

“Black Girl Magic, Y’all Can’t Stand It”

On Afrofuturism and intersectionality in Janelle Monáe’s *Dirty Computer*

Master’s Thesis

E. van Soldt

s4284720

Supervisor: Saskia Bultman

Word count: 28765

Abstract:

In early 2018, Janelle Monáe released her (now Grammy-nominated) studio album *Dirty Computer*. The album and accompanying „emotion picture“ (a short, emotionally evocative film), tell the story of „Jane,“ a young black woman who lives in an unnamed, futuristic dystopia. She and her friends are chased relentlessly by an organisation called “The House of the New Dawn,” which has started calling people „computers.“ If a „computer“ is deemed „dirty,“ they are taken to the House by force where they are then subjected to „The Nevermind,“ which causes them to forget everything they ever knew. The narrative is interspersed with songs from the album, and together they present and deal with themes of race, gender, and sexuality. Monáe is a feminist and activist, and her work is Afrofuturist. On top of this, the album is the first to *not* be part of her previous „Metropolis suites,“ and is instead about her as an artist as well as a person. The album, therefore, can be analysed for its feminist and activist contents. As the album deals with race, gender, sexuality, and the intersections between all three, this thesis employs Kimberlé Crenshaw’s intersectionality theory, and will explore what intersectional, activist message the Afrofuturist album carries out, and how.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Janelle Monáe Robinson (Kansas City, December 1st 1985), known by her stage name Janelle Monáe, is a feminist and Afrofuturist who has spent the past decade crafting a futuristic world through her music albums.¹ Her first EP, *Metropolis: Suite I (The Chase)*, which debuted in 2007, marks the start of her musical career as well as the founding of a fictional, dystopian city called Metropolis. The city was first introduced on Monáe's self-released album, *The Audition* (2003), which was not actually part of the broader Metropolis narrative.² The song "Metropolis" did, however, sketch out what the city was like: run down, oppressive, and with an incredibly dense population.³ It is on the subsequent albums that the city is visually constructed: the 2007 album has the track and short film "Many Moons," which starts off with the Metropolis Annual Android Auction.⁴ Androids are a commodity in this world with almost no right to personhood, positioning Metropolis as a type of technological dystopia.

Since *The Chase*, Monáe has released *The ArchAndroid* (2010), *The Electric Lady* (2013) and, most recently, *Dirty Computer* (2018), which is also a motion picture. Each album, up to *Dirty Computer*, contributed to the story and the realm that Monáe had been creating for years.⁵ While some scholarly work has been done on Monáe's previous albums, *Dirty Computer* was only released on April 27th, 2018, and has not received such attention yet. This thesis will therefore primarily centre on Monáe's most recent work and its contributions to her oeuvre, as it is the first album to step away from the story of Metropolis and that of Cindi Mayweather, Monáe's alter ego.⁶ Cindi Mayweather is a time-travelling android who serves as the protagonist of each album, and who seeks to rid Metropolis of its oppressors.⁷

Until *Dirty Computer*, each of Monáe's albums take place in the fictional world and city of Metropolis, which is plagued by „The Great Divide,“ a secret society which uses time travel to suppress freedom and love throughout time.⁸ Metropolis also features androids that appear to be enslaved and a massive capitalistic division of wealth.⁹ It is a dystopia that mirrors circumstances both from the past and present day, such as the enslavement of a marginalised class of people and deeply rooted capitalism. Monáe is not just the creator of this world: she is also an active member of it. She inserts herself into this world by way of her alter ego, Cindi Mayweather, and aims to free Metropolis

¹ Monáe, on feminism: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=by-xrVTVAp0> (Accessed on 10-11-2018) Monáe, on Afrofuturism: <https://vimeo.com/264269855> (Accessed on 10-11-2018).

² <http://www.eruditorumpress.com/blog/a-short-guide-to-janelle-mon%C3%A1e-and-the-metropolis-saga/> (Accessed on 04-12-2018).

³ Ibid.

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LHgbzNHVg0c> (Accessed on 04-12-2018).

⁵ Jones, 2018, p. 42.

⁶ <https://io9.gizmodo.com/from-metropolis-to-dirty-computer-a-guide-to-janelle-m-1825580195> (Accessed on 10-11-2018).

⁷ <http://www.eruditorumpress.com/blog/a-short-guide-to-janelle-mon%C3%A1e-and-the-metropolis-saga/> (Accessed on 04-12-2018).

⁸ Womack, 2013, p. 74.

⁹ Jones, 2018, p. 42.

from The Great Divide.¹⁰ Note that this persona even bleeds into the real world: Monáe's Twitter name reads „Janelle Monáe, Cindi.“¹¹ Cindi Mayweather is a subversive persona, created to undo Metropolis from its oppressive shackles and save the city. Monáe clearly identifies with Mayweather, and she can be described as an activist herself – having spoken at the Women's March on January 21st, 2017 – who stands against sexism, racism, homophobia, and transphobia.¹² Cassandra L. Jones, professor of Africana studies, describes Monáe as a „digital griot,“ a term originally coined by Adam J. Banks.¹³ According to Jones:

The digital griot is an intervening figure who unites the past, present, and future, refuses the digital divide as a barrier to black engagement with technology, and utilizes a specifically African American rhetoric.¹⁴

In other words, the „digital griot“ is a persona firmly settled in an African American context, who rejects the idea of black people being „less“ technological and who rejects this throughout history, across the present and well into the future, in order to tell a new story of a technologically engaged black diaspora. The „digital divide“ refers to how the digital age, once assumed to be inherently empowering and decentralising, can in fact lead to the increased marginalisation of those who do not have immediate access to the latest digital or technological innovations.¹⁵ As innovations are never introduced to everyone immediately or even to everyone at all, some people will inevitably be excluded from technological innovation(s). A 2008 study showed that, among others, marginalised racial and ethnic groups are already at a distinct disadvantage in society due to structural and systemic racism, and also tend to use the internet (the baseline for technological engagement) less than other ethnic groups.¹⁶ This may lead to them being further marginalised in the future, and although at the time of the 2008 article the gap in the divide was already closing steadily, this does not mean black people are not still inherently disadvantaged due to racist power structures.¹⁷ The „digital griot“ refuses the digital divide as being inherent, working to show that black people can and should engage with technology, even if previous circumstances – such as income inequality or lack of job opportunities – prevented them from doing so.

The „digital griot“ as a concept has significant overlap with Afrofuturist theory, which also looks to past, present and future, and can be considered an inherently Afrofuturist concept. Afrofuturism as a term was originated by Mark Dery in the nineties, who first used it in his essay

¹⁰ Womack, 2013, p. 74.

¹¹ <https://twitter.com/JanelleMonae> (Accessed on 11-11-2018).

¹² <https://www.billboard.com/articles/news/7662606/janelle-monae-hell-you-talmbout-womens-march> (Accessed on 11-11-2018); Jones, 2018, p. 43.

¹³ Jones, 2018, p. 43.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Kvasny & Payton, 2008, p. 307; Hilbert, 2013, p. 2.

¹⁶ Kvasny & Payton, 2008, p. 307-308.

¹⁷ Kvasny & Payton, 2008, p. 310.

“Black to the Future,” (1994).¹⁸ He used it to describe the trend of black college students and artists who were very quickly reframing and redefining discussions about art and social change through a scientific and technological lens in the eighties and nineties of the twentieth century.¹⁹ He defined it as:

[...] speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of 20th century technoculture-and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future.²⁰

Here, Dery is describing a recent trend of black people using science and technology to (re)describe their circumstances, and look towards a new, perhaps different future. This only concerns the origins of Afrofuturism as a term, however: Afrofuturism as an aesthetic trend had begun several decades before.²¹ Furthermore, the term „Afrofuturism“ now encompasses more than Mark Dery originally described. Director and author Ytasha L. Womack, in her book *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-fi and Fantasy Culture*, describes it as „an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation.“²² Ingrid LaFleur, art curator and Afrofuturist cited by Womack, describes it as „a way of imagining possible futures through a black cultural lens.“²³ Cassandra L. Jones, who also cites Womack in her definition, defines it as follows:

A growing movement of black speculative art, Afrofuturism is an umbrella term that covers the literature, music, high art, and street art that examine both the metaphors of technology as imagined by blacks across the African diaspora and the uses of technology by the same. Working at the “intersection of imagination, technology, future, and liberation,” Afrofuturist authors, musicians, and technicians rely on the resilience of black culture to imagine improbable and seemingly impossible futures, new technologies and new uses for old technologies, using the tropes of science fiction and fantasy to critique social inequality.²⁴

Jones, more so than other aforementioned authors, explicates all that Afrofuturism currently encompasses. For one, it is employed by all creative genres, but Jones specifically notes that Afrofuturism can be and is used as a way to critique society and social inequality. The connection between Afrofuturism and Monáe’s „digital griot,“ a subversive and activist persona is that both are indelibly linked in their desire to change, comment on and engage with society, whether in past, present or future.

Aside from being an Afrofuturist, Monáe is also a feminist. Afrofuturism is very inclusive of

¹⁸ Womack, 2013, p. 16.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Cited in Bould, 2007, p.182.

²¹ Womack, 2013, p. 17.

²² Womack, 2013, p. 9.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Jones, 2018, p. 42.

women and feminism,²⁵ in that it allows black women to have free reign over their own imagination, ideas, and creations, without in Womack's words, „framing them with the pop expectations and sensibilities of the day.“²⁶ Conversely, feminism has not always been inclusive of black women, or people of colour in general, let alone a movement like Afrofuturism.²⁷ Historically speaking, the early feminist movement – the suffragettes – primarily advocated for the voting rights of *white* women, though they claimed to march for all women. In 1913 in the United States, a massive suffragist march was held in Washington, and it was demanded that black women march in an all-black delegation in the back.²⁸ Susan B. Anthony, who famously illegally cast her ballot in 1872 and is generally hailed as the woman responsible for the 19th Amendment to the American constitution, still has her grave covered in „I voted“ stickers every election in commemoration of this act.²⁹ What is, perhaps, less well known is that she rather explicitly advocated for women's votes, and not black people's. Her infamous statement on the matter was that she would rather „cut off this right arm of mine before [she] will ever work for or demand the ballot for the negro and not the woman,“ as though „negro women“ did not exist.³⁰ In the end, the 1920 19th Amendment granted suffrage to white women only. This was the first wave of feminism, but the exclusion of black women from the feminist movement continued into the second wave, and later into the third, and is still present in contemporary feminism. The exclusion from the second and third waves has been described at length by authors like Audre Lorde and bell hooks. Lorde wrote that even in the women's movement, black women had to fight for visibility, which at the same time rendered them incredibly vulnerable.³¹ Hooks noted that while black women were very much part of the feminist movement from its conception in the sixties and seventies, they were not the ones who became the „stars“ of the movement; the white women were.³² Although the term has become more popular in recent years, the above describe the failings of what has been dubbed as „white feminism,“ which is also a mark of contemporary – or fourth wave – feminism.³³ It cannot be said for certain who coined the term, but the phenomenon has been described by the likes of Lorde, hooks and Kimberlé Crenshaw, who also coined the term „intersectionality,“ a feminist concept that specifically includes black women.

Simply put, white feminism is a type of liberal feminism that fails to examine racial power structures and racism within dominant contemporary feminism, where liberal feminism can be characterised as having the following core tenets: an emphasis on equal opportunity for women and

²⁵ Womack, 2013, p. 99-115.

²⁶ Womack, 2013, p. 101.

²⁷ hooks, 2000, p. 3-6.

²⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/28/opinion/sunday/suffrage-movement-racism-black-women.html> (Accessed 04-12-2018).

²⁹ <https://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/news/415247-woman-put-i-voted-stickers-on-susan-b-anthonys-grave> (Accessed on 04-12-2018).

³⁰ <https://www.womenshistory.org/articles/votes-women-means-votes-black-women> (Accessed on 04-12-2018).

³¹ Lorde, 1984, p. 42.

³² hooks, 2000, p. 3.

³³ Daniels, 2016, p. 4.

men, and for women to attain the same levels of representation, compensation and power in the public sphere as men.³⁴ In western patriarchy, white men are at the top of the social hierarchy. If we take this and consider it through the lens of white feminism specifically, this means that white women want access to the same privileges as white men, a „feminist“ trend previously noted by bell hooks.³⁵ Jessie Daniels, professor of Sociology, notes that especially in the current multimedia landscape whiteness remains an unexamined part of feminist digital activism.³⁶ It should be noted that although Daniels specifically deals with digital activism, white feminism and unexamined whiteness in the digital world is a microcosm reflecting the larger cultural state as it exists in society. When talking about the first and second waves of feminism, bell hooks also noted that discussions about class differences were held long before discussions about race.³⁷ Contemporary feminism is similarly guilty of shying away from explicit conversations about race in favour of a type of colour blindness. This colour blindness can be understood as white feminists imposing their whiteness on people of colour: whiteness, according to Daniels, is an „invisible“ denominator, it is the default.³⁸ Whiteness gets erased while people of colour are racialised and Othered.³⁹ This can be illustrated by establishing the reverse, or, in other words, racialising white people. Gloria Wekker, author of the book *White Innocence* (2016) said in an interview published in *DiGeST* in 2018 that white people felt incredibly attacked by her use of the term „white.“⁴⁰ What happened here is that whiteness was taken out of its normative position and very visibly positioned as being „just“ another race: whiteness was no longer invisible and this caused offence. Returning to white feminism, the feminists who partake in white feminism fail to examine their own prejudices and racism, meaning that they take their position as-is, rather than a construction similar to the gendered systems that they are aiming to dismantle.⁴¹

Of course, not *all* feminism is white feminism, though it is the dominant discourse. As was briefly mentioned above, Afrofuturism is inclusive of women and feminism, and brings forth a rather different feminism than white feminism as it centres on black women specifically. It therefore addresses a different range of problems, though these may be similar to the issues discussed in mainstream feminism. Monáe takes it one step further: her Afrofuturist praxis draws on feminism and vice versa, but she is also inclusive of transgender women and gay women, as becomes apparent in the music videos for “PYNK” and “Make Me Feel,” which shall be discussed at length in chapter five. Monáe’s music/videos often centre on the black female experience, but the songs above make explicit references to being a gay woman, and there are implicit references to trans women. Monáe’s feminism

³⁴ Daniels, 2016, p. 11.

³⁵ hooks, 2000, p. 4, 16, 41.

³⁶ Daniels, 2016, p. 9.

³⁷ hooks, 2000, p. 3.

³⁸ Daniels, 2016, p. 5-6.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Van den Brandt et al., 2018, p. 70.

⁴¹ Daniels, 2016, p. 8.

is *intersectional*, as she specifically addresses the intersections of gender, race and sexuality in her work.

Intersectionality is a term coined by critical race scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, when she first used it in her article “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics.”⁴² In the opening paragraph of her paper, she writes that there is a „problematic tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis.“⁴³ Crenshaw described this tendency of treating gender and race as mutually exclusive categories in 1989, and Daniels – who wrote her paper in 2015 – writes about the problems of white feminism in contemporary feminist movements, indicating that this is still a problem. An example of this could be, indeed, the aforementioned „I Voted“ stickers on Susan B. Anthony’s grave. She is celebrated for paving the way for women’s suffrage, but her painful and derogatory remarks towards black people are forgotten or ignored. It is contemporary feminists’ „uncritical acceptance of Anthony as a feminist pioneer, even though she did not advocate for *all* women, which epitomises white feminism. Ida B. Wells, who famously refused to walk at the back of the 1913 Washington suffragette parade,⁴⁴ gets no mass of stickers on her grave for refusing to budge and march in the back. She is no less of a pioneer and suffragette than Anthony was, and yet she remains in the margins of contemporary feminist memory.

Furthermore, one might note that gender and race are not the only categories of intersectionality: there are also class, sexuality, (dis)ability, age, and religion to consider. Intersectionality shall be expanded on in chapter two. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to create a framework which includes all the aforementioned categories through which to consider *Dirty Computer*. As Monáe’s work, and especially this most recent album, tends to focus on relations of race, sexuality and gender, these are the categories that have been selected to serve as an intersectional framework. This feminist, intersectional framework shall be used in conjunction with an Afrofuturist lens to consider Monáe’s work and persona.

Janelle Monáe’s first three albums told a story of a city named Metropolis and its android inhabitants. Cindi Mayweather, Monáe’s alter ego and the main character in the story, is a subversive, activist persona who is trying to save Metropolis from its oppressive, dictatorial overlords, also known as The Great Divide. *Dirty Computer* is the first album by Monáe that is no longer about a fictional world and no longer features Cindi Mayweather, but instead features Janelle Monáe as herself and an artist.⁴⁵ In spite of this, *Dirty Computer* still highlights complex themes of race, gender and sexuality, the treatment of which could, potentially, still be read as activist in their content. The main question

⁴² <https://www.newstatesman.com/lifestyle/2014/04/kimberl-crenshaw-intersectionality-i-wanted-come-everyday-metaphor-anyone-could> (Accessed on 14-11-2018); Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140.

⁴³ Crenshaw, 1989, p. 139.

⁴⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/28/opinion/sunday/suffrage-movement-racism-black-women.html> (Accessed on 04-12-2018).

⁴⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/19/magazine/how-janelle-monae-found-her-voice.html> (Accessed on 14-11-2018).

this thesis aims to answer is therefore: what intersectional, activist message does the Afrofuturist music album *Dirty Computer* carry out? Further questions, which will serve to answer the above, are: what type of world has Monáe built on this album? What themes, relating to Afrofuturism, race, gender or sexuality, can be identified in *Dirty Computer*, and how are they used? What messages of liberation does the album carry out, and how? How is sexuality presented as being liberating, or is it to do with marginalised sexualities *being* liberated? What aspects of black emancipation and liberation can be found on the album, and how does all of this tie in with the fact that *Dirty Computer* is supposedly a much more personal album, centring on Monáe herself?

In the following two chapters, an overview of the literature and the method of analysis shall be outlined. Following these, chapter four consists of a brief biography and overview of Monáe's work and the themes therein, after which chapter five shall analyse *Dirty Computer*'s visual album and the three singles that were released prior to the album: "Django Jane," "PYNK," and "Make Me Feel." This final (sub)chapter shall be divided in three categories: Afrofuturism, race/gender, and sexuality, as these three singles pertain most explicitly to these themes. It was decided for overall cohesion that the chapter on the „emotion picture“ shall not be divided into themes as this would disrupt the chronological analysis of the album. However, these themes will still be addressed per song instead. Lastly, the song "I Like That" was also released prior to the album, this one stands separate from the aforementioned three, as it was a promotional single released four days prior to the album's actual release. Furthermore, I am of the opinion that the three pre-released singles are the primary carriers of the album's overall message. "I Like That" is, however, not insignificant and shall still be afforded special attention in the subchapter that discusses the visual album.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

I. Afrofuturism

Afrofuturism has existed as a creative genre for at least three to four decades, even if the term itself was only coined in the mid-nineties. An Afrofuturist *avant la lettre* as well as a founder of the movement was Sun Ra, a jazz music artist.⁴⁶ Two other prominent figures from the early Afrofuturist movement are George Clinton and Octavia Butler, a music artist and writer respectively.⁴⁷ Together, they form the founders of Afrofuturism, whose footsteps have been followed by artists like Janelle Monáe, OutKast, and Grace Jones. Although Afrofuturism is a growing movement which has been on the rise for several decades and some Afrofuturist artists have become incredibly popular, the genre and movement itself are not exactly part of the mainstream. Even in academic literature, where Afrofuturism has been studied extensively and more than a few papers have been published in its name, there have been few comprehensive books written on Afrofuturism as a genre. Indeed, in his review of Ytasha L. Womack's book *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (2013), Tobias C. van Veen of the Canadian McGill University writes: "Let me not curb my enthusiasm: Ytasha Womack has successfully accomplished the long overdue and challenging task of writing the first book-length overview of Afrofuturism."⁴⁸ This indicates just how few comprehensive works have been written on Afrofuturism, though there is one seminal anthology, namely *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora*, edited by Sheree Thomas. This book consists of most of the classic Afrofuturist stories, such as those written by Octavia Butler, but does not contain an overview of Afrofuturist history or theory.

