

FINDING MOMENTS OF RUPTURE IN MONÀE'S *METROPOLIS*:
A HYBRID TRADITION

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ABSTRACT

My thesis asserts that there is a definite stylistic and thematic connection between author Octavia Butler and the performer Janelle Monáe. The association between them is founded on a black feminist tradition that uses hybrid characters and scenarios to counter typically white male heteronormative narratives. Studying how both artists construct feminist hybrid characters is important for two reasons: first, it adds to small but burgeoning area of study surrounding the figure of Janelle Monáe. Second, it calls attention to a mostly unnoticed literary legacy that unites Butler and Monáe. Through the use of hybridized characters, this thesis finds that both artists disrupt and reorient ordinary cultural arrangements of race, gender, class, and sexuality by warping the meaning of ritualized behavior.

For Darius and Belinda Za Gara.
Thank you for making that deal with me as a child, for opening up the world of literature to me.

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INTRODUCTION

Meet Cindi Mayweather, the singer/performer Janelle Monáe's doppelganger and primary means of exploring hybrid possibilities. Not only is Mayweather the Electric Lady Number One, but she just happens to be the ArchAndroid, the Neo to Monáe's imaginary city Metropolis, a riff on Fritz Lang's well-known 1927 film. In Monáe's retelling, a secret organization known as the Great Divide uses time travel to propagate the oppression permeating Metropolis. Its citizens are stratified between humans and androids. Cindi Mayweather, an android who is subservient to the ruling class, breaks the ultimate taboo by falling in love with a human. The coming of the ArchAndroid is supposed to bring about a system overhaul and everlasting peace.

Plot-wise, the story borrows heavily from the science fiction genre. It is the manner in which Janelle Monáe goes about presenting this futurist vision that brings her to the forefront of conscious science fiction. While introducing Monáe's vision, Ytasha L. Womack describes her as a "modern-day musical paradox" who combines the musical stylings of Sun Ra, Prince, "James Brown, Stankonia, big-band-era Duke Ellington, and the best in uplifting sonic sound" (74). Conceptually she also combines Fritz Lang, Philip K. Dick, Octavia Butler, and futurist theorist Ray Kurzweil. She mixes these frenetic elements together to challenge white, male-dominated capitalistic hierarchies. In an interview with *The Guardian*, Monáe has claimed that:

the android represents a new form of the Other. . . . I believe we're going to be living in a world of androids by 2029. How will we all get along? Will we treat the android humanely? What type of society will it be when we're integrated? I've felt like the Other

at certain points in my life. I felt like it was a universal language that we could all understand.

The certainty she has in predicting the Othering of future people stems from her historical insight into present day social realities, perhaps best exemplified by the marginalization of blacks in the United States. The visual and aural performance Monáe has created in *Metropolis* directly contrasts against notions that claim American society has entered into a post-racial bliss after the Civil Rights Movement. Her narrative reasons that the social infrastructure America has in place today still has residual defects left over from the mid-20th century and before. America still punishes those who belong to non-white racial categories as well as the already poor and disenfranchised.

This thesis will seek to explore the ways in which Janelle Monáe strives against the customary white heteronormative focus of science fiction. She defies the white patriarchy through the hybrid figure of Cindi Mayweather. By aligning herself with a tradition best exemplified by the black science fiction writer Octavia Butler, a tradition that intentionally subverts the typical fair of the science fiction genre, Janelle Monáe's transmedial performance style questions identity itself. As an android, Mayweather, the central figure in Monáe's storytelling, acts as synecdoche for understanding what makes someone human. The bodies of characters like Mayweather act like a blank slate. Monáe uses Mayweather as an open-ended metaphor that can subsume and represent a myriad of identity markers without forcing the author to narrow her message. By injecting androids into the story, Monáe manipulates these blank slates. Furthermore, race and class are but two of the tools that Janelle Monáe, an artist

who is distinctly situated within the sci-fi tradition, targets in her craft by calling upon the android, a hybrid figure, to struggle against oppression through her aesthetic.

Monáe is an accomplished singer-songwriter. She is a dancer who moves with the ease of Michael Jackson and James Brown. She is a Cover Girl. According to the narrative Monáe has spun, she also happens to be from the year 2719. Monáe was kidnapped and violated by people who stole her genetic data, and sent back to our time to prophesize the coming of the ArchAndroid Cindi Mayweather. Monáe dresses the issues up in trappings from seven-hundred and five years into the future out of basic necessity. To stage her epic in the present would restrict her critique. As H. Bruce Franklin has argued, science fiction denies “a part of present existence” by “substituting something new” (16), allowing for paralleling functions. By drawing conclusions from the fantastical storytelling elements, the audience member can analyze present-day society. Monáe uses the figure of the android to uproot the systemic oppression of African American people by situating them within the context of Metropolis. The perspective provided by Monáe’s sci-fi setting offers the necessary liminal space for identity to be discovered.

One important, and relatively unexamined, source for Monáe’s performance style is the fiction of Octavia E. Butler. Butler’s work uses the genre of science fiction to question racial hierarchies in the same fashion as Janelle Monáe. In a brief essay titled “The Monophobic Response” (1995), Butler claims that the “vast and terrible sibling rivalry going on within the human family as we satisfy our desires for territory, dominance, and exclusivity” (415) is still in the works, and that it is present and upheld by a global economy

that reduces human life to a commodity. It is fuel for the stagnation of social mobility (both in terms of class advancement and social change). She reasons that is why science fiction writers embellish scientific possibility. Future conditions are a natural platform for discussing the situation in which the descendants of the African Diaspora find themselves. For so long, they have been culturally buried beneath a gaze that reconstitutes their humanity into an alien form. However, science fiction, and Afrofuturism specifically, allows the writer to re-interpret classic events of abduction (the slave trade), and the alienation of people (social Othering) through the manipulation of essential sci-fi tropes. Butler consistently uses black female lead characters with hybrid capabilities. Anyanwu in the *Patternist* series and Dana from *Kindred*, are two key characters who use these capabilities to explore alternative possibilities. This thematic linkage between Monáe and Octavia Butler helps us uncover moments in which both artists, or at the very least the artists' characters, can orchestrate an alternative to the current state of us.

* * *

An article on *Vibe*'s website titled "What's On Janelle Monáe's Book Shelf?" lists the singer-songwriter's Top Ten reads (*Vibe* 2010). The first one listed is Butler's 1980 novel *Wild Seed*. The simple reality that Janelle Monáe has read and lists one of Octavia Butler's novels as one of her favorites immediately supports the idea that Octavia Butler's literary techniques enliven Monáe's art. In the case of Monáe, Butler's influence over her work becomes more evident due to Butler's status in science fiction. While she is not the first female or black author in the genre, she is the first black female science fiction writer that

used hybrid bodies to explore the issues plaguing American society through a black feminist gaze. Janelle Monáe's own work covers these same grounds and expands on the tradition started by Butler in the genre.

The majority of intellectual thought that has gone into studying Janelle Monáe has appeared from non-peer reviewed sources like blogs. However, there exists a handful of academic studies pertaining to her. Ytasha Womack's book, *Afrofuturism*, has a section that introduces Monáe within the context of Afrofuturism and cultural studies (74-76). The entire book serves as an overview to the Afrofuturist aesthetic. The majority of Womack's musings about Monáe are illuminating but the passages about her only serve as an introduction. Womack positions Monáe along a continuum of Afrofuturist musicians that stretch back to Sun Ra.

Elizabeth Stinson's "Means of Detection: A Critical Archiving of Black Feminism and Punk Performance" situates Janelle Monáe alongside Afro-Punk musicians like Tamar-kali, M.J. Zilla, and Poly Styrene to interrogate how black female bodies are rendered in punk music (275). According to Stinson, by using the power of sonic detection, she unveils how black musicians supplement punk's history while "redefining" the position of black punk artists; this allows for black feminist sexualities to prosper (301).

Finally, Shana L. Redmond's article "This Safer Space: Janelle Monáe's "Cold War"" analyzes Monáe's subversion of spaces within the titular music video. For the entirety of the music video, the camera focuses, and is forced to focus, on the face of a seemingly naked Janelle Monáe. The article dissects the historical relevance of the song's title to the Cold War. At the same time, it is playing on the importance of the music video's double gaze. The camera

attempts to treat Monáe as an object. Monáe's stare combats the camera's gaze. However, her eyes remain defiant towards male scrutiny by not allowing the camera to screen her naked body.

While these three works independently study Janelle Monáe, none of them draw a link between Monáe and Octavia Butler by decisively connecting them through a discussion of their shared thematic techniques. This paper argues that Monáe is directly influenced by Octavia Butler's work. Although Ytasha Womack's book does feature both artists separately at various points, she makes little effort to draw out the connections between the two artists aside from labelling them both as Afrofuturists. The three scholars independently investigate ways in which Janelle Monáe is resisting something (and that something changes between the pieces). However, they never venture into any explanation about how Monáe is intentionally invoking a creative linkage to Butler's use of hybridity or how that hybridity resists subjugation.

Janelle Monáe, like Octavia Butler, populates her world with social constraints that parallel the political, social, and economic disposition of the past and present. They do so to incite artistic conflict between the actual and imagined ideal. In the process of constructing their science fiction landscapes, they both recognize that cultures and political/economic structures mirror one another. When acts of upheaval, events such as genocide, rebellion, protest, and war, occur the "confrontation means that the received concepts of justice, power, protest, authenticity, identity...are all thrown into jeopardy by the requirements, or seeming such, of effective national existence in the contemporary world" (Geertz 319). The coming of the ArchAndroid, an event prophesized to mediate differences between people, calls for the collective redressing of social norms. As I show in the pages that follow, this dynamic in Monáe's music—and Butler's

fiction—is best approached through the lenses of Critical Race Theory, Disability Studies, and Anthropological Theory.

This thesis is divided into five sections. Section One explains my concept “moments of rupture” and how these moments remove or warp the meaning of ritualized behavior by using examples from Octavia Butler and Janelle Monáe. Section Two then offers a reading of the character Doro from *Wild Seed* and the video that accompanies Monáe’s song “Many Moons.” The point of the analysis is to uncover how both authors create their literary worlds’ systems of oppression. Section Three examines the grey areas between Metropolis’s society and its oppressive systems. These places are metaphorically underground and foster community amongst hybrid figures in direct comparison to Butler’s seed villages in *Wild Seed*.

In Section Four, the disabled imagery of cyborgs, seeds, and androids will be probed in order to ascertain their respective roles in finding rupture. Specifically, the section studies how literary depictions of hybridity are indebted to disability. Finally, Section Five focuses upon the music video for the song “Tightrope.” The video features Janelle Monáe as herself and not Cindi Mayweather. Trapped in a disabled setting, a psych ward, Monáe’s positions herself as a Prophet for the ArchAndroid in the present day. This directly associates the exaggerated conditions of her dystopian science fiction city with the United States. The section also compares Butler’s usage of time travel and disability in *Kindred* versus Monáe’s use of the same elements.

