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21. The Politics of World Building

Heteroglossia in Janelle Monáe’s Afrofuturist WondaLand

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Abstract
This essay approaches world building from a political point of view, arguing that the way in which imaginary and immersive transmedia storyworlds are constructed in fantastic genres reflects a fundamentally political position. In the context of 1970s countercultures and emerging identity politics, the cultural movement of Afrofuturism provided black artists with a way of reversing the racist bias so prevalent in science-fiction and fantasy narratives. In the 21st century, Janelle Monáe is an artist who has reinvigorated this movement with a series of albums, music videos, and stage performances that adopt the cultural logic of transmedia world building, but do so in a way that challenges the traditional ontological structure of such secondary worlds. By combining Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia with Hardt and Negri’s concept of the multitude, this essay argues that Monáe’s work represents an important challenge to the white-centric traditions of world building, even if her success simultaneously must rely in part on the cultural logic of neoliberalism.

Keywords: science fiction, world building, Afrofuturism, transmedia, Janelle Monáe, Mikhail Bakhtin

World building has become the name of the game in commercial science-fiction and fantasy franchises. As digital convergence continues to blur the boundaries between media and as multiple forms of participatory culture proliferate, the focus in fantastic fiction has shifted ever more strongly from linear storytelling to the development of coherent, recognizable, and ostentatiously branded storyworlds. While there is hardly anything novel about the commercial franchising of successful characters and narrative
environments, the hegemonic appropriation and commodification of world-building practices from fantasy and science-fiction traditions has come to typify the age of the global media conglomerate, from the Disney-owned Marvel Cinematic Universe to HBO’s cross-media juggernaut *Game of Thrones*. Most of these popular imaginary worlds offer mappable and therefore “knowable” environments, with a strong focus on the kind of consistency and coherence that pleases fan cultures, while also thriving commercially as part of the larger political economy in which these multiple texts circulate as branded commodities (Johnson 2013, 6-7).

In this context of imaginary worlds that are both commercial properties and sites of audience participation, the need for forms of world building that are politically productive grows ever larger. Janelle Monáe’s work offers a provocative example of just this kind of process. The prodigiously talented singer, dancer, songwriter, producer, arranger, painter, and futurist has produced a body of work over the course of the past six years that is remarkable for its range, its technical proficiency, its musical eclecticism, and its unique take on the concept of world building. As a musician working with sf tropes, her world building is far more loosely organized than the fantastic worlds in media that are more preoccupied by narrative. Her concept albums, music videos, and stage performances contain recognizable narrative elements, but they also remain open to a wide variety of possible readings, while individual tracks can take on different meanings outside the context of an album. Monáe’s work has attracted a great deal of attention from critics and scholars, not only because of the role she has played in the revival of Afrofuturism (see: English and Kim 2013), but also because her socially conscious perspective has been enthusiastically embraced by leftists of all stripes for its progressive ideals.

The main question I will engage with in this chapter is whether Monáe’s work does indeed offer the kind of transgressive potential that her many fans have so eagerly identified in it. After first establishing the inherently political aspects of world building, I will describe how Afrofuturism has expanded the political potential of fantastic storyworlds through black artists’ appropriation of sf tropes. While the Afrofuturist movement peaked in the 1970s, in the context of multiple social, cultural, and political movements that challenged the assumptions of “dominant ideology”, 21st-century neoliberalism poses a new set of challenges for artists attempting to resist or subvert hegemonic capitalist culture. I will examine Monáe’s “neo-Afrofuturist” project from this political perspective, using Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of “heteroglossia” to help describe how the unstable and decentered nature of her “sonic fiction” (Eshun 2003, 288) creates worlds that operate by a different logic than that of narrative subcreation.
But while Monáe’s pop art may, on the one hand, be read as one of the dangerous “possible worlds” (Gilbert 2014, 192) that can help us imagine worlds outside of capitalism, it simultaneously fits the cultural logic of neoliberalism with uncanny precision. The remarkable flexibility of her posthuman persona certainly destabilizes and decenters the basic coordinates of her imaginary world, but this very process perfectly complements the context in which her work circulates in commodity form. By claiming a space within globally popular entertainment culture, Monáe’s transmedia work productively navigates the critical tension between hegemonic corporate franchises and the subversive practices associated with a resistant culture of appropriation.

