PERFORMING POWER, PURSUING PAUSE:

VOCALITY, IDENTITY, AND LISTENERSHIP IN JANELLE MONÁE'S *DIRTY COMPUTER*

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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This thesis evaluates the musical and cultural components of singer-songwriter Janelle Monáe's 2018 album and "emotion picture" *Dirty Computer*. I argue that Monáe engages audience members from all walks of life through her Afrofuturistic plotline, imagery, sounds, and statements. I situate understandings of voice and vocality as discussed by Weidman, Meizel, and Malawey within scholarly frameworks of race, gender, and sexuality, particularly "naming" impositions discussed by Hortense Spillers and "figures of sound" described by Nina Sun Eidsheim. I apply these frameworks to Monáe's album, which follows protagonist Jane 57821 through her escape from white supremacist captors and explores her many life experiences as her captors work to erase her memories. In the case of Janelle Monáe, who, like Jane 57821, identifies as Black, queer, and female, these identities co-exist and are explicitly thematized throughout her album. I argue Monáe's direct incorporations of these identities in *Dirty Computer's* plotline hold even deeper meaning through her musical choices. I analyze three tracks from *Dirty Computer*—"Crazy, Classic, Life," "Pynk," and "Make Me Feel"—in a manner that considers multiplicity of meaning and

nuances of characterization and representation not only in the album as a whole, but within each track. I propose that listeners, particularly white listeners, consider their own processes of listening. Through my analyses, I demonstrate the need for listeners to "pause" and account for their own biases, as recommended by Eidsheim.

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sound. My trumpet teachers, Brian McWhorter and Sarah Viens, and the brass faculty at UO were supportive of my musicological pursuits from the get-go and helped me work across disciplines. I also extend my thanks to Dr. Nina Sun Eidsheim for her invaluable contributions to this project through her monograph *The Race of Sound* (2019) and her meeting with me during the 2020 American Musicological Society Conference.

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Finally, I extend my heartfelt gratitude to Janelle Monáe for her music. Through Monáe's gifts of music and storytelling, I find myself learning more about the world, perspectives I do not hold, and my own experiences, biases, and intricacies every single day. I cannot wait to witness her creative brilliance continue to shine in the years to come.

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STATEMENT OF LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This thesis was written at the University of Oregon, a public research institution located on Kalapuya Ilihi, the traditional indigenous homeland of the Kalapuya people. Following treaties between 1851 and 1855, Kalapuya people were dispossessed of their indigenous homeland by the United States government and forcibly removed to the Coast Reservation in Western Oregon. Today, descendants are citizens of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde Community of Oregon and the Confederated Tribes of the Siletz Indians of Oregon, and continue to make important contributions in their communities, at UO, and across the land we now refer to as Oregon.[1]

[1] This native land acknowledgement is borrowed from the Native Strategies Group at the University of Oregon.

CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Janelle Monáe's 2018 album and "emotion picture" *Dirty Computer* explores a complex tale of Black, queer, and female-identifying Jane 57821's incarceration and eventual escape from captivity that mirrors workings of a white-supremacist dystopian state. Identifying Jane as a "dirty computer," her captors work through her memories, presented as the album's tracks, one by one to cleanse her mind and make her submit to their will. The tracks vividly paint scenes from Jane's life, from her queer, pansexual, and polyamorous sexuality, as shown in "Pynk" and "Make Me Feel," to her experiences of discrimination and violence by the oppressive state, as illustrated in "Crazy, Classic, Life." We, the viewer-listeners, see the complexity of Jane's life in plain sight not just through imagery, but through the differing vocal performances and musical settings in each of the album's tracks and emotion picture's memory scenes.

Throughout the album, we explore the nuances of protagonist Jane's memories and varying yet intersecting identities through an array of vocalization styles. The human voice, as heard and experienced in Monáe's album, is a marker of identity and agency, a tool for expression that can be molded and mediated by the vocalizer *and* listeners. Monáe's album also positions Jane's voice as a physical entity and metaphysical tool to reclaim her own agency when that power has been stripped away. These seemingly dichotomous ways of positioning the voice as both as material and ideal have been expanded in recent works by Eidsheim, Wallmark, and others, to include voice as a product perceived by the listener. Contemporary voice scholars continue to show the social intricacies involved in the act of vocalizing.

In my own research on voice and vocality in popular music, I have found myself situated at an intersection of varying research methods and perspectives through which to understand popular music in a scholarly manner. I was particularly struck by the lack of interdisciplinary conversation among musical studies (musicology and music theory, in particular), women's, gender, and sexuality studies (WGSS), and Black studies, especially in their definitions and understandings of body and embodiment. Many of today's popular music artists like Janelle Monáe have produced works that hold significant potential for cross-disciplinary analysis and dialogue. In this thesis, I bridge these disciplinary gaps and offer a guide for how listeners can negotiate these differing frameworks to understand the complexity of Janelle Monáe and other queer of color musical artists' creative expressions as multifaceted and malleable, a journey not only for our protagonist, Jane 57821, but for listeners representing a broad range of identities and perspectives.

Voice and Vocality

This thesis examines voice and vocality in the contexts of contemporary musicological and anthropological scholarship. I work with a number of scholarly understandings of voice as discussed in varying disciplines of scholarship. I begin first with the overarching definitions of voice that will serve as a backdrop to this discussion. In her entry "voice" from *Keywords in Sound,* Amanda Weidman explains the meaning and origins of two key definitions of the term "voice": 1) as the sound production phenomenon produced by vocal organs of humans and

other animals, and 2) as a "guarantor of truth and self presence."[2] Words do not express single meanings, and speakers hold differing biases and knowledge bases when they listen, just as Eidsheim points out in *The Race of Sound* (2019). These definitions will be crucial in framing the voice for my analytical work. Additionally, using a case study from her fieldwork on female playback singers in Chennai, India, Weidman delineates four ways in which scholars identify vocal production: 1) materiality, 2) technological mediation, 3) performance and performativity, and 4) voicing. Applying these forms of vocal production, she identifies expressions of distinct characters and detachment from the performers' identities. Their voices are celebrated as they embody different characters, therefore skewing the cultural conception of voice belonging to a unitary agent and transparently disclosing the identity of that agent.

Weidman's definitions and analysis show the performative nature of the voice in expressing personas and identities that might not necessarily match one's own identity, a crucial insight that will support my arguments. I intend to use this argument to support my claim that Janelle Monáe actively manipulates vocal techniques that listeners are likely to understand through the filter of race, gender, and sexuality, and other identifiers that differ from her own identities to create distinct characters and affects. I want to clarify the differences between the terms gender and sexuality as I will distinguish them in this thesis. By "sex" (the noun, not the verb), I refer to one's sex assigned at birth based on their external anatomical makeup, using identifiers like "female" and "male." Gender, on the

[2] Amanda Weidman, "Voice," in *Keywords in Sound,* ed. David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny, 232–40 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015): 233.

other hand, describes how one identifies with roles constructed within the post-Enlightenment construction of a gender binary. One's gender and sex assigned at birth may or may not align with each other. When using the terms "women" and "men," I specifically speak to individuals' gender identities. "Sexuality" acknowledges one's attractions, either or both sexually and romantically, and how their attractions align with these cultural conceptions. In sum, biological sex refers to one's biological experience, but gender and sexuality, along with race relate directly to one's embodied experiences within society.

In discussing voice and its relationship to race and the human body, I find it crucial to outline and clarify the history of studies on voice as it relates to social constructions of race and debunk the claim originating in 19th-century anthropology that voice carries essential racial identities. In her article "A Powerful Voice," Meizel defines vocality as "the act of vocalization and the entirety of that which is being vocalized – it is a set of vocal sounds, practices, techniques, and meanings that factor in the making of culture and the negotiation of identity."[3] Meizel constructs a historiographical overview of vocality studies which began as a study of humanity and was used to signify differences among people, particularly on bases of nationality and race. During the Enlightenment, Rousseau identified differences between speaking French and Italian and how they affect singing techniques. As anthropology rose as a discipline under Queen Victoria, concepts of race and nationality (previously reified separately) were brought together in conversations about voice by scholars. 19th-century

[3] Katherine Meizel, "A Powerful Voice: Investigating Vocality and Identity," *A World of Voice: Voice and Speech across Culture* 7 (2011): 269.

researchers and doctors like Duncan Gibb, for one, used timbral descriptors like "powerful," "weak," "twang," "whine," and "metallic" to substantiate now disproven claims that timbral differences between voices were caused by physical differences associated with race and ethnicity. We now understand that race does not affect one's laryngeal anatomy; therefore, vocality, like race, is a social construct. It does, however, show differences in techniques and practices learned and performed by the vocalizers, which vary based on cultural values.

While this thesis incorporates sources that debunk these myths, I draw upon Meizel's contextualization of vocality studies to inform the history and evolution of voice scholarship. In contemporary work with voice and vocality, we must acknowledge Western researchers' placement of physicality in their arguments to justify otherness and perpetuate the objectification of bodies of color, particularly Black bodies.

Nina Sun Eidsheim's 2019 monograph *The Race of Sound* dismantles fallacies related to voice and its relationship to one's racial identity. She argues that listeners innately seek to identify sounds they hear to designate them as "knowable" despite their unknowable natures. Eidsheim proposes the "acousmatic question"—"who is this?"—and claims that listening without regard to this question stems from "the impossibility that the question will yield a firm answer."[4] This question cannot be answered concretely; listeners are, in turn, called to continue to seek information about the voice, its vocalizer, and the

[4] Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009): 3.

contexts surrounding vocalization. From this question, Eidsheim poses three "correctives" that she explains in her introduction and explores extensively through the work: 1) "voice is not singular; it is collective," 2) "voice is not innate; it is cultural," and 3) "voice's source is not the singer; it is the listener."[5] These three correctives and the acousmatic question will serve as the fundamental backbone for my arguments about the cultural elements of vocal performance both in interdisciplinary scholarship as well as my application of these theories to Janelle Monáe's performances in *Dirty Computer*.

We are taught to "hear" race; yet race in itself is a social construct deeply rooted in societal framing and labeling of sounds. We are entrained to identify certain sounds and performance practices as indicative of racial identity based on stereotypes and, in turn, compare perpetuated markers of difference presumed correct because of their social, cultural, and pedagogical enforcement. Vocal products are not, however, inherently tied to racial essence; rather, any perceivable racial markers in a vocal performance are the products of learned technique and behaviors. Eidsheim provides examples of this from differing national schools of vocal pedagogy as well as interviews with voice teachers that encourage their students to "display their inherent ethnicity" despite scientific evidence that has proven that race does not determine physical difference in the human voice.[6] Eidsheim's take on race as it is ascribed to voice and sound substantiate claims made by vocal scholars and performance theorists such as

[5] Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound,* 9.

[6] Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound,* 46.

Jose Esteban Muñoz, whose work considers ways in which queer people of color "disidentify" in order to work within society's expectations. Through these actions, queer people of color control their own performances of gender and sexuality in a society that controls their abilities to exert that control on their own. I aim to spotlight the agency that a performer holds through performance and the deliberate decisions made within performance to present themselves to audiences on their own terms.

Listeners, by the same token, often unconsciously associate certain sounds with racial essences, presuming an answer to the acousmatic question and assigning identity to the vocalizer. Often this serves people well, as it enables us to contextualize who and what we hear, and relating us to the sonic environments. Eidsheim presents a flaw, however: the associations that we make do *not* necessarily mean that our identifications are objectively and inherently true; these assessments are culturally and socially informed. The listener also holds the task of making decisions about *how* to listen. Eidsheim argues that in the act of listening, we should "pause" to consider the broader questions surrounding our own role in seeking *an* answer to the acousmatic question. A single answer is not possible; rather, there are unlimited possible answers to this acousmatic question. She writes, "pausing has the potential to move us from unexamined essentialization to a consideration of our participation in the process of reduction."[7]

[7] Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound,* 182.

The act of pausing also insinuates a wider call for individuals to examine their own privileges and power within society. As members of society, we are active participants just as listeners are actively involved in music making. Through this repositioning of roles, we eliminate the myth of voice as an essentialized and innate entity, and through pause, we consider the social, historical, cultural, and political implications that modify our listening processes. My analyses should be read as contextualizations of Monáe's music that assist in listening processes and explore the deeply intertextual nature of Monáe's music, from use of varying genre tropes to referencing artists and vocalization strategies from all over the spectrum of popular music. By connecting with these different sounds, Monáe, gives listeners opportunities to connect and listen closer in a way that invites the acousmatic question while subverting expectations and zooming in on our listening practices.

In this thesis, I use Weidman and Meizel's definitions of voice and vocality in conjunction with Eidsheim's philosophical take on listeners' roles in associating voice with identity. I identify the vocalist as separate from the listener, but both sources as part of the vocalizing process, just as Eidsheim emphasizes voice being not singular, but collective. In order to thoroughly contextualize vocal processes (recognizing voice as not innate, but cultural), I turn to theories on vocal production as well as embodiment to outline physical processes of not only vocalization, but also interpretation of vocal sound.

As recent scholarship in voice has emphasized materiality of vocal production, scholarly discourse about voice in popular music showcases particularities of voice in pop singing. In her 2020 monograph *A Blaze of Light in*

Every Word: Analyzing the Popular Singing Voice, Victoria Malawey presents a model for discussing voice that brings together pitch, prosody, and quality. Further, she applies her discussion to the popular singing voice in particular, considering the roles of performance practices (e.g., performance of pitch and timbre) and mediation with technology. She clarifies the dimensionalities through which pitch, prosody, and quality intermingle, acknowledging that while pitch holds more objective, pre-set, and measurable indications, quality holds more dimensional fluidity. Prosody, however, covers a wide spectrum, with some elements like phrasing being simpler to decipher and others like motility and micro-level displacements more open to interpretation. Malawey's work explores sonic contributions that signify meaning while assessing possibilities for creating a more distinct and well-defined lexicon and analytical framework for voice studies in contextualizing performance practices within pop music.

In this thesis, I discuss Malawey's descriptions of voice as intention in portraying specific characters, voice and its relationship with language in establishing one's place within a community, as well as voice's place as sonic materiality, borrowing from Eidsheim's argument that voice is an action, not a static noun. I also draw heavily from the vocabulary and framework that she proposes for popular music vocal analysis and applies to varying musical examples. This framework distinguishes vocal functions and their wider meanings without ascribing cultural connotations within analytical rhetoric.

Many scholars have used these discussions of voice and embodiment to address subjective elements within vocal storytelling. In their 2018 article "Embodied Subjectivities in the Lyrical and Musical Expressions of PJ Harvey

and Björk," Lori Burns, Marc Lafrance, and Laura Hawley define embodiment as "The expression of *ideas* in *material form*, and the incorporation of these ideas into a *system*."[8] A system encapsulates the entirety of the sonic elements and their signifiers. Their framework emphasizes intersubjectivity and intercorporeality, relationships with society, culture, and history, and time and space. Embodiment works directly with the voice as the voice expresses ideas as "material manifestation of the words and the music, as well as through the performance and strategic presentation of these expressive materials."[9] Combining Burns et al.'s approach, I theorize that in order to incorporate the body into analysis of vocality, we must acknowledge the body's multifaceted roles in producing the voice, the voice's role in expressing ideas through words, music, and performance/presentation, and the listener's embodied experience, as emphasized by Weidman, Eidsheim, Meizel, and others. The performer, in turn, has agency over identities and what is expressed. While I engage with embodiment most thoroughly in Chapter 3, I root my discussion of voice, performance, and Monáe's storytelling around the body and embodiment within systems of conceptual metaphor.

