

Walking the Tightrope:  
Selfhood and Speculative Fiction in Janelle Monáe's *The ArchAndroid*

Jessica R. Bates

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Frederick M. D'Aguiar, Chair  
Gena E. Chandler  
Ann G. Kilkelly

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#### ABSTRACT

Janelle Monáe's multi-part, multi-media work *Metropolis* can be read as a speculative fiction text. In my work, I examine the ways in which Monáe uses the structure of her second album *The ArchAndroid* and the music, lyrics, and dance of her video "Tightrope" to contribute to her underlying narrative. *The ArchAndroid* creates an auditory experience of time travel by varying the beat and musical style and through the use of specific production techniques. The accompanying video "Tightrope" delineates its titular metaphor through its music, dance, and visuals. These elements, as part of the central narrative of Cindi and Janelle, demonstrate the ways in which Monáe plays with the concept of selfhood by continually recontextualizing identity in time and space.

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## Clarification on Language within the Work

Given the interactive component of Monáe's work, it is impossible to engage with it without becoming a functional part of its mythos. There is no element of her work that does not contain some tincture of fact and fiction, cultural critique, and performative art. If the purpose of Monáe's work is to incorporate her audience and her society into her work, to cast us all as actors into her creative alternate universe, to allow us to question and play with reality, then this thesis itself is subsumed under that paradigm. As such, I will occasionally refer to her audience as "we" or "us" in deference to the purpose of her work.

As Monáe deploys multiple selves into her art, I will refer to the fictional, time-traveling Janelle Monáe as "Janelle" and the author Janelle Monáe as "Monáe" in order to minimize confusion and avoid repetitive uses of "fictional." There are times when both Janelle, the character, and Monáe, the artist, seem to be speaking at once. In these instances, I sometimes refer to the speaker as Janelle/Monáe.

The character of Janelle should not be confused with Cindi Mayweather, the cyborg double of Janelle. I should also clarify that Monáe refers to Cindi as both a cyborg and an android. In a sense, both of these terms are needed to fully understand what Cindi is. The "android" refers to her entirely human appearance and the "cyborg" refers to her "organic compounds," which were "cloned from Ms. Monáe's stolen" DNA (*The ArchAndroid*).

The title of the complete work is *The Metropolis Suites*. The first is entitled, "Suite 1: The Chase" and the two subsequent suites are both entitled "The ArchAndroid." My work refers primarily to the latter.

## Chapter 1: Cindi and Janelle

In contemporary American society, identity is defined by our physical selves and by our cultural allegiances. We are judged and categorized by our gender, sexuality, age, and race as well as what we like and what we consume. In her multi-part musical work *Metropolis*, Janelle Monáe plays with these definitions and defies these categorizations. Her work questions contemporary notions of identity. As a performer, she sings through characters -- characters who call into question what it means to be human. The work itself resists categorization by drawing from an incredibly breadth of subject material and literary and musical genre. The music shifts from genre to genre, including such wide ranges as classical, bebop, punk, funk, and folk rock. The narrative itself is perhaps best described as speculative fiction as it continually blurs the line between science fiction, fantasy, and magical realism.

The story is centered upon and narrated by two women -- Janelle Monáe and Cindi Mayweather. Janelle was born and lived in the 28th century but was kidnapped, assaulted, and sent back through time. Her genetic material was used to create Cindi Mayweather, a cyborg with a soul, as well as numerous cyborg duplicates. Janelle works as a performer and musician in our contemporary time and she provides perspective and commentary on both the future and our present. At some point, she is incarcerated in The Palace of the Dogs mental asylum, which seems to exist suspended within the year 1954.

Cindi Mayweather is a popular entertainer in the 28th century, but she breaks the law by falling in love with a human. For this transgression, she is condemned to die and is forced to flee. As she travels through the city of Metropolis, she gains a greater understanding of the society and the plight of her fellow cyborgs. She eventually learns

of a secret society known as “the Great Divide[...] which has been using time travel to suppress freedom and love throughout the ages” (*The ArchAndroid*). Cindi discovers that she is the ArchAndroid, destined to free Metropolis from the Great Divide. The number 57821 has particular significance to both characters; it is both Janelle Monáe’s Palace of the Dog’s patient number and Cindi Mayweather’s android designation. This number serves as a representation of their mutual oppression and dehumanization. The number links them together through a shared identity and common experience, but it also highlights the unfortunate commonality of their abuse and indicates the ways in which they may be indistinguishable to their oppressors.

These two characters exaggerate the effects upon identity of being embodied within a marginalized race and of being contextualized within a specific time. If “the double is a mental creation of the hero, who has a trial to overcome and needs to prove his authority” then the separation of Monáe’s protagonist into two separate but related entities allows the characters to work in tandem towards a mutually liberated existence (Andrade 2). Cindi and Janelle are dominated by fear -- the fear of a society that continually exerts control over their bodies and the fear harbored by that society of what they represent.

The term “Afrofuturism has emerged [...] to describe the analysis, criticism, and cultural production that addresses the intersections between race and technology” (Nelson). Afrofuturist narratives “provide novel takes on lived experience in a technologized world, perspectives that open up space for new ideas about politics and new visions of black life: new icons, new heroes, new futures” (Nelson). Monáe presents us with two new heroes, Cindi and Janelle, within an Afrofuturist narrative that

juxtaposes the future against our past to expose the enduring legacy of historical injustice and the possibility for its continuation and renewal.

The sense of being trapped in a dangerous situation comes up repeatedly in her use of metaphor: the tightrope, the cold war, the asylum. The character of Janelle is assaulted, kidnapped, and institutionalized. Cindi is enslaved, tormented, and forced to flee. These images represent captivity, but they also indicate a strong desire for freedom. The tightrope symbolizes the deconstruction of binary distinctions: fact and fiction, human and nonhuman, black and white, sanity and insanity, science and magic, male and female. It represents the precarious tension of contemporary identity. Monáe is African American and female, but she embodies characters whose identities are not as clear. Because Monáe provides the vocals for multiple characters, it is never entirely clear whose perspective we are hearing. We are never in control of the narrative. Janelle and Cindi are performers and artists within the work, creating art from their own lives just as Monáe is doing with the work itself. The repeated use of mirroring and doubling, a blurring of fact and fiction, nested stories, and disjointed narration forces the listener to take an active role within the work and allows Monáe to avoid simple parallels between her life and her work. Her employment of multiple selves within the work disrupts interpretations of the artist as a single, unified self. This is particularly clear in her choice to give one character her own name and to continually link and blur both characters narratively, visually, and audibly. Whereas “[s]elf-representation has been ‘naturalized’ through a rhetoric of unproblematized realism which depends upon the distinction between fact and fiction in determining autobiographical authenticity,” Monáe creates multiple iterations of “self” while overtly examining distinctions between fact and fiction,

science and mythology (Gilmore 79). In doing so, she forces her listener to actively create a narrative, and, ideally, to consider the ways in which they are continually doing so in their own lives.

Monáe places her characters into oppressed worlds and then allows them to gradually break free. The story is a chronicle of past transgressions and current abuses, but it is also a message of hope. She uses these characters to free herself from outside subjectivities and to explore personal issues of selfhood. Within her work, she changes and complicates what it means to be a young, queer, black woman by recontextualizing her own body into the lives of her characters. The central metaphor of the work is the tightrope, which represents the negotiation of binaries, the precarious nature of success, and the confining, controlling nature of society. It also represents the tension of what Monáe is trying to do -- serve as both serious cultural critic and popular entertainer.

