

Towards a Queer Black Futurity: The Disruptive Potential of (Re)memory in Janelle Monáe's
World of Dirty Computer

by

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B.A., The Ohio State University, 2021

A thesis submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English

2023

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Abstract

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Thesis directed by Associate Professor Benjamin J. Robertson

Singer, actress, activist, and writer, Janelle Monáe, has been critically acclaimed as one of the greatest voices in pop music of the twenty-first century. Her work, however, is often overlooked in terms of its political potential. This thesis serves as a critical intervention into Monáe's *Dirty Computer* album, accompanying emotion picture, and shorty-story collection set in the *Dirty Computer* storyworld. The Afrofuturist world-building that Monáe undertakes in these three interconnected projects constitutes a vital queering of the futures that Afrofuturism has posited up to this point. Her work closely engages with the chronopolitics of capitalist time, revealing the ways in which such a system hinges on the exploitation of the Black, femme, and queer body. I argue that Monáe's *Dirty Computer* world acts as a future projection that challenges America's insistence on a linear view of progress by calling back to the nation's willfully suppressed histories of racial violence that date back to the initial moment of African enslavement in the Western world. By imagining a future that warns of the authoritarian direction America is headed in if it continues its intentional ignorance of its history and reliance on "othering" of groups that do not fit the mold of white heteronormativity, Monáe signals the importance of reflecting on the past in order to direct future action. At the same time, Monáe's depictions of unabashed queer Black joy in *Dirty Computer* make it apparent that the futures we

imagine must be grounded in communal love and must forefront care for the well-being of people over the well-being of capital.

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Introduction

From her diverse and detailed science-fictional world-building to the androgynous persona she has frequently adopted in stage performances and music videos—which she aptly calls “emotion pictures”—artist, activist, actress, and writer Janelle Monáe¹ has given Black queer liberation a much-needed public platform.² Her work over the last almost two decades has brought a multi-modal and political approach to music, the scope of which has never before been effected. In this thesis, I aim to demonstrate the cultural and political import of Monáe’s musical endeavors, particularly her 2018 album *Dirty Computer*, as well as its accompanying emotion picture and the science fiction short story collection *The Memory Librarian: And Other Stories of Dirty Computer* (2022), which Monáe authored in collaboration with a team of writers of color. I think it’s important to preface my work by acknowledging my position as a gay white man whose research is indebted to a long history of Black feminist theory and Black political discourse. My intent in writing about Monáe’s work, and the broader pantheon of Afrofuturist art and Black political literature, is to amplify the voices and ideas of scholars who have come before me while attempting to draw links between existing discourses to express the full cultural weight of Monáe’s Afrofuturist projects.

In analyzing Monáe’s *Dirty Computer* album, and particularly *The Memory Librarian*, which is set in the world of *Dirty Computer*, it is necessary to clarify what definitions of science fiction and Afrofuturism I will be working with. Noted sci-fi theorist Darko Suvin provides a useful jumping off point for the consideration of science fiction’s properties and purposes. He

¹ Monáe identifies as non-binary and uses she/they pronouns. I will be referring to Monáe using the pronoun “she” throughout this work for the sake of consistency, but want to highlight her queer identity as it factors heavily into her artistic output. Further discussion of Monáe’s personal identity takes place in “Queering the Future”, the final chapter of this thesis.

² I capitalize Black as an intentional political choice throughout this work—except when adopting terms from other scholars—following Rachel Kanigel in *The Diversity Style Guide*

writes that sci-fi is a literary genre “whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the authors empirical environment.”³ This conception of sci-fi is, I believe, sufficiently broad enough to encapsulate the scope of what the average reader, lay or academic, would consider to be under the genre of science fiction. Additionally, Suvin’s acknowledgment of sci-fi as a genre considered to be low art, and his identification of sci-fi as a medium for giving voice to non-hegemonic social groups, rings true. However, I disagree with much of what else Suvin has to say in his *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, especially when it comes to additional qualifiers that Suvin adds to his consideration of sci-fi. He argues that the genre must take into account the progressions of a Marxist pattern of history and discounts any science fiction that does not offer up new social possibilities. Furthermore—and this is the point I particularly contest—Suvin believes that any works containing elements of the fantastic cannot be classified as science fiction. He goes on to argue that such works are, in fact, unworthy of serious consideration.⁴ Such conditions would disqualify a work like *The Memory Librarian*, which contains some fantastical elements and yet has been marketed as science fiction since its release, from receiving critical attention. I am in agreement with John Reed, who, in his review of *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, argues that Suvin is doing away with the life-blood of the genre in the aims of making sci-fi seem more worthy of critical appraisal.⁵ In Suvin’s efforts to elevate sci-fi to the realm of “high art” he represses elements of the genre that are essential to writers from minority groups, who Suvin himself admits are in most need of science fiction as a

³ Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, 7-8.

⁴ Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*.

⁵ Reed, Review of *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, 340.

creative outlet. As Sami Schalk⁶ observes in the introduction to her book *Bodyminds Reimagined: Disability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction*, Black women writers of sci-fi have a tendency to reject the realist and embrace aspects of the fantastic.⁷ The reason for this artistic difference in the works of white sci-fi authors and sci-fi authors of color has a relatively simple explanation, which Dan Hassler-Forest explores in his book *Janelle Monáe's Queer Afrofuturism: Defying Every Label*. Hassler-Forest explains the differing focus of white and Black science fiction by rooting science fiction in the histories of global colonization and American slavery.⁸ He posits the notion that white sci-fi tends to mimic an imperialist impulse. This is why white-authored works, from literature to popular media, often explore alien encounters in a colonial context. Franchises like *Star Trek* and novels like Kurt Vonnegut's *The Sirens of Titan* present paternalistic white protagonists that meddle in the affairs of foreign worlds.⁹ *Star Trek* succinctly sums up the reasoning for this trend in white sci-fi in its title sequence. The voice of Captain Kirk intones, "Space, the final frontier...To explore strange new worlds. To seek out new life and new civilizations. To boldly go where no man has gone before."¹⁰ Essentially, white-created science fiction frequently takes as its foundation the doctrine of Manifest Destiny. The white world has a desire to constantly expand its reach, to know and own everything that can be owned. Black-authored sci-fi, on the other hand, does not have the same capitalist drive as its white counterpart. In his book *Afrofuturism Rising: The*

⁶ Schalk is one of many writers who have made such a claim, including Isiah Lavender, Sherryl Vint, and others.

⁷ Schalk, *Bodyminds Reimagined*, 30.

⁸ Hassler-Forest, *Janelle Monáe's Queer Afrofuturism*.

⁹ *The Sirens of Titan* (1959) tells the story of a war between Mars and Earth. Although the war is initiated by a human man turned Martian ruler, Winston Rumfoord, he colonizes the planet and forms a Martian army composed of abducted and memory-wiped Earthlings.

¹⁰ *Star Trek*, Title Sequence, 0:05-0:24.

Literary Prehistory of a Movement, Isiah Lavender implies that this is due to hierarchical systemic oppression—and an ensuing need for developing modes of survival—that Black peoples of the Western world face. Black sci-fi is thus more concerned with imagining alternatives to pressing social concerns of the contemporary moment, as evinced by Afrofuturism’s tendency to depict future Earths rather than wholly new planets¹¹.

My purpose in elucidating differences in impetus and intent between white and Black-created science fiction is to clarify the way my understanding of the sci-fi genre differs from Suvin’s. In her work “‘Only by Experience’: Embodiment and the Limitations of Realism in Neo-Slave Narratives,” Sherryl Vint argues that “traditional claims about what ‘counts’ as sf should be understood as tending to exclude the perspective and experiences of people of color.”¹² Taking Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* as her case studies, Vint explores the fantastical natures of each piece and identifies their generic classifications as being relegated to the realm of the neo-slave narrative, though both works heavily invoke speculative elements. *Kindred*, for instance, is not often taken to be a sci-fi novel due to the lack of scientific explanation surrounding its time travel conceit. According to the strictures for sci-fi classification that Suvin lays out, the main character, Dana’s, experience of being called into the past any time her white slave-owning ancestor is in mortal danger would place *Kindred* in the realm of science fantasy, a genre that Suvin thinks should not be taken seriously critically. I, following from the arguments of Vint, contest such sci-fi qualifiers on Suvin’s part to be antiquated and white/Western centric. *Kindred* is simply not attempting to do what Suvin believes the genre of sci-fi must. Butler’s concern is not with depicting a technologically detailed

¹¹ Examples include, but are certainly not limited to, N.K. Jemisin’s *The Broken Earth* trilogy and Octavia Butler’s *Earthseed* novels

¹² Vint, “Only By Experience,” 241-242.

or feasible explanation for how time travel works in an imagined world. Rather, she is concerned with reflecting lasting legacies of slavery and the precarious position the institution placed, and continues to place, Black women's bodies in. The idea, therefore, that a Black woman's enslaved—or in this case enslaving—ancestors can draw her back through time at any minute, physically as well as mentally, emphatically demonstrates that the past bears heavily on the present. The way time travel functions in Butler's work is thus highly intentional, and any attempt to give Dana's journeys to the past scientific reasoning would only lessen Butler's emphasis on the continuous trauma of slavery that links past and present. As Lavender insists, this harkening back to times of slavery and/or the antebellum period—what Lavender terms a transhistoric feedback loop—is one of the three core elements of Afrofuturist literature.¹³ Not infrequently, it is by adopting features of the fantastic that the transhistoric feedback loop is initiated in Afrofuturist texts.¹⁴ If Afrofuturism is to be viewed as a branch of science fiction,¹⁵ then fantastical aspects of a work must not necessarily bar it from classification as sci-fi. Otherwise, books that have been understood to be both science fictional and Afrofuturistic—including Butler's *Parable of the Sower* with its minimal explanation of hyperempathy's functioning or *The Memory Librarian* with its unexplained pausing of time and varying iterations of time travel—would have to be re-evaluated and declassified as sci-fi. For this reason, I will be employing a view of sci-fi and Afrofuturism that encompasses and embraces fantastical elements.

¹³ Lavender, *Afrofuturism Rising*, 6.

¹⁴ This is the case in *Beloved* as well. Sethe believes herself to be haunted by Beloved, the ghost of the daughter she killed, and this haunting leads her to relive her enslavement and the aftermath of her escape from slavery.

¹⁵ It is important to note that Lavender does distinguish between science fiction and Afrofuturism, believing that not all Afrofuturism is necessarily sci-fi. For the purposes of this thesis, and given the primary text I am working with, I treat contemporary Afrofuturism as inhabiting the broader sci-fi genre.

Before diving into analysis of the science-fictional world Monáe crafts in *Dirty Computer* and her subsequent release of *The Memory Librarian*, I find it necessary to ground her work in a broader history of Black political thought. In doing so, I follow in the footsteps of Isiah Lavender and Kodwu Eshun, the latter of whom crucially elaborates on Afrofuturism's relationship to capitalism in his essay "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism." Eshun insists that the African diaspora's collective trauma of slavery must be foregrounded as the founding moment of modernism and, by extension, capitalism.¹⁶ It was, after all, on the commodified labor of Black bodies that the American Industrial Revolution reached the heights that it did. Today, the United States continues to profit from Black labor via exploitation of a prison industrial complex that disproportionately incarcerates Black men. The state of the United States economy from the period of American slavery to the present day is thus indebted to the country's continued subjugation of Black peoples. This reality, though glaringly apparent to many Black Americans, is still ardently denied by US citizens across the political spectrum.¹⁷ This disparity stems from a vast divide in America's national memory that separates "official" memory—an extension of what Eshun calls "the colonial archive"—from the real lived historical experiences of Black people in the United States.¹⁸ Such a jarring gap between America's accepted national memory discourse—that which enters school history textbooks—and the country's ongoing reality of racial violence can be best understood via the term chronopolitics, a concept which I examine

¹⁶ Eshun, "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism," 288.

¹⁷ See Larry J. Griffin and Kenneth A. Bollen's sociological study "What Do These Memories Do? Civil Rights Remembrance and Racial Attitudes," in *American Sociological Review*.

¹⁸ Eshun, "Further Considerations," 288.

more in depth in the first chapter of this thesis, “Chronopolitics of the American Dream.”¹⁹ In short, chronopolitics refers to the various existing perspectives regarding the construction of time. White/modernist time perceives the movement of both time and progress as linear while other perceptions of time are more bodily and rooted in the natural flow of life.²⁰ Though the term chronopolitics has gained traction in recent years, the likes of Walter Benjamin,²¹ James Baldwin,²² and others have long warned about the social repercussions of a linear conception of progress. The very belief in linear time is, in large part, the driving force behind Afrofuturist writing.

The three tenants of Afrofuturism that Lavender enumerates in the introduction to *Afrofuturism Rising* are directly linked to the counteraction of white America’s views concerning progress. They include the transhistorical feedback loop, the black networked consciousness, and the hope impulse. As I consider these tenants to be helpful in understanding Afrofuturism’s cultural function—and since I will be considering Monáe’s *Dirty Computer* storyworld through the lens of these three elements— will provide a brief explication of each of them.