In her book, Womack discusses Afrofuturism from its early beginnings in the seventies – though she also touches on Sun Ra's early works in the fifties – to possible futures.⁴⁹ Each chapter discusses multiple musicians, artists, writers, directors, and academics, creating an overview of a wide range of Afrofuturists that were previously less well known. Each chapter focuses on a different aspect of Afrofuturism, and not just its use as a creative genre. The second chapter, „A human fairy tale named Black,“ centres specifically on Afrofuturist theory and theorists. The chapter starts with a discussion on the creation of the concept of race, and then moves on to how black people were, by law, not considered human.⁵⁰ The chapter then continues with the similarities between the concept of the alien and the feeling/experience of Otherness.⁵¹ Womack writes: "Afrofuturist academics are looking at alien motifs as a progressive framework to examine how those who are alienated adopt

⁴⁶ Womack, 2013, p. 53.

⁴⁷ Womack, 2013, p. 57, 58-70, 109-115.

⁴⁸ Van Veen, 2013, p. 152.

⁴⁹ Womack, 2013, p. 57.

⁵⁰ Womack, 2013, p. 30.

⁵¹ Womack, 2013, p. 34.

modes of resistance and transformation.”⁵² In other words, Afrofuturist academics look at the alien and the act of alienation/the experience of being alienated, and examine how the people who are alienated work to resist their alienation, and how they might transform their circumstances through that resistance. The experience of alienation in science fiction is also discussed by writer and theorist Kodwo Eshun, in “Further Considerations on Afrofuturism,” published in 2003. He writes that black existence and science fiction are one and the same.⁵³ He elaborates on this by stating that the dramatic oppression or enslavement of any one group in science fiction – of which there are a myriad of examples, most recently the androids in *Detroit Become Human* (2018)⁵⁴ – and, usually, their subsequent revolt, are circumstances that black people have historically actually experienced.⁵⁵ Afrofuturists employ the idea of the alien and alienation rather differently, identifying with a feeling of Otherness, whereas the broader trend in science fiction media uses the alien – or the android – as the ultimate Other to oppress. In this sense, Afrofuturism has a rather different approach to science fiction, making use of their real-life circumstances and histories to create new stories, rather than creating a „new“ class or race to mimic their own experiences.

The transformative qualities and power of Afrofuturist praxis is discussed throughout the book. An example is that of an unnamed African American woman in Womack’s screenwriting class, who wanted to write a fictional, historical narrative featuring black characters, but felt like she could not because of historical racism.⁵⁶ Afrofuturism, Womack writes, inverts reality.⁵⁷ Womack suggests that perhaps if the student had looked to Afrofuturism to alter the circumstances of the past in order to create a brighter future, she might have felt less constrained by these historical realities. Another example of the empowering qualities of Afrofuturism that pervades the book is that of fighting the erasure of black people from historical, scientific, and futuristic narratives. According to Womack, Afrofuturists sought to find the missing history of black people and their roles in science, technology, and science fiction. They were either erased from these narratives, or not represented in them at all, as was the case with science fiction and other media.⁵⁸ Eshun also writes that „imperial racism has denied black subjects the right to belong to the enlightenment project,“ which lead to the „urgent need to demonstrate substantive historical presence.“⁵⁹ This effectively means that black people were excluded

⁵² Womack, 2013, p. 35.

⁵³ Eshun, 2003, p. 298.

⁵⁴ *Detroit Become Human* (DBH) is a sci-fi video game set in a future where hyper-realistic, human-looking androids are generally discriminated against. In one of the most widely criticised scenes, the androids are placed in the back of a city bus in a separate „android“ compartment, which echoes the „coloured“ sections in buses prior to the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955-1956. The game was criticised for blatantly copying real life racist occurrences and themes and instead applying them to androids at large and the main character, a white android. This falls in line with a broader trend of „fantasy realism,“ where elves/androids/aliens/others are discriminated against in the same way that African Americans were, both historically and contemporarily, and DBH was heavily criticised for it.

⁵⁵ Eshun, 2003, p. 298.

⁵⁶ Womack, 2013, p. 15.

⁵⁷ Womack, 2013, p. 16.

⁵⁸ Womack, 2013, p. 17.

⁵⁹ Eshun, 2003, p. 287.

from a significant historical movement, namely Enlightenment, and that this created the need to find and establish historical black people in order to create historical presence. Eshun writes that „it is never a matter of forgetting what it took so long to remember.“⁶⁰ This quote also neatly summarises the work of Afrofuturists: that which took so long to remember and acknowledge – the pain of the past, the forgotten contributions of black people, historical role models – is not so easily forgotten, and should be celebrated and researched instead.

An example of the issue of representation is how black people were not represented in media as anything other than servants. One of the first black women to be portrayed in a significant role where she had a modicum of power and agency was Nichelle Nichols, in the role of Lieutenant Uhura in *Star Trek*.⁶¹ She was also one of the only black women on television in the 1960s, meaning that black women were either *not* represented, *or* presented as maids and nannies.⁶² The creating of stories, artworks, music, movies, as well as doing research into the involvement of black people in history and technological developments, serves to undo the erasure that has taken place. Where black people had been neatly wiped from history, Afrofuturists work to both rediscover black people in the past, and create spaces for black people in the future. Authors like bell hooks have touched on this, writing that during the second wave of feminism, white women acted like feminism belonged to them.⁶³ Black women had been active in the movement from the start, but were kept out of the feminist narrative. The same applies to Ida B. Wells, who is often a mere footnote to feminist history rather than a key figure like Susan B. Anthony. Hooks writes: “[White women] know that the only reason nonwhites are absent/invisible [from the face of American feminism] is because they are not white.”⁶⁴ Hooks, without ever using the term „erasure,“ describes the act in one sentence: people of colour – within the context of this thesis and Afrofuturism, black people specifically – are invisible and erased because of their skin colour. They are erased from movements they helped create. They rarely, if at all, get credit for their contributions to history or technological development, and they are kept outside of broader narratives. Such erasure can be very pervasive. Womack, in a personal anecdote, writes: “I was annoyed that when science and technology are discussed, the images of black scientists or inventors don’t come to mind.” Erasure and underrepresentation of one group of people can lead to a complete lack of role models for that group, and a large gap in the historical understanding of the world at large.

An example of both erasure of black people, black women specifically, and the combatting of that erasure is the movie *Hidden Figures* (2017), based on the book of the same name by Margot Lee Shetterly. The story of *Hidden Figures* is that of the black female mathematicians who were

⁶⁰ Eshun, 2003, p. 288.

⁶¹ <https://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2011/01/17/star-treks-nichelle-nichols-on-how-martin-luther-king-king-jr-changed-her-life/> (Accessed on 06-12-2018).

⁶² Womack, 2013, p. 99.

⁶³ hooks, 2000, p. 40.

⁶⁴ hooks, 2000, p. 55.

responsible for the calculations that put the first men on the moon.⁶⁵ While these women were directly responsible for ensuring a safe launch and landing for the astronauts, they were effectively erased from the historical space travel narrative in favour of the stars of the show: the astronauts. While white men like John Glenn and, later, Neil Armstrong enjoyed enduring fame, women like Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan and Mary Jackson were overlooked and forgotten until recently.

Another aspect of this erasure that Afrofuturists seek to undo is that of black people being inherently considered un-technological, and therefore not involved in science and technological developments.⁶⁶ Mark Bould, in his paper „The Ships Landed Long Ago: Afrofuturism and Black SF“ (2007), writes that Western society constructs blackness as oppositional to stories driven by technological progress.⁶⁷ This means that in stories of science fiction, black people are not the driving force behind the futuristic elements of the story but accessories to it, excluded from being part of the main narrative and, instead serving as a contrast to that narrative.⁶⁸ Afrofuturists who explicitly make black people part of technological progress or the driving force of that progress therefore deliberately subvert this trope. Marlo David, in „Afrofuturism and Post-Soul Possibility in Black Popular Music“ (2007), comments on this western tendency as well, saying that:

Afrofuturism challenges the post-human ideology of an imagined raceless future. It recognizes that blackness still has meaning in the virtual age, and it still implies that which is primitive and antithetical to technological progress. For example, Adam J. Banks notes that contemporary Digital Divide discourse continues to highlight blacks' lack of access to and facility with technology, rather than our production of it.⁶⁹

This is not to say that the discourse that addresses black people's lack of access to and facility for technology is irrelevant or unimportant. The point that both David and Bould are making is that such explicit focus on but one aspect of technological engagement (or lack thereof) by black people is damaging to perceptions of blackness in relation to technology, implying that black people are „inherently“ less technological.

Afrofuturists, however, do not ignore the past material realities in which black people were often prohibited from taking part in technological or scientific development. Octavia Butler insisted that the present and future are inextricably connected to the past.⁷⁰ Afrofuturists primarily insist that the focus of their work does not have to be the past, as is the case with a lot of contemporary media *about* black people, and not necessarily *by* black people. This problem was discussed recently when

⁶⁵ <https://www.npr.org/2016/09/25/495179824/hidden-figures-how-black-women-did-the-math-that-put-men-on-the-moon?t=1544123343948> (Accessed on 06-12-2018).

⁶⁶ Bould, 2007, p. 181.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ David, 2007, p. 697-698.

⁷⁰ Bould, 2007, p. 183.

actress Viola Davis, who is a black woman, remarked in an interview that she had shared a romantic kiss on-screen with actor Liam Neeson (a white man) in the movie *Widows* (2018). She said:

He's not my slave owner. I'm not a prostitute. It's not trying to make any social or political statements. We're simply a couple in love. And what struck me in the narrative is that I'd never seen it before. And you're not gonna see it this year, you're not going to see it next year, you're not going to see it the year after that.⁷¹

The lack of such a narrative lies in the same vein of erasure discussed by Bould and David, in which black people are considered inherently technologically disadvantaged. The explicit focus on black pain and tragedy are what Afrofuturists are negating, subverting the idea that black people – on-screen or otherwise – can only be acknowledged for their past or present suffering. *Essence* magazine, a monthly magazine whose target audience is black women, wrote an op-ed in December 2018 titled: “Is Our Pain For Profit?”⁷² Melissa Kimble (founder of blkcreatives, LLC) argues here that black pain is absolutely everywhere. She writes that there seems to be a new documentary, television series or special every other day that highlights the tragedies created in black communities.⁷³ She calls it „the commodification of our pain,“ and notes that there is a fine line between compassion and consumerism.⁷⁴ As has become apparent in Davis’s statement above, black pain is not only extremely prevalent in cinema and other media: its ubiquity is used for profit. Afrofuturists aim to change this narrative of constant pain and tragedy. Like Octavia Butler, Afrofuturists at large acknowledge the pain of black history and black contemporary existence, but choose to build towards a hopeful future where black people are the driving force of, and participants in, technological and scientific advancement. There is an acknowledgment of black historical trauma, also known as „trans- or intergenerational trauma,“ which refers to how the chronic stress and trauma experienced by ancestors of oppressed groups (notably Native Americans, Jewish people and African Americans) is passed on from parent to child throughout generations, leading to a changed genetic structure (relating to stress hormones) as well as an inherent traumatising which is then exacerbated due to continuous exposure to racism and discrimination.⁷⁵ It is this trauma and pain that Afrofuturists come to terms with in their work without allowing it to take to become the focus of the narrative.

Aside from that, Afrofuturist narratives allow for black people to simply exist as thriving members of society within their own stories and worlds. Jennifer Baker, editor of *EVERYDAY PEOPLE* (2018) wrote an article in September 2017 for *Electric Lit*, the title of which sums it up quite

⁷¹ <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/news/widows-viola-davis-film-liam-neeson-kiss-opening-scene-steve-mcqueen-a8629746.html> (Accessed on 22-11-2018).

⁷² <https://www.essence.com/entertainment/op-ed-is-our-pain-for-profit-how-tv-documentaries-are-showcasing-black-tragedies/> (Accessed on 13-12-2018).

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Jackson et. al., 2018, p. 1-5; Craddock, 2014, p. 1-3.

neatly: Art must engage with black vitality, not just black pain.⁷⁶

Viola Davis' comment on her kissing scene with Liam Neeson touches very briefly on a different issue, which is that black women in popular culture have become marginalised to the point where their primary representations are that of black pain. As she notes, they are often slaves, prostitutes, or other, related stereotypes that were historically prevalent. Such stereotypes, some of which are also described by bell hooks in her book *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992), Dwight Brooks and Lisa Hébert's *Gender, Race and Media Representation* (2006), and by the Jim Crow Museum, are „welfare mothers“ (stay-at-home black mothers who do nothing but cash their welfare checks), the „jezebel“ (a hypersexualised image of a black woman who wants to have sex with white men), the „mammy“ (the wise, motherly black woman, often depicted as being old and/or fat, who was „happy“ to be a slave), tragic mulattoes (black women who were the offspring of a white slave owner and a black mother, who would henceforth live an intensely tragic life), and the more general black matriarch.⁷⁷ Hooks specifically writes about the sexualisation of the black female body, and how the black female body was eroticised and objectified historically (by white people), and how the echoes of that trauma still existed in 1992, when she published the book.⁷⁸ Brooks and Hébert's essay focuses more specifically on the various directions of research performed in the name of race and gender in media representation, what types of stereotypes are prevalent in media for black, Latina and Asian women and men, as well as how media shapes our identities.⁷⁹

While feminist criticism rightfully targets the lack of women representation in popular culture in general, such as the token girl in a group of men,⁸⁰ there has been less criticism of the lack of (positive) representation(s) of black women in popular culture. This has to do with the larger, more structural problem of mainstream feminism leaving women of colour behind,⁸¹ which prompted Kimberlé Crenshaw to coin the concept of „intersectionality.“

II. Intersectionality

Crenshaw wrote her paper, „Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine,“ which features the first use of the term „intersectionality,“ in 1989. In the opening paragraph, she writes that she „will center Black women in [her] analysis in order to contrast the multidimensionality of black women's experience with the

⁷⁶ <https://electricliterature.com/art-must-engage-with-black-vitality-not-just-black-pain-d39b7cd690c1> (Accessed on 13-12-2018).

⁷⁷ Brooks & Hébert, 2006, p. 299 ; hooks, 1992, p. 61-72; <https://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/jezebel/#> ; <https://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/mammies/homepage.htm> ; <https://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/mulatto/homepage.htm> (Accessed on 13-12-2018).

⁷⁸ hooks, 1992, p. 64, 72 .

⁷⁹ Brooks & Hébert, 2006, p. 297-299, 302-304, 309-312.

⁸⁰ Also known as „The Smurfette Principle“:

<https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/TheSmurfettePrinciple> (Accessed on 22-11-2018) .

⁸¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2015/02/24/patricia-arquettes-remarks-explain-why-some-black-women-dont-call-themselves-feminists/?utm_term=.1ef0cba91cfa (Accessed on 22-11-2018).

single-axis analysis that distorts these experiences.⁸² The analysis that she refers to here is one that assumes that gender and race are mutually exclusive categories of analysis. As Crenshaw is a lawyer, the case studies that she discusses in this text are all court cases in which the plaintiffs were black women. Each of these cases featured a black female plaintiff attempting to present a case as a black woman, rather than either a black person or a woman, and the complications this caused with the legal system due to a lack of intersectionality in law (or elsewhere). Crenshaw describes how, in these sex- or race discrimination cases, the discrimination tended to be viewed in terms of the most privileged members of either group.⁸³ What this meant is that, in race discrimination cases, black women were viewed through the lens of black men, and in sex discrimination cases, black women were viewed through the lens of white women. The main point of Crenshaw's text is that these cases treated black women as the sum of their parts: black and female, and that legally speaking they could only experience discrimination as either one.⁸⁴ Beyond legal constraints, however, Crenshaw writes that discrimination for black women can indeed happen because they are black or female, or black *and* female. They can be discriminated against across both axes of racism and sexism simultaneously, and sometimes, they are discriminated against as black women specifically. Not because they are „black“ and „female,“ but because they are „black women“.⁸⁵

This section of the text highlights legal problems specifically, but Crenshaw moves beyond that and into the problems of a lack of intersectionality in both feminism and the civil rights movement.⁸⁶ For either movement, black women were often considered to be too much of either group: their issues were either „too black“ for feminism or „too female“ for the civil rights movement, and were therefore placed at the margins of both.⁸⁷ On top of this, the dominant discourse at the time was that the discrimination of any one member of a group was the same as discrimination aimed at the group in general, meaning that black women were thought to be discriminated against in the same way that all other black people were.⁸⁸ Ultimately, what this means is that the civil rights movement equated the experience of racism to the experiences of black men, and that feminism at the time was – and, to some extent, still is – centred on the experiences of sexism by white women, even though their experiences were not and are not always similar to those of black women. Crenshaw accurately describes this way of thinking as a „single-issue framework,“⁸⁹ which can then be contrasted with an intersectional framework.

Crenshaw goes on to discuss the single-issue framework in relation to feminism specifically, noting how black women – already often overlooked by the movement at large – face reinforced

⁸² Crenshaw, 1989, p. 139.

⁸³ Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140.

⁸⁴ Crenshaw, 1989, p. 141-146, 149.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Crenshaw, 1989, p. 150.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Crenshaw, 1989, p. 152.

exclusion from feminism when white women speak as women in general.⁹⁰ Several pages earlier, she writes that the privileging of whiteness is implicit and therefore often not noticed at all.⁹¹ From there, it is hardly a leap to conclude that when white women speak as *women*, they are often unaware of the privilege that their race affords them and how therefore their experience as women is often quite different to that of black women. Feminism, which was and is dominated by white women's voices, represents and addresses „women's“ experiences, but it does not speak to black women's experiences. This means that a women's movement effectively excludes a group of women as though they do not belong to that category.⁹² An example, provided by Crenshaw herself, is that the feminist pillar of women's exclusion from the workforce does not historically apply to black women: black women traditionally and historically worked outside the house far more than white women did.⁹³ Therefore, if feminism claims that „women“ are excluded from the workforce in general, black women are not addressed, and excluded from the nominator of „women.“

Having addressed the feminist movement's negligence of black women, Crenshaw moves on to discuss the civil rights movement.⁹⁴ The main issue at hand is that black women's issues were considered a threat to the antiracist agenda of the civil rights movement, as they might have conflicted with one another.⁹⁵ The black community was not and is not immune to patriarchal structures, which meant that black women found themselves in the complicated position where they had to oppose black men.⁹⁶ Here, Crenshaw names the example of the controversy surrounding the movie *The Colour Purple* (1985): on the one hand, it was feared that such a graphic depiction of domestic abuse at the hands of black men might reinforce negative stereotypes about them. On the other, the struggle against racism suppressed certain black female experiences in favour of protecting the larger black community.⁹⁷ Where feminism excluded black women through the privileging of white voices, within the civil rights movement (and the black community in general), black women's experiences were relegated to the margins for fear that it might disrupt the community.

Crenshaw concludes that feminist theory, if it is to express the aspirations of non-white women, they must include an analysis of race, whereas theories and strategies that claim to represent the black community must include an analysis of sexism and patriarchy.⁹⁸ Lastly, she comments that focusing on those who are most disadvantaged – rather than employing a top-down approach – would benefit all others who suffer from oppression as well, whereas the reverse is not true.⁹⁹

After Crenshaw's original 1989 text, many other scholars have written on and employed

⁹⁰ Crenshaw, 1989, p. 154.

⁹¹ Crenshaw, 1989, p. 151.

⁹² Crenshaw, 1989, p. 154.

⁹³ Crenshaw, 1989, p. 156.

⁹⁴ For more on Intersectionality in contemporary feminist politics, see: Yuval-Davis, 2006.

⁹⁵ Crenshaw, 1989, p. 161.

⁹⁶ Crenshaw, 1989, p. 162.

⁹⁷ Crenshaw, 1989, p. 163.

⁹⁸ Crenshaw, 1989, p. 166.