In our post-democratic societies of control, organized through rhizomatic circuits of biopolitical power (ibid., 1-4), “we need to create weapons that are not merely destructive but are themselves a form of constituent power, weapons capable of constructing democracy and defeating the armies of Empire” (Hardt and Negri 2005, 347). The question is: how to develop and deploy fantastic world building as just such a weapon? While most major storyworlds in fantasy and sf have quite obvious anti-capitalist elements, the narratives typically strive to contain and delimit them. At the same time, processes of commercial branding and franchising further reinforce this unstable but largely effective inoculation. For, although the “textual poaching” associated with fan fiction and other forms of audience participation has done much to destabilize and subvert this dynamic (see also: Matt Hills’ chapter in this volume), such activities have become, in many ways, even more marginal than they were before the 21st-century mainstreaming of post-genre fantastic fiction. Or, to put it more accurately, fans’ individual creative acts of subversion have become increasingly irrelevant as the media industries’ business model has shifted from a logic of exposure to one of “long-tail engagement” (Napoli 2011, 15) that better fits our digital environment of constant immersion in connective networks (see: Van Dijck 2013; Rose 2011).

Mark J.P. Wolf’s study of imaginary worlds takes as its point of departure Tolkien’s concept of “subcreation”, which Wolf views as an inseparable combination of process and product resulting in the development of a fictitious “Secondary World” (2012, 24). The “secondariness” of this imaginary environment is a question of degree rather than of absolute separation, depending on the ways in which certain familiar defaults are transformed into imaginary alternatives: “Fictional worlds can be placed along a spectrum based on the amount of subcreation present, and what we might call the ‘secondariness’ of a story’s world then becomes a matter of degree,
varying with the strength of the connection to the Primary World” (ibid., 25). Wolf then offers an impressively detailed historical overview of many types of imaginary worlds, with varying levels of subcreation, each of which is, to some degree, separated from the ways in which the “Primary World” is commonly represented. Wolf’s definition of world building clearly relies on the assumption of an unambiguous distinction between what constitutes a “realistic” representation of a diegetic world and a fictional environment that defamiliarizes its audience from realistic defaults by altering a number of these coordinates.

Navigating imaginary worlds thus becomes a primarily epistemological endeavor: the audience’s knowledge of a supposedly unified and coherent “primary” reality is required to establish the crucial degree of secondariness that Wolf defines as central to world building. This notion has obvious similarities to Darko Suvin’s classic definition of cognition as the defining characteristic of sf, describing both the genre’s aesthetics and its political values based on the “cognitive dissonance” it creates in relation to one’s knowledge of historical reality. Missing from Wolf’s theorization of world building are its profoundly ontological and political implications: the ways in which the dialectical tension between Primary and Secondary Worlds can serve to destabilize absolute distinctions between past and future, subject and object, history and myth. As Mark Fisher has argued, it is precisely in this ontological dimension of imaginary worlds that we may find “that there are futures beyond postmodernity’s terminal time” (2013, 53) that can be expanded, negotiated, and explored from a political perspective.

Besides this explicit deviation from realist narrative conventions, which is widely shared by large portions of genre fiction, a second crucial feature of subcreation identified by Wolf is that of scale. World-building franchises are typically developed not only across multiple texts, but most commonly also involve multiple media. For example, the world building that followed the release of Star Wars was as much the result of the production of toys, video games, television broadcasts, comic books, novelizations, and role-playing games as it was the mere process of producing filmed sequels. This proliferation of world-building activities transforms not only the nature of any individual fictional narrative and its associated sets of practices, values, and markets; it also destabilizes the prevailing discourses of individual authorship, especially once the audience starts contributing actively to the development of the imaginary world (see Brooker 2002).

A helpful concept to explain more clearly the political implications of world-building is Mikhail Bakhtin’s “heteroglossia”: a term meant to indicate
the coexistence of multiple varieties within a single signifying system, destabilizing any central conception of “unity” or single meaning (1981, 263). Bakhtin initially applied the concept to the novel as a literary form made up of radical and uncontainable difference, in contrast to scientific discourse or religious dogma, which he described as “authoritative” in the sense that the reader must yield to a single “centripetal” meaning. The cultural and political role of the novel—or, by extension, any other modern work of art—should be to draw the very concept of the authoritative into question by foregrounding its own hybrid nature and consequent “centrifugal” multiplicity of meaning.

