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Publication date

2014

Document Version

Author accepted manuscript

Published in

Para-doxa

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Hassler-Forest, D. (2014). The Politics of World-Building: Heteroglossia in Janelle Monáe's Afrofuturist WondaLand. *Para-doxa*, 26, 284-303. <http://paradoxa.com/volumes/26>

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The Politics of World-building: Heteroglossia in Janelle Monáe's Afrofuturist WondaLand

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Abstract

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

It is my job to create universes, as the basis of one novel after another. And I have to build them in such a way that they do not fall apart two days later. Or at least that is what my editors hope. However, I will reveal a secret to you: I like to build universes which do fall apart. I like to see them come unglued, and I like to see how the characters in the novels cope with this problem. I have a secret love of chaos. There should be more of it.

Philip K. Dick, "How to build a universe that doesn't fall apart after two days" (1978)

World-building has become the name of the game in commercial sf and fantasy franchises. As digital convergence continues to blur the boundaries between media, and as multiple forms of participatory culture proliferate, the focus in fantastic fiction has shifted ever more strongly from story-telling to the development of coherent, recognizable, and ostentatiously branded story-worlds. While there is

hardly anything novel about the commercial franchising of successful characters and narrative environments, the hegemonic appropriation and commodification of world-building practices from fantasy and sf traditions has come to typify the age of the global media conglomerate, from the Disney-owned Marvel Cinematic Universe to HBO's cross-media juggernaut *Game of Thrones*. Most of these popular imaginary worlds offer mappable and therefore "knowable" environments, with a strong focus on the kind of consistency and coherence that pleases fan cultures, while also thriving commercially as part of the larger political economy in which these multiple texts circulate as branded commodities (Johnson 6–7).

These world-building practices derive much of their immersive power from narrative traditions and cultural forms established in twentieth-century genre fiction: paradigmatic texts like J.R.R. Tolkien's story-world of Arda, Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* series, the *Star Trek* franchise, and role-playing games like *Dungeons & Dragons* provided the culture industry with a potent toolbox for the development of immersive story-worlds that can be developed across novels, television series, feature films, comic books, toys, and video games. What originated as a cult phenomenon among niche audiences has in the 21st century thus become the primary focus for global media conglomerates. Franchised and branded story-worlds based on comic books and sf and fantasy novels have by now become emblematic of global corporate entertainment.

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

also because her socially conscious perspective has been enthusiastically embraced by leftists of all stripes for its progressive ideals.

The main question I will engage with in this essay is whether Monáe's work does indeed offer the kind of transgressive, even revolutionary potential that her many fans have so eagerly identified in it. After first establishing the inherently political aspects of world-building, I will describe how Afrofuturism has expanded the political potential of fantastic story-worlds through black artists' appropriation of sf tropes. But while the Afrofuturist movement peaked in the 1970s, in the context of multiple social, cultural, and political movements that challenged the assumptions of "dominant ideology," 21st-century neoliberalism poses a new set of challenges for artists attempting to resist or subvert hegemonic capitalist culture. I will examine Monáe's "neo-Afrofuturist" project from this political perspective, using Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of "heteroglossia" to help describe how the unstable and decentered nature of her "sonic fiction" (see Eshun *More Brilliant*) creates worlds that operate by a different logic than that of narrative subcreation.¹

But while Monáe's pop art may on the one hand be read as one of the "dangerous 'possible worlds'" (Gilbert 192) that we require in order to start imagining a world outside of capitalism, it simultaneously fits the cultural logic of neoliberalism with uncanny precision. The remarkable flexibility of her posthuman persona certainly destabilizes and decenters the basic coordinates of her imaginary world, but this very process perfectly complements the context in which her work circulates in commodity form. By claiming a space within globally popular entertainment culture, Monáe's transmedia work productively navigates the critical tension between hegemonic corporate franchises and the subversive practices associated with a resistant culture of appropriation.

