



PROJECT MUSE®

---

“Tryna Free Kansas City”: The Revolutions of Janelle  
Monáe as Digital Griot

Cassandra L. Jones

Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies, Volume 39, Number 1, 2018, pp.  
42-72 (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/fro.2018.a690809>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/690809>

# “Tryna Free Kansas City”

The Revolutions of Janelle Monáe as Digital Griot

CASSANDRA L. JONES

## INTRODUCTION

Self-identified Afrofuturist, R&B singer, and now actress Janelle Monáe has garnered both popular and academic attention for her musical creation of the alternate cityscape Metropolis via multiple studio-released recordings and videos. The futuristic city is the landscape for the tale of Cindi Mayweather, or Monáe’s vision of the subversive “electric lady,” calling on the cyborg trope that Monáe revisits in each trip to Metropolis and one that is frequently invoked by other Afrofuturists. A growing movement of black speculative art, Afrofuturism is an umbrella term that covers the literature, music, high art, and street art that examine both the metaphors of technology as imagined by blacks across the African diaspora and the uses of technology by the same. Working at the “intersection of imagination, technology, future, and liberation,” Afrofuturist authors, musicians, and technicians rely on the resilience of black culture to imagine improbable and seemingly impossible futures, new technologies and new uses for old technologies, using the tropes of science fiction and fantasy to critique social inequality.<sup>1</sup>

Monáe’s futuristic city, Metropolis, which features slavelike android laborers and a deeply technological capitalistic division of wealth, has been created over one EP, *Metropolis: Suite I (The Chase)* (2007), and two full-length albums, *ArchAndroid* (2010) and *The Electric Lady* (2013). The videos released for the albums likewise elaborate on the science fiction world of Metropolis. Monáe cites her inspiration as a collection of figures and texts including Fritz Lang’s 1927 film *Metropolis*, Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* (1982), and the literary science fiction of Octavia E. Butler and Isaac Asimov as well as her own escape from “a drug-addled family in Kansas City, Kansas.”<sup>2</sup> Each song and accompanying music video, such as “Many Moons” and its “official short film,” can be read as akin to a novel in a series, each focusing on new themes or ex-

panding on the universe of Metropolis. This essay takes as its focus the theme of digital revolution in multiple songs and videos in Monáe's oeuvre but centers largely on her song "Q.U.E.E.N." from the 2013 album *Electric Lady*, as Monáe tries simultaneously to free herself from the overlords of Metropolis and the larger listening audience from these same oppressive forces in a literal and figurative "Kansas City." Building on Lang's 1927 critique of the class division between workers toiling underground and the lavish lifestyle they afford the wealthy living above them, Monáe's Metropolis critiques the machinations of race, gender, and sexuality using an Afrofuturist framework.

As Afrofuturism has grown in scope and visibility, multiple theoretical voices such as Adam J. Banks's "digital griot," John Akomfrah's "data thief,"<sup>3</sup> Anna Everett's "black cyberflaneur" and "Afrogeek,"<sup>4</sup> and Paul D. Miller's "rhythm science"<sup>5</sup> have contributed metaphors for understanding the links between black histories of engagement with science and technology and the imaginary exploration of these in literature, music, and artwork. Each of these metaphors blurs the boundaries between what D. Fox Harrell calls "inspirational fiction"<sup>6</sup> and literal engagement with technology. Of these metaphors, this essay employs that of the digital griot to explore how the Metropolis universe speaks back to the notion of anti-technological blackness and how Janelle Monáe's music and videos digitize revolution by insisting on a historicized African American female presence in both highly technological and revolutionary roles.

Using technology and metaphors of technology to layer and remix histories, Monáe's songs and videos add new voices to previous African American approaches to art and activism. Her work echoes and challenges efforts like the Black Arts Movement, turning up the volume on queer tracks in response to the heterosexist loops of the Black Power movement. However, her stories are not simply tales of a highly technological utopian world. While she voices narratives of liberation via technology, she equally confronts the racist, heterosexist, patriarchal, capitalist origins of technology and how these have been used against black women's bodies.<sup>7</sup>

The remixed histories of Monáe's songs and videos are the work of a "digital griot," a term coined by Adam J. Banks in *Digital Griots: African American Rhetoric in a Multimedia Age*.<sup>8</sup> The digital griot is an intervening figure who unites the past, present, and future, refuses the digital divide as a barrier to black engagement with technology, and utilizes a specifically African American rhetoric. The digital griot is a DJ who speaks through the deconstruction and reconstruction of texts, uses these links to time-travel, connecting "tradition and future. Holding the power to shape how both are seen/heard/

felt/known.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the DJ constantly shifts her identity and never settles. Banks’s poetic prose describes her as

always analyzing audiences their wants their needs their knowledges  
their attitudes joys pains feats—in any given situation—at a moment’s  
notice . . . always researching digging in the crates looking for that cut  
that break that connection nobody else has found, nobody else has used  
quite that way . . . bearer of history, memory, and rememory, able to turn  
on the planetary or intergalactic time space transporter within seconds.  
interpreting a world, implicitly and explicitly telling us how to manage  
the madness of it all, how to live in it but still escape with our souls.<sup>10</sup>

The digital griot is a revolutionary figure and a marker of African American rhetoric who allows black people to “see themselves as part of the digital story.”<sup>11</sup> She functions as a liberation strategy that highlights how technology and access to it are a vital aspect of the pursuit of creating and understanding black people’s role in that digital story. Just as Afrofuturism uses science fiction to reconfigure blacks’ relationship to technology, the digital griot uses the power of storytelling to bring this new relationship to “academic, civic, and often-ignored Black communities.”<sup>12</sup> In a world where social media create echo chambers, insulating us from differing opinions and worldviews, where Google pre-sorts responses to our Internet searches, returning viewpoints we are most likely to click, the digital griot and the links made between the past and present serve as a form of social connection and historical understanding that can open new approaches in dealing with present challenges of racial and gendered inequalities. The digital griot’s roots in the storytelling traditions of African Americans employ their experiences, myths, and symbols to recast histories and to “offer important perspectives on what it means to be human in relationship with technologies and technological systems.”<sup>13</sup> Using science fiction tropes, Monáe challenges racism, sexism, and heterosexism as she insists on a blackness that has deep roots in the history of technology as she digitizes revolution.

#### AFROFUTURISM: A SYNAPTIC CIRCUITRY

Monáe began her revolution in her hometown of Kansas City, where she both “discovered her inner weirdo” and escaped the atmosphere of drugs and violence that plagues the community. Maintaining her connection and allegiance to this city, she mentions in an interview with *Pitch* magazine in 2006 and reaffirms in the lyrics to “Q.U.E.E.N” in 2013 that her goal is to “free” Kansas City through a combination of art and activism in her tales of

a futuristic world. “It’s crazy, but I really want to be the one to show everyone back home that it can be done. And not by selling drugs but by being passionate about the right thing—and the right things will come your way.”<sup>14</sup> By the release of her 2007 EP *Metropolis: Suite I (The Chase)*, Monáe’s emphasis on personal salvation via “passion” in her remarks in *Pitch* in 2006 have shifted to an attack on structural inequalities and how the full force of the state can be harnessed against minorities. This is evidenced by the gleeful tone of the opening, “March of the Wolfmasters,” in which android Cindi Mayweather’s queer love of a human has broken the law. As a voice cheerfully broadcasts Mayweather as the “star-crossed winner of the heartbreak sweepstakes,” bounty hunters are encouraged to stalk her for a reward.<sup>15</sup> In this song Monáe does not simply paint a picture of a landscape of drugs and violence from which Mayweather must affect her own escape. Moving away from the story of individual salvation that Monáe conveys in her 2006 interview, “March of the Wolfmasters” presents the listener with a dystopian landscape in which Mayweather’s “cyber soul” is hunted for reward money, and the full power of the government supports the extirpation of those engaged in queer relationships.

Where science fiction has long been recognized as a genre that serves to critique social values,<sup>16</sup> the cultural criticism within Afrofuturist texts is beginning to move from the theoretical to the lived experiences of Afrofuturist activists. The shift toward social justice is a developing area of Afrofuturism, moving beyond what has previously been defined as an aesthetic movement. While Afrofuturism is made up of intellectuals, writers, artists, and musicians, it is not simply an area of academic inquiry or a literary or artistic movement. A recent example is the story of activist and filmmaker Bree Newsome, who on June 27, 2015, climbed a flagpole in Columbia, South Carolina, to remove the contested Confederate flag flying beside the South Carolina State House.<sup>17</sup> While she herself is an Afrofuturist filmmaker, she is also an activist who has been involved in North Carolina’s Moral Monday protests in support of African American voting rights, among other causes. Her protest atop the flagpole spawned numerous memes that returned her to her Afrofuturist origins by depicting her as a superhero. As an Afrofuturist, Newsome is both activist and artist, bringing the social critique of her films to her actions. In addition, as collections and books materialize—such as *Octavia’s Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements* and Adrienne Maree Brown’s *Emergent Strategy*, and the Octavia E. Butler Celebration of Arts and Activism at Spelman College in 2014 drawing inspiration from the work of the first noted African American woman science fiction writer, Octavia E. Butler—there seems to be an increasing amount of social justice and

community outreach emerging from Afrofuturist circles, making literal the social criticism found in the artists' imaginations.