This concept is especially helpful when we turn our attention to transmedia world building as a practice that is defined by this very tension between the authoritative desire to unify on the one hand and the hybrid, constructed nature of “heteroglot” utterances on the other. Most of the energy deployed by writers, producers, and critics in relation to world building has been directed towards the centripetal notion of the “authoritative”: the ways in which imaginary worlds become mappable, measurable, and navigable spaces with coherent chronologies, characters, and events, even when they cross over into other media. Frequently measured by the yardstick of “fidelity”, transmedia adaptations like Tolkien’s world of Middle-earth or the Star Wars franchise have established elaborate narrative canons that identify clearly which texts are considered part of the “real” imaginary world and that are discarded by the storyworlds’ “authoritative” center.

This desire for coherence and measurability in world building has been central to most academic work on the topic as well, even when it takes into account not only the profusion of these narratives across media, but also the contributions made by active audiences through fan fiction and mash-up culture. Jonathan Gray’s Show Sold Separately (2010), for instance, rightfully emphasizes the importance of peripheral paratexts such as trailers, spoilers, and other intertexts that John Fiske described as “secondary” and “tertiary” (1987, 117-126). But Gray’s focus on the narrative coherence across media consistently privileges texts that add to the development of an authoritative storyworld in a constructive and systematically organized manner. Gray strongly favors fan-created material that contributes to the narrative’s thematic coherence, such as a mash-up video that “invites viewers to contemplate [a] character” by adding “the time and reflective space [...] that the films never truly provide” (2010, 156). By contrast, Gray dismisses the paratextual existence of a “Gotham City pizza” in relation to the film The Dark Knight as a “mere marketing tool” whose sole function is to “signal the size of the film” (p. 209-210).
This exclusive focus on narrative and aesthetic coherence has far-reaching political implications. The desire to create, navigate, or otherwise engage with an imaginary world that is stable and coherent expresses a desire to understand what Wolf describes as the Primary World in similar terms. By contrast, a centrifugal approach shifts our focus to an environment defined by multiplicity, transformation, fluidity, and irresolvable internal contradictions. Such a form of world building rejects post-Enlightenment foundations organized around a metaphysics of presence in favor of what Iris Marion Young has described as a “politics of difference” (2010, 229)—a model that applies Jacques Derrida’s critique of the subject as grounded in difference from an imagined “other” to a sociopolitical framework based on radical diversity and constant (internal and external) forms of negotiation and mediation. If we therefore wish to discover existing cultural practices that productively employ the critical potential of imaginary worlds, we must turn away from fantastic franchises informed primarily by the “authoritative” discourses of centripetal narrative traditions and start exploring the more radical heteroglossia of world-building practices whose form of organization is itself more explicitly centrifugal.

Afrofuturism and “Hauntological” World Building

While the paradigmatic imaginary worlds of The Lord of the Rings and Star Trek have resulted in a generic tendency in fantasy and sf towards politically reactionary forms of cultural nostalgia, technocratic notions of progress, or combinations of both, more progressive alternatives have emerged that have taken world building in productive new directions. One such phenomenon has been the modest but influential revival of Afrofuturism, the cultural movement that emerged among black artists, authors, and musicians in the 1960s and 1970s as “speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of 20th-century technoculture” (Dery 1994, 736). The Afrofuturist project took it upon itself to appropriate sf imagery, which had been overwhelmingly white in its mainstream cultural representations, and use it to reimagine a past as well as a future in which people of color played central rather than marginal roles. From the elaborate mythology articulated by avant-garde jazz musician Sun Ra to the spectacular stage shows of 1970s bands like Parliament-Funkadelic, and Earth, Wind and Fire, Afrofuturist culture has adopted and expanded upon many familiar sf tropes.
Afrofuturism opened up a perspective on world building that fits Derrida’s “hauntological” model of an infinitely confused and deeply ambiguous sense of historicity (1994, 10), demanding to be interpreted as an attempt to “assemble counter memories that contest the historical archive, thereby situating the collective trauma of slavery as the founding moment of modernity” (Eshun, 2003, 288). Rather than constructing a narrative world that stood apart from a single shared “Primary World”, Afrofuturism instead deployed concepts and iconography from fantastic genres to fracture the metaphysical model that has privileged one form of identity over another. By reversing the existing hierarchy, Afrofuturist art intervened in sf’s long-standing tradition of presenting color-blind futures that were “concocted by whites and excluded people of color as full subjects” (Bould 2007, 177), while, at the same time, using forms that challenge Western culture’s focus on narrative conventions like closure, linear causality, and teleological organization.