Embodiment within Black Studies and Beyond

As I incorporate Black feminist and queer theories into my discussion of voice, vocality, and identity, I want to acknowledge my own place in writing this thesis

[8] Lori Burns, Marc Lafrance, and Laura Hawley, "Embodied Subjectivities in the Lyrical and Musical Expression of PJ Harvey and Björk," *Music Theory Online* 14, no. 4 (2008): paragraph 4.

[9] Burns et al., "Embodied Subjectivities," paragraph 5.

as a white, queer scholar. I incorporate quotes from these Black scholars to present their theories directly while bringing their scholarly voices into my analyses. Additionally, I draw from their definitions in contextualizing terms pertaining to race. Often used to describe individuals with ancestry within the African diaspora, when I use the term "Black," I refer to individuals that self-identify as Black based on their racialized experiences within the United States. The term Black has a complicated history within the English language, which E. Patrick Johnson outlines in his entry "Black" from the *Keywords from American Cultural Studies*. As Spillers writes, people identifying as Black have historically been subjected to naming by individuals not marginalized due to their race. Johnson writes, "if the history of the term "[B]lack" has taught us anything, it is that racialized symbols—those that are disparaging and those that are affirming—never quite fade from sight or consciousness but constantly evolve alongside the people who create them."[10] Throughout this thesis, I will adhere to the emerging practice within American journalism of capitalizing the first letter of Black as a symbol of power and acknowledgement of Black experiences' distinctiveness within a racialized society.[11]

I use the term and overarching concept "intersectionality" from Kimberlé Crenshaw's discussion in her 1989 article "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex." Intersectionality refers to overlapping experiences of Black

[10] E. Patrick Johnson, "Black," in *Keywords for American Cultural Studies,* vol. 2, edited by Bruce Burgett and Glen Hendler, 30–34 (New York: New York University Press, 2014): 34.

[11] This practice, made prominent in 2020, is now used in a number of major newspapers and publications, including the *New York Times, the Washington Post,* and the *Associated Press*.

individuals holding other marginalized identities that. With these identities coexisting, these individuals often experience further marginalization. Crenshaw writes, "Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated."[12] This understanding of intersectionality has been expanded upon within Black feminist and queer scholarship, particularly incorporating discussion of the body, a conversation that is particularly prominent when assessing the embodied experiences of Black people in U.S. society.

In "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," Hortense Spillers identifies the human body as a metonymic figure. She famously draws attention to the historically objectified "Black body," stating that "the procedures adopted for the captive flesh demarcate a total objectification, as the entire captive community becomes a living laboratory."[13] Further, Spillers resituates the complexity of the experience of Black bodies as a "private and particular space" that encapsulate a multitude of societal and historical positions.[14] She delineates the tendency of non-Black individuals to try to pin labels onto Black bodies, writing, "The captivating party does not only 'earn' the right to dispose of the captive body as it sees fit, but

[12] Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989): 140.

[13] Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 68.

[14] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 69.

gains, consequently, the right to name and 'name' it."[15] Spillers calls for a reexamination of how roles set by racist and patriarchal structures throughout U.S. history have continued to shut out and further neglect Black women, from rhetorical practices of "naming" to strategically discriminatory legislation. She argues that Black bodies must be considered not only as symbolic of agency, but literally significant in conversations about Black experiences. Historically, studies of the human voice, both directly and in popular discourses, illustrate this naming act that Spillers describes. In this thesis, I use Spillers's theories as a framework for situating voice as a simultaneously metaphoric and physical entity. Spillers's discussion of naming mirrors Eidsheim's "acousmatic question" ("who is this?") and the subsequent "figure of sound" that follows a process of naming, presuming an answer to the acousmatic question. While the acousmatic question engages with a social phenomenon that is not inherently unethical, the act of "naming" involves a deliberate imposition on another's agency using power structures to label the bodies and experiences of people holding less power.

Evelynn Hammonds places Spillers' theories into conversation with women's, gender, and sexuality studies (WGSS) to acknowledge the complexity of Black female bodies and Black individuals' experiences as it relates to the act of voicing in her article "Black (W)holes." Hammonds writes, "disavowing the designation of [B]lack female sexualities as inherently abnormal, while acknowledging the material and symbolic effects of the appellation, we could begin the project of understanding how differently located [B]lack women engage

[15] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 67.

in reclaiming the body and expressing desire."[16] Hammonds calls for a specific type of vocal enactment which she calls a "politics of articulation," which would "build on the interrogation of what makes it possible for [B]lack women to speak and act."[17] She expands upon the significance of confronting the past through such articulation to acknowledge history and bring Black women into the spotlight, saying, "visibility in and of itself does not erase a history of silence nor does it challenge the structure of power and domination, symbolic and material, that determines what can and cannot be seen."[18] In centering queer studies around the body, scholarly discourse as well as conversations outside of classrooms and textbooks hold the power to affirm those bodies that have historically been held captive, thus, in turn, uplifting the experiences and stories that those individuals share with the world. Hammonds's article will substantiate my conversation about the significance of the body and embodiment in discussing voice as it relates to Janelle Monáe's intersectional experiences as a Black, queer, female-bodied individual.

E. Patrick Johnson calls for a queer studies, which he reframes as "quare studies," that focuses on the queer of color bodies and their voices, their stories as their own articulated vocalizations and their experiences as queer and people of color. He writes, "by refocusing our attention on the racialized bodies, experiences, and knowledges of transgendered people, lesbians, gays, and

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[16] Evelynn Hammonds, "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 6, no. 2-3 (1994): 138.

[17] Hammonds, "Black (W)holes," 141.

[18] Hammonds, "Black (Wholes," 141.

bisexuals of color, quare studies grounds the discursive process of mediated identification and subjectivity in a political praxis that speaks to the material existence of 'colored' bodies"[19] In centering queer studies around the body, scholarly discourse as well as conversations outside of classrooms and textbooks can affirm those bodies that have historically been held captive, thus, in turn, uplifting the experiences and stories that they share with the world. Johnson's work presents a call for recognition of intersectional experiences within queer studies, especially when discussing queer people of color. Johnson also, like Hammonds and Spillers, emphasizes the role of the body and its historical treatment as captive and continued societal placement as "other" in the United States. I use Johnson's arguments in conversation with these other Black feminist and queer scholars to situate the role of the body as it applies to hearing and processing voice in the context of Monáe's work.

Just as E. Patrick Johnson proposes a new theoretical framework for queer studies, Matthew Morrison deconstructs the exclusionary practices maintained and perpetuated within the field of musicology in the United States in his article "Race, Blacksound, and the (Re)Making of Musicological Discourses." Morrison introduces the race-based epistemological framework that he identifies as "Blacksound," which he defines as "an integration of historical, material, and hermeneutic analysis of performance, publications, recordings, and other ephemeral technologies vis-à-vis the aesthetic construction of race and racism

[19] E. Patrick Johnson, "'Quare' Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know About Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (2001): 10.

within popular entertainment."[20] As both an "object of study" and a methodology, Blacksound aims to consider the historical, material, and social conditions of music making processes and intersectional experiences emulated in the music's content, production, and reception. As an example, Morrison presents the racist origins of blackface minstrelsy within the parody tune "Old Zip Coon," of which the melody eventually became the popular folk tune "Turkey In The Straw," perpetuating white control and racist stereotypes. Morrison's work calls for new musicological analysis that encapsulates the complexities of the Black experience as portrayed in popular music. Morrison substantiates the need for interdisciplinary musicology that treats Blacksound as unique and complex much like Black intersectional experiences. Through my own analyses in my thesis, I draw upon Morrison's call extensively through incorporation of material and historical elements particular to Black music making practices.

These alternative methodologies serve as guide for me in crafting not only this discussion about Monáe, but in proposing a framework for listening to music while experiencing our self-imposed iterations of Eidsheim's acousmatic question. In recognizing our own biases and disparate perspectives, we each bring distinct manners of listening to the table; however, through Eidsheim's call for pause, we create space for possibility over prescription, listening over naming, and learning over presuming.

[20] Matthew Morrison, "Race, Blacksound, and the (Re)Making of Musicological Discourse," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 72, no. 3 (2019): 789.

Black Narrative Frameworks

With these theories in mind, I turn to the narrative strategies rooted in Black storytelling and music making showcased in *Dirty Computer*. In particular, I observe and reflect upon Afropessimistic and Afrofuturistic narrative frameworks used throughout the album and emotion picture, especially in the three tracks I analyze in this thesis.

Mark Dery introduced the term "Afrofuturism" in his influential 1994 piece "Black to the Future," a collection of interviews with Black science-fiction author Samuel R. Delany, Black musician and author Greg Tate, and Black sociologist hip-hop scholar Tricia Rose. Delany, Tate, and Rose each discuss Black creators' uses of Afrofuturism in their works to showcase how they are seen as "other" by society. Tate notes that "Black people live with the estrangement that science fiction writers imagine."[21] Meanwhile, Delany identifies technology and its use in science fiction storytelling as a sign belonging to white men, inaccessible to non-male and non-white creators; while this has led to a lack of engagement with science fiction as a genre, much opportunity exists for reclaiming and reframing these signs and symbols in an act of resistance, as Rose suggests. Afrofuturism also creates an opportunity for Black creators to depict, explore, and control a future that is tangible given not only the intangibility of their pasts, but also the inaccessibility of knowledge regarding their families' geographical and historical roots. According to Tate, "knowing yourself as a

[21] Mark Dery, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose," in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture,* ed. Mark Dery, 179–222 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994): 212.

[B]lack person—historically, spiritually, and culturally—is not something that's given to you, institutionally; it's an arduous journey that must be undertaken by the individual."[22] This journey has been taken on by a number of artists producing music for audience members of all racial identities, creating opportunities for varying Afrofuturistic visions. In the case of *Dirty Computer,* Monáe, both performatively and conceptually, looks backward into the past and forward into the future at the same time to present, understand, and reimagine her own role within society.

This article contains foundational insights to Dery's contextual understanding of this concept and keyword. In my thesis, I explore Afrofuturism as it is used by Janelle Monáe throughout her album, from the main plot of the *Dirty Computer* emotion picture to rhetorical strategies in her lyrics. I also draw upon Rose's discussion of Afrofuturism within hip hop. In talking about Sun Ra and his application of science and science fiction, Rose illuminates science's role in "creating power and positing new social myths" in a manner that emphasizes one's own self-imposed vision of his, her, or their identities.[23] These points ground my analyses of Monáe's employment of Afrofuturism, especially in the tracks "Pynk" and "Make Me Feel" and, in a broad sense, "Crazy Classic, Life." Monáe applies Afrofuturism to explore possibilities that exist within the futures of fictional Jane 57821, Black Americans, and herself.

[22] Dery, "Black to the Future," 210.

[23] Dery, "Black to the Future," 215.

Frank B. Wilderson's recent book *Afropessimism* (2020) defines and elucidates the concept of Afropessimism using a combination of critical theory and his own experiences as a Black person in America. According to Wilderson, Afropessimism emphasizes the positioning of Black people as "inert props, implements for the execution of White and non-Black fantasies and sadomasochistic pleasures."[24] This functions under a meta-aporia, a "contradiction that manifests whenever one looks seriously at the structure of Black suffering in comparison to the presumed universal structure of all sentient beings."[25] That is, Afropessimism acknowledges and critiques the white supremacist foundations of the United States and continued discrimination, objectification, and persecution of Black Americans as an interminable and unchangeable condition of American political, economic, and cultural life . By way of contrast, Afrofuturism imagines a future in which Black individuals hold power, granting a space for control and mediation of that future on their own terms. I discuss Monáe's application of Afropessimism in depth in my analysis of "Crazy, Classic, Life" in Chapter 2. Beyond the songs explored in this thesis, an Afropessimist reading cuts across the emotion picture and is especially prominent in the track, memory, and single "Django Jane."

Many scholars have applied Afropessimism and Afrofuturism to their writings about Black music making and Black creative spaces. Tricia Rose posits numerous insights about Afropessimistic dialogue within hip-hop scenes and the

[24] Frank B. Wilderson III, *Afropessimism* (New York: Liveright, 2020): 14.

[25] Wilderson, *Afropessimism,* 14.

rap genre. She confronts the issues of musical space and agency, noting, "Black culture in the United States has always had elements that have been at least bifocal—speaking to both a [B]lack audience and a larger predominantly white context."[26] Rose argues that rap is used as a space to work against white-supremacist social values, acting as a critique through art. She writes, "Often rendering a nagging critique of various manifestations of power via jokes, stories, gestures, and song, rap's social commentary enacts ideological insubordination."[27] Expanding upon her own artistic origins and interests, Monáe uses rap, along with many other genres, to provide these social commentaries through the use of sonic and visual storytelling.

While Afropessimism and Afrofuturism are entirely different in their definitions, I find substantial overlap in their applications within the artistic construction of *Dirty Computer*. While Monáe's career showcases Afrofuturistic frameworks, she strategically constructs her songs and, in many ways, her albums to bring Afropessimism into the conversation, oftentimes as a focal point. While seemingly dichotomous in nature, I place Afropessimism and Afrofuturism in dialogue with one another, especially in Chapter 2 and the conclusion of this thesis. I position Afrofuturism as a mode of storytelling and reconstructing a vision of the future with Black characters at the center of the story; I consider Afropessimism as a manner of confronting the past to resituate the present or, in this case, a vision of the future.

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[26] Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994): 101.

[27] Rose, *Black Noise,* 99-100.

Pursuing Pause

I begin this thesis with an elucidation of Monáe's early life and her emergence onto the Atlanta music scene. I discuss her musical influences and her establishment of a unique brand that thoroughly incorporates Afrofuturistic plots, from her cyborg alter-ego Cindi Mayweather in earlier albums transitioning to the more self-influenced Jane 57821 in *Dirty Computer*. Engaging her published interviews, I describe Monáe's use of activism in her music which holds particular prominence in the three tracks that I analyze in later chapters.

In chapter II, I identify three distinct vocal types or characters performed by Monáe in the song "Crazy, Classic, Life": a Black declamatory speech emulating a preacher's voice (sampled), sung verses and chorus affecting a light, "pop" style, and a lengthy rap at the end of the track. Analyzing these musical elements with the lyrics and visuals from the music video, I explore ways in which Monáe constructs a multifaceted narrative that critiques the "American dream" that she has been promised but has not been granted. Monáe expresses Afropessimistic reflections on reality, which I argue are embodied through disparate vocalization strategies.

In chapter III, I engage with varying theories on embodiment, especially philosopher Mark Johnson's (1987, 2007) work on conceptual metaphor and imagination, to assess the role of the body in both vocalization and listening processes in the song "Pynk." From Monáe's costumes and visual representations of sexuality to her performative choices, I explore the intricacies of Monáe's explicit display of queer sexuality. I also incorporate the visual elements that

Monáe presents, particularly yonic imagery (resembling the vulva), explicit references to female queer sexuality, and the display of exclusively Black bodies in the music video.

In chapter IV, I discuss Monáe's use of an '80s pop-star persona coupled with performance within the sonic realm of pop, electro-funk, and disco genres. Often posited as a "bisexual anthem," the music video for "Make Me Feel" features Monáe flirting and dancing intimately with her lovers Zen and Ché, overtly showcasing a polyamorous relationship. The visual aesthetics of the track allude to disco, using bright colors, a disco ball, and retro black and white checkered floor paired with sonic elements, from use of guitar to vocal inflections, that are reminiscent of Prince's "polymorphically perverse" 1986 single "Kiss."[28] Using Mark C. Samples's theories of musical branding, I argue that this track reimagines this '80s pop-star music video genre as one that explicitly includes Black women and queer intimacy while maintaining strong similarities between production, semiotic, and aesthetic elements.