Social media groups like Afrofuturist Affair or the blog *Futuristically Ancient* collect under the Afrofuturist umbrella artistic expressions of black science fiction as well as activist opportunities that may or may not be exclusively speculative fiction-oriented in nature. One such example is a *Futuristically Ancient* post uniting a Black Girls Code event in Brooklyn, *Afrikadaa* magazine's issue on Afrofuturism, and a then-proposed, now-published book on race and digital creativity, titled *Black Girls are from the Future*, by Renina Jarmon.<sup>18</sup> While not all the events are related to speculative fiction directly, citing each of the events or items on the same blog post hints at the web connecting community activism, technological engagement, and visions of the future from a black feminist perspective. Combating the notion of an anti-technological blackness in multiple arenas, organizations such as Black Girls Code, a non-profit body that seeks to teach young African American women and girls to code, are attempting to open up financially lucrative spaces that continue to be dominated by white men. On the other hand, books such as *Black Girls are from the Future* examine the digital communities, fund-raising opportunities such as Kickstarter, and visions of a highly technological future and what the place of black womanhood might be within it. Technological innovation, in addition to critiques of race, gender, and sexuality, is a strong part of this movement, reaching beyond what is inspirational fiction. Collective action and digital revolutions are beginning to spill forth from the witches' brew of speculative fiction and social criticism in which Afrofuturists engage.<sup>19</sup>

Where some scholars, such as D. Fox Harrell, see their work with technology as more concrete than Afrofuturism, which Harrell claims is "inspirational fiction,"<sup>20</sup> Afrofuturism reaches beyond speculative fiction, the artists who produce it, and the scholars who study it. Anna Everett's article "The Revolution Will Be Digitized"<sup>21</sup> and Alexander Weheliye's "Feenin"<sup>22</sup> have, from the first blossoming of Afrofuturism as an area of scholarly inquiry, joined the discussion of speculative fiction with their own scholarship on black uses of technology. Technology, and not simply metaphors of it, features heavily in Afrofuturist thought. The movement began as recuperation of neglected black voices engaging with the technologies of their day and imagining those of the future. Mark Dery cites the response to the erasure of the past and the foreclosure of the future to blacks as expressed in much of twentieth century science fiction as one of the major goals of Afrofuturism.<sup>23</sup> Afrofuturist scholar Alondra Nelson expands this idea to think more about how black technological engagement is constructed via popular culture. She notes that Afrofuturism confronts these visions of a highly technological

future that leaves blacks behind either through their absence, by envisioning the future as an unproblematic return to a “primitive” state or ancient culture, or by positing a highly technological future in which all racial identities have been erased. Each of these futuristic visions equally constructs blackness as anti-technological.<sup>24</sup>

By confronting representations of blackness as anti-technological, Afrofuturism draws attention to overlooked histories of blacks as technological innovators, inventors, and early adopters. In reconstructing this history, Afrofuturism aligns itself with the long-standing African American tradition of creating unofficial histories via oral tradition or the use of backchannel negotiations to combat the erasure of black American’s history from official American histories that center white men. This practice of creation and study stretches from the enduring Africanisms of the Gullah/Geechee communities of the Sea Islands to the African American historians and educators such as Anna Julia Cooper and Carter G. Woodson to Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Brittney Cooper. Afrofuturist works, such as those by Janelle Monáe, rethink the past in order to imagine blacks in the future and, in doing so, recreate a vision of the future, an African diasporic experience that is “rooted in the past, but not weighed down by it, contiguous, yet completely transformed.”<sup>25</sup>

As an area encompassing such a wide field, from speculative fiction, scholarship, and technology use to social justice movements, Afrofuturism forms a network of thinkers and social actors. This network is formed via loose connections of seeming disconnects between areas of activity. These connections and the spaces between them form a circuitry with seeming gaps or disconnects. However, we might read these gaps not as breakages but rather as synapses. A synapse is the space between two nerve cells where messages are exchanged. This lapse in the connection of one nerve cell to another is where the shape of the message changes from electrical to chemical and back again. The connection remains, despite a seeming gap, a break in the communication as the message changes form. This is how I see the various nodules of this argument connecting to each other. I take inspiration from the networks in African American science fiction writer Octavia E. Butler’s work that are made up of nodes of knowledge production, simultaneously both communal and individual, which redistribute power in ways unintelligible to the humans they encounter. This is most clearly articulated in Butler’s short story “Amnesty,” featuring alien beings that exist as “Communities” in which individual identities are distributed among and shared between larger singular units.<sup>26</sup> The connections between these beings are unseen, and while groups of individuals may move between communities, they can never be severed one from the next. They are always enmeshed within their

communal node, and yet they also retain a certain autonomy. And perhaps most saliently, they communicate using electrical impulses that jump the tiny spaces between them. I build on this metaphor to trace the cyborg articulations of my argument: time-travel, weaponized musical technologies, and the remixed histories that dismantle the anthropological gaze and notions of an anti-technological blackness. As in “Amnesty,” where these beings called “communities” form multi-nodal sites of knowledge production via electrical impulses that connect one to the next, so too are messages transmitted between various Afrofuturist groups, sometimes directly connected and traveling as electrical impulses, sometimes changing form as they shift to chemical communiqués as they jump the gap between cells. They allow for the seemingly disparate ideas to connect in unforeseen ways. These shifts in communication style make possible a radical reinterpretation of the limits of the body and how that body connects to others in the community. This transformation of thought from “electrical” to “chemical” that transmits a shared message by differing means is how we might think of the connection between the artistic, the scholarly, and the growing activism within the Afrofuturist community. Theory and practice find new ways to interact and pass forward the goal of liberation. This notion of community as synaptic circuitry and communication via musical technologies across the boundaries of self and time become apparent in Janelle Monáe’s role as digital griot but also appear across the universe of Afrofuturists as a whole. Afrofuturism’s deeply intertwined appendages of music, visual art, and literature, science and science fiction, and black storytelling traditions are enmeshed in communities of thought from which they cannot be fully extricated and seek to create connections across time, reaching to the past and to the future to reassemble and imagine future communities. While the articulations between these Afrofuturist appendages may not seem entirely clear to us, they reveal themselves as we undertake the work of examining the pathways of influence they share.

#### CONTROLLING THE NARRATIVES OF TIME, THE BODY, AND REBELLION IN MONÁE’S METROPOLIS

The trope of time-travel is one means by which Afrofuturists reach beyond the self in an effort to reconstruct seemingly lost histories as well as reveal the contours of social inequality. According to Renina Jarmon, for African American women artists, time-travel can act as a “tool to create space to resist racial and sexual domination.”<sup>27</sup> The ability to move through time, uniting rebels across the boundaries of time, is one of the key elements of resistance

in Monáe's video. Revolution in Janelle Monáe's Metropolis is woven together with knowledge and use of technology as well as African and African American history as demonstrated by the music video that accompanied the release of Monáe's song "Q.U.E.E.N." The video, which depicts Monáe and her band members on display in a museum, begins with a video voiceover spoken by a white woman on behalf of Metropolis's "time council":

It's hard to stop rebels that time travel, but we at the time council pride ourselves on doing just that. Welcome to the living museum where legendary rebels from throughout history have been frozen in suspended animation. Here in this particular exhibit, you'll find members of Wondaland and their notorious leader Janelle Monáe, along with her dangerous accomplice Badoula Oblongata. Together they launched Project Q.U.E.E.N., a musical weapons program in the twenty-first century. Researchers are still deciphering the nature of this program and hunting the various freedom movements that Wondaland disguised as songs, emotion pictures, and works of art.<sup>28</sup>

As the voiceover comes to a close, two young black women enter the museum and share a glance before moving quickly toward the Wondaland exhibit. They break the convention of passive observance in the museum space, playing a record using a skull with a gold tooth and then restraining the guard. As the music begins, the imprisoned Wondaland members, who had been trapped in suspended animation, awaken and perform the song.

