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Electric Ladies in Playback: The Android Antecedents of Janelle Monáe's *Dirty Computer*

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Abstract:

Playback, the process of separately recording actors' images and voices in cinema and media, has a long history of cultural stereotyping. This essay analyses how performers are typecast when media technicians manipulate sound/image synchronisation in lip sync and dubbing. Inspired by Janelle Monáe's oeuvre, I focus my study through the figure of the electric lady – female simulacra who are programmed by heteronormative, patriarchal operators. I trace the electric lady back to talking machines (Faber's Euphonia) and early phonograph recordings (minstrelsy and opera singer Agnes Davis) to show how proto- and post-phonographic notions of playback are bound up with racialized and gendered stereotypes. Drawing on the work of Alice Maurice, Mary Ann Doane, Jennifer Fleeger, and others, I illustrate how industrial practices of playback reproduce the sounds and images of ideal femininity and obedient Others. In her 'emotion picture' *Dirty Computer* (2018), Monáe transforms history's electric lady from obstinate object to empowered subject by unmasking homogenizing operations of playback. Monáe lip syncs as multiple personae to showcase the material heterogeneity of her Black, queer, and feminist identities. Ultimately, Monáe's hybrid personae mobilize Doane's notion of the masquerade in their defiance of playback norms that would bind Monáe to racialized and gendered images.

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I began painting this female silhouette every night, and I didn't understand exactly why. I spoke to my therapist, who said, 'You should name her.' I was freaked out – I had a visceral reaction. I was making a mythical figure tangible, and the words 'electric lady' came to me. [...] When thinking about who the Electric Lady is, I think about women standing up and being the voice of our community. She is an ambassador of great change and comes in different shapes, sizes, and colours.

(Janelle Monáe quoted in Diehl, 2013)

Since 2003's *The Audition* album, the singer Janelle Monáe has performed as her android persona, Cindi Mayweather. But Monáe was not the first electric lady: she challenges the history of feminized automata whose voices and identities are controlled by male operators. The electric lady is synchronised by her master to perform his labour – the meaning of the Czech word *robota* – much like the robot-Maria in *Metropolis* (Dir. Fritz Lang, 1927). In this essay, I situate Monáe in a historical trajectory of electric ladies. First, I analyse the gendering and racializing of nineteenth-century talking machines, or human look-alikes that synthesized speech. Second, I examine misogynist phonograph-era producers like maestro Leopold Stokowski, who desired to replace opera's 'fat ladies' with amplified thinner divas, intoning that 'electricity will change the lady' (1932, p.12). Third, I show how Janelle Monáe redefines the electric lady to seize control of her voice. In 2018's *Dirty Computer*, she plays Jane 57821, the human antecedent of the android Cindi. The album's accompanying 'emotion picture' (Dir. Andrew Donoho and Chuck Lightning, 2018) depicts a near-future dystopian régime that dubs her a 'dirty computer' and wipes her memory of 'deviant' sexuality and radical politics. Monáe takes back her agency by defying norms of playback technology that force marginalized people's voices and bodies into homogenized stereotypes. By multiplying herself into distinct personae across several music videos, she showcases the material heterogeneity of her Black, queer, and feminist identities.

Monáe's resistant practice of multivocality intervenes in a history of entertainment and recording industries that packaged racialized or feminized voices as univocal in playback. Since the coming of sound to cinema, technicians have manipulated the synchronisation of voices and images to make characters fit cultural stereotypes – from the gendered voice/body matches of *Singin' in the Rain* (Dir. Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly, 1952) to racialized ones in *The Jazz*

Singer (Dir. Alan Crosland, 1927) and *Hallelujah!* (Dir. King Vidor, 1929). As Alice Maurice argues, several sound-era critics and filmmakers thought that Black voices produced particularly resonant recordings and that Black bodily gestures were emphatically legible via minstrel tropes, so technicians used racialized bodies to increase spectators' belief in cinema's new sound technology (2013, p.167). By synchronizing gendered and raced conceptions of voices to similarly gendered and raced images, media technicians exploit identity stereotypes to 'authenticate' onscreen bodies for spectators. But while playback's voice/body packages have been theorized extensively in classical Hollywood cinema (Feuer, 1977; Doane, 1980; Herzog, 2010) and phonography (Moten, 2004; Weheliye, 2005), they have earlier roots in proto-electric ladies who were synchronised by white male inventors to subservient and exoticized images.

In what follows, I put Monáe's music videos in conversation with her android antecedents in early modes of synchronisation – talking machines and phonograph performances. I chronicle playback as a form of capture by white patriarchal operators who used sound reproduction technologies to construct icons of ideal femininity and obedient Others. First, in nineteenth-century Europe, inventors eroticized talking machines with female and ethnic faces to sell the spectacle of synthesized speech. The automata Euphonia in particular exemplifies an ideal voice/body package evacuated of soul and memory – not unlike *Dirty Computer*'s memory-wiping procedures. Next, twentieth-century phonograph recordists appropriated Black voices for minstrelsy and tamed female voices to quell listeners' fears of shrill ghosts in the machine. Last, lip syncing in music videos continues to perpetuate a logic of hardwiring singers to stereotypes. By placing Monáe in this lineage of electric ladies who are manipulated objects, I show how she flips the script to claim control of her own embodiment.

Monáe is an electric lady who ruptures the homogenizing logic of playback. As Neepa Majumdar has shown in the context of Hollywood cinema, 'the function of sound synchronisation is to mask the operations of technology so as to produce the effect of the organic unity of voice and body' (2001, p.165). However, as Mary Ann Doane explains, '[s]ound carries with it the potential risk of exposing the material heterogeneity of the medium' (1980, p.35) when voice-offs loosen or unmask unifying voice/body constructs. Artists who emphasize the ways in which voice and body are artificially bound in playback unravel the binary codes of synchronisation that traffic in stereotypes. In experimental films and music videos especially, playback can be deployed to show the range of different images and identities that can

synchronise with one's voice. In *Dirty Computer*, Monáe masquerades as multiple personae, alternately synchronizing with the struggles of Black, female, and queer kin. She champions the technological packaging of the mismatched woman – Jennifer Fleegeer's term for mediatized women who shirk the 'essential correspondence' of voice/body matches in playback (2014, p.4). Monáe transforms history's electric lady from obstinate object to empowered subject by unmasking the homogenizing operations of playback. Whereas Monáe's historical antecedents display masked operations of obedient embodiment, her hybrid personae, which I will discuss through Doane's notion of the masquerade (1991), defy the bonds of playback that collapse raced and gendered bodies into singular images.