⁹⁹ Crenshaw, 1989, p. 167.

intersectionality, both as theory and method. Crenshaw herself co-authored a paper with Sumi Cho and Leslie McCall in 2013 titled „Towards a field of Intersectionality studies: Theory, applications and praxis,“ in which they note that intersectionality has proven to be a „productive“ concept used over a wide array of disciplines, among which are history, feminist studies, and sociology.¹⁰⁰ The way in which intersectionality insists on the examining of „dynamics of sameness and difference“ has made for the fact that there is now relatively widespread consideration of gender, race and various other axes of power.¹⁰¹ Although Crenshaw’s original text was based primarily on antidiscrimination law and the practice of feminism and antiracism, the use of intersectionality has expanded well beyond that. The categories of gender and race certainly do not exhaust the possibilities that intersectionality as both a theory and a method have to offer.¹⁰² Intersectionality, in their view, is best used as an „analytic sensibility,“¹⁰³ which means that it is a way of thinking about an analysis or problem in an intersectional way. Importantly, the text touches on one of the main criticisms that intersectionality faces: its alleged emphasis on categories of identity as opposed to structures of inequality and therefore power.¹⁰⁴ They contest this, as there are explicit references to (power) structures in early works on intersectionality.¹⁰⁵ Indeed, when looking back at Crenshaw’s original text, most of the text is concerned with structures of inequality as the entire text centres on the position of black women within sexist, racist, and patriarchal structures. These are all inherently tied to power imbalances and, therefore, structures of inequality. This thesis, too, focuses on specific categories of identity and how these intersect, but as these are inherently anchored in larger structures of inequality and power (such as the patriarchy and the larger structures of institutional racism), those shall not remain unaddressed, either. Furthermore, to imply that attentiveness to identity is somehow a detriment to analyses of power structures indicates a fundamental misunderstanding of how identities come into being and how they operate within society. Catherine A. MacKinnon, in her 2013 text „Intersectionality as Method: A Note,“ writes that „categories and stereotypes and classifications are authentic instruments of inequality. And they are static and hard to move.“¹⁰⁶ Identities are not created in a vacuum: they are the products of power structures in society, and society in general. To be attentive of identities does not mean that an analysis of power is somehow negated or forgotten in favour of identity politics.

This is, however, not to say that there are no valid criticisms of intersectionality as a theoretical framework and/or method. In her paper “Re-thinking intersectionality” (2008), Jennifer C. Nash writes that academia need to make up their minds in regards to what intersectionality really is: is it a generalised theory of identity, or a theory of marginalised subjectivity? One would mean that intersectionality can (and, arguably, should) be used to examine all identities with varying

¹⁰⁰ Cho et. al., 2013, p. 787.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Cho et. al., 2013, p. 791.

¹⁰³ Cho et. al., 2013, p. 795.

¹⁰⁴ Cho et. al., 2013, p. 797.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ MacKinnon, 2013, p. 1023.

intersections of „multiple vectors of power,“ including privileged identities.¹⁰⁷ Academically, intersectionality does not include identities that have intersecting, privileged aspects of identity, and therefore it cannot and should not purport to be a general theory of identity.¹⁰⁸ I am of the opinion that the theory of intersectionality was brought into life to call attention to the intersections of two marginalised identities (black and female), and that it should not stray away from that founding principle. Simply put, I feel that intersectionality is a theory of marginalised subjectivity, and that it is best employed as such, as it brings to the forefront categories of identity and their intersections that were previously overlooked. It makes little sense to remove intersectionality from that context – the context of feminist and critical race studies, which inherently focus on marginalised identities – in order to apply it to *all* identities, even if it could technically be used that way.

Nash also criticises intersectionality – and Crenshaw’s text specifically – for not 1) considering other categories of identity such as sexuality, class and religion, which could all influence marginalisation/discrimination and 2) neglecting to examine the intersections of privilege and oppression (i.e. what if someone is both wealthy and black?).¹⁰⁹ I disagree with the first argument, while the second argument had merit until quite recently. Firstly, I disagree with Nash because I do not think that these additional categories would have added to Crenshaw’s fundamental argument, which is that black women are discriminated against as *black women*, legally and systemically. These women could have been wealthy and would therefore enjoy class privilege, but that would not necessarily have changed the outcome of the court cases that Crenshaw discusses. Furthermore, class is not necessarily immediately visible, and the discrimination black women face is based on their two most visible identity markers: their blackness, and their womanhood. This lead to problems in both the feminist movement and the civil rights movement respectively, which have their own separate issues when it comes to matters of, for example, sexuality. I believe that including more categories – while necessary for a contemporary intersectional analysis – would have muddled Crenshaw’s main argument, and was therefore not necessary to include in her seminal paper. Secondly, I disagree with Nash’s second point of criticism, which is that intersectionality neglects the way that oppression and privilege interact, because intersectionality is one of few theories that *does* allow for such analysis. It is fair to say that up until recently this has not happened. This is changing and this criticism of intersectionality is now less urgent. Consider professor of women and gender studies Helma Lutz’s paper, „Intersectionality as Method“ (2015), for example. She writes that intersectionality’s main added value as a research method is that it allows one to take into consideration the variety in power contexts.¹¹⁰ In other words, it allows an analysis to be made not just of the sum of various axes of power, inequality or discrimination, but to analyse the overlapping points of these axes. For example, to follow Crenshaw’s original example, an analysis of black women can be made not just in the

¹⁰⁷ Nash, 2008, p. 9-10, 13.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Nash, 2008, p. 9, 11-12.

¹¹⁰ Lutz, 2015, p. 39.

context of racism and/or sexism, but of their lived experience as black women specifically. Black women's identities are situated within power structures that generate the oppression against them. The power structures of racism and sexism together do not constitute the full sum of black women's oppression, as made evident by Crenshaw's text. Lutz also argues that intersectionality as method can avoid the trap of having a „master category“ of oppression.¹¹¹ According to Lutz, this can be avoided by not merely reducing analyses of race, gender, and class (among others) to oppression and discrimination, and by considering the privileged positions within and between them.¹¹² This effectively means that even within categories of oppression, there are subdivisions of people who are privileged over others, and these positions should be examined and analysed as well. Lutz's paper proves a direct counterargument to one of Nash's main criticisms, but this is not to say that her critique of intersectionality has no merit. Analysing the intersections of privilege and marginalisation can and should be a valuable point of research, as it elucidates the interactions between axes, levels and varieties of power.

III. Janelle Monáe

As an artist and activist, Janelle Monáe has positioned herself as a black, afrofuturist, feminist woman. Although few and far between, some scholars have devoted articles to Monáe and her persona, as well as her world-building in her albums up to *Dirty Computer*. Dan Hassler-Forest, in his 2014 article „The Politics of World-Building: Heteroglossia in Janelle Monáe's Afrofuturist WondaLand,“ Hassler-Forest approaches Monáe's world-building from a political point of view, stating that „the way in which imaginary and immersive transmedia story-worlds are constructed in fantastic genres reflects a fundamentally political position.“¹¹³ His paper, much like my own, presupposes that Monáe's album is inherently political, based on the idea that she constructed an entire world to (supposedly) reflect her own political views/position. Hassler-Forest questions whether or not Monáe's work really does offer the transgressive or revolutionary potential that her fans identify in it.¹¹⁴ His main argument is that Monáe's work challenges the white-centric traditions of world-building, even if her success is dependent on „the cultural logic of neoliberalism.“¹¹⁵ What this means is that, while a lot of Monáe's work is Afrofuturist, and the world that she has created criticises capitalism and resists it, the work itself is still a commodity that has to circulate within the material realities of a neoliberal, capitalist market. He writes:

¹¹¹ Lutz, 2015, p. 43.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Hassler-Forest, 2014, p. 1.

¹¹⁴ Hassler-Forest, 2014, p. 3.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

In other words, in a context where even the most subversive counter-narratives can be effortlessly appropriated and recycled within the very system they attack, the important work of imagining alternatives and creating productive resistance expands to the larger sphere of world-building.¹¹⁶

World-building, therefore, is one of many ways to imagine a world free of the system it aims to criticise, even though that fictional world circulates within that system. The main concept employed in this paper to analyse world-building is Mikhail Bakhtin's „heteroglossia,“ which Hassler-Forest describes as „a term meant to indicate the coexistence of multiple varieties within a single signifying system, destabilising any central conception of „unity“ or single meaning.“¹¹⁷ A key term used by Bakhtin is „authoritative,“ which means that the medium forces the reader to adhere to one single meaning or interpretation.

Afrofuturism posed a challenge to authoritative stories and worlds, as it resisted writing stories that revolved entirely around „objective“ histories and geographies that served to reinforce similarly knowable historical realities, such as the Atlantic slave trade and post-colonial histories.¹¹⁸ Simply put, while Afrofuturism might pick and choose elements from historical and material realities such as they occur in the world at large, their stories may well incorporate fantastical elements that immediately destabilise these knowable elements, creating a multitude of viewpoints both real and imagined. Hassler-Forest cites writer, theorist and filmmaker Kodwo Eshun, who coined the term „chronopolitics“ to describe the Afrofuturist tendency to, in author William Gibson's words, „preprogram the present.“¹¹⁹ Eshun himself quotes science fiction author Samuel R. Delaney, who said that „[science fiction] offers a significant distortion of the present.“¹²⁰ Chronopolitics thus refers to the way in which the present might be altered by looking at possible futures, while science fiction itself is not so much the projection of a future utopia, but rather an alteration of a possible present. Eshun describes it as science fiction being concerned with „engineering feedback between its preferred future and its becoming present.“¹²¹ Science fiction envisions a „future“ that could, hypothetically, be a preferable present.

Hassler-Forest goes on to say that contrary to „most phallogentric forms of Afrofuturism,“ naming George Clinton's Parliament/Funkadelic collective as an example of such, Monáe's personas are as much post-gender as they are post-human.¹²² I disagree with this for a number of reasons: for one, Afrofuturism is generally *not* phallogentric or inherently masculinist. Womack addresses the feminism of Afrofuturism at length in chapter six of her book, „The Divine Feminine in Space.“¹²³ It can certainly be argued that the *starting* point of Afrofuturism was phallogentric, as Afrofuturist music

¹¹⁶ Hassler-Forest, 2014, p. 6.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Hassler-Forest, 2014, p. 10.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.; Eshun, 2003, p. 290.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Eshun, 2003, p. 290.

¹²² Hassler-Forest, 2014, p. 11.

¹²³ Womack, 2013, p. 97-115.

was dominated by Sun Ra and George Clinton, and women Afrofuturist musicians were (and are) still relatively unheard of in the mainstream. Monáe, in that regard, is one of few. Secondly, Monáe's performances are decidedly *not* post-gender. She explicitly addresses and plays with gender, from her 2013 release "Q.U.E.E.N." to 2018 single "PYNK." Especially the latter, although of course released four years after Hassler-Forest's article, focuses specifically and almost graphically on the vagina, „pussy power“, and romantic relationships between women.¹²⁴ It is unclear what Hassler-Forest sees in her performances that he constitutes as „post-gender,“ as he does not elaborate, but this claim is in direct contrast with the nature of her performances, lyrics, videos and brand.

The claim of Monáe's post-humanism does merit further analysis, however. In every single one of her albums, including *Dirty Computer*, the concept and character of the android resurfaces. The android, according to Hassler-Forest, points towards the socially constructed nature of identity.¹²⁵ This is especially interesting, as he then touches on how Monáe blurs the lines between Monáe's many selves, our world, and the world that she herself has constructed as an Afrofuturist dystopia.¹²⁶ This effectively means that there is no way for the „authoritative,“ as described by Bakhtin, to establish. If one constantly shifts between worlds and personas, changing perspectives and points of view along the way, such single meaning is circumvented and resisted. These are the heteroglossia of Monáe's work. He ends his article by stating that, while Monáe's work is critical of capitalism to a point, her work functions as a commodity that is very easily adopted by capitalism. In other words: Monáe's work *does* have revolutionary potential, and the work that it is doing is important, but it will not outright change capitalism.¹²⁷ Hassler-Forest concludes that, in its own modest way, Monáe's work does contribute to the various developments of forms, narratives and identity formations that will help people to think beyond the narrow restrictions of capitalism and neoliberalism.¹²⁸

Lastly, Cassandra L. Jones' „The Revolutions of Janelle Monáe as a Digital Griot,“ published in 2018. Jones' paper centres on the theme of digital revolution throughout Monáe's oeuvre, focussing specifically on the song "Q.U.E.E.N." from the 2013 album *Electric Lady*, which she analyses both through its lyrics and visuals.¹²⁹ Jones describes Monáe's activist oeuvre as follows:

Using technology and metaphors of technology to layer and remix histories, Monáe's songs and videos add new voices to previous African American approaches to art and activism. Her work echoes and challenges efforts like the Black Arts Movement, turning up the volume on queer tracks in response to the heterosexist loops of the Black Power movement. However, her stories are not simply tales of a highly technological utopian world. While she voices narratives of liberation via technology, she

¹²⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PaYvIVR_BEc (Accessed on 26-11-2018).

¹²⁵ Hassler-Forest, 2014, p. 12.

¹²⁶ Hassler-Forest, 2014, p. 13.

¹²⁷ Hassler-Forest, 2014, p. 15-17.

¹²⁸ Hassler-Forest, 2014, p. 17.

¹²⁹ Jones, 2018, p. 43.

equally confronts the racist, heterosexist, patriarchal, capitalist origins of technology and how these have been used against black women's bodies.¹³⁰

Jones's text is much more descriptive of Monáe's oeuvre than Hassler-Forest's, as the latter approaches Monáe from an analytical, theoretical point of view, centring the potential of the built worlds rather than that of Monáe's work overall, though he ends with a note on her critique of capitalism. Jones, on the other hand, aims to outline Monáe's work and its activist potential: Jones considers Monáe as a „digital griot.“ The concept of the „digital griot“, first explained in the introduction, was coined by Adam J. Banks in his book *Digital Griots: African American Rhetoric in a Multimedia Age* (2011), though the term „griot“ is older than that. It is a concept that refers to a figure in West African cultures, where the griot serves as a storyteller.¹³¹ The griot is central to the life of their society, be it as a master of music, words, historian, entertainer, or whatever other role is available on the „[spectrum] between playful and serious.“¹³² Banks cites Tom Hale in his book, who stated that the griot is a „time binder,“ who connects the past, present and future.¹³³ The griot is the keeper of history and a „master of its oral tradition,“ and can perform at will any one piece of history requested by its tribe.¹³⁴ Banks goes on to position the contemporary figure of the DJ as a '*digital griot*,' as they also make use of narratives in all of their sampling.¹³⁵ Music becomes the vehicle through which the narrative is told. The griot is in and of itself a West African concept, but can also be applied to African Americans, especially those who look to black history and what might have come before slavery, of which so much knowledge is lost to many. Returning to Cassandra Jones's text: Jones describes the concept as: „the digital griot is a revolutionary figure who allows black people to see themselves as part of the digital story.“¹³⁶ As a „digital griot,“ Monáe employs science fiction and its tropes as a way to contest structures of inequality, such as sexism, racism, and heteronormativity, while insisting on „a blackness that has deep roots in the history of technology as she digitises revolution.“¹³⁷ Monáe's „digital griotism“ consists of telling a story of past pain (or future-past as her narratives usually take place in a future-that-has-already-happened, meaning she often employs flashbacks into a future that has already taken place for her, but not us) and using that to continue a narrative of revolution and social justice. Jones then goes on to note that the shift towards social justice in Afrofuturism is a relatively recent development, externalising the social criticism that was previously only found in the artists's imaginations.¹³⁸ That said, though this might be a new trend in Afrofuturism specifically, it certainly is not in fantasy genres or science-fiction at large. Monáe's futurist Metropolis, an oppressed, dark dystopian city, might echo

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Banks, 2011, p. 22.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Banks, 2011, p. 23.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Banks, 2011, p. 24.

¹³⁶ Jones, 2018, p. 44.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Jones, 2018, p. 45-46.

the oppressive surveillance state described in George Orwell's *1984* (1949), or the Capitol city in post-apocalyptic North America in Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* (2008-2010), which is surrounded by twelve poorer/impoverished districts that are ruled by the Capitol. Each of these criticise the existence poverty, dictatorships, totalitarian regimes, surveillance states, and the enslavement of others (either through brainwashing, as is the case in *1984*, or by physically enslaving people, as is the case in *Metropolis*).

Monáe's "Q.U.E.E.N." music video starts with her – not Cindi Mayweather – and her band members on display in a museum in *Metropolis*. The „living museum“ displays „legendary rebels from throughout history.“¹³⁹ In the video, „Q.U.E.E.N.“ is a musical weapons programme that had been used in the 21st century. Monáe and her band are rescued by two young black women, after which the actual music video starts. Time travel, rebellion and the weaponisation of otherwise harmless technologies feature prominently in this narrative.

Jones touches on the cultural logic of capitalism in which Monáe's carefully constructed, anti-capitalist commentary exists. Jones more explicitly cites the problem of working inside the cultural logic of late stage capitalism, where no cultural product can truly exist outside of the capital, meaning that it *has* to operate within the system, even if the product heavily criticises said system.¹⁴⁰ Indeed, as Hassler-Forest notes, Monáe's critique of capitalism is enabled by that same capitalism. It allows her to broadcast her critique as far and wide as possible, while at the same time perpetuating the system it seeks to criticise.

Jones notes that in „Q.U.E.E.N.“ and Monáe's other works, such as short film „Many Moons,“ Monáe either positions herself as a force against existing structures of oppression, or uses her alter ego Cindi Mayweather to do so. Whether the oppression consists of sexism, homophobia, racism, or some amalgamation/variation thereof, Monáe aims to fight it in her music. Furthermore, the explicit dimension of black emancipation in Monáe's work, which she creates by having black people be liberators, freedom fighters, creators, rebels, and technological ingénues, directly counter the discourses that define blackness as inferior.¹⁴¹ Finally, Jones' article addresses how in „Q.U.E.E.N.,“ Monáe follows an historical path through time, making references to Harriet Tubman and Marie Antoinette alike, taking bits and pieces from the past to reject, subvert, and change aspects of the present, carrying with it the rhetoric of revolution.¹⁴²

This literature review served to outline the literature used for the Afrofuturist framework, the intersectional framework, and finally address two articles on Monáe which were similar in content and research to this thesis. While Hassler-Forest and Jones both wrote in-depth analyses on Monáe's oeuvre, Jones more so than Hassler-Forest, neither of them had the opportunity to analyse an album that stepped away from the narrative of *Metropolis*, of Cindi Mayweather. Up to *Dirty Computer*, all

¹³⁹ Jones, 2018, p. 49.

¹⁴⁰ Jones, 2018, p. 51.

¹⁴¹ Jones, 2018, p. 55.

¹⁴² Jones, 2018, p. 60-61.

albums were activist in nature, but shielded Janelle Monáe herself. This thesis aims to explore what Monáe's newest album, of which she herself is the subject, adds to the oeuvre as described by Hassler-Forest and Jones. The following chapter shall briefly outline the methodology that will be used for theoretical analysis, before moving on to Janelle Monáe and *Dirty Computer*.

Chapter 3: Method

Two primary methods of analysis shall be employed in this chapter: visual and lyrical analysis. Visual analysis takes precedence and shall be used more extensively. This type of analysis consists of making a detailed formal analysis of everything that takes place on the screen. Following this descriptive analysis, the various layers of references, symbolism and iconography can be analysed, leading to a full visual analysis. The lyrical analysis shall be employed only to the most relevant lyrics – those which pertain to Afrofuturism and matters of race, gender and sexuality – and be used primarily to support the visual analysis. These shall be used in conjunction with a theoretical framework consisting of Afrofuturist and intersectional feminist thought and theory.

Visual analysis shall be employed to look at the aesthetics and visual messaging of the album's „emotion picture“ – a narrative film and accompanying music album¹⁴³ – which is intended to „evoke emotions,“ as Monáe put it in a 2010 interview when explaining the term she herself invented.¹⁴⁴ This method of analysis will not be limited to only the three singles “Django Jane,” “PYNK” and “Make Me Feel,” but will cover the full short film. These songs were chosen because they were the three songs released prior to the full album release, two of which were big hits.¹⁴⁵ “PYNK” and “Make Me Feel” were especially popular singles, and deal the most explicitly with sexuality and gender. “Django Jane,” like several other songs on the album, focuses more on the intersection between race and gender. These songs were chosen because – due to their pre-release – they stand out the most from the album. Generally, singles that are released prior to the album serve to introduce the album's most prominent themes and to generate buzz and traffic for the upcoming album. As such, singles that are released prior to the album tend to become the album's most popular songs.¹⁴⁶ The „emotion picture“ includes all three of the aforementioned songs, though it does not contain some others, like the titular song “Dirty Computer.” Furthermore, the music videos of all three singles will be subject to detailed visual analysis. Each of the music videos will be summarised generally: where do they take place, what are the video's most dominant themes, what are recurring visuals, before zooming in on specific scenes in relation to the lyrics being sung, as most videos feature Monáe singing the songs on camera, rather than doing a voice-over. The album shall be analysed in sequentially: from the first track on the album to the last. As the „emotion picture“ contains narrative scenes that tell a complete story, these shall also be analysed sequentially as they take place

¹⁴³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jdH2Sy-BINE> (Accessed on 04-01-2019).