As the voiceover demonstrates, time-travel, the weaponization of musical technologies, and rebellion are deeply intertwined in Monáe's narrative. Monáe is not alone in this endeavor. Many Afrofuturist musicians, authors, and theorists such as Sun Ra, Amiri Baraka, and Paul D. Miller equally develop this mix of ideas. In his manifesto *Rhythm Science*, Miller explores the complicated interplay between the prefabricated desires of the late capitalist system and how technology of that same system deconstructs the borders of the self, linking the DJ with other people, sounds, and inanimate objects across the boundaries of time:

A deep sense of fragmentation occurs in the mind of a DJ. When I came to DJ-ing, my surroundings—the dense spectrum of media grounded in advanced capitalism—seemed to have already constructed so many of my aspirations and desires for me; I felt like my nerves extended to all of these images, sounds, other people—that all of them were extensions of myself, just as I was an extension of them. Trains, planes, automobiles, people, transnational corporations, monitor screens—large and small,

human and non-human—all of these represent a seamless convergence of time and space in a world of compartmentalized moments and discrete transactions. Somehow it all just works.<sup>29</sup>

As an archivist who also disassembles and reassembles packages of music and the aspirations and desires built into them by the marketing machines that produced them, the DJ experiences this fragmentation not just where her music is concerned. There is a conflation of the music and the body, wherein the DJ is transformed into a cyborg, and her musical dissections become a practice of cyborg dismemberment, attaching and reattaching an arm, a rhythm, a leg, a beat. This very act of dismemberment and reattachment becomes an act of extending nerve-endings beyond the borders of oneself, forging connections to other people. Via the manipulations of the DJ's fingers as she performs the blending with surgical precision, the musical sound waves reach through the air, vibrating the ear drums of the listener, touching their nerve endings, and activating an entire cascade of physical and emotional responses in the listener. In this way the DJ connects beyond herself. For Monáe, this extension of self becomes the means by which cultural battles are fought across time and space, the means by which musical technologies become weaponized.

Building on Donna Haraway's cyborg myth, which breaks down the barriers between machine, human, and animal,<sup>30</sup> the DJ as a "rhythm scientist" dissolves the boundaries of the music as one song glides or crashes into another and, in doing so, extends the limits of her body, forging connections beyond the boundaries of her fingertips. In choosing songs from "back in the day," before "her day," she reaches back in time. As she creates new songs from these samples, she also projects herself into the future, creating an archive for future rhythm scientists to access. In this way technology connects us to other people and to other times, allowing the past, present, and future to merge so that we might access historical moments directly and yet in a way that is both transformed and transforming.

Merging the past and the present is work Monáe performs as the digital griot. As Banks notes, the "back in the day" narrative is one that is used to distinguish between generations of African Americans who experienced or lived through the Civil Rights and Black Power movements and those who have not. Beyond this, it also can be used to silence exchange between these two groups as they talk about rather than to each other. These narratives of generational divide operate equally in the realm of technology, signaling "deeply rooted anxieties about black culture, identity, and activism in a digital age."<sup>31</sup> The digital griot can bridge this gap by remixing the narratives of "back in the day" and troubling the notion of originality.<sup>32</sup> This loosens the generational

ownership over activism and social justice, allowing for multiple voices to be heard and successful intergenerational connections to be forged. Monée invokes the time-travel the DJ performs as an act of subversion. She and the other members of Wondaland are “rebels who time-travel” and use this subversion to marry art to activism in the “various freedom movements that Wondaland disguised as songs, emotion pictures, and works of art.”<sup>33</sup>

Despite this subversion, as Miller notes, and as Haraway also claims about the origins of the cyborg, the DJ is not exempt from the economic and political structures around her. Haraway claims the cyborg is “the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism.”<sup>34</sup> The “illegitimate offspring” may be used for subversive purposes, precisely because of that illegitimacy and a loyalty that does not attach to the father or necessarily seek to replicate his power structure. Miller similarly notes the tainted origins of the music from a system of marketing that constructs his own desires and aspirations for him. However, Miller also claims an ability to disrupt these constructions through the sampling of various records, disassembling their neat packages and cannibalizing the parts. English and Kim note that this is equally true of Monée’s work: “Monée is well aware that . . . she must ‘tip on the tightrope’ of a cultural logic of late capitalism that dictates the impossibility of ‘the positioning of the cultural act outside the massive Being of capital.’”<sup>35</sup> The DJ’s ability to move through time connecting various samples through the mix is mirrored in the digital griot’s power to sample various historical moments creating a remix that rebels against the linear narrative of the historical archive.

This ability to recapture control of the narrative is a vital component to the rebellion depicted in Monée’s video. Just as Angela Y. Davis critiques how within a single generation she had been defined largely as “a hairdo” that “reduces a politics of liberation to a politics of fashion,”<sup>36</sup> the time council’s museum carries a similar desire to curate or control the depiction of Wondaland and other time-traveling rebels.<sup>37</sup> The video suggests that linear historical narratives and technologies combine to contain the rebellion of the Wondaland crew. Just as museums of the mid-nineteenth century and beyond impose order on the chaos of cabinets of curiosity that might combine artifacts from disparate eras, regions, and/or histories, the museum functions as a linear prison where all revolutionary voices from across time have been placed in orderly suspended animation, removing the danger of their challenge to the larger society, and placing them on exhibit to be consumed by viewing audiences.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, the time council and museum construct this linear narrative, telling the story of the rebels from the dominant perspective, as criminals

rather than freedom fighters, effectively neutralizing the potentiality of “legendary rebels.”

This co-optation of rebellion that Davis refers to appears as well in the story of Cindi Mayweather, played by Monáe, in the EP *Metropolis: Suite 1 (The Chase)* and the music video for “Many Moons.” While Mayweather begins as a fugitive from the law, a criminal cyborg who dared to fall in love with a human, through the course of the EP she becomes a revolutionary figure as Mayweather meets an underground movement of similarly hunted cyborgs. The lyrics to “Many Moons” focus on the struggle for freedom with lines such as “Broken dreams / No sunshine / Endless crimenois / We long for freedom (for freedom)” and “Revolutionize your lives and find a way out.”<sup>39</sup> Mayweather is positioned as a second-class citizen whose queer love, a love not sanctified by the state, sets her at odds with the government. These lyrics demonstrate her transition from an ordinary lover to a freedom fighter who seeks to dismantle the status quo.

The video provides additional elements to the story of Mayweather, depicting a society attempting to co-opt her rebellion, turning her insurrection into a fashion marked by celebrity. In the “Many Moons” video, the auctioneer/emcee introduces Mayweather as “the toast of the town.”<sup>40</sup> Mayweather is surrounded by fans clamoring to dance and cheer to her music as she seemingly happily performs, her lyrics asking them if they are “bold enough to reach for love.”<sup>41</sup> The queer love between human and cyborg has been erased by the co-opting narrative of celebrity and fashion, leaving Monáe alone with her band to perform for the delight of onlookers. Further marking her co-optation, this musical performance is quickly revealed to be a slave auction in which other cyborg models, all bearing Mayweather’s face, are sold to the highest bidder. In this auction, which takes place on a fashion catwalk with cyborgs strutting and posing while being bid upon, the term “model” does double duty, referring to both runway model and a particular type of hardware in a cyborg product line. In this setting, Mayweather’s rebellion, much like Davis’s hair and clothing, have been transformed by the overarching narrative of Metropolis’s power structures to a politics of fashion, a consumable item that has lost its political force as a critique of heterosexist policies.

It is this racist, heterosexist, overarching narrative that Monáe, as the digital griot, disrupts. In “Many Moons” Mayweather becomes increasingly frantic as she dances, chanting about negative labels that have been applied to black women: “Hood rat, crack whore / Carefree, nightclub / Closet drunk, bathtub / Outcast, weirdo / Stepchild, freak show / Black girl, bad hair / Broad nose, cold stare.”<sup>42</sup> As her “cybernetic countdown” continues to tally the modes of

social control, she overloads and floats into the air. The audience of auction-bidders gasps as her floating cyborg body discharges an electrical current into the heavens. Stricken, Mayweather quakes and is lowered to the ground as women wearing white dresses and veils surround her. The lyrics announce that “when the world just treats you wrong / just come with me and I’ll take you home / Shan, shan shan shan-gri la,” as Mayweather becomes still.<sup>43</sup>

Read as either her death or orgasm as death in the vein of *la petite mort*, this moment of shuddering collapse represents a kind of “homegoing” for Mayweather that queers the system and sets her free from social control. I use “homegoing” in the African American sense of returning to a spiritual home or heavenly afterlife in death, but also as a return to an earthly space of family. The presence of these women as brides suggests that Mayweather’s ability to queer the system of power has returned. She is now the tuxedo-ed woman in a queer wedding that will take her “home.”<sup>44</sup> Mayweather takes up the mantle of black feminist Cheryl Clarke, who sees lesbianism as an act of resistance to the heterosexism that lies at the base of racism and sexism.<sup>45</sup> Despite her seeming death, this is not a moment that can be dismissed as another example of the “bury your gays” trope in which LGBT characters are denied the promise of a loving future routinely granted to straight characters. Rather, Mayweather’s death functions as means of wresting control of the narrative from Metropolis. While Mayweather may register as already dead within the paradigm of the hunt that has already determined her fate, this figurative death frees her from societal constraints and allows her to continue as an underground freedom fighter. Despite the capitalist system’s attempt to co-opt her revolutionary movement and reduce it to a fashionable commodity, the cyborg is not loyal to her paternalistic creator. Her link to community, forged while on the run, had not been severed despite her performance on the auction block. These links, shown here as an electrical discharge or perhaps an orgasmic burst of energy, are ultimately what free her from a system of labels that attempted to shape her being. This is the power of the digital griot at work. She has regained control of her own story and her future by disrupting a narrative that sought to strip her of her rebellious potential. Not only this, but she has used African American history to trouble our understanding of the present. The final shot of the video is a quote attributed to Cindi Mayweather: “I imagined many moons in the sky lighting the way to freedom.” Remixing references to the slave on the auction block and their escape North using stars and other astronomical features with the technology of the cyborg, Monáe has created a vision of the future that reveals historical and contemporary intersectional inequalities facing black people, women, and LGBTQ communities.<sup>46</sup>