I conclude this thesis with a brief discussion of Monáe's final track, "Americans." I refer back to Eidsheim's call for pause, assessing the need for using pause when experiencing Monáe's *Dirty Computer*. Pause not only allows us to learn more about what we listen to, but also more about ourselves and how we listen. In thinking through historical, social, and cultural contexts of music making while pursuing pause, listeners, from scholars to fans, are able to consider the full scope of vocalization processes. I argue that we as listeners

[28] Susan McClary, *Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Form* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000): 156.

should consider frameworks across discourses and disciplines to expand beyond our biases and into new realms of listening and understanding the multifaceted nature of vocal performance within popular music.

Throughout this thesis, I root my analyses in my own listening processes. I acknowledge that I, like all listeners, come to each experience of *Dirty Computer* with my own set of biases, my own "figures of sound" that I construct. As a result, I think of this thesis as a presentation of not only theoretical contextualization of the album, but also a synthesis of my own reflections and moments of pause. I anticipate that these insights will continue to evolve far beyond this thesis.

CHAPTER II

JANELLE MONÁE AND *DIRTY COMPUTER*

Nina Sun Eidsheim's acousmatic question—"who is this?"—calls us to consider the complexity of not only the vocalizer's identities and positions within society, but also our own roles as listeners in processing what we hear (and, crucially in the case of this "emotion picture" and album, what we see). Following Eidsheim's acousmatic question, this chapter introduces singer, songwriter, actress, and visionary Janelle Monáe and contextualize her background, career, and creative insights. Beginning with her upbringing and emergence onto the Atlanta music scene, I delineate Monáe's early artistic influences and collaborations that launched her career. Considering strategic narrative themes and musical ideas, I explore the roles of Afrofuturism and activism within her creative works. Thoroughly outlining the plot to *Dirty Computer*, I introduce the context for the three songs and their accompanying music videos—"Crazy, Classic, Life," "Pynk," and "Make Me Feel"—that I analyze in the following chapters of this thesis.

Monáe's Beginnings

Janelle Monáe Robinson was born on December 1st, 1985 and was raised by a Black, Baptist, working-class family in Kansas City, Kansas. Monáe's mother, a janitor, left her biological father when Monáe was a toddler and married a postal worker. Monáe's father, a trashman, battled addiction and spent numerous stints

in jail during Monáe's childhood before becoming sober later in life.[29] Speaking of her working-class upbringing in an interview with the *Harvard Business Review*, Monáe says, "I saw [my family members] getting up every single morning, putting on their uniforms, living check to check, working hard. My idea of working was to work hard and contribute to your community. It's my truth."[30]

Monáe's family also inspired and encouraged her interests in music. Monáe's great grandmothers, both church organists, taught her to play the piano, and Monáe's biological father sang to her as well. Monáe actively performed throughout her childhood, performing Lauryn Hill songs a cappella for weekend talent showcases and getting quite involved in theater. Her mother helped her prepare her performances by buying her costumes and cheering her on as a very enthusiastic fan. Monáe says, "when I didn't win [the talent competitions], she would get up like Kanye and be mad, like, 'My baby shoulda won!'"[31]

Monáe decided early on to pursue a career in music. In an effort to save money for conservatory training, Monáe worked as a waitress at Ponderosa Steakhouse, sales person at Foot Locker, and maid cleaning middle-class homes.[32] She soon earned a scholarship to attend the American Musical and

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[29] Jenna Wortham, "How Janelle Monáe Found Her Voice," *New York Times,* April 19, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/19/magazine/how-janelle-monae-found-her-voice.html.

[30] Curt Nickisch, "Life's Work: An Interview with Janelle Monáe," *Harvard Business Review,* September-October 2020, https://hbr.org/2020/09/lifes-work-an-interview-with-janelle-monae.

[31] Carrie Battan, "Mind Control," *Pitchfork,* September 4, 2013, https://pitchfork.com/features/cover-story/reader/janelle-monae.

[32] Nickisch, "Life's Work: An Interview with Janelle Monáe."

Dramatic Academy and moved to New York. Monáe was the only Black female-bodied member of her class. While in New York, Monáe worked side jobs and shared an apartment with her cousin who worked night shift at the post office. Monáe found herself conflicted with the idea of New York's preexisting molds for music artists (particularly within the sphere of musical theater), and longed to "create [her] own musicals" without the constraints of "standard teachings."[33] Her best friend, a student at Georgia State University, spoke highly of student life in Atlanta and encouraged her to consider relocating. After a year and a half of living in New York, Monáe moved Atlanta and lived in a boarding house across the street from the Atlanta University Center Consortium (AUC), a student association connecting four historically Black colleges and universities in the Atlanta area: Clark Atlanta University, Spelman College, Morehouse College, and Morehouse School of Medicine.

Through the AUC, Monáe met Morehouse College students Mikael Moore, her longtime manager, as well as Chuck Lightning, and Nate "Rocket" Wonder, with whom she founded Wondaland Arts Society. Monáe attended Georgia State University's Perimeter College. While in school, Monáe worked at Office Depot while developing her online presence through MySpace, often using her workplace's computers to update her page. Monáe was later fired from Office Depot for replying to a fan email while at work. She credits the boss that fired her

[33] Greg Kot, "Turn It Up: Janelle Monáe, the Interview: 'I Identify with Androids," *Chicago Tribune*, May 26, 2010.

as her "best boss," as her departure from this job created a launchpad for her career. "When they fired me, I had no excuse. I had to go all in on my career.[34]

Around this time, Monáe met Antwan Patton, otherwise known as rap duo OutKast's Big Boi at an open mic night.[35] Big Boi immediately took interest in Monáe, prompting Big Boi to feature Monáe on the 2005 compilation album *Got Purp? Vol. II* by the Purple Ribbon All-Stars. Soon after, OutKast featured Monáe in the track "Call the Law" from their album *Idlewild,* the soundtrack to the musical film of the same name.[36] Once her career kicked off, Monáe continued to work with Big Boi, featuring him on "Tightrope" in her 2010 album *The ArchAndroid.*

Monáe's connection with OutKast paved the way for her introduction to Sean Combs, or Diddy, [37] who first heard Monáe's music through her MySpace release of "Violet Stars Happy Hunting."[38] Diddy reached out to Monáe about negotiating a record deal with his record company, Bad Boy Records, the label famous in the nineties for their work with The Notorious B.I.G. and the company's feud with west coast label Death Row. Skeptical of the offer at first, Monáe convinced Diddy to cancel his taping of reality show "Making the Band" for Monáe's release of her EP *Metropolis: Suite 1 (The Chase).* Diddy obliged and

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[34] Kot, "Turn It Up."

[35] Wortham, "How Janelle Monáe Found Her Voice."

[36] Wortham, "How Janelle Monáe Found Her Voice."

[37] Diddy has also gone by the names Puff Daddy, Puffy, and P. Diddy. He announced his new name "Diddy" in 2005 on the Today Show.

[38] Battan, "Mind Control." Diddy has also gone by the names Puff Daddy, Puffy, and P. Diddy. He announced his new name "Diddy" in 2005 on the Today Show.

cancelled his plans in order to meet with Monáe the next day. He said in an email interview: "I knew I had to work with her … It was immediate. I just knew she was going to be important to music and culture. It was the same sort of feeling I had when I first heard Biggie or Mary J. Blige, and I wanted to help introduce this artist to the world."[39] In 2008, Diddy announced Monáe's signing to Bad Boy, and Wondaland entered an artistic partnership with Bad Boy that allowed Monáe and her colleagues to hold full control over their brand.[40]

Establishing Monáe's Afrofuturistic Brand

Monáe has incorporated Afrofuturistic plots and themes into all of her albums, starting with her first major release. Loosely based on the 1927 Fritz Lang film of the same name, Monáe's 2008 EP *Metropolis* introduces her alter-ego protagonist Cindi Mayweather, "Android No. 57821, an Alpha Platinum 9000" from the year 2719. Figure 1.1 shows the cover: Mayweather in android form. Mayweather's programming incorporates "rock-star proficiency" and a "working soul," which has led her to create a rebellious type of pop music called "cybersoul."[41] The liner notes explain that "although she is a state-of-the-art organic android, Cindi must abide by THE RULES … the set of laws that decree that, above all things, androids shall never know love–especially with a

[39] Wortham, "How Janelle Monáe Found Her Voice."

[40] Battan, "Mind Control."

[41] Janelle Monáe, *Metropolis: The Chase Suite (Special Edition),* Bad Boy/Wondaland 511234-2, 2008, compact disc, liner notes.

human."[42] The Wolfmasters, order the capture and "immediate disassembly" of Mayweather for her love affair with a human and "robo-zillionaire" named Anthony Greendown. Throughout the EP, Mayweather is on the run from the "bloodthirsty aliens, petulant poltergeists, and devilish bounty hunters" that the Wolfmasters have sent out to kill her.[43]

Figure 1.1: *Metropolis* (2008) EP album cover

Discussing her choices when constructing Mayweather's character, Monáe says:

> I chose an android because the android to me represents "the other" in our society. I can connect to the other, because it has so many parallels to my own life – just by being a female, African-American artist in today's music industry…Whether you're called weird or different, all those things we do to make people uncomfortable with themselves, I've always tried to break out of those boundaries. The android represents the new other to me.[44]

[42] Janelle Monáe, *Metropolis.*

[43] Janelle Monáe, *Metropolis,* liner notes.

[44] Kot, "Turn It Up."

Monáe continued her *Metropolis* plot into her first full-length studio album. On May 18, 2010, Monáe released *The ArchAndroid* under Wondaland Arts Society, Atlantic, and Bad Boy labels. Fashioned as a concept album and "emotion picture," or a movie centered around the emotional experiences of the protagonist, the plot of *The ArchAndroid* follows Mayweather as she time travels to free citizens of Metropolis from an oppressive society called The Great Divide. The album's title and program reflect the influenced of *Metropolis,* with Mayweather mirroring the "False Maria" android character that rebels against the dystopian Metropolis elite. Monáe's album artwork (Fig. 1.2) is emblematic of the film's art deco inflected city setting. The liner notes specify that Monáe herself has been sent back in time to the year 2010, further intertwining Monáe's role as singer with Mayweather as her fictional alter-ego.

Figure 1.2: *The ArchAndroid* (2010) album cover

Monáe fashions the next installment of the Metropolis saga, *The Electric Lady,* as "secret compositions conveyed to [Monáe] by the android hero Cindi Mayweather" that she left behind when she mysteriously left the Palace of the

Arts Dog Asylum (figure 1.3). Monáe has asked the fictional Vice Chancellor of the Palace of the Dogs Arts Asylum to release to American listeners ASAMP: "As Soon As Magically Possible."[45] The Vice Chancellor writes in the album's liner notes,

> Ms. Monáe informed me not to fear, and that this recording was dangerous to the Great Divide not only because it contained Cindi's truest autobiographical feelings about her dangerous love affair with Anthony Greendown, but also because it seems to contain within its frequencies some sort of mystical battle plan. If that is indeed true, perhaps each and every one of us that hears and loves and shares these songs is truly already at war, fighting for the freedom of a future age.[46]

Figure 1.3: *The Electric Lady* (2013) album cover

Monáe's first three major projects seem to showcase an evolution of not only Monáe as a creator, but also her own insertion of self within her plots. Beyond her performance of Cindi, Monáe maintained her distinct Afrofuturistic sci-fi brand, prompting journalist Bernadette Mcnulty to question whether or not

[45] Janelle Monáe, *The Electric Lady,* Bad Boy/Wondaland 536210-2, 2013, compact disc, liner notes.

[46] Janelle Monáe, *The Electric Lady,* liner notes.

Monáe was even human: "I begin to worry for a moment that Monáe may not just be a humourless science-fiction nerd, but actually an android herself, created in a laboratory as a super-musical cross between James Brown, Judy Garland, Andre 3000 and Steve Jobs, invented to test the desperate incredulity of music journalists."[47] In her more recent public presentation, she has maintained her unique persona while actively identifying with her characters' experiences and perspectives.

When speaking about Afrofuturism, Monáe immediately cites the role of the 2018 film *Black Panther* as broadening the scope of Afrofuturistic possibilities and bringing it to the limelight. With works like *Black Panther* and *Dirty Computer,* the use of Afrofuturism gives Black creators the opportunity to "redefine what it means to be Black."[48] For Black viewers, they have the opportunity to see, hear, and connect with stories and identities that mirror their own. In Monáe's words, "When we can see it, we can be it."[49]

Dirty Computer

While Monáe's first three works centered around Cindi Mayweather's rebellion against Metropolis, *Dirty Computer* explores the life of Jane 57821, a "dirty

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[47] Bernadette Mcnulty, "Janelle Monáe Interview: The Android Has Landed," *The Telegraph,* June 25, 2010, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/rockandpopfeatures/7854112/Janelle-Monae-interview-the-android-has-landed.html.

[48] Janelle Monáe, "Janelle Monáe - Dirty Computer YouTube Space Q&A," YouTube video, 33:22, April 27, 2018, 12:53.

[49] Monáe, ""Janelle Monáe - Dirty Computer YouTube Space Q&A," 13:03.

computer" held captive by New Dawn—a powerful group seeking to homogenize the population and rid the world of dirty computers—and is forced to have her memories erased. Both Cindi Mayweather and Jane 57821 are fictional characters, yet Jane holds many of the same identities as Monáe as a Black, female, queer person living within an oppressive society. While Monáe's Black and female identities were thoroughly incorporated into her songs in her previous work, Monáe's queer identity was rumored, especially in her track "Q.U.E.E.N." from *The Electric Lady,* but this was never explicitly affirmed by Monáe prior to *Dirty Computer*'s release. On April 10th, 2018, a little over two weeks before the release of *Dirty Computer,* Monáe debuted her music video and single "Pynk," which led to further speculation about her sexuality. Monáe appeared on the cover of *Rolling Stone* on April 26th, a day before the full album's release, with the article headline reading, "Janelle Monáe Frees Herself."[50] In the article, Monáe comes out publicly: "'Being a queer [B]lack woman in America," Monáe says, taking a breath as she comes out, "someone who has been in relationships with both men and women—I consider myself to be a free-ass motherfucker.'"[51] In this article, she goes on to identify herself as pansexual.

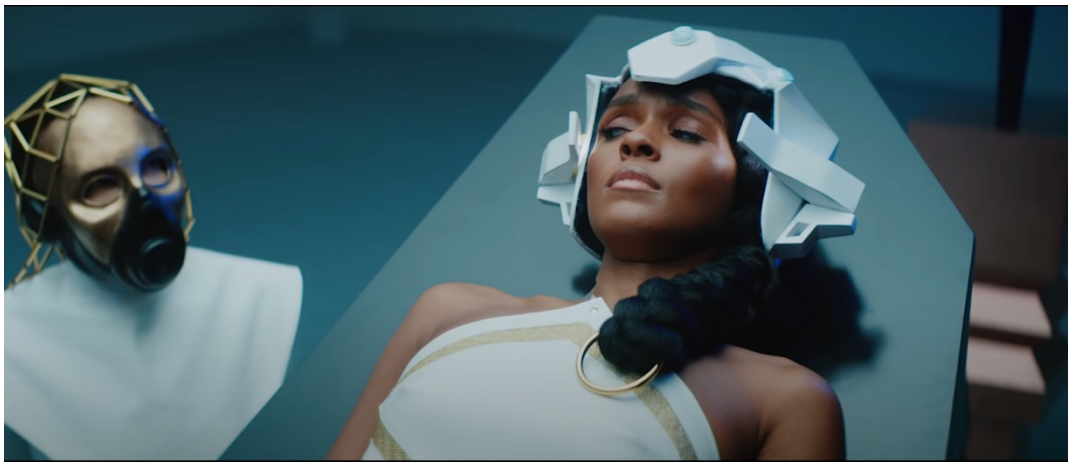
[50] Brittany Spanos, "Janelle Monáe Frees Herself," *Rolling Stone,* April 26, 2018, 36.