¹⁴⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lkAHDFWtIPo> (Accessed on 17-12-2018).

¹⁴⁵ The album overall peaked at #6 in *Billboard*'s 200 list (<https://www.billboard.com/music/janelle-monaie/chart-history/billboard-200>), whereas “PYNK” and “Make Me Feel” are listed as #21 and #9 on their “Hot R&B Songs” list. (<https://www.billboard.com/music/janelle-monaie/chart-history/r-and-b-songs>) (Accessed on 13-02-2019).

¹⁴⁶ Consider, for example, the song *Viva la Vida* (2008) from the album of the same name by Coldplay, or *Uptown Funk* by Mark Ronson featuring Bruno Mars from the *Uptown Special* (2014) album. Both of these songs, similar to Monáe's singles, became top hits and instant classics in mainstream music, with the former winning the Grammy Award for Song of the Year, and the latter winning the Grammy Award for Record of the Year in 2009 and 2016 respectively.

in between songs. Furthermore, as the most dominant themes presented by the album are sex/sexuality, the intersection of race and gender, and Afrofuturism, special attention will be devoted to these themes and their surrounding discourses. These three themes are also the ones most strongly carried out by the three singles, though Afrofuturism pervades the entire album. It is because of this that the following structure shall be used: the first subchapter in chapter five, which pertains to the „emotion picture,“ shall be analysed sequentially as to not muddle the analysis, though special attention will be paid to the aforementioned themes throughout the chapter. The second subchapter will be divided into three subcategories: Afrofuturism, sex/sexuality, and race/gender. This way, all three songs can be analysed according to the underlying message, and we might analyse what this message is and/or what its activist content aims to activate. Before these thematic analyses take place, each song will be described in-depth in a similar fashion to the formal analyses of chapter 5.1.

The style of analysis is quite similar to what Jones does in her article, though her analysis centres specifically on Monáe’s song “Q.U.E.E.N.” She, too, discusses the visuals of the song in relation to the lyrics, and analyses both the significance of the visuals and lyrics separately, allowing for a complete analysis of the song proper in accordance with Afrofuturist thought.

Lyrical and/or textual analysis will primarily be used for the three singles mentioned above, though some of the „emotion picture“ will also be analysed in a similar manner, as especially the narrative breaks in the motion picture have text that warrants analysis. As the narrative of the album will be discussed at length in chapter 5.1, the singles shall be analysed on their own merits as carriers of the album’s message rather than as part of the larger narrative, also because these songs were released prior to the narrative album itself.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁷ For the lyrics to each of the singles, please see the appendix.

Chapter 4: Janelle Monáe: Biography and Work

Janelle Monáe Robinson was born in Kansas City, Kansas, on December 1st 1985. In her music, she often references her childhood and parents: her truck driver father and janitor mother feature regularly in her songs. In relation to her parents' jobs, she has said that she wears her suit as a „uniform“ to support the working class, who live their lives in uniforms most of the time.¹⁴⁸ Monáe came out as a pansexual¹⁴⁹ in an interview with *The Rolling Stone*.¹⁵⁰ After she finished high school, Monáe moved to New York City to attend the American Musical and Dramatic Academy, hoping to pursue musical theatre in the future. Performing on stage did not work for her, as she found no roles that really suited her, and she moved to Atlanta to pursue her career there. She eventually got in touch with her future Wondaland Arts Society partners – which she co-founded and still works with today – and recorded *The Audition*, which she financed, released and distributed by herself.¹⁵¹ This would lead to her big break in 2005, when she was invited by OutKast's Big Boi to record some songs for OutKast's album.¹⁵² After this feature, she wrote and published *The Chase*, the first of four planned „Metropolis Suites,“ featuring Cindi Mayweather the android as a protagonist and set in the year 2719.¹⁵³ From here, she continued releasing albums that all took place in Metropolis, up to *Dirty Computer*, featuring guest artists like the late Prince, Afrofuturist and neo-soul singer Erykah Badu, and singer-songwriters Solange, Pharrell and Grimes. Themes that feature heavily in her work are those of liberation, be it related to class, race, sexuality, or gender. Monáe is also an activist: in 2018, she spoke out for the „Time's Up“ movement, a movement aimed at counteracting sexual assault in Hollywood.

Furthermore, Monáe is not active in the music scene alone: in 2016, she starred in both *Moonlight* and *Hidden Figures*, two movies that centre on different aspects of black struggle. *Moonlight* deals with themes of gay existence and homophobia in the black community, whereas *Hidden Figures* is a biographical movie about three black, female scientists that helped NASA engineer the moon landing. She also recently joined the cast for a Harriet Tubman biopic set to release in 2019, as well as a Gloria Steinem biopic, following a signing with Universal Studios.¹⁵⁴

Having briefly addressed Monáe's life, the next chapter shall centre entirely on *Dirty Computer*, an analysis of its „emotion picture“ and the three songs “Django Jane,” “PYNK,” and “Make Me Feel.”

¹⁴⁸ <https://www.biography.com/people/janelle-mon%C3%A1e-17178736> ; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lkAHDFWtIPo> (Accessed 17-12-2018).

¹⁴⁹ Pansexual means that one can be attracted to anyone of any gender identity, and is interchangeable with bisexual (to be able to be attracted to two or more genders).

¹⁵⁰ <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/janelle-monae-frees-herself-629204/> (Accessed on 17-12-2018).

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ <https://variety.com/2018/film/news/janelle-monae-harriet-tubman-movie-uglydolls-1202964332/> ; <https://www.complex.com/pop-culture/2018/12/janelle-monae-to-join-cast-of-gloria-steinem-biopic-the-glorias-a-life-on-the-road> (Accessed 17-12-2018).

Chapter 5: Dirty Computer

Dirty Computer was released on April 27th, 2018 by Wondaland Arts Society, Bad Boy Records and Atlantic Records. It garnered positive reviews overall, with 4/5 stars from *The Guardian*, 4.5/5 stars from *The Rolling Stone* and 87/100 points on *Metacritic*, with an 8.5 user score.¹⁵⁵ As of this writing, has been nominated for a Grammy Award for Best Album of 2018.¹⁵⁶ In short: it was well received among critics as well as the general public, praised for its messages of sexual and racial liberation.¹⁵⁷

Monáe released an „emotion picture“ that encompasses most of the album *plus* the comprehensive narrative that the album aims to create. This „emotion picture“ shall be analysed in lieu of the entire musical album, as the „emotion picture“ is available to Monáe’s entire audience without payment, and arguably the largest carrier of the album’s message in spite of its missing a few tracks. After this, the aforementioned three singles shall also be analysed: “Django Jane,” “PYNK,” and “Make Me Feel.”

The „emotion picture“ and the abovementioned singles shall be analysed by way of visual and lyrical analysis, where the visuals of each scene shall be analysed in depth for themes that are Afrofuturist and/or intersectional in nature, as well as their relation to the lyrics. The „emotion picture“ as well as the singles shall also be analysed in relation to themes of Afrofuturism, sex/sexuality, and the intersection of race and gender. This way, the questioned about what intersectional, activist message the album carries out can be answered.

¹⁵⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2018/apr/28/janelle-monae-dirty-computer-observer-review> ; <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-album-reviews/review-janelle-monaes-dirty-computer-is-a-liberated-futurist-funk-masterpiece-630669/> ; <https://www.metacritic.com/music/dirty-computer/janelle-monae> (Accessed on 19-12-2018).

¹⁵⁶ <https://www.grammy.com/grammys/news/album-year-nominees-revealed-2019-grammy-awards> (Accessed on 19-12-2018).

¹⁵⁷ <https://mashable.com/2018/04/10/janelle-monae-queer-feminist-video/?europa=true#z0PDHyJeMsqh> ; <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/reviews/janelle-monae-dirty-computer-review-today-listen-live-prince-tessa-thompson-a8324771.html> ; <https://www.nme.com/reviews/album/janelle-monae-dirty-computer-review> ; <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/janelle-monae-dirty-computer/> (Accessed on 13-02-2019).

I. (Emotion Picture)

The *Dirty Computer* „emotion picture“ was first released in its entirety on YouTube on April 27th 2018, on the same day as the full album release.¹⁵⁸ As was mentioned briefly in the previous chapter, the „emotion picture“ does not contain every song featured on the album. The album’s tracklist contains fourteen tracks:

01. Dirty Computer [ft. Brian Wilson]
02. Crazy, Classic, Life
03. Take a Byte
04. Jane’s Dream
05. Screwed [ft. Zoë Kravitz]
06. Django Jane
07. PYNK [ft. Grimes]
08. Make Me Feel
09. I Got the Juice [ft. Pharrell Williams]
10. I Like That
11. Stevie’s Dream
12. Don’t Judge Me
13. So Afraid
14. Americans¹⁵⁹

In spite of missing these four tracks, the „emotion picture“ is still nearly an hour long and contains a comprehensive narrative. It starts out with Monáe narrating what has happened prior to the events of the album.

¹⁵⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jdH2Sy-BINE> (Accessed on 04-01-2019). Though images are used throughout this chapter, I highly recommend watching the short films in its entirety as the visuals throughout are of vital importance to the overall feel and atmosphere of the album. All images used throughout this chapter are screenshots of the „emotion picture“ on YouTube.

¹⁵⁹ The tracks that are present on the album, but absent from the „emotion picture,“ are: “Jane’s Dream,” “I Got the Juice,” “Stevie’s Dream” and “So Afraid.” Two of these, namely “Jane’s Dream” and “Stevie’s Dream,” are not full tracks. The former is an eighteen-second instrumental, whereas the latter is a 46-second instrumental plus a brief monologue by Stevie Wonder. It is unclear at this point why “I Got the Juice” and “So Afraid” are not in the „emotion picture,“ as Monáe has not elaborated on this. The songs in the „emotion picture“ are presented in the same order as they are on the album, and shall therefore be discussed in the same order as well.

ceilings with harsh fluorescent lights, mirrors on one side and windows to – presumably – laboratories or rooms on the other. It looks cold, harsh and clinical, and is quite similar to what one might expect from, for example, a hospital or medical facility. This clinical setting further aids the dehumanising process of the „computers“: in this facility, they are (test) subjects first and people last.

In the large room, two torches are lit by the two women in bodysuits, after which one woman and both men leave the room. The remaining woman stands before the stretcher as the camera pans out, and it is revealed that the person lying on the slab is, in fact, Janelle Monáe (fig. 5). As she is the first character whose face we get to see, and considering the fact that this is her own album, this shot establishes her as the main character of the narrative.



Fig. 5: The woman on the „stretcher“ is revealed to be Janelle Monáe.

The narrative so far is thus that of a young black woman who is presumably captured by a large, controlling organisation. The camera turns and zooms in on a large black screen in the background, after which it is revealed that there are two men sitting behind it. Note that, so far, all four facility workers have been black and silent, whereas the men behind the screen are both white and speaking. Through an Afrofuturist lens, white people are – so far – the wielders of technology as well as the only speaking roles, implying that they have more agency than the black workers. As such, the narrative suggests that in this organisation, white people hold more power (both technologically and verbally) than black people. On the holographic-looking computer screen before them is a camera feed of Monáe’s face as she lies on the stretcher, before the text „BEGIN CLEANSING“ appears. One of the men activates the cleansing process, followed by a twenty-second countdown.

Back in the room, we see that the stretcher tilts, raising Monáe up. She appears to only just be waking up, surprised and shocked at her surroundings but too afraid (or sedated) to move. A helmet-like contraption floats down through a massive opening in the ceiling, and the woman in white takes it in her hands before placing it on Monáe’s head. Monáe, at this point, looks terrified. Through a megaphone attached to the ceiling, we hear a voice: “You will repeat after me. Your name is Jane 57821.” „Jane“ repeats this word for word. The voice from the megaphone continues: “I am a dirty

This last sequence is especially interesting, if not troubling: simply by scanning their irises, the robot - a government tool, based on the use of police sirens - knows who Jane and her friend are. This means that the government can use a sophisticated type of facial recognition software that can accurately identify a person by their irises, implying that there is a database somewhere that contains iris scans. Overall, this scene suggests that wherever Jane lives is a surveillance state that employs drones, among other things, to control the population. The use of a drone - a depersonalised, digital government tool - as well as the implication of a surveillance state can be read as strong warnings for the future: in 2018, multiple high profile trial hearings (such as that of Facebook founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg) centred on the digital privacy - or lack thereof - of internet users.¹⁶⁴ The fear that we are constantly being watched or listened to by the government and/or third parties through webcams, social media, camera phones and any and all microphones was and is a tremendous issue in contemporary society. Consider, for example, the facial recognition technology currently being developed and used in China,¹⁶⁵ the purpose of which is to be able to identify any Chinese citizen in seconds. One of many consequences is that everyone is thus permanently under control of the government and can, therefore, not push for reform. Monáe's not-so-distant future drone, which performs the same action, is a chilling warning of what is to come if we do not oppose it. Here, Monáe connects the present to the future by inventing technology that does not exist just yet, but probably will within ten years.

Following this stop by the drone, Jane and her friend exit the car to open up the trunk of the car, revealing that three other (black, female) friends were hiding in the trunk. They presumably would not have passed the iris-scan test, potentially implying that they are criminals, not registered/illegal visitors or immigrants. Then, "Crazy, Classic, Life" starts playing, opening with a spoken word sermon by Rev. Dr. Sean Macmillan, who quotes Martin Luther King's reference to the Declaration of Independence in his "I Have a Dream"-speech.¹⁶⁶ The song thus opens with:

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 pursuit of happiness.

During this sermon, we see several portrait shots of "alternatively" dressed (piercings, facial tattoos) individuals, the majority of which are black people (fig. 7).

¹⁶⁴ <https://www.csoonline.com/article/3283236/2018-the-year-data-privacy-got-real.html> (Accessed on 03-03-2019).

¹⁶⁵ <http://fortune.com/2018/10/28/in-china-facial-recognition-tech-is-watching-you/> (Accessed on 03-03-2019).

¹⁶⁶ <http://www.philly.com/philly/entertainment/music/janelle-monae-dirty-computer-20180504.html> (Accessed on 07-01-2019).



Fig. 7: The portrait shots shown at the beginning of "Crazy, Classic, Life."

Then, the camera cuts back to Jane and her friends in their car, and the song starts properly with the lyrics „young, black, wild and free.“ The video, as well as the lyrics, are about liberation, partying, and living free. Before the chorus sets in, Monáe sings: „I am not America’s nightmare, I am the American dream. Just let me live my life.“ America’s „nightmare“ is, based on who Jane is in this video and what she represents, a free, happy-go-lucky black woman. Conversely, the „American dream“ – described by James Truslow Adams in 1931 – refers to the American principle that anyone, no matter their circumstances of birth, can be successful in America.¹⁶⁷ Monáe, being the daughter of a janitor and a truck-driver and growing up with relatively little financial means, embodies the American dream in that she is now an A-list pop star who did not come from money.

The video primarily takes place in/near a large mansion, where everyone is dressed outside of societal norms: neon-coloured hair, spikes and other modifications on leather, unconventional and dramatic makeup, as well as references to other alternative icons such as David Bowie (fig. 8). In the clip, Jane encounters a woman – played by Monáe’s actual girlfriend Tessa Thompson – whom she is



Fig. 8: The „Bowie posse“ seen in “Crazy, Classic, Life.”

immediately attracted to, and the two women share several intimate moments on-screen. It is worth

¹⁶⁷ Truslow, 1931, p. 214-215.

The last shot deserves a moment of consideration: the people that were handcuffed here have been arrested following a party. They were not rioting, nor were they protesting, and yet they are lined up and handcuffed as though they are criminals. The line-up is especially evocative imagery, in that it is reminiscent of large-scale protest(or) arrests such as those of the Black Panthers, and, more recently, arrests made at Black Lives Matter protests. Of course, not all protest line-ups are to do with black emancipation, but within the narrative of Monáe's album, an album that champions Afrofuturism and black resilience, these are the images that she intends to evoke in the viewer's mind. Here she connects images of past protests to create an image of the future, which can be read as another warning: in the past and present, we were and are arrested for protesting. In the future, we might be arrested for living our lives simply because the government, who can see our every move, does not agree with our lifestyles.

The shot after the memory deletion is of Jane, asleep and lying on her back on a bed in a room that is otherwise empty, save for a pedestal with a fruit basket on it, now wearing a bodysuit similar to that of the female guards in the opening segment, including bracelets. The door opens, and Thompson walks in, wearing the institute's intricate headpiece and a white bodysuit with those same bracelets. She wakes Jane, and introduces herself as „Mary Apple 53.“ It becomes immediately clear that she, too, has been brainwashed by the institute and made to forget her memories. She says that she is there to escort Jane from the darkness into the light, while helping her to sit up in her bed. Jane, utterly confused, looks at Mary Apple, who she calls „Zen,“ before expressing her relief and that she thought she was never going to see Zen again. Mary Apple ignores this, and goes about her routine checks of Jane. Jane asks her if „they“ hurt her, which Mary Apple ignores as well. Mary Apple then asks if it is alright to call Jane by her name. Jane does not appear to understand the question, and Mary Apple explains that it is what is listed in Jane's file. Jane, devastated, only barely manages an affirmative, before Mary Apple states that „if there is anything else [she wishes] to be called,“ Jane should let her know, as she is there to „make her experience as sweet as pie.“ What this experience is, exactly, is unclear. Jane asks: “Why are you talking to me like you don't know me, Zen?” To which Mary Apple replies: “Like I said: my name is Mary Apple 53, and I don't know you. At least not yet, but what I do know is that you have some bugs. So we are here to get you clean.” Mary Apple then leaves the room, and the camera fades back into the control room, where the men are about to activate the cleaning process.

Now, the word „bugs“ raises an interesting question: *are* the people in Monáe's *Dirty Computer* universe human? One might argue not, as „bugs“ and „dirty computers“ are very clearly digital terms, far removed from the flesh and bones of humans. However, this can easily be attributed to the New Dawn institute wanting to dehumanise people in order to control them. A convincing argument for the human side is that Jane inhaled the Nevermind gas: robots or androids do not have lungs and cannot breathe. There would also likely be a more simple „reset“ for an android brain, as opposed to the invasive procedures that Jane is subjected to. Therefore, she – and others – are most

likely human, and are effectively subject to human experimentation and brainwashing. This is especially heinous when one considers that human experimentation has long been used by totalitarian regimes against marginalised people. Consider, for example, the experiments carried out on Jewish prisoners in concentration camps by Nazi doctor Josef Mengele during World War II, or the experimentation carried out on black slaves during the slave trade.¹⁷⁰ Here, too, Monáe uses past events to create her dystopian future. Monáe's dystopia is largely based off of events that have already taken place in the material world, both holding up a mirror to society and warning the viewer that history can and might repeat itself. From an activist point of view, this warning can be read similar in tone to the popular activist hashtag #NeverAgain, commonly used in relation to the holocaust. As such, Monáe might be urging her audience to get up and oppose a system that aims to control its population as much as possible, while simultaneously activating the viewer to live life as one sees fit.