¹ Regrettably, it is impossible to describe in words the physical and emotional effect her music can have on its listeners. Her most recent album *The Electric Lady* (2013) is full of perfectly engineered moments such as the horns finally bursting in to the restrained slow-burn of "Givin' Em What They Love," the disarming candor of Monáe's rap eulogy to her working-class mother in "Ghetto Woman," or the seemingly endless horizons opened up by the melodious and ethereal closing number of "What An Experience." Monáe's virtuosity as a musician, composer, and performer are vital elements that I leave mostly unexplored in this essay.

The politics of world-building

In our post-democratic societies of control, organized through rhizomatic circuits of biopolitical power (Gilbert 1–4), “we need to create weapons that are not merely destructive but are themselves a form of constituent power, weapons capable of constructing democracy and defeating the armies of Empire” (Hardt and Negri *Multitude* 347). World-building has the potential to be just such a weapon.

The question is: how to develop and deploy it as such? While most major story-worlds in fantasy and sf have quite obvious anti-capitalist elements, the narratives typically strive to contain and delimit them. At the same time, the extratextual processes of commercial branding and franchising further reinforce this unstable but largely effective inoculation. For although the “textual poaching” associated with fan fiction and other forms of audience participation has done much to destabilize and subvert this dynamic (Jenkins *Textual*), such activities have become in many ways even more marginal than they were before the 21st-century mainstreaming of post-genre fantastic fiction. Or, to put it more accurately, fans’ individual creative acts of subversion have become increasingly irrelevant as the media industries’ business model has shifted from a logic of exposure to one of “long-tail engagement” (Napoli 15) that better fits our digital new media environment of constant immersion in connective networks (see Van Dijck 2013; Rose 2011).

The imaginary worlds of cross-media storytelling franchises have been described thus far in largely neo-formalist terms: the exhaustive detail, the elaborate histories behind them, the endlessly negotiated relationship between fans and producers, and the variety of media that make up convergence culture have encouraged many scholars in the field to describe their forms and the cultural practices that surround them, rather than to theorize their political implications. Mark J.P. Wolf’s *Building Imaginary Worlds* (2012), the first major academic study to focus extensively on world-building as a set of cultural and aesthetic practices, discusses it primarily in these terms. Wolf takes as his point of departure Tolkien’s own concept of “subcreation,” which he views as an inseparable combination of process and product resulting in the development of a fictitious “Secondary World” (24). The “secondariness” of this imaginary environment is a question of degree rather than of absolute separation, depending on the ways in which certain familiar defaults are transformed into imaginary alternatives: “Fictional worlds can be placed along a spectrum based on the amount of subcreation present, and what we might call the ‘secondariness’ of a story’s world then becomes a matter of degree, varying with the strength of the

connection to the Primary World” (25). Wolf then offers an impressively detailed historical overview of many types of imaginary worlds, with varying levels of subcreation, each of which is to some degree separated from the ways in which the “Primary World” is commonly represented. Thus, for instance, L. Frank Baum’s world of Oz is a prominent example of an imaginary environment where the presence of witches, flying monkeys, and cowardly lions indicates a high level of “secondariness,” while the imaginary world of the film *Blade Runner* (Scott 1982) “is as much a constructed environment as Oz, yet it depicts a Primary World location, set in an alternate version of 2019 ... in which replicants, artificial animals, flying cars, and gigantic buildings not only exist but are common” (27). Wolf’s definition of world-building clearly relies on the assumption of an unambiguous distinction between what constitutes a “realistic” representation of a diegetic world, and a fictional environment that defamiliarizes its audience from realistic defaults by altering a number of these coordinates.