The type of alter egos that Monáe employs are of particular importance to the aesthetic and message of Afrofuturism. Robin James examines the recent trend of “the black female R&B singer as robot” (James 403). Though this work predates *The ArchAndroid*, James analyzes the robot imagery and cyborg alter egos of Beyoncé, Rihanna, Ciarra, and others. She writes, “[T]he Robo-Diva figure challenges entrenched aesthetic norms and gender–race politics by asserting her black femininity and technological prowess” (403). Just as other Afrofuturist artists seek to reconcile or satirize the division between science and magic, history and folklore, these “Robo-Divas” exploit the mixture of fear and attraction to black female sexuality by associating it with similar reactions to changing technology. These images disrupt the associations between black bodies and natural, “primitive” environments.

This is, of course, particularly relevant to the character of Cindi. Monáe deploys Cindi as a symbol of a changing society and our contemporary fears of those changes. She is both a black woman seeking to liberate herself and the product of technology that humanity can no longer control. The Cindi/Janelle story bears a clear parallel to Fritz Lang's 1927 film *Metropolis*. In many ways, Monáe's *Metropolis* is a retelling of this earlier work. In this film, a young woman, Maria, is abducted and doubled against her will. The result is a perfect robotic replica of her. The human Maria represents nature, emotion, and maternalism whereas the Machine-Maria represents the potential threat of both future technology and unbridled female sexuality. Maria is the virgin to the Machine-Maria's whore. Monáe borrows these characters and subverts them. Janelle and Cindi are both complex, sympathetic characters who are objectified and exploited by their societies. Just as importantly, they, unlike the two Marias, are not in opposition to each other; indeed, they seem to operate within a set of shared values. Here, there is no fear of female sexuality or technology. There is only a warning to humanity that we will be judged by our interactions with these forces -- what we will create, how we will use it, and what role will women have in these decisions.

Interestingly, the cyborg in Monáe's work is given the name Mayweather, which heavily connotes nature. It is also associated with well-known Mayweather boxing family, establishing Cindi as a fighter. Her first name may be a reference to Cinderella, a character who also began as a servant, acted a role, and ultimately broke free. But the name Cindi has a secondary meaning. The more common spelling Cindy is derived from the name Cynthia, which is itself from Kynthia, another name for the goddess Artemis ("Behind the Name"). Artemis is a loaded allusion; she is also a fighter with multiple

names and identities. Artemis is frequently associated with female empowerment and independence. She is a twin to Apollo, which continues the theme of doubling in the work.

Whereas Cindi is a cyborg, Janelle is a time traveler. Her story allows the narrative to take place in the past and present as well as the future. Through the metaphor of the cyborg, Monáe explores physical embodiment; through the metaphor of time travel, Monáe explores one of subjectivity linked to a placement within history. By placing Janelle and the events of “Tightrope” within a 1954 insane asylum, Monáe explores issues of civil rights within a science fiction frame but with direct allusions to real events and practices in American history. Alondra Nelson refers to this aspect of Afrofuturism as a “past-future vision.” Many cultural critics strive to create art that perfectly mimics realistic lived conditions in order to give their commentary greater weight and resonance. But Nelson emphasizes that “future vision is a necessary complement to realism [...] And we should not think of speculative cultural production as only ‘escapist,’ but rather as holding important insights about people's lived conditions” (Nelson).

Both Cindi and Janelle are victims of their society and each mode of victimization represents a criticism of a different type of institutional control. Cindi is born into a life of servitude and must fight to gain her initial civil rights. Janelle is born as a full Metropolis citizen, but she is assaulted, abducted, exploited, and displaced. Their Cindi and Janelle’s lives parallel the experience of an American slave and a marginalized citizen respectively. In Mark Dery’s description of Afrofuturism, he states:

[African Americans] inhabit a sci-fi nightmare in which unseen but no less impassable force fields of intolerance frustrate their movements; official histories undo what has been done to them; and technology, be it branding, forced sterilization, the Tuskegee experiment, or tasers, is too often brought to bear on black bodies.

Monáe presents us with a case of physical assault, the abuse of technology in the creation of Cindi, and the literal erasure of time. But she subverts each of these elements. As her cyborg clone, Cindi is the direct result of the assault upon Janelle. Both figures break free from their confined roles within the system and work together to disseminate truth. Both Cindi and Janelle learn to time travel and to alter physical laws -- effectively using their oppressors techniques against them.

These themes are present in the construction of the work itself. The second album, *The ArchAndroid: Suites II and III*, particularly highlights her use musical production and allusion. She allows her listeners to experience a wide variety of musical allusions and timeframes; she allows them, in a sense, to time travel. In doing so, she capitalizes on the technology of a musical album in creating a narrative, she emphasizes the physical experience of listening to the work, and she makes it difficult to easily categorize the album into genre. In her centerpiece, "Tightrope," Monáe uses elements of funk, bebop, and modern-day hip-hop to elaborate on the message of the lyrics. We all walk a restrictive tightrope of societal expectation, personal inhibition, and systematic oppression. She incorporates the physicality of dance into her message, using her own body to undermine these expectations and reclaim them.

This work provides a close reading of the music, lyrics, visuals, and dance elements for the video "Tightrope." In doing so, I hope to further illuminate the ways in

which Monáe exerts power over selfhood by consistently avoiding or deconstructing categorization through her lyrics, dance, costuming, setting, and use of allusion and homage. I will also delineate the ways in which she performs her characters' mastery of time through her use of rhythm and mimicry. I focus primarily on the work in which "Tightrope" appears, *The ArchAndroid: Suites II and III*, as this provides a manageable and coherent focus within the larger work.

## Chapter 2: Performing Time

*Suite 1: The Chase* begins the story with a loudspeaker announcement played over military-sounding drums, immediately placing the listener within the dystopian world of the futuristic Metropolis. It also implicates the listener in the hunt for Cindi Mayweather and provides the voice of the society's power apparatus before that of the heroine's.

While the beginning of *The Chase* creates the illusion of reality, the beginning of *The ArchAndroid* draws attention to the illusion. *The ArchAndroid* opens to the sound of an audience and an orchestra turning as though the performance has been recorded live. The tuning, like the loudspeaker announcement, establishes the album within the present moment -- the same moment as that of the listener, regardless of when the moment occurs within the narrative. The music is not a passive experience; the listener is incorporated into the action of the album. This effect also highlights the artificiality of the work as “no recorded performances, not even live recordings, are ‘real’—or even representations thereof” but rather “virtual productions created through interactions of musicians and listeners with recording and reproduction technologies” (Weheliye 30). Technology is present in our contemporary music whether we acknowledge it or not; even the live, classical performance at the start of the work is virtual. Here again, a distinction is broken down. The inclusion of sampling, voice modulation, and other production techniques is merely a continuation of the technology in use in all forms of recorded music.

