

Research Article

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Agency in the Afrofuturist Ontologies of Erykah Badu and Janelle Monáe

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Abstract: This article discusses the visual, textual, and musical aesthetics of selected concept albums (Vinyl/CD) by Afrofuturist musicians Erykah Badu and Janelle Monáe. It explores how the artists design alternate projections of world/subject relations through the development of artistic personas with speculative background narratives and the fictional emplacement of their music within alternate cultural imaginaries. It seeks to establish that both Erykah Badu and Janelle Monáe use the concept album as a platform to constitute their Afrofuturist artistic personas as fluid black female agents who are continuously in the process of becoming, evolving, and changing. They reinscribe instances of othering and exclusion by associating these with science fiction tropes of extraterrestrial, alien lives to express topical sociocultural criticism and promote social change in the context of contemporary U.S. American politics and black diasporic experience.

Keywords: conceptual art, Afrofuturism, gender performance, black music, artistic persona

We come in peace, but we mean business. (Janelle Monáe)

In her Time's up speech at the Grammys in January 2018, singer, songwriter, and actress Janelle Monáe sends out an assertive message from women to the music industry and the world in general. She repurposes the ambivalent first encounter trope “we come in peace” by turning it into a manifest for a present-day feminist movement. Merging futuristic, utopian ideas with contemporary political concerns pervades Monáe's public appearances as much as it runs like a thread through her music. The effect of this combination is twofold: While highlighting the alien(ated) status of those who are threatened to be silenced or relegated to the margins of society, she reclaims the initiative by affirming her agency under the circumstance of unequal power relations.

The fundamental significance of agency for the unimpeded development of the individual combined with the fierce reinterpretation of the subject position as alien or presumed ‘other’ in hegemonic power structures is shared characteristics of Janelle Monáe's and Erykah Badu's musical *œuvres*. Both artists are inspired by Afrofuturist ideas and tropes when they develop and embody fluid artistic personas that put the black female agency in the limelight. By means of these personas, they project collectives of empowered and inclusive solidarity in their creative visions—their collaboration for the single Q.U.E.E.N. being a case in point. In the song that Ytasha Womack calls “an ode to the eccentric, independent ladies of the world who are labeled as freaks for being themselves” in *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (76), Badu and Monáe join forces to declare that they mean business by breaking the mould of external determination. Together as well as in their individual projects, the repeated adoption of different alter egos as well as the continuous (re)naming and self-fashioning themselves represent deliberate acts of unmaking, remaking, and, ultimately, staging alternate ways of being in the world.

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The worlds they project in their art are characterised by multilayered temporalities where the simultaneity of past, present, future provides the speculative space for the artistic negotiation of emancipated liminal existence that finds its most encompassing realisation on Erykah Badu's and Janelle Monáe's concept albums. While the notion of concept album usually refers to the connectedness of each featured track to a larger overarching theme, the ontological reflections of Badu and Monáe move beyond this musical scope. Their conceptual art extends to the videos, the visual artwork, the handwritten notes, as well as the narrative texts on the cover and in the booklets that complement their songs.

Overall, I seek to establish that Erykah Badu and Janelle Monáe use the concept album as a platform to constitute their Afrofuturist artistic personas as ever-becoming black female agents against all the odds. In the ontological visions of these two artists, who "tip on the tightrope" when navigating contemporary sociocultural processes of marginalisation (to re-appropriate a verse from the hook of the song "Tightrope" on Monáe's album *The ArchAndroid*), individuals are subjected by as much as they create the world. Therefore, I will first investigate notions of agency and gender in the context of Afrofuturism. I will then analyse how the visual, textual, and musical aesthetics of selected concept albums (Vinyl/CD) reflect particular modes of agency and Afrofuturist worlding and explore how the artists design alternate projections of world/subject relations.

Agency and Black Womanhood in the Context of Afrofuturism

One of the sociocultural functions of speculative fiction in popular culture is to reflect on actual intersubjective dynamics through the relocation of world/subject constellations onto remote spatiotemporal planes. Particularly when the fictional worlding of alternate possible worlds combines the free play of speculation with references to or analogies for past and present human conditions, it fosters the expression of cultural critique and the promotion of social change. Afrofuturism, in particular, reinscribes lived experiences of othering and exclusion by associating these with science fiction tropes of extraterrestrial, alien lives. As the Afrofuturist cultural theorist, Kodwo Eshun, writes, "Afrodiasporic subjects live the estrangement that science-fiction writers envision. Black existence and science fiction are one and the same" (289). Black diasporic experience resonates with outer space imaginaries because these display similar imbalances in power relations along disenfranchising dichotomies of racialization, gender, and class while telling stories about the crossing of thresholds, the exploration of new frontiers, or the multifarious assemblages¹ of hybrid and liminal identities. Science fiction situates itself at the interstices of the social and thrives on the challenges and opportunities inherent to an in-between that bears a striking resemblance with the spatiotemporal networks of the black diaspora.

