Epilogue

Janelle Monáe’s Collective Vision

In many of the everyday images of eccentricity that populate our collective consciousness, we see the confirmation of the stereotype of the eccentric as isolated, and even sociopathically single-minded: the slippers-in-the-snow distracted genius of Facebook’s founder Mark Zuckerberg, as played by Jesse Eisenberg in the film *The Social Network* (2010); or Natalie Portman, possessed by the human-animal erotic in *Black Swan* (2010). Among Post-Soul protagonists, we might consider the socially isolated Birdie, passing and on the run, in Danzy Senna’s *Caucasia*, or the caustic observer Gunnar Kaufman, one in a long line of caustic observers biding their time and on the lookout for opportunity, in Paul Beatty’s *White Boy Shuffle*.

Despite the common image of the eccentric as antisocial outsider, the eccentrics I’ve explored here are sharp of mind, fierce in spirit, and infectiously interested in other people, and ultimately in something bigger than all of us: imaginative freedom. In the music of P-Funk, there has always been an interest in us, freeing our minds, so that our asses can follow. Despite his sometimes crippling shyness and odd behavior, Michael always wanted to rock with us. Stevie wants to share his inner visions, Meshell invites us on her Soul spaceship. Prince, George Clinton, and Meshell Ndegeocello are leaders of bands, as well as individual performers. Their invitation is, despite the resistance of previously limiting narratives of nation, family and racial belonging. Counter to the idea of eccentrics as isolated in their own off-centered galaxy of one, these eccentric musicians are deeply interested in inciting collective freedom through grooving collaboration.

And as the twenty-first century enters its double digits, Post-Soul eccentricity has an impassioned representative in Janelle Monáe. We can see the spirits of crunk collectivity and Afropunk in Monáe’s work. In the fever dreams and science fictions of Monáe, she rallies for imaginative freedom and shared struggle by extraordinary and truly strange means. She has created the character Cindi Mayweather, sometimes androgynous android heroine and muse at the center of her concept EP *Metropo-
lis, Suite I: ἀ e Chase (2007) and her full album ArchAndroid (2010), to argue for the rights of the marginal. Monáe tells the Guardian, “ἀ e android represents the minority, whether it’s a black person, an immigrant, or coming from another country.” She does so, though, with a palate of songs and styles and samples that are extraordinarily polychromatic and quirky. From the new wave love song “Cold War” to the folksy-dreamy “Oh, Maker” to the tight James Brown funk of “Tightrope,” Monáe is hard to pin down sonically. Her voice can move from sweet, belting, rocking, and funky to deadpan. Monáe is also hard to classify by her critics, and for once this seems to suit them just fine. Already with a strong alternative hip-hop, funk, and Soul following in the United States, Monáe made her first tour in the United Kingdom in the summer of 2010, taking it by storm, with sold-out seats and five-star reviews. ἀ e London Times says that she’s like “the biggest pop star from a planet you’ve never heard of.” ἀ e London Observer calls her an “extraordinary cyber diva with a mission,” “Dizzying,” and a “Supernova.” And (happily for me), the Guardian calls her “POP MUSIC’s HOTTEST NEW ECCENTRIC.”