[51] Spanos, "Janelle Monáe Frees Herself," 36.

Figure 1.4: *Dirty Computer* (2018) album cover

The *Dirty Computer* "emotion picture" begins with flashes of computer images of people in captivity, each labeled "COMPUTER" and assigned an identification number. Monáe's voiceover classifies these individuals: "You were dirty if you looked different. You were dirty if you refused to live the way they dictated. You were dirty if you showed any form of opposition at all. And if you were dirty, it was only a matter of time." The camera zooms in on a white building labeled "NEW DAWN." The interior is plain and resembles a prison with its white concrete walls. Jane 57821 (portrayed by Janelle Monáe) is carried through a white, concrete-walled hallway on a hovering stretcher by four people dressed in white with gas masks and gold headpieces. Two more individuals in the same attire carry Jane's stretcher to the center of a white-illuminated empty room, placing blue torches at each side of Jane's stretcher. A white headpiece is pulled down from the ceiling and is placed on Jane's head (Fig 1.5).

Figure 1.5: Jane 57821's first cleansing session at New Dawn[52]



A voice says "You will repeat after me: Your name is Jane 57821. I am a dirty computer. I am ready to be cleaned." To each statement, Jane repeats the line back to the voice over the loudspeaker, but at the last statement, Jane hesitates and refuses to say the words aloud. The voice replies, "Unfortunate, my dear. Cleaners, please initiate the NEVERMIND." One of the cleaners presses the button. Smoke comes from both sides of the room and is sucked into Jane's mouth as the cleaners swipe through her memories, landing on Memory 283206, which occurred 79 days ago. Memory 283206 plays a snippet of Jane's life in the form of a third-person narrative music video "Crazy, Classic, Life."

In the first memory, we meet Zen (Tessa Thompson) and Ché (Jayson Aaron), both later revealed to be Jane's lovers. After the memory plays, Zen appears at Jane's bedside in her cell, taking her hand as she wakes up. Zen introduces herself as Maryapple 53 and says to Jane, "I'm here to escort you from the darkness into the light." Jane looks at Maryapple 53 and immediately

[52] Janelle, Monáe, Andrew Donoho, and Chuck Lighting, *Dirty Computer: An Emotion Picture*, Wondaland/Bad Boy/Atlantic Records, 2018, YouTube video, 48:37 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jdH2Sy-BlNE, 2:51.

recognizes her, proclaiming that she did not think she would ever see her again. Maryapple replies, seemingly unfazed by Jane's statement, "I'm here to make your experience as sweet as pie." After the following sequences, featuring videos and tracks "Take a Byte" and "Screwed," Jane begins to submit, finally saying aloud, "I am ready to be cleaned." The cleaners land on a new memory ("Screwed") that details Zen's capture: Zen, Ché, and Jane wake up on a roof. They run away from a floating robot and escape to the inside of the building where a concert is taking place. They pass two men in uniforms watching the concert. The crew of Zen, Ché, and Jane make it outside without being caught. Suddenly, Zen walks forward and is captured by uniformed people that pop out of a van. The others hide from a floating robot seen nearby. After the cleaners delete Jane's "Screwed" memory, they land on "Django Jane," a response to the discrimination and marginalization she's experienced as a Black and queer woman and a forthright proclamation of her identities, successes, and power.

Returning to the present, Jane continues to learn the truth about her captivity and fate: she is being held in "the House of the New Dawn," where "torches" work to cleanse the minds of the individuals deemed "dirty computers." Using a special gas, their memories disappear. Jane realizes that Zen has already been wiped clean and fears that there is no way to save her. We learn more about Jane and Zen's sexual relationship indirectly through the track "Pynk," a homoerotic dream-like sequence that celebrates female bodies and same-sex sexuality that I argue in Chapter 3 engages listeners through suggestive metaphor and illusion. An interlude disrupts the song and features a monologue by Jane speaking directly to Zen. We then enter another dream sequence: an '80s-

themed, Prince-inspired funk/pop number that features Jane as a pop superstar seducing and dancing with Zen and Ché, an anthem celebrating and normalizing pansexuality and polyamory.

Following "Make Me Feel," Zen removes Jane's shackles and lifts one of her sleeves to reveal a tattoo. Zen sits next to her and says, "thinking will only make it harder." Jane says that she does not want to forget Zen, but Zen reminds her that she has no other option. Jane continues to reflect on her own life despite Zen's warning. The memory for "I Like That" shows Jane/Monáe's body multiplied and scattered throughout a theater dancing independently of one another. In the lyrics, she recalls being bullied in sixth grade and how she still, despite the tears in her eyes, "always knew [she] was the shit." Coupled with her line from the chorus, "I don't really give a fuck if I'm the only one who likes that," this song is presented as a proclamation of self-love as Jane nears her fate and the "cleaners" continue to delete her memories one by one.

The camera cuts to an older white woman wearing a gold headpiece named Mother Victoria. Zen greets Mother Victoria and asks how Jane remembers her, pointing out elements of her past life that Jane has shared with her: where she's from, how she was a filmmaker, played instruments, and how the two of them were in love. Mother Victoria assures Zen that this is impossible, that Jane is "dirty" and will be cleaned and, like Zen, will act as a torch after her "walk." In another vision, we see Jane, Zen, and Che together on a beach with Zen giving Jane the tattoo previously seen on her right forearm. The scene, which we then learn is one of Jane's memories, is deleted. Jane looks distraughtly at Zen, who

lies at her bedside. Jane discovers that Zen remembers her relationship with Jane and all of the memories that they share, but Zen tells her that it is too late.

While being transferred to the cleaning chamber, Jane stumbles down the hallway and collapses. Zen picks her up and tells her to keep walking. Jane enters the room and smoke blows onto her, "cleaning" her. In the following scene, Jane, now promoted to the status of torch and renamed Maryapple 54, walks back down the hallway and enters a room where she finds Ché Achebe, Patient 06756 laying on a bed similar to the one Jane had been kept in before her walk. Jane tells Ché that she will bring him from the darkness into the light. The credits begin to roll as the track "Americans" begins to play.

In an epilogue, Zen enters the room and hands masks to Jane and Ché. They unleash the memory wiping gas, immediately knocking out a fly in the room, and open the door to expose all of the torches and torch leaders to the gas as Zen and Jane lead Ché down the hallway. They escape into the light; Jane looks back for a moment, looking proudly at the camera and making eye contact with viewer-listeners, then proceeds into the light (Fig. 1.6).

Figure 1.6: Jane looks back before entering the light[53]

Monáe's *Dirty Computer*, like all of her albums, confronts human rights issues relevant to the social climate at the time of the album's release right in the middle of Donald J. Trump's presidency amid a rise in hate crimes and police violence against Black Americans. In her interview with HOT 97 radio, Monáe specifically discusses her fear and disdain towards Trump for his lack of actions to protect Black and LGBTQ-identifying Americans, accusations of sexual assault by dozens of women, threats to defunding Planned Parenthood, and Michael Pence for his support of conversion therapy. As she says in an interview with Hot 97, speaking specifically to her artistic goals during the #MeToo movement and decision to address the issues through her music:

> I feel a personal responsibility. Some artists may not, some women may not. I do. I come from a line and a tribe of strong Black women. My mother had nine sisters, and, you know, I have over fifty first cousins. I have a huge family, and most of them are girls. When you grow up like that, and you feel like when you see representations of people that look like your cousins or your aunts being painted in a negative light and being thrown and rattled on the floor and put in

[53] Monáe, et al., *Dirty Computer,* 45:50.

> prison and put in jail, it's personal for me. I really care. It affects me…This country was built off of the blood and sweat and tears of our ancestors. We built the White House. We built all this shit. So, for me, when I think about women and women's rights, it's personal. When I think about the music industry, when I think about all these industries and the lack of opportunities that women are given, and I say given because it's not like we can't do the work. We need the opportunity. We can compete at a high level.[54]

Addressing these issues through her glimpse at a future that seems to mirror the present, Monáe showcases not only an Afropessimistic critique of the present, but an Afrofuturistic articulation of alternative realities and, at the end of the emotion picture, freedom through the characters' escape from captivity. This freedom might be seen as a metaphor for Monáe's own freedom after coming out as pansexual publicly and boldly speaking out against systems of oppression in the United States.

Through her music, music videos, and other creative endeavors, Monáe wants to be remembered not just as a creator, but as a charitable person. She described many of her key influences and their own giving natures in mentoring her and others, particularly Prince, Stevie Wonder, her grandmother, and her ancestors.

> I'm not a politician. I'm an artist. I'm an American, and I care about this country. So I think I can critique certain things that I feel might be cancerous to the United States. Especially when the rights of those I love that come from my community are being trampled on, I feel a responsibility to use my platform to say something. These days I'm more about partnering with people who are doing the work on the ground, trying to get folks registered to vote, helping lower-income folks, and lobbying for women's reproductive rights,

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[54] HOT 97, "Janelle Monáe on Kanye West, Sexuality, and Looks Back At First Time She Met Prince," YouTube video, 38:08, April 25, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WeN9VDG1ZCo, " 16:36.

> protection for LGBTQIA+ communities, and racial justice. These are the issues I care about.[55]

For Monáe, activism plays a crucial role in her music making. As Monáe speaks openly about her concern for human rights, she embeds these issues within the lyrics of her music. To create further opportunities for audience engagement, Monáe tells her story from her own life perspectives, speaking to all audience members about her truth. Monáe recognizes the significance of her platform, using a variety of sounds, influences, and ideas to reach out to all listeners and start broader conversations beyond the music. In the words of Janelle Monáe, "the conversations might not happen with people in positions of power…but they can happen through a movie, they can happen through a song, they can happen through an album…"[56]

The following chapters investigate Monáe's evocation of these conversations in *Dirty Computer* through her plot, production, and engagement with listener expectations. I begin with "Crazy, Classic, Life," which investigates Monáe's use of Black vocalization methods to sonically depict her experiences as a Black American. Throughout this thesis, I argue that Monáe uses *Dirty Computer* as a space to callout prejudices while uplifting Black, female, queer voices and showcasing Monáe's power as a performer, creator, and activist.

[55] Nickisch, "Life's Work."

[56] Spanos, "Janelle Monáe Frees Herself," 39.

CHAPTER III

"I AM THE AMERICAN DREAM":

BLACK SOUND AND BLACK VOCALITY IN "CRAZY, CLASSIC, LIFE"

> *Inspired by the vibranium in Wakanda, wild mushroom tea parties in Mexico, and the notion that true freedom also comes from "the right to be wrong at least occasionally," see Mary Beard's pronouncement in WOMEN & POWER: "It is not just that it is more difficult for women to succeed; they get treated much more harshly if they mess up. Think Hillary Clinton and those emails…"*
>
> – Janelle Monáe, in *Dirty Computer* liner notes[57]

The first memory investigated by the cleaners of New Dawn begins with Jane and a Black, female-bodied passenger driving in a red car with the hood down on a highway with "I Got The Juice" playing from the car radio. The scene introduces scenery and technology of Jane's futuristic world, as the car floats above the road without wheels attached. A flying robot approaches their car asking for clearance, prompting them to pull over and, amid their frustration, immediately present triangular neon identification cards worn on chains around their necks (Fig. 2.1).

[57] Janelle Monáe, *Dirty Computer,* Bad Boy Records 567348-2, 2018, compact disc, liner notes.

Figure 2.1: Jane and her friend present clearances[58]

After being cleared, the robot flies away; once it is out of sight, the women get out of the car and open the trunk, letting out three Black women who excitedly join them in the car.

The remainder of this memory/music video walks through protagonist Jane 57821's complex array of experiences, emotions, and dreams as a Black American expressed through three different vocalization styles that are typically assigned a label as "Black": spoken word of a preacher's sermon, pop singer voice in verse and chorus, and a rapped closing section, transforming the plot into a complex, polyvocal narrative. In this chapter, I explore the contexts of these three strategic performances of Blackness and their roles in storytelling on an internal level. Coupled with the content of this music video, I argue that Blackness is presented in a multifaceted manner that mediates Black expression and provides a spotlight on racism, white supremacy, and suppression of difference for an

[58] Monáe et al., *Dirty Computer: An Emotion Picture*, 4:35.

audience presumably composed largely of individuals who do not hold similar perspectives.

Returning to Eidsheim's acousmatic question, I examine the viewer-listener's role in comprehending the contents and contexts of "Crazy, Classic, Life." Considering writings by Keith Negus and Tricia Rose, I elaborate on the definition and uses of Black sound and Black vocality in music scholarship, breaking down Monáe's three types of Black vocalization and their wider implications. Applying this conversation to "Crazy, Classic, Life," I analyze the lyrical, visual, and musical contents and their portrayal of Afropessimism to viewer-listeners. Finally, I revisit Eidsheim's acousmatic question and her call for listeners to take "pause" and reflect on their own biases, privileges, and listening processes when experiencing "Crazy, Classic Life."

"Figure of Sound" and "Naming" Processes

In *The Race of Sound,* Eidsheim argues that listeners innately seek to identify sounds they hear to designate them as "knowable," using the acousmatic question to seek an answer. This question, however, cannot be answered concretely; in turn, often without informative contexts, listeners construct "figures of sound," statements that attempt to answer the acousmatic question. Eidsheim's discussion of figures of sound parallels Hortense Spillers's discussion of naming processes imposed upon Black bodies, particularly in the case of the 1965 Moynihan Report. Spillers writes, "the procedures adopted for the captive flesh demarcate a total objectification, as the entire captive community becomes a

living laboratory."[59] Further, Spillers resituates the complexity of the experience of Black bodies while calling out naming processes often utilized by white bystanders. Rather than seek out more information and allow those within "captive communities" to signify their own identities, those in power outside of these communities, without the experiences and histories of being held captive, place labels, associations, and judgments onto already "othered" bodies.

What causes listeners to identify certain sounds as Black? Negus discusses a dialectical shift from the assignment of essentialist ideas about cultural identity towards an overarching idea that "cultural identities are not fixed in any essential way but are actively created through particular communication processes, social practices and 'articulations' within specific circumstances."[60] In particular, Negus critiques Simon Frith's rhetoric in his 1983 *Sound Effects*, in which Frith uses all-encompassing qualifiers like spontaneity, non-conventional, and "of the body," not acknowledging the complexity and diversity of Black musical forms and their varying social meanings. Ronald Radano writes: "Black music, it is often claimed, is soulful, rhythmically affecting, based on collective engagements of call and response, and expressive of multiple levels of feeling and desire: pain, freedom, rebellion, and sexual ecstasy, just to name a few."[61] Radano points out that these claims are "impossible to verify."[62] Additionally, while the body and physicality

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[59] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," 68.

[60] Keith Negus, *Popular Music in Theory: An Introduction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1996): 100.

[61] Ronald Radano, *Lying up a Nation: Race and Black Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003): 5.

[62] Radano, *Lying Up a Nation,* 5.

are crucial to the discussion of Black musics, discourses about Black music have often associated Black music and the body with primitivism and fetishization, as McClary and Walser argue.[63] Referring back to Spillers's such labeling without contextualization perpetuates stereotyping and essentialism.

