disembodiment. Enlightenment discourse, Cartesian mind-body dualism in particular, promoted the notion that the mind (a “thinking thing”) and the
body (a “non-thinking thing”) are distinct entities. This dichotomous articulation of blackness as the body and whiteness as the mind, committed the epistemological violence of constructing black people as intellectually inferior to and more physically suited for labor than white people.

The phonograph made it possible to splice voice from singer, to disarticulate black expression from the black body. The ability to record and play black music without presence of a live musician provided the opportunity to re-produce black subjectivities outside of logics of rational language—to re-present blackness in the sonic sphere removed from linguistic limitation. Both Weheliye and Eshun argue that technologies that splice voice from body disembodied blackness in a manner that refutes notions of an obligatory black condition and provide the mechanics to reconfigure a variety of social identities.

Innovative sonic recalibrations and fusions upset presuppositions of the look and sound of blackness. Digital sound technology, including “effects, studio technology, sampling, scratching, drum computers and synthesizers,” has the potential to enable musical mutations, aural assemblages, and sonic stimulations that rupture representational presumptions. Weheliye argues that the musical practices of black popular artists “frequently defy […] authenticating mechanisms by embracing new technologies, hybridity, and self-consciousness about the performative aspects of soul.” These technologies provide the disorientation equipment necessary to break essentialist beliefs that conflate particular identities with certain sonic categories.

Soul, for me, loses some of its vital potential when it is marked essentially black because, when blackness is already given, already integral to soul, it does not
have full capacity for transformation. The authentication of soul in black music occasions an over-determination of genre (re: black musician = soul music) that focuses on the skin of the musician over the substance of their music. If black music is fixed as always already soulful, black musicianship is reductively homogenized. As critical race and music scholar Alexander Weheliye asserts, “numerous cultural discourses have done their best to authenticate and naturalize the soul of black popular music.”238 For music genre to precede musicianship limits artist agency to embrace soul, disgrace soul, re-make soul. This conflation begets a semantic and sonic flattening that obfuscates the foundational role of black musicianship across genres, including rhythm and blues (R&B), jazz, gospel, rock and roll, funk, disco, Detroit techno, punk, hip-hop, rap, and drum ‘n’ bass.239

Afrofuturist musicians have long been invested in creating the unheard. However, as Weheliye argues, accounts of the post-human and of technological advancement often exclude the innovative sound technologies of black music. This neglect inscribes the posthuman as white, masculine and disembodied rather than combatting a “digital divide” that would render people of color primitive. Duke Ellington’s orchestral arrangements and solo improvisations, Jimi Hendrix’s psychedelic guitar riffing, Sun Ra’s jazz incorporation of the electronic keyboard, Erykah Badu’s blend of New Age sounds with soul and hip-hop, for instance, are advancements that broke norms of music production and unsettled notions of genre authenticity. Interventions such as these have enabled new ways to make music, transforming the artistic and listening experience.
George Clinton, although a self-declare “Pure Funk” musician, engaged with the sonic and political potentials of genre fusion. In his electro-rock-funk jam “Who Says A Funk Band Can’t Play Rock?!”, his band Funkadelic responds to the title’s query, “Okay, we’re gonna play some funk so loud / We’re gonna rock and roll the crowd / Just watch them dance.” Funkadelic lays down a heavy guitar riff and foregrounds the snare drum over a deep funk baseline, making clear they can play not only funk and rock but also dance music with ease while they “relax and wear a big grin.” One of George Clinton’s most popular songs, this track designates genre fusion in both its lyrics and music, resisting the delineation of clear musical boundaries. This melding of rock and funk also resists authentications of funk as essentially “black” and rock as essentially “white.” Genre blending is a sonic mechanism in the Afrofuturist toolkit to de-essentialize not only musical parameters but also identity formations. The sonic fusion of Afrofuturist artists maintain race as “unmoored from inherent boundaries” in order to denaturalize blackness from an “inherited position of abjection toward a greater expression of agency,” to borrow Beth Coleman’s language from “Race as Technology” (2009).

Musical genre-fusion galvanizes the images and narrative of Monáe’s sonic fiction. Monáe blends and transitions between phonic forms. Her performance within, among, and betwixt them is nimble and convincing, moving from the psychedelic-rock jive of “Come Alive (War of Roses);” to the grand, classical movie score of “Suite Overture II;” to the synth-heavy, funk anthem “Q.U.E.E.N” with neo-soulstress Erykah Badu; to the folk-opera harmony of “57821” with Afropunk, Wondaland production duo Deep Cotton; to the electro-punk melodrama of “Violet
starts, Happy Hunting!”; to the R&B croon of “PrimeTime” with Miguel; to the sultry jazz of “Dorothy Dandridge Eyes” alongside Esperanza Spalding, to the folksy love song “Oh, Maker;” to the funky, classy-brass of “Tightrope” featuring Outkast rapper Big Boi; to the ukulele pop jam “Dance Apocalyptic.” Monáe’s music is difficult to classify without extensive hyphenation: to dub the track “BaBopBye Ya” a jazzy electro-soul-folk-opera-spoken word-classical piano ballet feels excessive, but is nonetheless accurate. Monáe’s self-designation as a “cybersoul” artist marks her music as oriented toward the rich legacy of the musical past as well as toward the future music of the yet to be heard. Her genre and temporal blending serve to disrupting the of historical events, such as slavery, as essentially in the past.

**Wondaland: Composite Identity, Collective Labor**

Monáe develops her stylistically abundant soundtrack with her collective, the Wondaland Art Society (W.A.S. or Wondaland), and together they create a highly produced, visually evocative sound. W.A.S. dubs Monáe’s albums “emotion pictures,” identifying the music’s affective and visual resonances. The use of digital sound technologies brings more players to the creative process. As Weheliye astutely observes,

> While singers remain central to the creation of black music, they do so in conjunction with the overall sonic architecture, especially in the turn away from the lead singer as the exclusive artist to a more producer-driven and collaborative musical production.²⁴²

The descriptors of “producer-driven” and “collaborative” are well suited to Monáe’s body of work. Monáe has remained consistent in her production team since she joined up with Nate “Rocket” Wonder (Nathaniel Irvin III) and Chuck Lightning
Wonder and Lightening, the two halves of the future-funk band Deep Cotton, co-founded Wondaland along with Monáe shortly after meeting her, and the trio has co-produced every Monáe record since 2007. The collective has grown exponentially since then.