The imaginary intermediate formations of science fiction in Afrofuturism recuperate the prerogative of interpretation and, therewith, the agency over black diasporic pasts, presents, and futures. Eshun describes the Afrofuturist political agenda "as a program for recovering the histories of counter-futures created in a century hostile to Afrodiasporic projection and as a space within which the critical work of manufacturing tools capable of intervention within the current political dispensation may be undertaken" (301). The critical and aspirational interventions of Afrofuturism target the here and now of contemporary social formations and, therefore, ultimately seek to make sense of diasporic human experiences on earth in their excursions into digital, virtual realms as well as in their accounts of space and time travel. Womack also understands Afrofuturism as "an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation" (9). According to her, the constitutive elements of this "artistic aesthetic and . . . framework for critical theory . . . [are] science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western beliefs. In some cases, it's a total reenvisioning of the past and speculation about the future rife with cultural critiques" (9). In this artistic and cultural nexus, the liberation of hegemonic constraints

¹ I understand the notion of concept album in Erykah Badu's and Monáe's work as a platform because it encompasses the mutability and multilayeredness of the personas' temporal and cultural assemblages by providing a plan or architectural design for their articulation. I seek to establish that the main recurring principles that govern their artistic expression are personal freedom, temporal liminality, and critical engagement with contemporary social dynamics.

is achieved through the transversal shift to utopian ideals and projections because the resulting what-if scenarios facilitate the recovery of the power of the subject in light of oppressive pasts of colonisation and slavery.

Afrofuturism counters the pervasive objectification of black bodies with the resistant conception of technologically well-versed and empowered subjects whose becoming takes place beyond oppressive master narratives. “While technology empowers creators, this intrigue with sci-fi and fantasy inverts conventional thinking about black identity and holds the imagination supreme. Black identity does not have to be a negotiation with awful stereotypes, . . . an abysmal sense of powerlessness, or a reckoning of hardened realities,” writes Womack (11). Instead, it can be an inquiry into the productive powers of emancipated imagination. One could argue that the agency that arises from Afrofuturist ontologies resides in said emancipation from discourses that contain blackness within the frameworks of supposed dichotomies—such as normalised whiteness—and as, a consequence, continue to subject black cultural expression to processes of othering. “In Afrofuturist cultural productions,” Kristen Lillvis writes in *Posthuman Blackness and the Black Female Imagination*, “historical experiences of disorientation converge with contemporary strategies for survival and futurist projections of vitality” (3). The divergence from linear time to the simultaneity and intersections of temporal networks not only offers alternative perspectives on an existence beyond survival, but also multiplies the possibilities for self-determined actions and individual freedom.

To come back to the collaboration of Janelle Monáe and Erykah Badu on Q.U.E.E.N., the video to the song proves that the alternative pathways of Afrofuturism do not deny or forget their embeddedness in history because they “record and reconfigure the black subject’s experiences of liminality by blending references to the past and present with predictions for the future” (Lillvis 2). Q.U.E.E.N. includes an introductory announcement that depicts and describes the two artists and their collaborators Chuck Lightning and Nate Wonder from Monáe’s artistic collective the Wonderland Arts Society as historical exhibits in a futuristic museum: “It’s hard to stop rebels that time travel, but we at the time council pride ourselves on doing just that. Welcome to the living museum where legendary rebels from throughout history have been frozen in suspended animation. Here . . . you’ll find members of Wondaland and their notorious leader Janelle Monáe along with her dangerous accomplice Badoula Oblongata” (00:00:00-00:00:53).



Figure 1. Still from the music video showing Janelle Monáe and Wondaland members with visitors walking through the exhibition (“Q.U.E.E.N.” 00:0:40)

The protagonists of the video are literally and figuratively frozen in time in the beginning. They are in stasis like the exhibits of a Natural History Museum suggesting an intertextual reference to Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña in their performance “The Couple in the Cage” (1992-3). Wonder and Lightning’s bodies initially covered in sacred white chalk, in particular, refer to anthropological discourses of the discovery of supposedly premodern, undiscovered, and ahistorical peoples intended to legitimise Western conquests and settler colonialism while at the same time retracing the historical ancestry of the African Diaspora.