The album continually draws attention to its own constructed nature. There are several clearly metafictional moments within the work. But its structure and use of genre also functions as a type of performative time travel. The beat of the album, its “time,” is extraordinarily complex. Each track features a different style and tempo that references a

different point or points in musical history. The beats work in conjunction with the changes in Monáe's vocal style. Some of the tracks bridge more than one distinct musical allusion while others seem to be a more direct homage to a particular style. But each track transports the listener into a style or genre associated with a specific time and place. As a whole, this amalgamation of styles allows Monáe to further defy genrefication and categorization. It also further emphasizes the importance of time in our interpretation of data. A key component of Afrofuturism is its tendency to present alternate visions about our past and future, visions that typically run counter to dominate socio-cultural histories. The term "chronopolitics" refers to "the relationship between the political behavior of individuals and groups and their time-perspectives" (Wallis 102). That is, the way in which we situate our society in relationship to past events affect our predictions for the future, which, in turn, affect contemporary behavior. Therefore, futurist visions become a serious attempt to correct a discriminatory or limited view of our society. Stories of time travel such as *Metropolis: The ArchAndroid* can literally recontextualize the black body in relation to contemporary views of social progress. Indeed, "[b]y creating temporal complications and anachronistic episodes that disturb the linear time of progress, these futurisms adjust the temporal logics that condemned black subjects to prehistory" (Eshun 296). The tension between science and magic, highlighted in "Tightrope" demonstrate how arbitrary many such distinctions are, particularly in terms of art and culture.

*The ArchAndroid* presents a world in which the past is still a literal part of contemporary life. Incorporating time travel into the story blurs the distinctions between past, present and future; to ignore the past or future would be to ignore a part of the

present. Issues of selfhood, subjectivity, and authenticity are very much at the heart of the story -- a single body can represent more than one person existing at more than one time.

*The ArchAndroid* demonstrates Monáe's ability to navigate within the complex cultural history to which she is heir. Her mastery of so many different styles serve as a musical and cultural ethos for her body of work and allow her to play with the contextualization of time. Although the music will hold different musical connotations to different listeners, I have provided a broad overview of the structure of the album and a close reading each track's musical style. As I have previously state, *The ArchAndroid* consists of Suites II and III of *Metropolis* (*The Chase* is the first suite of the work). The division is marked by the "Suite III Overture," the twelfth track of the album.

Likewise, the very first track of the album is "Suite II Overture," a piece of orchestral music. It begins with the sounds of an audience talking and moving around, an orchestra tuning, and then live applause. The music itself is classical, building to include a darkly chanting chorus. The chant is unintelligible, but its sound alludes to John Williams' "Star Wars Theme." The piece is a true overture; it sets the mood for the album and alludes to the melody and rhythms of later tracks. The first transition between tracks indicates something else about the album. There is not a clear division between the end of the "Suite II Overture" and the next track, "Dance or Die." The end applause from the first track bleeds directly into the second album. This element of the musical production is continued throughout. Other songs continue directly into the following track. Some of the tracks have more than one possible ending -- one at the end of the track and another (generally a smoother, more natural auditory transition) that can be heard a few seconds into the next track. This furthers the emphasis on time in the album

and encourages the listener to experience the work as a whole rather than as individual tracks.

Despite their connection, the style of “Dance or Die” is distinctly different from “Suite II Overture.” While there is also chanting in this track, it is of a very different style and there is a clear link to African drum rhythms in the underlying beat. Saul Williams provides a clearly audible spoken word performance that is overlaid with a robotic chorus and then the lead vocals of Monáe. The meter of her flow bears a strong similarity to Busta Rhymes, particularly in his work, “Gimme Some More” -- a work which also begins with an overture.

The title, “Dance or Die,” is also related to rhythm and movement. “Dance or Die” is followed by “Faster.” The juxtaposition of these two titles can be read as commands. The listener is told to dance upon threat of death and then told to speed up. This sort of uneven power dynamic and emphasis on dance as a form of power is repeated in the choreography of “Tightrope.” The rhythm of “Faster” actually slows considerably from the beat of “Dance or Die.” If “Faster” is the command then the performer is openly defying it or we are not hearing the tracks in their original chronology. But the lyrics also contrast with the rhythm. It is essentially a love song in the style of Motown girl groups, akin to Jackie Wilson's "Higher" and The Supremes' "Can't Hurry Love.” The chorus states, “Faster and faster/I should run/ Faster and faster/ From your arms.” The beat speeds slightly during the chorus and then slows back down. The singer appears to be wrestling with her decision. The lyrics also connect the beat of the song to the beat of the singer’s heart. She sings, “My heart beats; it beats for you and only you/ It’s kicking like a kick kick drum.”

The transition from “Faster” to “Locked Inside” is incredibly abrupt. The song begins, “I’m locked inside” but the “I’m” of the line is easily lost in the changeover between songs. The subject is literally caught between these two tracks. The style of the song is heavily influenced by Stevie Wonder. It should be noted that although each of these songs stylistically alludes to specific artists, the lyrics of each song is distinctly Monáe. Many of the metaphors use classic science fiction works to create meaning. “Faster,” for example, uses “kryptonite” and “electric sheep” to refer to Superman and *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* respectively. “Locked Inside” refers to *Logan’s Run* with the lyrics “the color black means it’s time to die/ And nobody questions why.” But this lyric also reframes the color coding in *Logan’s Run* within a more contemporary context. The color black can clearly refer to the black bodies of both Janelle and Cindi.

This song gives us another timeframe within the mythology. It states, “She always fights, for her man but not her rights/ Even though its 3005.” 3005 is nearly three hundred years after the timeframe given within the *Metropolis* PDF, placing the singer (most likely Cindi) within an even more futuristic timeframe. However, the sentiment of these lyrics may be commenting upon the predicament of Cindi herself at the start of the narrative. Her initial catalyst for her flight is her love of a man and not a desire for freedom. The singer is either Cindi commenting upon the actions of women, including herself, at a previous timeframe or an outsider (perhaps Janelle) providing perspective on the events of the album.

It is significant, then that the very next track focuses on the love story between Cindi and Sir Greedown. The song, fittingly entitled “Sir Greedown,” is very reminiscent of early 1960s American girl groups such as The Ronettes and The Shangri-

Las. It has a distinctly utopian fantasy feel in the sound of the lyrics, the production of the song, and girlish backing vocals; it is a song about idealized love. There is also a distinct musical allusion to the Bond theme in the song, perhaps emphasizing the unrealistic nature of the love song and further recalling old-fashioned, mainstream, and often repressive gender roles.

Following in stark contrast to the romantic, retro feel of “Sir Greendown” is the song “Cold War.” There is a very clear correlation to the beat of OutKast’s “Bombs Over Baghdad.” The snare drum within the track creates a nearly identical rhythm and an exactly identical tone as well as the same quick drum roll every few measures. This allusion highlights the cultural critique of the song. The “war” of this track is primarily cultural; Monáe is focusing on issues that often exist as subtext within our society.

Cindi/Janelle/Monáe sings, “When you step outside/ You spend life fighting for your sanity [...] I was made to believe there’s something wrong with me.” These lyrics work for any of the three artists. Cindi is condemned as a cyborg, Janelle is accused of literal insanity, and, as a young, queer, black woman, Monáe exists at an highly marginalized intersection of contemporary American society.

The next track on the album is “Tightrope,” which I will discuss with greater detail in later sections. The musical association to OutKast formed in the previous song is carried through to “Tightrope” in the appearance of Big Boi (one half of the musical duo). It also appears in the exact midway point of “Suite II.” “Tightrope” represents tension, division, and balance. In both its content, theme, and placement, “Tightrope” works as the centerpiece of the album.