Similarly to the struggle for narrative and rebellion in “Many Moons,” Monáe wages a battle for the control of the narrative that defines her in the video for her song “Q.U.E.E.N.” Technology features heavily in both the narrative at stake, blackness as anti-technological, and the means by which that battle is fought. Monáe traces the dangers of technology and their associated capitalist narratives as a means of literal and figurative imprisonment, echoing past uses of technology against black bodies. She also holds hope for technologies to be used against the systems that created them. While the audience is not privy to the apparatus by which they travel through time, technology is both the mechanism by which the rebels are imprisoned and their means of escape. The rebels have been momentarily detained physically by the museum’s animation suspension technology and rhetorically contained by its narrative, but they are not forever halted. It is the technology of the turntable and the musical extension of the DJ that connects them to the larger community that ultimately frees them from their imprisonment. Two young women who had been “touched” by the music storm the museum and play the record that frees the members of Wondaland.

Part and parcel of Monáe’s use of community is in-group membership and the transmission of coded messages across synapses of time between “cells,” where cell refers both to a biological unit and to an individual group of “terrorists” in Monáe’s “freedom movements.” These messages are illegible to the outside world, decipherable only to in-group members. As the voiceover in “Q.U.E.E.N.” notes, “Researchers are still deciphering the nature of this program and hunting the various freedom movements that Wondaland disguised as songs, emotion pictures, and works of art.”<sup>47</sup> These messages, transmitted through the music, are designed in such a way as to block access to their meaning by the researchers who, years later, still struggle to decode them. This allows the revolution to continue long after the original revolutionaries have been captured. Working beyond the temporal boundaries of their own lives in this manner enables the Wondaland crew to time-travel in multiple ways.

This community’s identity is also a racially marked one. This is apparent in the contrast between the white cultural markers of the museum and the markers of blackness to be found on the bodies of the Wondaland members, in the lyrics of “Q.U.E.E.N.,” and in the imagery of the Wondaland exhibit. The museum is marked by whiteness in many ways: it is represented visually by a white woman who speaks with a British accent against a backdrop of classical music, indicating a cultural whiteness, while the space of the museum itself is a blizzard of a literal whiteness. In contrast, the Wondaland exhibit is equally

marked by blackness. In addition to the blackness of Wondaland's bodies and those of the black women who free them, the painted African tribesmen, the skull with the gold tooth, and Monáe's music equally mark a cultural blackness. Activated through the musical impulses across the boundaries of space and time, this community liberates Wondaland and allows the cycle of rebellion to begin anew. The "musical weapons program" of Wondaland is the tool by which that liberation is made possible. Musical technologies have become weaponized, have become a tool in the fight for liberation.

The weaponization of music so key to Monáe's revolution in Q.U.E.E.N. has a long history in African American thought and certainly Afrofuturist thought. For example, Sun Ra's 1974 film *Space Is the Place* opens with the black science fiction icon's discussion of the power of music as a tool of liberation. While wandering through the woods on a planet in a distant galaxy, Sun Ra notes:

The music is different here. The vibrations are different. Not like planet Earth. Planet Earth sounds of guns, anger, frustration. . . . We'll set up a colony for black people here. See what they can do on a planet all their own without any white people there. They could drink in the beauty of this planet. It will affect their vibrations . . . for the better, of course. . . . We'll bring them here through either isotope teleportation or transfelequization or better still teleport the whole planet here through music.<sup>48</sup>

Music, space travel, and utopia are deeply entwined in what Afrofuturist scholar Graham Locke refers to as Sun Ra's "Astro Black mythology."<sup>49</sup> Whereas Sun Ra does not characterize music as a weapon, it certainly exists as technology that can connect to distant points and functions as a form of transportation between them. And similar to the racialized community in Janelle Monáe's "Q.U.E.E.N.," this is a community for black people and one that, according to the black separatist thought of the day, represents the potential to better black lives: "It will affect their vibrations . . . for the better, of course."<sup>50</sup> According to Sun Ra, once away from the influence of white people, black people may be able to achieve something greater, a utopian community made possible through musical vibrations. Undeniably, music is the core of his vision. Music, in Sun Ra's cosmic philosophy and reflecting the black nationalism of the era, functions not just as the means of transportation, but the "vibrations" of black people form their very essence. The music of the planet and connections built among the community through these musical sound waves are what will improve black lives. Music serves a similar function in "Q.U.E.E.N.," uniting would-be rebels across time and space, but also dismantling the discourses that define blackness as inferior.

Just as music crosses the synapses of space and time to reach fellow rebels in “Q.U.E.E.N.” and conveys black people from Earth to a new home in Sun Ra’s *Space Is the Place*, so, too, does music serve to transport and unite black people separated by time and space in Amiri Baraka’s short story “Rhythm Travel.”<sup>51</sup> Baraka sees music as force that links the past to the present, moving listeners through time as well as space. His story features particular musical phrases that have the power to transport modern African Americans to the past and back again. By singing slave work songs and spirituals, one is literally transported to the fields where the song had previously been sung, connecting contemporary African Americans with their enslaved ancestors. While music may not literally transport us to the past, it does serve as a tangible cultural connection to that past. As musicologists such as Portia K. Maultsby have shown, the evolution of African American music is evidence of a “continuum of an African consciousness in America.”<sup>52</sup> Further evidence of this connection to the past can be found in the documentary *The Language You Cry In*, in which a short song sung by members of a Gullah family in Harris Neck, Georgia, is traced to a funeral dirge in the Mende language. Although the Gullah family had lost the meaning of the words, the song persisted among the elders of the community and was passed from Amelia Dawley to her daughter, Mary Moran. A ceremonial song used by the Mende to remember one’s ancestors, it is said to hold “the mystical power to connect those who sing it with their ancestors, with their roots through time and space.”<sup>53</sup> This is a particularly powerful example of how music can retain a certain form of cultural significance, bonding distant families even when the origins of the song have been forgotten. For the Mende people, the Gullah who continued their traditions, and the Afrofuturists who use science fiction to tell ancient African stories in new ways, music is the means by which we bridge the distance between ourselves and our ancestors.

This notion of music connecting listeners through time and space is echoed in the digital griot, a figure who unites the traditions of the past with visions of the future, deconstructs and reconstructs sonic structures to tell new stories, and shares the impulse to liberate African Americans through a combination of music and history. It is a history of revolutionary thought in particular that can be traced through these cultural moments. Music in Baraka’s story transforms the performer into a time-traveler, merging the performer’s physical body from the present with a time and place in the past. While the fields in which the slaves worked were marked by hardship and oppression, present, too, were agency and resistance, particularly in the songs that referenced freedom, justice, and even punishment for those who had mistreated the enslaved.<sup>54</sup> The revolutionary thought of the slaves’ protest music is traced

through to the desire to transform both the dominant American historical narrative, which overlooks African American history, and the person time-traveling, who forges a personal connection to that transformed past. Baraka's story, similarly to Monáe's, seeks to disrupt the overarching historical narrative that denies agency and significance to the history of enslaved Africans and African Americans. And just as Monáe's emphasis on in-group knowledge and the coded messages of the musical weapons program that remains to be deciphered by researchers, Baraka's prose is a heavy dialect that might make the story itself difficult for an uninformed white reader to discern. The nature of the song and its power is obscured, accessible only to those with the cultural knowledge to tap it. The musical travel indicated in both Baraka's story and Monáe's "Q.U.E.E.N." are based on an insider-knowledge that comes with in-group identity and one that is decidedly marked as black.

#### MONÁE'S REMIXED HISTORIES

Using musical weapons or electrical impulses to unite a community sonically and remix histories, Monáe's work demonstrates an unbroken chain of history, representing another of Afrofuturism's goals: to reconstruct our seemingly lost African past. However, some scholars of Monáe's work, such as English and Kim and Tobias C. Van Veen, see Monáe as somehow transcending the boundaries of black Atlantic identity. Van Veen suggests that the cyborg Cindi Mayweather presents a new vision of blackness somehow free from the history of oppression that haunts other versions of black Atlantic identity.