Negus argues that Black musical practices do not inherently hold set musical characteristics; rather, these elements are performed. Negus offers a corrective: "Blackness is not *in* the music but has been identified with certain stylistic traits that can be *found* in the music made by people who are described as [B]lack."[64] Here, Negus implicitly reemphasizes that race is a social construct, and we must treat racialized sound as a social construction as well. Additionally, Radano argues, "the resonances of [B]lack music not only reveal the social construction of race but serve to voice and ultimately to shape and advance them…[B]lack music, in its various articulations has projected racial notions into the public sphere, displaying incomparable potential to travel across the social landscape."[65]

Race is a social construct and sound is, at its core, a physical entity entirely separate from race within society yet is ascribed labels by listeners. As a result, many sounds exist as "marked," or embedded within practices from Black musical spaces, such as, by way of example, hip hop or jazz. In many cases, Black musicians have used music as a gateway to sharing their experiences with

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[63] Susan McClary and Robert Walser, "Theorizing the Black Body in African-American Music," Black Music Research Journal 14, no. 1 (1994): 82.

[64] Negus, *Popular Music in Theory,* 103.

[65] Radano, *Lying up a Nation,* 11-12.

audiences of different backgrounds. Coupled with systemic exclusion of women and composers of color in the 20th century in the classical music industry, Black musical practices continue to be "othered" by predominantly white insiders while used for aesthetic and capitalistic gain. Matthew Morrison's recent article in the *Journal of the American Musicological Society* discusses the use of blackface, whitewashing, and commercialization using Black American popular musics. Morrison proposes a musicological framework called Blacksound, which "seeks to expand the inclusive development of musicological discourse by placing sound, race/identity, performance, and its reception at the center of the analysis of popular music making in the nation."[66]

Tricia Rose's seminal 1994 monograph *Black Noise* reframes musicological discourses by discussing the ways in which Black musicians use rap and hip hop as sites for resistance and storytelling. She writes,

> Under social conditions in which sustained frontal attacks on powerful groups are strategically unwise or successfully contained, oppressed people use language, dance, and music to mock those in power, express rage, and produce fantasies of subversion. These cultural forms are especially rich and pleasurable places where oppositional transcripts, or the "unofficial transcripts" are developed, refined, and rehearsed. These cultural responses to oppression are not safety valves that protect and sustain the machines of oppression. Quite to the contrary, these dances, languages, and musics produce communal bases of knowledge about social conditions, communal interpretations of them and quite often serve as the cultural glue that fosters communal resistance.[67]

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[66] Morrison, "Race, Blacksound, and the (Re)Making of Musicological Discourse," 790.

[67] Tricia Rose, *Black Sound: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994): 99-100.

Given the wide consumption of hip hop and rap by non-Black audiences, Rose argues that Black artists use "revisions" to Black cultural priorities and Black noise. She writes, "these revisions do not take place in a cultural and political vacuum, they are played out on a cultural and commercial terrain that embraces Black cultural products and simultaneously denies their complexity and coherence."[68] As a result, the sounds produced are heard in a manner that is accessible to non-Black audiences while still maintaining their Black origins and meanings. I argue that Monáe takes advantage of the platform that hip hop and rap, among other deliberately marked Black musics and sounds, hold among non-Black audiences to express her specific experiences of racial oppression through varying examples of Black vocality. Through her storytelling and vocal techniques, Monáe extends her Black, female, queer perspectives to audience members that do not hold those same perspectives. She says in an interview, "If we don't tell our stories, they won't get told."[69] Radano proposes "retention" as a lens to examine Black musical pasts and their significations in the present while acknowledging the historical continuity.[70] In the following sections of this chapter, I present three vocalization methods and their specific roles in the track "Crazy, Classic, Life."

[68] Rose, *Black Sound,* 65.

[69] Monáe, "Janelle Monáe - Dirty Computer YouTube Space Q&A," 11:07.

[70] Radano, *Lying up a Nation: Race and Black Music,* 10.

"…And the Pursuit of Happiness": Afropessimism and Black Preaching

As the music video's introduction ends with five Black women getting into the red hovering car, the camera instantly cuts to the faces to individual frames of a number of Black individuals paired with following spoken words from the lower-pitched voice of a person quoting the Declaration of Independence:

> You told us we hold these truths to be self-evident
> That all men and women are created equal
> That they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights
> Among these: life, liberty, and the, and the pursuit of happiness

The voice heard is a sample of Reverend Sean McMillan's preaching, who uses words that reflect not only Black Christian preaching traditions, but also reiterate Martin Luther King Jr.'s reflections on the Declaration of Independence from his 1965 speech "The American Dream." Radano identifies the Black preaching traditions' engagement with the body and emotion, citing accounts by 18th-century pastors and bishops that experienced "highly emotional expressive practices among [B]lack [communities], whose enthusiasms could inspire a 'shout' and sometimes uplift into song," practices that are still observed today.[71] This distinct manner of worship was used by white Americans to further mark a divide between non-Black and Black people as racial differences and white supremacy continued to concretize within American society. According to Radano, despite the crossover that inevitably occurred between Black and non-Black worshippers, racialization of sin (e.g., "demons as black as coal") perpetuated racial anxiety particularly during a time when slavery was still

[71] Radano, *Lying up a Nation: Race and Black Music,* 114.

practiced in the south and free Black citizens living in the north faced constant discrimination.[72] Lauded for their "dramatic and rhetorical skills and, especially, for the qualities of their voices," Black preachers continued to develop and work within this preaching style, leading to the pronounced marker of Black vocal practice that we experience in "Crazy, Classic, Life."[73]

In this sample, McMillan calls out the unachieved vision of the United States Declaration of Independence, acknowledging American society as inherently anti-Black given its construction around white supremacist ideals without any true push to deconstruct these systems of oppression. This sample might be heard as an example of Afropessimism, which Wilderson calls a "metatheory" that is "pessimistic about the claims theories of liberation make when these theories try to explain Black suffering or when they analogize Black suffering with the suffering of other oppressed beings."[74] Referring to the line "all men created equal," this quotation highlights the very documents that we hold as sacred to our ideologies as a nation and the country's foundations are rooted in the enslavement of and persecution and systemic hegemonies against Black citizens. This display of pessimism allows audience members, including non-Black audience members, to think deeply about present-day oppressions against Black people, as depicted in the futuristic opening scene that mirrors present-day mass targeting of Black drivers by police officers.

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[72] Radano, *Lying up a Nation: Race and Black Music,* 119.

[73] Radano, *Lying up a Nation: Race and Black Music,* 123.

[74] Wilderson, *Afropessimism,* 14.

“Just Let Me Live My Life”: Unmarked Pop Performance

Following the first section, the video’s focus shifts back to the women in the car driving on a highway, dancing and jamming to music, standing up, and waving their arms in the open air. The video also introduces a party at which young people, many of whom are Black, presenting as “punk” in their aesthetic choices (leather, chains, colorful mohawks) dancing and drinking together in an empty pool outside (Fig. 2.2). Monáe becomes the primary vocalist, singing verses and a chorus over a musical section that features ’80s-style synthesizer emblematic of women’s pop hits (e.g., Madonna or Cyndi Lauper). Monáe’s vocal inflections, along with the melodic and harmonic components of the verse and chorus themselves, do not feature any of the stereotyped elements of Black music described by Radano and others—emphasis on complex rhythms, use of call and response, sonic references to Blues, and others—thus removing the racialized markedness that we heard in the first section:

Young, Black, wild and free
Naked on a limousine (Oh-oh, oh-oh, oh-oh, oh-oh)
Riding through the hood real slow
I love it when I smell the trees (Oh-oh, oh-oh, oh-oh, oh-oh)

I just wanna party hard
Sex in the swimming pool (Oh-oh, oh-oh, oh-oh, oh-oh)
I don't need a lot of cash
I just wanna break the rules (Oh-oh, oh-oh, oh-oh, oh-oh)

We don't need another ruler
All of my friends are kings (Oh-oh, oh-oh, oh-oh, oh-oh)
I am not America's nightmare
I am the American dream (Oh-oh, oh-oh)
Just let me live my life

I want a crazy, classic, life
I want a crazy, classic, life

So if the world should end tonight
I had a crazy, classic, life

Figure 2.2: Partygoers in the empty pool[75]

These lyrics showcase a dream world in which Monáe can break rules and live without restrictions, with the video displaying a party where she and her mixed-race peers can dance, drink, and relax without any limitations. The chorus presents Monáe's plea for a "crazy, classic, life," the life described in the verses of the song, and her desire to live freely without having to worry about the restrictions set upon her. Monáe's liner notes point out the specific experiences of female-bodied people in breaking rules and making mistakes, citing the overly high standards that individuals with female bodies are held to. Monáe implicitly argues that the standards and stakes for Black female-bodied people are even higher. In conjunction with Black female-bodied people in a hovering car and futuristic costumes and visuals throughout the video, Monáe portrays a futuristic

[75] Janelle Monáe, "Janelle Monáe - Crazy, Classic, Life [Official Music Video]," YouTube video, 6:22, December 12, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cx30_oXJDaY, 2:33.

vision of everyday pleasures for Black female-bodied people like driving without being pulled over or being able to break the same rules as her more privileged peers who are not typically held to the same types of criminal charges.

Returning to Mark Dery's discussion and interviews in "Black to the Future," Afrofuturism creates an opportunity for Black creators to depict, explore, and control a future that is tangible given not only the intangibility of Black pasts. Throughout her career, Monáe has explicitly incorporated Afrofuturism into her plotlines, sonic materials, and overall presence in the media. While these Afrofuturistic plots typically showcase Black spaces, this portion of the music video positions the party as a space without racial divides, a "post-race" politics of inclusion. Everyone dances together and freely expresses themselves. Sonically, we hear no blatant markers of Blackness as heard in the McMillan preaching sample. The world on display seems, on the surface level, utopian, a space free from racialized oppression. When perceived in this way, this utopian world seems to mock the false notion of "colorblindness" touted as an "antidote to racism" by many white Americans in modern society. Disparities in the partygoers' racialized experiences within society, however, come into the spotlight in the song and scene's conclusion, snapping us back to the realities of this racialized, white-supremacist society in an Afropessimistic rap.

"Kicked Out, Said I'm Too Proud": Signifying Blackness through Rap

Following the verses and chorus, a sudden shift occurs, this time changing Monáe's performance to a rap:

Handcuffed in a bando

White boy in his sandals
Police like a Rambo
Blow it out, blow it out like a candle, Sambo
Me and you was friends, but to them, we the opposite
The same mistake, I'm in jail, you on top of shit
You living life while I'm walking around moppin' shit
Tech kid, backpack, now you a college kid
All I wanted was to break the rules like you
All I wanted was someone to love me too
But no matter where it was I always stood out
Black Waldo dancing with the thick brows
We was both running naked at the luau
We was both on shrooms praying face down, waist down
Remember when they told you I was too black for ya?
And now my black poppin' like a bra-strap on ya
I was kicked out, said I'm too loud
Kicked out, said I'm too proud
But all I really ever felt was stressed out
Kinda like my afro when it's pressed out

During the rap, many of the non-Black party goers have stopped dancing and come to a halt in the background, looking at Jane and other Black party goers as they continue to dance and enjoy the party. Immediately following the rap portion of the song, there are suddenly sounds of a helicopter, sirens, and flashbangs with police suddenly chasing and capturing mostly Black partygoers, everyone else disappearing without consequences. A voice is heard on a megaphone or loudspeaker, saying “any attempt to escape will be met with severe and overwhelming force. Surrender immediately.” The final shot of the video shows a selection of partygoers, most of whom are Black, kneeling in a line with their hands handcuffed behind their backs. The shift from party to police raid seems to mark a shift from a dream world of equity and freedom to the present realities for Black people in American society that white people do not experience

head on, as well as the complicity of the many non-Black partygoers that were able to flee from the scene and avoid arrest.

Figure 2.3: Partygoers handcuffed after the police raid[76]

This rap portion in particular spotlights the differences between Black and non-Black experiences using explicit examples Monáe's words identify the sharp contrasts between her Black experience and the experiences of her non-Black peers, from attire to methods of punishment imposed for the same offenses (e.g., "the same mistake, I'm in jail, you on top of shit") to the ways in which society pushes assimilation ("kinda like my afro when it's pressed out"). With rap serving as the vocal medium, we hear Monáe continuing rap's tradition of explaining and confronting racial injustices through art, an Afropessimistic outlook that parallels the realities of present-day America. The "young, Black, wild, and free" dream of youth suddenly appears shattered in a society that denies Black youth the same freedom as their non-Black peers. Monáe also navigates different models of Black

[76] Monáe et al., *Dirty Computer: An Emotion Picture*, 10:27.

reality's social meaning through Afropessimistic descriptions of the past versus present with an Afrofuturistic reimagining of the American dream.

Using different vocalization tactics, Monáe further delineates these sonic and narrative strategies for the listener. Perhaps most significantly for this discussion, rap maintains its historical role as a Black creative space presenting a call for listeners to pay attention to the injustices happening in the everyday lives of Black Americans. The rap directly incorporates rhetoric of African-American English (AAE) using the singular "was" when referring to plural subjects as an example, a dialect not used in the previous "unmarked" section.[77] The vocabulary used in the rap includes references to Black markedness such as "Sambo," Monáe's reclamation of the term used to objectify Black Americans following the Civil War. Additionally, viewer-listeners experience the hip hop tradition and rap genre as activist strategies, with rap being a tool to confront reality. There are so many parallels here: from political hip hop pioneer Grandmaster Flash to Janelle Monáe and her strategic incorporations of hip-hop musical styles in her works, rap creates a space for descriptions of the Black American experience, attracting an array of audience members and igniting crucial dialogue about systemic racism. Further, the oscillation between Afropessimism and this specific vision of Afrofuturism forces viewer-listeners to confront the stark difference between a utopian vision of equity and youth versus the realities of our racialized society.

In this track and throughout *Dirty Computer*, Monáe adds her own unique perspectives to the mix and encourages viewer-listeners to think deeply about

[77] This is also known as African-American Vernacular English.

everyday injustices in the United States. Eidsheim argues that in the act of listening, we should pause to consider the broader questions surrounding our own role in seeking *an* answer to the acousmatic question. A single answer is not possible; rather, there are unlimited possible answers to this acousmatic question. She writes, "pausing has the potential to move us from unexamined essentialization to a consideration of our participation in the process of reduction." The act of pausing also insinuates a wider call for individuals to examine their own privileges and power within society. As members of society, we are active participants just as listeners are actively involved in music making processes. Through this repositioning of roles, we eliminate the myth of voice as an essentialized and innate entity and move further into the complexities of identities, histories, and stories, like those of Jane 57821 and Janelle Monáe.