The First (Electric) Lady?: Faber's Euphonia, the Bearded Lady Talking Machine

The automaton illustrates two assumptions: that a human being is basically a machine and can be mechanically reproduced, and that the best way to demonstrate this principle is through a simulacrum that not only acts but *looks* human, thereby maintaining the unity of the human subject, voice and body.
(Gunning, 2001, p.19)

Even before mechanized playback arrived with the phonograph and was further developed in sound cinema, talking machines displayed early tenets of its stereotype-bound logic: they had the faces of beautiful women and racial Others. Like the constructed spectacle of Blackness that, as Maurice argues, ushered in sound cinema, operators used othering masks to increase the audience's belief in inhuman talking bodies. Nineteenth-century automata proliferated alongside Enlightenment-era views of Black subjects as primitive sub-humans and women as docile non-actors.¹ Since Enlightenment thinkers saw these subjects as threats to ideals of rationality (Huysen, 1981, pp.226-8), talking machines were one way to mould gendered and raced subjects into mechanized beings who obeyed their wishes. One example is Wolfgang von Kempelen's 1769 chess-playing Turk. The *Illustrated London News* cites this trend of 'mechanical figures, in heads and turbans,' while reporting in 1846 on Euphonia ('The Euphonia', p.96 – see figure 1), a bearded yet effeminate-looking talking machine. Euphonia's

ambiguities evoke Monáe's electric lady with a life-sized bust that was gender- and racially fluid throughout its exhibitions – as the varying pronouns suggest below.



Figure 1: Illustration for 'The Euphonia, or Speaking Automaton' in the guise of the Turk (*Illustrated London News*, 8 August 1846, p.96). Image provided by the University of Chicago Library.

Between the 1840s and '70s, Joseph Faber's Euphonia was exhibited as both man and woman, Caucasian and Turk. In spite of its feminine-sounding name, Euphonia arrived in London with a beard and a turban. The British satire magazine *Punch* assigned it male pronouns: 'his "G" [the musical note] excites the admiration of the whole room every time he succeeds in going down to it' (1846, p.64). This ventriloquized virtuoso was attached to two keyboards, one to synthesize speech and one to play musical notes. When Faber pressed keys down in different combinations, Euphonia produced an array of lifelike sounds – 'speaking German, French, English, Latin, and Greek; and even whispering, laughing, and singing: all this depending upon the agility of the director in manipulating the keys' ('The Euphonia', 1846, p.59). Crucially, these keys controlled the phonetics of Euphonia's voice and all but negated its semantics, save for the pitched inflections that Faber played on the musical keyboard. Faber substituted bellows for a soul, pushing air through its lips in a verisimilitude that delighted guests alongside the phrases the Turk uttered on request (ibid). Their fantasies were programmed by 'his master's voice' – the operator who modified his dummy's body at will. Faber could raise and lower Euphonia's pitch, putting his ideas in the mouth of a shrill lady or the obedient Other. This proto-playback operation enacts Frantz Fanon's observation that '[m]aking [the Black man] speak pidgin is tying him to an image, snaring him, imprisoning him as the eternal victim of his own

essence, of a visible appearance for which he is not responsible' ([1952] 2008, 18). Euphonia's operators used the sonic signatures of gender and race to play back stereotypes familiar to contemporary audiences.

While Faber orchestrated the illusion of speech synthesis, Phineas T. Barnum of Barnum & Bailey Circus used the tools of playback to synchronise this electric lady to a new identity. Barnum saw Faber's machine in Philadelphia in 1846, when it presented as 'a half-length weird figure, rather bigger than a full-grown man, with an automaton head and a face looking more mysteriously vacant than such faces usually look' (Hollingshead, 1895, p.68). Despite journalist John Hollingshead's account of the machine's ostensibly male appearance, Barnum christened it Euphonia and funded its European tour. Like the inventor Rotwang in *Metropolis*, Barnum 'puts together and disassembles woman's body, thus denying woman her identity and making her into an object of projection and manipulation' (Huysen, 1981, p.231). Barnum prefigures post-phonograph notions of playback by remixing the machine's voice with a new mask (see Crum, 1874, p.73). Euphonia appeared in London as 'the Turk, now swaddled in crimson', but as David Lindsay notes, it was '(despite its feminine features) sporting a full growth of beard'; on American tours in 1871 and 1873, however, 'where once the head of a Turk had sat atop a robed half-figure, a woman's head was now fixed to a scaffoldlike arrangement' (1997, n.p.). In 1846, she anticipated the freak show figure of the 'bearded lady' Barnum debuted in 1853 – Madame Clofullia, who Americans accepted as a woman with whiskers. Yet, as Sean Trainor notes, early to mid-century notions of fluid sexual identities beyond the male-female binary turned to 'late-century theories of sexual determination [... for] sorting the ambiguously formed into the ranks of men and women' (2014, p.572). Perhaps this backdrop prompted the erasure of Euphonia's beard, and with it, her gender transgression. While Barnum's autobiography and newspapers from exhibition cities skirt around Euphonia's conversion into a Turk for London and a woman for America, illustrations illuminate a progression from fluidity to rigidity. From Figure 1's Turk, Euphonia's head on a stake in images circa 1870 (see Riskin, 2003, p.108) props up speech synthesis with impassive femininity.