“Transhistorical feedback loop” refers to Afrofuturism’s consistent recall of the trauma of slavery, the ensuing antebellum period, and the era of Jim Crow laws and enforced legal

¹⁹ I first encountered this term in Eshun’s “Further Considerations on Afrofuturism,” p. 287, but the first use of it I could find was in George Wallis’ 1970 article entitled “Chronopolitics: The Impact of Time Perspectives on the Dynamics of Change.”

²⁰ From here on, I use the terms modernist time and capitalist time to refer to perceptions of time that view both time and progress as moving linearly in a forward direction. This view of time has also been called white or Western time by various critics. I choose to use “modernist” and “capitalist” in agreement with Eshun’s insistence that Western enslavement of Africans is the founding moment of both modernism and capitalism (287).

²¹ Benjamin, “On the Concept of History.”

²² Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*.

segregation.²³ Afrofuturist writing is in dialogue with, and an extension of, the social alienation of Black peoples produced by African enslavement in the Western world. Lavender's second tenant, the black networked consciousness,²⁴ conceptualizes how communal memories and traditions of the African diaspora link the past, present, and future.²⁵ These shared memories and traditions of peoples of African descent are also the foundation for Lavender's third tenant, the hope impulse, which relies on remembering Black pasts in spite of whitewashed accounts of national memory that attempt to erase violent histories of oppression as well as Black achievements. Lavender deftly sums up the interconnectedness of these three features and explains the way in which Afrofuturism engages its reader, writing, "To connect to the black networked consciousness, to experience the hope impulse, we readers create and maintain a transhistorical feedback loop, where we go outside the bounds of today's systemic narrative of past events related to early white America."²⁶ Afrofuturism, under Lavender's definition, is thus all about memory—or even more so, countermemory. The cultural function of Afrofuturism—at least in the context of the United States, whose memory discourse I am focusing on in this work—is to remember pasts other than those that are officially acknowledged in order to posit futures that do not simply continue to benefit only white

²³ I intentionally say "enforced legal segregation" because segregation continues to exist in the United States via the nation's history of redlining and blockbusting.

²⁴ Lavender credits Anna Everett and Kodwu Eshun with helping him formulate his theory of the black networked consciousness, but iterations of the idea have been around for decades, including in Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, Richard Wright's "Blueprint for Negro Writing," and Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider*. The primary difference between these earlier conceptions and Everett or Eshun's is the inclusion of the whole of the African diaspora in the network.

²⁵ Lavender, *Afrofuturism Rising*, 7

²⁶ Lavender, 7

Americans (A.k.a. the group who most evidently benefits from repression of histories of racial violence).

Keeping this primary function of Afrofuturist literature in mind, I aim to demonstrate the ways in which Monáe’s science-fictional world in *Dirty Computer* employs the transhistorical feedback loop, a black networked consciousness, and the hope impulse to disrupt notions surrounding America’s national memory.²⁷ In doing so, Monáe offers glimpses of an equitable and inclusive future. Yet, neither *Dirty Computer*, nor its companion book *The Memory Librarian*, are blindly optimistic. Monáe is aware that the fight to redirect and correct America’s national memory is not an easy one, but she also provides hope by illustrating that the tools needed to enact such a revolution are already at the disposal of those deemed “dirty computers”—a degrading moniker used to alienate and subordinate those the authoritarian New Dawn government views as outside of the white, heteronormative mold. Via context clues in the text of *The Memory Librarian*, and through lyrics and song titles (e.g. “Americans”) from the *Dirty Computer* album, Monáe makes it clear that the world she has created is a future America. *Dirty Computer*, therefore, serves as both a warning of a future to come—one in which the government literally controls its citizens memories in order to propagate a single official narrative—and a hope for a future built on love, community, and equity that there is still time to actualize.

Although my thesis will be focusing almost entirely on the world of *Dirty Computer*—Monáe’s most recent album/emotion picture/book cycle—it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge her previous sci-fi endeavors and the critical scholarship that has been written on her work. Prior to the release of *Dirty Computer*, each of Monáe’s first three projects, including

²⁷ I interchangeably use *Dirty Computer* to refer to *Dirty Computer* the album and the science-fictional world that Monáe has crafted with this album cycle, which includes the stories from *The Memory Librarian*

her EP *Metropolis: The Chase Suite* (2008), her debut album *The ArchAndroid* (2010), and her second album *The Electric Lady* (2013), revolve around the character Cindi Mayweather, an android who becomes the face of a revolutionary movement after being sentenced to termination for having a love affair with a human man. The *Metropolis Cycle* is undoubtedly worthy of critical attention given its commentary on interracial relationships, alienation and commodification of the Black subject, and objectification of the female body, among other themes. For the sake of examining ideas unique to *Dirty Computer* amongst Monáe's discography, however, I will only be mentioning *The Metropolis Cycle* in passing and when directly relevant throughout the body of this thesis. Additionally, *The Metropolis Cycle* has garnered more critical attention in the humanities than recent additions to Monáe's artistic oeuvre, such as *The Memory Librarian*, which was not released until spring of 2022, nearly four years after its parent album. In fact, Hassler-Forest, a preeminent Monáe scholar and professor of media studies at Utrecht University in the Netherlands, examines all products of Monáe's album cycles in *Janelle Monáe's Queer Afrofuturism* with the exception of *The Memory Librarian*.

Hassler-Forest's work is particularly useful for understanding how Monáe's art functions within and against the system of racial capitalism.²⁸ Hassler-Forest frames his book with the knowledge that capitalism is irrevocably tied to systemic racism. Monáe, as a multi-modal artist working in the realms of music, film, and literature, thus crucially navigates an inherently racist system in order to envision anti-racist, pro-Black, and pro-queer futures. The first chapter of my thesis, the aforementioned "Chronopolitics of the American Dream," deals heavily with the politics of racial capitalism and the ways in which Monáe exploits America's capitalist society in order to critique white patriarchal ideals and notions of the American Dream. I employ

²⁸ Racial capitalism is a term coined by Cedric J. Robinson in his book *Black Marxism*.

discussions of Western capitalism engaged in by Hassler-Forest, Eshun, and Amiri Baraka, among others, to demonstrate the manner in which Afrofuturist art simultaneously accedes to and challenges the linear progress believed to exist under modernist perceptions of time. I also expand my discussion of chronopolitics to include perceptions of time beyond the Western norm, drawing significantly from Eshun and from Bruce Barnhart’s “Chronopolitics and Race, Rag-Time and Symphonic Time in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*,” the latter of which provides a valuable history regarding how and why Black America experiences time in ways that differ from white America. Using Barnhart’s work as a jumping-off point, I conduct close readings of songs from Monáe’s *Dirty Computer*, scenes from the album’s accompanying emotion picture, and moments from the various short stories that make up *The Memory Librarian*. Through this direct analysis of her work, I illustrate the capacity of Monáe’s Afrofuturist world-building to destabilize modernist time—which critically includes narratives of national memory that disregard extreme racial violence and ongoing institutional racism in the United States. Lastly, I place Monáe’s album and book in conversation with Black political texts that provide backing for my argument that Afrofuturism as a whole, and particularly Monáe’s *Dirty Computer* world, works to overcome white America’s willful false national memory, the greatest barrier to racial equality in the United States.²⁹

The second chapter of my thesis, “Afrofuturism and the Neo-Slave Narrative,” builds on the previous chapter and connects Afrofuturist literature with the tradition of the neo-slave narrative. I extend arguments from Vint’s “‘Only By Experience’: Embodiment and the Limitations of Realism in the Neo-Slave Narrative”—in conjunction with Lavender and Hassler-Forest’s analysis of the cyborg/android figure as representative of Black alienation—in order to

²⁹ Though bold, I believe this statement to be accurate. After all, a country cannot remedy its racially violent systems if it refuses to believe they still exist or ever have existed.

read Monáe’s “dirty computers” as reflections of Black objectification and commodification that dates back to the trauma of slavery. I also draw upon Schalk’s *Bodyminds Reimagined* to compare language of “Othering” used to degrade disabled and otherwise marginalized peoples with the language of estrangement used to isolate and vilify “dirty computers” in the future America of New Dawn. I then perform close-readings of scenes from the *Dirty Computer* storyworld, including reading the fight-scene in “Nevermind,” the second story from *The Memory Librarian*, in connection with police violence against Black bodies. Thinking about Monáe’s *Dirty Computer* in relation to Baldwin’s warnings concerning police brutality in his essay “Nothing Personal,” I then read several instances of imprisonment of “dirty computers” as illustrative of a modern legalized form of Black enslavement. In uniting Afrofuturist and neo-slave narrative discourses, I aim to highlight the fight Monáe’s work wages against contemporary oppression of those who do not fit into the white patriarchal mold—specifically the Black femme-presenting queer individual.

Finally, my concluding chapter, “Queering the Future,” locates elements that distinguish Monáe’s Afrofuturism from previous products of the genre. Namely, Monáe’s inclusion of an array of queer identities and her presentation of overt femme sexuality—particularly in her emotion picture and in the lyrics of songs across *Dirty Computer*—serve to differentiate Monáe’s Afrofuturist worlds from those constructed by her peers.³⁰ I elucidate the importance of representation in popular media as a prerequisite for individuals from marginalized groups to be able to imagine futures for themselves and for others that share their identity. Turning to Audre Lorde’s collection of essays *Sister Outsider*—primarily “Uses of the Erotic”—I explore the radical potential of femme love. Additionally, I adopt arguments from Schalk’s *Bodyminds*

³⁰ There is much argument in queer theory as to the meaning of the word queer. Here, I use it to denote any gender or sexuality non-conforming identity that may fall under the LGBTQ+ umbrella.

Reimagined to bolster my claim that Monáe's depiction of queer bodies is in and of itself an act of rebellion, as it disrupts binaries imposed by the Western cultures of both her imagined New Dawn and of contemporary America. I conclude my thesis with a consideration of the future possibilities that Monáe's queer world-building hints at, again hinting at how these possibilities differ from those imagined by her contemporaries.

Chapter 1: Chronopolitics of the American Dream

Any discussion of the cultural import of Monáe’s work, or of Afrofuturism on the whole, would be severely lacking without acknowledgement of chronopolitics’ centrality in the Afrofuturist framework. Afrofuturism, in each of its many iterations,¹ is birthed from the awareness that capitalism—including capitalist time’s belief in linear progress—does not serve the Black subject and is, in fact, built on the continuing exploitation of Black labor. Amiri Baraka, perhaps the foremost writer and thinker of the Black Arts Movement, succinctly sums up the impetus for Afrofuturist art in writing that “Machines, the entire technology of the West, is just that, the technology of the West...The actual *beginnings* of our [the African diaspora] expression are post Western (just as they are certainly pre-western).²” Baraka’s indictment of Western technology is particularly poignant when it comes to the United States, a nation that continues to erase any of its history that does not depict the nation as the forerunner of progress and equality. Capitalist time in the United States, also usefully conceived of as “official time” by Bruce Barnhart,³ inherently perpetuates the narrative that the United States has always been the bastion of freedom and opportunity. Without such a narrative, the “American Dream” and its accompanying insistence on American exceptionalism could not exist. For this reason, America’s idea of itself—and therefore white Americans’ idea of themselves—hinges on a linear view of progress.

Sociologists Kenneth A. Bollen and Larry J. Griffin present evidence for the whitewashing of American history that is produced by a belief in linear progress in their study

¹ Lavender theorizes Afrofuturism as not just a literary genre, but as an artistic aesthetic, a reading praxis, and a vessel for cultural critique that spans media modes.

² Baraka, “Technology and Ethos,” 1.

³ Barnhart, “Chronopolitics and Race,” 553.

“What Do These Memories Do? Civil Rights Remembrance and Racial Attitudes.” The study consisted of asking several hundred respondents to name up to four of the most important national and world events from 1930 to the present.⁴ Of the respondents who listed the Civil Rights Movement as one of the most significant events in recent history,⁵ less than fifteen out of approximately five hundred respondents⁶ offered any critical commentary on the Movement or its results. Although this statistic could be taken to positively reflect liberal racial attitudes amongst present-day Americans, the nature of respondents’ reasons for listing the Civil Rights Movement as a crucial event are telling of the denial of ongoing systemic racism that dominates America’s national memory discourse. Americans who recalled the Civil Rights Movement, white and Black alike,⁷ overwhelmingly invoked an interpretation of the Movement as the event that redeemed the United States from its racist past.⁸ Griffin and Bollen provide reasoning for this consensus in their explication of mnemonic socialization, whereby people are subconsciously taught “what, how, and when to remember,” so that interested groups and memory entrepreneurs—in this case including, but not limited to, the United States government and conservative news outlets—can render “recollections more stable and resistant to eccentric

⁴ At the same of this survey the “present” was 1993. Griffin and Bollen’s article was published in 2009 and contains additional surveys and research that extends to that year. I intentionally mention the 1993 survey because it was the most comprehensive and included the largest sample.

⁵ It’s important to note that few white respondents mentioned the Civil Rights Movement as their first recalled event between 1930-1993 and very few respondents, regardless of race, referenced specific instances of extreme anti-Black violence during the Movement.