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

Besides this explicit deviation from realist narrative conventions, which is widely shared by large portions of genre fiction, a second crucial feature of subcreation identified by Wolf is that of scale. World-building franchises are typically developed not only across multiple texts, but most commonly also involve multiple media. For example, the world-building that followed the release of *Star Wars* (Lucas 1977) was as much the result of the production of toys, video games, television broadcasts, comic books, novelizations, and role-playing games as it was the mere process of producing filmed sequels. This proliferation of

world-building activities transforms not only the medium-specific nature of any individual fictional narrative and its associated sets of practices, values, and markets; it also destabilizes the prevailing discourses of individual authorship, especially once the audience starts contributing actively to the development of the imaginary world (see Brooker).

Approaching the concept of world-building from the perspective of radical politics, the subversive fan energies described by (amongst others) Henry Jenkins have at this point been appropriated and mobilized by the corporate cultures of neoliberalism. The critical potential recognized in sf by theorists like Suvin, Fredric Jameson, and Carl Freedman can clearly be reified and commodified as easily as the fantasy worlds of Tolkien and J.K. Rowling, making redundant the traditional ideological divide between fantasy and sf, while the commercial nature of contemporary “social media” make individual users’ appropriations all but irrelevant in terms of content. In the political economy of corporate convergence culture and ubiquitous social media, active engagement with a branded story-world is the overriding goal, while the systematic nature of these worlds’ spatial and temporal organization perfectly fits the objectifying framework of managerial neoliberal culture. The key political question about popular genre fiction therefore concerns not so much the ways in which the narrative contents of any given story-world articulate ideological values that can be described as conservative or progressive, but whether its organization helps destabilize the governing framework of capitalist realism (see Fisher *Capitalist Realism*). 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.

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

This concept is especially helpful when we turn our attention to transmedia world-building as a practice that is defined by this very

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

This desire for coherence and measurability in world-building has been central to most academic work on the topic as well, even when it does take into account not only the profusion of these narratives across media, but also the contributions made by active audiences through fan fiction and mash-up culture. Jonathan Gray’s *Show Sold Separately* (2010), for instance, rightfully emphasizes the importance of peripheral paratexts such as trailers, spoilers, and other intertexts that John Fiske described as “secondary” and “tertiary” (1987: 117–126).² But Gray’s focus on the narrative coherence across media consistently privileges texts that add to the development of an authoritative story-world in a constructive and systematically organized manner. Gray strongly favors fan-created material that contributes to the narrative’s thematic coherence, such as a mash-up video that “invites viewers to contemplate [a] character” by adding “the time and reflective space ... that the films never truly provide” (156). By contrast, Gray dismisses the paratextual existence of a “Gotham City pizza” in relation to the film *The Dark Knight* (Nolan 2008) as a “mere marketing tool” whose sole function is to “signal the size of the film” (209–10).

But as Philip K. Dick articulates so vividly in this essay’s epigraph, this exclusive focus on narrative and aesthetic coherence has far-reaching political implications. The desire to create, navigate, or otherwise engage with an imaginary world that is stable and coherent expresses a desire to understand what Wolf describes as the Primary World in similar terms. By contrast, an approach like the one Dick favors, of

² While the clear difference Fiske described between secondary texts (promotional materials, professional reviews, and other “producerly” paratexts) and tertiary texts (letters, discussions, and other materials produced by media audiences) is far more difficult to make in the context of participatory culture and media convergence, it remains a useful conceptual distinction that helps us question the various functions of specific paratexts.

“building universes that *do* fall apart” (my emphasis), shifts our focus to an environment defined by multiplicity, transformation, fluidity, and irresolvable internal contradictions. Such a form of world-building rejects post-Enlightenment foundations organized around a metaphysics of presence in favor of what Iris Marion Young has described as a “politics of difference” (229)—a model that applies Jacques Derrida’s critique of the subject as grounded in difference from an imagined “other” to a socio-political framework based on radical diversity and constant (internal and external) forms of negotiation and mediation. If we therefore wish to discover existing cultural practices that productively employ the critical potential of imaginary worlds, we must turn away from fantastic franchises informed primarily by the “authoritative” discourses of centripetal narrative traditions, and start exploring the more radical heteroglossia of world-building practices whose form of organization is itself more explicitly centrifugal.