The time travel theme is greatly highlighted in the next track. “Neon Gumbo” is simply “Many Moons” (a track from *The Chase*) played backwards. Given that it directly follows the center of the album, it also creates a mirroring effect. The next song, “Oh, Maker” showcases Monáe’s incredible vocal diversity. She sounds startlingly like Mama Cass. Like “Sir Greendown,” the song is very 1960s, though of a different type. At the beginning of the song, the harpsichord bears resemblance to the Mamas & the Papas, The Carpenters, and to the Beach Boys’ *Pet Sounds*. The beat of the album creates a layered effect; it has a distinctly 90’s hip hop feel in contrast to the 1960s vocal style.

“Come Alive” also demonstrates a layering of musical eras. The song contains strong elements of bebop -- a genre that represents a significant shift in the use of technology in music. “Come Alive” brings focus to the tensions that accompany changing technology. As such, there are also elements of punk, another genre that capitalized on changing technology, such as Iggy Pop’s “Lust for Life.” Both the sound and the neo-gothic elements of the song parallel Gnarlz Barkley, among others. The final song of Suite II, “Mushrooms and Roses,” recalls very late Beatles, particularly “Strawberry Fields Forever”; the lazy fills of the drums are very reminiscent of Ringo during this period. This is the time of Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Heart Club Band, which is, significantly, their own musical alter ego. There is also a Prince influence here with some similarity to “Purple Rain.” Interestingly, Prince is also known for his deployment of alter egos.

The overture for Suite III does not contain the same live cues as that for Suite II. However, it is also orchestral with chanting vocals and there is a very obvious reprise of Sir Greendown. The chanting becomes more intelligible as the song progresses and it’s

possible to also hear lyrics from “Locked Inside.” In effect, this piece serves as an overture for songs that have already appeared on the album, a continuation of the time travel theme.

“Neon Valley Street” also contains allusions to other songs on the album, but the jazzy melody over Alicia Keyes-type beat, arrangement, and vocals lend it a classic R&B beat and feel. This is complicated by a distinctly robotic voice that delivers a hip-hop interlude against the main vocals. The juxtaposition between the natural, effortless main vocal and the highly produced and stylized backup vocal highlight the overall tension of the work between “technology” and “nature.”

The fourteenth song on the album is “Make the Bus.” This song plays a distinct and crucial role within the overall work. It is the only song on the album that is written, produced, and performed without Monáe. This track is the work of the artist Kevin Barnes, lead singer of the band of [sic] Montreal. It functions, in effect, as a piece of metafiction and metacriticism, commenting on the album as a whole and on its possible reception. The song begins, “The way you are now/ You’re never going to make the bus/ Even though/ Everybody’s so impressed/ You’ve got *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* under your pillow.” As this song is entirely separated from the rest of the album in its creation and production and given that this is the only song featuring another artist in the lead vocal, it’s possible to read it as an outsider’s perspective on the work. These lyrics clearly refer to Monáe’s use of science fiction allusion; of Montreal critically examines her art and predicts her eventual failure. Given that both Cindi and Janelle are also performers, this can potentially be read as not metafiction but another voice within the world of the narrative. However, later lyrics seem to point to a metafictional reading.

Barnes sings, “I’ve got a terrible fixation/ Can’t get it off my mind/ Don’t want to really get to know it better/ Want to keep it in the realm of fantasy.” Here, he performs the part of consumer or critic. He wants to listen passively and is disturbed by the experience of *The ArchAndroid*. Monáe wants her work to be read outside of realm of fantasy as cultural criticism, and she directly confronts the listener who resists this by giving him a voice within the album. Of course, it’s unlikely that Barnes is this critic, he is simply performing his role in the metafiction. Indeed, he asserts the power of the work to overcome resistant listeners. He sings, “What do you give me but unwanted breakthroughs?/ Strange how certain details subvert everything.” It seems Monáe is in a Cold War with her listeners; she is forcing them to confront issues of which they may be happier to live in ignorance.

Barnes himself performs through an alter ego named Georgie Fruit, around whom he also created several concept albums. The style of this track is very typical of Montreal. Interestingly, nearly every instrument on the song is remixed an electronic departure from the original instrument. However, the drums are, for the most part, actually drums and not electronic. That is, the drums appear to be only traditional instrument on the track. Given the critical role that rhythm plays within the work, this artistic choice in musical production may highlight the artificiality of musical criticism in contrast to the art itself.

“Wondaland” is the next song on the album and it contains a very modern take on a disco rhythm. The vocals are highly feminine, and it also features many of the themes of the Ten Droid Commandments. The highly permissive sexual content of the song (jauntily singing, “Take me back to Wondaland/ I think I left my underpants”) is

juxtaposed with religious allusions (the song closes with a chorus singing “hallelujah”). The tone is playful and slightly wry, particularly following “Make the Bus.”

The next song on the album is strongly reminiscent of Simon and Garfunkel. It is an acoustic ballad backed by natural sounds such as pouring water. This effect contrasts strongly with the heavily electronic production elsewhere in the work. The title of the song is “57281,” the number assigned to Cindi by the Metropolis government and to Janelle by the administrators of the Palace of the Dogs. The number represents institutional control and dehumanization. The association with Simon and Garfunkel brings with associations of protest songs, love ballads, and complex harmonies, all of which work with the lyrics of “57281.” Here, we get our first clear look at the story of Sir Greendown and Cindi. The song tells the story of their love and the hardships they have both overcome. In the song, Greendown searches for Cindi who is suffering in a prison cell. It’s unclear what the chronology of the events of the song are, but Greendown encourages Cindi to pursue her fate as the cyborg savior. He tells her, “Fight like Achilles in Troy/ I will show you the ways that I love you/ I saved you so you’d save the world.” Their romance is placed secondary to her destiny as a warrior. The comparison to Achilles is a telling example of the allusions to Greek mythology that also run throughout the work. Achilles, like Greendown, fell in love with a slave (Briseis). However, it is Cindi, not Greendown, who is compared to Achilles here. The gender roles and power dynamic are reversed and the female slave becomes the warrior-hero.

“Say You’ll Go” is another example of classic R&B style on the album (particularly reminiscent of Sade) with some tribal rhythms. It is also a love song and contains clear references to Eastern religion (nirvana, etc). This goes along with the distinct plurality of

the religious imagery in the work. The nonspecific references to a “maker,” here and elsewhere, could also refer to the literal (human) maker of Cindi.

The final song on the album “BaBopBye Ya” is one of the most complex, particularly rhythmically. At eight minutes, 48 seconds it is also the longest. The song features the African rhythms and jazz beats from throughout the work but with greater variety and change. The song’s rhythm and sound shifts and changes at several points in the piece, incorporating tango rhythms (accompanying lyrics sung in Spanish), a jazz quartet of horns, and ethereal backing vocals. The lyrics of the song re-emphasize the time travel theme as well as the elements of metafiction. The listener is told to “Rewind the clock/ Our time’s approaching.” This can be read as a metaphor for the end of an experience of the end of a life, but it is also the end of the album. If the singer is the voice of one of the fictional characters, as can be reasonably assumed, then the end of the album is the end of their experience, of their life. There is also a synesthetic component to the metaphors of the song. Monáe sings, “ In your hair there is a symphony/Your lips, a string quartet/ They tell stories of a Neon Valley Street/ Where we first met.” In a way, this is a literal, metafictional description of the characters of *The ArchAndroid*; they are composed of the music of the album. It may be directed at the outside listener; they now possess the experience of listening to the song. These themes are carried through to the end of the album. The song continues with both an emphasis on time and on synesthetic descriptions: “Now somewhere time pursues us/ As we love in Technicolor.”