As a subservient Turk and woman, Euphonia offered a repository for Enlightenment-era fantasies of exoticism and subjugation: this controllable machine folded the threats of Others into a package that could be conquered by white subjects. For Katherine B. Crawford, 'Women, albeit mechanical ones, are reduced to objects that confirm the subjectivity of others by virtue of

being mechanical and female’ – yet automata like Lang’s robot-Maria showcase ‘ambivalence about women who might perform in ways *not* programmed by men’ (2014, p.265). Inventors assigned sex, gender, and ethnicity to Euphonia in order to present a unified voice and body as spectacle. But despite their assignations, these interchangeable Others had potential to express rationality and thwart paternalistic control. For example, a Turk who sang ‘God Save the Queen’ added speech and intelligence to supposedly mute and nonsensical subalterns. In the proto-playback of language, Euphonia’s speech synchronised with racial and gender fluidity, which foreshadowed artificial intelligence that could eclipse mere figurehead status. While Hollingshead described Euphonia as an ‘imprisoned human – or half human – being, bound to speak slowly when tormented by the unseen power outside’ (1895, p.69), the lady protested with hoarse croaks whenever Faber played the keys. Euphonia may have looked constrained, but its voice sounded otherwise. Indeed, Steven Connor characterizes Euphonia’s voice as a ‘protest against animation, the voice of its resistance to voice’ (2000, p.355). Operators expected their commands to translate to smooth speech, but Euphonia’s extraverbal performances threatened to expose the illusion of synchronisation. Euphonia vexed smooth audio-visual capture and playback, and troubled binaries of beards and women and subalterns and masters – an electric lady ahead of her time.

The Phonograph’s Hidden Homogeneity: Blackvoice Minstrelsy and Wired Valkyries

[T]he phonographic trace of the historically frozen black female body: open, public, and exposed – [is] here disintegrating in the throat of our heroine, who wears and discards an excess of masks.

Daphne Brooks on Nina Simone (2014, p.211)

[T]he Monáe / Mayweather machine [i]s a new millennium phonograph, one that revels in generating the sound of a mischievously ‘incomplete’ voice that calls out to other forms.

(Brooks, 2021, p.122)

The Enlightenment-era tendency to cast Others as obedient automata continued into 1877, when Thomas Edison promoted his new phonograph with raced and gendered idioms. While Euphonia required an operator to produce her speech, phonographs could mechanically reproduce sounds – our modern understanding of playback. As a result, phonographs rendered

the matchmaking ploys of playback far less visible than the many masks that redefined Euphonia's identity. Playback enabled sounds to be recaptured, metaphorically, by listeners who imagined the identities of recorded voices – a process enabled by the phonograph's schism between sight and sound. For Lisa Gitelman, Alexander Weheliye, Jennifer Stoever, and others, such a masking of sight triggered an American fascination with racialized voices. As Jacob Smith observes, 'vocal performances of "blackness" were central to the early phonograph industry, although actual African American performers were allowed to participate only in very circumscribed ways' (2008, p.136). Through raced and gendered stereotyping, phonograph recordings reveal attempts to control the voice and its mechanical reproduction.

Like the feminized and Othered Euphonia, phonograph playback was conditioned by white male ideals that severed gendered and raced voices from their bodily agency. As one example, recorded 'coon songs' troubled listeners' ability to 'clearly discern a white projection of blackness from a black image of blackness' (Weheliye, 2005, p.40). Turn-of-the-century white phonograph singers like Billy Murray tried on 'Blackvoice' minstrel dialects for comedic speech segments but sang in the operatic style of bel canto with round vowels and pure tones.² Such a vocal masking echoes descriptions of Blackface as a 'minstrel mask' with which white men could 'play with collective fears of a degraded and threatening – and male – Other while at the same time maintaining some symbolic control over them' (Lott, 2013, p.25). These minstrel singers had their cake and ate it too, but Black performers had to parrot these stereotyped timbres to become phonograph entertainers. Whereas minstrel performers could pass as 'authentically' Black and maintain their white outlines, Black performers were limited to the sonic colour line enforced by white listeners' expectations (Stoever, 2016). Given the split between sound and sight in the listening situation of phonographs, vocal stereotypes significantly shaped public perceptions of artists' identities. As the inverse of Faber and Barnum's racial and gendered guises for Euphonia, phonograph recordists could exploit the invisibility of their vocalists to influence listeners' fantasies of acousmatic identities.³



Figure 2: Guernsey Moore's illustration for 'The Edison Phonograph' advertisement (1908) highlights the gendered marketing of the phonograph. Image produced by the Media History Digital Library.

True to his nickname, the Wizard of Menlo Park, Edison acknowledged the phonograph as a technology of capture, 'gathering up and retaining [...] sounds hitherto fugitive, and reproducing them at will,' which it could do 'with or without the knowledge or consent of the source of their origins' ('The Phonograph and Its Future', 1878, pp.527; 530). The Wizard's techniques of captivation often relied on gendered stereotypes. First, Edison and early exhibitors anthropomorphized the machine as 'Mr. Phonograph', the businessman's friendly stenographer ('The Phonograph. An Exhibition of Edison's Wonderful Talking Machine', 1878). Sellers claimed that it presented recorded speakers in the flesh – a blend of inscription and simulation that, as James Lastra observes, aspires to human perception and representation (2000, p.45; see also Sterne [2003], ch.1). Phonographs became fixtures in American living rooms and increasingly interfaced with middle-class women, who for Gitelman 'helped deeply to determine the function and functional contexts of recording and playback' (2006, p.60). Industries targeted women as domestic music buyers and as their standard for vocal capture (figure 2). Up until the late 1890s, women's higher frequencies did not 'stick' to the wax or shellac of records as well as

men's voices did. In 1898, the Boswell Company of Chicago claimed to record women with 'No squeak, no blast; but natural, clear, and human' (ibid, p.70). But the problem persisted, as when Theodor Adorno argued in 1927 that female voices were 'needy and incomplete': listeners could conjure the presence of most male singers but needed women to be present to neutralize their ghosts in the machine (1990, p.54). While Caruso records synchronised with his star image for the public, women's voices were deemed uncanny, like Euphonia's. In both of these talking machines, operators dialled down electric ladies to myths of female vocality, which tend to fall into two categories for voice and film scholars: Sirens who tempt sailors into danger with their enchanting voices (Cavarero, 2005; Fleeger, 2014) or hysterics whose voices are deemed irrational and therefore silenced (Silverman, 1988; Lawrence, 1991).