This collaborative oasis of sorts is reminiscent of Sun Ra’s ever-revolving “MythScience Arkestra” ensemble. Ra insisted the Arkestra cohabitate to immerse themselves in the music and embrace the MythScience ideology. George Clinton’s Parliament-Funkadelic entourage, which at any given point might have contained fifty members and change, also assumed a grand, collaborative production and performance style. Contemporary jazz pianist and record producer Robert Glasper, like Clinton, performs as a solo artist as well as with his two bands: Robert Glasper Trio and Robert Glasper Experiment. On his most recent albums, Black Radio (2013) and Black Radio 2 (2015), Glasper collaborates with at least one other artist on all but two out of twenty-six tracks. There exists a rich tradition of genre-innovating black artists who treat music making as collective project.243

Monáe and Wondaland create a highly produced, technologically mediated sound. Daylanne K. English and Alvin Kim (2013) discuss Monáe’s “cybersoul” as a form of future funk in contrast to George Clinton’s 1970s “pure funk.” They understand her “steady deployment of multimedia and contemporary studio effects (including autotune and synthesized instruments)” as “creating an extensively packaged and sometimes wholly processed musical product,” flouting generic labels in favor of a blended, technological audio-visual output.244 Her product emphasizes digital manipulation, situating Monáe in a tradition of black popular music that, as
Weheliye writes, “[makes its] own virtuality central to the musical texts,” thereby emphasizing the virtuality of all forms of recorded music. There is no presumption of sonic authenticity, neither an effort to conceal mediation nor to disembody production, aggregating performer and producer. This calculated co-operation creates a “composite identity, a machine suspended between performer and producer that sounds the smooth flow between humans and machines.” Digital production technology serves as a mediator among creative parties, cultivating interpersonal sonic relations. In this manner, information technology does not distance us from our emotions, but rather functions as a magnet, bringing people closer together in the service of a joint effort.

Artists who develop a “composite identity” emphasize the fluidity among bodies and labor—creative or otherwise—highlighting the ways in which singular works, such as that of a song, are actually collaborative undertakings. Weheliye understands sonic performances of black humanity as “singularities…that always incorporate their own multiplicities,” contrasting Enlightenment fantasy of the liberal human subject’s individual, autonomous thought production. This understanding likewise recalls Muñoz’s conception of a “sense of brownness” in which singularities possess a virtual counterpart through which actual multiplicities can be shared. This sharing of life, of a force of brownness or blackness, recognizes fostering community and reorienting power to the communal as crucial to engendering progressive political change.

Wondaland is both an actual collective, a record label located in Atlanta, Georgia, and an imaginary utopia in Monáe’s sonic fiction, a place “where dreamers
meet each other.” The music-making process and the music itself implement, as Patricia Hill Collins articulates, a black feminist reconceptualization of power to emphasize energy and community, suggesting the “power as energy can be fostered through creative acts of resistance.” Monáe’s Wondaland, both actual and virtual, represents a black feminist collective of creative workers invested in fostering communitarian energy to confront oppressive social institutions and nurture an oasis beyond their hegemonic, racist forces.

Monáe and Wondaland utilize a wide range of digital music technologies to create her cybersoul sound, including sampling, scratching, back-looping and voice modulation. These music technologies, particularly Monáe’s frequent voice modulation (using a vocoder, synthesizers, and autotune), function to reinforce her posthuman, android identity and renegotiate notions of social identity. I will focus specifically on Monáe’s use of voice modulation in “Mushrooms and Roses” to demonstrate how these digital sound technologies enable Monáe to redirect temporality, mystify gender, and manipulate perceptions of age.

“Mushrooms and Roses”: Psychedelic Pleasure, Synthesized Gender, Ambiguous Age

On the psychedelic track “Mushrooms and Roses,” Monáe meanders through a sonic haze of subliminal recollection. A bittersweet string ensemble, reminiscent of Prince’s melancholic guitar and orchestral arrangement of the 1984 classic “Purple Rain,” welcomes the listener to this paradisiacal “place to be.” It is located in, or rather outside, Metropolis, “where all the lonely droids and lovers have their wildest dreams.” The track’s hazy soundscape also recalls the Beatles’ 1967 psychedelic-
rock trip “Strawberry Fields Forever,” which incorporates reverse-recorded instrumentation and tape loops. Monáe sings through a vocoder and with a reverberation effect, making her voice near unrecognizable as her own. Monáe’s typically feminine tone is rendered husky, mystifying her phonic gender. The synth and reverb effects further imbue the singer’s voice with a roughness that engenders an aged quality. Her gravelly tone suggests wisdom of experience to be contained in her words of remembrance. The voice-synthesizing technologies function to aurally transform aspects of Monáe’s social identity and circumstance—in this case, notions of gender, age, and time.

These transformations are important in the context of “Mushrooms and Roses,” the title and content of which alludes to passionate sex, uninhibited love, psychotropic drugs, nirvana, and transcendence. The singer’s technofied, husky vocals leisurely ride the nostalgic melody as they reminisce upon their time in the land of Mushrooms and Roses. After the first psychedelic, guitar-driven chorus, the vocal synthesizing effects are gradually tuned down for the second verse, as she attempts to remember “one of the regulars” to this ecstatic land. The singer slowly recalls the regular’s “long, grey hair” and “rosy cheeks.” This minimized synthesized usage returns a youthful, feminine tonality to Monáe’s voice, perhaps representing a younger self from an earlier time spent with the grey-haired regular. Through an attunement to listener notions of age’s attendant phonic qualities, the fluctuating degrees of vocoding and reverb effects thus enable temporal shifts between the singing subject’s present moment and a moment foregone. These are the same technologies that, in songs such as “The Chase,” “Cybertronic Purgatory,” “Violet
Stars, Happy Hunting!”, “March of the Wolfmasters,” and “Dance Apocalyptic,” enable temporal recalibrations and alien refigurations of the Afro-diaspora.

As the vocoder and reverb effects are restored in full, Monáe recalls “the regular” to have been “Blueberry Mary.” The term “regular” in this song’s context of ecstatic pleasure implicates Blueberry Mary to be in the subject position of a patron or “buyer,” and the singer’s subject position to be that of a “seller” of some form of pleasure (drugs/sex/love/music). Yet there is a tenderness in this transaction. The singer ruminates on these encounters,

Blueberry Mary, and she's crazy about me  
(Shes so crazy about me)  
She's wild, man, she's wild!  
She gives the boys all of her kisses and electricity  
(Til I come, til I come in her dreams)

The digitized ambiguity of the singer’s voice makes it unclear whether it is a female or male subject who proclaims dreamingly, “she’s crazy about me.” Though Blueberry Mary “gives the boys all of her kisses,” her relation to the singer is queried: we do not know whether the singer is sonically embodying a female android, male android, or an androgynous, gender-queer android. What does it mean for an android to have a gender? Is an android’s gender social constructed or programmatically hardwired? What does love, or lovemaking, look like between androids of any gender? These inquiries, phonically posed by the track, playfully invite listeners to revisit their own suppositions of gender, sex, and love.

Blueberry Mary is characterized as a “wild” android with a “beautiful smile” and “long, grey hair.” For a beautiful, sexually promiscuous female android to be described as having grey hair appears incongruous. Is grey hair an android specific
feature or a sign that this android is elderly? Are there elderly androids in Metropolis? What does age mean to a hybrid human-machine? Similar to the symbolic function of the singer’s enigmatically gendered voice, the atypical touting of grey hair as an attractive quality engenders a feminist, anti-ageist rethinking of normative beauty standards. The questions evoked by Monáe’s sonic fiction narrative and digital sound effects invite interrogation into norms of gender authenticity, sexual expectation, interpersonal relationships, and traditional conceptions of pleasure. The aesthetic of ambiguity and temporal shifts are not meant to establish clarity, but rather to revealing what is always already there—confusion and complexity.