Furthermore, the brainwashing and memory deletion process can also be read as a reference to conversion therapy, a practice where gay or transgender children are sent to therapy to „convert“ from being gay or transgender. Such therapies are often religious and highly abusive in nature.¹⁷¹ As Jane was in the process of falling in love with Zen, it can be argued that this is part of the reason why her memories are being erased. This is, possibly, why she is considered dirty in the first place. So far, then, the main themes of *Dirty Computer* come down to those of a homophobic, totalitarian dystopia, where people who divert from the norm are „dirty“ and in need of cleaning. Furthermore, I previously wrote that Monáe's album counters the American white supremacist heteropatriarchy, but if one takes into account the Nevermind's similarities to conversion therapy – commonly used by American evangelical therapists – we might consider that American evangelism is another discourse that Monáe is countering. This discourse consists of conservatism, chastity, modesty, as well as rampant homophobia and placing God (and faith in God) above humanity and individual life. The counterpoint to these discourses would be Monáe's own discourse of liberty through party, sexual and romantic freedom, as well as that of creating a community in order to thrive. Although the album is much closer to Monáe as a person and artist, the narrative of the „emotion picture“ *opposes* individualism and creates a discourse of strength through community and alliances, as will also become apparent near the end of this chapter. One might argue that a church is just as much of a community as the one Monáe creates, but while evangelical communities share a foundation of hierarchical control based around a fear of God, Monáe's community is one of egalitarian love, joy, friendship and shared freedoms. It opposes the fear that American evangelism thrives on by advocating for free love instead.

Returning to the „emotion picture,“ after the men press the button to „begin processing“ the video immediately switches to the clip of “Take a Byte.” We see Jane, in the clothes the New Dawn provided her with, raising her arms while blue lights „scan“ her (possibly for bugs). There are also several shots of her hanging upside down, and masked people working in labs. Jane sings that she

¹⁷⁰ Womack, 2013, p. 31-32.

¹⁷¹ <http://www.ncrlrights.org/bornperfect-the-facts-about-conversion-therapy/> (Accessed 09-01-2019).

knows that 'your code is programmed not to love [her],' possibly referencing Mary Apple/Zen. The chorus of the song encourage the „you,“ which may or may not be Zen, to „take a bite, help yourself,“ while masked scientists examine MRI scans of her brain in the clip. There is a brief interlude where we see Jane, now wearing the same bodysuit as Mary Apple, repeating word for word the mysterious voice from the megaphone that we heard earlier in the „emotion picture.“ This time she does repeat that she is ready to be cleaned. Briefly, we see the Nevermind gas operators laughing at the police violence from “Crazy, Classic, Life” as though the brutality on screen is funny (fig. 10). They are spurred into action when the voice tells them that Jane is ready for cleaning.



Fig. 10: The operators laugh at the scuffle between the police, Jane and her friends.

The men argue over what memories to delete: only some, or all of them? One prefers the former, the other insists on deleting everything. Following the start of cleaning, we see the memory of Jane and her friends, waking up on a rooftop in a city, after which one of the women proceeds to immediately throw up. Given the amount of bottles that they are surrounded by, this is likely due to excessive alcohol consumption. This memory takes place immediately after the events of “Crazy, Classic, Life,” as the drone reappears and threateningly hovers over them, immediately prompting Jane to wake all of her friends and make a run for it. This all happens to the opening guitar riff of “Screwed.” The clip starts with Jane and her friends running from the drones into what appears to be an underground warehouse, where the music video also takes place. We see Jane singing and her friends acting as the back-up band. Jane wears a shirt that reads „subject not object,“ a direct reference to the patriarchal act of objectifying women: denying personhood from them and reducing them to an object which is then consumed by men for sexual gratification. The lyrics of “Screwed” juxtapose war and discord (“I heard the sirens calling, yeah / The bombs are falling”) with sexual liberation (“It’s my birthday, baby

/ Gonna go sex crazy” and, later, “Wanna get screwed at a festival / Wanna get screwed like an animal.”) The chorus of the songs are carefree and rebellious: “Let’s get screwed / I don’t care / You fuck the world up now / We’ll fuck it all back down / Let’s get screwed / I don’t care / We’ll put water in your guns / We’ll do it all for fun.” Monáe contrasts the totalitarian regime of *Dirty Computer*, and more than a few material world elements (war, control, police violence) with sex, fun, and revolution. Amongst the imagery of Jane partying with her friends in the warehouse are flashing shots of soldiers marching, bombings and other war imagery.

Sexual liberty and free love are presented as an act of rebellion, where „getting screwed“ is the ultimate contrast to war. Conversely, „getting screwed (over)“ can also mean that one is being pressured, cheated, or deliberately sabotaged. During a brief musical interlude, one of her friends comments that „they’re so screwed,“ meaning that they are in a very bad place. It is also interesting to consider the centrality of sex and sexuality in this song, as well as others on the album: one could argue that by placing sexuality at the centre of the album, together with race and gender, Monáe is staunchly opposing the aforementioned conservatism, modesty and chastity, as well as the additional factors of homophobia, patriarchy and white supremacy. Monáe’s positions herself as a counterweight to what is, currently, the dominant American system (evangelical white supremacist heteropatriarchy) by being the exact opposite of that: a free-loving black woman, who also loves other black women. Her album embodies this discourse of free love between black women in numerous songs, including in the music video for “Screwed.”

During the bridge of the song, Monáe monologues: “You see / Everything is sex / Except sex, which is power / You know, power / Which is sex / You screw me and I screw you, too.” She repeats this once, replacing the last line with “Now ask yourself who’s screwing you.” This monologue can be dissected: sex is power, and power is sex, according to Monáe. What she means is likely that both sex and power function through a series of balances, where two (or more) parties have a modicum of control over one another. Ideally, all parties hold the same amount of control, but with both power and sex it is often the case that one party has significantly more control over the other. This is not inherently a bad thing, but in the case of political power a surplus of power for one party may result in totalitarian regime such as the one in the „emotion picture,“ where the other party is thus oppressed. Sex is power and power is sex also directly relates to „getting screwed over,“ especially when we consider the last line: “Now ask yourself who’s screwing you.” The question really is, elucidated by Monáe’s monologue: “Who holds power over you?” Another angle might be that, yes, sex is liberating, but it is also a form of power, therefore you should be careful with „who screws you.“ One final, vital interpretation is informed by an interview that Monáe gave to *Marie Claire* in 2017, where she called for women to „consider to stop having sex“ until men take women’s rights seriously, similar to the 1970s pleas for „political lesbianism“ as an alternative to harmful heterosexuality for straight

women.¹⁷² A sex strike – which is not a new concept and has been used before to leverage political power¹⁷³ - and by extension sex itself, thus becomes a tool of power. Near the end of the song, Monáe launches into a rap that almost explicitly references material world problems, especially the political reality of current America: “The devil met with Russia and they just made a deal / We was marching through the street, they were blocking every bill.” This is a reference to Donald Trump’s alleged collusion with Russian intelligence services during the 2016 elections, as well as the resulting marches and the blocking of governmental bills to improve the circumstances of marginalised peoples in the United States, which is also an immediate example of the people and discourses that Monáe opposes. During this rap, Zen is taken by police officers, and the drone finds Jane and her friends again, causing them to run once more.

After “Screwed,” “Django Jane” immediately plays as the next „memory.“ This song and the subsequent two songs will not be discussed here, as these will each be discussed in more detail in the following chapter. In-between “Django Jane” and “PYNK,” however, is one more narrative scene: the man remarks that the „memory clip“ of “Django Jane” does not look like a memory and wonders if it is a dream. This is likely due to the fact that “Django Jane” is about Monáe, not Jane, and takes place outside of the narrative of *Dirty Computer*; there will be more on this in the following chapter. His colleague tells him to just 'pull the content,' and to just delete everything they find. The word 'content' instead of 'memory' is another form of dehumanisation where even thoughts, arguably the most intimate aspect of human existence, are digitised. It is also worth pointing out here that the digitisation of memories in a surveillance state such as the one in *Dirty Computer* means that even your thoughts are not your own, much like online content. Following this is a brief scene where Jane and the voice in the megaphone go back and forth in the style of word-associations: the voice says one line, Jane replies with another. Then, we see Jane hanging upside down, and we hear her narrate again. “They call this place „The House of the New Dawn,“ this place where they drain us of our dirt, and all the things that made us special.” The last line drives home the point that she and others are being assimilated into a new system, leading up to a „New Dawn,“ perhaps. She goes on to say that if someone looked like they *might* remember something, they would hit them with the Nevermind gas. This sequence of narration is immediately followed by “PYNK” and “Make Me Feel,” back to back. Both of these „memories“ are also deleted.

After “Make Me Feel” ends, we see Jane sitting in her room, apparently now well enough to sit up on her own again. Mary Apple walks in, taking off the House's intricate bracelet Jane wears and drawing up her sleeve, revealing the crucified computer tattoo (fig. 11). Jane says that 'they are taking everything away from [her]' and that she no longer remembers how she and Zen met.

¹⁷² <https://www.marieclaire.com/celebrity/a26335/fresh-faces-2017/> (Accessed on 22-01-2019)
<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2009/jan/30/women-gayrights> (Accessed on 03-03-2019).

¹⁷³ Consider the 2003 Liberian women’s sex strike to end the civil war:
<https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/liberian-women-act-end-civil-war-2003> (Accessed on 22-01-2019).



Fig. 11: Mary Apple 53 uncovers the „crucified computer“ tattoo.

An increasingly distressed Mary Apple continues her checks while Jane comments that she is not sure whether any of her memories actually occurred. Mary Apple, finally intrigued, sits next to her on the bed. She says that thinking will 'only make it harder' and that it is best if Jane just 'enjoys the process.' In a true dystopian fashion, Mary Apple goes on to deny the wonders of freedom, saying that 'people used to work so hard to be free' and that those within the House are 'lucky,' as all they have to do is forget. Forgetting one's entire life prior to the House is presented as a positive thing, as it means you no longer have to 'struggle' to be free. This struggle is presented as being inherently detrimental rather than an act to improve one's circumstances in the world outside of the House. Jane turns to Mary Apple and says that she does not want to forget her. Mary Apple scoffs, and though she seems perturbed, she simply says 'you don't have a choice,' and leaves. This scene can be read as Jane and Mary Apple representing two different sides of social struggle: Jane as the activist, and Mary Apple as the complacent, fearful spectator. Mary Apple is narratively „wrong“ as she aids in the continued capture of our main character, meaning that Jane's activist persona is „right.“ This means that complacency and fear are considered to be detrimental qualities, and one could read this scene as Monáe activating the viewer to not be complacent, even if it is scary to get up and oppose a system that is much more powerful than an individual. If we consider the album's discourse surrounding the creation of a community (and subsequent disruption of that community by the government), we are slowly building towards a message of rebellion and uprising through community, rather than remain isolated, fearful individuals who are afraid of having to single-handedly challenge such a system. Note how, throughout the songs, Jane is almost always surrounded by other people, whereas in the narrative sequences, she is mostly alone *or* alone with a brainwashed Zen. Effectively, complacency for the sake of safety is criticised here.

The operators delete the memory to "Make Me Feel," and then play the 'memory' for "I Like

That.” The opening shot of this clip is several 'clones' of Monáe sitting in red bleachers, singing the opening hum together. As the actual lyrics start, the clones disappear and the central Monáe remains; they then periodically reappear in time with the bassline of the song. The song, a promotional pre-release that came out just a few days prior to the actual album, is arguably the most personal song on the album, as the entire song goes on to describe what Monáe is like as a person, with the chorus being an unapologetic celebration of that description: "And I like that / I don't really give a fuck if I was just the only one who likes that / I never liked to follow, follow all around, the chase is on.” During the bridge she recalls a real-life math class memory where she was made to feel strange and out of place, further adding to the up-close-and-personal feel of the song. Now, in light of this song, it is interesting to compare two aspects of the album to each other: firstly, the album is supposed to be about Monáe as a person, and secondly, this song is a 'memory' of 'Jane's.’ Earlier, I discussed whether or not the 'computers' in the „emotion picture“ were human or, indeed, androids. Following the argument that the computers are human, Jane is human, too, contrary to Monáe's Cindi Mayweather alter ego. When Monáe's character was introduced as Jane 57821, it was relatively straightforward to view her as another alter ego similar to Mayweather, but is she?

The answer to this question is not particularly straightforward: yes and no. On the one hand, she is certainly an alter ego in the sense that it is not Monáe herself in this „emotion picture,” in the same sense that Tessa Thompson is Zen and not Tessa. However, she is not an alter ego in the same way that Cindi Mayweather is: Cindi Mayweather was a different species, a character, a role that Monáe played in a different universe, embodying an entirely different personality. While *Dirty Computer* is clearly set in the future, there is – so far – no reason to believe that we are in a different world altogether. Furthermore, the name „Jane“ could be – and likely is – short for „Janelle.” Jane's 'memory' of "I Like That" in the „emotion picture“ positions her as a futuristic Janelle Monáe rather than an alter ego, as they are the same person, though in different settings. A more suitable term for Jane's character might be „self-insert”: it is effectively Monáe herself, but under a different name.

When we return once more to the operators, they are seen quarrelling once more over whether or not this is a 'memory,’ and whether or not it should be deleted. As was the case with previous 'memories,’ this one is also deleted per the 'delete everything' protocol. Dramatic, orchestral music swells, and we see an elderly white woman briskly stepping through the corridors of the House of the New Dawn (fig. 12). Contrary to other members of the House, her headpiece looks most like a crown fashioned after a nimbus. Mary Apple addresses her as 'Mother Victoria' and asks if they might speak. Note that, between the nimbus and the „Mother“ prefix, Mother Victoria is very much modelled after Mother Mary, adding to the evangelical elements already present in the „emotion picture.” Mother Victoria replies impatiently and says that she hopes it is important, the implication being that her time is precious. This brief interaction establishes Mother Victoria as a figure of authority with the House.

We do not know if there are multiple 'Mothers' within the institute, but for now one might assume that she is a leader, if not its sole leader. Mary Apple continues by saying that it is about Jane 57821, and that it seems that Jane remembers her and really knows who she is. Mary Apple goes on to detail some of the things that Jane has told her, such as that her name was Zen, that she played instruments and made films. Lastly and significantly, she states that Jane told her that they were in love. This is when Mother Victoria interrupts her ("That's enough.") and tells her it is not possible, and that a 'dirty mind' will do

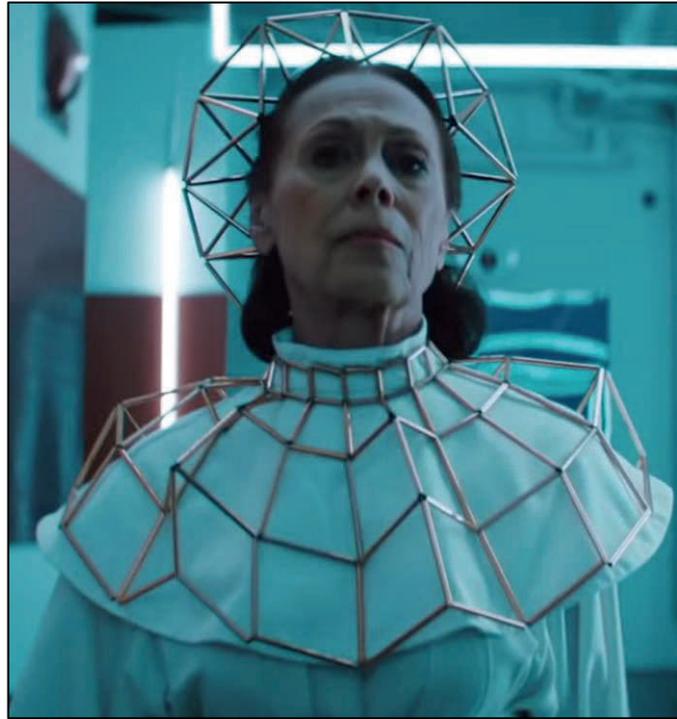


Fig. 12: Mother Victoria.

anything it can to survive. Mother Victoria says that Jane is dirty right now, and that tomorrow after 'the walk' she will be clean. If Jane is lucky, she continues, she will be a 'torch' just like Mary Apple in a few days. This refers to the process of bringing someone from the darkness into the light, like Mary Apple did with Jane at the start of *Dirty Computer*. "Then," she says, "We will have all this nonsense behind us."

It is significant that she only interrupted Mary Apple after she mentioned allegedly having been in love with Jane, further adding to what was already an apparently homophobic regime. Additionally, a „dirty mind“ usually refers to a person who has their mind on sexual matters constantly, which echoes common homophobia and the belief that homosexuality is inherently lewd or sexual. Within the context of Afrofuturism, however, it is even more significant that she is white, just like the men operating the Nevermind, whereas those who have been subjected to the Nevermind so far have all been black (Zen and Jane). Many Afrofuturist stories feature black people thriving with and through technology, but here it seems that black people are primarily suffering from technology at the hands of white people. In this narrative, white people are the oppressors of black people, which was both the case in the past and in the present. Monáe's overarching Afrofuturist narrative is one that connects the past (slavery, Jim Crow, the civil rights movement) to the present (a racist American president, everyday racism) to the future (renewed control of black people by white people, forced assimilation). Monáe draws a line from the past, through the present, to the future, creating a warning of what is yet to come if we do not oppose the white supremacist system. This shall be expanded on further later in this chapter. After the conversation with Mother Victoria, a confused and distraught Zen is left behind as the music and clip for "Don't Judge Me" start playing.

The opening sequence consists of Zen, Jane and their male friend - whom they appear to be in a polyamorous relationship with at the beach, drinking, dancing and laughing with each other. We now also see that Jane's tattoo was designed and placed by Zen, which explains why Mary Apple was so upset at seeing it, as it likely brought back a sliver of memory (fig. 13). "Don't Judge Me" is not played in its entirety, but the instrumental continues playing as we see Mary Apple - who has now remembered Jane - gently caressing Jane's tattoo as she sits next to Jane on the bed in the House of the New Dawn. Jane wakes and notices that Mary Apple seems to have remembered her, but the doors open, revealing three masked New Dawn workers, as Mary Apple tearfully states that it is 'too late.' Moments later, we see a limping Jane struggling to make her way through the corridors, while



Fig. 13: Zen places the tattoo on Jane's right arm.

Mother Victoria, Mary Apple and the others watch. Jane collapses, and Mary Apple rushes to her side to help her back up, after which she whispers to Jane to 'just walk.' Together, they enter a large room, where Jane is immediately surrounded by Nevermind gas. Mary Apple walks away, and Jane can do nothing but watch her leave. Then, the shot changes, and through the eyes of Jane we make our way through the corridors. Mother Victoria nods proudly at her as she walks by. A door opens, and on the bed lays the man that Jane and Zen were with at the beach. We learn that his name is Ché, and that his patient number is 06756. Jane introduces herself to him in the exact same manner that Zen introduced herself as Mary Apple, though she is Mary Apple 54, not 53. Ché asks "Jane?" which confirms that her



Fig. 14: "Mary Apple 54."

name really was Jane all along. Jane says that she is his torch, there to bring him from the darkness into the light (fig. 14). The scene cuts to black immediately and the credits roll.

After the credits, Zen enters the room and tosses gas masks at both, before saying 'let's go.' "Americans" starts playing, and we see how Jane activates the Nevermind gas throughout the entire building, causing everyone to fall asleep. Jane and Zen guide Ché through the corridors and outside, where Jane looks back into the camera once more before leaving.

Having reached the end of the „emotion picture,“ let us look back and summarise the overall narrative

and its discourses: it starts with a young black woman being carried into the House of the New Dawn, guided by „torches“ who were likely all captured and forcefully converted in the same way that Zen and Jane were. Jane explains that „they“ started calling people computers, and Jane is deemed „dirty,“ much akin to how we deem malware and corrupt files to be „dirty“ in the material world. Following this capture, Jane resists the initial cleaning, leading to the activation of the Nevermind gas, that we can safely assume serves as a total amnesiac and paralytic. Afterwards, she is tended to by her personal torch Mary Apple, who is revealed to be a brainwashed Zen, a lover of Monáe’s. At this point, we have two black women who have and are suffering the consequences of technology maliciously wielded by white people: the operators of the gas are white, and the only real authority figure we see is also white. Conversely, most of the torches appear to be black, further supported by the presumption that the last three people brought in to be converted were black (Zen, Jane and Ché). Throughout the „emotion picture,“ we see the story of Jane’s recent life through her „memories,“ which consist of most of the songs on *Dirty Computer*. The lines between *Dirty Computer*’s narrative and Monáe’s real life seem to blur occasionally, especially after “Django Jane” and “I Like That,” when one of the Nevermind-operators is convinced that the songs are not memories. He wonders whether they are dreams, and the viewer is never given confirmation either way, leaving us to wonder what they are. One possible interpretation is that they are exactly what they seem to be: music videos, but those would be Monáe’s and not Jane’s, as *Dirty Computer* is not Jane’s album. This leads one to believe that Jane and Monáe are, indeed, one and the same, just in different universes. As the album progresses, Mary Apple becomes more and more intrigued by Jane, until she finally remembers her, right as Jane is set to complete the Nevermind process. Mary Apple remains below Mother Victoria’s radar – Mother Victoria is the apparent leader of the institute – and helps Jane to the chamber where she is gassed one last time. Mary Apple, already back to being Zen at this point, leaves her, and we may assume that she went or had already gone to tamper with the gas. Jane is revealed to have been unaffected soon after, when she, Ché and Zen make their escape. Jane then activates the Nevermind, which neutralises everyone in the House, and escapes together with her friends. This ends the narrative with three black people using white people’s technology against them in a harmless, non-violent way. Jane and Zen are, in the end, the heroines of the story as well as liberators in a very literal sense. This resilience through nonviolence echoes Martin Luther King, whose speech was the opening monologue to “Crazy, Classic, Life,” the first song on the album. Here, too, Monáe draws strength and inspiration from the past.