ἀ e success of Janelle Monáe takes us to a new expansiveness, embodying the best memories of the last fifty years of black musical performance, along with a commitment to invention and intergalactic freedom. In the highly theatrical, self-consciously citational performance strategy of many of the performers discussed in this book, Monáe moves from David Bowie’s high-concept theatrics to Prince’s loose-spined, funky splits and squeals to Missy Elliott’s rolling b-girl worm to Grace Jones’s coolly imperious robot, crossing lines of race and gender, as well as genre, in her allusions and appropriations. She might break into a Temptations snap-tight bop, and then break out into a Bad Brains burst of manic energy, stage diving, her quiff coming undone, working up a sweat. Her winsome, too-long-to-be-real (I-think) eyelashes also take us back to an earlier era; they can be lowered into a Marilyn Monroe smolder, broken only by goggle-eyed David Byrne goofiness. She has an androgynous, high-style sense of fashion, including asymmetrically striped oxford shoes, uniforms, and tuxedos—all always in black and white, “a hint of Grace Jones . . . minus all the flesh,” says critic Kitty Empire. Monáe’s style, as well as her musical content, does stretch the physical and artistic territory that many women in Soul, funk, and R&B have been allowed by this still male-driven industry. She is not afraid to sweat, or let her hair come undone, dancing with a manic energy that signals both pleasure and purpose.
For Monáe, eccentricity is both an aesthetic and a tactic. Indeed, she has circumvented many of the constraints of the business through her collective vision and creativity. After studying musical theater in New York at the American Musical and Dramatic Academy, she went to Atlanta, attracted to it by Outkast’s artistic circle. There, she helped form her Afrofuturist collective, the Wondaland Arts Society, whose manifesto declares, “We believe truth can be broken down with the following formula: ought = Love + Imagination. We believe songs are spaceships. We believe music is the weapon of the future. We believe books are stars.” She and the other members of Wondaland call themselves “thrivals”: “individuals who won’t allow race or gender to be a barrier to reaching their goals.” To get her music heard, she’s used multiple tactics: distributing her first EP from the trunk of her car and using social networking spaces like MySpace to gain a following. And she has found alliances and mentors in some of the most productive folks in the music industry: Sean “Puffy” Combs, Big Boi, Prince, and Erykah Badu. Yet she insists on her own artistic independence, and stays connected to her collective. Together with Wondaland, she creates the concepts for her own videos, and is at work on a Broadway musical and graphic novel based on her android muse, Cindi Mayweather.

Despite her commitment to the fantastic, Monáe is unafraid to take on explicitly political positions. She says that she wears uniforms onstage to avoid the pressures of gender conformity, and as a salute to the working class: “My mother was a janitor, my father drove trash trucks, my stepfather works at the post office. . . . I worked at Blockbuster. I was a maid, so I connect with those who every day are struggling.” In 2008, she filmed a Rock the Vote video for Bad Boy Records, naming health care and education as the most important aspects of the campaign, and she speaks out in her interviews against sexism and homophobia. In the song “Many Moons,” she salutes a wide-ranging list of outcasts, drug addicts, and other outsiders, some reflecting the everyday hatred of internalized racism: “Black girl, bad hair / Broad nose, cold stare.”

Her video for “Tightrope” is set in the Palace of the Dogs, a fictional (?) asylum that she insists is in fact a real place that has imprisoned Jimi Hendrix, Charlie Chaplin, and also herself. Monáe leads a band of tuxedoed “patients” in a funky tightrope shimmy through its gray concrete halls, an androgynous James Brown, complete with horn section and pompadour. Their grooving survival seems to be despite the surveillance
of two hooded, video-faced ghouls and a Soul Nurse Ratched, who is prone to slipping into a little bit of tightroping herself, when no one is looking. The video is a little bit *Cuckoo’s Nest*, a little bit *Rocky Horror*, a little bit of *Night at the Apollo* and might very well capture what it’s like to be black and creative and queer in the twenty-first century, where freedom is still a tightrope walk. If the exuberant group dance scenes are a sign, freedom is clearly the magic of making music together, in the celebration of a lively horn section, in Big Boi’s solo, in the shaking and slipping of wigs, and an impromptu electric slide. Kanye might have been a little lost in his own “Dark Fantasy” in 2010, but Janelle Monáe imagines the possibility for liberation as a collective vision.

Within the video, Monáe interrogates the strange familiarity of prisons and asylums—both far away and very much a part of our lives. The plot of escape is featured in countless films, television shows, and music videos—from *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest* to *Frances* to *Alias* and *Lost*. Yet everyday culture distances prisons and prisoners from our everyday experience. As Angela Davis points out, we are asked to forget about prisons and not imagine ourselves or the ones we love there—even if our loved ones are there, and even if we ourselves have been there. At the same time, the prison and asylum, in their shared history, have become the mechanism for self-surveillance and control in the larger social sphere. In this cultural moment, when incarcerations of black and brown folks are at epidemic levels, all of our own imaginations are at stake. As Monáe sings, “You’ve got to dance up on them haters / keep getting funky on the scene.”