**Cold War: Craze in Common**

Popular music audiences tend to engage with music on both a sonic and visual level. In the aforementioned interview, Paul Gilroy describes youth music listeners as “screenies,” folks who not only listen to music but also watch their favorite artists in music videos. With the advent and widespread distribution of affordable compact listening devices and portable headphones, the listening experience has also become increasingly private. The visualization and privatization of the music listening experience have been enabled by cybernetics (re: television/MTV, Internet/YouTube, advances in sound technology) and the financialization of capital (re: digital music production and distribution). Gilroy’s statement is arguably even more true today than it was at the turn of the century given the only increasing prevalence of digital and virtual technologies in our everyday realities.
Monáe’s music video for “Cold War” begins with Monáe preparing for her onscreen performance, about seven seconds before the official title sequence. This glimpse strategically grants the viewer/listener access to the artist in an ephemeral, preparatory moment. Monáe speaks to someone off frame, presumably a member of the production crew, as she smiles and shrugs off her black robe. There is no audio but reading her lips we can decipher the twice-repeated phrase, “I’m ready, it’s fine,” which she insists playfully yet firmly. Her irresolute disposition and repetition implies ambivalence, as though Monáe might be hesitant or nervous to proceed. Though because the music video necessarily displays a performance, it is impossible for the viewer to tell definitively whether this tentativeness is candid, calculated, or somewhere in between.

This initial sequence highlights the form of the video itself as manufactured. By “breaking the fourth wall” and showing the moment preceding the shoot, the video heightens the viewer’s awareness that the musician is also an actor portraying a particular form of subjectivity. This performed self-reflexiveness demonstrates a desire to mutually understand the video as an art object always already devoid of the possibility of authentic representation. This revelation, this “break,” is a metafiction technique that troubles the distinction between reality and fiction—the performer and the performance—by deliberately demonstrating the staged nature of Monáe’s imminent portrait of affective vulnerability.

However, other aspects of the staging call upon the viewer to read the music video as emotionally sincere. The screen cuts to black [0:07] to display: “Janelle Monáe, Cold War, Take 1,” gesturing a transition to the “official” video. This
framing signifies this particular reel of footage as temporally significant; it is not only a single, uninterrupted take, but also the first take. The title arrangement invites the viewer to read the video as unmediated and Monáe’s performance as unpracticed. These metafiction techniques ask the audience to perceive the video and Monáe’s emotional response as “real” rather than contrived. Yet by accentuating the manufactured nature of the music video—for instance, displaying a rolling time stamp in the bottom right corner entirety of the clip—the inability to represent an unmediated reality is equally emphasized. The pilot sequent of “Cold War” foregrounds the inevitable inability to distinguish “authenticity” from performance. The project of disentangling the actual from artifice is always already frustrated.

Zoomed in tightly, the camera frame crops Monáe’s face from her forehead to just below her chin. Monáe’s resolute gaze, emboldened by black eyeliner and thickly mascaraed lashes, becomes the viewer’s focal point, their intensity and flickering movements magnified against the stark black background. Her hair is pulled up into a pompadour out of frame such that Monáe’s head almost appears to be floating, as though disembodied. This bare aesthetic contrasts the highly produced, elaborate styling of the vast majority of popular music videos. Popular videos tend to involve multiple costume changes, casts of lively characters, vibrant color palates, and unremitting cuts between various locations and scenes of entertainment. “Cold War’s” sustained close-up of Monáe proffers her expression as the exclusive site of interest in the video. At its most basic level, the video portrays Monáe’s lip-synch performance of the song and her emotional intensity unfolding as response to her own lyrics and music. The video structures a temporally finite instance in which the
viewer engages directly with the artist’s affective elicitation, cultivating an ephemeral virtual emotional intimacy bounded by the length of the track.

A mellotron (electro-mechanical keyboard) plays a methodically ascending and descending chord progression to introduce the song and first verse:

So you think I'm alone?
But being alone's the only way to be
When you step outside
You spend life fighting for your sanity

Monáe begins with a question, asking, “So you think I’m alone?” As she intones “alone” a snare drum strikes and a bomb effect explosively initiates the track’s heavy drum ‘n’ bass rhythm. Monáe inflects on the words “way,” “outside,” “fighting,” and “sanity,” registering audible an emotional ache, the pain of isolation (“being alone”). This is the ache of self-imposed solitude or emotional closure as survival strategy (“the only way to be”) to evade the fight for sanity inflicted by the world (“when you step outside”). The frenetic rhythm arouses a sense of urgency, sonically signifying the high stakes of finding ways to cope. The track continues with the chorus:

This is a cold war
You better know what you're fighting for
This is a cold war
Do you know what you're fighting for?

In the video, Monáe’s disposition is composed for these opening quatrains. She retains trained focus on the camera; her only movements are calculated head turns, slight eyebrow raises, and subtle glances. The deliberateness of each small motion emphasizes Monáe’s consistency of performance in this early portion of the video, in contrast to the later half.
The song title and chorus recall a protracted period of political and military
tension between the U.S. and the Soviet Union post-World War II. During the Cold
War, these countries each amassed sufficient nuclear weaponry to ensure a doctrine
of “mutually assured destruction” (M.A.D.). This accumulation of arms provided
a nuclear deterrent, given each country’s capacity to utterly obliterate the other.
Concerned about the threat of espionage, the U.S. proliferated nationalist propaganda
in attempts to bolster the appearance of a unified national front against the U.S.S.R.
The Truman and Eisenhower administrations promoted the white, heteronormative
nuclear family as a site of U.S. patriotism, marking those outside this social formation
as enemy “other.” Psychological warfare characterized this era, a time of widespread
paranoia over a seemingly impending apocalyptic world war between two nuclear
superpowers. Monáe transposes this historical sense of psychological turmoil,
outsider status, and looming danger to her personal and fictional “Cold War”
narratives.

Before delving into a deeper analysis of Monáe’s song and video, let’s pause
to consider the sonic elements of track that induce an affective intensity. It is my
assertion that the “Cold War” music video cultivates a virtual emotional intimacy. As
such, it is crucial to consider the phonic qualities that engender a heightened
emotional response. In their research study of psychophysiological experiences in
music, Luke Harrison and Psyche Loui (2014) deploy an integrative model to
“unpack the ontological root of musical emotion,” analyzing “that moment when
music resonates so deeply and viscerally as to elicit a physical, bodily response.”
They utilize the concept of “frisson” as a measure of sonically induced emotion.
because it incorporates affective intensity with “verifiable tactile sensations not localized to any one region of the body,” providing a holistic analytic.\textsuperscript{262} Harrison and Loui employ four interrelated mechanisms in their research, integrating social, autobiographical, psychophysiological, and psychological factors that have been shown to elicit frisson: (1) brainstem reflexes, (2) evaluative conditioning, (3) emotional contagion, and (4) musical expectancy.