Figure 2 Still from the music video showing Erykah Badu frozen in time (“Q.U.E.E.N” 00:0:35)

Eventually, when the singers and musicians start to move and perform the song, they disrupt the space of the museum and break out of the discursive mould in which there were supposed to be cast forever as past relics. They reconquer previously conquered spaces of subjection and create a futuristic overlay of personalities who have exclusive knowledge about the future and its inventions, as Lillvis has convincingly demonstrated in her monograph (c.f. 67-9). Along the lines of Caroline Rody on African American and Caribbean women’s historical fiction, Lillvis proposes that “[b]lack narratives, such as those shared by Badu, Monáe, and Jones, function as ‘formerly unarticulated histories’ that work in the tradition of ethnic and postcolonial literatures and poststructuralist and postmodernist theories to destroy master narratives—such as that of the liberal humanist subject—and tell previously unheard or ignored tales” (Lillvis 63). I would add, that they also project future possible worlds onto the now by showcasing the radical interconnections between creation, destruction, and regeneration further expanded in the video when one of the Wondaland members types on a typewriter that they “will create and destroy ten art movements in ten years” and thus showcase the fertilizing properties of Afrofuturist practices.

Moreover, the singing performances are also explicitly gendered. Badu’s alter-ego Badoula Oblongata (the last name being an allusion to the spinal cord²) and Monáe in her trademark tuxedo confidently move on displaying multiple ways of being in the world through their singing that references traditions and contemporary forms of African American music. In keeping with the energetic Funk bass line, their voices shift from Monáe’s funk to soul and jazz in Badu’s intermezzo where she declares “here comes the freedom song” back to Monáe’s rap performance in the final stages of the song that aligns with the marching and protest that she calls for in the lyrics:

March to the streets cause I’m willing and I’m able
 Categorize me, I defy every label
 And while you’re selling dope, we’re gonna keep selling hope
 We rising up now, you gotta deal you gotta cope
 Will you be electric sheep?
 Electric ladies, will you sleep?
 Or will you preach?

The song ends on a call to action to alienated women, the “electric ladies,” to embrace their liminal identities

² The intriguing reference to the *medulla oblongata*, i.e. the part of the spinal cord that is responsible for essential corporeal functions such as breathing, can be read as a characterization of Badu’s persona as a central figure to the rebellion that inspires the breath of life to the freedom movement.

and “defy every label,” a gesture that extends the positive energy of disruption in the video and potentially carries it into the lives of the audience. The display of artistic agency becomes a strategic assertion for the potential of change in the present.

In the context of the popular culture in general and in the music industry in particular, the normative transgression of the female voice and body has far-reaching implications since “Gender is located in the twists and shapes that construct the subject in music performance,” as Stan Hawkins observes (1). Contemporary musical performance exceeds the acoustic because it is accompanied by a wide-ranging visual media archive of gendered performances and by the embeddedness of performers in the networks of mass media ecology. A large number of gender norms “are (re)produced and perpetuated in culture” (4), the continuing reiteration of the convention that casts the female body as spectacle being just one example. Audiovisual and visual representations or live performances are the devices that support the grafting of the stereotype—depended on being visually perceived or imagined—onto the musical production and the singing voices of women artists. However, the extended mediality of music in text and vision also allows for the subversion of the convention and the negotiation of different ways of seeing and self-representation. Hawkins links this undermining potential to representational ambiguity when he argues that “gender only becomes subversive when things are unpredictable” (5). In other words, only when the pop-cultural representations of performers use “the narrative workings of performance” (6) to convey elements of surprise that disrupt gender expectations, the play of transgression can deploy its political potential.³ When Badu and Monáe adopt Afrofuturist personas that fuse the technological with the organic on the cover art of their albums (that will be discussed in the following sections) or when Monáe appears on stage and on video in a tuxedo and queers established fashion norms in the music industry, they disrupt the perpetuation of woman as spectacle and create an alternative visual language. They also reflect the will to counter normative determination and to explore their subversive potential as they continuously evolve or are replaced by new alter egos. New aspects of their performative identity formation emerge in every artistic collaboration and with each release of a new EP or concept album.