⁶ This figure includes the 1993 survey as well as ones from 1985 and 2000-2001.

⁷ The study does not specify response rates of other racial demographics. Additionally, I believe (or at least hope) that it is likely that responses are more cognizant of ongoing race issues in America following the Black Lives Matter Movement.

⁸ Griffin and Bollen, “What Do These Memories Do?,” 598.

or unsanctioned interpretations.”⁹ In this manner, official American memory discourse that depicts a whitewashed and redemptive story of race relations in the United States has been established. In effect, this discourse is an attempt to “blot out time.”¹⁰ It creates a vision of an America free of racism in the present and thereby communicates that America’s racial past need not be remembered.

Afrofuturism stems from the necessity of combatting “official” memory and the Western technologies that inevitably reinforce it.¹¹ I believe, in fact, that this is the central goal of Monáe’s Afrofuturist projects. *Dirty Computer* especially exhibits a desire to challenge America’s memory discourse through its song lyrics, emotion picture, and aptly titled accompanying book *The Memory Librarian*. Monáe uses the multi-modal dimensions of her Afrofuturist *Dirty Computer* world to disrupt linear capitalist time in a variety of fashions, and in doing so she posits an alternative queer, Black temporality. The disruption that flows through Monáe’s art is perhaps most indiscernible within the confines of her music, but the more subconscious subversion of her lyrical and sonic choices is no less potent because of its subtlety. Throughout the *Dirty Computer* album, Monáe consistently utilizes the three core tenants of Afrofuturism as outlined by Lavender. She does so in a variety of ways, one of the most effective of which is her invocation of the Black call-and-response tradition, which dates back to slave spirituals. In adopting call-and-response in several songs over the course of *Dirty Computer*, Monáe places herself within a revolutionary tradition while also communicating the bearing of

⁹ Griffin and Bollen, 596.

¹⁰ Barnhart, “Chronopolitics of Race,” 559.

¹¹ I am in agreement with Baraka’s claim in “Technology and Ethos that “Machines have the morality of their inventors.” Machines constructed under Western capitalism in the United States reinforce capitalism and its necessary mythos (e.g. American exceptionalism).

slavery on present struggles for racial equality. Just as slave songs often contained coded messages of resistance,¹² Monáe’s music employs call-and-response as a call to collective action.¹³ Coupled with lyricism that combines advocacy for active and passive modes of resistance with indictments of hierarchies of power, Monáe’s usage of call-and-response underscores *Dirty Computer*’s messages of resistance and reimaginings of the future. Call-and-response features in some form in more than half of the tracks on *Dirty Computer*, but it’s effect is arguably most potent on “Take A Byte” and “Screwed.”¹⁴ In order to understand what Monáe is communicating in “Take A Byte,” a song that ostensibly appears to simply be about an affair with a lover of a different social/racial/class status, it is necessary to turn to what Monáe herself has said about the structure of her album. She notes that *Dirty Computer* is split into three chapters: Reckoning, Celebration, and Reclamation. “Take A Byte,” the third song on the tracklist, is firmly situated on the “Reckoning” side of the album, in which Monáe identifies forms of oppression while simultaneously voicing passionate resistances to those oppressions.¹⁵ Given this information, I interpret “Take a Byte” as focusing not primarily on femme sexual desire as resistance and expression of joy, as “Pynk” and other tracks in the “Celebration” section do, but rather as a song concerned with white patriarchy’s “othering” of the Black female

¹² Lavender, *Afrofuturism Rising*, 25.

¹³ My attunement to call-and-response in Monáe’s work is largely indebted to Hassler-Forest, who discusses Monáe’s use of call-and-response as a mobilizing force in political songs she has released outside of album cycles in “Vector 5: Postcapitalism” of his work *Janelle Monáe’s Queer Afrofuturism*.

¹⁴ I say “in some form” because Monáe only utilizes call-and-response in a more traditional fashion in two songs, each of which contain a feature (“Screwed” feat. Zoe Kravitz and “I Got the Juice” feat. Pharrell Williams). In other tracks, what I read as call-and response is denoted by lines in parentheses in which Monáe typically echoes some -version of the line she has just sung. I still take these lines to be in the call-and-response tradition because they often consist of calls to action and, following Lavender’s Afrofuturist reading praxis, engage the listener as the respondent.

¹⁵ Hassler-Forest, *Janelle Monáe’s Queer Afrofuturism*, 66.

body as deviant. Hassler-Forest interprets the song in a similar manner, but reads the line “Your code is programmed not to love me”¹⁶ as referring to taboos concerning same-sex attraction.¹⁷ While I believe Hassler-Forest’s interpretation to be feasible and supported by lyrical evidence, I understand “Take a Byte” as representing the relationship between white patriarchal America and Black Americans. I interpret the line “Your code is programmed not to love me” as referring to America’s history of dehumanizing and oppressing the Black subject. I find support for such a claim in what I take to be Monáe’s adoption of call-and-response, a series of parenthetical echoings of preceding lyrics that sensually implore the subject of her song to “(Go on and help yourself),” “(Oh won’t you just take a byte).”¹⁸ Taking a “byte” as opposed to a “bite” connotes taking a bit of one’s data, a piece of the code that comprises a person. Monáe’s invitation to “help yourself” communicates the message that white America will exploit the Black body, whether they love the Black subject or not and whether or not the Black subject consents to their body being used for labor.

Monáe’s use of call-and-response to initiate the transhistoric feedback loop, black conscious network, and hope impulse is at its most joyously rebellious in “Screwed,” the penultimate track in the “Reckoning” chapter of *Dirty Computer*. Featuring Zoë Kravitz, a Black woman who dates both men and women, “Screwed” constitutes a sonic middle finger to white patriarchy.¹⁹ Lyrics like “You’ve fucked the world up now/We’ll fuck it all back down/Let’s get screwed” express the tongue in cheek humor with which Monáe often responds to a system

¹⁶ Monáe, “Take A Byte,” 0:28-0:30.

¹⁷ Hassler-Forest, *Janelle Monáe’s Queer Afrofuturism*, 70.

¹⁸ Monáe, “Take A Byte,” 3:14-3:16, 3:09-3:11.

¹⁹ Kravitz has resisted publicly labeling her sexual identity and I only mention here that she dates both men and women to underscore Monáe’s intentional choice to work primarily with artists and writers who do not identify as heterosexual—or in some way defy the gender binary—on the products of *Dirty Computer*.

meant to oppress and suppress queer and/or Black individuals like herself. The double entendres of “We’ll fuck it all back down” and “Let’s get screwed” represent, on one hand, the way in which our nation has been “screwed” up by a capitalist society that prioritizes material gain and the concerns of the wealthy elite. On the other hand, the dual meanings of “screwed” and “fuck” denote Monáe’s belief in the political potential of femme sexual expression and overt Black joy. An understanding of “Screwed” as advocating for collective Black joy and freedom is supported by the nearly hour-long *Dirty Computer* emotion picture, which provides a visual frame of reference for Monáe’s Afrofuturist world. The emotion picture centers on Monáe’s *Dirty Computer* persona, Jane 57821, undergoing memory wiping at a New Dawn Facility.²⁰ In the dystopian America of *Dirty Computer*, anyone deemed deviant—a.k.a. queer, Black, or otherwise outside of the white heteronormative mold—is labeled a “dirty computer” and an enemy of New Dawn. Jane, a queer Black woman, is captured by New Dawn and brought to their facility for memory wiping because she is a leader of a group of women-identified dirty computers and harbors memories of queer love, unsanctioned hideouts, and parties filled to the brim with raucous Black joy. Over the course of the emotion picture, a series of Jane’s memories are played back by New Dawn memory technicians as they prepare to delete Jane’s unauthorized knowledge. The idea that one can have “unsanctioned” memories of America’s past mirrors Griffin and Bollen’s study in “What Do These Memories Do?,” in which they discussed how governments and other memory entrepreneurs mnemonically socialize populations by inculcating them with accepted historical narratives. All products of Monáe’s *Dirty Computer* album cycle are directly concerned with contemporary race and gender struggles in America, as depicted in the memory during which “Screwed” plays in the emotion picture. The memory

²⁰ New Dawn is this dystopian world’s name for the United States and the authoritarian government that controls it.

opens to Jane and friends running through a dilapidated building, trying to evade the sensors of New Dawn surveillance drones. Despite the technology of the state tailing Jane's crew in hot pursuit, the "Screwed" memory feels light and exuberant. Jane and her fellow dirty computers are clad in bright clothing—a stark contrast to the crisp and total white that dominates the attire and architecture at the New Dawn facility—and they laugh and dance throughout the song, clearly reveling in one another's company. Jane's crew, all women with the exception of her male lover Ché, all join in in the call-and-response tradition utilized throughout "Screwed," repeating, emphasizing, and adding to Monáe's message of communal resistance.²¹ The ecstatic Black love of the "Screwed" memory is broken up when New Dawn police arrest one of Jane's friends and, back in the present of the New Dawn facility, the memory technicians delete this rebellious memory from Jane's mind. Such an ending is necessary for the emotion picture given its placement in the first half of the film and "Screwed's" position in the "Reckoning" chapter of *Dirty Computer*. However, even given the disheartening ending of the memory, its depiction of Black joy and underground parties that have been outlawed by the government sends a firm message that Jane and her friends will continue to wage a fight against their oppressors. "Screwed" is a song and video that taps into a history of Black subjugation via call-and-response, but instead of sulking, Jane's group acts as a covert black networked consciousness that continues to find hope in their reliance on one another.

I read other tracks from the "Reckoning" section of Monáe's album as waging additional critiques of white America and its accompanying beliefs in American exceptionalism and a capitalist conception of time. This critique is especially apparent in "Crazy, Classic, Life," the second track on *Dirty Computer*. "Crazy, Classic, Life" opens with credos of American

²¹ The "Screwed" memory extends from 14:53-18:35 in Monáe's *Dirty Computer* emotion picture.

exceptionalism that are directly lifted from the opening lines of the Declaration of Independence. Monáe invokes the narrative that “all men and women are created equal/And that they are endowed by their Creator/With certain unalienable rights,”²² only to illustrate the hypocrisy of such a statement at the song’s close, during which a rapped verse depicts a Black person being jailed for the same crime their white friend is let off for. The song continues to point out discrepancies between how America presents itself and what America’s reality is with lines like “I’m not America’s nightmare/I’m the American Dream.” Such a statement reveals the reality that America’s wealth and vision of itself as the world’s greatest nation hinges on its exploitation of Blackness. Systematic “othering” is essential to the maintenance of the American mythos of exceptionalism. For America to be exceptional, those Americans who are included in the American Dream promised in the Declaration of Independence (i.e. white, male, cis het Americans) must be set in opposition to some group(s) that they are exceptional in relation to. The founding myth of America as the city on the hill has, therefore, always been intended to be exclusionary to those outside of the bounds of whiteness.

Monáe performs her most scathing and direct censure of the hypocrisy of the American Dream in the closing track of *Dirty Computer*, “Americans.” In the first verse of the song, Monáe adopts the persona of a heterosexual white man, singing “I like my woman in the kitchen/I teach my children superstitions...I pledge allegiance to the flag/Learned the words from my mom and dad/Cross my heart and I hope to die/With a big old piece of American pie.”²³ By taking on the perspective of a white man in this first verse, Monáe highlights the values of white patriarchy, the group for whom the American Dream was implicitly promised. The man’s

²² Monáe, “Crazy, Classic, Life,” 0:06-0:14.

²³ Monáe, “Americans,” 0:48-0:58, 1:07-1:17.

point of view that Monáe affects exposes realities of sexism and indoctrination that underlie white supremacy in the Western world as a whole and in the United States in particular. Especially worth noting are the lines “I teach my children my children superstitions” and “Learned the words from my mom and dad.” The former is more overtly ominous, alluding to the idea that children learn the tenants of white supremacy—of which racism and sexism are central—from their parents at a young age. The word superstition elicits the possibility of a wide range of conspiracy theories ranging from medical misinformation to beliefs in genetic racial superiority. The lyric “Learned the words from my mom and dad,” though seemingly a harmless nod to patriotism, subtly communicates the idea that admission into the American Dream is in some way an inherited property from one’s similarly American ancestry.²⁴ In the next verse of “Americans,” Monáe performs in what is apparently her own personal voice, elucidating the ways in which alleged equal access to the American Dream is a fraudulent lie used to encourage and exploit labor from marginalized groups. She sings, “Seventy-nine cent to your dollar... You see my color before my vision” and punches home the hypocrisy of the American Dream by repeating the closing lines of the first verse: “I pledge allegiance to the flag/Learned the words from my mom and dad/Cross my heart and I hope to die/With a big old piece of American pie.”²⁵ With the opening lyrics of this verse in my mind, the closing “Cross my heart and I hope to die/With a big old piece of American pie” takes on new meaning. The word “die” bears greater weight in relation to the oppressed Black female subject, who, in an era of more discussion surrounding police brutality, must quite literally put her life on the line in the aims of achieving equality and equity. A piece of the American pie no longer seems promised, as it does through

²⁴ I owe the association of this lyric with the American Dream as genetic to Hassler-Forest (77), with whom I agree.