Electrical amplification and microphone systems in the mid-1920s expanded the phonograph's power to inscribe gendered stereotypes in concert and opera halls. Ironically, recordists used microphones to 'purify' singing – especially when conductors wired female opera singers. Much as opera typifies voices for characters – like beautiful sopranos who get rescued by triumphant tenors – recordists cast women into the audio-visual molds of electric ladies. Women already were mediated sites in opera, ordered to lose weight to supply beauty above all else, but technology amplified their packaging as archetypal acoustic mirrors. For example, Bell Laboratories helped conductor Leopold Stokowski separately control the volume and tone of the orchestra and operatic soloists with microphones and channels. Electric controls allowed him to raise quieter singers' voices over mighty crescendos and to adjust their '[vocal] sonority by increasing or decreasing the high or low frequencies' (McGinn, 1983, p.56). In a 1933 demonstration, Stokowski boosted the low frequencies of soprano Agnes Davis's voice to craft his ideal Brünnhilde in the last aria of Wagner's ring cycle. Typically cast as a buxom woman, Stokowski's Valkyrie was 'fair to look upon' but her voice was 'not heavy enough in texture to make her singing impressive', as critics lambasted her Metropolitan Opera debut (Straus, 1937). But in 1933, Stokowski manned volume and frequency controls and 'achieved depth where he wanted it' to make 'the invisible Miss Davis [...] as huge as the Statue of Liberty' (Kaempfert, 1933). Stokowski celebrated the possibilities for high-fidelity wired transmission, especially to sidestep opera's 'fat lady' optics:

Venus was chosen because she had a marvelous larynx, and unfortunately sometimes she weighed too many pounds [...] consequently] the whole point of the drama is changed and

spoilt.... Can we change that lady? She might change herself if she would exercise, if she would eat less..., but it is really not going to be necessary. Electricity will change the lady.

(1932, p.12)

By prohibiting fat ladies and using microphones to beef up ‘leaner’ women’s voices, Stokowski harnessed mechanical reproduction to manufacture the ideal operatic femininity. Never mind that ‘it isn’t over till the fat lady sings’ – Stokowski and his controls had the last word.

Stokowski joins Edison, Barnum, and Faber as masters who othered their female machines into obedience. These men imposed order on ‘unruly’ voices by confining them to mechanically controlled entities. The misogynist and racist notions of possession that circumscribed these early electric ladies shaped playback as a force that often masked racial and gendered difference and collapsed people into stereotypes. Yet, Euphonia’s hoarse croaks and the embodied sounds of phonograph women – the squeaks that mechanical reproduction sought to erase – resist constricting ideals of playback and alert listeners to singers’ multivocality behind the mask.

Janelle Monáe’s Masquerades: The Heterogeneous Personae of Playback

Will you be electric sheep? Electric ladies, will you sleep? Or will you preach?
(Monáe, ‘Q.U.E.E.N.’, *The Electric Lady*, 2013)

By calling out and breaking with stereotyped forms of synchronicity, Janelle Monáe makes electric ladies the authors – no longer the avatars – of their voices. Monáe intervenes in a history of music videos that continued automata- and phonograph-era masking operations of playback: early MTV videos in particular exploited raced and gendered tropes to sell sound as spectacle. Since the 1980s, pop music videos have contorted the female body around her voice. Producers presumed and objectified the star’s cisgender identity for audiences who either want her sex appeal or want to take advantage of it – like the two men who ogle Madonna in ‘Material Girl’ (Dir. Mary Lambert, 1984). Similarly, backup dancers fortify our desire for the star, modeling how we should consume her products.⁴ These playback features all contribute to the construction of a star’s persona in music videos. In his analysis of pop personae, Kai Arne Hansen builds on Carl Jung’s conception of the persona as ‘a complicated system of relations

between the individual consciousness and society, fittingly enough a kind of mask, defined on the one hand to make a definite impression upon others, and, on the other, to conceal the true nature of the individual' (quoted in Hansen, 2019, p.503). The public-facing mask of the music video star thus resonates with those of automata and minstrel and opera phonograph singers: across all of these cases, the persona is usually decided by a producer or operator, rather than the performer herself (see Railton and Watson, 2011).

Some pop artists, however, refused the mould of MTV sex object and instead adopted an electric lady persona, hailing postwar movements of women's and sexual liberation. Several Black women in different musical genres preceded Monáe in this guise. As Steven Shaviro shows, Missy Elliott and Lil' Kim leverage their voices and bodies as 'cyborgs' in hip-hop music videos (2005). Elliott often presents her body in inflatable suits, in 'The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly)' and 'Sock It 2 Me' (Dir. Hype Williams, 1997). A skilled producer on the cutting edge of electronic music and technology, Elliott defies misogynist hip-hop tropes of her era as a female rapper. She dons costumes and performs in settings that communicate that women are much more than ideals of stick-thin, bare skin – as Queen Latifah did before her. In R&B, Robin James characterizes Rihanna and Beyoncé as 'robo-divas' whose costumes and technological prowess critique white patriarchal moulds of Black women as hypersexualized 'bad girls' (2008). Beyoncé's robot-Maria suit at a 2007 BET performance and Rihanna's 'Umbrella' video (Chris Applebaum, 2007) showcase these women as powerful agents who rewrite history.