When compared to a more conventional sf franchise like Star Trek, Afrofuturism as a world-building practice is fundamentally similar in its desire to question the present by speculating about the future. Roddenberry’s utopian vision of humanity’s future has been heralded for its incorporation of ethnic and cultural diversity, but it remains a storyworld “based on a thoroughly Western vision of the importance of material wealth and technological modernization” (Booker 2008, 198). Afrofuturism rejects this incorporation of racial minorities into a larger framework of liberal capitalist humanism, offering instead a radical re-envisioning of the past in which this central dynamic is reversed. This alternative framework is strengthened by its inherently centrifugal form: while Star Trek, like most sf storyworlds, has been driven throughout its history by narrative media like episodic television drama, cinema, and literature, musicians have been the primary guiding force for the multiple “sonic fictions” of Afrofuturism (see: Eshun 1998). Because of this, the funky, groove-driven musical forms within which Afrofuturist discourse was articulated and circulated were as destabilizing as the speculative pasts and futures it expressed.

**Entering WondaLand: Janelle Monáe’s world building**

While the cultural work of Afrofuturists has survived in several forms within mainstream pop music, in which its subversive influence is noticeable in places as unlikely as the *oeuvre* of Michael Jackson (see: Steinskog 2015), its usefulness for world building as a cultural form that facilitates political
imagination requires a more inclusive framework. The difference between Janelle Monáe’s work and most phallocentric forms of Afrofuturism is the very distinction Gilbert makes between “formations which only constitute defensive enclaves and those which seek to widen their sphere of activity” (2014, 198). Unlike the “Afrocentric, masculinist, and messianic overtones” of George Clinton’s Parliament-Funkadelic collective (English and Kim 2013, 220), Monáe’s collection of on- and off-stage android and human personas is as much post-gender as it is posthuman, playfully walking the tightrope of celebrity culture and performativity.

Her ongoing series of concept albums, together with her “emotion pictures”, stage performances, and media appearances offer a new, more radical perspective on world building that builds on Afrofuturism as much as it does on 21st-century convergence culture and post-genre fantastic fiction. While certain elements across these media cohere loosely into narrative patterns and recognizable structures, these strands are interwoven with many others that frustrate any attempt to separate fictional characters, locations, and futures from a Primary World that insistently infects them. In this sense, Monáe’s WondaLand, both as a description of a central location within her imaginary world and as the name of her Atlanta-based artist collective, resonates strongly with Lewis Carroll’s Secondary World, in which Alice is never sure what she is going to be from one minute to another, and in which the question “Who in the world am I?” constantly frustrates our desire for any sense of “authoritative” stability.

The story Monáe tells in her work is elliptical and endlessly ambiguous, evading straightforward storytelling and instead constantly embellishing its imaginary world with new ideas, clues, and puzzles that are spread out across various media. The lavishly illustrated booklet that accompanies the “Special Edition” of Monáe’s first official release, *Metropolis: The Chase Suite* (2008), includes a primer on the artist’s imaginary world and its central character, Monáe’s android alter ego Cindi Mayweather. When read together with the booklet illustrations, liner notes, the elaborate “official short film” for the track “Many Moons” and the singer’s many interviews on the project, her imaginary world seems to take shape along familiar, easily recognizable patterns: a post-apocalyptic dystopian future ruled by “evil Wolfmasters”, an oppressed class of androids exploited by an oppressive upper class, and a heroic android protagonist whose programming includes a rock-star proficiency package and a working soul.

By appropriating a wide variety of familiar tropes from sf, Monáe’s first transmedia project establishes a basic narrative situation, but one that merely serves as an entrance point into an imaginary world of competing
allegorical patterns. Neither the lyrical content nor the elaborate music video offers any kind of narrative resolution, as Cindi is last seen in a disembodied “cyberpurgatory” state. Instead, her central figure of the android as an oppressed worker class of “othered” bodies relates back not only to the Afrodisaporic trauma of slavery and institutionalized racism, but also provides a remarkably flexible and slippery signifier that opens up any number of identification processes along lines of gender, sexuality, class, and religion: “androids are the ultimate exploitable ‘other,’ a human-like being who does not need to be afforded the rights of humanity” (Brandt 2014). Unlike the general tendency in hip-hop music, pan-Africanism, and many other strands of black culture to insist on “keeping it real” by rejecting whiteness and “adhering to the standards of the ‘black community’” (Rambsy 2013, 205), Monáe’s posthuman android points instead to the socially constructed nature of identity.