²⁵ Monáe, “Americans,” 1:46-2:00, 2:05-2:14.

the white man's perspective of the first verse. Rather, "American pie" now represents a fight to no longer be seen as inferior, over which Black blood is being shed.

Despite its bleak depiction of racial and gendered oppression in the United States, I view "Americans" as being one of the most directly hopeful songs on *Dirty Computer*. Monáe begins and ends the track with calls to collective action, opening with her singing "Hold on, don't fight your war alone/Halo around you, don't have to face it on your own/We will win this fight," while backed by a choir of voices.²⁶ The ending of the track offers a more politically charged resistance to systems of oppression, as a man's voice authoritatively pronounces, "Until black people can come home/From a police stop without being shot in the head/This is not my America," along with similar indictments of oppression, all of which end with "This is not my America."²⁷ Monáe closes her album on a note that is both triumphant and rebellious. Rev. Dr. Sean McMillan, the man behind the aforementioned voice that asserts "This is not my America," provides the hopeful and revolutionary cry that "it's gon' be my America before it's all over." Monáe then speaks the album's final invitation to enter the collective struggle for equality, prompting listeners to "Please sign your name on the dotted line."²⁸ Viewed in connection with Monáe deeming the last four tracks of *Dirty Computer* the "Reclamation" chapter, the closing lines of "Americans" demonstrates an unwavering conviction that this nation can be saved and it is up to the collaborative effort of "dirty computers"—those on the margins—to (re)create the nation.

²⁶ Monáe, "Americans," 0:01-0:18.

²⁷ Monáe, "Americans," 2:57-3:04.

²⁸ Monáe, "Americans," 3:48-4:03.

In its condemnation of a white patriarchal United States that can still be salvaged, “Americans,” as with many of the other songs on *Dirty Computer*, activates all three essential elements of Afrofuturism as identified by Lavender. In referencing discrepancies in access to the American Dream, Monáe calls back to a long history of oppression in the United States, thereby initiating the transhistoric feedback loop and provoking her audience to consider who America has always been structured to uplift (the white straight man). At the same time, Monáe is linking marginalized groups in America via the song’s gospel-inspired intro and spoken word outro that unite those suffering various aspects of hierarchical oppression under a common struggle and aim—the fight to receive the same treatment as heterosexual white men. Through her calls to collective action and her message that no individual wages war against subjugation alone, Monáe taps into the black networked consciousness and provides her listeners with the glimpse of hope needed to spur them on towards activism.²⁹

Monáe’s *Dirty Computer* projects also perform the key Afrofuturist function of making her dystopian future America directly reflect the present material reality of the United States. Connections between New Dawn and contemporary America are most apparent in Monáe’s lyricism throughout *Dirty Computer*, like in the recital of the beginning of the Declaration of Independence that begins “Crazy, Classic, Life.” Songs like “Americans” directly reference various ongoing forms of oppressions in the United States and “Screwed” ends with a call-out of Donald Trump, president of the United States at the time of *Dirty Computer*’s release.³⁰ These mentions of pressing political and social issues of modern America serve to remind listeners of

²⁹ Monáe does not only address Black people in “Americans,” but she does specifically address systemic barriers to Black achievement of the American Dream. Her message throughout *Dirty Computer* is rooted in histories of Black oppression (the transhistorical feedback loop) which calls on a uniquely Black political consciousness.

³⁰ Monáe, “Screwed,” 4:45-4:49.

Monáe's album, and particularly of its highly dystopian emotion picture, that government ordered memory control is not as far removed or unrealistically authoritarian as it may appear. In fact, as Griffin and Bollen's study observed, it is already occurring.³¹

In a conceptually different manner, Monáe's *Dirty Computer* emotion picture also breaks the fourth wall separating science-fictional future and frightening present reality. As Hassler-Forest crucially observes, the material history of the music video as a means to promote an artist and their work "has strongly determined the aesthetics of the music video as a textual form in which the *absolute primacy of the performer-as-star* overshadows each attempt to perform a fictional character."³² The same applies to Monáe, who's status as a well-known and respected activist and cultural icon subverts any attempt that might be made to fully immerse viewers of her emotion picture into its dystopian projection of a future America. I argue, however, that the viewers' inability to not see Monáe first when presented with her character, Jane, actually serves the artistic intent of *Dirty Computer* and of Afrofuturist art in general. By breaking the wall between escapist science-fictional future and the realities of contemporary America, Monáe makes clear the bearing that the present inevitably will have on the future. In a similar vein, her choice to invoke credos of American exceptionalism throughout *Dirty Computer* serves to counteract narratives of official memory that treat the past as over and done with. Thus, Monáe's Afrofuturism connects past, present, and future in a way that rejects capitalist time's insistence on a linear view of progress. What makes Monáe's work even more revolutionary and resistant is the manner in which she manipulates a capitalist system to create

³¹ See the Griffin and Bollen quote featured on p. 17 of this thesis. Griffin and Bollen, "What Do These Memories Do?," 596.

³² Hassler-Forest, *Janelle Monáe's Queer Afrofuturism*, 24.

such Afrofuturist vistas. Hassler-Forest notes that Monáe owns the intellectual property, and therefore has complete autonomy over, all of her solo-project musical endeavors and the Afrofuturist storyworlds they have spawned.³³ At the same time, Monáe's albums are released through Bad Boy Records, an R&B and hip-hop label and a division of Sony Music Entertainment, which is one the highest-grossing record companies in the world. Monáe's record company affiliations are significant because music videos are often funded by record companies' promotional budgets.³⁴ My supposition that Monáe's *Dirty Computer* emotion picture was funded by her label seems to be backed by Sony's credit in the emotion picture's description on YouTube.³⁵ Monáe therefore employs capitalism to her advantage, maintaining full artistic control over her work—which is highly critical of capitalism's exploitation of Black and queer bodies—while getting a multibillion dollar corporation to front the costs of her world-building that posits Black futures beyond capitalism.

The first story in *The Memory Librarian*, “The Memory Librarian” follows a protagonist named Seshet, who, like Monáe herself, manipulates systems of white supremacy and racial capitalism to her advantage. Unlike, Monáe, however, Seshet realizes that she is a token Black representative of the authoritarian New Dawn society who is being used to make the government appear non-racist. Seshet is the Director Librarian of the Little Delta, a section of what was once the United States. In this capacity, Seshet is in charge of overseeing the memories of the Little Delta's inhabitants and ensuring that no errant memories or unauthorized events occur in her territory. “Unclean” memories are marked by surveillance drones, which have the power to

³³ Hassler-Forest, *Janelle Monáe's Queer Afrofuturism*, 25. Monáe's music and additional album-related projects are created in collaboration with the Wondaland Arts Society, a collective of artists founded by Monáe.

³⁴ Hassler-Forest, 24.

³⁵ Janelle Monáe, “Janelle Monáe-Dirty Computer [Emotion Picture].”

alight on people's heads and scan or wipe people's memories, or by memory banks, which allow people, particularly the poor, to exchange their memories for currency. Those caught harboring unsanctioned memories or too many memories can be labeled as dirty computers and are put on a New Dawn surveillance list or taken to a New Dawn facility for memory wiping if their activities are deemed threatening to the New Dawn government. Seshet serves in her role as Director Librarian for ten years, practicing a subversive Black subjectivity that enables her to mask her qualms regarding her job and her feelings about the microaggressions of her white employers.³⁶ Her desire to uphold New Dawn's oppressive order is finally shaken when she meets Alethia, a trans woman who has been marked as deviant due to her non-cisgender identity. Seshet falls in love with Alethia, sparking a romance that reveals to Seshet dark secrets of New Dawn that have been kept from her. She learns that Alethia, a chemist, is a remixer of a popular drug among underground partiers that is creating unsanctioned memories, which are actually combinations of both memory and dream. Seshet, as part of a grand mission to stop unaccounted for memory flooding of New Dawn's memory receptors, begins taking one of Alethia's remixes. Prior to taking this remix, Seshet, as with other inhabitants of the "white city"—the name given to Little Delta by those who live on its margins and hidden in its shadows—cannot remember her dreams, if she has the capacity to dream at all. Under the guidance of Alethia and her remix, Seshet begins to dream again and, just as crucially, remember that which she or New Dawn had suppressed. By leaving the confines of the white city, Seshet learns that "what was once presumed lost, forgotten, soiled, and stripped away can be found, can be reclaimed and

³⁶ In *Afrofuturism Rising*, Lavender discusses ways in which Black individuals often have to mask their feelings in order to move upward in hostile predominantly white working environments (141). In *Janelle Monáe's Queer Afrofuturism*, Hassler-Forest similarly says that Black people have to at least appear to assimilate to whiteness to move up the ladder in a capitalist society (119).

resurrected, remixed, and revived.”³⁷ The drug Alethia has created is a remixed version of Nevermind, the drug used by New Dawn to wipe the memories of dirty computers. Her ability to flip the drug’s original intended use on its head, remixing it so that New Dawn’s weapons of erasure may actually be used to help one remember, reflects Sheree Renée Thomas’ conviction that history that society has intentionally erased can still be recovered and made useful to those groups from whom memory was stolen. Once made aware of the memories that New Dawn erased from her mind when she became Director Librarian, Seshet laments that, “Her life was the obelisk, and the obelisk is a lie. She has always known that, but she thought its lie could be in the service of the greater good... Little Delta has become a byword for everything good New Dawn has to offer this country. But her mother never left.”³⁸ Alethia’s Nevermind remix catalyzes Seshet’s memory, leading Seshet to remember that her mother, a woman who was critical of New Dawn’s takeover of the United States and frequently traveled outside of its borders when such a trip was still allowed, was turned in to New Dawn by her father so he could marry his mistress. Seshet recalls that the search for her mother was the reason she had initially wanted to become a Librarian, but all Librarians’ memories are erased when they take the position. Seshet’s employers, who frequently tapped her memories and tracked her activity, knew that Seshet believed her mother to have abandoned her and they also knew that her mother had been turned into a complacent, memory-wiped worker thirty years prior. The realization of this betrayal allows Seshet to finally come to terms with the extent of New Dawn’s abuses—abuses that Seshet herself was complicit in, even if not by intention.

³⁷ Thomas, “And So Shaped the World,” 4.

³⁸ Janelle Monáe, “The Memory Librarian,” *The Memory Librarian*, 74. The obelisk is the name for New Dawn’s headquarters (where Seshet works) in the Little Delta.

The change that Seshet's character undergoes in "The Memory Librarian" can be understood as a shift in Seshet's relationships to time and memory. Meeting Alethia launches Seshet into the underbelly of Little Delta's society, opening the door for Seshet to patronize off-the-grid dive bars, smoke marijuana, and experiment with Nevermind remixes that renew her capacity to dream and shift her perspective regarding memory. Prior to her relationship with Alethia, Seshet tampers with her own memories, erasing that which she does not want to remember with little hesitation. The memories that surface during drug-induced dreams teach Seshet the necessity of knowing and understanding one's past in order to direct future action. Significantly, it is only through regaining the ability to dream that Seshet is able to break out of a capitalist mode of time in which the past is quickly forgotten and only the present matters. Emphasis on dreaming or imagining is paramount to Afrofuturism, as the end goal of Afrofuturism is to imagine Black futures outside of the confines of white supremacy.³⁹ Monáe makes it clear that this is one of the primary aims of *The Memory Librarian* in the book's introduction, "Breaking Dawn." "Breaking Dawn" provides an abridged overview of New Dawn's takeover of the United States, hinting at burgeoning resistance in its closing lines, which warn that, "To save memory, it was time to stop living only within the time we'd been given...Beyond time and memory—where the computer cannot reach—is dreaming."⁴⁰ Monáe's introduction to her short story collection acts as an appeal to enter into the world of dreaming as a means of envisioning futures in which Black, queer, and otherwise marginalized lives are able to survive and thrive. "Breaking Dawn" directly addresses those who live in the dystopian world

³⁹ Some critiques, like Sheree Renée Thomas use the word "dream" to imagine the vast possible Black futures projected by Afrofuturism, while others, like Lavender and Alondra Nelson, opt to think in terms of imagining. For the purposes of this thesis, I treat the terms as interchangeable.

⁴⁰ Monáe, *The Memory Librarian*, XI.

of *Dirty Computer*, but Monáe makes it clear that her message is made for people of the here and now with indictments of America along the lines of, “Even before the Dawn, we lived in a nation that asked us to forget in order to find wholeness, but memory of who we’ve been—of who we’ve been punished for being—was always the only map into tomorrow.”⁴¹ In prefacing her science-fictional work with grounding in present-day America, Monáe initiates the transhistoric feedback loop, both within her text, and within her readers, who are prompted to consider long-standing hierarchical oppression within the United States while they read the remainder of *The Memory Librarian*.⁴² Simultaneously, “Breaking Dawn” delineates clear differences between time from the standpoint of racial capitalism—which encourages forgetting Black histories of suffering in the Western world in order for Black people to assimilate to a view of America as the benchmark of progress—and time as something plural, fluctuating, and promising endless potential futures.⁴³ The key to transitioning from one experience of time to the other is tapping into the black networked consciousness, a frame a mind that Seshet begins her transition into when she meets Alethia.⁴⁴ Seshet’s transformation in “The Memory Librarian” is thus one of escaping the bounds of an “official time” that conceptualizes little difference between past,

⁴¹ Monáe, X.