Mark Dery, the cultural theorist who coined the term “Afrofuturism,” asks an interesting question at the end of his essay “Black to the Future.” When considering a fictional depiction of a minority (race, gender sexuality) done by somebody who is a straight white male, how does the critic read these characters? Is it a reaffirmation of the bottom-line or does the space made

available by depicting any such character allow for enough punching room to open up a “rupture” (221)? As I argue in this essay, Monáe ensures that rupture is felt by continuing a hybrid tradition begun by Octavia Butler.

Section One: Moments of Rupture

A “moment of rupture” is an occasion during performance that disrupts and reorients ordinary arrangements of race, gender, class, and sexuality. A society is made up of countless components that exist independently but work simultaneously to affect and enforce a society’s ways. The performance of day-to-day life continuously reifies society through repetitive processes that reproduce the social order. This can be likened to the manner in which actors understand their role in a theatre production through stage direction and script. Moments of rupture occur when the actor, consciously or otherwise, is inspired to improvise. Once the actor improvises, the scene’s complexion is altered and the positioning of everybody in the scene is thrown into question. Examples of such scenes could include a boss berating her underling suddenly seeming dismissed when the accosted worker hides a smirk, and an all-important line can completely turn a scene on its head when uttered in a different mood. In much the same way, when the social performer deviates from culturally prescribed behaviors, it affords glimpses of a new world order. This rupture, found within the system like a certain lady sitting in front of the bus, offers an alternative view on what could be and supplements the argument for coding the new way of being into the system.

To give an example of how the hybrid character mold perpetuates the exploration of these moments, it is helpful to consider Octavia Butler’s character Anyanwu. First appearing under the

name Emma in the 1977 novel *Mind of My Mind*, Anyanwu takes center stage in *Wild Seed*. Published in 1980, it is the fourth novel to appear in the *Patternist* series and is chronologically the first novel to take place in the series. In 1690, the opening year of *Wild Seed*, Anyanwu has lived somewhere along the West Coast of Africa for an estimated three hundred years (*Wild Seed* 10). Anyanwu's powers virtually guarantee that, if she chose to, she can create a moment of rupture that reshapes the cultural geography she is bound to. Her hybridity opens up the possibility of rupture through two primary means: her standing as a "wild seed" and her shape-shifting (98).

First, in the language of the novel, Anyanwu is a "seed." Seeds are people who represent the evolution of the human species, and they are born with fantastical abilities. Anyanwu possesses the innate ability to control herself on the molecular level, manipulating every cell in her body. She can even enhance her immune system to overcome poisons and illnesses. Her ability to control the makeup of her cells also means she can alter her age at will, and can adjust her appearance to become virtually anything else. The science of the era cannot identify why she is different. However, while her powers might begin to place her in another taxonomy, she was still reared in the culture of her people. For example, she acts as a healer for her people at the beginning of the novel but, while she notes that they understand how much they benefit from her presence, they were still aware "that they had reason to fear her abilities" (5). Her internal thoughts do not delve much deeper than that observation but the reader can deduce that there is a subconscious recognition by her people that the established hierarchy on earth is threatened by Anyanwu's existence. Her hybridity represents a danger to humanity's position at the top of the food chain that can now be usurped at any time.

However, Anyanwu stays loyal to her people and their ways until another special being named Doro tracks her down. He arrives with promises that prey on Anyanwu's maternal nature. In her lifetime, she has had forty-seven children. She has outlived every one of them. Doro promises that their pairing will impart their children with their gifts and their longevity (23). Enticed, Anyanwu accepts, creating a rupture that dissociates her from the traditions of her parent culture and places her within Doro's seed society. Even then, Doro brands Anyanwu with the descriptive term wild because she cannot be fully contained by any social system. Other seeds, once planted, will take root. Anyanwu's immortality means that she appreciates a more long-term view. Rather than live persecuted, to be categorized in her native land as a witch or in Doro's seed villages as cattle for breeding, Anyanwu seeks out environments that are favorable to her.

The second way Anyanwu's hybridity allows her to create moments of rupture stems from her ability to recompose her body on a whim. In her article "Symbiotic Bodies and Evolutionary Tropes in the Work of Octavia Butler," Maria Aline Ferreira states that shape-shifting "can be interpreted as a fantasy version of hybridization that can be partially, at least, concretized through genetic engineering" (408). Shape-shifting makes Anyanwu a literal mixture of things. Her ability to change shape allows her to become other species. If she sees an animal, she can take its shape. If she eats the animal and consumes its DNA, she becomes it: "At first, I was a woman pretending to be a leopard. Now when I change, I am a leopard" (87). Her ability to consciously affect her body means that she is capable of escaping cultural confinement at any moment by simply thinking of alternatives.

Even after Anyanwu is forced into becoming another cog in Doro's slave system where he coerces her and others to breed to produce special people, Doro is left ill at ease because he is secretly aware that Anyanwu cannot be controlled by him like everybody else. He cannot sense her when she takes a non-human form. He learns of this on the passage over from Africa to America. During the voyage, Anyanwu takes the form of a dolphin and swims along the ship. Despite delighting him in her display, Anyanwu notices that Doro had a "troubled expression on his face. He was staring out at the dolphins" (*Wild Seed* 95). Her hybrid powers make her transformative and capable of navigating through moments of rupture which allows her to bypass Doro's system of oppression. While her ability to transform allows her to create these moments, it is ultimately an extension of these abilities that threatens to dismantle Doro's control over her. Doro and Anyanwu are both immortal. However, unlike Doro, Anyanwu can choose to manipulate her cellular structure to die. Since Anyanwu is capable of being one of the few people on the planet who can be Doro's cohort for the duration of his existence, the companionship Anyanwu represents means a lot to him. At the end of *Wild Seed*, she breaks Doro by frightening him with the thought of eternal loneliness, and forces him to ease some of the restrictions of the culture he propagates. Thus, Anyanwu's hybrid status allows her to subtly alter the makeup of her environment.

Monáe similarly uses the hybrid figure of Mayweather to create moments of rupture. When viewers first behold Monáe, they are immediately rendered participants in an Afrofuturist dialogue that addresses the possibility of a bright future. The discourse speaks to the social injustices and issues of the past and present in Metropolis' future scenario. She combines the present with the past through her visual aesthetic. It is marked by two distinctive qualities: her

hair done up in a robust coiffe and her bold black and white suits. Her hair follows along, or perhaps leads, her physical presentation. She is always immaculate. Her hair, makeup, and clothing all work together to exude gravitas. Cindi Mayweather wears the perfectly pressed black and white suits (or “uniforms” as Monáe calls them, referring to the clothes that some African Americans have worn in situations of servitude) to remind the audience that signs of degradation can be co-opted. In an interview with *io9* Monáe stated, “I feel like I have a responsibility to my community and other young girls to help redefine what it looks like to be a woman.” Often times, Monáe’s visual aesthetic is defined as androgynous and compared to sci-fi dabblers from the past such as David Bowie and Prince. The lack of firm gender qualifiers attached to her garb refuses to reify gender roles. She does not combat the male gaze by shying away from it, rather she demands the audience view her through a non-heteronormative lens.

In fact, during concerts Monáe hands out the “Ten Droid Commandments.” These commandments act as the instructional manual for the audience on how to properly employ themselves in her aesthetic experience. In this way, reality and fiction are fused together by Monáe’s transmedial narration. While the usual explanation of transmedial narratives expounds on how the story is told through multiple creative platforms—the book, the internet, songs—*Metropolis* distinguishes itself by expanding its narrative to the real world and on to the dance floor. The real world concert goers attending Monáe’s shows are opening themselves up to the possibility of role playing by following her Commandments. By warping a narrative in her preferred image and channeling it through the increasingly powerful industry of popular music, Monáe consciously attempts to deconstruct and reconstruct her viewership into identities that signify their idealized selves while unfurling the unpleasant aspects of

contemporary culture. She does this by encouraging her audience to interact with the possibility of rupture during her live performances.

The pamphlets distributed by the venues hosting her contain the “Ten Droid Commandments” in its entirety. In a short series of demands, Monáe encourages ticket holders to incite moments of rupture by engaging with modes of existence foreign to themselves and thus alien to the cultural status quo. White, black, homosexual or otherwise, the first of the Ten Droid Commandments, “I BELIEVE IN THE ARCHANDROID,” mimics the Decalogue of Judeo-Christian belief. Like the Ten Commandments of those religions, the first Droid Commandment lays the groundwork for a new cybernetic theological interpretation of the universe. The Judeo-Christian God declared that his worshippers would follow no other god, only him. In one sentence, the pamphlet encourages the reader to believe in the ArchAndroid and to comprehend her new approach while not dismissing other theologies. This first step in constructing a new world narrative, of finding a consensus worldview, paves the path for the subsequent nine commandments and the potential necessary rupture.

The second and third commandments inverts the spirit of the tenth Judeo-Christian Commandment that deals specifically with an individual harboring jealousy in his or her heart for the possessions of others: the second droid commandment is “IF YOU SEE YOUR NEIGHBOUR JAMMING HARDER THAN YOU, COVET HIS OR HER JAM” and the third is “BE AWARE THAT JAMMING HARDER MEANS: NO TWEETING WITHOUT CLAPPING, NO SEX WITHOUT SCREAMING AND NO FREEDOM WITHOUT DANCING.” This call to envy is interesting. Monáe’s entreaty to the audience, to “covet” his or her neighbor’s “jam,” works to unravel the persuasive cultural elements that demand

complacency. All three points of clarification made in the third commandment enforces multi-sensory possibility: Do not sing without rhythm (or to take this further, without keeping your own rhythm), do not partake in pleasure and repress the enjoyment with silence, and proclaim independence through the kinetic navigation of the spaces you are free in. Enjoy movement in the spaces that were previously not allowed by the rigorous cultural structure currently being unraveled.

The fourth Commandment cautions the audience to respect the electric nature of the songs they are about to hear. They should be careful while they experience them and interact with “electrical devices, drink water, or touch others.” A disclaimer is then added that details the manner in which the Wondaland Art Society cannot be held responsible for damage to property or people resulting from a series of potential side-effects (most of the side effects actual meaning are left to the interpretation of the reader): “lockback, sweat-tech, leaveweave, poparm, shockjaw, electrobutt, or any other maladies or malfunctions caused by the jam.” This whimsical commandment plays an important role in the process of constructing a counter-myth. By adding a legal repudiation exempting the performers from electric blowback, it thoroughly places the imperative to join in the efforts of Monáe in setting Mayweather as an example upon the audience members. They, as legal ticket holders, have claimed their right to, and announced their willingness to, experience the Electric Lady. The permanent ramifications of that choice could leave the concert hall with them, and in those instances, signal their removal from normative conditions.

The Fifth Commandment closely aligns with the Fourth in presenting the audience members with choice. It says that they must sing any song lyric that they know. If they do not

know English, sing out loud in whatever language that they do know. The reason? There is no right or wrong language because the world system the ArchAndroid's counter-myth established is global in its appeal. It beggars established systems that divides communities. These types of enforced divisions between humans and androids, black and white, are directly challenged in the sixth commandment, "ABANDON YOUR EXPECTATIONS ABOUT ART, RACE, GENDER, CULTURE, AND GRAVITY."