Researchers principally measure brain reflexes by arousal of the autonomic nervous system (ANS) and have found that ANS activation tends “to spike at the onset of loud, very high or low frequency, or rapidly changing sounds.”\textsuperscript{263} All of these elements, consistently associated with the pillars of ANS, increased heart rate and respiratory depth, correspond to the onset of frission and are present in “Cold War.” As previously mentioned, the track begins with the gradual ascending and descending notes of a mellotron before launching, with a bomb effect [:11], into a high frequency drum ‘n’ bass rhythm. Undulating degrees of amplification and rhythmic fluctuations persist at irregular intervals throughout the song [:11, :47, :59, 1:12, 1:24, 2:00, 2:24, 2:35, 2:52, 3:11], at times abruptly altering the volume and frequency from low to high [ex. :11] and at other intervals transitioning more gradually [ex. 3:11]. The track’s seventeen instruments give the music a polyphonic texture, in which numerous musical lines are played simultaneously.\textsuperscript{264} This rich instrumental orchestration conjoins with Monáe’s melisma (a vocal quality typical of soul music in which the artist sings a single syllable of text while moving between different notes in succession) to produce the rapidly changing sounds that, like the
onset of loud volume and high frequency, are consistently correlated with frisson—an amplification of the listener’s emotional intensity.

The second mechanism that has been shown to elicit frisson is evaluative conditioning, which involves “the learning of paired associations between music (conditioned stimulus), and the physical sensations of frission (unconditioned stimulus).” Autobiographical associations with music are one of the chief means by which frission stimuli can be induced. While Monáe’s live sets generally transition relatively seamlessly from one song to the next with scant spoken interlude, she consistently introduces performances of “Cold War” with a locally specific, yet broad address of the audience. For instance, before performing the song at the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize concert, honoring three women’s rights and peace activists—Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (Liberia), Leymah Gbowee (Liberia) and Tawakkol Karman (Yemen)—Monáe stated that she did not always feel empowered “as a young African-American woman” and wrote “Cold War” with the hope that all women and girls “can find their power.” At a New York City show I attended in March of 2015, Monáe spoke of having written the song from her own experience for other black women, for gays and lesbians, for those who have been marginalized on the basis of race, and declared 2015 “Year of the Woman.” She also critiqued police brutality, declaring, “this cannot go on” in a city recently rocked by a grand jury decision to not indict the policeman filmed choking an unresisting Eric Garner to death despite Garner’s staggering eleven repetitions of “I Can’t Breathe.” Monáe introduces “Cold War” by addressing people she imagines can connect to its affect and message. She invited her audiences to associate their relevant autobiographical,
local experiences of oppression with “Cold War,” conditioning the music to be a stimulus for emotional intensity. While these explicit references are not present in the music video, Monáe’s tentativeness as she disrobes prior to Take 1 suggests vulnerability, a prior experience of hurt. She insists “it’s fine,” providing a vacuous, terse response that tends to indicate that the speaker is anything but “fine.”

In an interview with hip-hop and R&B magazine Rap-UP, Monáe discusses the less-than-fine origins of “Cold War.” She explains, “‘Cold War’ reveals what the ArchAndroid looks like...[The video] deals with a psychosis—you’re in my mind and you get a chance to understand Metropolis, where it all stemmed [from] and my thoughts.” Monáe’s various introductions of “Cold War,” be the performance live, televised, or video recorded, suggest that the song captures both her own alienating lived experience—growing up a black woman in a sexist and racist society—and the inceptive inspiration for her alien future fiction—imagining android subjugation in the dystopia of Metropolis. Reality and fiction rub against each other once again in Monáe’s art. Their friction co-articulates the misogynoir (misogynistic anti-blackness) of the present with the dystopic, alien subjugation in the future. As discussed in chapter two, this co-constitution of biography and mythography operates to intertwine the black female body and the alien body. Distinguishing between the two is complicated in Monáe’s sonic fiction in a manner that demonstrates the (un)reality of how anti-black racism and misogyny entangle to perpetrate specific forms of physical and epistemological violence against black women.

This performance of alienation, both human and android, reflects the third mechanism of frisson: emotional contagion. Emotional contagion refers to the
emotion expressed in the music and a person’s ability to empathetically mirror that emotion. Monáe states that the video demonstrates “a psychosis,” a condition the OED defines as “severe mental illness, characterized by loss of contact with reality (in the form of delusions and hallucinations).” While this sense of madness is articulated as an internal experience of life spent “fighting for your sanity,” the cause of insanity is externalized to the world “when you step outside.” The source of Monáe’s enacted psychosis, as she terms it, is removed from the body, placing culpability for this psychological condition on a society lethal to black women and others imagined as alien. The viewer who identifies with Monáe's affect of insanity, the alien(ated) viewer, can allow themselves to feel insane with Monáe, to acknowledge their own feelings of aloneness, of spending life “running from depravity.” Monáe provided a virtual, psychological space to recognize the reality of that inner pain and recognize that pain as caused by the Cold War outside. While the term psychosis implies pathology, the song’s focus on the external denigrating sources—the “evil” that “flies through the world”—allows the viewer to identify with the sensation of insanity detached from the presumption that there is something inherently wrong or “off” with them. The external world, typically understood as the “natural” state of affairs, is criminalized as insane, rather than the individual whose internal experience is one of insanity.

Insanity is thus rendered a rational response to the insanity of an America that treats black, brown, and queer life as invisible, disposable, or predisposed to death. Expressing the internal experience of madness while condemning the madness of the external world might open up identificatory possibilities for cultivating a sense of
relationality. By virtually sharing these affects, Monáe cultivates a sense of craze in common that demonstrates you are not the only one. Monáe’s direct address of “you”—implicated as plural through the use of “we” in the third verse—indicates a desire to communicate with other aliens. Her intimate portrait of pain in conjunction with the repeated second person address and urgent sonic propulsion nurture a virtual emotional intimacy. As utopian queer theorist José Muñoz eloquently articulates in his writing on the virtual components of Ana Mendieta’s embodied art practice, “there is something in and about the work that is not so much a demand to identify, but instead the sharing out of the sense of brownness in and of the world.” Monáe’s virtual “Cold War” enacts an ephemeral, cyber-psychosocial space through a visual and phonic sharing that is at once agonizing and sublime. The video fosters a sense of relationality that ruptures the isolation Monáe conjures in the opening lyric (“So you think I’m alone?”), if only for a few minutes.

Monáe subverts common sense logic that privileges rationality—being of a sound mind, being reasonable, making sense—through the embrace of psychosis as a mode of being. This reconstruction of rationality serves to subvert the sexist logic of emotional outburst or hysteria as irrational “women illnesses.” By performatively claiming the insanity as her reality, Monáe both critiques the toxicity of this world and contends the urgent need for something else.270 She condemns a world in which breaking from reality, getting away from the here and now, is a critical mechanism for survival. If the outside world is insane, predicated on the displacement, degradation, and exploitation of black bodies, then Sun Ra’s demand that black people teleport to outerspace appears only practical. Delving into the potential of the
myth—distancing oneself from reality, as psychosis implies—may be the sensible move, then, for those for whom reality is nonsensical and violent. Afrofuturist art, as Eshun elucidates, understands alienation to be “a psychosocial inevitability,” a condition that the artwork “uses to its own advantage by creating contexts that encourage a process of disalienation” (my emphasis). 271 The recognition that one is not alone in feeling alone, can have a disalienating effect, diminishing one’s sentiment of alienation. Monáe’s singular performance of struggle and survival opens up identificatory possibilities for plural “others.” She cultivates an alien assemblage, a form of what Muñoz describes beautifully as a “brown sense of the world in which singularities flow into a politically enabling common.” 272