⁴² In *Afrofuturism Rising*, Lavender discusses Afrofuturism as reading praxis at length. When the transhistoric feedback loop, black networked consciousness, and hope impulse are invoked in a text, they are invoked, too, in the reader, according to Lavender. This is the capacity of Afrofuturist art to prompt activism from those who encounter it.

⁴³ White supremacy’s drive to erase histories of oppression clearly extend to Indigenous peoples of the United States as well as other marginalized groups. I only specifically mention Blackness in the body of this thesis because my focus is on Afrofuturism, the concern of which is in imaging Black futures.

⁴⁴ Lavender and those who have theorized about the black networked consciousness before him, like Richard Wright, imply that the black networked consciousness can only be tapped into by Black people. This seems to me to certainly be true, but I do think non-Black individuals can acquire a Black political consciousness from their engagement with Afrofuturism and other forms of Black political art.

present, and future, into an understanding of time in which the past, present, and future are interlocking and consistently exerting influence over one another.⁴⁵

In other stories from *The Memory Librarian*, Monáe tackles the concept of time more directly. “Save Changes,” “Timebox,” and “Timebox (Altered)” all deal with disruptions of linear time. The protagonist of “Save Changes,” Amber, comes from a family that has been torn apart by New Dawn. Her father is dead and her mother exists in a catatonic state brought on by memory-wiping that she endured due to her rebellions against New Dawn a few years earlier.⁴⁶ Amber’s father, on his deathbed, left Amber and her sister, Larry, each a piece of jewelry, telling Amber that the larimar stone he was entrusting her with had the capacity to turn back time but could be used only once by any single individual. When Larry is arrested following a party, Amber decides to use the stone to travel back in time to the point at which the story began. Armed with new knowledge of her mother’s capable mental condition and a realization that her family will forever be viewed as enemies of the state, Amber uses the second chance time travel has granted her to help her family escape to a destination unknown. The message Monáe is trying to communicate about time in “Save Changes” can best be summed up by what Amber’s father tells Amber and Larry when he gives them the larimar stone and a bee trapped in amber, respectively. He instructs Larry to “Remember that keeping time matters as much as rushing into the future” and advises Amber that “The only way to change the future is to hold the past.”⁴⁷ His emphasis on living in the present and remembering the past in order to create a better future directly contrasts the edicts of capitalist time, which preach messages of linear progress and the

⁴⁵ Barnhart, “Chronopolitics and Race,” 563.

⁴⁶ Amber’s mother actually escaped the New Dawn facilities with her memory in-tact because Amber’s father went back in time to save her from the Nevermind gas. However, Amber goes not know this until the end of “Save Changes” and it does not change the weight of responsibility Amber carries as a young head-of-household.

⁴⁷ Monáe, *The Memory Librarian*, 241.

future as now. Amber literally holds the past, both in the larimar stone's power to send her back in time and in the constant reminder of her father—as well as of New Dawn's violence against her family—that wearing the larimar necklace provides her. Amber's time travel and her ultimate decision to lead her family off-the-grid, away from New Dawn's clutches, signals the capacity engaging with the past has to guide future action. The caveat to utilizing the past, however, is that the past cannot be fabricated in the way that American history has been. James Baldwin is correct in his assertion that “An invented past can never be used; it cracks and crumbles under the pressure of life.”⁴⁸ America has whitewashed its national history, burying its moments of severest racial violence in order to imagine itself as the great nation it has always claimed to be. Such willful amnesia on the part of the nation and its people has engendered a “crisis of imagination,” preventing America from envisioning any future for itself beyond its founding mythos rooted in white supremacy and hierarchical oppression.⁴⁹ Afrofuturist art attempts to overcome the stifling of imagination generated by a linear belief in progress, and I argue that Monáe's work succeeds in offering future possibilities for what America may still become.

“Timebox” and “Timebox (Altered)” respectively present critiques of and solutions to the United States' temporal stagnation. “Timebox,” the first of the two stories, follows Raven and her girlfriend Akilah as they move into a new apartment. Raven quickly realizes that the apartment's pantry has the inexplicable power to stop or reset time. One can sit in the pantry for hours and when they step out of it the time in the outside world will be the same as it was when they entered the pantry. Raven sees the pantry as an opportunity to extend her busy schedule across a larger expanse of time so she can catch up on sleep and spend more time with Akilah.

⁴⁸ James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 81.

⁴⁹ Hassler-Forest, *Janelle Monáe's Queer Afrofuturism*, 117.

Akilah, however, sees Raven's plans for the pantry as selfish and exhorts her to realize that "This room *severs our relationship to time*. We could—we could end capitalism!"⁵⁰ Akilah wants to lease the pantry out, free of charge, to community organizers and other activists so she can create meaningful change in the Black community. She writes a blog post to such an effect, without Raven's advance knowledge or permission, and positions the closet as a remedy for time that has been stolen from Black bodies through the institutions of slavery, the laws of Jim Crow, and continuing systematic oppression. While Akilah is certainly right that Black people's time and labor have consistently been stolen and exploited since the founding days of the United States, I think Monáe warns against Akilah's solutions. We should not *sever our relationship to time*; this is the precise problem with a linear conception of progress. Barnhart expresses the issue with Akilah's embrace of atemporality in his critique of the patron from James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. Barnhart writes that "Collective action, political struggle, and any attempt to change or ameliorate injustice he considers futile because such acts are based on a...belief in a future qualitatively different from the present."⁵¹ Akilah falls into this trap at the end of "Save Changes," deciding to have her landlady seal her into the pantry, despite previously petitioning to use it for community welfare. She has been entranced by the belief that she need not worry about the past or future, and thus, in the span of a week in her new apartment, fallen victim to the self-interestedness that capitalist time promotes. Akilah's conviction that embracing atemporality will help her do good reminds me of Audre Lorde's warning in "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in which she argues that using the tools of patriarchy "means that only the most narrow parameters of change are possible and

⁵⁰ Monáe, *The Memory Librarian*, 184.

⁵¹ Barnhart, "Chronopolitics and Race," 563.

allowable.”⁵² Akilah wants to dismantle capitalism using a capitalist mode of thought and such a thing simply cannot be achieved. At best, one can manipulate capitalism’s framework to create subversive works that advocate for change, as Monáe herself has done throughout her career.

“Timebox (Altered),” a story clearly meant to be read in connection to “Timebox” based on their shared titles, considers alternate timelines that can be imagined as solutions to racial capitalism. Unlike its pessimistic counterpart, “Timebox,” “Timebox (Altered)” is focused on imagining Black futures rather than critiquing how capitalist modes of time and progress fail anyone that falls outside of white patriarchy’s privileged classes. The story features *The Memory Librarian*’s youngest protagonists, Bug, their brother Artis, and their friends Ola and Trel, all of whom live in a poor community called Freewheel on the fringes of New Dawn’s patrols. Together, under Bug’s leadership, the group builds an altar out of artifacts found in an abandoned field and are greeted by the sudden appearance of Mx. Tangee, a femme, non-binary elder who tells them they are on sacred land that was once home to indigenous tribes of America. One by one the children enter the altar and are mystically transported into a future that varies depending on the child’s aspirations. Bug sees a future in which his mother is alive again and all the art supplies he could need are at his disposal, Ola is transported into a prosperous future Freewheel of which she is the mayor, and so on. Monáe’s message in this story is reflected in what Bug tells his friends when he emerges from the ark: “You can’t build a future if you don’t dream it.”⁵³ Monáe does not offer any one solution in *The Memory Librarian*; she posits a multitude of possible futures, all of which offer chances for Black children like Bug and Ola that they are not available to them under the racial and financial oppression they currently face. In

⁵² Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools,” 1.

⁵³ Monáe, *The Memory Librarian*, 281.

doing so, Monáe's work embodies Hassler-Forest's belief that utopia's cannot offer a predetermined outcome but instead must be inclusive to the needs and desires of people of all kinds by presenting endless paths into the future.⁵⁴ The essential purpose and effect of the stories featured in *The Memory Librarian* is that "By creating temporal complications and anachronistic episodes that disturb the linear time of progress, these futurisms adjust the temporal logics that condemned black subjects to prehistory."⁵⁵ In an America in which Black pasts are being erased to a greater extent by the day, just acknowledging Black history and imagining Black futures beyond the grasp of capitalism is political in and of itself.

⁵⁴ Hassler-Forest, "Chronopolitics and Race," 117.

⁵⁵ Eshun, "Further Considerations," 297.

Chapter 2: Afrofuturism and the Neo-Slave Narrative

Afrofuturism's invocation of the transhistoric feedback loop, along with numerous Afrofuturist theorists' insistence that Afrofuturism is a response to Black alienation dating back to Western enslavement of Africans, leads me to consider Monáe's world-building through the lens of the neo-slave narrative. I find support for such a reading in the *Dirty Computer* album, its accompanying emotion picture, and especially in the short stories of *The Memory Librarian*. Additionally, Sheryl Vint's essay "Only By Experience: Embodiment and the Limitations of Realism in the Neo-Slave Narrative," has expanded my view of what constitutes a neo-slave narrative and prompted a reading of *The Memory Librarian* as such. Vint identifies three categories of the neo-slave narrative, the last of which centers on tracing the traumatic legacy of slavery on future generations.¹ I argue that Monáe's work, both in *Dirty Computer* and *The Metropolis Cycle*, acts as this third kind of neo-slave narrative. Following in the footsteps of Black revolutionary writers before her, Monáe uses metaphors of disembodiment linking Blackness to mechanization in order to represent the experience of Black alienation produced by the continuing trauma of slavery.² In Monáe's first three albums, which make up the *Metropolis Cycle*, Monáe's fictional persona, Cyndi Mayweather, is an android. *Dirty Computer* takes a different approach, doing away with overt mechanized representations and instead using the language of the mechanical to symbolize systematic "othering" of those who do not meet the norms of white patriarchy. The qualifier "dirty" in the "dirty computer" moniker carries connotations of racial impurity and sexual deviance often used to degrade the Black female

¹ Vint, p. 241.

² In *Afrofuturism Rising*, Lavender traces pre-Afrofuturistic texts. One of these is Richard Wright's *Native Son*, which Lavender believes can be read as Afrofuturism due to Bigger Thomas' alienation being represented with imagery of Bigger Thomas as metallic and cyborg-like.

body.³ The use of the word “computer” associates the Black, or otherwise “deviant,” body with machines, thereby denying Black subjectivity. Whether it be the figure of the android or that of the dirty computer, Monáe’s lexically “othered” characters never actually appear as distinctly robotic or otherwise non-human in their attributes. Rather, the mechanical language used to identify Monáe’s protagonists reflects the historical construction of “race...as a labor-based technology.”⁴ Monáe’s attachment of queer, femme, and/or Black characters to mechanical language is situated in a centuries-long history of commodified Black existence in the Western world. As Lavender notes, such language is used in Afrofuturism to enact the transhistoric feedback loop and exhibit the manner in which the historical construction of the Black body as object continues into the present day. In *Dirty Computer*, Monáe’s depiction of “otherness” via the dirty computer label serves to demonstrate the manner in which commodification of Blackness has had the dual effect of simultaneously emphasizing and deemphasizing the Black body as such. By this, I mean that Black people, dating from the initial instance of Black enslavement by the Western world, have been societally foregrounded as bodies, and not as minds. American construction of the Black individual as merely a body ranges from exploitation of slaves’ manual labor, to over-sexualization of the Black woman’s body, to erasure of Black intellectual achievements and beyond. The consequence of Black bodies always being defined from the outside, by white systems, has been a detached relationship between Black peoples and their own bodies.⁵ This disembodiment has included a disavowal of femme sexuality and other

³ Hassler-Forest, *Janelle Monáe’s Queer Afrofuturism*, 65.

⁴ Lavender, *Afrofuturism Rising*, 128.

⁵ Vint discusses white and Black America’s relationship to the Black body in “Only by Experience,” particularly in relation to Dana’s experience of dis(embodiment) in “Kindred” (251).

aspects of Black bodily expression for fear that embrace of the body will fuel racist white stereotypes regarding Blackness.⁶

Given my understanding of “dirty computers” as invoking America’s long-standing tradition of degrading feminine, queer, and Black embodiment, I find it productive to read Monáe’s Afrofuturism in connection to Sami Schalk’s work on bodyminds. I want to preface the connections I draw between Monáe’s work and Schalk’s theorizing with the understanding that bodyminds—a term that recognizes the inextricability of mind and body—is a concept that specifically applies to disability studies.⁷ While there are no disabled characters in Monáe’s *Dirty Computer* storyworld, I am prompted to read Monáe in relation to disability studies in light of Schalk’s parameters for when and why she reads characters as disabled. Schalk notes that disability can be mean different things in speculative fiction, the genre of focus in *Bodyminds Reimagined*, and she finds grounds for understanding a character as disabled “if that character’s bodymind is interpreted from a medical or psychological perspective in the text as nonnormative and in need of treatment or cure” and “if a character’s bodymind variation is considered nonnormative or deviant by the text’s fictional society at large.”⁸ *Dirty Computer* certainly meets each of these criteria. The New Dawn facility in the emotion picture treats Jane as needing to be cured of her deviance. Hassler-Forest likens the facility Jane is held in to a conversion therapy center, a weighty comparison with which I am inclined to agree.⁹ The memory technicians’ invasive wiping of Jane’s mind is analogous to conversion therapy’s use of electric shock

⁶ Audre Lorde discusses over-sexualization of women’s bodies leading to repression of the erotic in her essay “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power.” Her arguments are even more applicable to the way in which the Black woman’s body has been societally constructed as sexual.