Janelle Monáe extends cyborgs and robo-divas to their fullest realization. Her electric lady personae are self-crafted (she is credited as a writer and executive producer of *Dirty Computer*) and self-reflexive: across her many music videos, Monáe loosens the grip of playback that fixes a singer's voice – and viewers – to stereotypical personae. Whereas the proto-electric ladies of Euphonia and phonograph singers were masked as unified voice/body images, Monáe courts the gazes of spectators in a masquerade. In classical Hollywood cinema that conflates women with ideal types of femininity that solicit the controlling male gaze, Mary Ann Doane theorizes the masquerade as a performance that 'flaunt[s] femininity, [and] holds it at a distance. Womanliness is a mask which can be worn or removed' (1991, p.25). For Doane, onscreen women can pose themselves as hyperbolic, opposing refined-woman tropes to create 'a defamiliarization of female iconography' (ibid, p.26). While Doane theorizes the masquerade as a primarily visual phenomenon, I extend it as a way of contesting playback operations that

homogenize and eroticize singers' bodies.⁵ In *Dirty Computer*, Monáe performs masquerades to distance herself from the playback norms that would bind her to stereotypical racialized and gendered images. She splits herself into multiple personae to leverage notions of Blackness and femininity as masks that can be strategically deployed to emphasize the multivocality of one's identity.

The following readings of *Dirty Computer* examine how Monáe exhibits aspects of her race, sexuality, and gender in masquerades that both flaunt and subvert stereotypical representations of Black female recorded vocality. Emerging from a lineage of mechanical voice/body hybrids rendered as social outcasts, Monáe stages her body as a machine that refuses chaste sonic reproduction. In contrast to typical forms of Hollywood playback that aim to hide its constructed nature (Chion, 1999, p.125; Feuer, 1977, p.159), she depicts herself in music videos as a woman-becoming-robot. She employs hyperembodied close-ups, or shots that incite objectification of pop stars' glossy lips and come-hither eyes (see Hawkins, 2013 and Hansen, 2017); here, Monáe's wry smiles and knowing looks make spectators scrutinize her identity instead of fetishizing it. She reconfigures playback as a masquerade, courting and defying norms in *Dirty Computer*'s form and content.

Monáe's 10-track visual album melds experimental filmmaking and narrative-based commercialism. Its YouTube release, as Landon Palmer observes, 'means that it is unencumbered by studio demands, network standards, or even traditional expectations of narrative structure and run-time' (2020, p.217). Through the affordances of digital distribution, Monáe recasts music videos as dreams and memories within an overarching narrative frame. These music videos develop the backstory and current imprisonment of her character, Jane 57821, at the cleaning facility that dubs her a dirty computer. Each time the white male cleaning duo – paralleling 'Material Girl' – wipes Jane's memories, the diegetic cleaning screens fade into music videos. Diegetic/non-diegetic slippages and avant-gardist montage frame playback as both fact and fiction, as screens within screens also conflate Jane's memories with real-life protest footage. Such self-reflexive reality checks curb the capitalistic playback of star power, transgressing purely hedonistic forms of music video. Monáe may make us feel pleasure, but protest montages remind us that pleasure is an ongoing battle.

As a definitively hybrid and collaborative work, *Computer* not only showcases a vast production team but also depicts the struggles of Black, female, and queer kin, enlivening their

memory with audio-visual citations. Whereas music videos are often read as the work of the performer (Railton and Watson, 2011, pp.68-9; Hansen, 2019, p.516), Monáe makes apparent the influences of various music video directors and musicians – from fellow Wondaland Arts Society members who score scenes between videos to featured singers on certain tracks. This hybrid team helps her to transform back and forth ‘from narrative character to music video performer’ (Westrup, 2016, p.25), like Michael Jackson in the music video/short film *Thriller*. Through hair, make-up, and costume changes, Monáe masquerades as multiple personae that synchronise variously with Black girl magic, Afrofuturist tropes, and ebullient femininity and sexuality. *Computer* alternately presents visions of Black, queer, and female triumphs and tribulations, many of which – as Monáe’s album liner notes testify – were inspired by real events.

But Monáe’s personae were not always so close to her human self. In previous music videos for her albums *ArchAndroid* (2010) and *The Electric Lady* (2013), Monáe performed as the android Cindi Mayweather, expressing that ‘it felt safer to package herself in metaphors’ even while she has been ‘circling the themes explored on “Dirty Computer” for at least a decade’. She delayed making this album ““because the subject is Janelle Monae”” (quoted in Wortham, 2018). By performing as a persona rather than herself, she critically dislocated her performing identity from her personal identity. Pre-*Computer*, she evaded reporters’ questions about her sexuality. When the album debuted, she came out as pansexual (Spanos, 2018) and depicted herself in romantic relationships with both Zen (Tessa Thompson) and Che (Jayson Aaron) in the emotion picture. Even though Monáe still plays a character, Jane 57821, she is definitively more human, and Jane’s flashbacks gesture to possible aspects of Monáe’s life in playback. The video-flashbacks also establish the trope of memory as an antidote to bodily and sexual erasure: when Jane helps Zen remember their past, all three lovers break free.



Figure 3: Screen grabs of Jane's [Janelle Monáe] tattoo, in the top image from 'Take a Byte' (in *Dirty Computer*, Dir. Andrew Donoho and Chuck Lightning, 2018) which jogs Zen's [Tessa Thompson] memory in a later scene shown on the bottom.

Monáe's act of packaging of herself in different personae talks back to playback's early technowizards who split women's voices from the autonomy of their anatomy. An early video, 'Take a Byte', dramatizes the memory-wiping process that packages Jane as an electric lady. She is stationary for much of the video, either hanging from her feet, entangled in wires, or standing still as surveillance lights scan up and down her body. In addition to her bound body, Jane must recite commands for Virgin Victoria, who runs the cleaning facility: both aural and visual registers depict her as deprived of the right to think freely. But the micro movements she performs in playback, like her stuck-out tongue after the lyrics 'Take a byte, help yourself, don't think twice, I won't tell', wryly parody Virgin Victoria's commands. In a similar form of masquerade, the symbols embedded in her visual bondage raise spectres from history. Jane's wired body and those who hang next to her convert Cavalry's three crosses to three upside-down women. Repeated imagery of Jane alone recalls the horrific lynching of Mary Turner, a pregnant woman hung by her ankles for protesting her husband's lynching in 1918 (Armstrong, 2011). Religion and gendered violence also clash when light beams on Jane's outstretched arms expose a tattoo of a woman hanging on a cross (figure 3). Superimposing the Black body onto Christian

symbols, Monáe defies Virgin Victoria's religious, white-run prison. Jane's cross tattoo also gains currency for queer bodies by later jogging Zen's memory and galvanizing their escape. In both scenes, vision and the embodied memory of touch are markers of a history that has negated Black, female, and queer humanity. Storing tactile memory, Jane's tattoo thwarts machinery that would efface the love or violence seared into one's skin.