[Mayweather] offer[s] an escape hatch from paradigms for Afrodiasporic identity that are all too often restricted to the violence and capitalist bling of ghetto realism, confined to post-slavery resonances of subalternity, or entrapped within the lingering effects of the Civil Rights era, in which African-American subjects had to struggle, over the course of a long century since the Emancipation Proclamation, for the right to be considered Enlightenment subjects.<sup>55</sup>

Van Veen calls on Afrofuturist scholar Kodwo Eshun's argument that "it's in music that you get the sense that most African-Americans owe nothing to the status of the human. African-Americans still had to protest, still had to riot, to be judged Enlightenment humans in the 1960s." And Van Veen claims that Afrofuturists such as Monáe are no longer interested in investing in the notion of human as Enlightenment subjects.<sup>56</sup> He argues that the notion of human has been overly determined as white to such a degree that it must be altogether abandoned, leading to a post-human state. Van Veen claims that

the Afrofuturist metaphor of the alien uncouples from Earth's history and allows us to "explore unEarthly universes, timelines, and identities."<sup>57</sup> Sun Ra certainly seems to take this approach, entirely eschewing human identity and claiming to be an alien.

Despite Sun Ra's claims to an alien identity, his oeuvre and personal appearance did not distance themselves from black history and, in fact, drew heavily on the decidedly human history of ancient Egypt. Sun Ra's "astro-black mythology" is another example of the Afrofuturist impulse to blend historical moments, to look to the future, while remaining rooted in a past, "part of a black historical continuum that reaches back through the blues and slavery to an Egyptian civilization that began 5,000 years ago."<sup>58</sup> *Space Is the Place*, Sun Ra's 1974 film, equally weaves together references to Egyptian imagery and African American history, creating an unending connection through history, while looking forward to a place in outer space for blackness. This is a vision of Afrofuturism that does not align with Van Veen's escape from blackness but rather adheres closely to Alondra Nelson's understanding of Afrofuturism, which offers "takes on digital culture that do not fall into the trap of the neocritics or the futurists of one hundred years past. These works represent new directions in the study of African diaspora culture that are grounded in the histories of black communities, rather than seeking to sever all connections to them."<sup>59</sup>

Monáe, whose videos occasionally reference Sun Ra's, equally embraces African American history and identity. She samples these moments—she remixes them. In doing so, she unites disparate moments, movements, and identities, demonstrating an ongoing revolution as well as the opportunity to define ourselves. An example of these connections appears in the video "Q.U.E.E.N." The allusions to ancient Egypt are visually marked primarily in Badoula Oblongata's Cleopatra-style wig and makeup but equally appear in the song's lyrics, such as "My crown too heavy like the queen Nefertiti / gimme back my pyramid / I'm tryna free Kansas City."<sup>60</sup> This line, and others from Q.U.E.E.N—such as "Imma keep leadin' like a young Harriet Tubman"—create a distinct through-line uniting the history of ancient Egypt to the escape of slaves in the United States to the contemporary moment and our current struggles to be perceived as humans whose lives matter. Where Monáe differs from Sun Ra is in her view of this history from a feminist perspective. By including Erykah Badu, long noted for her self-depiction as "independent, strong, self-reliant, [agent] of [her] own desire, [master] of [her] own destiny" alongside other hip-hop and neo-soul performers like Missy Elliot and Lauryn Hill,<sup>61</sup> the through-line Monáe draws unites women leaders from African and African American history.

Where the alien or the cyborg might offer an “escape hatch” from Van Veen’s point of view, Monáe’s connections between African and African American women argue that the struggle to recognize the humanity of African Americans is a continuing and, increasingly, digital revolution. That listeners are asked to identify with cyborg Cindi Mayweather’s struggle to survive and love does not suggest that we must abandon the notion of human to achieve social justice. Her cyborg does not represent a freedom from the oppression faced by generations past simply because her consciousness is housed in machinery. Like others in science fiction, she uses the cyborg to reveal how oppression operates and how the denial of humanity specifically is used to oppress. In fact, the Civil Rights movement of the twentieth century was, at heart, a movement to claim blackness as a category of humanity and to secure the rights granted legally to other humans/citizens in the United States.

Monáe, too, is asking us to expand our definition of humanity to include those who have historically been excluded from that definition. For instance, the humanity of the prisoner is another of the questions at the center of this video. In what is certainly a human rights violation, the “time-traveling” rebels are to be imprisoned indefinitely while placed on display for a viewing audience. The increasingly technological aspects of the struggle for social justice are evident in the two young black women using technology in unexpected ways to free these prisoners whose rebellion has rendered them inhuman, they have been reduced to mere artifacts on display.<sup>62</sup> In freeing the prisoners, several important arguments are made for the expansion of the term *human* and, as Banks notes, “what it means to be human in relationship with technologies and technological systems.”<sup>63</sup> The first is this question of the human rights of prisoners and one that seems particularly relevant since, due to racist policing practices and policies, African Americans are over-represented within the American prison systems. The second is the challenge to anti-technological blackness and the role of women in the world of technology. In the video the young black women do not accept the passive role of feminine observers in a highly technological atmosphere; they become participants in the scene created for the viewer. To free the Wondaland revolutionaries from their prison, they transform an ornamental skull, complete with gold tooth, into a record player, also claiming a role in the creation of “Black secret technology,”<sup>64</sup> or the “marriage of myth to technology” found in the music of Detroit Techno pioneers Juan Atkins, Derrick May, and Kevin Saunderson. This is the work of the digital griot that tells stories of technology, placing blackness and black women within the narrative of technological engagement.

The young women’s use of technology to free the prisoners also reflects the activism of Afrofuturism, resembling the Black Lives Matter movement’s use

of Twitter to circumvent mass media's failure to report on the growing number of unarmed African Americans killed at the hands of vigilantes and police officers. Where Kodwo Eshun appears somewhat incredulous at the lengths African Americans had to go to in the 1960s—not simply to protest, but to riot, in order to be seen as fully human—Black Lives Matter has shown that we still must protest, and have recently rioted, in order to achieve this. The question of human rights and the use of technology at the center of the struggle for recognition of African Americans' full humanity suggests that the term *human* is not a lost cause for Monáe after all. While she troubles the category of human, her attempts to unite the past and the present, not simply jettison the past for a grab at an ahistorical future, suggest that she is not ready to leave humanity behind. As a digital griot, she makes these connections, achieving what Alondra Nelson called for, an African diasporic experience that is "rooted in the past, but not weighed down by it, contiguous, yet completely transformed."<sup>65</sup>

This desire to retain a connection to the past can be seen in the tracing of revolution through various historical moments in Monáe's "Q.U.E.E.N." video. The rhetoric of revolution is carried through the lyrics, the visual, and other markers of the Civil Rights movements of the mid-twentieth century. This time period is visually marked in video via the hair and makeup of the backup dancers as well as the spot-lit background and James Bond-style suit that Monáe wears during the rap portion of the song. Lyrics such as "I march because I'm willing and I'm able" highlight the continuing importance of activism in this near future that also recalls the past. As Monáe asks the listener, "Will you be electric sheep, electric ladies, will you sleep or will you preach?" we recognize that she is speaking primarily to women, and the song serves as a call to action for us to carry forward the "musical revolution" of Wondaland.<sup>66</sup> In this set of binaries, electric sheep are juxtaposed with the rebellious and powerful electric ladies,<sup>67</sup> and sleeping with preaching. While this call to "preach" calls to mind the role the black church played in the activism of the 1950s and 1960s Civil Rights movement, it also refers to the still contentious debate about the role of women in the church within the African American Baptist tradition. Just as music serves as the key to political movement in that historical moment, with songs such as "We Shall Overcome" serving as a source of strength and unity for activists, the "musical weapons program" of "Q.U.E.E.N." is the major tool by which the underground revolution is enacted, and it is a revolution that is at once concerned with both race and gender.

Monáe's revolutionary rhetoric and imagery also echo the Black Arts movement, the artistic wing of the Black Power movement, which roughly

spanned 1965–75 and celebrated black diasporic identity, rejecting the western cultural aesthetic. Poets, playwrights, and critics such as Addison Gayle Jr., Etheridge Knight, and Larry Neal wrote during this period of the need to develop a “Black aesthetic” that eschews the white lens through which black artwork and experience had been filtered. Neal describes the aesthetic as “a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology” that allows “Black people to define the world in their own terms.”<sup>68</sup> It is equally marked by “the destruction of the white thing, the destruction of white ideas, and white ways of looking at the world.”<sup>69</sup> Aligning with this rhetoric, Monáe’s music and videos make war on white American culture and western culture at large to dismantle systems of power. This can be traced through several key moments in the music video accompanying “Q.U.E.E.N.,” such as the aforementioned voiceover that introduces the viewer to the landscape of the future. This voiceover that speaks for the time council museum has a British accent. This, along with the accompanying classical music introducing the viewer to the exhibit, represents the western cultural aesthetic and acts as a framework designed to contain the danger of the “notorious leader . . . and her dangerous accomplice.”<sup>70</sup> It is this aesthetic that Monáe’s group must ultimately transgress to achieve freedom.