The embodied performances of speculative blackness and subversive womanhood in Badu’s and Monáe’s works mirror the versatility of their singing voices. Discourses about the gendered body intersect with racialisations of voice in black popular music.⁴ Badu and Monáe address this double marginalisation and recover a place for black female subjectivities in technological discourses by embedding posthuman elements in the visual artworks of their albums and in their texts and speeches alongside their vocal and musical experimentation. Along the lines of Lillvis, they demonstrate that in black cultural practice, posthumanism is still capable of including the complex ramifications of power and subjection since “[i]n posthuman theory, the subject—the individual, both body and mind—exists in networks of knowledge, discourse, and power that influence and are influenced by the subject” (3). She qualifies the connection between posthumanism and Afrofuturist conceptions of blackness as instructive because

posthuman blackness describes a temporal and subjective liminality that acknowledges the importance of history to the black subject without positing a purely historical origin for black identity. Posthumanist readings of contemporary black women’s historical narratives reveal that individual agency and collective authority develop not from historical specificity but, rather, from temporal liminality. (4)

³ Consequently, the contemporary adoption and development of Afrofuturist themes by black women in the music industry always takes place on multiple media platforms and enlists visual motives. Other notable Afrofuturist examples for the inextricable connection between sound and vision beyond the scope of this article are Rihanna, Solange Knowles, and Beyoncé whose pregnancy photographs complement the earlier release of her album *Lemonade* as a social media art extension.

⁴ C.f. Eidsheim, Nina Sun. “Marian Anderson and “Sonic Blackness” in American Opera.” *Sound Clash: Listening to American Studies*, edited by Kara Keeling and Josh Kun, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012, pp. 641-71. and Weheliye, Alexander G. “‘Feenin’: Posthuman Voices in Contemporary Black Popular Music.” *Social Text*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2002, pp. 21-47 in which he discusses the use of technology to alter voices in R&B. While “from the onset of the mass production and distribution of recorded sound in the 1920s, black popular music functioned as the embodiment of the virtual voice” the black subject is still “inscribed as the epitome of embodiment through a multitude of U.S. cultural discourses” (24-5).

Posthuman narratives based on the non-linearity of time disrupt the grand narrative of social progress through scientific invention since temporal liminality memorises past, present, and potential future marginalisations of in-between subjects that do not or cannot comply with categorisations in power while simultaneously paving alternate ways for liminal agency.

In the video to the single Q.U.E.E.N., both artists resist the double marginalisation of black women in American culture through the commitment to the speculative plane where they conceive of their futuristic avatars as hybrid formations situated on the threshold between living beings and technology. Agency goes hand in hand with the continued transformations, twists, and mutations that resist the forces of inertia and retention effected by hegemonic order. The complex layers of temporal liminality, of stasis and movement, and of the abundance of musical genres assembled in the song can be read as productive responses to Michelle-Lee White's query whether "black artists who work in electronic media [can] escape being reduced to pawns in a debate between magic and machine or roots versus robot" that she brings up in a written forum discussion with, among others, Keith Piper and Alondra Nelson on conceptual and performance art in the *Art Journal* in 2001 (91). In the following, a study of the two artists' selected concept albums shall show how the categories of technology, blackness, and gender are seamlessly reformulated by the Afrofuturist ontologies featured on selected concept albums.

Womanist Worlding after Baduizm: *New Amerykah Part Two: Return of the Ankh*

With the lines "Analog girl in a digital world / The Rasta style flower child," Erykah Badu introduces herself in the song "...&On" on her album *Mama's Gun* published in 2000. This self-description of her artistic persona as a girl, i.e. a human being in the process of becoming, who is simultaneously connected to a natural ecosystem and an environment governed by technology frames the techno-ecological discursive field of Badu's Afrofuturist conceptual art. Her hybrid personas transgress, or rather oppose, the discriminatory practices of instrumentalising the hegemonic conception of "the digital divide" described by Erik Steinskog "as a way to keep the dichotomy of black 'primitivism' versus white technological futurism" (245). Badu's art and performance reflects the ongoing debates within the cultural formations of Afrofuturism. As Steinskog remarks, "the digital divide [according to the Afrofuturist Kodwo Eshun] seems to be more about a dichotomy found within black music, as soul versus post-soul or as a humanist versus a posthumanist discourse" (245). Indeed, Badu's artistic personas encompass a mutability that shifts back and forth between nature representations that embed her in an ecology of the living and humanoid personifications that affirm futurist, tech-savvy navigation of posthumanist identity.