Following the sixth, the seventh stipulates that others should impersonate the perception of an eclectic cast that runs the full breadth of humanity. Audience members should wander around the venue, "impersonating one of the many inspirations of the ArchanDroid Emotion Picture" and that they should choose one between "Salvador Dali, Walt Disney, Outkast, Stevie Wonder, Octavia Butler, David Bowie, Andy Warhol or John Williams." If these new instructional social requirements are met, the audience member will actively attempt to experience their surroundings through new kinetic, visual, and auditory means by fulfilling the intention of the commandment. They might walk like Andre 3000, dream like Butler, and see the world through pop-tinted glasses like Warhol.

The ninth, in turn, demands that audience members "MUST" experience the transformation(s) outlined by the seventh commandment, or something related: a simple change in mood, the person's perspective, or eye color. The tenth commandments builds on this by asking that people be aware that children conceived during the show or in the hours immediately following might be born with wings. The commandment adds an addendum: they will not be responsible for raising or providing for the child. Monáe plays her audience by having them consent and engage with her in moments of rupture while she actively aspires to create a new

worldview. In the concert hall, as the sonic vibrations titillate the aural sense, the voice, the oral, must be involved in the music. At the same time, the audience members are expected to move, to sway, to dance in the room. The socio-economic standings of the various members are made irrelevant while creating a sphere of *communitas* that allows for rupture by fostering change. All of this is encompassed in the counter-mythos of the ArchAndroid. Typically, myth building involves the coercion of its target audience. The act of constructing a new narrative, a history, means that the freedom of interpreting metaphor becomes more restricted as ideology takes root. As a result of this, “ideology-making is a form of appropriation, alienation, theft. Myth, as Roland Barthes put it, is “stolen language”” (Wolf 314). Rather than illustrate a new core system with its own oppressive tendencies, Cindi Mayweather calls for independent ruptures. It allows for variation on what that language can be. Believing in the ArchAndroid becomes less about trusting in one absolute than believing in freedom.

To believe in the ArchAndroid means that the devotee must take another look at socially accepted viewpoints, think through them, and assign the object’s new values. As Caller Number Three declares without explanation, in the interlude track “Our Favorite Fugitive,” “Robot Love is Queer!” The radio show’s D.J. initially shows confusion towards this assertion but quickly struts an understanding tune. The conflation of identities is paramount to discussions of Cindi Mayweather, her human lover Greendown, and the movement that overtakes their environment in answer to this deconstruction of identity concepts. The D.J.’s about-face speaks to an alternate world view that accepts human-android cohabitation. This is in contrast to tracks that appear before “Our Favorite Fugitive” where the beholders of Mayweather question her freak/weirdo status.

Monáe/Mayweather is able to create this space for cohabitation by standing against the oppressive gazes through the interrogation and resistance of the phallogentric (hooks 116). The music video for “Q.U.E.E.N” takes place in a living museum—a museum where rebels from across time are on display in suspended animation. Janelle Monáe, accompanied by noted Afrofuturist musician Erykah Badu, are depicted as two of these rebels. During a tour of the museum, they regain function after the music begins to drop. The rebels, having begun as mannequins enslaved by the gaze of an environment that does not allow them access, begin to orally question:

Hey sister am I good enough for your heaven?

Say will your God accept me in my black and white?

Will he approve the way I'm made?

Or should I reprogram the program and get down?

In the article “Afrofuturism and Post-Soul Possibility in Black Popular Music,” David Marlo discusses how Erykah Badu exemplifies extraordinary possibility in black music post-soul, writing that through her “transformative visual style...soulful, visionary lyrics, and aural flexibility” she interacts within “the breaks, in the gaps between essentialized blackness and post-soul possibility to project forward into future blackness” (705). This eloquent description of Monáe’s fellow Afrofuturist and collaborator Badu can be similarly applied to Monáe. Together, Badu and Monáe invoke legacies of the Civil Rights movement by expressing their weariness towards Marvin Gaye’s inquiring and passive question “What’s Going On?” They demand protest action in the streets to defy social

taxonomies that are representative of an overridingly heteronormative and white society by challenging them with multiple gazes that redress social views on race, gender, and sexuality. Erykah Badu is dressed in a garb that fuses futurist clothes similar to the type of dress the viewer might find in *Dune* or *Star Wars* with particular cuts reminiscent of the ancient Sudan. Their approach mimics Octavia Butler. Historically, Butler deliberately invoked elements of African heritage and the slave system in the United States to remind the world that America's social structure is still not balanced.

Monáe understands that civilization has always operated in a manner that requires alienation and subjugation. Her aesthetic is an attempt to sway her audience into preparing for a future where alien life forms will not need to take the form of non-white races. During the interview with *io9*, Monáe acknowledges human interactions' dysfunctional state:

I know that we will live in this world. How will we all act? Will we teach our kids to fear the android? Will we treat the android inhumanely? Act superior? I want people to wrap their minds around that. I think that we need a mediator, if we're all gonna rewrite history, and not oppress the Other.

Janelle Monáe's tendency towards representing the Other in this ever-mutating fashion showcases Cindi Mayweather's hybrid lineage with Butler's Anyanwu. The hybrid requires her to contemplate the Othering of people in the past, present, and future simultaneously. Artists who are classified as Afrofuturists, like Butler and Monáe, push beyond the socio-economic realities of now by providing a prism to examine the historical issues. As a genre, Afrofuturism provides imaginative future technologies, such as cyborgs, that enable the

examination and forward momentum to push past the identities culture defines and thrusts upon its participants. While Donna Haraway famously used the word cyborg in “A Cyborg Manifesto,” the sentiment behind her word choice can apply to any hybridized body. Androids and seeds are rendered through commercial enterprise like cyborgs:

The main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential (Haraway 273)

As Haraway articulates above, hybrid bodies are products that signify a departure from the traditional creation of new life. The advent of cyborgs, androids, and Butlerian seeds are simultaneously indebted to their human fathers for creating them while also being completely free to diverge from their creators. Monáe, as Cindi Mayweather, mediates the historicized behaviorisms of humanity by directly addressing the heritage of oppression. She does this by situating Cindi Mayweather outside of the continuum of biological reproduction. Mayweather has no father except for the factory she was assembled in. Her oppressor is commerce itself.

In her book, *Afrofuturism*, Ytasha Womack recounts a Caribfunk dance performance she was once privy to while discussing Monáe’s song “Q.U.E.E.N.” to showcase exactly how an artist like Monáe can intentionally subvert the male gaze in order to attempt to effect a rupture. During a Black Existential Conference, a dancer named A’keitha Carey performed. She infused her routine with Afrofuturistic qualities. Womack notes that the style is akin to belly dancing but is not meant to “tease sexually or stir up any sensuous emotions” (102).

However, once the performance was finished, a male member of the audience asked Carey how one could watch her dance and not subject himself to objectifying carnal thoughts. Despite intention and execution, the overriding perspective won out and reduced Carey's identity to something comprehensible to the patriarchal system. The audience member immediately treated the spectacle as an "erotic object" (Mulvey 10) to fuel his response to the subject. This exploration into how personhood is demarcated through the gaze of others serves as a focal point of Monáe's message. To use lyrics from the aforementioned song "Q.U.E.E.N", "You can take my wings but I'm still goin' fly/ And even when you edit me the booty don't lie" (2013). While discussing another music icon, Nina Simone, Professor Feldstein uses a term appropriate to the deciphering the intentions behind Monáe's lyrics- "proactive self-fashioning" (1372). Janelle Monáe's songs do not acquiesce to any type of Lacanian gaze, male or otherwise, in their interpretation of her body and her essence. Her booty don't lie. The framing gaze might attempt to alter Monáe's message but an individual's self-fashioning exists beyond the meaning society tacks on.

At this juncture, it is important to note that the capacity for a hybrid body to provoke a moment of rupture, and to navigate through such a moment, is intrinsically liminal. Most figures of the hybrid have an inherent form. Octavia Butler's shapeshifting Anyanwu in *Wild Seed* always returns to her original human form. This debatably leads Anyanwu to fail since she cannot cause a permanent rupture. Every time she becomes human again, she is resituated in Doro's web (Doro, a being that can be considered the anthropomorphization of culture). Earlier, I contended that Haraway's ideas concerning cyborg femininity can be extended to other images of hybrid bodies like androids and seeds. This is because her conception of a cyborg is an

organism removed from a patrilineal biological continuity. As such the “cyborg is not subject to Foucault’s biopolitics; the cyborg simulates politics, a much more potent field of operations” (Haraway 283). The cyborg is a product of the state. It is a combination of ideology and materialist drive that does not reproduce identity categories based on culturally determined opinions of genetic worth. The cyborg is not male, not female, not black or white, it is a body that is “not armored against the world with robot technology, but rather open and redefined by technology” (Williams 167). The ability of the hybrid body to affect change through moments of rupture might manifest in it causing small permutations. It can fail altogether in successfully changing society, or it can cause the necessary rift. The importance of these moments do not necessarily lie in their permanence but in the potentiality they represent. Cindi Mayweather calls attention to these moments to shift the worldview of Metropolis and 21st-century America.

To understand how moments of rupture can be used for social change, let us consider the significance of the year 1954 in Monáe’s work. In the booklet that accompanies the CD *Archandroid*, Max Stellings, the Vice-Chancellor of the asylum Janelle Monáe is in, mentions the date twice. First, he writes that he is “convinced that 1954 is not just a year-it is an army.” The second instance the year appears is when Stellings claims that Monáe used to work at a Musiquarium in the future with the punk prophets Deep Cotton. But, he exclaims, that is impossible since records indicate they’ve been dead since 1954. The scholar Elizabeth Stinson points out the weight Monáe’s usage of 1954 carries:

1954 as an “army” in the liner notes of *Archandroid* has a direct connection the start of a rebellious army that Wondaland and Mayweather inspire; things are not what they seem and this time the army sits among other key events: *Brown v. Board of Education*, the

start of the second phase of the Civil Rights Movement, the year colonial revolt started in Algeria, and the start of the Vietnam War (297).

Monáe's positioning of her army at the time of *Brown v Board of Education*, the ruling that rid the United States of legal segregation in the U.S. education system, is tactical. It asserts future possibility onto the past in much the same way Butler intentionally chose to work backward chronologically from *Patternmaster* to *Wild Seed*. This futurist gaze emphasizes the fictional notion that the stratification between identity groups in the United States has been reduced with time. First, racial separation was enforced by master-slave binaries. Then segregation proposed infirm conceptions of separate but equal. Certain groups of people could not claim full citizenship in the United States because of legal actions like segregation. Butler wrote this racialized binary into her novels. She did so in pursuit of not allowing endemic social issues like racism to hide from plain view despite these issues still influencing people. As Madhu Dubey points out in the quote below, Octavia Butler provided historical backdrops to her work that underline America's present practices that are relics or new adaptations of the racial power structures from the past:

Butler revisits slavery in order to dispute dominant public narratives of the civil rights movement as inaugurating a postracial phase of national history. The insistently running thread of US chattel slavery in Butler's fiction attests to the persistence of racial inequality in the post-civil rights period. Yet by continually defamiliarizing this history, Butler compels attention to current practices of coercion and subjugation that are not always, or not most fully, understood as remnants or extensions of the racial legacy of antebellum chattel slavery. (Dubey 360)

These “current practices” took hold in America’s economy. After *Brown*, shifts in “demographic patterns, white flight, and the inability of the courts to effect the necessary degree of social reform” reduced the weight of the verdict and led to an increasing gap in economic conditions (Bell 518). The phenomena Derrick Bell Jr. sketches here stress that racial reformation only happens when the dueling motivations converge. Social change only occurs when the interests of those with economic capital intersect with the causes of minority populations. If there is no advancements to be made, there is no convergence and things remain the same. Instead of bowing to the mainstream narrative that sees no need for movement in the field of Civil Rights, Janelle Monáe follows Octavia Butler in the hybrid tradition. This tradition firmly situates her rebel alliance at the time of the *Brown v Board of Education* ruling, in the throes of the Cold War that overshadowed social issues during 1954. The next section will highlight how Butler and Monáe exhibit how the edifices of racial subjugation remain intact in every generation despite landmark decisions like *Brown v. Board of Education*.