CHAPTER IV

"DEEP INSIDE":

SEXUALITY AND EMBODIMENT IN "PYNK"

> *Inspired by Prince's mischievous smile as he played organ on "Hot Thang" and watched Cat Glover shimmy across the stage in "Sign O' The Times" and by Kali, Sheela Na Gig, Isis, Sheba, Athena, Medusa, Mary and all the Mothergoddess sculptures and paintings in pyramids, churches and castles around the world; midnight conversations and debates about The Great Cosmic Mother; insights from The Vagina by Naomi Wolff, and Interior Scroll by Carolee†Schneemann† and the calligraphy of Sun Ping; and Paul Simonon's quote that "pink is the only true rock n' roll color.*
>
> – Janelle Monáe, in *Dirty Computer* liner notes

On April 10, 2018, Janelle Monáe released her music video single "Pynk" on YouTube, creating an explosive worldwide celebration of femininity and queer identity. The video, which is featured in her "emotion picture" *Dirty Computer* released later that month, showcases her protagonist, Black, female, and queer Jane 57821 in a memory and dream-like sequence of Black women gathered at the "Pynk Rest-Inn" in the middle of a desert. Echoing the song's title, the color pink is *everywhere,* from the hues of the visual to deliberate choices in costuming, including iconic "vagina pants" that emulate female sexual anatomy. Monáe has constructed a pink-enshrined fantasy with an array of signifiers and metaphors dispersed to evoke viewer-listeners' imaginations about sexuality and femininity while honing in on the validity of Black, female, queer sexual experiences. I begin with a discussion of imagination as defined by philosopher Mark Johnson, then will explore imagination's role in Aerosmith's 1997 single

"Pink," which Monáe used as inspiration in writing her track of the same name, different spelling ("Pynk") for *Dirty Computer*. I argue that Monáe reimagines and expands the conversation evoked by Aerosmith in a manner that celebrates Black female voices. With imagination serving as a core throughline, I break down Monáe's uses of polysemy throughout "Pynk" and her incorporation of conceptual metaphors. Drawing from Johnson and Arnie Cox, I will show the varying ways in which Pynk's lyrical, musical, and visual contents leave room for viewer-listeners to fill in the blanks and construct meaning through processes of embodied cognition, codifying the experience not just on the surface level, but "deep inside."

"It's Not Even A Question": Sexual Affirmation in "Pink"/"Pynk"

In 1997, Aerosmith released their album *Nine Lives,* which included the track "Pink" as a single. "Pink" is sexually explicit in its own ways: implementing similar lyrical polysemic devices to the ones used by Janelle Monáe, Aerosmith's song articulates the color's literal appearance in sexual acts and assigns the color to passion involved in sex:

Pink, it's my new obsession
Pink, it's not even a question
Pink on the lips of your lover
'Cause pink is the love you discover
Pink as the bing on your cherry
Pink, 'cause you are so very
Pink, it's the color of passion
'Cause today it just goes with the fashion

Visually, Aerosmith does not emphasize the literal color pink in their music video, but does emphasize many of the ideas discussed in the lyrics. The

video features numerous closeups on lead singer Steven Tyler's lips in the first thirty seconds of the song (e.g., 0:00, 0:24, 0:29). At 0:30, Tyler's face is pasted onto the body of a child wearing bunny ears; Tyler points to the pink inside portion of the bunny ears while articulating the word "pink," the first word uttered in the entire song. Here, pink functions more as an imaginative entity associated with sex rather than a visual entity within the song.

Focusing on sex and sexuality, the video centers around a white background lit to resemble a runway with a number of clips of individuals strutting, dancing, posing, and expressing themselves on the runway, many in sexually enticing manners on this runway. The people featured vary in appearance drastically, with varying ages, body types, preferred ways of engaging in sex, and expressions of gender all on display. In many ways, Aerosmith's "Pink" deliberately subverts conventional representations of sex and sexuality in the media: anyone, regardless of age, appearance, body type, gender identity, sexual or romantic attraction, or sexual interests, can be sexual and can engage in sexuality on their own terms. As Tyler sings in the chorus, "Everything is going to be alright no matter what we do tonight."

How does Aerosmith's "Pink" relate to Janelle Monáe's 2018 track? While minimal research has been done on this correlation, it should be noted that Monáe actually credits Steven Tyler of Aerosmith as a co-writer of this track. "Pynk" might be interpreted as a reimagining of this iconic 1997 song and a repositioning of the narrative from male to female. There are some obvious parallels between the tracks: the melodic resemblance is uncanny, most of the sentences start with the word "pink," some of the camera shots focus on similar

subjects (particularly the lips of the mouth), and many others. The differences between these tracks and music videos, however, showcase the changes made by Monáe in recreating this song to serve her own artistic vision. Instead of articulating sexuality bluntly through her lyrics, Monáe leaves room for the viewer-listener to draw conclusions using an array of clues grounded by the uses of melodic motion, musical closure, polysemy, and conceptual metaphor. While the 1997 "Pink" shows sexuality as a broad, diverse framework of a shared human experience, the conversation only includes the literal voices of male-identifying members of Aerosmith.[78] Monáe's "Pynk" concentrates on the female and queer sexuality that Monáe, a Black woman, experiences, sexuality that is often either forgotten entirely or is highly fetishized and objectified within creative media. The titles' spelling differences reflect this upfront: Monáe's alternative spelling "Pynk" references the second-wave feminist of replacing the letter "e" in "women" with the letter "y," thus eliminating the internal spelling of "men" within the word. Monáe's creative decisions result an expansive utopian reimagining of Aerosmith's original song that celebrates Black, female, queer bodies, sexuality, and, as Monáe puts it, "pussy power."[79] By prioritizing Black, female, queer bodies, Monáe actively creates a space of active storytelling and positioning of

[78] I acknowledge and emphasize Steven Tyler's complex role in this conversation about sexuality. Tyler has been forthcoming about his sexual history with underage girls, including a three-year relationship with Julia Halcomb that resulted in a terminated pregnancy. I include Tyler's song and role in the development of "Pynk" purely for analytical purposes that support Monáe's repositioning of his melodic and lyrical devices for this reimagining of sexuality on display.

[79] Brittany Spanos, "Watch Janelle Monáe Celebrate 'Pussy Power' in 'Pynk' Video," *Rolling Stone,* April 10, 2018, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/watch-janelle-monae-celebrate-pussy-power-in-pynk- video-628927/.

bodies that have been stripped of their meaning throughout the history of the United States.

With the role of the body at the center of the conversation, I want to consider not only Monáe's embodied role as creator and performer, but also the ways in which listeners engage with "Pynk" and its imagination-evoking structures by means of embodied cognition. In his 1987 book *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason,* Mark Johnson discusses objectivism in Western philosophical thought and cultural traditions, highlighting it as an "offending cluster of assumptions that has led to … blindness toward imagination," or, in other words, anything without physical properties.[80] Johnson points out, however, that a number of complications brought about by recent scholarship debunk such an adherence to objectivism, including historical semantic changes, framing of concepts, categorization, and, most significantly for the sake of this analysis, uses of polysemy and metaphor. Johnson shows a number of ways in which we use imaginative structures to codify meaning, notably shifts in semantics, categorization tactics, and linguistic devices, and topics, musical ideas, and lyrical structures.

Topically, Aerosmith's "Pink" emphasizes the diversity of sexual experiences and the image of human sexuality. Again, we have all of these different people from varying walks of life featured in the music video. In the case of Janelle Monáe's "Pynk," there is a distinct vision of what that sexuality looks

[80] Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987): ix-x.

like but in an imagined sense. Monáe's "Pynk" is an imagined, dream-like sequence, a utopian setting where there's a definitive subject: Black, female same-sex sexuality. This reimagination mirrors the main tenants of Afrofuturism, through which creators like Monáe hold the power to redefine their Black experiences. Non-Black audience members, in turn, witness "Black Girl Magic" (the backup dancers) in action and reimagine what sex can look like in a society that primarily discusses sex and sexuality within white, hetero-, and cis-normative frameworks. While there is less fluidity in human subjects in Monáe's "Pynk," there is certainly much room for imagined structures that Aerosmith leaves much more concrete, particularly in the lyrical, visual, and musical content.

Polysemy and Conceptual Metaphor in "Pynk"

From the titles alone, listeners encounter the word "pink" or "pynk," which hold multiple connotations. Both renditions of the song draw upon these multiple meanings through use of polysemic devices. Johnson describes polysemy as the act of using a word to indicate multiple, yet related meanings, pointing out that polysemy "involves the extension of a central sense of a word to other senses by devices of the human imagination."[81] At the start of the music video, audiences are presented with the color pink in many forms: a pink hue of the desert scenery and hovering pink car to sunglasses and makeup. Throughout the song, the word "pink" is used a grand total of 29 times. The first verse, much like Aerosmith's

[81] Johnson, *The Body in the Mind,* xii.

"Pink," includes constant reiterations of the word "pink" at the start of each line, igniting viewer-listeners' brains to associate pink with the varying visuals evoked by the verse:

Pink like the inside of your, baby
Pink behind all of the doors, crazy
Pink like the tongue that goes down, maybe
Pink like the paradise found
Pink when you're blushing inside, baby
Pink is the truth you can't hide, maybe
Pink like the folds of your brain, crazy
Pink as we all go insane

The color pink appears in various visual nooks and crannies throughout the duration of the music video: the motel sign, carpet, and even the entire interior of a diner. When coupled with the lyrics, pink suddenly becomes more than an aesthetic choice in the context of the video: it is the color culturally associated with individuals assigned female at birth, as well as the color of body parts, from lips of the mouth to the epithelial tissue of the vagina and sexual organs. We might also associate the color pink with the concept of vulnerability, which we see concretely and physically manifested in the music video for "Pynk." The color pink is soft, exposed, *feminine*, an idea that I will return to in my discussion of overarching conceptual metaphors that Monáe uses to engage audience members.

Polysemic devices work with the human imagination through repetition and multiplicity of meaning. Conceptual metaphor, however, evokes imaginative mapping processes. Psychologist Rebecca Fincher-Kiefer defines conceptual metaphors as "overarching mappings between abstract and concrete concepts that take bodily experiences and map them onto abstract concepts, adding

additional meaning beyond the surface level musical and lyrical content.[82] Johnson points out that empirical evidence continues to show that metaphor is an imaginative structure that represents physiological processes of cognition. In her chapter "The Role of Metaphor in the Representation of Abstract Concepts," Fincher-Kiefer identifies a number of experiments that further support Johnson's claims. Behavioral and neurological experiments continue to show that metaphor allows the brain to map concrete bodily source experiences onto more abstract target concepts in a bidirectional manner. Fincher-Kiefer emphasizes the significance of metaphor in understanding how we think. She writes: "This view emphasizes that metaphors are not just linguistic conventions, but instead a reflection of mental representation. Therefore, we not only speak in metaphors, we think in metaphors."[83] I identify engagement with both linguistic polysemic metaphors and overarching conceptual metaphors throughout "Pynk," noting their role in grounding the viewer-listener's embodied experience.

Johnson's 2007 book *The Meaning of the Body* posits the basic conceptual metaphorical structures for musical motion. Johnson argues that three experiences of physical motion—seeing objects move, moving our bodies, and feeling our bodies being moved by forces—allow viewer-listeners to conceptualize musical motion similarly. Specifically, he proposes three metaphors for musical motion in Western Music. The MOVING MUSIC metaphor allows us to think about music as a force in motion; the MUSICAL LANDSCAPE metaphor

[82] Rebecca Fincher-Kiefer, *How the Body Shapes Knowledge: Empirical Support for Embodied Cognition* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2019): 126.

[83] Fincher-Kiefer, *How the Body Shapes Knowledge,* 141.

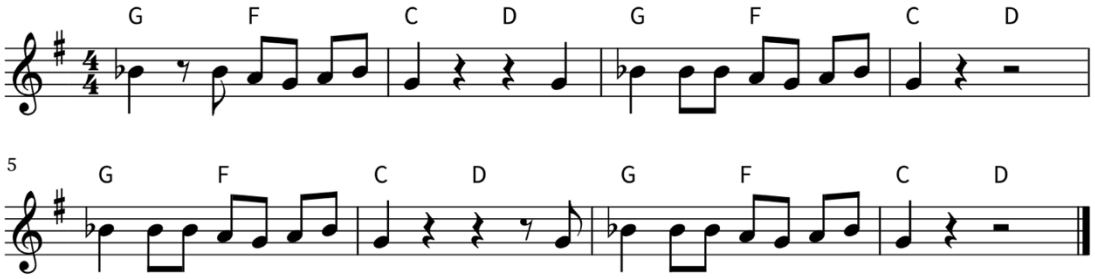
considers the listener as a traveler, with the music serving as the path traversed; and, most relevant to our discussion, the MUSIC AS A MOVING FORCE metaphor implies that musical movement causes listeners to feel and *be* "moved."

This idea of being moved by music relates to its ability to structure our experience of time by way of implied goals, a dynamic that we encounter in both versions of "Pink"/"Pynk," which deal with the short-range melodic-harmonic trajectories—like most popular music—in a cyclical, repetitive manner. As Johnson observes, "the experience of tracing the *same* musical path over again is so powerful that it can actually make you feel as though you are experiencing the *same time* over again."[84] In addition to polysemic text repetition (the word "pink"), the melody of Aerosmith's "Pink" remains relatively clear-cut throughout, with moments of closure particularly marked not only by the tonic pitch, but also the repetition of that tonic pitch following two beats of rest. While the listener is left waiting momentarily for that extra bit of closure, there is no question of where the motive is taking the listener: right back to the tonic key of G Major (Fig. 3.1). The conventional I- ♭VII-IV-V chord progression in "Pink" is two bars long: each chord gets two beats, so the chord changes are repeated four times per phrase. Through repetition of these chord changes with strong teleological implications, we experience predictable closure within a short period of time. Theorist Drew Nobile identifies type of phenomenon as a "chord loop"

[84] Mark Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007): 261.

that prolongs the tonic through circular motion.[85] While this type of reading may project repetition and a lack of closure, I hear it as repeated closure that engages with listener expectation. There is minimal room to wonder where we, as listeners, are "going."

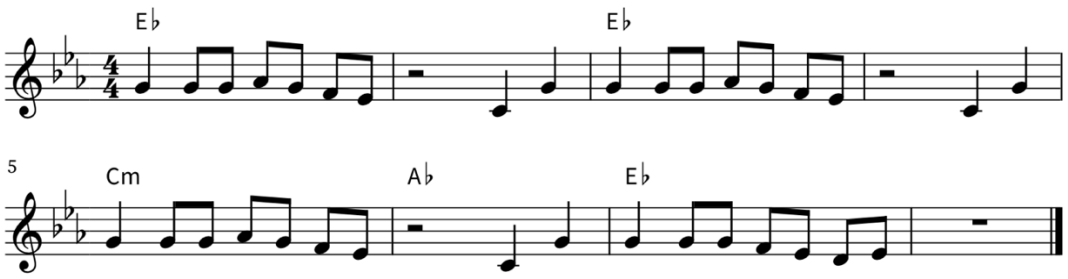
Figure 3.1: Melody and Chord Structure of Aerosmith's "Pink"



In Monáe's "Pynk," on the other hand, the melody begins on the third scale degree, moving diatonically as shown in the slide down to the tonic, but then, after leaving the same two beats of rest, the line moves to C and G in the key of E-flat Major, setting the listener up to hear the melodic motive again (Fig. 3.2). Monáe hits the G4 pitch in a manner that sounds ambiguous, with a slight scoop into the pitch. Harmonically, "Pynk" does not provide much motion, as chords stay on the tonic for the first four bars, then move to a vi chord (C minor) for one bar, then IV (A-flat major) for one bar, then ending the phrase on the tonic E-flat Major. Though approximately the same tempo as "Pink," its harmonic rhythm is significantly slower than "Pink," resulting in a more static harmonic context with less of a clear orientation around local cycles of goal-orientation and closure. In short, closure in "Pynk" is not as immediate, and leaves the listener hanging.

[85] Drew Nobile, *Form as Harmony in Rock Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020): 7.