Badu's philosophical reflections in her work revolve around black practices of resistance and the recovery of lost history in the black diaspora, and they highlight the necessity of negotiating the reconceptualisation of what it means to be human for black people in the present. As she sings on "On & On," the first song on the album *Baduizm* after the intro, "You rush into destruction 'cause you don't have nothin' left / The mother ship can't save you so your ass is goin' get it." Despite the reference of a futuristic cosmology that resonates with the music of Sun Ra and George Clinton, the urgency of the present remains a priority. The current dire situation of the song cannot be avoided, and the problem of destitution demands a solution in the here and now.

The future/present liminality is a recurring trope on the album that the genre of neo soul complements with the simultaneity of present and past through the contemporary reinterpretation of the soul music tradition. For Marlo David, Badu "casts her backward glance farther; into the imagined spaces inhabited by precolonial African spirituality. She splices ancient Egyptian symbolism and Nile Valley mysticism with atomic theory and allusions to space travel to give birth to an unashamedly hybrid, self-created version of black humanity that gestures toward the Civil Rights and black nationalist era values that were integral to 'soul' music" ("Afrofuturism" 698). Steinskog adds present-day agency to this perspective when he characterises Badu as a neo-soul singer and songwriter whose "return to soul is never simply a return; it is a renegotiation in which the old is taken up, repeated, and changed in the present" (245). Thus, the temporal

convergences in her work mirror the persistent mutability of music that artists can capture in their music.

Badu grounds the agency of her artistic persona in the practice of world creation and restoration that she associates with a religious conceptualisation of female creation. In line with Vicky Callahan, I consider Badu as a womanist figure in Alice Walker's sense of the term ("A Window Seat to History" 28-9). In the prose collection *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, Walker defines womanism as deriving from "womanish. . . . A black feminist or feminist of color. . . . Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Responsible. In charge" (xi). Badu's persona is in charge because the world that she inhabits in her music is a world of her own making that embraces liminality as a fundamental characteristic of black womanhood. Following David's interpretation in *Mama's Gun* where he argues that Badu herself endorses the maternal yet technological identity of the mothership, her many womanist personas—"[s]he uses the stage names Low Down Loretta Brown, Medulla Oblongata, and Sara Bellum, among others, in shows to suggest the multiplicity of her identity" (*Mama's Gun* 85)—include the authority of the mother figure. David reads her creation of neologisms such as "queendom" and "wombiverse" as "examples of the possibilities of transgressive black popular culture to be used as a tool to redefine intraracial maternal ideologies, specifically controlling images of single motherhood" (*Mama's Gun* 85).

The study of the cover of *New Amerykah Part Two: Return of the Ankh* (2010) supports the interpretation of an ontological significance of these terms. "Queendom" and "wombiverse" imply that she is in charge of a world, that she is the creator of the world—a view that the imagery reflects: Visually her agency is established through the acts of naming and worlding that are mutually productive as much as they are inextricably linked. The doubling of Badu's persona as a cyborg emplaced in nature takes place in her open head. She is the mirror image of her as a human version who nurtures a tree, most probably the tree of life while holding a tuning fork in her hand. In the article "Searching for Self," Margarita Simon Guillory retraces her religious evolution, a "trajectory that spans from the Nation of Gods and Earths (Five Percenters) to a view of religion as a creative medium" that is in line with the represented connection between the practice of writing a song to the flourishing of nature (13).

Moreover, the liner notes that complement the artwork for *New Amerykah Part Two: Return of the Ankh* and in which Erykah Badu represents herself, and her alter-ego Amerykah reinforce this image of her endowed with a spiritual mode of agency. According to Guillory's analysis of an interview from 2001 with hiponline.com, "Badu offers a dual conceptualization of the creator. On the one hand, the creator is an externalized force (as expressed in 'YeYo'), that is responsible for endowing Badu with artistic gifts. On the other hand, however, she views the creator as her higher form of self" (13). She is the creator, and consequently, her self-description is based on a cyborg goddess emerging in a dense botanical environment. Nevertheless, she is "a rather plain girl." In the introduction to the album or, in other words, the origin story of her artistic avatar, she writes: "Now even today, I have the upper body of a long-armed twelve-year-old boy and can go unnoticed or get lost in a crowd when my 'light' isn't on (I have the controls set to manual)." Badu is in control of an organic body that is as much technologically enhanced as it is culturally marked. It is visually endowed with generative powers as trees and foliage growing out of her brain. Her mind engenders and nurtures the nature surrounding her. In this symbiotic constellation, subject and world are inextricably connected. As a consequence, the particular and the universal correlate at all times.