Section Two: Hybrids under “Many Moons”

To understand the potential of the hybrid, an analysis of the structures that bind it is necessary. In an essay titled “Race, Identity, and Political Culture,” Manning Marable examines how racial subjugation has altered after the Civil Rights Movement. It has now become an “insidious and complex structure of domination” (292) that controls majority/minority relations in the United States. Marable speaks about how identity is coded through multiple channels like school, family, and religion. Only by recognizing how these

channels influence society can one begin to work against or through them.

In *Wild Seed*, Butler fashions a situation in which her hybrid character Anyanwu is subjected to the constraints of Doro's society and then eventually works through them by recognizing them. It is within Doro's web that Butler establishes a hidden civilization that mirrors American society's on a functional level. Seed villages are settlements Doro has established to collect and breed individuals born with special abilities. He corals people like Anyanwu, honing in on their location with his telepathic predatory instinct. After locating them, he convinces them, peaceful or otherwise, to relocate themselves into one of his villages (*Wild Seed* 111). There, they breed at his command as he attempts to create a superior species. While the effects of this genetically fueled diaspora are not fully felt until novels that appear chronologically later, Doro creates a society that parallels and overlaps the European settlements in America. While there are many commonalities linking the two, Doro's society diverges in a number of ways although none of those ways suggest a full cultural departure. Chronologically, Doro's project during *Wild Seed* spans a few hundred years. He wants to create a master species through a selective breeding program. His communities of seeds hide their existence by publicly mirroring their neighbors' culture aesthetic. Doro's project has not yet reached its rupture point with human civilization though. It exists parasitically with the mundane world, borrowing its capitalistic mold to further itself. He outfits himself like the slavers of whom he speaks so derogatorily, he has his own ships and crew, and he scours the earth for people with the right physiology to fulfill his needs.

While differentiated from the real world through the fantastic powers its residents display, the reader can begin to recognize the types of repressive functions that ensure Doro's

dominance over the seeds. Doro is the chief institution that all actions inside the seed villages are bound to follow. He decides who mates with who, and he strongly suggests what each citizen will do with their lives. Doro molds the seeds to live by his message. He is able to do this because “we perceive in patterns, and we remember in patterns” (Birdwhistell “The Age of a Baby”). People innately absorb the pattern of life around them. By founding his villages, Doro controls their upbringing and shapes the seed populations’ future. For the seeds who do not comply, he is death, the legal power capable of removing the malcontent seeds from society. To go against his will is to break the pattern since it is taboo to the cultural norms Doro has created. While culture is not totally in control of an individual’s actions, it negotiates the normative motions we might make by strongly delineating what is acceptable. This is true in the real world and in *Wild Seed*. Doro, as Butler’s first pattern master, acts as the origin point for the traditions of the seeds. The toxic traditions he represents act as the signpost for Anyanwu’s hybrid rebellion.

If the reader accepts that Doro is the anthropomorphized form of culture in *Wild Seed*, one can immediately eke out an air of cultural determinism within the novel. Doro cannot be killed or evaded. Even if an individual trapped inside his breeding program decides to take drastic action by slaying the patriarch or through fleeing, Doro’s abilities, to instantly be aware of where his seeds are and to bypass death and take possession of somebody else’s body, makes the attempt futile (21). Once Doro has somebody within his sights, they are his. There is a conversation between Doro and Anyanwu earlier in the novel. She asks him what happens to the people who do not follow him. He initially attempts to ease past the answer but she persists with the question. He stays quiet, thinking to himself that silence is answer enough—that only

“the stupid actually needed to hear his answer, and this woman was not stupid” (*Wild Seed* 20). Anyanwu’s understanding of Doro’s silent answer to her question reveals the way in which Doro, as culture embodied, is assured in how those around him will comply to his methods. Seeds configure their actions to meet Doro’s approval. Once Doro enters a seed’s life, they have no option but to comply or face extinction. Most seeds are not capable of resisting him, their individual powers are no match for the pattern he has created and embodies.

Finding Anyanwu changes that. While Doro, the social institution, is assured in his ability to quell Anyanwu’s independence, Doro the social performer is less certain if he should. Her immortality puts her on a similar level to him, a uniqueness Doro wishes to foster in order to strengthen his eugenic project. In order to subdue Anyanwu’s reticence to join him, the first thing he does is get himself invited into her home. He familiarizes himself to her by placing his body in a personal space. He abruptly demands access to her home and food during their first encounter while they argued over why she should follow him. Taken aback, Anyanwu laughs and treats him as a guest (14). The home is an interpersonal space that is supposed to act as an inhibitor to activity. By inhibiting the types of interaction that can occur within its space, it allows for a reification of what passes as normal for its resident. The permitted entry of an outsider, as Doro is, continues a sequence of culturally normative activities. Since Anyanwu gives Doro permission to come in, they enact certain social customs. She gives him “a deerskin to sit on since he carried nothing other than the cloth around his loins,” feeds him, and gives him a safe place to sleep (18). All of these activities are common to Anyanwu. Doro cleverly shields himself in Anyanwu’s persona space. He then takes it a step further, promising her children.

Children that would possess abilities similar to her own, perhaps ones that could live beyond even her.

With the promise of children comes coitus. The entry into Anyanwu and her intimate space, “It was not until she began to grow breasts that he knew for certain he had won. He got up then, and when the change was complete, he took her to the couch” (24). The omitted sexual intercourse marks the moment in which Anyanwu is rendered subject to Doro. She begins to perceive herself as his wife and willingly migrates to her new husband’s residence. This marks the moment that Anyanwu acclimates herself to Doro’s customs. Earlier, he had won favor with her by adopting her customs in her home. By relocating to his domicile, Anyanwu burdens herself with the expectations of fulfilling a role in Doro’s seed village.

In the song “Mr. President,” Monáe addresses similar issues about how location oppresses individuals while describing the plight of the androids in *Metropolis*. The android population of Metropolis is, like the seeds, restricted in how and where they are able to live their lives. The second-class status they are afforded forces them into precarious situations. In “Sincerely, Jane” Monáe depicts the plight of the android community. They live in neighborhoods that have inadequate educational institutions and are rife with crime. Monáe ambiguously sings that “it seems they have abandoned us” (Monáe 2010), a thought that is picked on the subsequent track called “Dear Mr. President.” Monáe sings:

Dear Mr. President

I hope you got the letter I sent

A Dollar only goes so far

And we need help here, no matter who we are

See we come from different worlds and different places

Until there's one great land, one nation under god,

Times are getting harder and we need you to be like Moses

And lead your people through (Monáe 2010)

These lyrics are intended to speak as easily to the social situation in the real-world United States to a listener uninitiated in Monáe's *Metropolis* concept. Monáe agrees with Cornell West's observations regarding the linkage between behavior and environment (37). In the lyrics above, Monáe expresses her opinion that the social policies that are aimed to help ease the burden of poorer communities ("a dollar") that government officials legislate and pass are often unaccompanied by actual leadership. If an environment is allowed to stagnate because of inadequate political coverage, the people who reside in that place will not be given a fair chance. This is a result of the fact that they do not receive adequate access to resources or proper representation. Policies typically circumvent opportunity while favoring the maintenance of the status quo. The United States' democratic system is largely staffed by elected participants who can by-and-large mark off a census box denoting the elected official's (non-Hispanic) whiteness. The lack of diversity does not reflect the fact that there are so many people in the country "from different worlds and different places." These types of official qualifiers infer the stagnant oppression of the remaining demographic field by emphasizing a particular hue. So Monáe, as Cindi Mayweather, issues a plea during the song

“Mr. President.” She asks him to assume the mantle of Moses and lead everybody out of servitude rather than standing by as minority populations are neglected by their elected officials.

Her sci-fi opus constantly brings identity to the forefront by directly questioning it through her lyrics. In “Make the Bus”, the band Of Montreal provides the voice for the citizens of Metropolis. Fascinated by the celebrity of Mayweather, they reflect on their obsession, wishing for her to return to her diva roots. Begging her to understand their point of view, they point out, “The way you are now/You’re never gonna make the bus/Even though/Everybody’s so impressed” (Monáe 2010) in hopes that Mayweather will come to a realization about the nature of her mission. It will result in Mayweather being shunned for her non-conformity. So her messianic return is coupled with an epiphany about the nature of identity and humanity. This factors into the next line where her fan base continues to reason that her non-conformity, the reason for her exclusion from the bus, stems from Cindi Mayweather having a copy of *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* under her pillow. By possessing that particular novel, Monáe/Mayweather intentionally evokes the themes of transient identity notions that litter Philip K. Dick’s work. Like the titular androids from Dick’s novel, Cindi Mayweather is an economic creation, a product made. Mayweather is a product surrounded and pressured by her environment. She is expected to follow the market’s rules in the same manner as Anyanwu. Both lead characters live in societies that would prefer they acquiesce to their conditions and continue to smooth the way for their particular markets (Metropolis’ economy and Doro’s breeding program).

Race is a technology, a product of culture. Its chief anthropological purpose is to aid in the maintenance of the market; the existing pattern of wealth distribution. Cindi Mayweather, a product of that market, becomes the vehicle guiding Janelle Monáe's Afrofuturist vision. Her android station emphasizes the status of race as a technology. The android figure contextualizes race as a historical byproduct, an offshoot of the technological needs of economic gain. Their origins lie in the African Diaspora, the slave trade, and other social institutions that have descended from slavery that then aided in the subsequent marginalization of people through constructed differences. Race, in the United States, consolidates the position of the wealthy. The upper class develops the social hierarchy by providing social codes, ritualized behaviors, and revisionist histories. Janelle Monáe's Metropolis, acting as the stand-in for the United States in her storytelling, enacts "collective rituals to maintain the order of the world and from which they deployed the power to ensure it" (Wolf 401). The social stratification of the androids benefits the humans of Metropolis who create the androids and then benefit from their labor.