⁷ Schalk, *Bodyminds Reimagined*, 5.

⁸ Schalk, *Bodyminds Reimagined*, 28.

⁹ Hassler-Forest, *Janelle Monáe’s Queer Afrofuturism*, 30.

therapy. Both procedures are intended to correct a perceived psychological deviance and each of the procedures leaves its subject exhausted and cognitively bereft. Additionally, just as conversion therapy practices have been known to promote the efficacy of their “therapy” by publicly platforming those they deem cured, New Dawn holds their “cleaned” dirty computers up as exemplars of reform. This was, in fact, New Dawn’s intention for Amber’s mother, Diana, in the story “Save Changes” until they gave up on their dream of turning her into a Torch—the name given to memory-wiped dirty computers who are forced into service at New Dawn facilities. *Dirty Computer* meets Schalk’s second criteria in a more obvious sense. Dirty computers are viewed as nonnormative, not just by the New Dawn government but by any citizen of good standing in *The Memory Librarian*. Amber and Larry, for instance, are shunned by classmates when they begin to attend university and they find it difficult to make friends because they are known as the children of a dirty computer. The sisters are essentially guilty by association and are avoided as if they carry a sickness. The way in which dirty computers are treated in Monáe’s world thus mirrors ableist aversion to disability.

By drawing a comparison between Monáe’s *Dirty Computer* and Schalk’s theorization of bodyminds, I seek to establish how marginalized identity markers—like Blackness, queerness, and womanhood—have been positioned as inferior to white cisgender heteronormativity. Each of these identities has been societally constructed as oppositional to white patriarchy, and thereby threatening to the maintenance of white patriarchy’s “matrix of domination.”¹⁰ The only way to be “cured” of the sickness of Blackness (or queerness, etc.) is to assimilate to whiteness as fully as possible. However, no degree of assimilation is ever enough, as Seshet realizes in “The

¹⁰ Hassler-Forrest, 52. I find Hassler-Forest’s phrase “matrix of domination” particularly helpful for understanding the hierarchical and interlocking nature of racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, etc.

Memory Librarian.” The marginalized subject, particularly the Black person, will always be “othered” under white patriarchy because the stability of an oppressive society relies on the establishment of a hierarchy. Baldwin accurately reflects why this is the case in *Nothing Personal*, an essay—recently published as a book with an introduction from Imani Perry—in which Baldwin recounts his own experiences of being racially profiled. In *Nothing Personal*, Baldwin indicts the ideologies of racial capitalism and a linear view of progress, both of which depend on willful ignorance of the past and its bearing on the present. America’s reluctance to acknowledge and assess its history has led the nation and its people to be “caught in a kind of vacuum between their present and their past,” which has consequently resulted in a “crisis of identity. And in such a crisis...it becomes absolutely indispensable to discover or invent...the stranger, the barbarian, who is responsible for our confusion and our pain.”¹¹ America is at a point at which it must recognize Black people as fully human and dismantle its systems of oppression or double down in its creation of marginalized groups in order to maintain the status quo.¹² Baldwin and Lavender, among others, would argue that America has thus far chosen to double down, and therefore preserve its vision of itself as the exceptional land of opportunity for all. Under this guise, the United States can continue to prop itself up as the world’s greatest nation while allowing police brutality to go unchecked.

Coupled to police brutality is increased surveillance and targeting of people of color, a theme Monáe focuses on in *The Memory Librarian*. In “Save Changes,” for instance, Amber experiences a form of racial profiling similar to that which Baldwin recounts in *Nothing Personal*. Baldwin shares his story of being stopped by a police officer while out on the streets of

¹¹ Baldwin, *Nothing Personal*, 23-24.

¹² Lavender, *Afrofuturism Rising*, 28.

New York City with a friend recently arrived from Switzerland. Like Baldwin, Amber is questioned and interrogated in the city she has lived in from birth, treated as an outsider for simply existing in a non-white skin.¹³ Although the surveillance drone that stops Amber allows her to move along, Amber's home, too, is under constant surveillance due to her mother's status as a dirty computer. The threat of being captured by New Dawn, as her mother once was, keeps Amber at home except for the occasional trip to the grocery store. Her experience of isolation and estrangement from the world around her mirrors, to my mind, the self-disciplining that was vital to upholding the institution of slavery. Vint argues that plantations functioned in a similar manner to the panopticon, a prison model that allows for any prisoner to theoretically be watched at any time. Plantations created a similar atmosphere, instilling slaves with the fear that all of their actions were being observed and that they were thus always seconds away from being punished with physical violence. As Vint notes in her discussion of *Kindred*, "the spectacle of punishment is, however, insufficient to maintain the smooth operation of slavery. It is also necessary for slaves to perceive themselves as constantly visible and thus to discipline themselves."¹⁴ New Dawn's seemingly omnipresent surveillance performs the same function. In the white city, a.k.a. the center of Little Delta, over which Seshet resides, surveillance drones land on civilians' heads without warning, scanning people and even erasing their memories without warning. The same is true in the future New York City of "Save Changes," the dilapidated town of Freewheel in "Timebox (Altered)," and in any other space New Dawn believes to be worth patrolling. However, in each of Monáe's stories there are also pockets of resistance, places off-the-grid where New Dawn's drones seldom venture.

¹³ Baldwin, *Nothing Personal*, 18.

¹⁴ Vint, "Only By Experience," 251.

The most radical and rebellious of these hidden locations is undoubtedly the Pynk Hotel, a refuge for woman-identified people of all backgrounds that features prominently in the *Dirty Computer* emotion picture and is the setting of “Nevermind,” the second story in *The Memory Librarian*. The Pynk Hotel fittingly first appears in Monáe’s work in a memory that also functions as the music video for her song “Pynk” in the *Dirty Computer* emotion picture. The memory stages the Pynk Hotel as a site of feminine joy secluded in the desert. Here, Jane relaxes and embraces her lover, Zen, played by Tessa Thompson. Though New Dawn’s memory technicians erase this memory from Jane’s mind, the Pynk Hotel is the place she returns to after her escape from the New Dawn memory-wiping facility at the end of the emotion picture. “Nevermind” centers on Jane’s experiences at the hotel as she begins to realize that something is amiss. Power lines are being cut and blushhounds, people born with the ability to sniff out emotion, are being caught lurking around the hotel. At the story’s climax, a battle breaks out between the members of the Pynk Hotel and the police force/soldiers of New Dawn. Jane and company manage to fight off their attackers while suffering little damage, but the battle reveals that a member of the Pynk Hotel, Rhapsody, acted as informant, hoping that “New Dawn would pretend that we didn’t exist...Give them Jane and Zen and once those two were *clean* the rest of us could be free to live the way we intended to.”¹⁵ Rhapsody’s betrayal of her fellow women of the Pynk Hotel is reminiscent of Lavender’s discussion of the panopticon and why slave revolts and escapes often failed.¹⁶ Just as slaves feared the constant surveillance of overseers and often self-disciplined by reporting other slaves plans for rebellion, Rhapsody knows that New Dawn is looking for Jane and Zen, two women who New Dawn has already attempted to “clean” once,

¹⁵ Monáe, *The Memory Librarian*, 160.

¹⁶ See Lavender’s *Afrofuturism Rising*, 83.

and she too self-disciplines by trying to turn her alleged friends into a government that will wipe their memories. Rhapsody believes that doing so will keep her and the other women of the Pynk Hotel safe because New Dawn has conditioned her to believe so, even though every woman at the Pynk Hotel is in some way deviant according to the Standards enacted by New Dawn. Monáe adds another layer to Rhapsody's betrayal by locating Rhapsody's decision, in part, in transphobia. Rhapsody takes issue with Neer, the main character—along with Jane—of “Nevermind.” Neer is a Black trans woman or otherwise “genderfucked,” woman-identified person who was taken into the Pynk Hotel under Jane's leadership.¹⁷ Neer's inclusion in the hotel's sisterhood makes Rhapsody furious, as she expresses in a heated exchange with Neer following Neer's reveal that Rhapsody has been acting as New Dawn's informant. Rhapsody, in a tirade reminiscent of Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist (TERF) talking points, claims that welcoming people like Neer is “how our spaces become the space of men, of misogynists.”¹⁸ She divulges that she wanted New Dawn to capture Neer as well, saying that Neer and others like them make a mockery of womanhood. Rhapsody anticipates that the women of the Pynk Hotel will have her back, but instead the story ends with all of the women standing in support of Neer. With this conclusion to “Nevermind,” Monáe makes a point about how the “othering” techniques of white patriarchy have the capacity to pit marginalized groups against one another. A person's identity as Black, as queer, as a woman, or as otherwise oppressed does not make them immune to the rhetoric of white supremacy.

Beyond its mechanized metaphors for Blackness and its depiction of panopticon-esque modes of surveillance, Monáe's *Dirty Computer* storyworld contains more obvious parallels to

¹⁷ Neer's identity is unclear, but they use they/them pronouns and identify themselves as a woman. The only specific term used to describe Neer's identity is “genderfucked.”

¹⁸ Monáe, *The Memory Librarian*, 160.

slavery that prompt my reading of Monáe's projects in connection to the neo-slave narrative genre. The most literal tie between dirty computers and the history of Black enslavement in the United States is the forced labor that dirty computers captured by New Dawn perform. In the emotion picture, Zen, renamed Mary Apple by New Dawn, is working as a Torch in the New Dawn facility that Jane is taken to after being captured. Zen appears not to remember Jane, her lover and best friend, and is forced to aid in the memory-wiping process of dirty computers brought to the facility. Her position is similar to that of Diana in "Save Changes," who, like Zen, was a dirty computer caught by New Dawn with the intention of making her perform unpaid and unwilling labor as a Torch. Although the reader learns at the end of "Save Changes" that Diana never lost her memories and the same may be true of Zen—at least in part—given her escape from the New Dawn facility with Jane and Ché, the pair's other lover, at the end of the emotion picture, the idea of wiping one's memory and then forcing them into labor constitutes a form of enslavement. The loss of subjectivity that memory-wiping enacts is particularly reminiscent of enslavement of African peoples in the Western world because the erasure of Black subjectivity was dependent on severing ties between enslaved Black people and their past. Families and those who shared a common tongue were often separated upon arrival in the United States—or England, France, etc.—because slave owners feared that communication between slaves would encourage revolts. Memory-wiping similarly disconnects Black dirty computers from the black networked consciousness, erasing not only one's memories but one's understanding of oneself as a subject. In her reading of *Beloved* in "Only by Experience," Vint, through her analysis of Sethe's decision to kill her children, argues that a loss of subjectivity is the greatest lasting trauma of slavery's legacy.¹⁹ Eliminating a slave's sense of self was key to forcing complicity,

¹⁹ See Vint, "Only by Experience: Embodiment and the Limitation of Realism in the Neo-Slave Narrative," 247.

just as it is with dirty computers in Monáe's Afrofuturism. I believe Monáe is fully cognizant of, and intentional with, the parallels that she draws between the world of *Dirty Computer* and America's histories of slavery, Jim Crow, and police brutality. In all of the components stemming from the *Dirty Computer* album cycle, arrest, imprisonment and excessive use of force against those who deviate from the norms of white patriarchy are recurring themes. The disproportionate depiction of people of color being arrested, imprisoned, and forced into labor for no other reason than perceived violations of New Dawn Standards—which explicitly mandate heterosexuality and other unnamed moral “virtues”—closely resembles the prison industrial complex in the United States, which targets Black and brown peoples at exorbitant rates. All of the arrests depicted in Monáe's *Dirty Computer* projects, including Bug's mother and father in “Timebox (Altered),” Diana and Larry in “Save Changes,” Jane and Zen in “Nevermind,” Alethia's friends in “The Memory Librarian,” and every arrest shown in the emotion picture, are of individuals explicitly identified as people of color. Like in her breaking of the fourth wall in the emotion picture and her directly indicting lyrics in songs like “Americans,” such glaring parallels between Monáe's Afrofuturist vision and the present-day reality of the United States make it impossible to look past the critiques *Dirty Computer* levies against America's violent treatment of marginalized groups. Monáe's imagined future is, in many ways, a warning of what America will become if it continues on its current trajectory. Even the enforced legal segregation of New Dawn, in which poor and Black people are relegated to dilapidated communities like Freewheel or to the run-down areas of Harlem, is merely a true display of the continuing effects of the United States' history of redlining. By presenting Black struggles and slavery's persisting estrangement and alienation of the Black subject through a dystopian future America, Monáe communicates thoughts and critiques of a Black political

consciousness. She does so by adopting an aesthetic mode (science fiction) that has typically been labeled “fun” and non-serious and therefore appears more inviting to readers who may not otherwise engage with a political text.²⁰ Thus, through her Afrofuturist world-building, Monáe validates the claims of Vint, Lavender, and countless other Black thinkers who see the speculative as the ideal medium for representing the Black experience in America.