Janelle Monáe presents an interesting Afrofuturist narrative, in that while those who are hunted by the House are not exclusively black but predominantly so, as that is what Monáe chose to show us through the clips. This is not a *new* narrative by any means, it is even in line with material world history where white people have also predominantly been the oppressors of people of colour, but it is a narrative where, in the end, black people come out on top through pacifist means. Monáe chose to show the viewer a world where black people are continuously on the run from the authorities,

and who are forcibly captured when they eventually get caught. They are then integrated into a system intended to strip them from their very humanity – something that echoes both human experimentation on black people as well as slavery – and make them servile. Monáe then made the narrative choice to have Jane resist hard and for long enough to make it through with her humanity intact, even rescuing Zen from the same fate along the way. Then, stronger through this alliance with another black person, they break out their friend from the same institute, that is portrayed as being a „white“ institute (the scientists, operators and the one leader are all white).¹⁷⁴ Jane, who was mostly alone and significantly weaker during the story of the „emotion picture,“ regains her strength the moment she has a friend in Zen, and they together rescue Ché, salvaging their community and breaking free. While it is certainly more nuanced than a white versus black narrative, it is certainly us versus them, where one group is predominantly black and the other predominantly white respectively. Eshun remarked that the dystopian hallmarks of slavery and experimentation are historical events that black people have experienced, and that Afrofuturists therefore do not create a separate class of people to experience these.¹⁷⁵ Rather, they use the historical realities of black people and build a new narrative from there. This is also what Monáe has done, which is a step away from her *Metropolis* narrative. In *Metropolis*, androids were enslaved, whereas in the world of *Dirty Computer*, there no longer is a separate, alien, oppressed class: there are now simply people who have been labelled as „computers,“ who might be „dirty“ and in need of cleaning. From here, Monáe constructs a story in which people have become marginalised in the search for power by another group – The New Dawn institute simply removes and assimilates undesirables – similar how black people were enslaved in order to make white people more comfortable, as well as cause their economy to boom and thrive. Monáe makes use of black people’s historical realities by recontextualising them into a futuristic setting, but does not focus or settle on the pain of those realities. Rather, they are used to represent the resilience and revolutionary potential of black people, creating a narrative in which Monáe openly supports and showcases the strength of her own community. The entire narrative is told from Jane’s perspective: they are her memories, it is her narration, and it is her (and her friends) who open and close the story. In other words, black people’s history was used to create a new black narrative, representing black people as free, rebellious and heroic characters in their own right, on their own terms. This total control over the narrative, as well as how black people are represented, is crucial media representation for black people overall, as was explained in chapter 2.1.

Another important aspect of Afrofuturism, as was mentioned earlier, is having black people create, utilise and thrive through technology, which is simply not the case for most of Monáe’s album. White people held the tools to oppress black people, who were subject to their experimentation through these tools. It cannot be argued that Jane retained her humanity *because* of technology, but

¹⁷⁴ An argument can be made that even the entire interior of the institute, as well as its exterior, are also white. However, this goes for most medical facilities and hospitals, and as this appears to be a laboratory, the argument of its colour being symbolic does not hold.

¹⁷⁵ Eshun, 2003, p. 298.

rather *in spite* of it. However, at the end of the „emotion picture,“ Jane and Zen appear to have learned to work with technology that they did not make, and this is not to be underestimated in its Afrofuturist potential. As such, the Afrofuturist hallmark of black people using technology is used very minimally in the „emotion picture,“ but not insignificantly. Jane and Zen take Mother Victoria’s tools from her, signifying agency, willpower and resilience, before using them against her in order to escape.

Additionally, there is an important angle to consider with regards to intersectionality, here: while Monáe fights for women on her album, she does not shy away from laying her finger on contemporary feminism’s sore spot. White women have been complicit in causing the suffering of black women, in this case represented through Mother Victoria. Monáe’s feminism is not only Intersectional through her defence, recognition and admiration of black women in *Dirty Computer*, it is also the refusing to praise the white women who cause harm to the larger community of women. Monáe chose to present a feminist narrative while simultaneously deliberately stating that women are *not* harmless: Crenshaw, hooks and Lorde have all noted that feminism lead by white women left black women behind, and neglect can be equally harmful as open hostility. Mother Victoria, whose „title“ of Mother implies caring, does not care for the women who are her charges. She harms them, as she does Jane, and then neglects them, as she does Zen. It is no coincidence that she is white, and they are black.

Furthermore, Monáe’s activism occasionally explicitly touches on material world issues and constructs of racism. For one, an overarching theme of the album is rebellion, as could be seen in “Crazy, Classic, Life” and heard in “Screwed.” Jane’s character hinges on wanting to be free, fighting the system and actively pursuing equality. Her lyrics, in several of the songs, touch on the racial inequality between black and white people, as well as the financial inequality between men and women. In “Screwed,” she raps that there are one “Hundred men telling me cover up my areolas / While they blocking equal pay, sippin' on they Coca Colas,” referencing the wage gap between men and women, while in “Crazy, Classic, Life,” the final rap addresses a white „you“: “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,” and then, “Remember when they told you I was too black for ya? / And now my black poppin' like a bra-strap on ya.” Monáe is not explicit in her lyrics here, but does touch on the cultural disparity where black people are much more likely to be jailed or criminalised for „breaking the rules“ in the same manner as white people.¹⁷⁶ She also touches on being deemed „too black“ and „too proud,“ whereas there is no comparable cultural phenomenon of being „too white“ for society. This, as was stated in the introductory chapter, is down to whiteness being the default. Monáe positions herself as an activist black woman fighting for

¹⁷⁶ Example: A study comparing black and white drug offenders found that black offenders were much more likely to be charged with possession and sale of drugs, whereas white offenders were charged with secondary offences, such as stealing to support the drug habit. The former is a much more serious offence and warrants different judicial treatment: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5614457/> (Accessed on 16-01-2019).

women, black people *and* black women, though the latter remains to be addressed further in the following chapter.

Moving on to sex and sexuality, Monáe presents sex as being both liberating – quite a few of the clips feature polyamorous, free love between all genders – and a potential tool of oppression. Monáe uses sex/sexuality as one of three pillars to counter the discourse of American evangelical white supremacist heteropatriarchy, the others being race and gender, all told through an Afrofuturist lens. She juxtaposes war and sex with each other in “Screwed,” while simultaneously using both meanings of getting screwed interchangeably. One is either having sex or getting cheated, while the sex/power parallel serves to remind the listener that sex is more than liberty and rebellion, as it can be a tool of oppression as well. The centrality of sexuality makes for the fact that sex and sexuality become a tool rather than an aspect of one’s identity, though Monáe positions herself as bi-/pansexual in the „emotion picture,“ which returns it to the level of personal identity and representation. She has an intimate relationship with both Zen and Ché simultaneously, and this sexuality is celebrated in “Make Me Feel,” “Crazy, Classic, Life” and “PYNK,” the latter two of which are yet to be discussed. One could also argue that Jane liberating herself and her friends from the intensely homophobic House of the New Dawn can be construed as setting free their love and sexuality, though they are not safe in the outside world either.

Of course, this analysis remains incomplete: “Django Jane,” “PYNK” and “Make Me Feel” are yet to be addressed, and they carry a significant portion of the album’s message. In the following subchapter, these three songs shall be visually and lyrically analysed in depth according to the major themes on the album (Afrofuturism, race/gender intersections and sex/sexuality). After the following chapter the overall analysis shall be completed, leading to the conclusion of this thesis.

II. “Django Jane,” “PYNK,” “Make Me Feel”

The opening shot to “Django Jane,” the music of which transitions directly from “Screwed” into the intro, is that of a door opening into what looks like a well-decorated stockroom in the same – or a similar – warehouse to the one in “Screwed.” Inside the room are embroidered rugs, ornamental drapes, and plants everywhere. We see Monáe, dressed in a pink suit and a kufi cap, sitting on a throne-like chair surrounded by black women wearing studded leather jackets, sunglasses and kufi caps (fig. 15).¹⁷⁷ On the Moroccan-inspired coffee table in front of Monáe lie several objects: a singing bowl with its striker, an incense holder, an ornamental gold plate and two small pyramids. In the back, we see various obelisks standing on desks, as well as a sculpted bust of, presumably, an African (American) man. To the left, hanging from the scaffolding, is a somewhat generic mask that echoes the “African” masks that were brought to Europe in the early twentieth century, made famous across the continent by Picasso’s paintings of them, among others.¹⁷⁸



Fig. 15: Monáe on her „throne” during the opening of “Django Jane.”

As the lyrics start (“Yeah, this is my palace / Champagne in my chalice”), the shot changes to another room. This room is mostly empty, save for a small elevation on which Monáe is sitting on yet another throne with a small table with fruit on it and a hookah next to her, with the same troupe of black

¹⁷⁷ Kufi caps are brimless, short caps made of knitted or crocheted yarn. They are – in America – commonly associated with West African heritage, though they are also worn in the Middle-East and various other regions in Africa.

¹⁷⁸ Due to the prevalence of such masks across Africa, it is impossible to pinpoint from which specific culture/country/region these masks hail.

women surrounding her (fig. 16). This time around, they are all wearing fez hats, while Monáe's throne is guarded by two women wearing tall, African headdresses. Their faces are mostly covered, save for the eyes. The shot changes again, and we see Monáe in a turquoise-coloured suit, standing in a room full of ornamental drapes hanging from the ceiling. It should be noted that this is the first and only music video in which Monáe wears her trademark suit: this is the first video where she is not Jane, but Janelle.



Fig. 16: Monáe in a different room on a larger throne, guards at either side during “Django Jane.”

She sings: “We gon’ start a motherfuckin’ pussy riot / Oh we gon’ have to put ‘em on a pussy diet;” while she dances and the shot shifts between the throne and the room with the drapes. These shifting shots of the two rooms are the predominant setting for the entire music video. She references her parents as well as the plight of black people in America: “Momma was a G, she was cleanin’ hotels / Poppa was a driver, I was workin’ retail / Kept us in the back of the store / We ain’t hidden no more, moonlit n****, lit n****.” She continues, ending the following two verses – where she raps about her career successes so far – with “Remember when they said I ‘looked too mannish’.”

The song then erupts with “Black girl magic, y’all can’t stand it / Y’all can’t ban it / Made out like a bandit / They been tryin’ hard to make us all vanish / I suggest they put a flag on a whole ‘nother planet.” Monáe then ‘suggests’ that they find another planet to plant their flag on, as there are too many black people and people of colour to ever make them vanish. She continues to sing that she

is „Jane Bond / never Jane Doe / and I Django / Never Sambo“ before referencing her proclivity for wearing suits when she sings that „black and white“ has always been her „camo.“

In the second to last verse, she raps: “In the darkest hour, spoke truth to power?” She then raises her fist to the beat of „power.“ In the next verse, Monáe targets (black) men specifically, rapping: “And n****, down dawg / N**** move back, take a seat, you were not involved / And hit the mute button / Let the vagina have a monologue / Mansplaining, I fold „em like origami.” The music video, meanwhile, consists primarily of two shots: Monáe sitting on her throne, or Monáe dancing with the other women. The one shot that is different is that of “Let the vagina have a monologue,” where we see a naked Monáe holding a mirror over her mons pubis (fig. 17). The clip ends with the same doors we saw opening at the start, now closed.

The video to “PYNK” starts after a brief narrative intermission which was discussed in the previous chapter. We see Monáe in the same hover car we saw in “Crazy, Classic, Life,” riding



Fig. 18: The „PYNK Rest-Inn“ from “PYNK.”

through a rocky, desert-like landscape. A road sign pointing left reads „PYNK rest-inn,” after which the camera flashes and the colour scheme of the entire landscape changes to pink (fig. 18.). The music starts, and we see two women sitting and standing just outside of a run-down diner. A sign on the porch reads „girls eat free and never leave.”

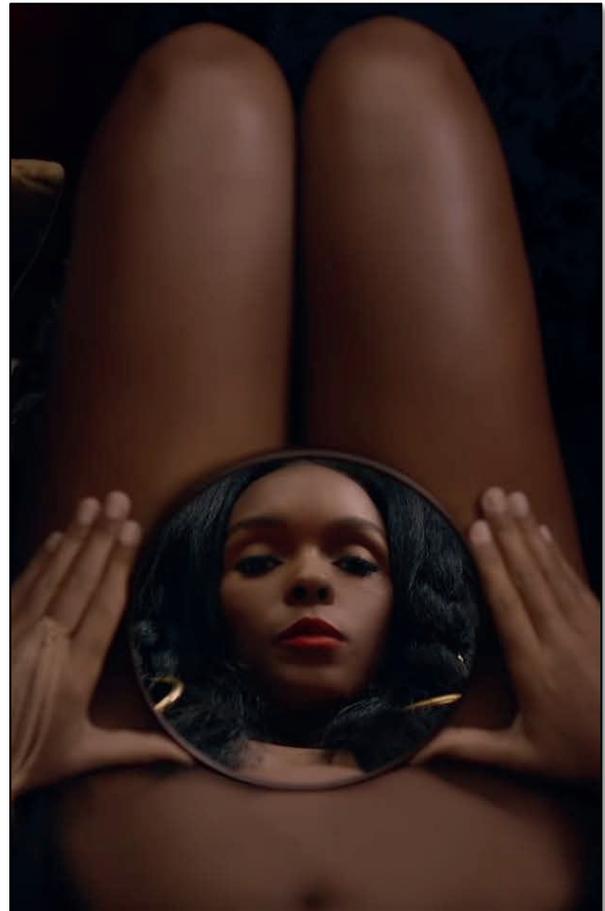


Fig. 17: “Let the vagina have a monologue,” during “Django Jane.”

The inn appears to be inhabited entirely by black women. After a couple of shots of the women’s faces, legs, their snapping fingers and groups of women drinking together, the lyrics start. The shot changes, and we see Monáe and six other women lined up, with Monáe and four other women wearing trousers designed to look like vulva and vaginas (fig. 19). Two of the women do

not wear the pants, and Thompson and Monáe have confirmed via Twitter that they are meant to represent the women that do not have vaginas.¹⁷⁹



Fig. 19: The vagina trousers, plus two women without (intended to represent women without vaginas) from “PYNK.”

In the music video, we primarily see Monáe dancing in the vagina pants with her friends and interacting with Thompson. At one point, Thompson sticks her head through Monáe’s pants, making



Fig. 20: The „Sex Cells“ underwear from “PYNK.”

her the „clitoris“ of the textile anatomy. We also see Monáe wearing underwear with fake, thick black pubic hair peeking out the sides, with the text „Sex Cells“ printed on the underwear (fig. 20.). There are also a couple of intermittent shots of Monáe on a pink, satin bed, pulling at the sheets. Another shot features a woman wearing underwear similar to that of Monáe, except it reads „I Grab Back,“ a direct reference to Donald Trump’s remark that he grabs „women by the pussy.“¹⁸⁰ At one point, in the diner, we see a

neon sign that reads „Pussy Power.“ The bridge of the song is an „emotion picture“ exclusive. We see a declaration of love from Monáe to Thompson in which she states she does not want to hide her love. Contrary to “Django Jane,” there is a direct reference to the „emotion picture’s“ narrative in the lyrics: “And if my memories never come back / I’ll still remember when we were first was naked at.” As the music video closes, we see Monáe and Thompson literally vanish from the screen as though they were „deleted“ from the clip.

Following “PYNK” is the last song that will be discussed, “Make Me Feel.” It follows immediately after “PYNK,” and we see Thompson and Monáe walking into a club together where “Make Me Feel” is already playing. The people in the club – some of which are almost David Bowie

¹⁷⁹ <https://twitter.com/JanelleMonae/status/983894793712553984> (Accessed on 23-01-2019).

¹⁸⁰ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-10-08/donald-trump-access-hollywood-vulgar-comments-women/7915146> (Accessed on 23-01-2019).

clones (fig. 21) – are dressed and made up in much the same way as in “Crazy, Classic, Life,” and the general feel of the music video is in the same vein of liberty, love and party.



Fig. 21: The „David Bowie posse“ from “Make Me Feel.”

We see Thompson and Monáe assessing the bar, where they are being stared at by other partygoers. The lyrics start, and we see Monáe singing about her feelings for someone, most likely Thompson or just a hypothetical „you.“ Similar to “Crazy, Classic, Life,” the shots constantly change to images of various groups of partygoers and their cliques, interspersed with various shots of Monáe singing her song. We see Monáe and Thompson hanging out in an arcade hall, where Thompson puts a lollypop into Monáe’s mouth in a seductive manner. Shortly after this, we hear the chorus: “That’s just the way you make me feel / So real, so good, so fucking real.” During the chorus, we also see Monáe walking through the bar, and we see Ché (real name Jayson Aaron), whom she embraces and continues to have a flirty conversation with. The entire song’s lyrics are dedicated to the feeling of being infatuated with someone, as well as being sexually attracted to them. Contrary to “PYNK” and “Django Jane,” the video is not heavy on its symbolism. Most significantly, however, we do see Monáe literally running between Thompson and Aaron as the bridge reaches its climax, when she sings: “Good God! I can’t help it! / That’s just the way that I feel, yeah!” Where in the previous song, Monáe paid mind to the intersections between being a black woman, and being a woman who loves women, she now explicitly references her own sexuality where she is attracted to both men and women. As the video continues, we see Monáe, Aaron and Thompson dancing together, relishing and basking in their shared love for each other. After several more various camera shots of Monáe dancing – either by herself as part of the music video, or with Aaron and Thompson – the video ends.

Having visually and lyrically described each of the music videos, we shall now turn to the analysis of meaning, where we shall look into the meaning/iconography of the visuals and lyrics, both independently and in combination with one another. This analysis shall take place in three parts according to three distinct themes: Afrofuturism, Race/Gender, and Sex/Sexuality.

Afrofuturism

“Django Jane” specifically makes use of heavily African(-inspired) imagery. Although singing bowls are Tibetan in origin and incense burners are used in cultures all across the world, the pyramids, mask, kufi hats, obelisks, bust and pyramids, as well as the Moroccan table itself, all signify a marriage of various African cultures. Within the first ten seconds of her music video, Monáe has firmly established the importance of African culture to her music and the video. African elements in and of themselves do not constitute Afrofuturism, of course. However, as the video still takes place in a futuristic setting, one where the modernity of an abandoned American warehouse is combined with the age-old imagery of various African cultures, one can in the very least argue that Monáe connects the past (a „return“ to Africa of sorts) with the present and/or future, which is very much part of Afrofuturist praxis.