“Technicolor” may also be a metonymy for film, a reading which is borne out by the later lyric “This time we will stay in our movie.” To “stay in our movie” may be the only way the fictional characters are given life. The term “movie” instead of story or album

emphasizes the drama of the work as well as its fictional elements. The last lyric of the album is, “My freedom calls and I must go,” which of, course, the singer does and the album fades out to piano and woodwinds.

The complexity and multiplicity of this work demonstrate an almost super-human ability to master a wide variety of musical styles. Marlo David writes, “Afrofuturist thought posits a reconciliation between an imagined disembodied, identity-free future and the embodied identity-specific past and present, which can provide a critical link through which post-soul artists can express a radical black subjectivity” (696). *The ArchAndroid* essentially provides an overview of the major musical styles of the 20th century. In doing so, the album demonstrates the interconnectivity of these styles and allows the reader to draw unexpected connections between them. This forces the listener to re-evaluate their perception of time, at least in terms of beat and genre and ideally in terms of a wider cultural context. The use of time in this work is a crucial component of the continual deconstruction and recontextualizing of the identity that occurs throughout.

### Chapter 3: The Music and Lyrics of “Tightrope”

“Tightrope” is about negotiating binaries: queer/straight, male/female, sane/insane, master/slave, human/nonhuman. But it is the tightrope itself that imposes these divisions, not the inherent identity of the walker. The rope is a dividing line, an unstable and ultimately untenable structure, and an obstacle to freedom of movement. The metaphor exposes these binaries as a gross oversimplification of a persona so complex it must be represented through multiple fictional identities. “Tightrope” is placed in the exact center of Suite II of Janelle Monáe album, *The ArchAndroid*. It is the sixth of eleven tracks and begins precisely 18 ½ minutes into the 37 minute work. This placement highlights the delicate balance and tension inherent in the song’s central image. Monáe walks a tightrope of identity, fame, and artistic genre. Her lyrics, beat, and musical style elaborate on this metaphor. The song contains strong elements of bebop and funk. Bebop, a style of jazz considered “a product of a 1940s African American social, cultural, and intellectual milieu,” was well established by the 1954 timeframe of “Tightrope.” Bebop’s cultural history is particularly relevant as it “spoke to observers of social and cultural resistance” (Porter 56). Likewise, the funk influence connects the song directly to James Brown (also influential in the dance and costuming) and George Clinton, who created a significant body of Afrofuturist music. The song also features a rap interlude by Big Boi. These musical influences underpin the message of liberation and rebellion in the song while highlighting its musical lineage.

“Tightrope” takes place during Janelle’s imprisonment in Palace of the Dogs Asylum. The letter by Max Stelling, Vice Chancellor of “The Palace of the Dogs Arts Asylum,” included with the liner notes for *The ArchAndroid* provides further background

for this setting. Palace of the Dogs is described as “a state-of-the-art federal facility for mutants, lost geniuses and savants” and Janelle Monáe as “Palace of the Dogs Patient #57281.” Stellings also writes, “I am convinced now that 1954 is not just a year -- it is an army...that the Palace of the Dogs is haunted and has been for many years...and that many things in the ‘real world’ around us are not what they seem.” This provides some context for the emphasis on illusion and magic within the video itself. The asylum serves as a physical representation the accusations of idiosyncrasy or instability sometimes associated with the elaborate fictions of Afrofuturist artists such as Sun Ra and George Clinton. These “metaphorical tropes of eccentricity or madness” exaggerate the “alien marginalization of the black community while simultaneously providing an empowering narrative of creative self-determination” (McLeod 344). That the inhabitants of this particular asylum are later revealed as artists capable of practicing magic only highlights the connection between the setting and context of this song and sometimes ambiguous social distinction between artistic vision and mental instability.

Monáe’s rapid singing, steady beat of the song, and her tendency to maintain a single note through several lines create the impression that she is moving forward on a single straight line. Her voice is also digitally modified and layered to provide the backing vocals. This layering of her voice into a unified chorus appears throughout the album, presumably as a reiteration of the mythology that Cindi exists as one of an entire race of identical beings. By digitally rendering her voice, Monáe joins the growing number of “musicians us[ing] the increasingly prevalent technological ventriloquism of these posthuman voices to chart the convulsions at the boundaries of race, gender and the human” (Weheliye 101). Her main vocals are left primarily untouched, perhaps as a way

of separating Janelle from an indistinct, mechanical crowd. However, we can still distinguish that it as her voice, a literal manifestation of the multiple iterations of self.

Though the video begins with a title card indicating the setting, the song itself begins with the words, “Whoaaa/ Another day/ I take your pain away.” Given that these words appear over an outside view of the asylum of the video, the viewer can make a clear correlation between the medicating nature of the asylum and the removal of pain. In this context, she is speaking for the asylum. The inclusion of “another day” may mean that this act is merely associated with each day at the asylum and this day, like every other, is focused on the psychiatric treatment of pain.

In fact, though the setting of the film fits well within the mythology of the work, this song can easily be interpreted as Monáe confronting the challenges of operating as a young black artist in popular music. She must walk a tightrope of fame and criticism as her musical ability, public persona, and physical appearance are continually commented upon. Though Monáe’s music is well-received, she is still beholden to the expectations of others. This discussion of the effects of fame is carried out in the first verse of the song. The lines “Some people talk about ya/ Like they know all about ya/ When you get down they doubt ya” can be clearly read as a description of the public discussion of her and her work. But it, like the previous line, also works as a commentary on the asylum itself thereby conflating the music industry with a confining, repressive institution. Of course, it may also refer to dancing or performing as in “to get down.” This latter meaning connects to the next lines of the song: “And when you tippin on the scene/ Yeah they talkin' bout it/ Cause they can't tip all on the scene with ya.” The implication that certain criticism is borne from jealousy can enrich our reading of the interaction between

the asylum officials and the inmate dancers. While every patient within the asylum is seen dancing or singing, the mirror guards and the nurse do not. The guards move or glide without any stylized motion and when the nurse mimics the dancers, her movements are clumsy and ill-timed. The artist possesses something distinct and inimitable. Art achieves the level of magic within this context. Outsiders may attempt to denigrate or repress these abilities in order exert control over them.

The lyrics are very clear about how to move across a tightrope. She forces the viewer/listener to take note of her movements saying, “See, I’m not walking on it/or tryin’ to run around it.” One cannot move casually across it or attempt to escape it; there must be a constant, controlled awareness of movement. She is “tipping” on the tightrope and continually in danger of falling over the edge. The song further clarifies that, “This ain't no acrobatics/ You either follow or you lead.” Indeed, there is limited room for artistry or self-expression and there is always a specific power dynamic. Every tightrope walker has a distinct, immovable place within the hierarchy, either in the dominant role as leader or more submissive role as follower. These distinctions have little meaning on a tightrope as there is only one possible path and the walkers can do nothing to change direction or control the other walkers without disturbing their own balance. The tightrope is essentially static. The only goal for a walker can be to continue to move forward as safely and efficiently as possible.

The singer addresses the audience directly by stating simply, “I’m talkin’ ‘bout you.” The next few lines make the greater societal implication of the song particularly clear. She states, “I’ll keep on blaming the machine, yeah/ I’m talkin’ bout it T-t-t-talkin’ bout it/ I can’t complain about it/ I gotta keep my balance/ And just keep dancin on it.”