One of the main points of Monáe’s work, and of Afrofuturist chronopolitics in general, is that racial capitalism’s violence against Black people is nothing new. America is, in fact, built on othering Blackness and denying subjectivity of Black people. In her introduction to Baldwin’s *Nothing Personal*, Imani Perry reflects on the recurrence of police brutality in Black literature, writing: “The fact that we treat the issue as new is the evidence that we have failed our history.”²¹ Vint makes similar points in regards to the United States collective past, situating it in light of rememory, a term Vint pulls from *Beloved* and one I see as especially poignant. Rememory bears the acknowledgement that time and progress do not move in a linear fashion as Western societies entrenched in capitalism, like the United States, suppose it does. Rather, time operates on a repetitive basis and rememory indicates the manner in which the willfully forgotten past can emerge at any moment.²² America has alternately remembered and forgotten its past depending on what suits the nation’s vision of itself at any given time. The Civil Rights Movement is remembered and looked back on fondly as eradicating racism in the United States, but many of the memories crucial to motivating action during Civil Rights—from slavery’s abuses to segregation and other Jim Crow mandates—are no longer mentioned by the average

²⁰ Schalk, *Bodyminds Reimagined*, 19. See the introduction to Schalk’s *Bodyminds Reimagined* for an elucidating discussion of what makes speculative fiction the perfect vehicle for discourses of disability and Blackness.

²¹ Imani Perry, Introduction to *Nothing Personal*, xvi.

²² I take the notion of time as operating on a repetitive basis from Barnhart’s “Chronopolitics and Race.”

American when asked to think about the Civil Rights Movement.²³ America selectively chooses what (not) to remember in its national recall, but the concept of rememory cannot be so easily controlled. Rememory is attached to places and things; it lingers in the air and can initiate callbacks to the past at any time.²⁴ Vint argues that the United States, like Sethe, is trapped in the past until the nation and its people can come to terms with the rememories that always surround us. In order to move into a “transformed world,” one in which hierarchical distinctions of race, gender, sexuality, and class do not exist, “the past must not be repressed or denied but acknowledged and incorporated into our collective understanding of reality.”²⁵ This quote taken from Vint encapsulates the mission that Monáe’s *Dirty Computer* undertakes. Monáe employs extended metaphors of memory control to communicate the censoring of the past occurring in contemporary America—banning of books like *Beloved* in school libraries, erasure of mention of race from even the least graphic moments of anti-Black violence in the Civil Rights Movement, etc.—and projects an authoritarian future to warn about what America may become if it continues to willfully deny its past.²⁶ Her desire is not to seek inclusion into New Dawn’s—a.k.a. white patriarchy’s—categories of the human because “Western definitions of the ‘human’ have always been grounded in dehumanizing processes of exclusion.”²⁷ Instead, Monáe imagines

²³ Griffin and Bollen, “What Do These Memories Do?,” 598.

²⁴ Vint does not explicitly define rememory in this way. This understanding of rememory is my own and is informed by Vint’s analysis of Sethe in *Beloved* (p. 245) and my own interpretation of how Morrison uses the term in *Beloved*.

²⁵ Vint, “Only By Experience,” 255.

²⁶ The erasure of race I mention is recent proposals in Florida to rewrite a history textbook and remove mention of Rosa Parks’ race.

²⁷ Hassler-Forest, *Janelle Monáe’s Queer Afrofuturism*, 86.

alternatives to the prescriptivist gender and racial demands of white supremacy, offering a light at the exit of the New Dawn facility, a path to the Pynk Hotel.

Chapter 3: “I’ve Never Seen a Hero Like Me in a Sci-fi:” The Importance of Representation in Afrofuturism¹

Monáe’s use of music as the initial and central vehicle for her Afrofuturist world-building follows in the footsteps of Black artists before her, such as The Sun Ra Arkestra, who molded their music into sites of future projection. The quote in the title to this chapter comes from a song by FKA Twigs, a Black woman and contemporary singer whose 2019 album *Magdalene* utilizes Afrofuturist imagery to critique the lack of Black representation in popular science fiction. What separates Monáe from FKA Twigs, or other present-day artists conveying Afrofuturist imaginaries, is the array of identities represented in the products of Monáe’s *Dirty Computer* album cycle.² Although Monáe’s work has always subverted gendered expectations of her, *Dirty Computer* is inarguably Monáe’s most overt depiction of characters that do not fit in to sexual or gendered binaries. Each of *The Memory Librarian*’s five stories depict main characters who perform gender and sexuality in ways not sanctioned under patriarchy’s insistence on heterosexuality and strict adherence to gender norms.

With the exception of “Timebox (Altered),” all of the stories of *The Memory Librarian* depict same-sex romantic and/or sexual relationships between women. Jane’s relationship with Zen, first introduced to audiences in the *Dirty Computer* emotion picture, continues in “Nevermind.” The story begins with Jane seeing Zen off as Zen prepares to go on a scouting mission to find dirty computers who have escaped from New Dawn facilities. In this scene, Monáe introduces Guitar, another one of Jane’s lovers, revealing that Jane and Zen are still in an open, polyamorous relationship, though Ché, the pair’s lover from the emotion picture, does not

¹ FKA Twigs, “home with you,” 0:35-0:39.

² My decision to write on Afrofuturism and music is largely indebted to FKA Twigs, Erykah Badu, Yves Tumor, and other Black artists who have incorporated the science-fictional into their music.

live with them at the hotel because he does not identify as a woman. “Save Changes” similarly portrays a same-sex romantic relationship between Larry and her girlfriend Natalie, and “Timebox” centers on Raven and her girlfriend Akilah’s relationship problems that are exacerbated by the time-stopping pantry in their new apartment. The only story in which a woman loving another woman is construed of as deviant is in “The Memory Librarian.”³ Seshet, after finding the root cause of a bug in New Dawn’s memory machines, is offered a promotion and visited by her boss Terry. Terry drops into Seshet’s office under the guise of congratulating her and offers niceties that actually serve as a threat. He beamingly tells Seshet, “we’ve been pleased to see you found yourself a companion at last! Of course, officially we at New Dawn frown on homosexuality, but it’s not a problem at our level...your Altheia is...a *very* dirty computer...But you have nothing to worry about.”⁴ Terry’s mention of Alethia is meant to make Seshet aware that he has been watching her every move. Considered alongside the knowledge Terry intimates regarding Alethia’s dirty computer status, Terry’s seemingly friendly check-in on Seshet acts as a warning, letting her know that he has information that he can and will use against her if she ever steps out of line. Seshet’s identity as a lesbian is no more secure than the average New Dawn citizens’. It is simply viewed as a deviance that is permitted so that it may eventually be used against her. Monáe makes homosexuality a violation of New Dawn’s Standards in *The Memory Librarian* but she does so in order to demonstrate the othering of the LGBTQ+ community that continues to take place in America. Her choice to casually depict same-sex relationships between women throughout her *Dirty Computer* projects serves the

³ Context clues lead me to believe that “Timebox” is the earliest story in *The Memory Librarian* chronologically, which may explain why Raven and Akilah rarely mention New Dawn and have a public romantic relationship. “Nevermind” and “Save Changes” respectively occur in a desert and in Harlem—noted as being less patrolled by New Dawn—which explains the freedom of sexual expression in these stories.

⁴ Monáe, *The Memory Librarian*, 76.

reverse purpose of normalizing homosexuality and letting her audience, particularly those who are young, know that who they are is ok.

Monáe's *Dirty Computer* also subverts traditional definitions of womanhood. Following the aforementioned New Dawn raid of the Pynk Hotel after which Neer's womanhood is called into question by Rhapsody, Jane calls out Rhapsody's transphobia, saying, "you decided everyone who didn't fit your womanhood wasn't worth protecting. Including me, I guess, because I damn sure don't."⁵ I see Jane's admission that she does not meet patriarchy's parameters of womanhood as the most apparent moment of fourth-wall breaking in *The Memory Librarian*. Jane is played by Monáe in the *Dirty Computer* emotion picture and is the persona the Monáe has adopted throughout the *Dirty Computer* album cycle, including in the album interlude titled "Jane's Dream." Jane's acknowledgement that she does not fit society's prescribed idea of what a woman is parallels Monáe's own coming out as non-binary in 2022. I do not read Monáe's non-binary identity, Jane's recognition of herself as "genderfucked" and "genderscrewed," or the inclusion of non-binary characters in "Timebox (Altered)" as denoting a desire for "gender abolitionism" in Monáe's work as Hassler-Forest does.⁶ Monáe still identifies closely with womanhood and throughout her *Dirty Computer* projects, especially "Nevermind," explicitly foreground relationships between woman-identified people. I think, therefore, that Monáe's critiques of gender construction can be better understood in relation to Judith Butler's theorization of gender performance in their book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Butler writes that if gender is performative, which they believe it to be, "then there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured; there would be no true or

⁵ Monáe, *The Memory Librarian*, 161.

⁶ Hassler-Forest, *Janelle Monáe's Queer Afrofuturism*, 95.

false, real or distorted acts of gender, and the postulation of a true gender identity would be revealed as a regulatory fiction.”⁷ Monáe is not arguing to do away with categories like man or woman or gender as an idea on the whole. She is instead opting for an expansion or loosening of definitions of what constitutes womanhood. Given her critiques of white supremacy and patriarchy throughout her work, Monáe seems to be cognizant of the idea that strict gender norms and definitions only serve those in power and in the privileged classes of humanity (a.k.a. rich white men with money and governing authority). Like race, gender is a technology fashioned to reproduce “heteromasculine social power.”⁸ Both race and gender are used as mechanisms of control that function to alienate and restrict those that deviate from the heteronormative mold. Monáe’s dirty computers act as “glitches whose very existence inherently disrupt the smooth operation of the matrix of domination” and demonstrate the way even genderqueer and non-binary people can identify with womanhood.⁹ Essentially, the dirty computers of Monáe’s science-fictional future push back against white patriarchy by challenging its hierarchies, which rely on binaries like man or woman, gay or straight, white or non-white. The array of gender configurations Monáe portrays reveals that these binaries are arbitrarily constructed to prop up white masculinity and keep marginalized peoples in line. Additionally, the sense of community illustrated in the Pynk Hotel, including the wide scope of womanhood the members of the hotel embrace with their support of Neer at the story’s conclusion, expresses that gender non-conforming people are not alone. There is a future, and even a present, in which those that defy gendered binaries can find loving communities of like-minded people where they

⁷ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 192

⁸ Hassler-Forest, *Janelle Monáe’s Queer Afrofuturism*, 94.

⁹ Hassler-Forest, 52.

can exist as they are. Monáe, to adapt Lavender's term, enacts a kind of feminine conscious network that communicates the hope that by "changing the way marginalized people are represented and conceived in contemporary cultural productions" we may also "change the way such people are talked about, treated, understood in the 'real' world."¹⁰ As Baldwin attests in *Nothing Personal*, being seen, having one's reality witnessed, understood, and not maligned, quite literally saves lives.¹¹ There undoubtedly have been, and will continue to be, transgender teenagers, young Black girls, and others in marginalized groups who watched Monáe's *Dirty Computer* emotion picture, listened to her music, read *The Memory Librarian*, and finally saw themselves being depicted. *This* is why representation matters. It has often been said that one cannot be what they do not see. Monáe provides queer, Black, and trans people with visions of those like themselves experiencing unadulterated joy and love and, in doing so, she shares Afrofuturism's all-important gift of dreaming with those who need it most.

Monáe's normalization of "deviant" aspects of Blackness and queerness is furthered through the embrace of femme sexual desire throughout *Dirty Computer*, particularly as it pertains to the emotion picture and to song lyrics from the album.¹² Jane's memory from the emotion picture that doubles as a music video for the song "Pynk" is perhaps the most overt example of Monáe's depictions of the sexual. The "Pynk" memory, which takes place in a pink desert that is home to the Pynk Hotel, contains a combination of more directly romantic and sexual scenes—like Jane and Zen's intimate displays of affection on a pink blanket in the sand—

¹⁰ Schalk, *Bodyminds Reimagined*, 2.

¹¹ Baldwin, *Nothing Personal*, 35.