At the same time, the creator also incorporates destructive forces. The central figure of the cover art that the visual artist EMEK created with her is simultaneously human and cyborg, an embodied convergence of robotic and organic elements in which, as the visual artist Keith Piper delineates in his "Notes on *The Mechanoid's Bloodline: Looking at Robots, Androids, and Cyborgs*," "the physical power of the robot other is merged problematically with the human sensibilities of the organic norm" (97). In the persona's name that resonates with the national personification of Columbia and neologism of *Amerykah*, the artist converges with the nation that she seeks to recover from the colonial past of slavery and the present of systemic racism that relegates black lives to marginalised spaces and seeks to impede independent black identity formations. Badu describes the release of her album as "a statement that simply says 'This is the beginning of the new world' – for both the slaves and the slave masters.... This new world moves much faster. We don't even realise how fast we're moving" (quoted in David, "Afrofuturism" 705). As a consequence, the image also

contains darker aspects of human existence that Guillory describes as “handcuffs, cigarettes, foreclosed homes, nuclear war-heads” and represent the foundation for the “multicolored flowers embedded with images of infant faces and bodies” (19). This pictorial hierarchy represents an optimistic impetus since the implied process of conversion from destruction to blooming articulates a world building that is regenerative.

Badu’s exploration of Afrofuturist creative world building at the interstices of technology and ecology continues to be a dominant force for Badu’s art. Transformation is similarly exposed as an emergent drive. On the cover of the mixtape that Erykah Badu released in 2015, called *But You Caint Use My Phone*, the “analog girl” fully transitions into the digital age with the representation of herself covered in sound speakers and a tuner as integral parts of her body and holding multiple phones in her many arms that evoke the Hindu goddess Durga. As technoid divine mother, she introduces “a whole new frequency for the planet” that explores human connection in today’s media ecology while simultaneously advocating for environmental issues with the slogan “save the bees” displayed at her feet and, therewith, protesting the nefarious effects of mobile communication for the insects that uphold the regenerative cycle of nature through pollination.

Cyberblackness, Empowerment, and Queering in *The Archandroid* and *The Electric Lady*

“Power up, power up!” chant Mia Nunnally as PowerUp Sista 1 and Charly Darker as DJ Crash Crash on the interlude “Good Morning Midnight.” Because this slogan repeatedly resurfaces on *The Electric Lady* Album, it is an overarching leitmotif for the affirmation of a technologically enhanced agency. It is also a reminder that the adoption “of science and technology by marginalized groups has always been an essential component of resistance,” to quote Grace D. Gipson’s observation from her article on “Afrofuturism’s Musical Princess Janelle Monáe” (92). The incorporation and control of hardware and software components, the knowledge of navigating a computer engineered and digitalised world in combination with being aware of one’s status as alien Other characterises the cyber blackness represented on Janelle Monáe’s concept album. “Power up” can be understood as a rallying call to resist discrimination, a warning about depleted energy resources, or a celebratory call and response ritual for the alienated community around the persona of Cindi Mayweather, aka Jane 57821, that the audience knows as Monáe’s alter ego since her first EP from 2007.

The EP *Metropolis* establishes Cindi as a time travelling, human-shaped android from the year 2719 when mankind has to deal with catastrophic environmental destruction to 1954 with the purpose “to free the citizens of Metropolis from the Great Divide,” a totalitarian secret society. Janelle Monáe’s artistic persona displays her inner mechanical features in parts on the cover of the EP *Metropolis*, but like the androids “seen in movies ranging from Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1926) to Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* (1982) [she] can effectively pass as a normal member of the human race” (Piper 97). Piper elaborates on his definition of the Android by comparing it to the notion of the robot:

If the robot’s visibly mechanical body explicitly marks its otherness, then the android’s concealed mechanical body makes it a metaphor for the other, able to masquerade as a member of the dominant norm. From the Replicants of Philip K. Dick’s 1968 novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* to the android Ash in Ridley Scott’s 1979 movie *Alien*, the masquerade is almost invariably depicted as subversive. The android’s true identity is concealed to allow it to fulfill its preprogrammed, usually hostile agenda. (97)