Afrofuturism and “hauntological” world-building

While the paradigmatic imaginary worlds of *The Lord of the Rings* and *Star Trek* have resulted in a generic tendency in fantasy and sf towards politically reactionary forms of cultural nostalgia, technocratic notions of progress, or combinations of both, more progressive alternatives have emerged that have taken world-building in productive new directions. One such phenomenon has been the modest but influential revival of Afrofuturism, the cultural movement that emerged amongst black artists, authors, and musicians in the 1960s and 1970s as “speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of 20th-century technoculture” (Dery 736). The Afrofuturist project took it upon itself to appropriate sf imagery, which had been overwhelmingly white in its mainstream cultural representations, and use it to reimagine a past as well as a future in which people of color played central rather than marginal roles. From the elaborate mythology articulated by avant-garde jazz musician Sun Ra to the spectacular stage shows of 1970s bands like Parliament, Funkadelic, and Earth, Wind and Fire, Afrofuturist culture has adopted and expanded upon many familiar sf tropes.

Afrofuturism opened up a perspective on world-building that fits Derrida’s “hauntological” model of an infinitely confused and deeply ambiguous sense of historicity (10), demanding to be interpreted as an attempt to “assemble counter memories that contest the historical archive, thereby situating the collective trauma of slavery as the founding

moment of modernity” (Eshun “Further Considerations” 288). Rather than the creation of a narrative world that stood apart from a single shared “Primary World,” Afrofuturism instead deployed concepts and iconography from fantastic genres to fracture the metaphysical model that has privileged one form of identity over another. By reversing the existing hierarchy, Afrofuturist art intervened in sf’s long-standing tradition of presenting color-blind futures that were “concocted by whites and excluded people of color as full subjects” (Bould 177), while at the same time using forms that challenge Western culture’s focus on narrative conventions like closure, linear causality, and teleological organization as privileged cultural forms.

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

As Jeremy Gilbert and Ewan Pearson argue, dance music has the potential to challenge or even collapse the post-Renaissance distinction between body and mind, opening up a space in which existing identity formations and power hierarchies can be negotiated and even challenged. Dance music largely rejects the dominant “logocentric” tradition that “privileges modes of thought and experience which occur in the medium of verbal language, which thereby have clearly identifiable and analyzable meanings” (57). The forms of music most strongly associated with Afrofuturism, such as “the intergalactic big-band jazz churned out by Sun Ra’s Omniverse Arkestra, Parliament-Funkadelic’s Dr. Seussian astrofunk, and Lee ‘Scratch’ Perry’s dub reggae” (Dery 182), are good examples of the kind of rhythm-focused dance grooves Gilbert and Pearson describe as bypassing and transforming “the acceptable

channels of language, reason and contemplation” (42). Afrofuturist music therefore destabilizes not only sf’s traditional “exclusion of people of color” (Bould 177), but does so in media forms with an innate ability to upset the implicit hierarchies of Western culture and the centripetal world-building practices of genre fiction.

For example, Sun Ra’s elaborate “MythScience” offers a version of black history in which ancient Egypt was created by a technologically advanced race of black aliens from the planet Saturn, while claiming an identity for himself as a time-traveling deity who has returned from the past via the present to our future. The mythology constructed by Sun Ra presents itself to us not in terms of secondariness to a single shared Primary World, but as a challenge to “the invisible paradigm of unquestioned reality” of historical white supremacy, allowing the artist’s performative role as a black musician to resonate on multiple registers simultaneously (Van Veen 11). Afrofuturism therefore presented a challenge both to fantastic genres’ normative traditions of white, Eurocentric historiography, and to emerging world-building practices that revolve around “objectively” mappable histories and geographies that reinforce a similarly knowable historical reality.³ By practicing what Kodwo Eshun describes as “chronopolitics,” Afrofuturists employ world-building not as a way to reinforce the coordinates of existing reality, but as “a means through which to reprogram the present” (“Further Considerations” 290). And as Janelle Monáe’s ambitious neo-Afrofuturist work suggests, an essential component in this act of reprogramming involves more than the mere reversal of existing race dichotomies.