The museum suggests that the western cultural aesthetic can only appreciate Monáe’s art within the confines of this space, and the attempt to interpret Monáe using this white framework interrupts the full force of her production, limiting her, trapping her. Echoing Larry Neal’s critique of the western cultural aesthetic as inherently flawed and lifeless,<sup>71</sup> Monáe transforms this lifelessness into a form of “suspended animation” that imprisons her and her band mates/fellow revolutionaries. Her lyrics question the label “freak” and the ways in which her inability or lack of desire to conform to the dictates of the white aesthetic mark her as culturally inferior. “They call us dirty ‘cause we break all your rules now.”<sup>72</sup> Monáe further critiques this aesthetic that would judge her as unworthy in the following lyrics: “They be like: Ooh, let them eat cake / But we eat wings and throw them bones on the ground.”<sup>73</sup> Where white heterosexist western culture asserts that queenhood be interpreted via the lens of European royalty, in this case via the history of Marie Antoinette as referenced by the phrase “let them eat cake,” Monáe rejects this cultural framework by claiming a remixed version of queenhood. The passive elements of the reserved leadership of the monarchical figure embedded in the word “queen” are transformed into an active agenda of resistance that rejects the monarchy entirely and the cultural framework from which it emerged. While she rejects the western cultural aesthetic, she simultaneously insists on a black identity that consumes wings rather than cake, and refuses to respect

the space imposed on her by the framing of the museum by “throw[ing] them bones on the ground.” In addition, throwing the bones to the ground recalls the central and southern African divinatory act of “reading the bones,” also present in the Hoodoo of the black Atlantic, which is a system of knowledge production that is marked as outside the bounds of western reason.<sup>74</sup> The lyrics, “My crown too heavy like the queen Nefertiti / gimme back my pyramid / I’m tryna free Kansas City,”<sup>75</sup> remind us that she rejects the European framework that would position her as Marie Antoinette. Instead, Monáe envisions herself as Nefertiti. In taking on the role of powerful female figure that is decidedly black African, Monáe embraces a black feminist position that rejects the western cultural aesthetic residing in pockets of unchecked privilege within white feminism.

This rejection of the white aesthetic extends to Monáe’s references to the Black Power movement in “Q.U.E.E.N.” The Black Panthers are invoked by the presence of the black men flanking Erykah Badu as Badoula Oblongata. The men are dressed in suits, with sunglasses and berets, poised with their legs far apart, taking up as much space as possible and with their arms crossed in front of their chests in a gesture of defiance and strength. Where the Black Panthers would be clad in black, these men are dressed all in white, representing how their reality has been staged and filtered through the lens of the museum that seeks to present them as captured and safe for its audience of curious onlookers. They have literally been whitewashed.

However, while Monáe takes up the criticism of the western cultural aesthetic, she does not wholly reproduce the Black Arts movement or the Black Power movement. As feminists such as Michele Wallace, Cheryl Clarke, Barbara Smith, bell hooks,<sup>76</sup> and Dwight McBride have pointed out during and in the decades since these movements, they were heavily marked by sexism and homophobia. Wallace, for example, notes sexism in the depictions of black masculinity that she terms the myth of the Black Macho. “The picture drawn for us over and over again is of a man who is a child, who is the constant victim of an unholy alliance between his woman and the enemy, the white man. It is an emotional interpretation but it has also been used by the contemporary black man to justify his oppression of the black woman, to justify his getting ahead by walking over her prostrate body.”<sup>77</sup> This rhetoric that casts black women as conspirators with white masculinity to oppress black men is one that Monáe rejects. Her songs and videos build an alternate future movement wherein men and women work together to fight oppression. Monáe’s “Project Q.U.E.E.N.” is not one in which women are servile to their “kings,” but rather one in which women can lead revolutions. This is marked not just by Monáe singing that she “wants to be” queen, but by naming herself the head of Won-

daland, an organization that has set its sights on racial, sexual, and gender liberation. Women clearly hold positions of authority within her organization, as Erykah Badu's presence as Badoula Oblongata suggests. However, Monáe's rule is not a simple reversal of the gendered order in which one leader in a hierarchy emerges. When she first awakens, dressed in garments chosen for her, one supposes, by the museum's curators, she is wearing the garb of a military leader. However, when we see her dancing with the other members of Wondaland, there are moments in which she is dressed identically to the other female singers and dancers. Marked sartorially by sameness, Monáe is not the sole Q.U.E.E.N. of this video. Her movement is one with flashes of non-hierarchical structure.

Equally critiquing the way queer people are denied humanity, Monáe's oeuvre joins a lineage of black feminists who have also confronted the homophobia of the Black Power and Black Arts movements as well as contemporary expressions of this in the African American community. Where many in the Black Power movement saw homosexuality as "a genocidal practice . . . [that] does not produce children . . . [or] birth new warriors for liberation,"<sup>78</sup> feminists like Cheryl Clarke note that this reading of homosexuality as a threat because of the inability of same-sex couples to produce children assumes that "one's only function within a family, within a relationship, or in sex [is] to produce offspring."<sup>79</sup> While arguing that many black gay and lesbian people raise children and remain deeply involved with their families, Clarke also notes that continued adherence to the Christian fundamentalist view of sex as "sin" has contributed to the ongoing homophobia. With lyrics such as "They call us dirty 'cause we break all your rules now," Monáe's critique of the notion of an inappropriate or "dirty" sexuality aligns with Clarke's thoughts. This criticism of homophobia further critiques the church with Monáe's use of the "brother" in the lyric "Say, Brother, can you save my soul from the devil?" Where she previously indicts the white cultural aesthetic and the desire to contain the "danger" she presents, her lyrics indicate she is now speaking to the black public who would judge her.<sup>80</sup> Her refrain questioning her status as "freak" builds on the critique of homophobia more explicitly citing that Monáe likes "the way she wear her tights" and "I love watching Mary."<sup>81</sup> Questioning if she is "good enough for your heaven?" Monáe expressly critiques the homophobia that can be found in some African American Christian thought, while also echoing McBride's criticism of construction of a monolithic "black community" that overlooks the history and contributions of gay and lesbian African Americans.<sup>82</sup> As she "remixes" histories, Monáe continues the theme of queer desire from her earlier songs, such as the aforementioned "Many Moons." What had previously been expressed as non-heteronormative love in the re-

lationship between android Cindi Mayweather and her human lover now becomes a different queer relationship in which Monáe expresses her desire for Mary's body.

By echoing some aspects of the Black Arts movement's criticism, but failing to replicate its more problematic aspects, Monáe performs the work of the digital griot who fades out old voices, such as the homophobia-laden rhetoric of Eldridge Cleaver, Frances Cress Welsing, and other Black Power and Black Arts movement figures, to layer in the perspective of cultural critics such as Smith, hooks, and McBride, giving their ideas an increased platform within the message. English and Kim note that Monáe's remix represents a "funk cut," a response to the "uncut" or purely masculine funk of Sun Ra, George Clinton, and Parliament by the introduction of Monáe's feminine and feminist critique.<sup>83</sup> Monáe takes inspiration from these performers, while also innovating in areas both within the music and the apparatuses supporting and producing the music and videos:

In embracing her role as the mediator between artist and label, between androgyny and *Vogue*, between androids and humans, between capital (the haves) and the working class (the have-nots), and between technoculture and live performance, Monáe creates a sound and persona that are far more feminist, as well as more willingly commercial and more self-consciously amalgamated than were George Clinton and P-Funk and their uncut funk. We should not forget, however, that her narrative—complete with futuristic alter ego, space, and time travel, and gender play—owes a great deal to Clinton and P-Funk, itself an artist's collective of its time.<sup>84</sup>

This impulse to remix, to take only what you need, to discard what is no longer useful, is the work of the digital griot as a "canon maker. A time binder."<sup>85</sup> While the digital griot's work is inherently intergenerational, sifting as she does between temporal locations, she is bound to no one specific generation, nor to any particular generation's vision of the future. She can "bind" the visions and goals of various eras and define her own vision of blackness and its goals for liberation by creating her own canon. Alexander G. Weheliye notes how this mix is possible in his study on the uses of time and the physicality of the sonic in the work of Ralph Ellison, W.E.B. DuBois, and contemporary DJs in *Phonographies: Sonic Grooves in Afro-Modernity*: "If, in Ellison, history appears in the form of a groove, then the mixing tactics of DuBois and DJs provide ways to noisily bring together competing and complementary beats without sublimating their tensions."<sup>86</sup>

CONFRONTING THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL GAZE  
AND ANTI-TECHNOLOGICAL BLACKNESS

Part of the revolutionary potential of Janelle Monáe as digital griot is her ability to layer these “competing and complementary beats” to critique previous historical moments and their continuing impact on the present. For instance, “Q.U.E.E.N.” recalls and critiques the nineteenth-century pseudoscience that sought to prove black inferiority by examining every body part. Indeed, the exhibit of the frozen bodies of the rebels echoes the display of Saartje Baartman.<sup>87</sup> The positioning of Badoula Oblongata’s body at the beginning of the video further supports this claim. While she is positioned as the leader of the three revolutionaries she stands beside, clearly planning some sort of response, Oblongata’s back is to the viewing audience, and her buttocks thrust toward us. In this way we focus not her role as a leader within the organization but rather on her body.