Monáe’s “Cold War” video represents a virtual modality of a singularity manifesting multiplicity. This video, viewed online, demonstrates the particular power of the virtual to share actual impressions of life, particularly life lived in close proximity to death. In his poetic, evocative piece “Vitalism’s after-burn: The sense of Ana Mendieta” (2011), Muñoz explicates the siluetas of Cuban-American performance artist Ana Mendieta. Mendieta created what she termed “earth-body” sculptures using natural materials, including twigs, mud, grass, and flowers, blood, and her own body to imprint siluetas into the outdoor landscape. Mendieta’s art practice explored relationships between life, death, gender, violence, race, identity, and place through embodied representation. Muñoz explains Mendieta’s work to be “saturated with an intense vitalism, a concentrated interest in life itself,” as deeply invested in sharing a precarious, affective sense of brownness through her image repertoire. 273 He understands Mendieta’s siluetas as signifying a vital force that
builds “a cosmology that responds cogently to precarious histories of singular and multiple dispossession,” a constellation of moving, flickering lights that in relation to one another form an impression of commonality while retaining a sense of difference.\textsuperscript{274}

The vital force animating Monáe’s “Cold War” comes through most strongly in the latter half of the video, starting with the fourth verse:

\begin{verbatim}
I’m trying to find my peace
I was made to believe there’s something wrong with me
And it hurts my heart
Lord have mercy, ain’t it plain to see?
\end{verbatim}

Monáe breaks character on the lyric “I was made to believe there’s something wrong with me” [1:37]. Breaking eye contact with the camera, she laughs nervously and exclaims, “I’m starting to cry.” After trying to proceed in time with the music, she breaks down as her emotion mounts on the phrase “Lord have mercy.” Tears cling to her lashes as her head bows in an out of frame. Succeeding on her second attempt to regain composure, Monáe earnestly fans her eyes in attempt to dry the tears and shakes her body as though to shake off the affective interruption and soon resumes performance in time. The veins bulging in her temples, tears in her eyes, furrow of her brow, and quiver of her lips [1:52-2:08] visualize Monáe’s own increased emotional intensity.

Monáe belts an elongated, “Kellindoooo!”, hailing W.A.S. lead guitarist Kellindo Parker into the sonic fold. Her interpellation of Kellindo—a highly relevant concept in musical interplay—brings to mind when James’ Brown would invoke his musicians, especially Maceo Parker, during performances.\textsuperscript{275} In funk and musics derived from such, solos never truly dominate the space of the music because they are
reliant on interplay and coordination with the other components of the soundscape. In this case, “solo” is somewhat of a misnomer and “anti-solo” might be a more suitable descriptor.

In the vein of Brown, Monáe explicitly introduces Kellindo two-thirds of the way through the track, the typical time juncture for an instrumental solo, yet his complex, guttural guitar playing is never granted center stage. There is a refusal to let the guitar dominate the sonic space; it is in the mix rather than layered on top. The track enacts an egalitarian layering of sound. The guitar fills the sonic spaces with many rapid sequences, a high density of playing. Rhythmically, it reinforces the drum patterns by “landing” on the relevant phrases of the beats and as such urgent drum 'n' base rhythm remains prominent. During this section of the song, the background vocals, sung by Monáe and Wonder, take the foreground, asserting over the baseline and Kellindo’s wailing riffs, “there’s nothing wrong with me.” The guitar fills the middle ground between the background vocals and the high bells and low bass.

The space of the solo, typically governed by the reverberations of the phallic, masculine axe, is subverted; it is transformed into a forum of instrumentation, in which the background vocals are accorded an aural platform they are normally denied. The atypical arrangement of this anti-solo provides the fourth mechanism of frisson: musical expectancy. This mechanism refers to the “emotions elicited when one’s explicit or implicit expectations are violated.”276 Violations to harmonic, rhythmic and/or melodic expectations have consistently been shown to induce frisson and may, in fact, be a necessary prerequisite.277
This amplification of background vocals is particularly significant given the fundamental role of black female musicians, including Merry Clayton, Lisa Fischer, Darlene Love, Claudia Lennear, and Táta Vega, throughout popular music. Black female background singers have provided the unforgettable hooks and a sense of depth and soul to the albums and tours of musicians—most often white, most often male—such as the Rolling Stones, Lynyrd Skynyrd, Bruce Springsteen, Taking Heads, George Harrison, Joe Cocker, David Bowie, and Sting. The job of background singers is, simply, to make the lead artist sound brilliant and take little to no credit. “Cold War”’s deliberate foregrounding of the background vocals subverts this occlusion. This foregrounding in the context of a “solo,” in the context of song about having been “made to believe there’s something wrong with [oneself]” provides a crucial intervention in the discounted, yet vital role of black women in the history of music-making.

The music production of “Cold War” executes an egalitarian layering of sound with Monáe’s own vocals deeply embedded in the track, cultivating a composite sonic identity. This anti-solo constitutes what Moten would dub a “break.” Here, we are confronted not so much by what is inside the break, but rather by the knowledge that it is framed by some convention, that it is breaking from normative composition. In this case, the guitar serving as an intermediary between the song’s high and low frequencies and framed by Monáe’s background choruses might be read as Monáe’s co-optation of masculine, exhibitionist forces and deployment of a communitarian sonic composition. This is, I would argue, is what black feminism sounds like.
This anti-solo then opens up into melodic intonations from Monáe. She modulates her tone, changing keys with control and finesse. She riffs, “Do you know it’s a cold, cold war? Do you? Do you?” as a single tear streams down her cheek. After a pause, the drum ‘n’ base rhythm resumes with an aggravated propulsion as the background vocals, keyboard, and guitar reenter with augmented force. The music crescendos as Monáe’s riffs turn to runs turn to cries of pain, a Sorrow Song at once beautiful and devastating. Monáe’s song cries a radical response and rejection of a present lethal to black Americans, to women of color, to lesbians, to poor queers. Monáe sounds an anguish rendered by a society structured on this subjugation while also animating a vital force that insists this subjugation is never total. It is this force that poet-theorist Fred Moten, working at the intersection of black and sound studies, designates,

what’s at stake in the music: the universalization or socialization of the surplus, the generative force of a venerable phonic propulsion, the
ontological and historical priority of resistance to power and objection to subjection, the old-new thing, the freedom drive that animates black performance. It is this surplus, this “venerable phonic propulsion,” that has been articulated under the rubric of soul as that which exceeds expressions of value possible under the hegemony of capitalism. While pain is evident in Monáe’s performance, there remains the impossibility of authentic representation of the pain of the world. The “Cold War” visual reflects the inexpressibility of psychosocial anguish when, during Monáe’s belabored cry [2:46-2:52], the camera unfocuses, rendering Monáe’s expression incomprehensible during the peak of the cry. This obfuscation enacts the “critique of the valuation of meaning over content,” that Moten reads in the scream of Fredrick Douglass’ Aunt Hester. As Moten hears an echo of Aunt Hester’s scream of resistance in Abbey Lincoln, Max Roach, and Oscar Drown Jr.’s “Protest,” I too hear an echo of this phonic resistance and rejection of a brutal present in Monáe’s cry. Their critiques are embedded in a phonic matter that is irreducible to verbal meaning. It is the vital excess of black performance, the surplus of cybersoul.