When Monáe references her parents (“Momma was a G, she was cleanin' hotels / Poppa was a driver, I was workin' retail / Kept us in the back of the store / We ain't hidden no more, moonlit n****, lit n****”), it is the last line that fiercely opposes the marginalisation of black people: they are hidden no longer. Much like the rest of the album, she juxtaposes past circumstance with current reality: where black people were – according to Monáe – „kept in the back of the store,“ they are now out in the open. „Hidden“ seems to refer to *Hidden Figures* (2016), whereas „Moonlit“ refers to *Moonlight* (2016), two movies in which Monáe had a significant acting role. The subsequent line, “Already got a Oscar for the casa” also refers to the Academy Award that was won by *Moonlight* in the category for Best Picture. She goes on to sing about the “Highly melanated, ArchAndroid orchestrated,” referencing three things at once: first, melanin is the organic pigment that causes skin to be dark(er); secondly, the ArchAndroid was Monáe’s debut album, which ties in with the third reference: The WondaLand ArchOrchestra, which provides string instrumentals on *Dirty Computer* as well as other WondaLand productions. In summary, Monáe refers to the all-black orchestra that helped her create her work, celebrating what is popularly known as „black excellence.”¹⁸¹ In the clip for “Django Jane,” when she repeats “yeah, we highly melanated,” she touches her hands to her own face, indicating her own blackness with pride. It is also interesting to note that there are no men whatsoever in this clip, only black women. The warehouse, having been transformed into something resembling an African idyll, a feeling evocated by the objects and lush greens placed in the space, almost becomes a black, female utopia this way. Though most of the album’s Afrofuturist thought is worked into the narrative of the album and less in the music videos, it does peek through in instances such as this. Monáe, almost positioning herself as an African queen sitting on her throne surrounded by her all-female guard, becomes the leader of this small utopia.

Lastly, in “Django Jane,” she also raps “In the darkest hour, spoke truth to power?,” where she raises her fist to the beat of „power,” symbolising black power specifically. The raised fist has long

¹⁸¹ „Black excellence“ is a term commonly used on social media to denote when a black person or collective of black people do something noteworthy or – indeed – excellent. There exists a website dedicated to showcasing black excellence exclusively: <https://blackexcellence.com/> (Accessed on 22-01-2019).

been a symbol of unity and power, but was popularised among black people through the Black Power movement of the 1960s, which grew out of the civil rights movement. The word „power“ in combination with what has been dubbed the „Black Power Fist“ is both a reference to the past and to the present, connecting the two and symbolising the ongoing struggle that has, clearly, still not ended by the time of Monáe’s fictional future.

Race/Gender

During “Django Jane’s” third verse – where she raps about her career successes so far – Monáe raps “Remember when they said I „looked too mannish“;” referring to at least one viral incident on Twitter, when a man said she was „too soulful“ and needed to stop wearing suits and „be sexy“ instead.¹⁸² The song then erupts with “Black girl magic, y’all can’t stand it / Y’all can’t ban it / Made out like a bandit / They been tryin’ hard to make us all vanish / I suggest they put a flag on a whole „nother planet.” This line refers to white supremacy (and white patriarchy) and its attempts at silencing and removing those who are not white from the world. „Black girl magic“ falls into the same category of popular jargon as „black excellence,” where black girl magic (and its companion, black boy joy) is used to refer to black women specifically, in order to combat the erasure of black women within the black community. „Black girl magic“ is a „term of endearment“ used to recognise and pay homage to the accomplishments of black women and girls, meaning that what they create or do – which was previously not recognised or undervalued – is magical and worthy. The line, though small, is significant with regards to intersectionality: she acknowledges and celebrates black people all throughout the song and music video, after which she specifically focuses on black girls. Monáe recognises that black *girls* are ignored within their own communities as well, as Crenshaw had already established with regards to the position of black women within civil rights movement.¹⁸³

The lyrics “Jane Bond, never Jane Doe / And I Django, never Sambo.” The former references Jane(ille) identifying strongly with James Bond, the fictional secret agent who works to keep Britain (and, arguably, the world) safe, and not Jane Doe, a name given to unidentified female bodies. She makes clear that she does not exist in the margins, that she has a significant identity, one that she refuses to hide. Furthermore, „Django“ (as well as the song’s name, “Django Jane”) is a reference to the Quentin Tarantino movie *Django Unchained* (2012), in which the house slave Django frees himself from slavery and emerges victorious. „Sambo,” on the other hand, refers to the racist children’s book *The Story of Little Black Sambo*, in which black characters are referred to by slurs for dark-skin people and the main character – Sambo – is depicted as a caricature of a black child. In summary: these two lines state who Janelle Monáe is through references. By juxtaposing a black hero (Django) with a caricature of a black child, she is saying that she is not an unnamed victim of racism and white supremacy, and she is not a caricature of a black person. She is instead a black, activist woman who campaigns for peace and who fought her way to fame and recognition. Her general activist message – that of opposing white supremacy, the patriarchy, fighting for freedom and liberation of all races, genders and sexualities – becomes incredibly personal in this one, single line. She is the embodiment of her own activist, intersectional message.

In the next verse, Monáe targets (black) men specifically, rapping: “And n****, down dawg /

¹⁸² <https://mic.com/articles/115422/janelle-mon-e-s-response-to-criticism-about-how-she-dresses-was-astoundingly-brilliant#.QM9WGZxxt> (Accessed on 22-1-2019; the man’s tweets have since been deleted).

¹⁸³ Crenshaw, 1989, p. 160-166.

N**** move back, take a seat, you were not involved / And hit the mute button / Let the vagina have a monologue / Mansplaining, I fold ,em like origami.” The n-word is, within black communities, typically used to indicate men specifically. Mansplaining as a term refers to when men condescendingly explain something to women, even though the woman in question is aware of the facts or, in some cases, is much better informed than the man is. Monáe here first tells black men to back off and let black women speak, though ,the vagina“ can also refer to all women.¹⁸⁴ The emphasis on the vagina and its immediate corollary relationship to womanhood and feminism leads to a very specific brand of feminism: ,pussy power feminism,“ where the vagina is central to feminist praxis. The term ,pussy power“ was first used by early Black Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver in his work *Post-prison Writings and Speeches* (1969): “You have the power to bring a squeaking halt to a lot of things that are going on, and we call that pussy power. We say that political power, revolution power grows out of the lips of a pussy.”¹⁸⁵ It has since been adopted by liberal feminism, the most recent and most visible usage of which was during the 2017 Women’s March, where feminists wore pink ,pussy hats“ (fig. 22) in retaliation to Donald Trump’s comments about ,grabbing women by the pussy.“



Fig. 23: The ,pussy hats“ and Pussy Hat Project stand at the 2017 Women’s March. (Photo by Kevin Mazur/WireImage.)

¹⁸⁴ Additionally, it is a direct reference to *The Vagina Monologues*, a play by playwright Eve Ensler, written in 1996. The play explores sex, rape, genital mutilation, body image, reproductive issues and sex work.

¹⁸⁵ Cleaver, 1969, p. 143.

For this specific brand of feminism the pussy is central to their praxis. It is used as the ultimate common symbol for womanhood and, therefore, all women.¹⁸⁶ Pussy, while also meaning „coward“ and generally being a misogynistic slur commonly used in America, has thus been reclaimed by „pussy power feminism.“ However, the prevalence of Intersectional thought and feminism throughout this album causes tension with „pussy power feminism.“ For one, conflating the „pussy“ with womanhood and female resistance to oppression risks reducing all that a woman is to her genitals.¹⁸⁷ This is no different than dominant patriarchal, misogynist perceptions of womanhood, which is that women primarily exist in order to reproduce. If „the vagina,“ and not „the woman,“ is to have the monologue, then the entire woman’s value comes down to her vagina, which is very much on par with misogynists’ perceptions of women. On the other hand, reproductive rights was one of the most important/most emphasised aspects of the early feminist movements, therefore the vagina certainly is not unimportant. In current society, however, Intersectional feminism demands the recognition of the fact that not all women have vaginas (some intersex¹⁸⁸ women/pre-surgery trans women do not have vaginas) and that the vagina is not the core, primary experience of womanhood.¹⁸⁹ „All women“ means the explicit inclusion of trans women. As such, the sudden switch to a type of feminism where the vagina is central to the female experience feels like a step *away* from Intersectional feminism for the album. The music video consists primarily of two shots: Monáe sitting on her throne, or Monáe dancing with the other women. The one shot that is different is that of “Let the vagina have a monologue,” where we see a naked Monáe holding a mirror over her genitals. Just as described above, the vagina and womanhood become synonymous: Monáe’s vagina becomes a reflection of herself.

“PYNK,” the video of which celebrates Sapphic¹⁹⁰ love and the female anatomy, also brings us back to „pussy power feminism.“ On the one hand, one could argue that this video explicitly celebrates the vagina and not women, but if that were the case, the women without vagina pants would not have been present. Furthermore, the video features (black) women celebrating their bodies and their love exclusively. There is no way around the central focus of the song, which is women’s empowerment through „pussy power.“ Though Monáe briefly referred to trans women in her music video, who defy the centrality of „pussy power“ to womanhood, they are only present for a moment while the rest of the video is specifically and explicitly aimed towards celebrating „pussy power.“ Destigmatising the vagina is important: in a 2012 paper by Sarah Rodriguez and Toby Schonfeld it was found that stating or naming the vagina was still taboo and not much has changed over the course

¹⁸⁶ Wrenn, 2018, p. 1-2.

¹⁸⁷ Wrenn, 2018, p. 11-13, 16.

¹⁸⁸ Intersex refers to people who are born with non-definitive primary sex characteristics, i.e. some cisgender women may be born with testes, XY chromosomes, and so on.

¹⁸⁹ For more on pussy power feminism, see: Laymann, 2017.

¹⁹⁰ „Sapphic“ is a term used in online communities to refer to women who love women (a reference to the Greek poet Sappho, who wrote romantic poetry about women), but of whom the sexuality has not been established. In order to avoid less common acronyms (wlw) or misidentifying any of the women in the clip, Sapphic shall be used in this chapter instead to denote romantic or sexual love between women.

of seven years.¹⁹¹ However, when emancipating the vagina and the woman as one, one is at risk of not only conflating the two as inherent characteristics of one another (vagina = woman and vice versa), but also of undoing the wealth of diversity and experiences that exist within and define womanhood. Destigmatising the vagina can be part of feminism, but it does not necessarily have to be used as the one aspect of womanhood that all women have in common. With regards to intersectionality, acknowledging that the woman is not her vagina *and* that not all women have a vagina is necessary. We risk taking part in the reductionist practice of considering the vagina to be the one „true“ definer of what it means to be a woman, even though trans men might have vaginas and trans women might not. If we reduce a woman to her genitals, then we risk ignoring her lived experiences. While wanting to find a common experience or element of womanhood that all women can relate to in order to unite all women is, arguably, in the best interest of „all“ feminism, it is also impossible and alienating: women across the world simply do not have one, single, unifying experience. The specifics of patriarchy and womanhood are often at least cultural, if not individual.

Furthermore, as sexuality plays an extremely central role in both this music video and the one for “Make Me Feel,” the suggestion of the vagina equalling womanhood also relates to bisexuality and/or lesbianism. As the lyrics of the song continually refer to vaginal foreplay (either digital or cunnilingus) while also exposing the viewer to „pussy power“ symbolism continuously, the suggestion that, at its core, lesbianism comes down to a distinct set of genitals is present. Intersectional feminism holds that the intersection between being a trans woman and a Sapphic woman exists, and though Monáe refers to women without a vagina in her music video, it is overpowered by the emphasis on the vagina as being central to both womanhood and Sapphic love. Perhaps if, during the more sexually tinted scenes (such as the bedroom scene) a more explicit reference to women without vaginas, transgender or otherwise, had been made, this could have been avoided. In terms of discourse, the tension between Intersectional feminism, which inherently includes the existence of Sapphic trans women, and „pussy power feminism,“ which uses the vagina as the core symbol of womanhood, is exacerbated by the existence of one more fringe feminist movement which allies itself with „pussy power feminism“: Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists, also known as “TERFs.”¹⁹² While their arguments against trans women specifically are broad, they generally believe trans women to be men colonising female spaces. TERFs also believe that having a vagina is essential to the female experience as well as lesbianism. Lesbian women who identify as TERFs believe trans women to be predatory men who wish to infringe upon lesbian spaces. To equate genitalia with gender adds to this dangerous and transmisogynistic rhetoric, further isolating them from feminist and female spaces and potentially endangering them in their isolation. Though Monáe does not refer to them in her video and

¹⁹¹ Rodriguez & Schonfeld, 2012, p. 19.

¹⁹² <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/nov/29/im-credited-with-having-coined-the-acronym-terf-heres-how-it-happened> (Accessed on 14-03-2019). It should be noted that radical feminism itself is *not* inherently against transgender people, but it has been co-opted the incredibly vocal minority of the TERFs: Williams, 2016, p. 254-257.

likely did not intend to mimic their rhetoric, various studies have shown that the way people acquire knowledge about LGBT+ people is through media.¹⁹³ As such, if Monáe's intention was to have a genuine moment of Intersectional, transgender representation in her music album *alongside* Sapphic women, it is paramount that she does not feed into the rhetoric of a movement that directly opposes her intentions (and Intersectional feminism). As transgender people are still underrepresented,¹⁹⁴ the risk of unintentionally adding to such stigmatisation through media is much bigger, even if it is only done by inadvertently giving credence to the thought that a woman is her vagina. Monáe, in centralising sexuality and gender on her critically acclaimed studio album which has reached millions of people, she has inadvertently contributed to the popularisation of genital-essentialist gender rhetoric and validated those who hold these beliefs. Monáe wanting to give honest representation to one marginalised group of people – black Sapphic women, who are also grossly underrepresented in media¹⁹⁵ – unfortunately highlights how, when intersectionality does not reach far enough, it can potentially add to the cultural marginalisation of another group, even if this is not explicitly addressed in the video itself.

¹⁹³ McInroy & Craig, 2015, p. 606-608, 610-616; Cook, 2018, p. 4, 9-10; Wellborn, 2015, p. 20-27; Ayoub & Garretson, 2015, p. 1-4, 7, 12-16, 26-34.

¹⁹⁴ Ng, 2013, p. 260; Cook, 2018, p. 38.

¹⁹⁵ Ng, 2013, p. 275.

Sex/Sexuality

The “Django Jane” lyrics “We gon’ start a motherfuckin’ pussy riot / Oh we gon’ have to put ,em on a pussy diet’,” referencing the Russian punk band who caused tremendous controversy after opposing the Russian Orthodox church as well as Putin which lead to their subsequent arrest. She also references her own remarks with regards to a ,sex strike,” discussed in the previous chapter.

During the open sequence of “PYNK,” a sign on the porch reads ,girls eat free and never leave.” In relation to the lyrics of the song, this is almost certainly a tongue-in-cheek reference to cunnilingus, as the colloquialism for cunnilingus is ,to eat pussy.” The entire song is somewhat euphemistic in that it never explicitly mentions the vagina, but alludes to it constantly. The opening line is “Pink, like the inside of your- baby,” followed by lines such as “Pink, like the tongue that goes down- maybe”¹⁹⁶ and “Pink, like the lips around your- baby,” which refers to the vulva, and lastly “Pink, like your fingers in my- maybe” and “Pink, like your tongue going round- baby.” Another lyric is “Cause boy it’s cool / If you got blue / We got the pink,” opposing the implied penis with the vagina. Each of the earlier lines refers to the vagina, the act of cunnilingus or digital penetration of. Paired with the ,vagina pants,” the song represents love between women, and love of the female body. The music video itself also has constant references to the vagina and love between women, such as a shot of an oyster – a well-known aphrodisiac and slang for the vagina – and a book featuring cover art of oysters, a cat (,pussy”), as well as the women playing and working out together in a provocative fashion.

The underwear Monáe wears later in the video, featuring the text ,Sex Cells” and prevalent pubic hair peeking out the sides, can be read as an on-the-nose critique of the widespread practice of shaving one’s pubic hair, a practice that is especially prevalent among young, western (white) women.¹⁹⁷ The words ,Sex Cells” can refer both to the genitalia – the cells which are beneath the underwear, also referred to as the ,sex” – as well as the act of intercourse (cells made to have sex). It is also wordplay on the popular phrase ,sex sells”, further adding to the commentary on objectification and the consumption of the ,pussy,” usually on men’s terms (shaved). There are also a couple of intermittent shots of Monáe on a pink, satin bed, pulling at the sheets; this is another reference to intercourse.

Previously, we discussed the problematic aspects of the centrality of the vagina. This centrality of the vagina, though it permeates all aspects of the video, should not serve to undo the importance of the visibility of black female love, however. Though Monáe is pansexual and not a lesbian, the visibility of her love of women on *Dirty Computer* both leaves her at risk of the same misogynist discrimination that lesbians face, but also results in her explicitly, deliberately making visible that

¹⁹⁶ It should be noted that ,going down” is another colloquialism for cunnilingus.

¹⁹⁷ <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamadermatology/fullarticle/2529574>; <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/all-about-sex/201509/pubic-shaving-which-women-and-why> (Accessed on 25-04-2019).

which we rarely see in contemporary media: black lesbianism. Poet, black feminist and lesbian Cheryl Clarke wrote in her essay “Lesbianism: an Act of Resistance” that the black lesbian not only suffers institutional racism and sexism at the hands of white people, but also the homophobic sexism from the black community.¹⁹⁸ According to Clarke, to be a lesbian in North America is an act of resistance.¹⁹⁹ Monáe’s music video, in that same homophobic, patriarchal, right-wing North America, is a similar act of resistance. Though Monáe’s feminism with regards to gender diversity seems more closely allied with „pussy power feminism“ and less with Intersectional feminism (primarily because of the symbolism of the clip), her message of acceptance and support for black women who love women²⁰⁰ is a crucial part of the activist message of *Dirty Computer*. Furthermore, Monáe featuring black women exclusively in the clip that is laden with LGBT-related content is a firm reminder of black people’s place within the LGBT movement, as LGBT activism (similar to feminist activism) has often neglected black people. In recent years, there have often been claims that „gay is the new black“²⁰¹, as though the black struggle has somehow been completed. Black and black gay emancipation go hand in hand, and it requires LGBT activism to take a stand against anti-blackness, which it has not done.²⁰² Monáe’s music video, while not necessarily Intersectional in relation to gender, does carve out a space for black women who love women within LGBT activism by demanding it be paid attention to. The near-graphic vaginal imagery as well as the lyrics that continuously reference the vagina and love between women do not allow for subtlety. In creating this blatant, unequivocal setting of the Pynk rest-inn, Monáe carves out a space for the representation of black, queer women, though in doing so, she appears to take a step away from Intersectional gender rhetoric, and one towards Intersectional race/sexuality representation.

Where in “PYNK,” Monáe paid mind to the intersections between being a black woman, and being a woman who loves women, she explicitly references her own pan-/bisexuality women in “Make Me Feel.” It is very literal at times, with her running back and forth between Ché and Zen in the clip. The most significant themes of this clip are sexual and romantic liberation, paired with the freedom to be bi-/pansexual in whatever way one is comfortable with. In Monáe’s case, this translates to polyamory. With regards to Monáe’s LGBT activism, this is significant, as bisexuality faces erasure even within its own community.²⁰³ Psychology lecturers Nikki Hayfield and Adam Jowett also found that bisexuals are considered as inherently unfaithful, hypersexual and promiscuous, both by straight and gay people.²⁰⁴ The invisibility of bisexual people in contemporary media has contributed to these negative stereotypes as well as the subsequent marginalisation of bisexual people, both in- and outside of the LGBT community. Monáe, in making her sexuality highly visible and available for public

¹⁹⁸ Clarke, 1981, p. 130.

¹⁹⁹ Clarke, 1981, p. 128.

²⁰⁰ Women who love women is also commonly shortened to „wlw.“

²⁰¹ Bassichis & Spade, 2014, p. 192.

²⁰² Bassichis & Spade, 2014, p. 202.

²⁰³ Roberts et. al., 2015, p. 556.

²⁰⁴ Hayfield & Jowett, 2017, p. 1.

consumption through the „emotion picture,“ is helping to make bisexuality much more visible. This allows for other bisexual people to see themselves represented, though visibility in and of itself does not make for more positive perceptions.²⁰⁵ All the same, while the effects of such visibility cannot be guaranteed either positively or negatively, representation on its own is significant.²⁰⁶ *Dirty Computer* presents bisexuality not as being shameful, sinful, greedy or unfaithful, but as fun, free, and full of shared romance, especially in conjunction with polyamory. The fact that it should result in polyamory signifies that there is mutual consent between all three parties.

Monáe shows that sex and (bi)sexuality are not „dirty“ in any sense, and this is part of the message that the album seeks to carry out. It can be a tool of oppression and/or control, yes, but it is not inherently problematic or dirty. This is what she carries out, among other things, in both the narrative of the „emotion picture,“ and the three pre-released singles.