That same economic system that permeates the world and props up a very specific center opens up new broadcasting avenues which Monáe takes full advantage of. As Richard Iton points out, paradigm shifts could and can occur through the direct actions of popular culture artists being broadcast along the "lower acoustic frequencies." These auditory excursions into a new dialectic makes it "harder not to know what is going on in black popular culture," forcing society to notice every single segment (Iton 124). There is much to be said about the continued commodification and globalization of American Black popular art forms that are both positive and negative. The technological progression, from sound bites to

dedicated radio stations to easy Internet access, means the spread of new cultural aesthetics that can have a political impact become increasingly more likely take hold over the public conscious. Monáe does not have to placate a publisher. She has the full support of Sean “Puffy” Combs, Bad Boy Records, and her own label Wondaland Arts Society. The interview with *The Guardian* reveals the interesting possibilities current technology is already opening. Instead of inclining her head to the publisher’s wishes, wishes that do not necessarily coincide or understand her aesthetics’ vision, she simply published herself online. Not only does that make her instantly accessible to anybody with an internet connection, it leaves her vision intact with the only thing condensing it being the file format.

Monáe’s emphasis on futuristic technologies mirrors Octavia Butler’s intentions for exploring the past. Butler intentionally chose to begin the *Patternist* series centuries before the 1900s. She set *Wild Seed* in a time when the slave trade first began and the novel continues into the United States of America’s antebellum era. She did this to chronicle how historical occurrences, like slavery, have a lasting impact upon the places and people who played a part. Doro, a stand-in for white oppression in the United States, has benefited from enslaving others. In the same way, the humans of Metropolis have continued to consolidate their wealth and position in society by denying androids the same rights and access in their city. Androids, like Doro’s seeds, must live in a conditioned way or face punishment. Janelle Monáe’s vision of the android, a future life-form, acts as an extension of Butler’s analysis of the past and how it can burden successive eras. While race and ethnic definitions are malleable realities that ebb and flow generationally, the switch from the past in *Wild Seed* to the future on display in “Many

Moons” showcases how the world is constantly being remapped with the intention of oppressing one group in favor of another.

While Metropolis is not a seed village, Janelle Monáe illustrates the many ways her future society, and twenty-first-century America shackles its citizens. “Many Moons” was the first music video Janelle Monáe released in 2008. The third track on her EP *Metropolis: Suite I (The Chase)*, “Many Moons” positions Cindi Mayweather as the in-house entertainment of an annual android auction. It is here, at the auction, that Janelle Monáe first fully showcases her nuanced understanding of oppression. The video is a virtual hodgepodge, giving light to a handful of problems Monáe targets. At this juncture, the thesis will detail how Monáe manufactures various oppressive systems into her Metropolis fiction in order to navigate and reflect upon real world issues as evinced through the music video. I will do so by primarily arguing that the auction in “Many Moons” is a site that allows for a trifold examination of American history, the male gaze, and class stratification. The manner in which Monáe uses setting to convey her message is imitated throughout the whole of her work. As Richard Iton indicates in *In Search of the Black Fantastic*, movements that are drawn up to engage on specific narrow fronts often lack a “substantive response” to the illegitimately wielded power that constricts social possibilities (102). The Archandroid Cindi Mayweather inspires a revolutionary movement within Metropolis because of the fact that her message is wide-ranging and does not focus on any one narrow front, like the ones Richard Iton discusses. Because of Mayweather’s ability to speak to a diverse audience, she threatens Metropolis’ power structure.

The video’s backdrop begins in black. As the music comes in, white letters appear, centered on the screen in a manner suggestive of Fritz Lang’s influence. The intertitles read,

"Metropolis: Annual Android Auction." The hostess of the auction, Lady Maxxa speaks from the shadows while a screen behind her shows a close up of an unidentified person's brow region. The gaze does not waver, although the camera does. After some discourse, Lady Maxxa introduces the "toast of the town" Cindi Mayweather. Mayweather rushes the stage and immediately dives into her performance. Much of the video deals with the presence of the bidders, men and women willing to trade in bodies, and, while the aura of the event feels 1960s, like American Bandstand, the celebratory atmosphere does not shroud how the android auction mirrors the historical slave trade.

Within the walls of Lady Maxxa's auction house, race takes shape. Before rushing onstage to perform, the Alpha Platinum Android 9000, Cindi Mayweather, touches a spot on her forehead. This act triggers a hue change. The android's skin switches from a metallic sheen to a human tone. With the dissipation of the slave trade, these racial and ethnic identities continue to reproduce to maintain the social stratification prevalent in the United States. Even when the facets of institutional discrimination are unheralded, the lineation of what is culturally available remains etched within the social parameters. This, in turn, frames the cultural narrative. Like the male audience member who was unable to comprehend the kinetic female body in Carey's performance for anything other than sexual value, it is important to understand how gazes cases the discussion.

This hybridization of racial categories enacted by Cindi Mayweather echoes the nebulous bodies Butler wrote into her *Patternist* series. The lead antagonist Doro performs within the chattel slavery system—the same thing the Auction House metaphorically stands in for. He walks a tightrope while attempting to differentiate his seed village system from the plantations.

Wild Seed opens with Doro discovering one of his many seed villages in ruins, abandoned, its previous residents taken into slavery. He has founded an untold amount of seed villages on an unspecified amount of continents (at least two-Africa and North America). Despite the fact that Doro engages in the trading of bodies and the enslavement of people to meet his goals, Doro does not consciously consider himself a slave master. This is seen in his regard for the occupation, “Slavers had been to it before him. With their guns and their greed, they had undone in a few hours the work of a thousand years” (*Wild Seed* 3). Presented with a reality that new slavers are unweaving centuries of his work, he is rendered thoughtless with anger. He ventures away from the village, not knowing where he is going, led by his instincts. Doro is a slaver angered by the possibility that the bodies that accrue value for him can be taken from him.

The conversation concerning Doro is an appropriate segue into discussing how the auction house, a setting Janelle Monáe consciously chose to first visually introduce her concept, targets multiple social concerns. Doro is a slaver. His motivation is to warp the world into a shape preferable to him. To achieve that, he treats men and women as objects whose primary function is to appease his wants. While he can and will forward his own interests by possessing a body of either male or female, he is a male whose eye subordinates the women like Anyanwu in his web. The Auction House in “Many Moons” metaphorically occupies the same role as Doro in *Wild Seed*. Cindi Mayweather’s role in the Auction House also mirrors the manner in which Anyanwu is trapped within Doro’s system.

The electric bodies that are being parceled out to the bidding audience through monetary transactions are female ones being dressed and forced to act in a manner that entertains the male gaze and sways him into bidding. They walk along a catwalk to the delight of the crowd as the

toast of the town, Cindi Mayweather, performs for them. Notable members of the buying audience include Chung Knox, a Tech Dandy, and Mousey, a Neon Valley Crime Lord. With a couple of exceptions, most of the people attempting to purchase the various androids are men. Backstage an android modeled after Janelle Monáe is forcefully being squeezed into a corset by a man. On the catwalk, Lady Maxxa's emceeing introduces the androids for sale. These two scenes make an example out of the complicit role both males and females find themselves in. Lady Maxxa and the dresser are both acting in a manner that upholds the patriarchal standard of Metropolis (and the real world). Like Doro, the Auction House's underlying power matrices spread beyond the institution. They tacitly mark all cultural actors as complicit because they operate within the same economic webs that oppresses certain groups.

Janelle Monáe's choice in extending the story beyond her songs and into the visual music video medium reflects Metropolis' attempts to unmask the exploitation of female, and in this instance black, bodies wherever it crops up. This has often taken form by reducing female participation to object roles; eye candy whose victimization defines manhood. Aisha Durham discussed the topic in an article on perhaps the most popular female figure in music today Beyoncé. She notes how Hip Hop Feminist studies often address the issue of gender reproduction in "Hip Hop dreamworlds" by examining how "the uneven production of music videos in which the gendered and sexual labor of women services male rappers and male-owned corporations that provide little agency and economic mobility for the majority of female cultural workers" (39). She goes on to employ a term "flat femininities" (45) that defines what the multitude of female representations, the majority of which are played by Janelle Monáe, is combating against. Flat femininities can be summarized through the complete lack of scope

female performers are given when appearing in music videos. The fact that Janelle Monáe chose to make her visage the oppressed androids' sole representative speaks to the multivalent femininity on display in "Many Moons." It parallels how Anyanwu's biological power allows her to take shape as any organic life-form which, in turn, grants her reprieve from the social constraints enforced upon her by Doro.

Janelle Monáe's tactic is similar but rooted in motherboards and watts. The barrage of figures she plays in the "Many Moons" music video uncovers the extent of the male gaze because of the fact that it is primarily one woman in a score of roles. Rather than showcase how to escape the gaze, Monáe highlights its reach and the inevitability that exists for everybody. The sexualized and enslaved androids on the auction block are mass produced for the pleasure of their future buyers and the viewing spectators. Cindi Mayweather's performance talents help in this regard by providing ancillary entertainment, smoothing out the way for sales and repeat patrons. Even the horse backed android, Lady Maestra, which appears after Cindi Mayweather short-circuits as she breaks from her coding acts as a witness. She is indistinguishable in action from the rest of the audience aside from the horse.

In an article titled "Drop It Like It's Hot" published in *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*, Mako Fitts outlines the typical casting procedure for music videos. While primarily discussing Hip Hop videos, Fitts discusses how the agentless "video girls" (220) are cast and usually chosen by men who base their selections almost entirely upon the women's physical appearance. The casting selections are almost courting sessions where the male panels (the artist is typically not present) attempt to become intimate with the female subject. The female body becomes the poster board for the men's desires. Over the course of creating the final

product, the music video, the female role in its creation can be summarized as follows: “from casting to production, women are subjected to harsh physical scrutiny because their bodies are among the many commodities used to create the music video as an extended advertisement for the music products (songs, albums) sold by the record label” (219). The music video, in these instances, becomes a symbol of sexism. The fact that the music video sells showcases sexism’s endemic status in society.

Furthermore, even female directors usually treat the women as derisively as the title “video girls” would suggest. Fitts goes on to note that while the personas of male artists are generally only half the story in that they sensationalize aspects of themselves to appeal to the market, video girls are stuck in the role of sexualized objects. Once they assume the mantle of video girl, they are typecast and thrust into a direction that forces them to meet the expectations of their surroundings. If they do not play up their on-screen persona in real life, in many instances they then “experience limited mobility when pursuing non-music video projects” (221-223). The economic production of music videos impacts women on multiple levels: first it becomes a source of income and of substance. Then, their on-screen exposure decreases their chances of finding success in other occupational settings as a result of the economic penalties of deviating away from a male-driven market.

Intentionally or not, Janelle Monáe’s near monopoly over the characters in “Many Moons” has a real world impact in that it mitigates the effects of the dominant male culture beyond the selection of video girls. This is not seen exclusively in “Many Moons.” Many of her music videos use people she knows directly through her association with the Wondaland Arts Society. “Cold War”, which occurs after “Many Moons” chronologically, tests many of the same

issues using different tactics. While Monáe's body of work shows a tendency to rebel against the norms of music video culture, Shana L. Redmond points out that the music video for the song "Cold War" is where Monáe takes it a step further:

The negative consequences wrought by nudity on individual careers and on collective representations disproportionately impacts women. Men's heightened access to the means of (cultural) production ensures that the nude body on display is most often imagined by and through a male, proprietary gaze. Monáe's disruption of this trend is evident in the way that she performs her body within her video for "Cold War." With director Wendy Morgan, Monáe debunks the reigning popular imagery of the nude, black singer within black music video culture. (404)

Rather than clad herself in multiple personas during the production of "Cold War", Monáe manipulates the sensory reception of her audience. As noted in the introduction to this thesis, Janelle Monáe is uniquely positioned while she is performing in "Cold War." For the entirety of the video, Monáe is in front of a black backdrop. For precisely three minute and forty-four seconds, the length of the video, Janelle Monáe is the only visual stimulus on screen. And she is nude. Rather than allow that fact to situate her along favorable lines with the male gaze, she demands the camera remain focused upon her face. While the camera is panned on her face, it continuously wavers as if opposing wills are in control, wanting to pan out, or shy downward. Monáe's voice serves as her will by neutralizing these opposing wills. As noted above by Shana L. Redmond, the music video for "Cold War" deliberately criticizes the standard way of doing things in both the music industry and the U.S. at large. "Cold War" is a visual continuation of the feminist project started in "Many Moons" because it challenges how the female figure should be

perceived. Rather than make the body a sexual commodity that can be sold, “Cold War” and “Many Moons” deliberately invoke moments of rupture that dismiss male efforts to objectify women.