This marks a small shift in the tenor of the lyrics as Janelle/Monáe claims they are an exposition rather than a protest. The song is meant as a warning and a guide, not a complaint. But it is clear that this is done not because the tightrope is just or fair, but because no one walking the tightrope has any time or energy to complain about her predicament. She must focus on the task at hand. However, it is possible to achieve the task with style, “like a star on the screen.” The further implication here is that the walker is being watched and reviewed continuously -- linking the song back to fame and artistry and adding to the metafictional elements of the work. She is also taking the only additional action she can: to talk about where she is and what she is doing. The walker may not be able redirect or escape the tightrope, but there is nothing to stop her from being vocal about it, not as a fruitless complaint but as a guide to the other walkers.

“The machine” in the lyrics is most likely the workings of society that traps/incorporates the individual. The machine is not a specific person but the entire underpinnings of society that have created the singer’s circumstances. Within the context of Monáe’s mythology there is another possible meaning. Cindi is literally a machine who is condemned as a danger to her society. Janelle may be *satirically* advising her listeners to just keep focusing on their tightrope without expending energy on enacting change. She facetiously advises them to merely seek out a scapegoat for their troubles. The tightrope becomes a metaphor for a myopic view of society. Individuals become so focused on their own circumstances that they resign themselves to the status quo. This tension between technology and nature is another integral part of the tightrope metaphor. The reference to Janelle’s cyborg double and the juxtaposition between Janelle and the robot choir “generates meaning by exploring and destabilizing the borders

between authentic human presence and the technological” (Auner 100). Blame becomes meaningless if the machine represents the speaker, a marginalized other, and the whole of society. The rat-a-tat of the “t” sound of “tightrope” also resembles a mechanical repetition -- a typewriter, perhaps, or a machine gun. This breaks down the distinction between the natural, physical experience of the tightrope walker and the artificial, mindless motions of a machine.

Big Boi’s interlude continues the major themes of the song but with dramatically different style and imagery. He raps very quickly with rolling momentum. Unlike the rest of the song, his lyrics are contain specific, contemporary references and allusions. His basic sentiment, however, is the same. He raps, “You gotta keep your balance/ Or you fall into the gap/ It's a challenge but I manage/ ‘Cause I'm cautious with the strap.” There is a darker feel to this section of the song. It’s the first description of what happens if you fail to remain on the tightrope. You enter into a “gap” where you are removed from the scene entirely. He also attributes his own success to his careful negotiation of violence. The “strap” here likely refers to a gun, though it may also refer to a belt, both potential weapons. The strap can also be read as a description of the tightrope line, but the connotations of violence are clear and carried through to the next line: “Doing damage to your canvas that a doctor cannot patch/ See why you don't want no friction/ Like the back of a matchbook.” The word “canvas” refers to the physical body. Monáe herself uses her body as a literal canvas, creating multiple characters with the same physical shape.

The images within the interlude are those of bourgeois popular culture. He refers to “clothes shows” and “your MacBook,” and he compares the rise and fall of personal fame to “the Dow Jones and NASDAQ.” While the rest of the video and song are

dominated with retro imagery, timeless metaphor, and allusions to Monáe's futuristic mythology, Big Boi's interlude is almost comically banal. But it is typical of Big Boi's unpretentious, inventive rhyme schemes and canny social commentary. His lyrics are very much of the moment and focused on the material. He combines consumerism, technological fixation, sexuality, and economic turmoil within his brief verse. Big Boi's lyrics are fiercely and crassly sexual and capitalistic; he forces an awareness of the lack of moderation or deeper meaning in these images. In the stark atmosphere of the mental asylum, surrounded by an impeccably dressed crowd of men and women, the images of "thongs in ass crack[s]," computers, stocks, and high fashion seem absurdly indulgent and insipid.

As though energized by Big Boi, Monáe's next verse is bolder and more confrontational than before. She begins, "I tip on alligators and little rattle snakes/ But I'm another flavor/ Something like a terminator." This is the only direct science fiction allusion in the track. It alludes to the 1984 science fiction action film *The Terminator*, starring Arnold Schwarzenegger. The image of the cyborg is a central one for Monáe as an artist. Hyper-masculine cyborgs such as the Terminator represent an "endeavor to resuscitate the image of white masculine power at a time when invisible technologies [...] are starting to render it irrelevant" (Shaviro 170). Rather than present herself in opposition to this image, Monáe co-opts it. She claims for herself the power of the superhuman cyborg, rendering its agenda for white male power essentially irrelevant. As Robin James writes, *the* "robo-diva [...] operates, as much as possible, outside both white patriarchy's misogynist, racist nature/culture hierarchies and their gyno- and Afro-centric inversions" (James 419). Monáe triumphs over the alligators and rattlesnakes,

both animals associated with American voodoo, by allying herself with something highly advanced, technical, non-feminine, and powerful.

In the next verse, she sings, “Some callin' me a sinner/ Some callin' me a winner/ I'm callin' you to dinner.” Here, Monáe confronts the virgin/whore dichotomy and abandons it as irrelevant to what she is trying to do. Though some may denigrate and others may praise her, she is going to ignore both of these labels and focus on the personal details of her life. She moves from describing the predicament of the tightrope to focusing on her own strength and independence. The song continues: “And you know exactly what I mean/ Yeah I'm talkin' bout you/ You can rock or you can leave/ Watch me tip without you.” These lyrics are again addressed directly to the audience but with some hostility. Monáe the artist invites her listeners to participate in what she is doing or allow her to function without them. The somewhat paradoxical “Watch me tip without you” implies that her success is not dependent on universal validation. Personal strength becomes the focus here. The idea that she can embody contradiction (the primary function of her work) is substantiated by the contradictory perceptions of her audience. She is able to represent both a success and a failure, a role model and a “sinner.”

The music and lyrics of “Tightrope” highlight elements of its central metaphor. The singer must continually negotiate a series of seemingly-contradictory expectations. The ambiguous sexuality of the lyrics contributes to her atypical performance of gender later highlighted in her use of dance and costuming. She confronts the questions and expectations of fame and the continually negotiation of identity. If the characters of Cindi and Janelle allegorically represent the multiplicity of self than “Tightrope” states outright

the impossibility of maintaining a comfortable, stable self within a society that continually forces its subjects into the precarious balance of a negotiated subjectivity.

## Chapter 4: The Dance of “Tightrope”

The video inserts a new emphasis on dance into the mythology of Monáe’s work; it opens with an expository title card with the text:

### 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

We are told that both dancing and magic have “long” been outlawed within the institution in an attempt to suppress any potential rebellion. Thus, these forces are set up in direct opposition to forms of institutionalized power, a form of agency for the asylum’s residents. The video visually represents the way in which the “black body in America has long been legislated and controlled by political systems both legal and customary,” represented here by the asylum. But “[t]he dancing black body, responding to and provoking the drumbeat, acts performatively against the common American law of black abjection” (DeFrantz 71). Here, oppressive systems are represented through asylum, the guards with mirror faces, and the nurse pushing a cart of medication. The power of each of these elements is called into question, however. The walls of the asylum are permeable, the guards merely reflect their external world, and the nurse has no power of her own. Perception and reality is, in fact, played with throughout the film. Here, we see a literally blurring of the lines between magic and reality, sanity and insanity, science and voodoo, and male and female.