Monáe plays with the “metaphorical anxieties” that these stories convey (97). The cover artwork of *The Electric Lady* shows her with all the necessary features that could characterise her as human and make her whole (as opposed to the dismembered and mutilated upper body of Jane 57821 on *Metropolis*). And yet, she is multitudes, to paraphrase Walt Whitman, since she is represented as six identical Janelle Monáes who all have a luminous barcode on their wrists and a small shiny spot on their left temporal lobes. A metal skull with a digital uplink module is placed next to her as if to flaunt her mechanical inners under the organic surface with pride.⁵

⁵ On the other cover art on the back of the album, this bold pose is seconded by a combative pose with spiky brass knuckles on her left hand.

With the glamorous appearance of her artistic persona, Monáe turns the sci-fi trope of hostile androids on its head. Instead of bothering with the anxieties of the dominant class of humanity in a posthuman context and dominant white discourses in actual American and Western contexts (which give more insight into the colonial psyche than they provide knowledge on the identity formations of marginalised people), she speaks and acts from the margins.⁶ She foregrounds the moral discontents with such binaries and problematizes the ethical concerns with instances of othering and silencing that are grounded in economic exploitation. On the cover of her first concept album *The ArchAndroid*, her upper body is gowned in Afrofuturist metal garbs that mix futuristic technological devices such as bolts, light displays, and shaft-hub couplings with triangular earrings reminiscent of Ancient Egyptian pyramids and a head ornament that fuses the African architectural design with the skyscraper skyline of a postmodern city. This assemblage of past, present, and futuristic elements marks the delimitations of the Triangular trade as much as it resuscitates the collective memories of the Black Atlantic.

In doing so, she activates a community of droids or marginalised others and puts the subversive potential of posthumanism to use in her activist program. The liner notes to both *The ArchAndroid* and *The Electric Lady* reinforce Cindi Mayweather's inclusive message of collective experience by stating that the album has been released "in accordance with the Inspiration Information Act." As Gipson argues, she "gives freedom to that 'other' . . . or segregated minority that is often discussed in Afrofuturism. Instead of them being minimized, she maximizes their existence . . . It is as though she elevates this state of consciousness that surpasses the misfortunes that one may visually perceive in today's society" (93). In her performances, she shares her celebratory perception of otherness with her spectators. At her concerts, flyers written and distributed by Janelle Monáe and The Wondaland Arts Society delineate the "Ten Droid Commandments" that are "written like P-Funk hyperbole," according to Womack, and "instruct attendees on how to experience the music" (75). Commandment 4 reads: "Please be aware that the songs you will hear are electric: be careful as you experience them and interact with electrical devices, drink water or touch others;" Commandment 6 instructs to "[a]bandon your expectations about art, race, gender, culture and gravity;" and Commandment 9 demands that "[b]y shows [sic] end you must transform. This includes but is not limited to eye color, perspective, mood, or height" (cited in Womack 75-6). The transformation is a call to social change and to the adoption of an empowered perspective on the world: The electricity of the songs affects the attendants because of the conductivity of their bodies and helps them to transcend social, cultural, and physical boundaries as required by Commandment 6.

In the video to the song "Tightrope," the control on and over one's own body is mediated not only by the lyrics but also through the exhibited dancing bodies. In *Imagining Slaves and Robots*, Gregory Hampton observes that

It is the dancing that places the narrative within the realm of science fiction. And it is the movement of the marginalized bodies in the video that evokes images that might be associated with machines. The tightrope dance entails a gliding that is analogous to hovering across floors and tables by Cindi Mayweather and her equally agile entourage. The dance necessitates a mechanical control of the body that evokes images of super-humans or androids moving to poly-rhythmic baselines that conflate an African past with an African American present. (74-5)

The posthuman dance pattern of the performers' bodies situates them on the line between moving objects—a hoverboard as a sci-fi vehicle that actually challenges gravity (see Commandment 6)—and adept liminal subjects who assume full control over their movement in space. The whole dance number takes place in the psychiatric ward of a hospital where the performers are patients. It is thus defined as an authoritarian and hierarchical space that seeks to govern every step that Monáe and her crew make. As they dance the tightrope, they reclaim their agency in a superimposed alternate space where the order of madness cannot

⁶ The background story to Monáe's alter ego Cindi Mayweather on *Metropolis* explains the futuristic references in the songs and relates a dystopian tomorrow to present socio-cultural formations. The time travel story that Monáe introduces on the EP and fleshes out on her subsequent concept albums *The ArchAndroid* (2010) and *The Electric Lady* from 2013 is reflected in the music in which the renditions of a "traditional orchestra . . . [resonate with] kinetic computer-generated beats" (Womack 75). The artificial sounds of future-driven technologies merge with the human-crafted tunes of instruments built from natural resources evoking past cultural heritages.

interpellate and subject them.