The third oppressive social construction in “Many Moons” that Monáe intentionally builds up and calls out is class stratification. To be more specific, Monáe constructs a class structure akin to the real world, one that is nuanced by fabricated categories like race and ethnicity. While noting the dualistic nature of the Auction House, it being a fashion runway and an auction block, the layout of the auditorium skillfully positions “the masses below, the rich bidders in the stands, and the bandstand behind the thrust stage” (Stinson 298). To add to Stinson’s breakdown of the room, there are also the androids on stage, removed from the class structure, a people treated as products because of the android label. The presumably middle- and working- class audience, located in the lower tier general admission section, are perhaps the most in tune with Cindi Mayweather as she begins to perform. They go crazy as most impassioned fans are wont to do. Despite their apparent empathy for the “toast of the town” Cindi Mayweather, they are still unable to truly engage with Mayweather and the androids as a result of their placement in the room. The fact that the audience members bought tickets to attend the event commercializes their relationship with Mayweather. Even if the standing room section has free admission, their place in society, on the lower to middle spectrum, is still sited along a social continuum that is markedly better than the androids being paraded on stage. This enforces their lack of spatial interaction. The only way the androids can leave the location is if they are bought. Even with her celebrity status, Cindi Mayweather’s mobility is restricted.

Property rights aside, the androids are partially forced into behaving through their coding, a thin allusion to the enculturating process in the United States that extols the American Myth while providing none of the circumstances for many to ever attempt to realize it. While providing entertainment during the chattel-like auction, Mayweather begins to recite the Cybernetic Chantdown during “Many Moons”:

Civil rights, civil war/ Hood rat, crack whore/ Carefree, nightclub/ Closet drunk,
bathtub/Outcast, weirdo/ Stepchild, freak show/ Black girl, bad hair/ Broad nose, cold
stare/ Tap shoes, Broadway/ Tuxedo, holiday/ Creative black, Love song/ Stupid words,
erased song/ Gun shots, orange house/ Dead man walking with a dirty mouth/ Spoiled
milk, stale bread/ Welfare, bubonic plague/ Record deal, light bulb/ Keep back kid not
corporate thug/ Breast cancer, common cold. HIV, lost hope/ Overweight, self esteem/
Misfit, broken dream/ Fish tank, small bowl/ Closed mind, dark hold/ Cybergirl, droid
control/ Get away now they trying to steal your soul/ Microphone, one stage/ Tomboy,
outrage/ Street fight, bloody war/ Instigators, third floor/ Promiscuous child, broken
dream/ STD, quarantine/ Heroin user, coke head/ Final chapter, death bed/ Plastic sweat,
metal skin/ Metallic tears, mannequin/ Carefree, night club/ Closet drunk, bathtub/ White
house, Jim Crow/ Dirty lies, my regards

While she goes through the chant, the various word associations shown above are accompanied by the videos on the screens behind Mayweather while she performs. The videos show scenes of oppression from unspecified fascist states. Interestingly enough, tucked within the switching and often times overlapping images of Cindi Mayweather and the fascist videos are two emboldened words: “MARKET RESEARCH.” This occurs at the 3:50 mark in the music video. It is between

these shifting visual images and the audible Cybernetic Chantdown that Monáe connects unfair government systems and social inequalities/ailments to the economic system. Groups of people are made disadvantaged for the betterment of others. The independent halves of binaries like rich/poor and white/blue collar cannot exist without its opposite.

It is within this revelation that Monáe and Mayweather prop up their most fundamental symbol: the uniform. In “Many Moons” and beyond, both Janelle Monáe and Cindi Mayweather are most commonly associated with “a coiffed 1950s pompadour and snug tuxedo” (Womack 74). Janelle Monáe keeps her wardrobe almost strictly black and white in homage to her family’s working class roots. In an interview with *Huffington Post*’s writer Julee Wilson titled *Janelle Monáe Honored at Essence Dinner Party, Explains Signature Black-And-White Style*, Monáe commented on her fashion, “It is a dedication to uniformity and I’m a minimalist by heart, but a lot of it had to do with me wanting to have a uniform like the working class, like my mom and grandmother.” The stark black and white colors have become her uniform, her most consistent visual that helps fully realize her telling of *Metropolis* because it harkens back to her family’s working-class roots. By intentional invoking the working-class with her clothing and putting it on center display, Monáe is ensuring that economic issues are viewed as a root of all other discourse. The creation of identity markers like nationality, race, sexuality and ethnicity, spring from the degradation of the people who are materially marginalized. This ensures that those in power can continue their primacy and stand firm with their coffers fattened. Doro’s act of establishing communities only furthers himself. He gains power and sustenance by gathering up his seeds while they endeavor to live despite having to do his bidding. Doro’s seeds must move when he tells them to, breed when and with whom he tells them to, and die when he grows bored

or dissatisfied. Likewise, the androids in the Auction House are swept up in the demands of their surroundings. They must prostrate themselves to appease their buyers and the auctioneers. Despite being dehumanized by being on sale, the androids are forced to entertain their audience. Only Anwanyu's ability to escape Doro's control by becoming something non-human and Cindi Mayweather's code malfunction grant them the license to explore alternative possibilities.

Section Three: Finding Communitas on the Streets of Metropolis

In the microcosmic examples of Metropolitan society provided in the last section, it might be hard to remember that Cindi Mayweather is the Messianic ArchAndroid: an entity prophesized by Janelle Monáe that will usher in an era of love and equality. In this weave of institutions that construct the setting, the listener/reader might be hard pressed to identify where there is the necessary breathing room that might foster and fulfill prophetic expectation. Mayweather has to have space to intercede and bring about a complete change to the system. So where in the divided world of Metropolis does she find this space to facilitate and engage moments of rupture? It is in the nightclubs, the concert venues, along the airwaves, and other manifestations of counter-cultural spaces. These zones shield taboo subject matter like interspecies coupling (the primary instance being Anthony Greendown and Cindi Mayweather). It is also where Mayweather discovers and is discovered by the demographic slice of the Metropolitan community thriving in the social structure's cracks. It is with these people, and around these people, where she finds the communitas necessary to uncover moments of rupture that will allow her to overhaul the system.

There are prescribed events or rituals most societies employ to reify the existing norms. In the transitional portion of these processes, the ritual participants, the liminoids, are often times temporarily removed from their social statuses. In the moments or periods in which the participants are unburdened by constructed differences, they can often form communalistic atmospheres with their fellow liminoids. Social scientist Victor Turner called this *communitas*. *Communitas* is the communal, egalitarian, feelings of camaraderie amongst these groups disenfranchised by society through rites and group intention (Olaveson 105). The reasoning behind the rise of *communitas* spaces in rites and group intentions are drastically different. In both instances, the anti-structure emboldened the parent structure. *Communitas* will always fall back into the prevailing social structure. Examples are replete throughout her discography: the crowd in “Many Moons,” the inmates of the psychiatric facility in “Tightrope,” and the sorority in “Electric Ladies.” These locations, either enforced by the larger society or through rituals that, within the context of the setting/event, act as a leveler between participants. As long as they are there, they are equal participants to the spectacle of Mayweather and empathetically share along in her revelations. Once the concert is done, the androids and humans return to their divided communities.

Moments of rupture share one key characteristic with *communitas*: to some degree, they both rely on time. However, moments of rupture feed off of *communitas* and differentiate themselves in possibility. Moments situationally allow for the possibility that individuals might become completely estranged from the dominant social structure. This is in contrast to *communitas* groups returning to their divided homes. In a second or an era, a person or a group might take an action that allows for their removal from prior circumstances or the removal of the

system itself. Just as Octavia Butler populates her novels with female leads that possessed hybrid choices that could allow for their unburdening, Monáe does the same. Her doppelganger, Cindi Mayweather, is an android whose metallic body can act as a reflection of any oppressed group. *Wild Seed*'s Anyanwu, as mentioned before, has evolutionary gifts that allow her to completely escape Doro's seed harvest system. Doro's global reach cannot account for her shapeshifting. Her decision to return and compromise a living situation with him might be perceived as a cynical return to the status quo. However, her decision, like most of her choices, is fueled by the maternal instinct to protect her offspring (*Wild Seed* 296). She uses her longevity as leverage with Doro. She gives him a choice: either he provides those in her protection with better treatment than the seeds in his villages or live out the rest of his (potentially) eternal existence alone. Her mediation between complete escape and reworking the way Doro's predatory nature could impact her wards is an example of a hybrid character successfully using a moment of rupture. As a result of Anyanwu's hybridity, a moment of rupture is uncovered that results in a change in her condition.

In the next section, I will investigate how the hybrid body is used to explore a subject or an idea by using manifestations of disability to ultimately make a point on some social level. As an extension of this, I will question how the music video for the song "Tightrope" sheds light on moments of rupture through its disabled setting.

Section Four: The Disabled Discourse of Hybrid Bodies

A quick exploration into the role of the android, both in Metropolis and throughout most science fiction, is necessary when considering questions pertaining to how the science fiction

genre handles identity issues. Science fiction writers like Butler and Monáe inject characters with fantastical qualities into their stories: characters like aliens, cyborgs, and mutants. Authors do this because cyborg, android, and other hybrid physiologies in the genre are often prescribed such labeling based on how different a character is in comparison to a normal human body. In these instances, the physical differences that distinguish these species from humans become a disability as the non-normative aspects of their body are used to treat them in a debilitating fashion.

Scholars David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder have called this literary phenomena “narrative prosthesis” (224). They write that “disability has been used throughout history as a crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight.” Depictions of characters like Cindi Mayweather and Anyanwu tread alongside these subjects by probing how people are allowed to be treated after their bodies are subjected to diagnostic terms like “android.” These terms question the worthiness of life by reflecting on various ways of being and bogging them down with meaning. By writing characters into their tales who possess physiological distinctions that mark them as other in the eyes of normal bodied humans, Butler and Monáe are employing the hybrid to explore topics of race, disability, and sexuality.