While the central narrative of Cindi Mayweather has hardly progressed on the two albums, five “emotion pictures”, and countless live performances, the scope of Monáe’s imaginary world has continued to expand, as has her sustained use of this remarkably fluid android alter ego. In the liner notes accompanying her 2010 album The ArchAndroid, we learn that Monáe is, in fact, a time-traveler from the year 2719 whose stolen DNA was used for the creation of Cindi Mayweather. In interviews, she has embellished this idea further, explaining that there is a hidden “time traveling machine” in her adopted city of Atlanta, through which many influential black musicians have passed, herself and hip-hop duo Outkast included (Lester 2014). This playful, self-reflexive, and thoroughly fluid relationship to her main character and alter ego demonstrates not only her authorial claim upon her imaginary world, but also the constant negotiations this requires: by deliberately blurring the lines between her many “selves,” it becomes impossible to separate her Secondary World of Wolfmasters, androids, bounty hunters, and “robo-zillionaires” from our own Primary historical environment.

Monáe’s world building therefore resonates productively with Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia: the interweaving of perspectives, constantly shifting back and forth between her own contemporary persona and her 28th-century alter ego, creates a paradoxical tension between past, present, and future in which definitions of identity and lines of causality continuously break down. Having absorbed Afrofuturism’s chronopolitical take on fantastic fiction’s cognition and estrangement, Monáe short-circuits the authoritative and centripetal systems that impose any number of boundaries: not only those between her science-fictional Secondary World and a more
“Primary” universe, but any form of limitation on the individual as part of a larger totality informed by power. This seemingly infinite multiplicity of references to other texts and personas obviously includes not only her embodiment of “the best memories of the last fifty years of black musical performance”, but also spins elastically “from David Bowie’s high-concept theatrics to Prince’s loose-spined, funky splits and squeals [...] to Grace Jones’s coolly imperious robot” (Royster 2013, 187).

But this world-building strategy based on heteroglossia and radical eclecticism does not result in any breakdown of meaning. Instead, both the fictional WondaLand described in verse on The ArchAndroid, the dreamlike “world inside/where dreamers meet each other”, and the actual WondaLand Arts Society, the Atlanta-based collective of which Monáe’s projects are among the most visible products, strengthen and reinforce one another. On her website, in interviews, and in the credits for her albums and music videos, the artist consistently emphasizes not only her own membership of the WondaLand collective, but also the fact that her work is the result of collaborative participation rather than purely individual accomplishment. The most utopian element in her imaginary world thus also connects back directly to a real-world counterpart that is similarly inclusive in its aspirations. At the same time, the heteroglossia of her storyworld is more than just a multiplicity of voices and styles contained therein: it is also the heterogeneous end product of a fully collaborative process undertaken by a functioning artist collective.

As tempting as it is to exaggerate the ideological implications of Monáe’s socially conscious world building, she also clearly owes much of her success to her compatibility with the cultural logic of neoliberal capitalism. Her desire to make her alter ego Cindi Mayweather an all-purpose stand-in for those suffering oppression simultaneously runs the risk of separating this critique from any specific power formation or set of social relations. While the progressive values she articulates in terms of race and gender come through loud and clear, her oblique perspective on capitalism is far more ambivalent. The attention and expense that goes into the production, packaging, and marketing of her albums demonstrates the kind of commodity fetishism that facilitates her successful circulation as a commercial pop icon. This is aided immeasurably by her impressive abilities not only as a musician and performer, but as brand manager of her public persona: her trademark tuxedo and pompadour are convenient and stable signifiers that function effectively as commercial selling points, and are featured with great regularity on the covers of fashion and lifestyle magazines.
While Monáe is always careful to present herself as a rebellious outsider from a working-class background, her comments about her own role as a celebrity within popular culture do not in any way criticize the capitalist system itself:

I also wanted to own something: I’ve always had this thought of owning my own label, of being in charge of my words, my art, everything you hear. My goal wasn’t to be the most famous person overnight—it was to make music on my own terms, develop myself and understand if my words were necessary to young people like myself and to make my family proud. (quoted in Shepherd 2013)

Her words demonstrate the careful cultivation of her own public persona as “independent” and “alternative” rather than the product of some global entertainment conglomerate. She has indeed been remarkably successful at projecting this image; even though she is signed to Sean “Diddy” Combs’ Bad Boy Records, itself a subsidiary of media conglomerate Universal Music Group, swooning journalists and academics have repeatedly pointed out that she has nevertheless managed to retain full creative freedom as an independent artist.