'Take a Byte' incorporates signs of Black, female, and queer history and politics, but across *Computer*, the images and sounds that Monáe smuggles into playback memorialize the racial violence that historical records wipe or silence. Some of these references are subtle masquerades, like images and language about cleansing that recall the racial and sexual homogeneity of eugenics and conversion therapy. But overt citations further expose the stains of sterilizing violence, such as quotes from the Declaration of Independence in 'Crazy, Classic, Life'. The high-gloss pop production of Monáe's vocals might first seem to jar with searing protest ballads like Nina Simone's 1965 cover of 'Strange Fruit', which witnesses the 'blood on the leaves and blood at the roots' of lynching. But all too often, marginalized people must mask their identities to survive. In tacit and overt sync points, Monáe uses playback as an arsenal to give counter-publics new music histories. From visual and verbal signs of protest to samples of punk and hip-hop, Monáe transmits the language, images, and sounds of marginalized people onto mainstream channels.

In 'Screwed' (dir. Emma Westenberg), the prelude to Zen's abduction by the regime, Monáe masquerades as, alternately, Prince and a subjugated American citizen. First, Monáe homages Prince in a foxy, funky groove kicked off by a 'Kiss'-like twangy guitar. Prince was a close friend who worked on the album 'before he passed on to another frequency' ('Dirty Computer YouTube Space Q&A', 2018). This phrase accords with Monáe's cultivation of music that feels across time, enlivening long-past sounds and images for listeners. In 'Screwed', remembrances touch us through mediatized grooves. For example, an 'abolition wave synthesizer' (dubbed in her liner notes) initially plays celebratory organlike chords as the video revisits Jane's memory of a wild party. But the synth morphs to Afrofuturist funk in the sobered-up bridge, perhaps to reflect the song's inspiration – waking up on November 9, 2016. Monáe cites this day as 'the first time I've felt threatened and unsafe as a young Black woman, growing up in America' (quoted in Wortham, 2018). To play back her reaction from her real-life subject position, Monáe crams the screen with resistant objects: Jane's shirt reads 'Subject not object'

and three diegetic screens show protest marches. Amid shots of the Statue of Liberty and immigrants, the hybrid voices of Zoë Kravitz’s cameo and the alien-sounding vocoder of Monáe’s outro equate sex with power – ‘You screw me and I’ll screw you too’. For Weheliye, purposeful estrangements of Black voices with vocoders – a kind of sonic masquerade – ‘challenge cultural inscriptions of black subjects and voices as “the epitome of embodiment” and authentic “soul”’ (2002, pp.30-1). While the vocoder speaks truth to power, Jane counters the gaze of surveillance – embodied in the trumpet-turned-camera Zen playfully wields – to refute limits to racial and sexual freedom in America. As the song ends, Monáe’s human voice returns in a low-pitched rap about equal pay and fake news, and flickering lights and digital glitch foreshadow Zen’s imminent abduction. Such audio-visual feedback jams up regular programming to screen Black, female, and queer outrage. Whereas glitches in talking machines indicate communication breakdowns, Monáe uses them as a vehicle of protest.



Figure 4: Screen grab of Monáe’s nod to Sun Ra and Afrofuturism in ‘I Like That’ (Dir. Lacey Duke, 2018, in *Dirty Computer*)

‘Screwed’ highlights two different types of masquerade that pervade *Computer* and assemble an archive of Black creative practices: sonic, through homages to other artists and with technological manipulation such as vocoders; and visual, in screenings of protest footage and iconic costumes, hair, and make-up. Both sonic and visual masquerades contribute to heterogeneous notions of playback, as they add multiple layers to a single voice or image. For example, a key persona-in-playback that cuts across *Computer* is clad in Afrofuturist clothing and hairstyles. Perhaps the most immediate form of this persona is seen in ‘I Like That’ (Dir. Lacey Duke), where Monáe dons a headpiece that resembles the cover of Sun Ra’s *Astro Black*

LP, coupled with pigtails and an ornate gown (figure 4). Another oft-cited costume element is the beaded veil in ‘Make Me Feel’ (Dir. Andrew Donoho) that echoes the one worn in the 1991 video for Prince’s ‘Violet the Organ Grinder’ (Vernallis et al., 2019, p.254; 261). As Cassandra L. Jones explains, across Monáe’s oeuvre, her costumes and sonic send-ups ‘sample various historical moments[,] creating a remix that rebels against the linear narrative of the historical archive’ (2018, pp.50-1). Monáe’s android guise and digital production skills also align with Afrofuturist fusions of humans and machines. Importantly, unlike the automata and phonograph singers, *Computer*’s playback does not collapse humans into machines, but uses machines to emphasize humans’ heterogeneity. Monáe’s lip syncing, costumes, and gestures remix the voice/body grafts that fix Blackness as a stable signifier, as in minstrelsy. By insisting that visual and sonic representations are always already hybrid, she underscores the polyphony of Black culture. Like Harawayian cyborgs ‘actively rewriting the texts of their bodies and societies’ (1990, p.177), her vocal styles and multiple looks – from Bantu knots to Afrofuturist headdresses – redress hegemonic systems that view Black bodies as the sum of their limbs.

By assembling disparate audio-visual elements from different temporalities and traditions, Monáe cultivates her playback personae as heterogeneous homages to her musical and cultural influences. As she masquerades past and future into the present, she redefines playback as a politically charged act of dislocation. Monáe is an electric lady who frees herself from ideal voice/body packages: she becomes ‘a figure critically dislocated from bodily materiality,’ as Gabriela Cruz observes of disembodied voices in playback, when ‘voice is offered along different points of an unhinged relationship to the represented body’ (2012, p.20). Monáe’s playful dislocations of historical and futuristic figures into her music videos offer a powerful mode of resisting homogeneous playback operations. In her masquerades, she communicates aspects of her subject position and also holds up an audio-visual mirror to Black, female, and queer communities.