Figure 3.2: Melody and Chord Structure of Monáe's "Pynk"



With these ideas in mind here, we experience a pronounced difference in perceived musical motion between these two contrasting versions of "Pink" and "Pynk." This striving for resolution is achieved over and over again in Aerosmith's "Pink." In Monáe's "Pynk," however, I argue that the employment of Johnson's music and motion metaphors is subverted and queered, or made different, while simultaneously emulating an alternative to heterosexual notions of motion and closure in sexuality. Arnie Cox makes the point in his mimetic hypothesis that mimetic motor imagery and mimetic motor actions are "more strongly activated in observation of goal-directed action."[86] But what if fulfillment doesn't come? Susan McClary famously argued that traditional notions of climax and closure, such as the ending of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, are ascribed masculine/patriarchal and heteronormative labels. McClary provides the example of Madonna's "Live to Tell," during which Madonna "refuses closure," not focusing on sexual triumph but rather "set[ting] up residence on the moments of the harmonic context that fluctuate between desire and dread on the

[86] Arnie Cox, *Music and Embodied Cognition: Listening, Moving, Feeling, and Thinking* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2016): 43.

one hand and resolution on the other."[87] McClary points out that the overarching phenomenology of forward motion toward an implied goal, as well as the patterns of tension-release associated with tonal procedures, might be closely linked to experiences of sexual climax and orgasm, which are mirrored by Aerosmith's complete sentences, phrases, and motives. In "Pynk," we don't achieve the harmonic closure that repeats in each line of Aerosmith's "Pink," only getting back to tonic at the end of the verse.

Monáe also leaves many of her lyrical phrases incomplete: "Pink like the inside of your… baby" leaves viewer-listeners unaware of what the "inside" signifies before the completion of the line with "baby," as if a word is missing in each line. Coupled with the visual of the famous "vagina pants," viewer-listeners might not have explicit closure, but Monáe makes her intentions and the imagined concept of female interiority open for viewer-listeners to discover for themselves.

By means of conceptual metaphor, Monáe's "Pynk" takes the source domain (viewer-listeners' bodies) and transfers it to the music, leaving room for viewer-listeners to question what happens next. Thus, Monáe subverts the MUSIC IS A MOVING FORCE metaphor by queering and feminizing musical structures rooted in expectations attributed to male experiences and meaning making. Monáe derives pleasure from these alternative ideas of motion that don't lead to predictable cycles of fulfillment in the same type of way; rather, viewer-

[87] Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality*, with a new introduction (Minneapolis 1991; Reprint Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002): 160-61.

listeners are left with more questions than answers, room to keep encountering imaginative structures and constructing an imaginary while subverting patriarchal expectations in our society.

In addition to the more general conceptual structures proposed by Johnson, Monáe fashions the body as an expansive physical structure throughout "Pynk," invoking what I call the BODIES ARE BUILDINGS conceptual metaphor (e.g., "the body is a *temple*"). With this metaphorical entailment in mind, the body is viewed as a capacious structure that one can inhabit, enter, or leave. Crucially, associating the body with a building differentiates between outside and inside. The inside of the body is presumably out of view, just as one must enter a physical building to see what's inside. Referring to the lyrics of "Pynk," Monáe taps this conceptual metaphor constantly: "Pink like the inside of your…", "Pink when you're blushing inside…", and "Pink where its deepest inside…" Monáe even references this idea of the body being a building with the line, "Pink behind all of the doors" and uses the car seen and referenced in the lyrics to illustrate the concept of "inside" even while outdoors, the car separating Monáe and a lover from external people and forces. In these instances, Monáe extends another metaphor: INSIDE IS SECRET (e.g.,"that's *insider* information," "I'm on the *outside* of that conversation"). In thinking about the body as a building in this way, viewer-listeners might think of an outsider entering an inside space, presumably in a sexual act, with the inside serving as a secret, protected entity. Viewer-listeners also see visuals that provide a glimpse into this "inside" with the costumes and choreography.

Figure 3.3: “Vagina Pants” worn by Monáe and Black Girl Magic dancers[88]

Figure 3.4: Monáe’s dress with silhouette resembling a vaginal canal[89]

[88] Janelle Monáe, “Janelle Monáe - PYNK [Official Music Video],” YouTube video, 4:28. April 10, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PaYvlVR_BEc, 0:43.

[89] Monáe, “Janelle Monáe - PYNK [Official Music Video],” 0:37.

"We Got The Pink": Marked Femininity in "Pynk"

Culturally, viewer-listeners also associate softness in quality, volume, and highness in pitch with femininity, adhering to two overlapping conceptual metaphors: SOFT IS FEMININE and HIGH IS FEMININE (e.g., he "sings like a girl"). Victoria Malawey writes, "attributes associated with femaleness include softer delivery, greater breathiness, higher formant frequencies, more upward shifts (and fewer downward shifts) in fundamental frequency, and slower rate of speech in addition to higher pitch and wider range," among others.[90] While some of these elements are somewhat abstract, many are quite obvious. Referring first to this notion of softness, I identify the concept of "softness" with two sonic entities: timbre and volume. Timbrally, Monáe uses a hushed, breathy delivery, deliberate choices that influence the overall affect. Wallmark writes, "Timbre is not a neutral, unmarked category of sound; rather it is deeply invested with both biologically and culturally situated meanings."[91] This can be compared to a whisper: as humans, we whisper when we want to speak a secret aloud. We whisper because we don't want everyone to hear our secrets. Referring back to the metaphor INSIDE IS SECRET, timbre, in this role, brings us even more into a realm of secret keeping.

In addition to the soft, whisper-like timbre that Monáe employs, this quality paired with a soft volume creates a sense of closeness and intimacy, as if

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[90] Victoria Malawey, *A Blaze of Light in Every Word* (New York: Oxford University Press): 62.

[91] Zachary Wallmark, "Theorizing the Saxophonic Scream in Free Jazz Improvisation," in *Negotiated Moments: Improvisation, Sound, and Subjectivity,* ed. Gillian Siddal and Ellen Waterman (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016): 243.

Monáe has carefully chosen her audience and is speaking directly to them. Moore identifies this proxemic zone as "intimate," implying physical closeness to the listener by means of clarity of bodily sounds. Moore writes that this persona achieved by the proxemic zone is further articulated with related lyrical content that "suggests intimacy/potential physical contact and addresses [an] interpersonal relationship between two people."[92] Viewer-listeners, in turn, hear Monáe's vocal lines in a way that emulates sitting right next to her. With the INSIDE IS SECRET metaphor in mind, one might hear that intimacy through audible breaths, wetness of the mouth, and the use of the tongue and lips in articulating consonants heard works like "pink." This intimacy is intensified through the use of the close-miked snapping that occurs throughout the track and video, further creating proximal intimacy that crosses into erotic intimacy.

As Malawey considers the association of femaleness with timbre and volume, she also connects femaleness with higher pitch frequencies. While Malawey debunks the myth of vocal pitch and range as essential to gender identity, higher pitch frequencies are, whether acknowledged or unacknowledged, culturally associated with femaleness despite the fact that singers of all genders tend to sing in similar ranges in pop music. Monáe and Grimes, a Canadian pop artist also featured as a vocalist on this track, do not sing in very high range by any means, but pitch in this song generally stays within the scope of a mezzo-soprano range, with the melody going as high as a C5 on the

[92] Allan Moore, *Song Means: Analysing and Interpreting Recorded Popular Song* (Farmingham, UK: Ashgate, 2012): 187.

staff. Monáe also sings with slight inflections that move in an upward direction, which is heard the words “car” and “boulevard,” among others to follow. The combination of these vocal elements lead to a particular sonic setting that are associated with femaleness, thus adding another dimension to Monáe’s narrative about female same-sex sexual experiences. Softness might also reference a youthfulness on display, which is subverted by the outward expression in the chorus; all of the references to female bodies, sexuality, and empowerment create a space in the chorus for Monáe to express her identities freely and openly through a fuller voice, louder volume, and the act of speaking out against or, as one clip from the video suggests, “flipping off” systems of oppression (Fig. 3.3).

Figure 3.5: Black Girl Magic dancers raise middle fingers onscreen[93]

Monáe has constructed her music video and song to deliberately evoke bodily responses for the listener, igniting our own imaginative structures and employing conceptual metaphors and polysemic devices at play. In turn, Monáe presents a complex imaginary that all viewer-listeners, regardless of our own

[93] Monáe, “Janelle Monáe - PYNK [Official Music Video],” 3:59.

identities, are welcomed into and invited to interpret through their bodies. In this utopia, Black bodies are subjects, not objects, same-sex sexuality is embraced, and female bodies and experiences are put into the limelight. Monáe's "Pynk" offers one lens through which viewer-listeners can see, acknowledge, and celebrate human sexuality, updating and recontextualizing the conversation that Aerosmith started 24 years ago. Aerosmith and Monáe both remind viewer-listeners that sexuality is, at its core, a human experience that looks different for everyone.

CHAPTER V

"AN EMOTIONAL SEXUAL BENDER":

PERFORMING A POP-STAR PERSONA IN "MAKE ME FEEL"

Jane and Zen walk into a bar, looking at each other and at the setting before them, gradually becoming curious about their surroundings. Suddenly, the sonic scene shifts: tongue clicks and snaps bring everyone —Jane, Zen, and viewer-listeners of this memory/video— into an alternate universe that embraces a 1980s pop sound and feel featuring a dancing, singing, and flirting pop-star: Janelle Monáe herself (Fig. 4.1).

Figure 4.1: Monáe as pop-star[94]

From the retro arcade and fashion choices to the vocal inflections, Monáe takes on an '80s pop-star persona in "Make Me Feel" that emulates the work of

[94] Janelle Monáe, "Janelle Monáe - Make Me Feel [Official Music Video]," Youtube video, 3:50, February 22, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tGRzz0oqgUE: 0:35.

her longtime mentor and friend, Prince. In this chapter, I argue that this track serves as an updated version of the musical and visual aesthetics of Prince's 1986 track "Kiss," taking the overt theme of seduction and reimagining it in the context of modern Black, female, queer sexual experiences. Referring back to my Chapter 1 discussion of Monáe's distinct Afrofuturistic brand, I will assess Monáe's short term branding techniques in this particular track, particularly her use of Prince-inspired production, semiotics, and aesthetics. Using these frameworks as backdrops, I will explore the role of "Make Me Feel" as a "bisexual anthem" and place within the mosaic musical narrative and plotline of *Dirty Computer*.

Monáe's Brands

From the very onset of her career, Janelle Monáe established an Afrofuturist brand persona, which Mark Dery influentially defines as "African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future."[95] From forced sterilization in late-19th and 20th century American eugenics programs to tasers and guns used by police forces to detain often innocent Black people in contemporary America—technology has played a key role in torturing and othering Black bodies. In this reimagination, Black creators reclaim technology in a science-fiction setting while casting new possibilities for futures where Black bodies are affirmed and hold power.
In her first two albums *The ArchAndroid* and *The Electric Lady,* Monáe's programs explore the life of character Cindi Mayweather. Beyond her

[95] Dery, "Black to the Future," 180.

performance of Cindi, Monáe maintained her distinct Afrofuturistic sci-fi brand. I identify Monáe's cyborg Cindi Mayweather character and branding strategy as a "short-term person brand," a brand that a celebrity personally identifies with, but only for a short period of time, which she breaks out of and redefines in this album.[96] In the emotion picture, Monáe introduces a new protagonist: Black, female, and queer Jane 57821 whose captivity by white supremacist forces leads to an exploration of her memories that qualify her as a "dirty computer." While the character Jane 57821 remains consistent throughout the album and emotion picture, viewer-listeners experience many facets and identities of Jane in each of the tracks and music videos as mirrors of Monáe's own identities. In this album, Monáe shifts her brand from a short-term person brand as her cyborg alter-ego to a self-affirmative "person-brand" expressed by Afrofuturistic döppelganger Jane 57821. Monáe presents this protagonist Jane as a mosaic, with many identities, experiences, and sub-brands acting in conversation with each other, allowing her to maintain this overarching person-brand beyond just her album's protagonist.[97] The pop-star persona might be experienced an additional short-term brand under the overarching Jane person-brand.

Given *Dirty Computer*'s mosaic-like construction, viewer-listeners hold the opportunity to "zoom in" on the individual sub-brands or mini short-term person brands that Monáe presents throughout the album and emotion picture. In his paper "The Humbug and the Nightingale," Mark Samples identifies three

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[96] Kristin J. Lieb, *Gender, Branding, and the Modern Music Industry: The Social Construction of Female Popular Music Stars* (New York: Routledge, 2013): 37.

[97] Lieb, *Gender, Branding, and the Modern Music Industry,* 34.

elements of the brand concept: production, semiotics, and aesthetics within a commercial ideology.[98] Given Monáe's numerous short-term person brands on display throughout the album, each track/memory displays a distinct collection of influences, sounds, imagery, and spotlight upon elements of Jane and Monáe's life. Additionally, Monáe reflects upon her musical influences, from rap and her work with OutKast and Diddy to her musical mentors Prince and Stevie Wonder. Samples also writes, "every performer or composer who has risen to prominence has been either a great self-promoter or has had a champion."[99] While Samples in this case is writing about P.T. Barnum's "champion" role in branding of vocalist Jenny Lind in the mid 1850s, we can identify a number of champions and key influencers and role models in Monáe's circles. In order to understand Monáe's rise to prominence *and* how her artistic choices support her brand, I turn to one of her key influences and "champions": Prince.

Monáe's Relationship with Prince

Prince's career exploded in the early '80s with his many albums, notably *1999* (1982) and *Purple Rain* (1984), achieving international success and critical acclaim. With seven Grammy awards and over 150 million records sold, Prince's eclectic merging of sounds from funk, R&B, pop, and so many other genres certainly lend to Monáe's own developments and artistic choices, particularly

[98] Mark Samples, "The Humbug and the Nightingale: P. T. Barnum, Jenny Lind, and the Branding of a Star Singer for American Reception," *The Musical Quarterly* 99, no. 4 (2017): 290.

[99] Samples, "The Humbug and the Nightingale," 312.

when constructing various personae and genre performances in *Dirty Computer*. Monáe identifies Prince as a close friend before his untimely death in 2016.[100]

Monáe met Prince over the phone following an opening act for producer and R&B and soul singer Raphael Saadiq. Monáe reflects,

> I had a sinus infection, my nose was stopped up, I thought I did a terrible job. I went backstage and I was like man, I want to go home. We were riding the little church van too…we couldn't afford the tour bus! …I get a knock on the door, and I open up the door, and she was like "hey, I'm DJ Rasheeda…I have somebody on the phone who wants to talk to you.
> Prince: … "Hello, Janelle."
> Monáe: And I was like "hi, um, who is this?"
> Prince: "This is Prince."
> Monáe: "PRINCE?! This is Prince?"
> Prince: "Yes, this is Prince. I'm sorry I couldn't make your show…I love what you're doing in the music industry. I love your jazz voice. You wanna come over and jam?"
> … Just as cool as fuck, and the rest is history.[101]

After having Monáe's band change from outfits that he called "too clean" into silk, Prince and Monáe had a jam session, the first of many. Monáe remembers Prince as a generous mentor. She says, "He never let his mystery get in the way of his mentorship… He gave. He gave quietly. He didn't want people to know what he contributed."[102] Monáe hadn't been able to speak openly about his mentorship as a result until following his death.

> I have to do everything I can with the projects I put out because if you know that someone has opened up that many doors for you for artists like you to be free and express yourself freely through your art and through your music and through film and all that, you don't want to let them down…artists who used their songs to uplift and

[100] Spanos, "Janelle Monáe Frees Herself," 39.

[101] HOT 97, "Janelle Monáe On Kanye West, Sexuality & Looks Back," 26:22.

[102] HOT 97, "Janelle Monáe On Kanye West, Sexuality & Looks Back," 29:27.