While Monáe’s progressive values and independent-mindedness may have had radical and subversive implications in the past, neoliberal capitalism has proved to be more than a little hospitable to this brand of identity politics. As many critics by this time have pointed out, “‘alternative’ and ‘independent’ don’t designate something outside mainstream culture; rather, they are styles, in fact the dominant styles, within the mainstream” (Fisher 2009, 9). Slavoj Žižek has also argued repeatedly that there is no such thing as a “capitalist worldview” (2013, 55): capitalism can absorb and contain any movement aimed against it, including feminism and the civil rights movements, with very little effort—as long as the existing economic and political systems remain unchallenged. Therefore, even if Monáe’s work were more explicitly anti-capitalist in its content, this too would matter little within an industry run by capitalists more than happy—as Lenin famously quipped—to sell us the rope with which we would hang them.

While these contradictions obviously diminish some of the more exaggerated claims concerning Monáe’s semi-messianic image, her unique approach to world building together with the inclusive spirit of her neo-Afrofuturist vocabulary still puts her at the forefront of politically productive popular artists working in fantastic genres. While incorporating Afrofuturism’s critical and subversive response to fantastic fiction’s tendency towards
racist and white-centric storyworlds, her world building mobilizes not only an imaginative form that can challenge and question these traditions, but can also engage with them joyfully and productively. Her immaculately produced, highly accessible, and commercially viable music is not only a collection of branded commodities, but also an explicit celebration of “non-productive” human activity. By placing her contagious call to dance, enjoyment, and creative collaboration in a storyworld that frames these things as acts of political resistance, her music becomes an act of defiance within neoliberalism’s “relentless capture and control of time and experience” (Crary 2013, 40). While popular culture will quite obviously never change the political organization of post-democratic neoliberal capitalism by itself, it can still contribute to the vital work of imagining alternative futures without simultaneously repressing the very problems it would dissolve (Jameson, 2005, 265).

On its website, the WondaLand Arts Society expounds its fundamental belief in “something futuristic and ancient that we call WISM”, a force made up of Love, Sex, Wisdom, Magic, and Wonder. This mantra resonates not only with the various cultural movements from the post-1968 moment of emerging countercultures and progressive politics, but also with 21st-century radical politics and its insistence on love and hopefulness as vital political forces. While moving beyond the essentialist humanism and technocratic frameworks of traditional sf, Monáe's project can be read in alignment with Hardt and Negri's utopian description of “multitudinous energies” alongside their adoption of Spinoza's description of joy:

The path of joy is constantly to open new possibilities, to expand our field of imagination, our abilities to feel and be affected, our capacities for action and passion. In Spinoza's thought, in fact, there is a correspondence between our power to affect (our mind's power to think and our body's power to act) and our power to be affected. The greater our mind's ability to think, the greater its capacity to be affected by the ideas of others; the greater our body's ability to act, the greater its capacity to be affected by other bodies. And we have greater power to think and to act, Spinoza explains, the more we interact and create common relations with others. Joy, in other words, is really the result of joyful encounters with others, encounters that increase our powers, and the institution of these encounters such that they last and repeat. (Hardt and Negri 2009, 379)

While the affective experience of joy is clearly one of the primary goals of Janelle Monáe's blissfully eclectic neo-Afrofuturist soul music, the
inclusiveness of her approach to style, genre, and identity does indeed seem to facilitate and even organize exactly this kind of “joyful encounters with others”. There may be nothing inherently political in the momentary communal release of infectious dance music, but, when experienced in the context of her unstable imaginary world, it can provide an entrance point towards more radical political perspectives. Both her imaginary world-building practices and their real-life community-building counterparts meanwhile give structural shape to “the institution of these encounters such that they last and repeat”, even in their supposedly low-impact pop-cultural forms. In this sense at least, her work does contribute in its own modest way to the development of forms, narratives, and identity formations that help us think beyond the confines of capitalist realism and neoliberalism’s purely instrumental ontology.

Works cited


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