For example, by mirroring her pansexuality in her personae, Monáe highlights alternatives to the pervasive heteronormativity on offer in many music videos. As she told *Rolling Stone* when she came out as pansexual, ‘I want young girls, young boys, nonbinary, gay, straight, queer people who are having a hard time dealing with their sexuality, dealing with feeling ostracized or bullied for just being their unique selves, to know that I see you’ (quoted in Spanos, 2018). The album’s lead single, ‘Make Me Feel’, connects most overtly to Monáe’s

message. Numerous scholars have already commented on the various audio-visual devices that emphasize sexuality in the song's music video, which portrays her pivots between female and male partners (Zen and Che) in a club. For Steven Shaviro, Monáe's James Brown yelps and Michael Jackson moonwalks 'pay homage to her precursors, at the same time queering them with her "emotional, sexual bender"' (Vernallis et al., 2019, p.254). And as Sasha Geffen writes, the video's mix of blue and pink lighting hails the bisexual pride flag (2018). Building on these send-ups, Monáe plays with the viewer's gaze throughout the video in a masterful use of masquerade. At the beginning of the video, Jane and Zen enter the club and appear to observe a blonde-wigged Monáe, who sings the first verse of the song. But this Monáe refuses to meet Jane's gaze – which is aligned with that of the viewers in its shot-reverse shot structure – as the latter looks defiantly off camera. We come to realize, from club scenes of Jane flirting with Zen and Che, that the blonde Monáe is singing in a separate space of performance (Vernallis et al., 2019, p.254). This masquerade of multiple Monáes in multiple spaces is heightened when the blonde Monáe suddenly meets our gaze at the pre-chorus line, 'It's like I'm powerful with a little bit of tender'. But like her coy lyrics, the blonde still prevents our access to her expression, as her eyes are shaded with mirrored sunglasses. The rest of the video alternates between several performing personae, including the Monáe in the beaded Prince veil. These Monáes meet our gaze between dancers' legs, but at other times refuse it again with sunglasses or even full-body pink latex. It seems fitting, then, that in the last shot, Monáe turns her head to face the camera. But in her beaded mask and the marionette-like twist of her arm, she refuses the often one-way direct address of pop videos: this masquerade scripts desire on the electric lady's terms.

Monáe also harnesses playback to express multivalent desires in 'Pynk' (Dir. Emma Westenberg), a celebration of feminine power and sexuality that has attracted much attention for the dancers' 'vulva pants'. But not all of the female dancers are wearing these pants, and the video as a whole contains a spectrum of femininity and sexuality. Notably, the song's title is itself a masquerade of Aerosmith's 1997 so-called sexist rock song 'Pink' – with, perhaps not coincidentally, several similar lyrical and melodic structures.⁶ In this masquerade, Monáe takes this colour back as a rightful banner of Black femininity. But she also offers alternate versions of femininity than the softer, pink variety. In 'Django Jane' (Dir. Andrew Donoho), Monáe sits on a throne flanked by a female entourage, all wearing her signature suit that she dons 'onstage to

avoid the pressures of gender conformity' (Royster, 2013, p.188). Combined with rap, gender has a different look and feel here – it is inherently malleable and diffuse.

Through Monáe's multiple personae that emphasize the varied aspects of her race, gender, and sexuality, she deliberately positions herself in *Computer* as a mismatched woman. This figure, coined by Jennifer Fleegeer, 'reveals the centrality of the female voice to technologies that have been built to imitate male bodies in their pretension to "natural" completeness' (2014, p.6). That is, mismatched women solicit our attention through detectable traces of production, such as the reaction shots of *Britain's Got Talent* judges shocked by Susan Boyle's homely appearance yet angelic voice, or the Broadway style of singers' voices that flouts the purported ethnicity of Disney Princesses. When audiences can identify the mismatch between a woman's voice and body, Fleegeer argues, we can perceive how a mismatched woman both defies the homogenous nature of playback and 'restores our faith in technology, assuring us that the machines threatening to unravel our social bonds need not be feared' (ibid, p.190). Monáe rehabilitates the technology of playback and the pop music video with mismatched masquerades. For one, many of her videos have the high gloss of typical female pop stars, but she often mobilizes her multiple personae to introduce friction into the capitalist reproduction of ideal types. In so doing, Monáe spotlights mainstream music video as a technology of capture that sells a star's voice and image. The music video, like Doane observes of classical Hollywood cinema, captures women 'more closely to the surface of the image than its illusory depths, its constructed three-dimensional space' (1991, p.20). But while Monáe at times appears available for surface consumption, her multiple personae reveal how she is the master of her voice. Her masquerades, which split aspects of herself into disparate audio-visual elements and honor her musical and activist heroes, refuse the control of playback norms and heteronormative, patriarchal society.

Monáe's masquerades reach the fullest extent of mastering control in playback in 'Django Jane' and 'I Like That'. In 'Django Jane' (Dir. Andrew Donoho), Monáe inscribes subaltern bodies into the glossy surfaces of pop and music video. Her rap that hybridizes voice as song and speech – even laughter – mixes autobiographical references to film roles and public calls to represent the 'highly melanated'. The women's constrained, uniform gestures – not unlike Hollingshead's description of Euphonia as 'imprisoned' – wryly deny the scenes of emphatic protest we expect from her lyrics. But noncompliance surfaces in micro gestures like

colour-changing suits, lyrics that ‘cue the violins and violas’, and her occasional slips in lip sync across jump cuts. These expose the manufactured nature of playback, where singers and producers labour to graft bodies to voices in post-synchronisation. As Michel Chion observes in commercial playback practices, it’s possible to stage singers’ bodies in radically different settings in music videos because the recorded voice provides a sense of embodied continuity: ‘the body tends to incorporate the voice, in aspiring to achieve an impossible unity’ of time and space (1999, p.154). Playback aims to erase the threat of a mismatched voice by controlling her star image. However, Monáe’s micro gestures of masquerade foil playback’s suturing attempts, as her voice comes to mean both a signature of inhabitation and a means of inhabiting. When Monáe raps ‘let the vagina have a monologue’ and angles a mirror in front of it to reflect her face (figure 5),⁷ she fuses her lips and sex organs to suggest that she speaks from both – like the Monáes threaded throughout *Computer* splinter a supposedly unifying voice into divergent bodies.