Departures from the normative ideal’s conceptions concerning which bodies should be awarded positive and negative values greatly impacts the social divide in Metropolis. While disability is not usually directly cited, the constant depictions of dismantled androids (modeled by Monáe in the music videos) speak to the prosthetic role the android category carries. This is analogous to an idea put forward by Lennard J. Davis: “even in texts that do not appear to be

about disability, the issue of normalcy is fully deployed... a kind of surveying of the terrain of the body, an attention to difference-physical, mental, and national” (12). In this case, conceptions of normalcy and how the normate population stigmatizes difference are embedded by observing the wires and circuitry protruding from humanoid forms. Difference is institutionalized through ritual behavior. These social rituals lead to social marks that castigate the individual’s standing. By attending to conceptualizations of disability, Metropolis’ social structure is ensured.

Taking the stigmatization of physical difference further, the android figure must be redressed by the reader. The android, the electric humanoid, is typified and classed as not human because of its physiological differences. Androids are forcefully enrolled in service while not receiving the same rights and privileges as the humans. This is because of the social marking that comes with android status. In a similar fashion, the genetically advanced humans in Octavia Butler’s *Patternist* series are inherently under threat and consigned to Doro’s reality because his immortality and powers trap them in his social weave. Doro senses their difference. By simply being born, Butler’s creations, who are uniquely empowered by their genetics, are weakened by the fact that Doro knows who and where they are at all times. Lerita Coleman Brown recounts how social psychologists outline humanity’s need to bring order to chaos, “the perception of human differences indirectly posit that stigmatization is a natural response, a way to maintain order in a potentially chaotic world of social stimuli” (151). When a difference is either immediately noticeable on the visual plane or when that knowledge of physical difference can arise from any given situation, the typical reaction from the normate population is to explain it. This, in turn, reduces the stimuli. This reduction leads to stereotyping and stratification. Androids can be maligned and tolerated on the periphery because humans thrust labels and

program all the rules. They are marginalized people who are bereft of chance because their existence is condensed through this unnecessary explanation. The androids in *Metropolis* and Butler's seeds are not discernable through an eye check. The reduction of identity induced by the stigmatization process does not allow deviations and sets up institutions that promote a type of social stagnancy that underlines the position of those already better off.

The moments of rupture that exist for Cindi Mayweather and her literary predecessor Anyanwu are rooted in their hybridity and the elements of their bodies that see them stigmatized and disabled by the powers that be. The psychic landscape of their respective worlds, however, can be fundamentally altered on a molecular level because of why they are deemed disabled. Furthermore, the imposition of an existing social element into a new arena can slowly change how that existing element is received. By having a person or persons diagnosed with a disability move closer to normative culture, an ideological conflict can be forced.

Disability is written into the hybridity on display in both *Metropolis* and the bulk of Butler's corpus. Hybridity acts as a mirror to reality by forcing considerations of marginalized people into the forefront. Society has generally operated on a principle that stipulates people must assimilate, become one with the status quo, or be blurred out. Integration is a concept bandied about but never realized. The narratives being discussed force the audience to reflect on the characters' actions in the face of real world situations that are programmatic to culture.

Section Five: Walking a "Tightrope"

Monáe's role as abducted time traveler and prophet in the video for "Tightrope" and *Metropolis* reveals another connection between her and Butler. This connection results from how

they use the figure of the hybrid to handle moments of rupture. Monáe's *Metropolis* and Butler's novel *Kindred* (1979) both feature characters whose stories see them inadvertently sent back in time. Both characters are disabled by the journey. When paired, the act of time travel grounds the social woes of the contemporary United States to the past and the future.

To flesh out the overt presence of mental disability and time travel within Monáe's story, one must consider the song "Tightrope" and its accompanying music video. It marks the first occasion in which the figure of Janelle Monáe is inserted into the story in the absence of Cindi Mayweather. Monáe is victimized and institutionalized because her knowledge of the future is perceived as dangerous. Hybridity, in this instance, stems from her unique situation. Her future prophecies empower her to alter the asylum. As chronicled in the liner notes of the CD insert for the first album *The ArchAndroid*, Janelle Monáe is from the future. Accosted, her genetic material is stolen and she is thrown back into the past. While in her own time her DNA is used to manufacture the line of androids that Cindi Mayweather springs up from, Janelle Monáe is left bereft in our time to tell us of the coming of the ArchAndroid. She does this inside the walls of an asylum, her message is not received and interpreted as the musings of a madwoman. It is in the asylum, the Palace of the Dogs, that a message of hope and prosperity stagnates because the normative segment of society is unwilling to learn new modes of being and communication. Stuck in this restrictive location, Monáe's only avenue in finding escape and spreading her vision of hope is to dance.

The music video for the song "Tightrope" begins with a silent film-styled intertitle juxtaposed over a black screen that gives the location, its purpose, and the setting's taboo: "The Palace of the Dogs Asylum Dancing has long been forbidden for its subversive effects on the

residents and its tendency to lead to illegal magical practices.” Monáe’s emphasis on setting speaks to its usage. Asylums are locations where elements perceived as aberrant, usually disabled individuals, are locked away in order to shelter normative culture from the characteristics that make the inmates something other than of able body and mind. The asylum then acts as a placeholder for all real world institutions in the narrative. It possesses prosthetic value that enables the reader and the writer to insert his or her own visage upon the institution to speak to and represent multiple social woes. They do this by robbing medical conditions of their actual meaning and attaching metaphorical powers to the conditions in order to bolster a particular position. While the usage of disabled metaphor can be construed as problematic, Monáe makes use of it and questions the prescriptive usage of terms like diagnostic, racial, and class categories.

The actions Monáe takes throughout the music video show what it means to refuse diagnosis in a place that actively attempts to confine people to peripheral roles through these labels. Diagnostic terms task the individual as well as their community. By attaching a signifying term, the signified person is forced to acquiesce at least a portion of their selfhood to operate in a mode culturally fashionable. Signifying terms carry the prescriptive weight of symptoms and expectations. At the same time, the surrounding community is socialized to interact in a certain way with the signified. This interactive behavior is typically demeaning to the disabled figure:

A glance through a few dictionaries will reveal definitions of disability that include incapacity, a disadvantage, deficiency, especially a physical or mental impairment that restricts normal achievement: something that incapacitates or disqualifies... These definitions are understood by the general public and by many in the academic to be useful

ones. Disability so defined is a medical derived term that assigns predominantly medical significance and meaning to certain types of human variation. (Linton 224)

Linton goes on to argue that people with disabilities should be able to define themselves. Like other marginalized identity groups (race, gender, sexuality), people with disabilities are burdened by flawed social opinions about them. Monáe subverts the usage of diagnostic terms by defining her identity through her own gaze. As a nurse pushes a trolley laden with pills and water near the beginning of the video, Monáe sticks her head out conspiratorially from her room and then proceeds to slam the door shut. She eyes the camera directly, widening her eyeballs, as she utters the words "some people talk about you" when she gets to the next line, "like they know all about you," she shifts her head to her trademark angle and says, "like they know all about you." These two lines posit the song's central thesis. People must struggle to find a balance between reaching their own expectations for themselves and the identity heaped upon them by their community. Rather than wait in line for the nurse to reach her and confirm the exterior interpretations of who Monáe is by swallowing the pills prescribed to her, Monáe sneaks out and dances. Just as with many other settings Monáe explores, the asylum does not divide the inmates internally based upon social categories. Regardless of income bracket, the inmates are all treated the same once they are entered into the system. They are elements of society incised from the whole because their existence carries unsavory connotations. As Monáe travels throughout the building, she is joined in dance by her fellow inmates, ready to partake in subversive dance. The inmates' decision to dance is an affirmation that they do not agree with their diagnosis. Through dance, they find new meaning.

This building-wide consensus to rally against the medical establishment is presaged by a moment of rupture illustrated through physics failing. Before the nurse ever makes her first appearance, two men, the members of Deep Cotton, sit in individual wooden chairs in what appears to be a lobby for visitors. Both are wearing Monáe's uniform, black and white tuxedos with bow ties. One skims through a book, occasionally flipping the page, while the other tosses a blue racquet ball up and down in his left hand. The clock reads 8:50. When the man on the right throws the ball up, it stays there, hovering. The expectation of the scene was that the ball would fall back down. Instead, it surprises both men. The levitating ball signals the coming rupture in the Palace of the Dogs. When Monáe initially dips back into her room and starts to sing, she not only dodges the advancing nurse, an occupation that enforces normative culture by affirming constructed categories through her actions, but the black robed men following methodically behind.

Monáe's dancing and singing quickly spreads out from her room and into the rest of the asylum. However, the dancers continuously have to play possum whenever it seems like they could be caught by the robed men and the nurse. There is a point at the 1:53 mark of the video where the hooded men seeking the dancers run into Monáe and her friends. Monáe quickly takes up a relaxed stance. Since the guards only witness Monáe meeting the expectations of the asylum, they do nothing. Monáe's apparent passivity allows her to continue on after the guards pass by none-the-wiser because it plays into the idea that the inmates are subordinate. To continue turning the rules of the asylum on its head, the inmates gather in the rec room to showcase their communitas. When they enter, Luscious Leftfoot, played by Big Boi from the Hip-Hop duo Outkast, is standing in front of a music stand. He begins to rap while everybody

looks on and dances. A few bars into his rhymes, Leftfoot tosses away the notation music after only glancing at it briefly. He repositions the stand behind himself, and continues to rap while the camera begins to switch around the room concentrating on Monáe and the various dancers. Leftfoot's action is emblematic in that he literally throws away the script. This reflects the actions of the dancers as they go against what is perceived as proper within the asylum walls. Perhaps even more interesting is how the action almost seems to be in response to seeing Monáe and the rest of the room's occupants. It is a reversal of the intent behind the guard's mirrored masks. The masked guards act as mobile personifications of Foucault's panopticon (Foucault 199). Rather than allow the inmates to see the guards' actual visages, they'd prefer to have uncertainty spread as a result of the inmates never truly being certain about the capabilities or identities of the guards. The inmates' knowledge of what they are expected to do in the asylum setting, to remain docile and controlled by prescription written by other people, ultimately leads the inmates to control themselves. The two tall robed and looming presences wear flat masks with no eye or mouth holes. Their occupational purpose in the video is never directly expressed. However, inferences can be made that the inmates' very awareness of the guards is expected to curtail any actions that might disrupt the asylum's structure. The masks are made of a mirror-like material that reflects their surroundings back at the beholder. While they never physically interact with the other figures in the video, they act as enforcers. In contrast to this, when greeted with the faces of real humans, Leftfoot is inspired to improvise rather than continue compliantly reading from a page.