The pace and energy of the video builds as it progresses. We first see two men in tuxedos sitting inside the asylum, one is reading a book and the other is tossing a ball into

the air and catching it. On his second toss, the ball does not fall back down -- it remains suspended in the air, spinning. The other man turns away from his book (revealed to be *Grass: The Yearbook of Agriculture 1948*) and they both watch the spinning ball as the camera cuts away. We are shown a nurse pushing a cart of red and blue pills down the hallway in front of the two cloaked, mirror-faced guards. Janelle/Monáe peers from her room in apparent paranoia. She begins singing directly to the camera before moving to the mirror in her room in the asylum, swaying and snapping her fingers. The inclusion of the mirror here is a continuation of the prevalent “doubling” theme. Monáe is in one of her mirror worlds in which our history is blended with her own fictional mythology. (The mirror imagery literally moves through the film in the form of the mirror guards). The allusions to other African-American musicians contained throughout the room further emphasize this point. There are two portraits on her wall, briefly shown: one a woodcut print of a trumpet player (possibly Louis Armstrong) and the other a performer in a black and white checkered coat. In the vase on the table by her bed is a large magnolia flower, the signature flower of singer Billie Holiday. There is both an antique typewriter, radio and, phonograph in the room. Monáe is dressed in her typical tailored tuxedo. The inclusion of these outdated music players may be a nod to the virtuality of recorded music, even within its earliest forms.

As Janelle/Monáe moves from her room into the hallway, her movements become more stylized and energetic. She is joined by other inmates in a choreographed dance. Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of the video’s dance is the way in which it mimics the act of walking on a tightrope. In the most repeated move in the video, a dancer (such as Monáe herself) ducks down as she raises her arms and then rises up as her arms are

lowered (as though working to maintain her balance) in a fluid extension and flexion. This move is repeated during each chorus with the line “Whether you’re high or low, you got to tip on the tightrope” and is generally followed by the dancer’s arms slightly raised as the focus shifts to the footwork, which further mimics the tipping of a tightrope-walker as the group moves further down the hallway.

The video blends elements from many types of dance, most notably early 20th century American vernacular dance such as the Black Bottom, Tranky Doo, Camel Walk, Shim Sham, and Charleston. By incorporating these elements, the “Tightrope” dance calls out to this cultural history. Its inclusion of the Charleston, for example, that “continuing appeal” has been ascribed to the “outgoing exuberance of its gestures, a kind of kicking over the traces,” may reiterate the message of rebellion and liberation (Stearns 112). The different dance influences are especially apparent when the hallway dancers enter a much larger space, probably a recreation room as the song transitions into Big Boi’s interlude and we see a wide variety of dancers and dance steps taking place. It should be noted that Big Boi is performing here under his own alter ego Sir Lucious Left Foot (made clear at the start of the video with the introduction of “ Monáe and Left Foot”). This is another element of the emphasis on naming that runs throughout the work. Though Big Boi/Left Foot does not incorporate much dance into his own performance, three women in black catsuits form a rhythmic chorus line next to him. Though they seem to mimic the formation and movement of a traditional backup trio, they do not actually contribute to the song. As he raps/sings without dancing, they sway/dance without singing. This represents a symbiotic relationship, of sorts, that

appears in other dances in the video. These symbioses indicate the importance of community and cooperation in the production of art.

For example, Big Boi/Left Foot's interlude is further intercut with two men dancing alongside each other, clearly reacting to and cooperating with each others' dance steps without ever touching. This routine mimics early 20th century African-American male dance duos such as the Nicholas Brothers or Al Minns and Leon James. This "call and response mode of performance embraces an inclusionary aesthetic of creativity and invention" as well as the interconnectivity of an artistic community (DeFrantz 76). The duo incorporates more modern street dance and funk elements such as "popping" into the traditional tap roots. The focus shifts from them and the trio of women disperses as Big Boi/Left Foot's interlude ends. Janelle switches from supporting dancer back to main performer as she jumps onto a table. The energy of the video builds as she performs an elaborate form of the "Tightrope" chorus dance routine on the table top. The choreography has more in common with an elaborate, high energy vaudeville routine than an erotic table dance. This can be seen, in part, as a protest against the practice of objectification that occurs in many contemporary music videos; "[o]bjectifying Black women's bodies turns them into canvases that can be interchanged for a variety of purposes....African American men who star in music videos construct a certain version of manhood against the backdrop of objectified nameless, quasi-naked Black women who populate their stage" (Collins 129). Here, Big Boi and Monáe work in tandem or in a good-spirited rivalry -- each listens and watches as the other performs. Monáe is also dressed very similarly to Big Boi and the other male dancers. The only dancers not wearing tuxedos are the women in modest and modern-dance-inspired body suits. The

typical visual distinction between male and female artists is not present here. Both men and women take on primary and supporting roles within the video. The women's tuxedos are tailored and styled to their bodies but are not dramatically different or less modest than those of their male counterparts.

The dancers' costuming further emphasizes the retro feel of the dances. Monáe's mythology place the events of the video in 1954, and the run-down asylum, classic tuxedos, and the antiquated technology in Janelle's room contributes to a retro ambiance. In fact, there are so few colors in the video with its drab interiors, black and white costumes, and sepia-toned landscape that the video somewhat resembles a monochrome film. However, the costuming also alludes to other performers who incorporated variations of classic looks into their performances. The tuxedo was the uniform of vaudeville; this association works with the video's dance roots. The tuxedo, like the dances of the video, is continually reinterpreted and reused thus creating a visual awareness of cultural lineage. Two more recent influences here are James Brown and Michael Jackson. Janelle's dancing, in particular, heavily references James Brown (particularly his famous variation of the Camel Walk). The video's performers would also not look out of place in *James Brown's Revue* that required performers to wear tuxedos long after more casual styles were prevalent amongst musicians.

Likewise, Michael Jackson frequently performed in highly stylized tuxedos and updated classic dance steps to great effect. The most famous example of this is his signature Moonwalk, essentially the dance move "the backslide" that can be dated to dance routines decades before Jackson employed it (Glentzer). What is important here, besides the connection to Jackson, is the emphasis on illusion on many of "Tightrope"'s

dances. The choreography furthers the narrative of the underlying mythology by creating a visual link between dancing and magic. This is first indicated by the gravity-defying ball early in the video. The government handbook on grass is a conflation of government control and communal coding for controlled substances. The variations on popping used in the video such as the backslide and the robot/mannequin allow dancers to create visual illusions with their bodies. Many of the dancers employ steps that allow them to appear to defy gravity or to affect those around them without touching them. The robot/mannequin dance, in particular, plays well into the overall themes of the video. This move is also associated with Michael Jackson (in the Jackson 5's "Dancing Machine"), but it also alludes to the cyborg/robot imagery in Monáe's overall work. Indeed, the science fiction themes in the video are fairly subtle when separated from the larger narrative. The stylized robotic dancing and the slightly mechanized voices of the backup vocals (apparently slightly sped up to sound alien/robotic) are the main components in the song and dance.

There are two points in the video when two of the dancers (neither of whom are Janelle) perform a highly stylized version of the marionette. One dancer performs the part of the puppeteer while the other responds as the puppet, responding to the puppeteer's guidance in jerky, marionette-like motions. This image also enacts a master/slave relationship between the two dancers that highlights the unequal distribution of power represented by the asylum. The dancers are inmates, acting out a forbidden impulse to dance, but they are ultimately controlled by the asylum guards. When the asylum nurse sees the dancing, she informs the guards. Soon after, Janelle's dancing reaches a frenzy and she literally dances through the walls of the asylum and ends up on a wooded path.