However, this anthropological discourse is disrupted by the music, inserting a revolutionary and technological narrative into the disturbed linear one. For instance, the skull is transformed from a marker of the anthropological gaze to a literal tool of liberation. It is the skull used as a record player that frees Monáe from the prison attempting to define, sanitize, and contain her. This skull-as-record player, which features a golden tooth as the needle that translates the grooves into liberating vibrations, recalls the grill, a marker of the “thug.” This constitutes a radical reclamation of the gold tooth from marker of otherness to one of liberation. Where Van Veen argues that “the violence and capitalist bling of ghetto realism” that traps blackness into one confining identity and that Afrofuturism provides an “escape hatch” from this trap, by adopting the gold tooth as the mechanism for escape, Monáe does not seek to distance herself from the “bling of ghetto realism.”<sup>88</sup> She reclaims and transforms that marker. Again, Monáe returns to the struggle to define blackness as fully human.

Pundits, such as Geraldo Rivera, have argued that markers of “thug” culture like the gold tooth or the hoodie, somehow divorced from race, are responsible for the loss of young African American lives.<sup>89</sup> Those making this argument claim that it was not his race, but rather Trayvon Martin’s choice to wear a hoodie that resulted in his death, for instance. However, the hoodie, or the gold tooth, cannot be divorced from race. The importance lies in what the hoodie comes to represent, particularly when clothing a black body, a “thug.”<sup>90</sup> According to arguments of this type any marker of thug life, be it a hoodie or baggy pants, is enough to cheapen the value of the life of the black man wearing it. The “Q.U.E.E.N.” video critiques this argument and other argu-

ments made about blackness, about femininity, and sexuality via the repeating chorus that continually asks “Am I a freak . . .” What white culture might read as a marker of disposable life, the gold tooth in the context of the video is transformed from a marker of class and race that dehumanizes blackness in the eyes of white America to a tool of liberation. White America’s definition of the gold tooth does not constitute an identity to be escaped in this video. The tooth itself becomes a signifier that transmits a liberatory signal, a vibration that crosses synapses to connect the past and the present; a signal that demonstrates how technological engagement, when paired with knowledge of history, and an awareness of the present combine to create a force of social liberation. This marriage of the transformation of both technology and its attendant racialized narrative is the power of the digital griot.

## CONCLUSION

Monáe’s revolutionary digital griot uses technology as means of liberation from the prison of the museum. Technology alone, however, does not provide the necessary freedom. To be sure, it is technology that is used to contain and de-weaponize the movement of the rebel leader and her fellow revolutionaries. Rather, it is a complex usage of technology that acknowledges race, gender, sexuality, class, and history, that brings together echoes from the past, challenges of the present, and hope for the future. Despite the time council and the museum’s best attempts to end the rebellion, the voiceover notes: “Researchers are still deciphering the nature of [the musical weapons program in the twenty-first century] and hunting the various freedom movements that Wondaland disguised as songs, emotion pictures, and works of art.”<sup>91</sup> It is the rebellion’s ability to code their resistance in ways indecipherable to the machine of western culture that allows them to continue their underground movement. This indecipherability resides in the “weaponization” and other creative uses of musical technologies, what Mark Dery referred to as “B-Boy bricolage.”<sup>92</sup> This is the notion that creative reuses of “street style” and technological refuse can be remade into “high style” and have the power to subvert the status quo. As Dery notes, the cyberpunk adage that the “street finds its own uses for things” has a long tradition within African American culture. It is Henry Louis Gates Jr. who points out that “the Afro-American tradition has been figurative from its beginnings.”<sup>93</sup> Those cultural fragments that might have been overlooked by western culture are recuperated within Wondaland’s resistance. The skull with the gold tooth is transformed into a record player to become the literal mechanism of the rebels’ liberation. Where some might read this as a move that concretizes blackness as solely

embodied, we might instead read the skull record player as a moment that rewrites historical narratives of blackness as anti-technological, that raids the museums of the past that have showcased the bodies and body parts of Africans and African Americans, denying them full humanity, and reinvents these bodies into literal technologies of liberation.

.....  
CASSANDRA L. JONES is an assistant professor of Africana Studies at the University of Cincinnati. Her research at the intersection of race, gender, technology, and speculative fiction examines memory and futurity, postcolonial identity, and metaphors of technology in Afrofuturist texts. She has contributed to the edited collections *The Tube Has Spoken: Reality TV and History* and *The Child in Post-Apocalyptic Cinema*.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to the many people who have helped me at the various stages of planning, writing, and editing this essay: Merri Lisa Johnson, Desiree Rowe, Esther Godfrey, Araceli Hernández-Laroche, Maria Francisco Montes, Angela C. Fitzpatrick, Ana Grujic, Adrienne Hill, Michael DelNero, Rachel Dean-Ruzicka, Vanessa Cozza, Clare Lemke, Elizabeth J. Fleitz, Rosalind Sibielski, Therí A. Pickens, and Kelly L. Watson.

#### NOTES

1. Ytasha L. Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2013), 9.
2. Michael Martin, "Janelle Monáe," *Interview Magazine*, April 28, 2009.
3. John Akomfrah, "The Last Angel of History," YouTube video, 45: 12, posted by seriouscatalog, February 15, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yIVuTqiGCyo>.
4. Anna Everett, *Digital Diaspora: A Race for Cyberspace* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009).
5. Paul D. Miller, *Rhythm Science* (Cambridge: Mediawork-MIT Press, 2004).
6. D. Fox Harrell, "Digital Soul: The Computer, Imagination, and Social Change," *The Root*, March 24, 2014, [http://www.theroot.com/articles/culture/2014/03/digital\\_soul\\_the\\_computer\\_imagination\\_and\\_social\\_change/](http://www.theroot.com/articles/culture/2014/03/digital_soul_the_computer_imagination_and_social_change/).
7. Examples of technologies used on black women's bodies include the endless experimentation on the HeLa cells collected from Henrietta Lacks; the techniques used to cure vesicovaginal fistula developed by Dr. James Marion Sims on enslaved women who were forced to undergo multiple surgeries without the use of anesthesia; the radiation experiments conducted on African American men, women, and children between 1944 and 1994; or the biochemical weapons developed and deployed by South

Africa's Chemical and Biological Warfare Programme to kill anti-apartheid protesters and keep the black majority in line. Rebecca Skloot, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (New York: Broadway Books, 2010); Harriet A. Washington, *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Harlem Moon, 2006).

8. Adam J. Banks, *Digital Griots: African American Rhetoric in a Multimedia Age* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011).

9. Banks, *Digital Griots*, 3.

10. Banks, *Digital Griots*, 4.

11. Banks, *Digital Griots*, 12.

12. Adam J. Banks, "Scholarship," *Dr. Adam Banks*, last modified January 13, 2014, <http://dradambanks.net/dradambanks/Scholarship.html>.

13. Banks, *Digital Griots*, 79.

14. Danny Alexander, "Janelle Monáe's Roots in One of Kansas City's Most Historic—and Troubled—Neighborhoods," *Pitch*, last modified October 21, 2010, <http://www.pitch.com/kansascity/janelle-monaes-roots-in-one-of-kansas-citys-most-historic-andmdash-and-troubled-andmdash-neighborhoods/Content?oid=2200471>.

15. Janelle Monáe, "March of the Wolfmasters," YouTube video, 1:33, posted by Erik Chowbay, July 13, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P2DChn7Rhaw>.

16. Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 12.

17. Brianna Edwards, "Bree Newsome Opens Up about Taking Down Confederate Flag on SC Statehouse Grounds," *The Root*, last modified June 30, 2015, [http://www.theroot.com/articles/news/2015/06/bree-newsome\\_opens\\_up\\_about\\_taking\\_down\\_confederate\\_flag\\_on\\_sc\\_state\\_capitol.html](http://www.theroot.com/articles/news/2015/06/bree-newsome_opens_up_about_taking_down_confederate_flag_on_sc_state_capitol.html).

18. "Moving on the Wires: Black Girls Code in NYC + Afrikadaa/Afrofuturism + Afrofuturism 2070 + Black Girls are from the Future + Blogging while Brown . . ." *Futuristically Ancient* (blog), June 18, 2013, <http://futuristicallyancient.com/2013/06/18/moving-on-the-wires-black-girls-code-in-nyc-afrikadaaafrofuturism-afrofuturism-2070black-girls-are-from-the-futureblogging-while-brown/>.

19. I use the term *witches brew* in a variety of ways. First is the connection to speculative fiction and its cadre of supernatural creatures, including werewolves, vampires, and witches. Second is the historical connection of femininity and feminine power with sorcery. This is of interest as Afrofuturism and Janelle Monáe are both concerned with interrogating forms of discrimination and female empowerment in realms of technology. Third is an allusion to Miles Davis's 1968 album, *Bitches Brew*, which as a jazz-funk fusion album is representative of the influence of his young wife on Davis's musical form. This album's title represents the misogyny in the African American community to which Monáe speaks back. That the name *Witches Brew* became *Bitches*

Brew at the behest of Davis's then wife, Betty Davis, does not lessen the misogyny of the title because, as previously mentioned, *witch* already has a negative connotation where women are concerned. The fact that the album is named so because it represents a new musical style, with the added implication that this style is dangerous, brought about by the machinations of a powerful woman in his life, a bitch, is not lessened by the woman herself approving or even suggesting the name. See <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2010/sep/05/miles-davis-bitches-brew-reissue>.