Identification with this “shriek turns speech turns song,” the experience of craze in common, of virtual emotional intimacy, is only possible with prior injury. You do not get to feel the intimacy without the wound. Monáe simultaneously shares her alien cry, while showing the impossibility of authentically representing what that cry “truly” feels like. Here, language, both written and sonic, encounters the limit of the impossible expression of
the pain of what Judith Butler dub an “unlivable life,” what Giorgio Agamben articulates as “bare life,” what Lauren Berlant describes as “dead citizenship,” what Orlando Patterson explicates as “social death.” When we reach the limits of language, we must turn to affect. It is the content of affect, the phonic matter of the cry that supplies a rigorous critique of normative modes of valuation, of universal notions of the Human. The cry is the critique. It is up to us to open our ears and listen.

“Dance Apocalyptic”: Funking and Freaking Out

“Cold War” fosters virtual emotional intimacy and sense of craze in common. The track “Dance Apocalyptic” advocates a similar communitarian affect of insanity: a collective investment in the “freak out.” The lyrical content of these tracks is analogous. Both songs evoke affects of madness, conjure images of a dystopic world, and ask the listener to reject the dystopic and reach for something more. In a similar vein to “Cold War,” the song “Dance Apocalyptic” describes the experience of “going crazy,” the threat of “hit men,” and needing to find “a way to break out.” Yet the affects of these tracks are remarkably different. “Cold War” elicits a deep sense of pain at a present that is poisonous for black, brown, and queer earthly aliens. The song calls for an orientation toward pain in order to comprehend the external sources of internal experiences of insanity.

The seventies throwback tune of “Dance Apocalyptic,” by contrast, elicits an affect of jubilation in the despite, and in spite of, a world that “says it’s time to go.” The song is a playful pop-rock dance jive that in which Monáe expresses the need for
nourishment and pleasure within and outside of the insufficient, painful world of the present. Monáe asserts, “You gotta laugh at the zombie in the front yard,” implying the need to make fun, both to critique in spite of and to celebrate despite of the proximate threat of fatality. Monáe’s call to “freak out” sounds a rigorous critique of an unlivable present for black, brown, queer, and poor people. It a critical rejection to remain complacent in a world that structures you peripheral, at best, and dead, at worst. The call to be “not afraid to break out” is a call to strive for something beyond a toxic present. It is to embrace a movement towards life, the groove of the funk, to “dance ‘til the” apocalyptic “end.”

This call to collective movement, to grove as a group, structures a notion of craze in common, a collective investment in the “freak out.” As Muñoz writes, “the state understands the need to keep us from knowing ourselves, knowing our masses.” The experience of insanity in isolation is debilitating. The madness becomes internalized and individualized—the incapacitating sense of aloneness, of feeling you are the only one who feels like a freak, an outcast. And even if you know you are not truly the only one, that may not mean you don’t feel like the only one.

The online digital distribution of music and music videos has granted more and more people access to a wider and wider range of artistic sites. Internet cruising is self-selecting, enabling disparate alien groups—black American, black women, women of color, lesbians, poor queers—to seek out and engage in virtual sonic and visual spaces. Many alienated people, particularly those distant from urban city centers, do not have access to traditional forms of subculture. As such, virtual forms of emotional intimacy and “freak out” are critical for folks on the margins of the
margins. Monáe’s “cybersoul” music provides a virtual forum for earthly aliens. The sharing out of a sense of insanity and “freak out” as a rational response to a maddening world can provide a sense of being grounded in this world, as someone who matters.
OUTRO

F.A.N.D.R.O.I.D.S.: Download the Network

As I spy from behind my giant robot's eyes
I keep him happy cause I might fall out if he cries

- Lupe Fiasco²⁸⁶

When I was just a girl I wore a thousand lives
Heading on a search for the thing that makes me feel alright
Ten black moments in my room
Diamonds shimmers from the moon
And now I'm just a girl living in the satellite

- Solange²⁸⁷

What happens when you get stuck?
Get to the bottom of the illusion that you're in
From the roof now, it's your go
No one else without will do you in

- Santigold²⁸⁸

Monáe’s Metropolis mythology is a sonic form of theory that makes an argument about past and present day alienations through the alien, android future. It hails black, brown, and queer subjects, providing us with conceptual tools to imagine ourselves beyond the poison of the present. Metropolis in the year 2719 serves as an interpretive reimagining of a dystopic present that renders us aliens in America, foreigners in a burning house built by the labor of black people on land stolen from brown people, an America that tosses queer life out with trash. Monáe’s sonic fiction is deeply engaged with the (un)realities we live today that stem from forced dislocations, sexual violences, labor exploitations, medical pathologizing, and
normative, nuclear family structures. It is anything but *escapism*. Through a virtual network of fans, Monáe’s artistic project also allows people invested in kind of sonic politics and aesthetic movement to come together in real time, at Wondaland concerts and listening parties. I’ll describe two personal examples to illustrate my understanding of the distinctions between escapism, movement, and arrival.

I’ve often found myself gravitating towards creative virtual sites: video games, fantasy novels, concept albums. In my early to mid teens, I immersed myself in the online role playing game, *Runescape*. This multiplayer online game takes play in the medieval fantasy world of Gielinor, which players navigate using customizable avatars. The game has no linear storyline and players design their own objectives: gaining skill experience, engaging in multiplayer combat, completing quests, accumulating in-game currency and items. I spent Lorde knows how many hours exploring this virtual world. It was escapism for me, a means to transport out of a reality that I that could not make sense of, a reality in which I made no sense. So, in the intervals between school, sports, and studying, I left it.

I love video games and will always play them. It can be great to detach from reality through mindless or mindful entertainment. It’s a great way to unwind and immerse in an utterly new zone. For me and others, I would guess, it’s also a reprieve, a temporary means to get out of here. It’s a tactic of recharge when existing in this present is an utterly draining task, when you are constructed as an accident, as an alien, as an invasion. But this escapism is not enough. Though I still consider my acquisition of a full dragon armor set in *Runescape* to be a laudable achievement, these pixilated armaments did not equip me to deal with the everyday experience of
feeling that I was not meant to be here. Escapism does not provide tools to deal with this nonsensical and violent “here and now” that abjects black, brown, and queer life. Escapism is static: an “ism,” it does not move. It is a strategy of avoidance, a departure that returns a person the same as when she left. An escape, a meaningful flight, an intergalactic voyage, takes you someplace else and returns you with something else. The “then and there” is only transformative when in direct dialogue with the “here and now,” when the far up and away, the far-out, is in communication with the ground. Exit stage right: The Electromagnetic Lady. Enter stratosphere left: you. And there we are, now.