The hybridity of Monáe's persona as an organic-technological assemblage is seconded by the "tactics of queering" along the lines of Teresa de Lauretis's theory that Hawkins recognises in all of Monáe's performances (Hawkins 5). In "Tightrope" as well as in other visual appearances in the context of *The Electric Lady*, Monáe wears suits that elevate her persona and her performance to the level of a special occasion. Furthermore, they also play on the gender expectations that she wants her audiences to abandon. The multiplication of non-normative sign systems in the signification processes deployed by her android alter-ego dilutes barriers that dominant discourses depict as an insurmountable difference. For Dan Hassler-Forest, "[t]he posthuman body is no longer conceived as singular, rational, and coherent but as a multiplicity: a fluid and uncontainable assemblage that operates as a site of constant negotiation" (153-4). The threshold position upheld by the singer over the diverse media platforms she uses serves as the site from which she exercises her agency of worlding alternate spaces that intersect with the realm of the 'real.'

The empowerment through practices of queering and performances of cyber blackness functions as a catalyst for productive change that has an impact on the world. "Janelle Monáe's creative work offers a provocative example of world-building that structurally resists capitalism's neutralizing and objectifying framework" (Hassler-Forest 175). This resistant stance continues to inform the artist's work, as she explores other ramifications of the analogue-digital nodes that define the beginning of the twenty-first century with her album *Dirty Computer* that came out in 2018. Here she leaves the hard, protective shell of the android to perform as Janelle Monáe, the human, who is interpellated as a dirty computer along with her friends by the authorities. The film by the same name that complements the release of the album explains its narrative context by showing scientists who inspect the brains of her and other unadjusted nonconformist women and who manipulate or delete unwanted memories and behaviours. In a three-part structure of "reckoning, celebration, and reclamation" (Monáe in the "iheart radio interview") she assesses current U.S. politics and social debates and declares a state of emergency for the alien-ated that she rallies in the last song on the album, "Americans": "Hold on, don't fight your war alone." Monáe's Afrofuturist interventions connect the past of "capitalism's long and brutal history of exploitation and barbarism" (151) to a transversal vision of the future and relate a message of change in the urgency of the present.

Conclusion: Fluid Conceptions of Being in the World

With the focus on community and social change in their music, both Erykah Badu and Janelle Monáe fulfill "[t]he imaginative challenge" that cultural critic and artist Martine Syms calls for in *The Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto*, a challenge "that awaits any Mundane Afrofuturist author who accepts that this is it: Earth is all we have. What will we do with it?" For Syms, the alternate ontologies of Afrofuturism can never be tethered from the realities that govern black lives in the here and now because its imaginative power lies in "The opportunity to make sense of the nonsense that regularly—and sometimes violently—accents black life" (Syms). The generative power in Badu's and Monáe's works resides in asserting agency over these sense-making processes by tapping into the positive potential of change, rupture, and (r)evolution. Building on motherhood tropes and womanist ideas, Badu simultaneously affirms and redefines black womanhood while Monáe's gender-bending performances deconstruct or rather overwrite female/male dichotomies. What their individual visions on gender have in common is a shared sense of renewal and self-expressive potential that resides in the process of constant becoming. Their versatile artistic personas can be understood as a reminder that identities are multilayered, complex, and fluid and therefore resist one-dimensional examination and easy categorisation. The temporal and performative fluidity that governs their encompassing artistic imaginaries allows them to determine autonomous discursive spaces in which they negotiate blackness, and gender for that matter, in productive, independent, and inventive ways.

Erykah Badu's and Janelle Monáe's works prove that social change needs visions and utopian ideas that popular culture at its best is able to provide. They deliver pluralistic, open-source blueprints with their cultural production that their audiences can adopt as well as adapt to question their own boundaries playfully and to explore new possibilities for action and subject formation. In doing so, the musical thought

experiments of these two Afrofuturist artists have the potential to turn imaginative projections into lived experience.

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