20. D. Fox Harrell, "Digital Soul: The Computer, Imagination, and Social Change," *The Root*, last modified March 24, 2014, [http://www.theroot.com/articles/culture/2014/03/digital\\_soul\\_the\\_computer\\_imagination\\_and\\_social\\_change.html](http://www.theroot.com/articles/culture/2014/03/digital_soul_the_computer_imagination_and_social_change.html).

21. Anna Everett, "The Revolution Will Be Digitized," *Social Text* 71, no. 2 (2002): 125–46.

22. Alexander G. Weheliye, "Feenin," *Social Text* 71, no. 2 (2002): 21–47.

23. Mark Dery, "Black to the Future," in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, ed. Mark Dery (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 180.

24. Alondra Nelson, "Introduction: Future Texts," *Social Text* 71, no. 2 (2002): 4–6.

25. Nelson, "Introduction," 8.

26. Octavia E. Butler, "Amnesty," *Bloodchild and Other Stories* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005), 147–86.

27. Renina Jarmon, *Black Girls Are from the Future: Essays on Race, Digital Creativity, and Pop Culture* (Washington, DC: Jarmon Media, 2013), 81.

28. Janelle Monáe, "Q.U.E.E.N. feat. Erykah Badu," YouTube video, 6:04, posted by janelleMonáe, May 1, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tEddixS-UoU>.

29. Miller, *Rhythm Science*, 21.

30. Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *The Cybertcultures Reader*, ed. David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy, 291–324 (New York: Routledge, 2000).

31. Banks, *Digital Griots*, 87.

32. Banks, *Digital Griots*, 88.

33. Monáe, "Q.U.E.E.N."

34. Haraway, "Cyborg," 293.

35. Daylanne K. English and Alvin Kim, "Now We Want Our Funk Cut: Janelle Monáe's Neo-Afrofuturism," *American Studies* 52, no. 4 (2013): 218.

36. Just as Angela Davis has been reduced to a politics of fashion, the machinery of celebrity has attempted, somewhat unsuccessfully, to co-opt Monáe. In fact, she has served as the face of Cover Girl Cosmetics. However, she has also been cited as a mini-mogul in her ability to retain control of her image in her partnership with Jay-Z and her development of Wondaland. Carrie Battan, "Janelle Monáe," *Pitchfork*, September 4, 2013.

37. Angela Y. Davis, "Afro Images: Politics, Fashion, and Nostalgia," *Critical Inquiry* 21, no. 1 (1994) 37-39, 41, 45.
38. Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995), 2.
39. Janelle Monáe, "Many Moons: Official Short Film," YouTube video, 6:31, posted by janelleMonáe, October 3, 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LHgbzNHVg0c>.
40. Monáe, "Many Moons."
41. Monáe, "Many Moons."
42. Monáe, "Many Moons."
43. Monáe, "Many Moons."
44. Mayweather's queer love also joins a legacy of blues women who deviate from gender expectations, particularly those whose lesbianism was a means by which they portrayed the "wild woman." Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude 'Ma' Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 39.
45. Cheryl Clarke, "Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance," in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall, 242-51 (New York: New Press, 1995).
46. Moya Bailey has also discussed this video and Monáe's "Tightrope" video as means of challenging ableism and demonstrating the liberatory potential of disabled bodies. Moya Bailey, "Vampires and Cyborgs: Transhuman Ability and Ableism in the Work of Octavia Butler and Janelle Monáe," *Social Text*, last modified January 4, 2012, [http://socialtextjournal.org/periscope\\_article/vampires\\_and\\_cyborgs\\_transhuman\\_ability\\_and\\_ableism\\_in\\_the\\_work\\_of\\_octavia\\_butler\\_and\\_janelle\\_monae/](http://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/vampires_and_cyborgs_transhuman_ability_and_ableism_in_the_work_of_octavia_butler_and_janelle_monae/).
47. Monáe, "Q.U.E.E.N."
48. Sun Ra, *Space Is the Place*, YouTube video, 1:10:37, posted by Kerry Farmer, March 4, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xQEPB2IFVBw>.
49. Graham Lock, *Blutopia: Visions of the Future and Revisions of the Past in the Work of Sun Ra, Duke Ellington, and Anthony Braxton* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 14.
50. Sun Ra, *Space*.
51. Amiri Baraka, "Rhythm Travel," in *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora*, ed. Sheree R. Thomas, 113-15 (New York: Aspect-Warner Books, 2000).
52. Portia K. Maultsby, "Africanisms in African American Music," in *Africanisms in American Culture*, ed. James E. Holloway, 326-55 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).
53. *The Language You Cry In*, directed by Angel Serrano and Alvaro Toepke (San Francisco: California Newsreel, Video, 1998).

54. Edna M. Edet, "100 Years of Black Protest Music," *Black Scholar* 7, no. 10 (July–August 1976): 38–48.

55. Tobias C. Van Veen, "Allegories of Afrofuturism in Jeff Mills and Janelle Monáe," *DanceCult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture* 5, no. 2 (November 2013): 7–41, see 10.

56. Van Veen, "Allegories of Afrofuturism," 10.

57. Van Veen, "Allegories of Afrofuturism," 10.

58. Lock, *Blutopia*, 14.

59. Nelson, "Introduction," 9.

60. Monáe, "Q.U.E.E.N."

61. Rana A. Emerson, "Where My Girls At? Negotiating Black Womanhood in Music Videos," *Gender and Society* 16, no. 1 (2002): 116.

62. For more discussion on black humanity, protest, the grievable life, and its relationship to science fiction, see Cassandra L. Jones, "Not the Little Blonde Innocent You Picture: Race and 'Innocent' Girlhoods in *The Hunger Games* Fandom," in *The Child in Post-Apocalyptic Cinema*, ed. Debbie Olson, 207–20 (New York: Lexington Books, 2015).

63. Banks, *Digital Griots*, 79

64. Ben Williams, "Black Secret Technology," in *Technicolor: Race, Technology, and Everyday Life*, ed. Alondra Nelson and Thuy Linh N. Tu, 154–76 (New York: NYU Press, 2001).

65. Nelson, "Introduction," 8.

66. Monáe, "Q.U.E.E.N."

67. As described in the lyrics to Monáe's song "Electric Lady" on the same album.

68. Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," *Drama Review: TDR* 12, no. 4 (1968): 29.

69. Neal, "Black Arts Movement," 30.

70. Monáe, "Q.U.E.E.N."

71. Neal, "Black Arts Movement," 31.

72. Monáe, "Q.U.E.E.N."

73. Monáe, "Q.U.E.E.N."

74. John M. Janzen, *Ngoma: Discourses of Healing in Central and Southern Africa* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1992).

75. Monáe, "Q.U.E.E.N."

76. It is important to note McBride's critique of bell hooks as a voice speaking against homophobia in the African American community. While hooks is critical of the notion of an exceptional black homophobia, she also excuses homophobia in the African American community as mere "play" for masculine bonding purposes.

77. Michele Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (New York: Verso, 1999), 22.

78. Cheryl Clarke, "The Failure to Transform: Homophobia in the Black Community," in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith, 197–208 (Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, 1983).
79. Clarke, "Failure," 199.
80. Monáe, "Q.U.E.E.N."
81. Monáe, "Q.U.E.E.N."
82. Dwight M. McBride, "Can the Queen Speak? Racial Essentialism, Sexuality and the Problem of Authority," *Callaloo* 21, no. 2 (1998): 365.
83. English and Kim, "Funk Cut," 228.
84. English and Kim, "Funk Cut," 228.
85. Banks, *Digital Griots*, 3.
86. Alexander G. Weheliye, *Phonographies: Sonic Grooves in Afro-Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 13.
87. Harriet A. Washington, *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Bodies from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 82.
88. Van Veen, "Allegories of Afrofuturism," 10.
89. "Geraldo Rivera: I was right about the hoodie," *Huffington Post* (blog), July 19, 2012, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/07/13/geraldo-rivera-hoodie-trayvon-martin\\_n\\_1671146.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/07/13/geraldo-rivera-hoodie-trayvon-martin_n_1671146.html).
90. Rashawn Ray, "'If Only He Didn't Wear the Hoodie . . .': Selective Perception and Stereotype Maintenance," in *Getting Real about Race: Hoodies, Mascots, Model Minorities, and Other Conversations*, ed. Stephanie McClure and Cherise Harris, 81–93 (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2015).
91. Monáe, "Q.U.E.E.N."
92. Dery, "Black to the Future," 185.
93. Quoted in Dery, "Black to the Future," 185.