Now that each single has been described and analysed, we may move on to the conclusion of this thesis, where we shall at last answer the questions regarding the Intersectional and activist content of the Afrofuturist studio album *Dirty Computer*.

²⁰⁵ Ayoub & Garretson, 2015, p. 277-278.

²⁰⁶ Cook, 2015, p. 33-34.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This thesis aimed to establish what Intersectional, activist message the Afrofuturist studio album *Dirty Computer* carries out. This thesis explores Afrofuturism, representations of blackness, femininity and bisexuality in Janelle Monáe's work and can be considered the next instalment in a series of works on Monáe, following Hassler-Forest's and Jones' excellent articles on her previous albums. It can also be considered an exploration of activist Afrofuturism and feminism in contemporary pop music through a critically acclaimed, recent music album. The following paragraphs summarise the various analyses made in this thesis.

An important aspect of an activist message is what it activates within its audience and how. In order to answer this question, we looked towards Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality and the Afrofuturist movement. Crenshaw was chosen specifically because Monáe is a queer black woman and feminist activist whose music often centres on the marginalisation of black lives, women, and queer people. Monáe has, throughout her oeuvre, often discussed the intersections between these three identities, which often exist in one and the same person. To complement the Intersectional analysis employed in the previous two chapters, an Afrofuturist perspective was employed primarily because Monáe identifies as an Afrofuturist who produces Afrofuturist work.

Afrofuturism as described by Womack, Eshun, Bould and David, and epitomised by works such as those of Octavia Butler, has certain pillars that can be found among a lot of prevalent Afrofuturist work: for one, the motif of the alien – as described by Womack – where Afrofuturists look at the alien and its inherent Otherness, using this to examine the feeling and experience of Otherness.²⁰⁷ The alien becomes the Other through which Afrofuturists could examine their own experiences of being the Other and of marginalisation and isolation, after which they would look at modes of resistance in order to transform those experiences in order to arrive at better circumstance. Eshun, however, wrote that black existence and science fiction are one and the same: in other words, Afrofuturists use the motif of the alien to examine their own circumstances, but are generally not *creating* this (new) alien. They do not need an Other to oppress in their works, as they can use their personal and cultural histories in order to create a story that examines the pain of alienation.²⁰⁸ Simply put: for Afrofuturists, the alien is a theoretical concept rather than a creature onto which they project their (historical) struggles.

Another important pillar of Afrofuturism is the acknowledgment of the lack of black presence in scientific and technological development, and remedying this through their works. Afrofuturists, according to Womack and Eshun, sought to combat the erasure from these scientific narratives, both by rediscovering historical black people and by carving out spaces for black people in the future.²⁰⁹ Bould and David both write that „blackness“ is considered antithetical to technological progress and

²⁰⁷ Womack, 2013, p. 34-35.

²⁰⁸ Eshun, 2003, p. 298.

²⁰⁹ Womack, 2013, p. 17; Eshun, 2003, p. 287.

that black people are, therefore, considered to be inherently less technologically advanced.²¹⁰

Afrofuturists, in making black characters the leads in technologically driven narratives, subvert this trope.

Afrofuturists do not ignore black historical realities: Octavia Butler insisted on an inextricable connection between past, present and future.²¹¹ The main difference between works that centre on the pain and trauma of these historical realities and Afrofuturist works is simply the focus of the work: Afrofuturists focus on future possibilities rather than past suffering (Atlantic slave trade, Jim Crow, racism and discrimination through the years) and its results (intergenerational trauma), though past suffering is incorporated into their works.²¹² Their art engages with the painful past as much as it does with current vitality, without allowing the trauma and suffering to be the sole focus of the narrative.²¹³

In my analysis of Monáe's album I found that her Afrofuturist narrative centres on black people's resilience and ability to even overcome institutional hardships. They are not aliens or androids (contrary to Monáe's previous Afrofuturist narrative) and their experiences during *Dirty Computer* can be read as references to black historical realities. For example, Jane – who was on the verge of being assimilated into non-autonomous servitude, which amounts to slavery – freeing both Ché and Zen can be read as a reference to black people escaping from their historical slave masters, though in a futuristic, dystopian setting. However, technology is not the primary tool that Jane uses. We do not see black people at the centre of a technological or scientific narrative, or at least not in the sense of them pioneering that technology/science. We see Jane using her oppressor's tools against them, which shows cleverness, resilience and cunning, but she did not create this technology. As such, the narrative is that of a black woman under white supremacist control using tools of white supremacy to free herself and her friends. Although her knowing how to operate this technology – likely with Zen's help – certainly goes against the perception of black people as inherently less technological, as it takes considerable insight into technology to operate what one did not understand or create, it does not put her at the forefront of technological development. As such, this Afrofuturist narrative is much more about black people thriving in a dystopian future in spite of technology maliciously being wielded against them. It is a narrative in which current (drones, iris scans, mass surveillance) and futurist technology/elements (hovering beds, Nevermind gas, gaining visual and auditory access to a person's memories) are combined into a horrific dystopia that, against all odds, Jane and her friends manage to survive and even thrive in.

Monáe chose to present the viewer with a tale of black strength, resilience, perseverance and – in the end – victory. It represents the (future) black community as one of immense power and strength through community, and while it is mostly desirable to portray any community as strong, powerful and

²¹⁰ Bould, 2007, p. 181; David, 2007, p. 697-698.

²¹¹ Bould, 2007, p. 183.

²¹² *Dirty Computer*, for one, has incessant references to police brutality, slavery, human experimentation and forced assimilation, all of which black people have experienced (and still do).

²¹³ Womack, 2013, p. 100.

capable of enacting change through their own actions, one might momentarily consider what this representation means for the black community. Afrofuturism (and Afrofuturist representations of the black community) allows black people to thrive in a distant future, one that is sometimes – though not necessarily – dystopian and several degrees more hostile to them than current society is. By allowing them to thrive in settings that are possibly worse than current circumstances, black people are shown as being able to overcome worse. Additionally, this is often presented against a (heavily traumatised) cultural history with the intention of communicating survivability. As such, Afrofuturism connects past trauma, with present suffering, with possible future suffering, all of which black people have lived or will live through and survive. Such representations of resilience can be beneficial for the black community: one may draw strength or inspiration from positive representation. However, to present an entire community as resilient is beneficial to that community in that it makes them less vulnerable to outside forces, but on an individual level the constant pressure of having to be strong/resilient/vigilant can be daunting and draining. As such, it is possible that Monáe’s activist message of a strong and collective black community is less aimed towards the individual listener, and more towards her own community.

Monáe’s Afrofuturist album is deeply informed by intersectional thought as well. This is especially prevalent in the centrality of black (queer) women – often considered the most marginalised group in modern America²¹⁴ - in her music videos. Her juxtaposing black women – and one black man – with the only three prominent white people present in the „emotion picture“ (Mother Victoria and the two unnamed Nevermind-gas operators) can be read as her protecting black people (black women specifically) while simultaneously noting that white women are not harmless, and have historically been complicit in causing black suffering and trauma, which runs from the trauma of slavery to the constant exposure to institutional racism.²¹⁵ White women were and are not innocent bystanders to slavery, lynching, and racism: they were enablers at best and active participants at worst. It was Kimberlé Crenshaw who wrote that feminist theory, if it is to express the aspirations of non-white women, they must include an analysis of race, whereas theories and strategies that claim to represent the black community must include an analysis of sexism and patriarchy.²¹⁶ Monáe’s album is a dystopian future vision from the perspective of a black woman, where history repeats itself and a white woman is at the head of a totalitarian organisation. Though this seems to be a repeat of an older

²¹⁴ In 1962, Malcolm X said the following: "The most disrespected woman in America, is the Black Woman. The most un-protected person in America is the Black Woman. The most neglected person in America, is the Black Woman." (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z_q_Z9A0RuQ) (Accessed on 24-03-2019) Though this speech is almost sixty years old at this point in time, its relevance has not ceased: it was sampled in Beyoncé’s „Lemonade“ in 2016 (<https://mic.com/articles/141642/here-s-the-malcolm-x-speech-about-black-women-beyonce-sampled-in-lemonade#.vEXNyIcIX>) (Accessed on 24-03-2019), and was more recently used in a *The Washington Post* column titled „Black Women Deserve Better.“ (https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/black-women-deserve-better-will-2019-be-the-year-of-change/2019/01/09/fc40e842-1439-11e9-803c-4ef28312c8b9_story.html?utm_term=.b152e2bcb272) (Accessed on 24-03-2019).

²¹⁵ Jackson et. al., 2018, p. 2-4.

²¹⁶ Crenshaw, 1989, p. 166.

narrative – that of a white matriarch oppressing a young black woman – but it is the conclusion of the album that turns this narrative on its head: patriarchy already appears to have little relevance as the most prominent organisation has a matriarch, and it is black women who both beat Mother Victoria with her own tools (overpowering the symbol of white supremacy) and who then free their male friend (showing black womanhood triumphing as well as aiding the one man in their community).

Additionally, in spite of the fact that most of Monáe’s album focuses on categories of identity (black, female, queer) either through lyrics or visuals, the overall narrative focuses on larger power structures. This happens in quite a literal sense through the presence of The House of the New Dawn, which represents white supremacy and – to a lesser extent – the larger structure of American Evangelical homophobia, which Monáe manages to non-violently disrupt. This proves that while focusing on categories of identity and being less explicit in addressing power structures (patriarchy, racism, and homophobia), they are still very much present. Homophobia and racism are, respectively, explicitly and implicitly present in the narrative of *Dirty Computer*, and are not forgotten in favour of exploring black and bisexual identities. In fact, one could argue that such structures *must* exist in order to have a fruitful exploration of identities. After all, one can only contrast a positive with a negative: black identity versus racism, bisexuality versus homophobia. The criticism of intersectionality and its alleged focus on categories of identity as *opposed* to power structures, addressed earlier by Crenshaw, Cho and McCall, is at least partly invalidated by this album, its visuals and its lyrics. The direct references to Trump and his government go against patriarchy and white supremacy, while the figure of Mother Victoria and The House of the New Dawn represent the bulwark of the American Evangelical church. The church is one of the biggest opponents to LGBT+ rights, and Monáe’s activism, here, seems almost obvious: to counter the dominant, Christian doctrine in order to create a safer, more accepting America, where the LGBT+ community (to which she herself belongs as a bi-/pansexual woman) can live without fear of having their sexuality „converted.“

Afrofuturism and intersectionality are both conducive to featuring marginalised categories of identity front and centre, especially the categories of black and female. Of course, there is one additional „master“ category on this album: the joint category of sex and sexuality. Monáe heavily features themes of free love, bisexuality and polyamory on her album, urging the listener to „take a bite“ and singing at the top of her lungs that she wants to „get screwed like an animal.“ In relation to Monáe’s activism, we must consider the centrality of race, gender and sex/sexuality as a discourse: these categories together represent both the politics of representation (more visibility = more acceptance/equality) as well as a direct counterpoint to the dominant American political discourse: white supremacist, Evangelical, and patriarchal. Even her reference to trans women, though brief, within the context of “PYNK” can be read as a counterpoint to the Evangelical which heavily opposes the existence of trans and queer people through, for example, conversion therapy. Sexuality is extremely prominent on the album, but one must consider how much activist potential really rests within this prominence. Yes, representation matters: it creates role models, it creates much-needed

visibility for an otherwise marginalised group (black Sapphic women), and it serves to destigmatise bisexuality in the face of the popular perception that it is predatory and capricious. Representation, however, does not make for reliable activism: attitudes towards bisexual people might shift and become more positive,²¹⁷ but the power structure of institutional homophobia is not dismantled because of this. At best, it makes bisexual people feel safer and more accepted, but that does not mean that larger structures of compulsory heterosexuality are in any way truly challenged, even if the viewer is bisexual. As such, the prevalence of the category of sexuality is not so much activist, I believe, as it is representation.

Sex, however, is presented – primarily through the lyrics of “Screwed” – as a tool of liberation and power, one that is connected to the act of partying and can be used as a tool to oppose major structures of power. The song, which entirely consists of lyrics to do with sex, has the line „We’ll put water in your guns” in its chorus: the juxtaposition with war is unmistakable. Furthermore, the bridge („Sex is power/ You know, power / Which is sex”) suggests that sex is both a tool of power and an act that consists entirely of (opposed) power structures. The activism in the centrality of sex rests within this: Monáe already once suggested women stop having sex until all men fight for women’s rights, a direct reference to sex strikes that have historically been used as a tool of activism in order to create, for example, the end to a civil war.²¹⁸ While I do not believe Monáe is once more calling for her audience to engage in a sex strike, I do believe she is asking the viewer to consider sex as more than an act of (romantic) passion and to examine the structures of power within, as well as how sex is used as a tool of power in society. In other words: Monáe’s perception of sex on *Dirty Computer* has the potential to activate the viewer/listener to examine their own relationship with sex, as well as deeply examine what sex means in our current, patriarchal society.

In summary: Janelle Monáe’s Afrofuturist album *Dirty Computer* relies heavily on its featuring of both Afrofuturist themes and Intersectional thought in order to get its activist message across. This message consists of heavily going against dominant current American political discourse, activating the viewer to go against this system as well, although Monáe’s message is also one of acceptance and representation. The activist potential of representation is debatable, but it cannot be denied that the representation of marginalised groups of people is almost exclusively beneficial to the self-perception of that group, even if it does not immediately change popular perception. Additionally, Monáe’s activist potential is somewhat thwarted by her having to exist and thrive within the systems that she herself criticises. As Hassler-Forest pointed out, for all of Monáe’s critiques of capitalism, she still has to circulate her content within capitalist systems if she is to reach any major audience at all.²¹⁹ The same goes for her critiquing racism, sexism and homophobia: institutes and award shows that

²¹⁷ See: note 193.

²¹⁸ Such was the case in Liberia, as stated in chapter 5 (note 171).

²¹⁹ Hassler-Forest, 2014, p. 17.

have historically and recently refused to give credit to black artists (such as the Grammys)²²⁰ still nominate her and her album, and Monáe still attends these shows. It is important to also consider, however, that if she were to deliberately and outspokenly boycott such award shows, she is at risk of being blacklisted. This brings me to my final point: it is impossible to escape capitalism, therefore it is impossible to critique capitalism without functioning inside of it. One cannot improve society if one is not part of society. To say that Monáe's activism is somewhat pointless because she is a pop artist far removed from „regular people“ is to misunderstand how media functions in contemporary society: Monáe might not incite a riot, but it just might make people think and activate them to evaluate their attitudes, either towards themselves or others, as well as their surroundings“ attitudes. Raising awareness is the first and arguably most fundamental step of activism: one cannot campaign either for or against something one is not aware of. Monáe's activism rests primarily in raising awareness among her audience. It is an activism of the mind and not the body, though the body may well follow.

²²⁰ <https://www.npr.org/sections/therecord/2017/02/14/515024057/the-problem-with-the-grammys-is-not-a-problem-we-can-fix> (Accessed on 24-03-2019).

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Chapter 8: Appendix: Lyrics

Django Jane:

Yeah, yeah this is my palace, champagne in
my chalice
I got it all covered like a wedding band
Wonderland, so my alias is Alice
We gon' start a motherfuckin' pussy riot
Or we gon' have to put 'em on a pussy diet
Look at that, I guarantee I got 'em quiet
Look at that, I guarantee they all inspired
A-town, made it out there
Straight out of Kansas City, yeah we made it
out there
Celebrated, graduated, made it pass/fail
Sassy, classy, Kool-Aid with the kale
Momma was a G, she was cleanin' hotels
Poppa was a driver, I was workin' retail
Kept us in the back of the store
We ain't hidden no more, moonlit nigga, lit
nigga

Already got a Oscar for the casa
Runnin' down Grammys with the family
Prolly give a Tony to the homies
Prolly get a Emmy dedicated to the
Highly melanated, ArchAndroid orchestrated
Yeah, we highly melanated, ArchAndroid
orchestrated

Yeah, Gemini they still jammin'
Box office numbers, and they doin' outstandin'
Runnin' outta space in my damn bandwagon
Remember when they used to say I look too
mannish
Black girl magic, y'all can't stand it
Y'all can't ban it, made out like a bandit
They been trying hard just to make us all
vanish
I suggest they put a flag on a whole 'nother
planet

Jane Bond, never Jane Doe
And I Django, never Sambo
Black and white, yeah that's always been my
camo

It's lookin' like y'all gon' need some more
ammo
I cut 'em off, I cut 'em off, I cut 'em off like
Van Gogh
Now, pan right for the angle
I got away with murder, no Scandal
Cue the violins and the violas

We gave you life, we gave you birth
We gave you God, we gave you Earth
We fem the future, don't make it worse
You want the world? Well, what's it worth?
Emoticons, Decepticons, and Autobots
Who twist the plot?
Who shot the sheriff, then fled to Paris
In the darkest hour, spoke truth to power?
Made a fandroid outta yo girlfriend
Let's get caught downtown in the whirlwind
And paint the city pink, paint the city pink
And tuck the pearls in, just in case the world
end

And nigga, down dawg
Nigga move back, take a seat, you were not
involved
And hit the mute button
Let the vagina have a monologue
Mansplaining, I fold em like origami
What's a wave, baby? This a tsunami
For the culture, I kamikaze
I put my life on a life line
If she the G.O.A.T. now, would anybody doubt
it?
If she the G.O.A.T. now, would anybody doubt
it?
Do anybody got it? Do anybody got it?
I say anybody got it?

PYNK:

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

So, here we are in the car
Leaving traces of us down the boulevard
I wanna fall through the stars
Getting lost in the dark is my favorite part
Let's count the ways we could make this last
forever
Sunny, money, keep it funky
Touch your top and let it down

Ah, yeah
Some like that
Ah, ah
Some like that
Ah, yeah
Some like that
'Cause boy it's cool if you got blue
We got the pink

Pink like the lips around your, maybe
Pink like the skin that's under, baby
Pink where it's deepest inside, crazy
Pink beyond forest and thighs
Pink like the secrets you hide, maybe
Pink like the lid of your eye, baby
Pink is where all of it starts, crazy
Pink like the halls of your heart

So, here we are in the car
Leaving traces of us down the boulevard
I wanna fall through the stars
Getting lost in the dark is my favorite part
Let's count the ways we could make this last
forever
Sunny, money, keep it funky
Touch your top and let it down

Ah, huh, yeah
Some like that
Ah, ah
Some like that
Ooh, yeah
Some like that
'Cause boy it's cool if you got blue
We got the pink, huh
Yeah, some like that
Oh, some like that
Yeah, some like that
'Cause boy it's cool if you got blue
We got the pink

Pink like the inside of your, baby (we're all just
pink)
Pink like the walls and the doors, maybe (deep
inside, we're all just pink)
Pink like your fingers in my, maybe
Pink is the truth you can't hide
Pink like your tongue going round, baby
Pink like the sun going down, maybe
Pink like the holes in your heart, baby
Pink is my favorite part

Make Me Feel:

Baby, don't make me spell it out for you
All of the feelings that I've got for you
Can't be explained, but I can try for you
Yeah, baby, don't make me spell it out for you
You keep on asking me the same questions
(why?)
And second guessing all my intentions
Should know by the way I use my compression
That you've got the answers to my confessions

It's like I'm powerful with a little bit of tender
An emotional, sexual bender
Mess me up, yeah, but no one does it better
There's nothin' better

That's just the way you make me feel
That's just the way you make me feel
So real, so good, so fuckin' real
That's just the way you make me feel
That's just the way you make me feel

You know I love it, so please don't stop it
You got me right here in your jean pocket
(right now)
Laying your body on a shag carpet (oh)
You know I love it so please don't stop it

It's like I'm powerful with a little bit of tender
An emotional, sexual bender
Mess me up, yeah, but no one does it better
There's nothin' better

That's just the way you make me feel
That's just the way you make me feel
So real, so good, so fuckin' real
That's just the way you make me feel
That's just the way you make me feel

That's just the way that I feel now, baby
Good God! I can't help it! Agh!
That's just the way that I feel, yeah
Please! I can't help it

It's like I'm powerful with a little bit of tender
An emotional, sexual bender
Mess me up, yeah, but no one does it better
(oh!)

There's nothin' better (better!) Damn

That's just the way you make me feel
That's just the way you make me feel
So real, so good, so fuckin' real
That's just the way you make me feel
That's just the way you make me feel