I have argued that Monáe’s android functions as a conceptual technology through which we might imagine a network of disparate alien subjects. I’ve also asserted that her cybersoul music fosters a virtual emotional intimacy and collective investment in the “freak out.” Her music and videos bespeak a deep dissatisfaction with the dystopia of our present through a yearning for utopia of the not-yet-here. Her sonic fiction rejects stasis and commands movement—political protest, social movement, electric dance. Utopia, as Muñoz explicates, is an ideality, an impossible achievement.\(^{289}\) It is in the striving for the utopia that we garner utopic ephemera. We must reach for something better than this shit because to not move is to be smothered by its reeking stench. We must move to escape quarantine in this quagmire of a present.\(^ {290}\) This is not escapism, but rather a radical rejection of the limitations of this world, a refusal to remain complacent, a refutation of the notion that this is all there is for us.
Black Feminist and Queer Worldmaking practices do. Monáe's Metropolis mythology develops alien networks and affective connections that manifest not only in the individual imagination of the listener, but also in a loosely organized network of Janelle Monáe fans: F.A.N.D.R.O.I.D.S (or Fandroids). The Fandroid community is both a virtual and actual network of people, an online Facebook group with just over 1,000 members that also manifests in actuality at concerts and listening parties. I stumbled upon and requested to join the Fandroid Facebook group—a private page—in January of 2015 while doing research for this project.

In March I connected with fellow Fandroid online (let's call her Michele) who informed me of a free Monáe concert in New York City. I hadn’t heard about the show, so Michele provided me with a very elaborate concert description. Samsung—the mobile service provider—was putting on a promotional concert series to promote some new gadget and Monáe was one of the artists on their line up. I was thrilled about the possibility of seeing Monáe live for the first time, but didn’t have a Samsung phone, a prerequisite for admission to this “free” show. While I made feeble attempts at borrowing a phone, the prospect of getting a friend to part with their social network for a day was about as likely as a friend getting me to part with mine. And after spending inordinate amounts of time attempting to extract information from the wormhole of the Samsung customer service hotline, regarding ticket availability and terms of entrance, I had given up. In a serendipitous turn of events the night before the show, Michele messaged me saying she was able to score an extra ticket, and that if I could make my way to the venue, it was all mine. I was there.
It won’t surprise the reader to hear that I had an excellent time at the show. It was fantastic, of course, and all the more fantastic because of the Fandroid connection. There were many factors working in my favor to make the experience possible. I happen to attend college just two hours from New York City. I own a car and had $60 dollars to spend on gas money to and from NYC and the parking fare. I have enough flexibility in my schedule to devote a full Thursday to making it come to fruition. I was lucky enough to connect with a Fandroid who was kind enough to help me out—though Fandroids, as an unofficial policy, make every effort to get as many folks as possible from the virtual group to the actual shows: driving together, helping with logistics, even paying for others’ tickets. This community helps each other work with and against capital; in this case, with and against Samsung.

The opportunity to experience the show with folks who are as invested in Monáe’s project as I am, who understand this world to be a Cold War, who strive for the Wondalands, who Dance Apocalyptic, it was powerful. To be at the show with people who support the Droid Rebel Alliance, folks who see themselves as freaks and Q.U.E.E.N.s, fans who, as much as I, want to know who are the Zoids, anyway? And is Metropolis’ Great Divide somehow connected to the American government? This is a future we are deeply invested in, because it is about us, now.

This experience is not escapism, but a powerful moment of coming together. Monáe’s sonic fiction project allows for people invested in this kind of music and politics to coalesce not only through sonic imaginaries or virtual groups, but also in real time, at concert venues, at the Best Buy Theatre in Times Square. I see Fandroids as attempting to enact an alien commons at Monáe’s concerts to have a
moment of “being-with, in difference and discord,” experiencing the ephemeral trace of utopia in world that is dystopic for many of us. It was a Thursday both fantastic and ordinary. Subscribe to the sonic fiction. Freak out. Download the Network. And Power Up.

_To get lost in your thoughts_  
_Is a very very complex thought_  
_And the things that you thought are surprising_

- Janelle Monáe
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60 Eshun, "Further Considerations of Afrofuturism," 288.
61 Janelle Monáe, liner notes, *The ArchAndroid* (Bad Boy Records, 2010), CD.
62 Janelle Monáe, liner notes, *The ArchAndroid* (Bad Boy Records, 2010), CD.
63 Eshun, "Further Considerations of Afrofuturism," 298.
65 Ibid.
67 Ibid., 42.
70 Ibid., 36.
71 Ibid., 38.
73 Ibid., 10.
75 Ibid., 30.

79 Ibid.
81 Ibid., 4.
84 At this early stage of Monáe’s sonic fiction, the identifiers of “cyborg” and “android” are used interchangeably, evidenced through Cindi’s self-identification as a “cyber girl” on the following track (“Violet Stars, Happy Hunting!” *Metropolis*, 2008). On her two most recent albums, *The ArchAndroid* (2010) and *The Electric Lady* (2013), Monáe almost exclusively employs the term “android.” The key difference between cyborgs and androids is that cyborgs are human-machine hybrids while androids are made purely of nonhuman material and tend to more closely resemble humans in form, emotion, and intellect. However, these definitions are not fixed, as evidenced by the fact that Cindi and Monáe share DNA.
86 Ibid., 17.
87 Ibid., 23.
88 Ibid.
90 Ibid.
91 Ibid.
93 Ibid.; ibid.; ibid.
95 Ibid., 16.
99 Ibid., 98.
Carefree, nightclub
Closet drunk, bathtub
Outcast, weirdo
Stepchild, freak show
Black girl, bad hair
Broad nose, cold stare
Tap shoes, Broadway
Tuxedo, holiday
Creative black, Love song
Stupid words, erased song
Gun shots, orange house
Dead man walking with a dirty mouth
Spoiled milk, stale bread
Welfare, bubonic plague
Record deal, light bulb
Keep back kid not corporate thug
Breast cancer, common cold
HIV, lost hope
Overweight, self esteem
Misfit, broken dream
Fish tank, small bowl
Closed mind, dark hold
Cybergirl, droid control
Get away now they trying to steal your soul
Microphone, one stage
Tomboy, outrage
Street fight, bloody war
Instigators, third floor
Promiscuous child, broken dream
STD, quarantine
Heroin user, coke head
Final chapter, death bed
Plastic sweat, metal skin
Metallic tears, mannequin
Carefree, night club
Closet drunk, bathtub
White house, Jim Crow
Dirty lies, my regards

133 Cybotron, “Enter,” Enter (Fantasy Records, 1983), CD.
Grace Jones, “Corporate Cannibal,” *Hurricane* (Wall of Sound, 2008), CD.

Robert Pepper’s *The Posthuman Condition* (1995), Steve Nichols’ “The Posthuman Manifesto” (1988), Douglas Dixon’s *Man After Man: An Anthropology of the Future* (1990), Francis Fukuyama’s *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution* (2002), and Cary Wolfe’s *What Is Posthumanism?* (2010) are examples of theoretical works on posthumanity that ignore structural inequalities among human populations and neglect consideration of the precarious relationships of minoritarian bodies to biotechnology. The singular declarations of their titles—“The, “Man, “Posthumanism,” “Our”—suggest a definitive relationship between the human and the posthuman. By contrast, Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century” (1985), Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston’s *Posthuman Bodies* (1995), Rosi Bradatti’s “Posthuman, All Too Human: Towards a New Process Ontology” (2006), and Alexander Weheliyes’ *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (2014) are examples of works that foreground temporality, characterize embodiment as plural, recognize shifting perspectives, and abstain from absolute declaration—“Late Twentieth Century,” “A,” “Bodies,” “New Process,” “Theories.” While normative posthuman theorists tend to adopt an absolutist posture to the posthuman, feminist theorists of the posthuman tend to conceive their perspectives as partial and plural. Furthermore, these feminist theories generally conceive a direct relationship between the posthuman and the human, articulating them as mutually constitutive. Their consideration of the posthumanity’s implications for racializing, gendering, sexualizing, and classing assemblages in these feminist theories likewise reflects an understanding of humanities as partial and plural.


Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid.

Ibid.


Hill Collins, Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment, 222.


Janelle Monáe, “Sally Ride,” The Electric Lady, (Bad Boy Records, 2013), CD.

Janelle Monáe, “Our Favorite Fugitive,” The Electric Lady, (Bad Boy Records, 2013), CD.

Janelle Monáe, “Ghetto Woman,” The Electric Lady, (Bad Boy Records, 2013), CD.

Janelle Monáe, “Dance Apocalyptic,” The Electric Lady, (Bad Boy Records, 2013), CD.

Janelle Monáe, “Suite IV,” The Electric Lady, (Bad Boy Records, 2013), CD.

Janelle Monáe, “Given Em What They Love,” The Electric Lady, (Bad Boy Records, 2013), CD.


Janelle Monáe, “Neon Valley Street,” The ArchAndroid, (Bad Boy Records, 2010), CD.


Ibid., 156.

Ibid., 157.

Ibid., 150.

Gloria Anzaldúa, Borderlands: The New Mestiza = La Frontera (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987), 25.


Ibid., 44.

Ibid., 59.


Anzaldúa, Borderlands: The New Mestiza = La Frontera, 101.
Ibid., 102.
172 Sandoval, "Re-Entering Cyberspace: Sciences of Resistance," 83-84.
173 Ibid., 80.
176 Ibid., 4.
180 Janelle Monáe, “Cold War,” The ArchAndroid, (Bad Boy Records, 2010), CD.
181 Janelle Monáe, “Dance or Die,” The ArchAndroid, (Bad Boy Records, 2010), CD.
187 Ibid., 155.
188 Hill Collins, Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment, 236.
190 Ibid., 5.
191 Ibid.
192 Ibid., 6.
193 Ibid.
194 Ibid.


José Esteban Muñoz, “‘Gimme Gimme This... Gimme Gimme That’ Annihilation and Innovation in the Punk Rock Commons,” Social Text 31, no. 3 116 (2013): 96.

Ibid.


THEESatisfaction, “QueenS,” Awe Naturale (Subpop, 2012), CD.


Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folk, 205.

Ibid., 207.


Moten, In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition, 22.

Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folk, 205.


Ibid.


Guillory and Green, Soul: Black Power, Politics, and Pleasure, 259.

Ibid.

Ibid., 250.

Ibid., 251.

Ibid., 252.

Moten, In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition, 12.
Brown and Clinton’s samples have provided the hooks, beats, and rhythms for some of the most influential and commercially successful hip-hop artists, including Tupac Shakur, Missy Elliot, Grand Master Flash & The Furious Five, TLC, De La Soul, Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg, En Vogue, Outkast, Lil’ Kim, Wu Tang Clan, Kendrick Lamar, and countless others. In order to account for George Clinton’s samples, I had aggregated the samples from his two bands, Funkadelic and Parliament, with the samples listed under Clinton’s name. As of 2015, James Brown has been sampled 4,892 times and Clinton an aggregated total of 1,569 times.


“Some Excursions into Sonic Fiction: A two-step with Kodwo Eshun”


It is my view that any genre classification must always be clarified and qualified, for to claim an artist fits easily into just one genre leans dangerously close to promoting the notion genres have essential properties. Genres have broad sonic similarities, including tempo, song structure, rhythm, and prominent instruments. While each genre has generally accepted particularities, loosely established through a commercialized dialogue between artists, producers, fans, critics, and industry executives, there is no standardized way of distinguishing one genre from another. In a similar manner to the ways in which identity is important in order for people to establish ideas of selfhood, community, shared history, genre classification helps people understand particularities, commonalities, and histories amongst musicians and musical forms. Puar’s re-reading of intersectionality-as-assemblage helps us here once again. If we understand genres as constituted through relations between various musical forms, genre becomes unmoored from essential identity typifications. A rigid read of the “rock” genre might define it as music with heavy use of electric guitars, snare drums, and raw vocals typically performed by a four-member band. A more expansive read might understand rock to be derived from “rockin’ rhythm and blues” and as a complex fusion of jazz with elements of country music. I discuss genre’s social dimensions and complicated constitution to emphasize the fluidity and
mobility of these musical identifiers. We can think of genre as music “identities” that I would argue we ought to read as intersectional assemblages in perpetual process.


Glasper warps orthodox instrumentation through synthesizers, fusing dynamic jazz composition with neo-soul, hip-hop, gospel, and R&B stylings. He reinterprets songs from the likes of Nirvana, Soundgarden, Little Dragon, Radiohead, and David Bowie, and collaborates with a wide range of vocalists including Dwele, Brandy, Jill Scott, Common, Yasiin Bey, Snoop Dogg, and Me’shell Ndegeocello.

Robert Glasper Experiment, Black Radio, (Blue Note Records, 2012), CD.

Robert Glasper Experiment, Black Radio 2, (Blue Note Records, 2015), CD.


Ibid.

Ibid., 30.


Janelle Monáe, “Wondaland,” The ArchAndroid (Bad Boy Records, 2010), CD.


“Many Moons,” “Neon Valley Street,”

“Sincerely, Jane,” “Dance or Die,” “Faster,” “Tightrope,” “Q.U.E.E.N.” “Dance Apocalyptic,”

“Neon Gumbo”


“Mushrooms and Roses”

Janelle Monáe, liner notes, Metropolis: The Chase Suite (Bad Boy Records, 2007), CD.

Janelle Monáe, liner notes, The ArchAndroid (Bad Boy Records, 2010), CD.

Janelle Monáe, liner notes, The Electric Lady (Bad Boy Records, 2013), CD.


Prince, ”Purple Rain,” The Revolution (Warner Bros. Records, 1984), CD.


I use the gender neutral pronouns of “they” and “their” for the singer to reflect the gender ambiguity at play in “Mushrooms and Roses.” I also strategically refer to Monáe as “the singer” when the gender of the speaking-subject appears enigmatic.


Ibid., 2.

Ibid., 3.


Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, 1.

Eshun, "Further Considerations of Afrofuturism," 298.


Ibid.

Ibid., 195.

Ben Zucker, April 16, 2015, email message to the author.


Caitrin Rogers et al., "20 Feet from Stardom,"(Anchor Bay Entertainment, 2014).

Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*.


Ibid., 7.

Ibid., 6.


Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, 66.


Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, 1.
Ibid.

290 Muñoz, ““Gimme Gimme This... Gimme Gimme That” Annihilation and Innovation in the Punk Rock Commons,” 96.