> inspire and encourage and celebrate Black people. He was all about us owning and coming together and collaborating and creating.[103]

Monáe continues to channel Prince's energies and musical ideas. In an interview with Hot 97 Radio of New York City, Monáe says,

> I try to honor him as much as I possibly can. I think it's cool to bridge that gap between '80s and '90s to this generation –we're keeping it fresh. I think that most of his heroes, you know, he was inspired by James Brown, Jimi Hendrix…you felt that but you also got Prince. It was the way he did that that made him Prince. How we rock stuff helps define us as this artist, and having somebody like Prince in my corner to encourage me and to just be there has been a very comforting thing. I still feel his presence, and I think that people will feel his presence until the end of time.[104]

Monáe has continued to honor Prince's legacy by sharing his impact upon her career and paying homage to him in her music. In order to assess the scope of Prince's influence upon the brand presented in "Make Me Feel," in the next section I apply the three elements that Samples attributes to brand identity (production, semiotics, and aesthetics).

Production

In a number of interviews, Monáe states that Prince was actively involved in the production of *Dirty Computer* before his death. Monáe said in an interview with Annie Mac: "Prince actually was working on the album with me before he passed on to another frequency, and helped me come up with sounds. And I really miss

[103] HOT 97, "Janelle Monáe On Kanye West, Sexuality & Looks Back," 30:35.

[104] HOT 97, "Janelle Monáe On Kanye West, Sexuality & Looks Back," 24:27.

him, you know, it's hard for me to talk about him. But I do miss him, and his spirit will never leave me."[105]

Monáe also writes a special note to Prince in the acknowledgement section of her liner notes:

> Lastly, Prince without you there'd be no me. Without Paisley Park there'd be no Wondaland. We miss you deeply. Thank you for always believing in me. Thank you for always wanting to give me a helping hand. Thank you for our paisley jam sessions and 5 hour talks. Eye-m sorry eye-m swearing so much. Eye'll put money in the swear jar when we meet again. Your spirit will never leave me or us. And Eye'll honor you always. Eye am thankful you stayed with us throughout this process as a guiding light. Until next time...[106]

How much of a mark did Prince leave on Monáe and her music? One key clue can be found in a Facebook post by Prince's DJ, Lenka Paris. Although this post has since been deleted, screenshots of the Tweet reveal that Paris identified Monáe's beats, sounds, and synth parts in the track "Make Me Feel," as well as other parts of the album. Monáe has stated that Prince did not write "Make Me Feel," but certainly helped inspire many of the choices heard in the track. As Spanos points out, "Make Me Feel" very closely resembles Prince's "Kiss" from his 1986 album *Parade*.

A number of recording choices also showcase the similarities between these videos' productions. Both tracks prominently feature synthesizer and electric guitar. While Monáe's use of the electric guitar plays a role as a visual and sonic reference to Prince's "Kiss," the electric guitar's amplification settings are

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[105] Ben Kaye, "Prince Was Heavily Involved in Janelle Monáe's Forthcoming *Dirty Computer*, February 25, 2018, https://consequenceofsound.net/2018/02/prince-was-heavily-involved-in-janelle-monaes-forthcoming-dirty-computer/.

[106] Monáe, *Dirty Computer,* liner notes.

set to emulate an early ’80s vintage pop sound heard in “Kiss” and other ’80s pop classics. Prince and Monáe each employ exceptionally similar beat patterns as well, placing emphasis on the backbeats in the percussion while syncopating the synthesizer on beat one and the pickup into beat three, creating a funk groove through juxtaposing rhythmic feels. The resulting musical products, while sonically unique, hold similar ’80s pop/funk vibes.

Semiotics

Monáe implements a number of vocal inflections made iconic by Prince, many of which cross gender lines and contribute to the ’80s pop-star image. In particular, Prince moans his iconic “uhh” vocal scoop a number of times throughout “Kiss,” the first instance at 0:07 followed by a pronounced more spoken “uhh” just microseconds after 2:18. Monáe imitates this same scoop with an emphasized descent in her video for “Make Me Feel” at 2:43. This “uhh” might be heard as a sexual moan or vocalization of desire, but its meaning seems to allude just as much to the vocal sounds associated with this ’80s pop-star brand as it does to sex. Additionally, both artists include electric guitar not just audibly, but visually, thoroughly incorporated into the music videos. In Prince’s video, the electric guitar is audible from the very beginning of the music, but is first visible at 0:22, being played by The Revolution band member Wendy Melvoin (Fig. 4.2).

Figure 4.2: Wendy Melvoin plays guitar next to Prince[107]

The guitar even has a prolonged solo beginning at 2:20. Musically, Monáe waits to introduce the guitar until 1:48; the pop-star version of herself is seen playing it at 1:53 (Fig. 4.3) and numerous times throughout the video.

Figure 4.3: Monáe playing the electric guitar[108]

[107] Prince, "Prince & The Revolution - Kiss (Official Music Video)," YouTube video, 3:55, August 11, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H9tEvfIsDyo, 0:26.

[108] Monáe, "Janelle Monáe - Make Me Feel [Official Music Video]," 1:53.

Emblematic for Prince's music, the electric guitar and its funky chords and sound settings serve as signs of this '80s pop-star, which Monáe takes time to highlight in her video as a way of paying homage to the electric guitar sound so often attributed to Prince's pop-funk sound. Traditionally, the electric guitar has been associated with masculinity due to its phallic physicality and sonic strength.[109] Here, Prince and Monáe assign the guitar to female players, subverting this cock-rock stereotype. Finally, both artists include the role of the musical protagonist as seducer. Prince acts as a seducer towards numerous female subjects in his video, which can be seen at 0:45 and 1:48 in particular (Fig. 4.4).

Figure 4.4: Prince seduces dancer Monique Mannen[110]

Monáe's video shows seduction on the part of Jane with her two lovers Zen and Che, but also as this imagined pop-star version of Monáe seducing everyone, including Jane (Fig. 4.5).

[109] Steve Waksman, *Instruments of Desire: The Electric Guitar and the Shaping of Musical Experience*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999): 5.

[110] Prince, "Prince & The Revolution - Kiss (Official Music Video)," 1:48.

Figure 4.5: Monáe's pop-star character flirts with Jane[111]

While androgynous in nature, Prince directs his seduction only towards female-bodied people, an eroticism that McClary calls "polymorphously perverse;" however, Monáe and Jane are attracted to and *attracting* both male- and female-bodied characters simultaneously, portraying this '80s pop-star and sex symbol persona as an updated and affirmational pansexual and polyamorous icon in a social setting in the video where this sexuality is not questioned, but, rather, affirmed. [112]

Aesthetics

Aesthetically, the sonic entities present themselves often, including the "uhh" moan/grunt sounds as well as inflections and scoops, which can be heard at 1:08 of Prince's video and 1:23 of Monáe's video. Visually, a lot of the color choices seem almost identical, particularly fluorescent pinks, reds, and blues in each of

[111] Monáe, "Janelle Monáe - Make Me Feel [Official Music Video]," 1:45.

[112] McClary, *Conventional Wisdom,* 156.

the videos. Playing off of the symbolic duo roles of "seducer," each artist has a moment where video characters dance to approach one another. While a female-bodied person dances toward Prince at 2:11 (Fig. 4.6), a similar instance occurs at 2:36, where Jane dances in the direction of Zen and again at 2:40 when she runs towards Ché (Fig. 4.7).

Figure 4.6: Monique Mannen dances in Prince's direction[113]

Figure 4.7: Jane runs towards Zen[114]

[113] Prince, "Prince & The Revolution - Kiss (Official Music Video)," 2:11.

[114] Monáe, "Janelle Monáe - Make Me Feel [Official Music Video]," 2:36.

Considering dance on its own, Monáe obviously emulates Prince's moves in her video, with a Prince-like spin at 3:25 (also seen in "Kiss" at 0:13), footwork at 3:40 (in "Kiss" at 1:55), and even a booty grab at 1:44 and 1:33 respectively. Each artist also wears a jacket at varying points in the video. Aesthetically, the similarities between the two pop-stars are undeniable.

With these parallels in mind, how does this '80s pop-star persona work within the context of *Dirty Computer*? Monáe uses each track of *Dirty Computer* to communicate distinct memories of Jane 57821. Incidentally, each track features an entirely different genre *and* sub-brand, from the pop feel of "Pynk" to the rap and mainstream hip-hop/pop vibes of "Crazy Classic Life." These different genres or sub-brands create different sonic settings for the varying memories. They also likely attract different listeners, particularly when presented as singles from the album. Overarchingly, the disparity between each genre displays the complexity of the individual, more particularly, in the case of Jane 57821 and Monáe herself, Black, female, and queer.

The palette of branding choices and personae that Monáe changes up throughout the album *Dirty Computer* might be seen as a gateway for a variety of audience members to connect with Monáe's music. In the case of "Make Me Feel," Monáe's decision to pay tribute to Prince and the sheer likeness between the two tracks formulates a sense of nostalgia for fans familiar with Prince's music and '80s pop/funk aesthetics without explicit articulation of queerness. As a result, Monáe's track and video might be seen as a modern update of the dream-like seductive plot for younger generations to listen, watch, and connect with this style in their own unique ways, creating a space for everyone to

experience and hear Monáe's homage to Prince and his original "sexual-bending" music video.

Just as viewer-listeners encounter this Prince-inspired performance style, they also see and hear queerness, androgyny, and fluidity celebrated openly. Monáe says, when speaking about the album as a whole, "I want young girls, young boys, nonbinary, gay, straight, queer people who are having a hard time dealing with their sexuality, dealing with feeling ostracized or bullied for just being their unique selves, to know that I see you… This album is for you. Be proud."[115] With her update to the '80s pop-star persona that Prince championed throughout his career, Monáe creates a space for queer and trans youth to embrace their sexualities and celebrate all that they are not as "dirty computers," but as multifaceted and intricate human beings.

[115] Spanos, "Janelle Monáe Frees Herself," 36.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION:

"HOLD ON, DON'T FIGHT YOUR WAR ALONE"

Inspired by Barack Obama's "A More Perfect Union" speech delivered on March 18, 2008 in Philadelphia, further inspired by Quincy Jones' quote in GQ (February 2018): "If you're [B]lack, that's what you get used to in America… anger doesn't get anything done, so you have to find out: How do you make it work? That's why I was always maniacal about transforming every problem into a puzzle which I can solve. I can solve a puzzle – a problem just stresses me out.

—Janelle Monáe, in *Dirty Computer* liner notes

At the end of *Dirty Computer,* Jane 57821, Zen, and Ché escape from New Dawn after defeating their captors. The song "Americans" plays as the trio exits. As acknowledged in Monáe's program notes above, the track centers around Monáe's outlook about American society, proposing her take on confronting injustices within the United States. In her lyrics, she mocks traditional sexist, heteronormative, and whitewashed American values:

War is old, so is sex
Let's play God, you go next
Hands go up, men go down
Try my luck, stand my ground
Die in church, live in jail
Say her name, twice in hell
Uncle Sam kissed a man
Jim Crow Jesus rose again

I like my woman in the kitchen
I teach my children superstitions
I keep my two guns on my blue nightstand
A pretty young thang, she can wash my clothes
But she'll never ever wear my pants

In a later verse, Monáe shifts this presentation of mockery to a call to Americans to think further about their own roles in complacency under white-supremacist, sexist, and homophobic power structures. Her chorus reclaims the United States as her own, telling those in power that she will stand firmly in her fight for justice and equity for all Americans:

Seventy-nine cent to your dollar
All that bullshit from white-collars
You see my color before my vision
Sometimes I wonder if you will fly
Would it help you make a better decision?

I pledge allegiance to the flag
Learned the words from my mom and dad
Cross my heart and I hope to die
With a big old piece of American pie
Just love me baby
Love me for who I am
Fallen angels
Singing: "clap your hands"
Don't try to take my country
I will defend my land
I'm not crazy, baby, naw
I'm American...

This overarching concept of freedom remains prominent throughout *Dirty Computer* and central within Monáe's creative mission for the album and emotion picture. Perhaps most poignantly, Monáe presents both Afropessimistic reads on the ways in which society is historically rooted in racism and sexism and a flipped-script call to reposition our understanding of America in a way that acknowledges the marginalization of Black people, the role of slavery in America's foundations, and the need for Black Americans to hold the same status as non-Black Americans within society. Additionally, *Dirty Computer* serves as a

space for Monáe to perform her power and truth without limitations. When asked "how does it feel to be free?" Monáe replies:

> I think that this album, *Dirty Computer,* is really an album that celebrates marginalized groups… *Dirty Computer* is an album that I hope that we feel seen when we see the visuals, when we feel heard and we feel celebrated during a time where those in the position of power and making regulations and rules say that our very existence is dirty and that we need to be cleansed. So, I wanted to do something about the anger that I was feeling. I feel very angry when I think about women's rights being trampled on in the way that they are. Somebody trying to control *my* vagina, somebody telling me what I can or what I can't do. Policing *my* areolas. Like, it's an upsetting thing, but I didn't want to stay there, so *Dirty Computer* is a journey through all those emotions, and at the end of the day, you know, the things that are going on, it doesn't feel like this is my America, but when it's all said and done, it will be my America.[116]

As discussed in this thesis, Monáe engages with an array of topics, sounds, identities, and, echoing her quote, emotions throughout *Dirty Computer*. She calls listeners to stop and listen to her truth through the story of fictional yet autobiographical Jane 57821. As we stop to listen, we shift our instinct of Eidsheim's acousmatic question "who is this?" and turn it back upon ourselves in asking "who am I?"[117] Further, this question leads to a follow-up provocation: "how was that sound learned, and through which sets of practices, constraints, desires, and structures of power did its so-called meaning become unquestioned?"[118] Eidsheim's acousmatic question allows us to explore our own biases while listening closer to the nuances of the music's materiality and historical and cultural contexts. In calling for pause, Eidsheim writes,

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[116] HOT 97, "Janelle Monáe On Kanye West, Sexuality & Looks Back," 13:12.

[117] Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound,* 56.

[118] Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound,* 56.

> Unless I am aware of my beliefs, I am imprisoned by them. Thus, while the acousmatic question is crucial and can help us to gain insight into both the non-fixity of any one position and our active participation in any articulation, one question cuts deeper—indeed deepest. That question is this: Who would I have to be, and what would I have to feel, if I did not cling to any given identification, and instead practiced inquiry through pause?[119]

In my own pursuit of pause in this thesis, I have explored Monáe's use of strategies for deliberate expression of marked and unmarked Blackness in "Crazy, Classic, Life," use of conceptual metaphor to further engage audiences in her feminized and homoerotic "Pynk," and homage through familiar sounds of '80s pop superstar (and Monáe's mentor) Prince in "Make Me Feel." These deep dives into Monáe's music and examinations of its contexts creates a space for me, for all of us, to take pause and think deeper about our own listening processes. Just as Monáe constructs a space for us to hear and learn from her story, we, as listeners, must use this space to listen to ourselves and learn from our implicit beliefs and biases. In many ways, this act of taking pause is the first of many steps in engaging in activism and re-building a country that acknowledges its histories, affirms Black, female, and/or queer bodies, and celebrates differences. In an interview, Janelle Monáe states, "We have the power to shape culture and we have the power to undo the culture that does not serve us well."[120] All of us, regardless of our identities, hold this power to "undo" this culture that does not serve all communities. I conclude with the introduction of "Americans":

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[119] Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound,* 199-200.

[120] HOT 97, "Janelle Monáe On Kanye West, Sexuality & Looks Back," 18:22.

Hold on, don't fight your war alone
Halo around you, don't have to face it on your own
We will win this fight
Let all souls be brave
We'll find a way to heaven
We'll find a way...

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