In “Tightrope,” Monáe reminds us of the many ways the prison industrial complex infiltrates our lives by means of surveillance and the heightened fear of black bodies in motion. We watch as Monáe and her band of tightropers stop and pose as the nurse and faceless guards pass by. To an onlooker, they are wasting time gossiping and posing. But we know that this pose is a tactic, the mask of the trickster. The dancing is smooth, light, and infectious, that gospel-inflected lyric “Whether you’re high or you’re low” punctuated by the gesture of a bird taking flight, at once comic and graceful—a little bit of Man Tan, a little bit of P-Funk, flying out of the underpass. “Tightrope” celebrates the power of creative rebellion in the music itself. Dance and music are both metaphors for creative freedom to be protected, and the tools to protect creative freedom. Monáe is the ringleader in the highly theatrical spirit of George
Clinton, yet she also acknowledges the trickiness of rebellion in the public eye, and in this way is profoundly feminist in her exposure of the pressures to be heard, and the psychic costs of vulnerability.

Monáe’s creation, the android Cindi Mayweather is another eccentric tactic used to address issues of power specific to the music industry: the dehumanization of the commercial marketing of black performance, the ways that capitalism manages to appropriate the underground, and the always present push back of that underground to keep creating. Set in the year 2719, *Metropolis, Suite I: the Chase* is located in a moment of war and capitalism gone wild, “partying robo-zillionares,” and “riotous ethnic, race and class conflicts and petty holocaust,” according to the liner notes. Cindi is the only android among the pack whose programming includes “a rock-star proficiency package and a working soul.” Cindi must use her extraordinary skills of rock and soul to escape and locate freedom. In the video for “Many Moons,” a song from *Metropolis* that features Cindi, Monáe imagines a catwalk of androids (all played by Monáe herself). The androids strike various poses of black style: sultry, haughty, cool, funky. The androids seem to be modeled on past black performances: a chorus of identical Cindis echo Grace Jones’s use of an army of selves in her *One Man Show*. Another android shakily prepares herself for the stage, combing her long back wig, a visual echo of Tina Turner in “What’s Love Got to Do with It?” We watch as the androids are all to be sold to the highest bidder by their “madam,” herself an android, played by Monáe. The auction is the site of multiple exchanges of power and desire, and we watch while the androids are traded between men and women competing for power and visibility. In the background, providing the soundtrack and entertainment for the android auction, is a live band, also played by Monáe and her band. But this rocking Cindi, sampling inspiration from black performance mavericks Prince, Little Richard, and Michael Jackson, has the power, with the help of her audience, of interrupting the auction. As she breaks into an M.J. moonwalk, the musician Cindi brings an audience of screaming female fans to such a fever pitch that she interrupts the auction, taking the attention of the bidders away from the sale, until this final rocking Cindi explodes in a lightning bolt of energy.

“Many Moons” captures the rebellious energy of black queer musical performance, but it also speaks to the power of black performance to meet and produce the demands of pleasure seekers, sometimes to the point of their own destruction. Indeed, in the video productions, co-
conceived by Monáe and her Wondaland collective, she explores both the radical energy of performance and the psychic costs of fame. In the video for “Cold War,” a diva (Cindi? Monáe herself?) breaks down in the course of singing, the camera still whirring, taking in her tears. (As we watch the singer’s increasing psychic distress, I’m reminded of Yoko Ono’s performance art piece *Cut Up*, as audiences participate in cutting apart the black knit dress of a passive Ono, leaving her exposed as a camera takes it all in.) In her rendition of “Smile,” performed on *Billboard’s* “Mashup” series, Monáe’s performance evokes the earnestness of Michael Jackson’s ballad singing style on “Ben,” and the raw emotionalism of Judy Garland’s own version of “Smile,” reminding us of the vulnerability of the performer. She lampoons the larger-than-life hysteria of the performer who knows that she has the audience in her pocket, and who just might be going a little too far, in her performance of “Let’s Go Crazy” at the 2010 BET Awards—performing her parody of Prince right in front of the Purple One himself, to his amusement. In this performance she is both Prince, successfully quare performer, and his persona, *Purple Rain*’s α e Kid, isolated and a little lost to himself, but still capable of explosive performance.

Monáe brings her funky, energized, and citational approach to the ongoing questions posed by Post-Soul eccentricity. How do we negotiate the tightrope of black authenticity to create original art? How do we keep creating a future that includes all of us, when the crises of the present and past have the power to stop us in our tracks? How do we deploy our bodies, in their quareniness, to create positive change? Monáe continues the forward and backward thinking of the eccentrics before her while keeping in mind the shared humanity of all of us.