“Tightrope” takes great pains to unveil how geographic locations can warp the individual and how, if one can successfully navigate moments of rupture, the individual can warp their

location. When she does finally re-enter her room, she stands at a desk, playing with the keys of a typewriter (no paper inserted), then looks at blueprints for the Palace of the Dogs. There is a note on the blue print:

"Walls finish for res. room"

Were never completed ---

After grazing over the blue prints and her own scribble, Monáe sits on her Spartan bed, chin in hand, and stares at the camera, mouth parted slightly as she contemplates the possibility of escape. The prosthetic manner in which Monáe uses a medical setting is further enhanced by how the inmates are dressed. They are uniformed in guises exceedingly similar to Monáe's trademark black and white tuxedos rather than the garb of a patient. It is in this instance that the role of the inmates/patients and the asylum are insular representations of the United States class system. The black and white clothing act as the constant symbol for working-class bodies. By confining them in a highly monitored location like an asylum, the working class are "denied any meaningful sense of agency in the contemporary world; abandoned by global capital and powerlessly tied to local, impoverished labor markets" (Strangleman 149). The power that geography has in propping up the class structure is reinforced by Monáe's walk through the asylum. Like the floating blue ball, at various points Janelle Monáe defies the physical expectations of the asylum. This, in turn, undermines the asylum's ability to confine her through labeling. She walks into the surface of a large boulder and again disappears with the mirror men just behind her. She flitters through locations inside and outside of the asylum, at one time passing a clearly marked exit door, the Mirror Men mere steps behind her, herding her down a hallway, and into a room-her bedroom. Monáe's ability to traverse through a variety of scenes

without exiting through the designated door indicates the need for change to happen from within and not outside of the system in “Tightrope.” In much the same way that the nurse finds herself miming dance while telling the guards about the inmates’ behavior, the guards find themselves a step behind Monée as she leads them on a casual chase along a path of her own making. Monée reconstitutes their job description by forcing them to follow her along a route that does not abdicate to the solid state of the asylum. Monée reshapes the asylum’s geography to destabilize the mantle of its authority.

Monée’s ability to determine the building’s structural weakness, as well as bypass solid barriers to keep a step ahead of the unceasing gaze of the guards, also speaks to how overall privileges are meted out unfairly amongst the different social brackets. As discussed earlier, the primary subsets of the population in Monée’s Metropolis are the humans and the androids. While the narrative does ruminate over the different demographic breakdowns in the first category, the androids are consigned by very basic social expectations. Androids, as a demographic category, are firmly rooted in the medical model. This is because the term is derived from the makeup of their bodies and how they differentiate from humans; the medium. Their coding, the physiological and mental differences, justify the clear delineation and differential treatment between the two species. As evinced by the present day mental patients and the future androids’ living conditions, they are expected to linger along the margins:

The production of space in particular ways is not only important for capital’s ability to survive by enabling accumulation and the reproduction of capital itself, but it is also crucial for workers’ abilities to survive and reproduce themselves. Just as capital does not exist in an aspatial world, neither does labor. The process of labor’s self-reproduction

(both biological and social)...most take place in particular geographical locations.

(Mitchell 92)

This production of space helps foster a continuum of class identity, the same continuum that Monáe is actively resisting in both performances of herself and Cindi Mayweather. Metropolis' human population continuously accumulates and maintains their own wealth by mapping and designing the layout of the city. It matters where people are positioned along a double-axis that charts socio-economic spectrum to physical location (a neighborhood, an apartment, in a room). The rich assert their status by isolating themselves around expensive property. People become entrenched in the predominant white class myths and black class myths to remain satisfied with the slow-changing face of the society they are in. While change does occur, conceptions of race and ethnic definitions are malleable realities that ebb and flow generationally-unless change is sparked by a social force like the ArchAndroid Cindi Mayweather or an element out of time like Janelle Monáe. While replying to a quote about how the system of capitalism governs human interaction in a cannibalistic way, specifically how people and businesses prey upon each other, Don Mitchell writes, "This view of the geography of capitalism has more than the ring of truth about it" (79). He goes on to note that immaterial constructs like loans, banks, stocks, and even money help the working-class survive. However, these same constructs consolidate the individual's working-class status by burdening them with interest rates and debt. The positioning of every room, the paths of the guards, and the waiting room on display in "Tightrope" are all painstakingly thought out by the governing social caste. Even the placement of the asylum, removed from the center of any metropolitan area, encumbers the cultural actors because its planned location nuances the treatment of those placed in it.

Time travel, paired with disability, becomes the final parallel this thesis draws between Octavia Butler and Janelle Monáe. In *Kindred*, Octavia Butler's protagonist, Dana, is a struggling black female writer who is happily (and newly) married to a white writer named Kevin. They live in California during the 1970s, in a world as ordinary as our own. Inexplicably, however, Dana begins to be drawn back into the past, to a slave plantation in Maryland on a more and more frequent basis (*Kindred* 12-17). The story begins at the end, with Dana in the hospital. After she returns to the present for the final time, her body is positioned so that when she reappears in her own timeline, her arm occupies the same space as her home's wall. She loses her arm. All of this occurs after she kills Rufus Weylin. Weylin is Dana's family's ancestral slave-owner. Weylin also happens to be Dana's ancestor because he has raped her foremother (260). The events that happen in the past directly affect Dana in the present by crippling her.

An initial thought that might arise upon reflection of this rather simplistic overview of *Kindred*'s key facts might expose only one similarity between *Kindred* and *Metropolis*: two female leads who are forced to travel through time and end up in medical establishments. It is in this simple detail, though, that the aim of both occurrences is revealed. The loss of Dana's arm in the present symbolizes, somewhat heavy handedly, that the events of the past still "disable" the present day situation in the United States. Janelle Monáe's arrival in our present-day means that the basis for the future's Great Divide will be generated through the social production we engage in. By extension, the Great Divide's roots range back even further, to antebellum slavery and the slave trade. While Janelle Monáe and Dana are human, they represent a temporal hybridity, struggling between the present and the future/past. Just as Dana chooses to protect her lineage

and stay at the plantation whenever she is whisked off into the past, Monáe chooses to stay within the asylum, to undermine its structure and build anew from within, when she passes by the door with the “EXIT” sign.

Section Six: To Close...

Octavia Butler took part in an interview with Charlie Rose on June 1, 2000. After asking Butler a number of questions regarding her background and the genre of science fiction, Rose inquired as to whether Butler wanted to say anything “central” about race. Butler’s response was succinct but brilliant: “We’re here.” Upon further prodding, she expanded upon this initial answer with an anecdote about a science fiction convention panel she was on in 1979. An editor on the same panel with her opined to the public that representing minority figures, specifically black people, was not necessary in the genre. The editor suggested this because “you could always make a racial statement you needed to make by way of extraterrestrials.” She took issue with that remark for obvious reasons. Whitewashing the cast of a book is an unnecessary and false depiction of the world. Black characters should be present for precisely the same reason white characters should—they exist. Extraterrestrial, or android, stand-ins need not apply. This line of thinking permeates her work. Her books are filled with characters who are described as different races. Her primary route of exploration is to use fantastical hybrid characters in science fiction settings. There are even characters, like Doro and Anyanwu, who use bodies with black and white characteristics, who were born black and in Africa. The diversity you find on display in her novels is a result of her attempts to enliven the discussion of racial issues that still exist in mixed-race communities post-Civil Rights.

Readers might dismiss attempts to categorize Janelle Monáe as following this Butlerian tradition just because they both use hybrid characters—which are replete in the science fiction genre—as being circumstantial. However, it is what both artists hone in on, the topics of class and racial divisions as evinced through female struggle, that unites them in a common tradition. They both provide context to their narratives by pairing them with the United States’ history of race and racism in order to bring attention to the inequalities that still exist. Using hybrid bodies like Anyanwu and Cindi Mayweather, they both articulate dystopian realities and the types of bodies that are needed to navigate oppression in order to potentially find moments of rupture.

To discuss moments of rupture, the preceding sections centered on Janelle Monáe and her Metropolis concept. This was done to highlight the ways in which Monáe uses fictitious elements to comment on the prejudice still permeating American society. Shannon Gibney writes that many black female artists during the Black Arts Movement were dissatisfied with “the movement’s treatment and comprehension of Black women,” and that this shared sentiment led them to write themselves into a literary space that was previously unoccupied by the female figure (Gibney 102). Gibney argues this to firmly situate Octavia Butler within the same tradition as Audre Lorde. Here it is argued that it is important to set Monáe along that same continuum from Lorde to Butler and then to Monáe. Historically, sharp upheavals in society have focused on reconditioning the role of men. Women, in these instances, have been all but forgotten. Monáe tasks her work, like her predecessors, with the material necessary to interrogate fixed identity categories (like race and gender)—namely through the usage of the hybrid body. The post-racial theme disguises white privilege and the corresponding systems of oppression that depower and omit those who stand outside the center of capital. From the James Brown shuffle

to the historical 1954 references, there are constant allusions to the Civil Rights and Black Arts Movement in Monáe's work. Consequently, it is necessary to study how she uses liminality to advocate to her audience the necessity in moving beyond social constructions and transcending into cybernetic awareness.

The composition of the android, its wires and circuitry, does not just negate attempts to pigeonhole identity categories. Androids, like Cindi Mayweather, transcend identity and bask in commonality. When Donna Haraway wrote "A Cyborg Manifesto," she conceived a feminist being that united the organic and inorganic. This union between (wo)man and machine ruptures Western Societies usual male-dominated narrative by partially blocking the continued succession of patrilineal ideas. Cindi Mayweather and the android takes it a step further. The android is a completely manufactured being. This is unlike the cyborg who are organic beings, typically human, that have been enhanced through robotic additions. Androids are the children of human endeavor, brought on by invention and economy.

Mayweather is a factory-made commodity that was coded by the upper-class. She is able to overcome her constraints and begins to follow a program written by herself. By re-inscribing meaning into the coding, the trappings of culture like clothes and dance, Monáe shows her audience the ways in which hybrid possibilities can be coaxed out of current situations. Like the many examples spread throughout Octavia Butler's work, hybrid possibilities exist within the capabilities of the body. However, the physical existence of these objects do not bring about the rupture.

The rupture is successfully navigated, or even brought about, by how the character chooses to mediate the scenario through his or her movements. In the case of Metropolis, it is

choreographed kinetic motion, like dance, which inspires a population to seek equality and unbind the rigid structures of ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender and race that are propped up by the economy in order to maintain the current class structure that buttresses the fabric of the United States culture. Monáe's dance questions these institutions on multiple levels. Narratives, like *Metropolis*, are indicative of the society contemporaneous to its writing. Monáe's insistence on using images of workers and products while exploring the intersections between identity categories emphasizes the manner in which every monetary transaction-the buying and selling of androids for example-solidifies the system as is. The people who hold economic capital keep hold of it by aiding in the maintenance of identity categories and the stigmas that are attributed to them. Race, as an example, acts as an insularly function that stabilizes the pockets the wealth is already deposited in. It is this cultural tendency to order and pair that Cindi Mayweather/Janelle Monáe rally against.

By studying the work of artists such as Octavia Butler and Janelle Monáe, the reader is afforded the chance to critically participate in narratives that run counter to issues pervasive to society. The hybrid examination of moments of rupture through storytelling gives the reader an opportunity to see and discuss issues such as racial, class, and gender divisions that might otherwise go unnoticed because of the reader's real-life participation in the society. Octavia Butler began a literary project decades ago that sought to keep the continued presence of social divisions in American society alive in public discourse. She initiated a tradition of challenging gender and racial categorization through the hybridization of bodies in science fiction. Years later, Janelle Monáe has assumed that same project by working multiple media platforms, and expanding the reach of their message. Monáe carries on these traditions of hybridity by assuming

the mantle of an android freedom fighter. The technology needed to create Cindi Mayweather is not currently possible. This parallels the fact that equality has still not been achieved. However, through TV, internet, and radio, Janelle Monáe is using her global brand to reach out to her audience and ensure them that freedom and equality is an attainable goal for everybody in the near future.

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