Entering WondaLand: Janelle Monáe’s world-building

Afrofuturism presented an important and influential challenge to the authoritative white discourses of fantastic fiction, while implicitly providing an alternative to authoritative, logocentric modes of world-building. But at the same time, its most popular musical forms represented alternatives that in many ways were not yet radical enough: the elaborate stage acts of groups like Earth, Wind and Fire or Funkadelic for instance articulated a transformation of historical race relations, in which black pride and pan-Africanism played central roles. But the simple reversal of such a power dynamic does little to

³ See Stefan Ekman for an elaborate description of what the author describes as the “topofocal” tendencies in fantastic literature.

alter the structural organization of political power, especially because the vast majority of these Afrofuturist musical performances built upon traditional gender roles that reinforced the inherent phallocentrism of “authentic” rock music (Gilbert and Pearson 85). While playful in their often non-normative on-stage performances of masculinity (Royster 102–3), Afrofuturist musical acts of the 1970s left precious little space for identity formations that were not black, male, and straight.⁴

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

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

The story Monáe tells in her work is overwhelmingly elliptical and endlessly ambiguous, evading straightforward storytelling and instead constantly embellishing its imaginary world with new ideas, clues, and

⁴ In Funkadelic’s epic 1971 track “Wars of Armageddon,” for instance, the phrase “More power to the people” leads effortlessly via “More pussy to the power” to “More pussy to the people.”

puzzles that are spread out across several different texts and across various media. The lavishly illustrated booklet that accompanies the “Special Edition” of Monáe’s first official release, *Metropolis: The Chase Suite* (2008), includes a “brief primer” on the artist’s imaginary world and its central character, Monáe’s android alter ego Cindi Mayweather. When read together with the booklet illustrations, liner notes, the elaborate “official short film” for the track “Many Moons,” and the singer’s many published interviews on the project, her imaginary world seems to take shape along familiar, easily recognizable patterns: a post-apocalyptic dystopian future ruled by “evil Wolfmasters,” an oppressed class of androids sold to and exploited by “partying robo-zillionaires,” and a heroic android protagonist whose “programming includes a rock-star proficiency package and a working soul.”⁵ This Android No. 57821 has already achieved celebrity in this future Metropolis as “the leading voice of a rebellious new form of pop music known as cybersoul” when she is forced to go on the run, chased by chainsaw-wielding bounty hunters, for having committed the crime of falling in love with an actual human being. This is the point where the album begins, the opening track “March of the Wolfmasters” summarizing the most crucial narrative points in its rousing proclamation of Cindi’s newly decreed outlaw status.

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

⁵ All direct quotations in this paragraph are taken from the explanatory liner notes in the digital booklet that accompanies *Metropolis: The Chase Suite*.

women's bodies on album covers by shedding not just her clothing, but her very skin, revealing beneath it the uncanny "robotic ultra-whiteness" of her androidal endoskeleton (English and Kim 222).

While the supposedly central narrative of "star-crossed lovers" Cindi Mayweather and Anthony Greendown has hardly progressed on the two albums, five "emotion pictures," and countless live performances that have occurred since the 2008 release of Monáe's *Metropolis* EP,⁶ the scope of her imaginary world has continued to expand, as has her sustained use of this remarkably fluid android alter ego. In the liner notes accompanying her 2010 album *The ArchAndroid*, we learn that Monáe is in fact a time-traveler from the year 2719 whose stolen DNA was used for the creation of android 57821, better known as Cindi Mayweather. In interviews, she has embellished this idea further, explaining that there is a hidden "time traveling machine" in her adopted city of Atlanta, through which many influential black musicians have passed, herself and hip-hop duo Outkast included (Lester). This playful, self-reflexive, and thoroughly fluid relationship to her main character and alter ego demonstrates not only her authorial claim upon her imaginary world, but also the constant negotiations this requires: by deliberately blurring the lines between her many "selves," as celebrity, as artist, as author, as performer, as producer, and as a black woman who is also a role model and celebrity, it becomes impossible to separate her Secondary World of Wolfmasters, androids, and bounty hunters from our own Primary historical environment.