Figure 5: Screen grab of Monáe’s vagina monologue in ‘Django Jane’ (Dir. Andrew Donoho, 2018, in *Dirty Computer*) that enacts citation and lip-sync fragmentation.

Jump cuts among uniform images in ‘Django Jane’ jumble the gloss of commercial production in a refusal to be polished. In ‘I Like That’, Monáe’s stripped-down persona asks spectators to reckon with the distance between a star’s body and voice. She bares skin and body doubles that synergize through eyeline matches, dance moves, and hair – which, as Carol Vernallis observes, can multiply personae through graphic matches and metaphors (2017, p.20). In verse one, Monáe’s digital doppelgängers with chunky braids rhyme with the hair that masks her attendants in verse two. The aforementioned Afrofuturist persona, which appears during the

song's chorus, alternates with a barer-skinned Monáe in the verses. In the third verse, she raps about her own childhood, not Jane's; her Southern accent emerges with recollections of standing out with thrift clothes. And in the ultimate display of baring her skin, she lies alone in a bathtub, a setting that many artists have used to complicate their star texts in music videos from Prince's 'When Doves Cry' (Dir. Prince, 1984) to Demi Lovato's 'Stone Cold' (Dir. Patrick Ecclesine, 2016). This mediated bareness parallels the video for 'Cold War' (Dir. Wendy Morgan, 2010), where Monáe, nude in head-and-shoulders close-up, abruptly stops lip syncing and tears up, making audiences intensely privy to the emotional journey of baring oneself in song. In 'I Like That', juxtapositions of stripped-down and Afrofuturist personae register Monáe's address as at once intimately raw and consciously constructed. Monáe's relayed gazes and lip-synced voice do not merely emphasize stardom, as in many music videos, but through her rap portray a once-working-class citizen's triumphs over Black, queer, and female oppression.

Monáe's many personae in *Dirty Computer* harness playback as an instrument of masquerade and dislocation, assembling hybrid voices that were disembodied across history. With citations from hair to rap, Monáe's cosmic grooves bridge multiple generations in the spirit of Afrofuturism. Amplifying past and future frequencies and re-sounding racial and sexual difference, she embodies what Daphne Brooks calls 'Black feminist phonography': 'Monáe is the phonographic archive, the performing repository of her future, (post)-human self, the media(tor) who toggles between the discursive citationality of the [liner] notes and the multidimensional resonances of her embodied performances' (2021, p.118). Playback is a critical tool for her archival practice. As sounds and images traverse voices and eras, Monáe calls spectators to co-hear how the voice coheres and to decouple bodies from ideological bonds of representation. The final shot of the emotion picture, as Jane, Zen, and Che escape the cleaning facility, displays Jane/Monáe turning around to face the camera. She gives a knowing look, then slowly turns back to face her future. In her culminating performance of masquerade, Monáe's direct address is a reminder of her refusal to be contained by univocal stereotypes of race, gender, and sexuality.

Conclusion: Electric Ladies in Protest

By probing the industrial ideals of audio-visual synchronisation that have controlled the representation of racial, sexual, and gendered identities in automata, phonograph recordings, and music video, we can more fully grasp how Monáe unmask the homogenizing nature of playback. White male operators used talking machines to stifle racial and gendered Others, and music videos suture stars' voices to their public image. But reading between the seams of playback exposes producers' attempts to solder voice, bodies, and stereotypes. The electric ladies embedded in these machines may be built to purport a singular identity, but slippages of voice and body through masquerades of multiple personae deflect stereotyping gazes and produce an ever-changing flux of identifications.

Electric ladies recombine voices and bodies to show the polymorphous ways in which voices and bodies meet despite industrial strictures of playback. When Monáe knowingly masquerades in different roles and skins, her wilful multiplications of personae reveal constrained comportment as a constructed fiction. The critical dis- and re-embodiment of her palpable body-swapping injects aura into glossy mechanical reproduction. When singers retrace their words through new guises and other visual citations, they summon spectators' memories of fugitive meanings that defy singular contexts of vocal (re)production.

Monáe samples from her musical and political influences to model ways for electric ladies to make their own heterogeneity seen and heard in playback. Through sonic and aural masquerades, she shatters univocal stereotypes of gendered or raced bodies: her multiple personae and references enable social outliers to fantasmatically inhabit new bodily possibilities. She uses audio-visual playback, the tool of the oppressor, to transgress sonic reproductions that subjugate individuals and forms of expression. These gears grind on, as streaming services and deepfakes operate surprisingly similarly to phonographs, distancing us from the moment of a sound's creation and hiding its source from view. But electric ladies in masquerade can air tacit voices, stoking the vital protests of those who wait in the interval between sounding and sound.

Notes

¹ For example, Edward Said observes that ‘European civilization incorporated [the Ottoman] peril and its lore, its great events, figures, virtues, and vices, as something woven into the fabric of life’ (1978, pp.59-60).

² See Morrison (2019) for further examples of blackface minstrelsy and its legacy of racialized scripting, which he terms ‘Blacksound’.

³ See Vest (2018) to compare gendered representation in Euphonia and the phonograph.

⁴ On spectators’ identifications with Madonna’s sexuality, see Austerlitz (2007) pp.46-7 and Vernallis (2004) pp.54-72, also on background figures.

⁵ I thank one of my anonymous reviewers for suggesting that blues women also resist the presumptive womanliness Doane names, and therefore are important predecessors to Monáe in playback history.

⁶ On the alleged sexism of ‘Pink,’ see Jessie M. (2018).

⁷ This image also occurs in *A Fantastic Woman* (Sebastian Lelio, 2017); see Lelio’s flattered response to what may have been an unconscious citation in Kohn (2018).

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