¹² I use the term "femme," instead of "female" or "women's" because the former connotes gender and the latter is more gender-specific than Monáe's lyrics get. Monáe most concretely embraces feminine sexuality.

and coy vaginal imagery.¹³ Monáe’s sly sexual innuendos extend across the “Pynk” music video,¹⁴ starting with *Dirty Computer*’s most viral and culturally recognizable moment in which Monáe/Jane and her company of Black women dancers wear labia-shaped pants, save two of the dancers who are clad only in bodysuits and represent Pynk-ness “as a signifier of a female sexuality that is universal rather than particular” and not defined by one’s anatomy.¹⁵ Other allusions to vaginas and/or sex between women in the “Pynk” video include Zen’s head appearing in the folds of Jane’s labia-pants, a (pussy) cat being picked up and dropped to transition from a scene in which Jane and Zen are staring at each other over the gyrating asses of Black women into another scene, a finger going through a donut hole, and more. The lyrics of “Pynk” similarly exhibit a playful feminine sexuality, with lines like, “Pynk like the lips around your, maybe/Pynk like the skin that’s under, baby/Pynk where it’s deepest inside, crazy/Pynk beyond forest and thighs.”¹⁶ In both its music video and lyrics, “Pynk” is about loving one’s body and foregrounding the feminine over the phallogentric.

The memory that proceeds “Pynk” in the emotion picture is again joyous, humorous, and sexually free. It centers around what appears to be Jane’s first-time meeting Ché. As Jane and Zen enter a bar drenched in the aesthetic of the 1980s, Monáe’s song “Make You Feel”—worked on in collaboration with her mentor Prince before his death—kicks in. Jane, dressed in a white and black sequined outfit, sees “Make Me Feel” being performed by herself, or, possibly, by

¹³ Monáe, *Dirty Computer* [Emotion Picture], 27:14-28:10.

¹⁴ The “PYNK” music video extends from 23:29-28:54 in the *Dirty Computer* emotion picture, and all of the following mentions of sexual innuendo in the video occur in that frame.

¹⁵ Hassler-Forest, *Janelle Monáe’s Queer Afrofuturism*, 76.

¹⁶ Monáe, “PYNK,” 1:46-2:03.

Monáe.¹⁷ Monáe is clad in a bright pattern with a pink shoe on one foot and a white shoe on the other, a fashion choice which I take to symbolize pansexuality given what takes place over the course of the “Make Me Feel” memory. The colorfully dressed Monáe pushes a seemingly hesitant Jane to welcome her desire to flirt with both Ché and Zen. As “Make Me Feel” progresses, both Jane and Monáe grow more exuberant in their dancing and in their body language. Jane alternately dances with Zen and Ché, winding up pressed between the bodies of her two lovers by the end of the dance sequence, an end which I read as an artistic choice made on Monáe’s part to demonstrate that Jane does not have to pick who she loves.¹⁸ She can have both. Jane, or anyone for that matter, does not need to hold themselves to white patriarchy’s standards of heterosexuality or monogamy. Lyrically, “Make Me Feel” is about shutting off one’s mind and trusting the instincts of one’s body as well as the intentions of one’s lover. Beyond imagery like “Laying your body on a shag carpet,”¹⁹ “Make Me Feel” simply consists of the repetition of “(That’s just the way you make me feel)/So good, so good, so fucking real.”²⁰ The song is the most lyrically sparse on *Dirty Computer* but its minimalism speaks volumes. Both Jane the character and Monáe the artist are coming to terms with their pansexuality and learning to follow their bodily instincts. The touch of Jane’s lovers makes her feel “so fucking real,” concretizing her sense of subjectivity as a result of her embrace of embodiment. As Vint observes, a Black woman’s denial of her embodied self is one of the most harmful lasting

¹⁷ I refer to the other “Jane,” as Monáe during the remainder of my discussion of the “Make Me Feel” music video in the emotion picture. My basis for making such a distinction is that the brightly clad Monáe breaks the fourth wall by performing directly into the camera while the other Monáe, Jane, never stares into the camera (representing her position as a character).

¹⁸ Monáe, *Dirty Computer* [Emotion Picture], 31:49-32:04.

¹⁹ Monáe, “Make Me Feel,” 1:22-1:25.

²⁰ Monáe, 1:53-1:57.

traumas inflicted by slavery.²¹ White supremacy's construction of the Black woman's body as hypersexual has led Black women "to feel contemptible and suspect for the expression of the erotic."²² This has resulted in a suppression of Black women's sexuality under the false belief that rejecting one's bodily feelings as a Black woman will distance oneself from the oversexualized stereotype that white America has used to other the Black body. I call the belief that such a thing is possible—the belief that America may do away with its hypersexualization of Black women—false because hierarchical distinctions of race and gender rely on framing the Black woman as inferior. Audre Lorde remarks in her essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic As Power" that when women reject the erotic they are feeding into male power structures, and I think she is certainly correct.²³ In part, Monáe's refusal to give in to white patriarchy's attempt to shame Black women into submission is what makes her work so powerful. Songs like "Make Me Feel," "Take a Byte," "Screwed," and "Pynk" act as models of joyous resistance in their unabashed championing of Black femme sexuality.

The erotic as theorized by Lorde, however, is not solely, or even primarily, sexual in nature. Lorde, instead, draws the starting point for her definition of the erotic from its Greek root *eros*, which encompasses all aspects of love.²⁴ She writes of the erotic "as an assertion of the life force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives."²⁵ This view of the erotic, even more so than the erotic as sexual, is useful for considering the political

²¹ Vint, "Only By Experience," 242.

²² Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," 53.

²³ Lorde, 53.

²⁴ Lorde, 55.

²⁵ Lorde, 55.

work that Monáe's feminine bonds in *Dirty Computer* do. Take, for instance, the aforementioned confrontation of Rhapsody after she aids in New Dawn's raid of the Pynk Hotel in "Nevermind." Jane censures Rhapsody for transphobic and patriarchal notions of what a woman is, but in reality her words in defense of Neer and other genderqueer people would carry little weight if she were not backed up by the other women of the Pynk Hotel. The decision of these other women to remain a community that accepts women-identified people of all backgrounds is both political and spiritual, a combination Lorde argues is bridged by the erotic.²⁶ It is political in the sense that the women of the Pynk Hotel directly contest white patriarchy's edicts of womanhood and it is spiritual in the sense that the Pynk Hotel operates on an emotional basis that foregrounds deep feelings of love in its decision making. As the *Dirty Computer* emotion picture illustrates, the women who comprise the Pynk Hotel's community relate to one another through song, dance, and unrestrained expressions of joy.²⁷ This sharing of joy is central to the erotic and "forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference."²⁸ Because the women of the Pynk Hotel have danced together, laughed together, and even fought off an authoritarian government together, they know they do not need to fear differences in race or gender expression among the members of their community. What matters is that they are all women-identified people who have been deemed dirty by a society that devalues them for their Blackness, their femininity, and their queerness. Together, these women are able to turn the very traits New

²⁶ Lorde, 56.

²⁷ The extended dance-party scene stretching from 26:27 to 27:13 of the *Dirty Computer* emotion picture is a particularly joyous example of the bonds uniting the women of the Pynk Hotel

²⁸ Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic, 56

Dawn has demonized them for into sites of connection through which communal joy and collective action become possible.

Although the Pynk Hotel is the most instantly recognizable example of the erotic in Monáe's *Dirty Computer* storyworld, other manifestations of the erotic as defined by Lorde crop up throughout the stories of *The Memory Librarian*. The titular story, for instance, describes an intimate encounter between Seshet and Alethia that blends the sexual with the deeper emotional aspects of the erotic that Lorde identifies. Seshet describes her first time having sex with Alethia as “just two humans learning together in the most old-fashioned of ways” and thinks about it in terms of “burrow[ing] into one another” to “discover what’s beneath.”²⁹ The connotations of discovering what lies beneath a person and “learning together” are innocent and romantic, eliciting the idea of intimacy with one’s mind rather than the conquest of one’s body that phallogocentric norms of penetration have led sex to be associated with.

The story “Save Changes” portrays a very different example of the erotic that, like the Pynk Hotel, centers around community. To make sure her sister stays safe, Amber accompanies Larry to a party in a run-down section of Harlem that is seldom patrolled by New Dawn surveillance drones. At this party, Amber meets Frank—the brother of Larry’s girlfriend Natalie—who draws a map for Amber of all of the known off-the-grid spots in New York City where New Dawn’s surveillance does not reach and where revolutionaries against New Dawn meet. When Amber uses her larimar stone to turn back time at the end of the story, this is the map she redraws as she prepares to lead her mother and sister away from New Dawn’s clutches.

²⁹ Monáe, *The Memory Librarian*, 16-17.

“Save Changes” is thus a great demonstration of the efficacy of the black conscious network.³⁰ It depicts a physical manifestation of the network via a community of young, underground Black and brown partiers who alternately rage together in the partying sense and rage together in a rebellious “let’s take down the authoritarian government” sense. I read the collective action of the partiers in “Save Changes” as erotic for a few reasons.³¹ Firstly, the party scene contains open displays of same-sex love. Secondly, it embodies the communal sharing of joy that Lorde views as essential to the erotic. Lastly, it combines the emotional with the political, highlighting through the map Amber acquires the political potential of collaborating with those of similarly marginalized identities.

“Timebox (Altered),” the final story of *The Memory Librarian*, is wholly different from Monáe’s other stories in its eroticism. Notably, it is the most future-looking story in *The Memory Librarian*, providing several different glimpses into what the futures might look like for the young, gender non-forming kids that act as the story’s protagonists. Early in the narrative, the children, led by Bug, the youngest, create a structure from abandoned artifacts they find in a deserted field. They are greeted with the appearance of Mx. Tangee, a non-binary figure who ostensibly possess powers, given her ability to appear and disappear on a whim. Tangee is seemingly summoned by the structure the children build. She appears before the children, appraising their creation and telling them, “Looks to me like you built yourself an altar, a tent of

³⁰ I’m encouraged to read the party in “Save Changes” as an instance of a black conscious network in light of Lavender’s idea that a networked consciousness points to feelings and emotions as a way of transcending the white world (*Afrofuturism Rising* 141).

³¹ I find it important to note that what I am calling erotic in both “Save Changes” and “Timebox (Altered)” would not be considered erotic under Lorde’s definition because she theorizes the erotic as unique to women. I disagree with Lorde on this point and instead consider the erotic as “feminine.” I believe our culture would actually have less extensive toxic masculinity if we promoted Lorde’s idea of the erotic in men, but this is a topic for another paper.

miracles.”³² Tangee’s observation is in line with Sheree Renée Thomas’s—the co-author of this story—observation that Afrofuturism is “a prayer of art-making.”³³ The children of the story make a sculpture that might be called a work of found art, and Tangee’s identification of their work as an altar obviously invokes associations with prayer. The altar’s capacity to serve as a vessel for time travel confirms the commentary of both Thomas and Tangee, as the future each child is transported to is a reflection of their greatest dreams or, in other words, their prayers. I read this scene as falling in line with Lorde’s concept of the erotic because, once again, it demonstrates the revolutionary and imaginative potential created at the intersection of the political and the emotional. The children are all taken to futures that are distinctly different from their present reality, which is especially the case with Ola. In the future Ola sees, she is the mayor of a prosperous Freewheel and has an assistant drone that is similar to New Dawn’s surveillance drones only in slight physical resemblance. The benignity of the drone and other technology in Ola’s future evinces Baraka’s arguments that “Machines have the morality of their inventors” and we must create new technology that is “spiritually oriented” and “humanistic.”³⁴ The drones future-Ola has created can sense levels of distress and contentment and instead of wiping memories they perform health and well-being scans. They are machines that are truly made with care in mind rather than regulation and punishment. “Timebox (Altered)” is therefore erotic in Lorde’s sense in that it imagines futures in which love, humanity, and community come first.

³² Monáe, *The Memory Librarian*, 268.

³³ Thomas, “And So Shaped the World,” 5.

³⁴ Baraka, “Technology and Ethos,” 2.

Monáe's *Dirty Computer* projects do not provide any one solution to white supremacy or way forward past racial capitalism. Instead, Monáe has partnered with a collective of artists—like the four Black women speculative fiction writers and the Black non-binary writer Danny Lore,³⁵ each of whom co-authored one of the stories in *The Memory Librarian*—to imagine queer futurities that are “neither a state of being nor a destination to be reached” but rather “a potentiality that is ignited through gesture, dance, story, song, and encounter.”³⁶ The possibilities Monáe conjures in her work are quite literally endless but all of them are undoubtedly and unabashedly havens for the Black, the queer, and the woman-identified. The sites of communal joy portrayed through the products of Monáe's *Dirty Computer* album cycle act as visions of resistance to white supremacy. In doing so, they embody Lorde's conviction that the love those on the margins share with one another compels them to reject the conventionally expected and always live in pursuit of “that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of.”³⁷ Just as Butler writes that “the prevailing law threatened one with trouble, all to keep one out of trouble,” leading them to conclude that “trouble is inevitable and the task, how best to make it,”³⁸ Monáe compels her audience to “start a motherfuckin' pussy riot” built on a love for one another that is strong enough to push for the future(s) we know we deserve.³⁹

³⁵ Hassler-Forest, “Stories of Hope.”

³⁶ Hassler-Forest, *Janelle Monáe's Queer Afrofuturism*, 69.

³⁷ Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic, 57.

³⁸ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xxxviii.

³⁹ Monáe, “Django Jane,” 0:29-0:32.

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