Monáe's world-building therefore resonates productively with Dick's description of "universes that keep falling apart": the interweaving of perspectives, constantly shifting back and forth between her own contemporary persona and her 28th-century alter ego, creates a paradoxical tension between past, present, and future in which definitions of identity and lines of causality break down.⁸ Having absorbed Afrofuturism's chronopolitical take on fantastic fiction's cognition and estrangement, Monáe continuously short-circuits the authoritative and centripetal systems that impose any number of boundaries: not only those between her science-fictional Secondary World and a more "Primary" universe, but any form of limitation on the individual as part of a larger totality informed by power. This seemingly infinite multiplicity

⁶ The earlier announcement that her second album *The ArchAndroid* would be followed by a graphic novel, a traveling Broadway musical, and narrative music videos for each track on the album has not yet come to fruition, though further transmedia side-projects are still continuously rumored (see Collins).

⁸ Among Monáe's many homages to sf texts, the explicit mention of "electric sheep" on each of her albums further reinforces her intertextual association with Dick's perspective.

of references to other texts and personas obviously includes not only her embodiment of “the best memories of the last fifty years of black musical performance,” but also spins elastically “from David Bowie’s high-concept theatrics to Prince’s loose-spined, funky splits and squeals ... to Grace Jones’s coolly imperious robot” (Royster 187).

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

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

And while Monáe is always careful to present herself as a rebellious outsider from a working-class background, her comments about her own role as a celebrity within popular culture do not in any way criticize the capitalist system itself:

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

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

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

But while these contradictions obviously diminish some of the more exaggerated claims concerning Monáe’s semi-messianic image, her unique approach to world-building together with the inclusive spirit of her neo-Afrofuturist vocabulary still puts her at the forefront of politically productive popular artists working in fantastic genres. While incorporating Afrofuturism’s critical and subversive response to fantastic fiction’s tendency towards racist and white-centric story-worlds, her world-building mobilizes not only an imaginative form that can challenge and question these traditions, but can also engage with them joyfully and productively. Her immaculately produced, highly accessible, and commercially viable music is not only a collection of branded

commodities, but also an explicit celebration of “non-productive” human activity. By placing her contagious call to dance, enjoyment, and creative collaboration in a story-world that frames these things as acts of political resistance, her music becomes an acts of defiance within neoliberalism’s “relentless capture and control of time and experience” (Crary 40). While popular culture will quite obviously never change the political organization of post-democratic neoliberal capitalism by itself, it can still contribute to the vital work of imagining alternative futures without simultaneously repressing the very problems it would dissolve (Jameson 265).

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

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

While the affective experience of joy is clearly one of the primary goals of Janelle Monáe’s blissfully eclectic neo-Afrofuturist soul music, the inclusiveness of her approach to style, genre, and identity does indeed seem to facilitate and even organize exactly this kind of “joyful encounters with others.” There may be nothing inherently

political in the momentary communal release of infectious dance music, but when experienced in the context of her unstable imaginary world, it can provide an entrance point towards more radical political perspectives. Both her imaginary world-building practices and their real-life community-building counterparts meanwhile give structural shape to “the institution of these encounters such that they last and repeat,” even in their supposedly low-impact pop-cultural forms. In this sense at least, her work does contribute in its own modest way to the development of forms, narratives, and identity formations that help us think beyond the confines of capitalist realism and neoliberalism’s purely instrumental ontology.

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