She stops dancing as she walks down the path, and she is being followed, slowly, by the mirror guards. She walks obediently back into the asylum through what appears to be a large rock face. Though the guards have succeeded in stopping her dancing, her obedience is enacted magically. As both magic and dancing are forbidden in the asylum, she is able to redirect her obedience into a form of resistance. Thus, both individual choreography and the dance itself extends beyond the world of the video into the deeper themes of Monáe's work -- historical repression and the potential for continuing and future enslavement.

The elements of illusion in the dance and its association with forbidden power intersect with the references to Haitian voodoo in the song and video. A few minutes before she bursts through the asylum walls, Janelle sings "now put some voodoo on it." Voodoo operates on two levels here. First, as slang for anything strange or inexplicable happening. Second, to completely bewitch an onlooker; both meanings are relevant here. Upon returning from the woods, she passes a figure in the hall who tips his hat to her. Wearing a red velvet tuxedo, stylized cravat, and top hat, his dress and behavior differ significantly from the other dancers. He appears to be the embodiment of Baron Samedi, a figure of death and resurrection in Haitian voodoo. Baron Samedi is also the name and persona of a James Bond villain, portrayed by Geoffrey Holder, an accomplished dancer and choreographer. The complexity of this allusion is typical of Monáe.

The allusions to Haitian voodoo emphasize the overall power of dance. Dance is incorporated heavily into voodoo rites as a form of communication and worship. Dance functions not merely as a supplement to speech or music but as its own revered form. This is further explored in the connection to Maya Deren. The image of the mirror guards

comes from Deren's short film "Meshes of the Afternoon." Deren is also renowned for her work documenting Haitian rituals, particularly their use of drumming and dance. This further complicates the allusion as it ties the work into the history of feminist, experimental film (a seeming deviation from a voodoo allusion). This serves Monáe's purpose of breaking down binary distinctions. Just as "the stereotyped vision of Afro-Caribbean voodoo stands in as a signifier of blackness, the robot stands as a similarly stable of whiteness" (Rollefson 87). Indeed, "it is the racialized tension between future and past, science and myth, robots and voodoo, that Afrofuturism its critical power" (Rollefson 87). These diverse themes intersect in this short film through the imagery, choreography, and narrative component. The elements of dance, illusion, and voodoo work within the structure of an asylum -- a symbol not only of repressive institutions but of the institution of science itself. The nurse (the only clear representative of medical science) moves clumsily in the film, leaning heavily on her cart of medications and awkwardly mimicking the actions of the dancers as she informs the guards. The guards themselves glide smoothly and uniformly, unimpeded by rhythm or artistry. The employment of the guards as agents of the state, themselves so clearly non-human, breaks down the distinction between magic and science and, perhaps, sanity and insanity.

The drumbeat and rhythm is crucial to the video, as it is elsewhere in Monáe's work. She frequently uses the supporting beat to contribute to the time element of her narrative. The often syncopated beat clearly slows and speeds up throughout the video and the dancers respond accordingly. Their movements slow *en masse* at certain points in the recreation room and different groups of dancers seem to move at slightly different speeds. Notably, the numerous clocks visible in the asylum are all set to different times.

The community of the asylum is created from many moving parts -- differing times, rhythms, and dances. This is fundamentally anti-essentialist imagery; even within the fairly homogenous group of the institution (tuxedoed, African-American dancers) supposedly unchangeable forces such as gravity and time cannot be taken for granted. Monáe participates in the tradition of African-American modern dance in which physical movement operates as cultural criticism. The body is used to comment upon preconceptions of that body. This recursion is key in African American dance performance, particularly notable in early performers such as Josephine Baker who incorporated elements of satire and humor into performances dominated by racist contemporary imagery (wildness, the jungle, and the “savage”). Baker redirected the dehumanizing gaze in small but significant ways. Her humor disrupted and subverted the attempt by her audience to reduce her completely to something sexual or animalistic. Likewise, Bill “Bojangles” Robinson<sup>1</sup> “led the way in breaking down a variety of economic and social barriers while creating a new and much larger public for vernacular dance” while being subjected to racist stereotypes (Stearns 149). Robinson was subject to highly restrictive roles on-screen, but he exercised greater artistic freedom on stage. In fact, the “stair dance” for which he became famous “broke with the convention of dancing along the narrow horizontal line of the stage to utilize the verticality of the stage space, thus elevating the dancer to occupy the center of the proscenium frame” (Hill 67). The visual impact of this, along with Robinson’s complexity as an artist, is generally lost within a film setting.

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<sup>1</sup> I’ve focused here on Baker and Robinson, but I recognize there are innumerable examples of black resistance through performance.

Perhaps the most relevant work to Monáe's is that of contemporary dancer and choreographer Bill T. Jones (who himself was influenced by Alvin Ailey, Martha Graham, and Jose Limon, among others) who creates large, multifaceted dance installations and complex narratives to examine or recode associations with different bodies. Jones' work demonstrates for us that "[a]s we move we change" (Martin, *Allegories*). Notions of selfhood in conjunction with physical embodiment can be literally demonstrated in the motions of dance. The dancer exerts physical control over his or her own body and demonstrates the power of the body to communicate in nonverbal ways. Without language (or with a minimum of language) the dancer and viewer are left to confront the body itself.

Jones himself uses performances that draw heavily from religion and ritual to convey the power that physical motions have in human culture. He brings in groups of dancers who differ greatly in age, race, size, and sexuality as part of an "effort to portray belonging [that] is at once a refusal to be partitioned into the singularizing identity categories of race, gender, sexuality, and HIV status by which he himself is so commonly referred" (Martin). Monáe's "Tightrope" approaches this from a different angle but with similar results. She takes a fairly homogenous group and places them within the highly restrictive and heavily symbolical setting of an insane asylum where dancing has been forbidden. Then, as the video progresses, each dancer's movements become increasingly energetic and idiosyncratic. The recreation room features numerous distinct dances working together as a large ensemble. She demonstrates the way in which each dancer rebels and performs both individually and communally.

The video concludes with the dancers still held inside of the asylum and their dancing has been stilled. It seems unlikely that the guards have achieved any permanent solution to their rebellion and, of course, Janelle's story continues past her imprisonment within the asylum. Jones stated in regards to his own work, "I think that that dissatisfaction was also determined by my need to find another way to live in this body and to answer to the social contract" (Speech at Tides Foundation). The "Tightrope" video portrays a dark, repressive side of that contract in which artists are imprisoned as a danger to their society. Their method of communicating and interacting within that environment requires them to continually break laws and act on the impulses that the governing body sees as dangerous. This cycle is essentially another element of the tightrope or the cold war metaphors of Monáe's work. The artist (or individual) is repressed and deals with that repression by continuing to be an artist. But there is also an element of chaos in the video, of the inexplicable. Dance is also magic, power, and illusion. Janelle's dance confines her to the asylum but also allows her to walk through its walls. The use of dance to tell a part of the narrative is a key element in the work's placement within Afrofuturism. While other cyberculture or science fiction works might idealize a future that holds "the body as passe" this is "a position available only to those privileged to think of their (white, male, straight, non-working class) bodies as the norm" (Vint 8). In the world of *The ArchAndroid*, the body is still a source of power and a site of institutional control.

Monáe's work relies heavily on the visual as well as the auditory; each component can be taken apart and examined but works within a much larger, moving narrative. This is mirrored in the video's dance in which many individual dances create a

large, connected whole. Seemingly disparate or opposing forces, such as science and magic, gravity and illusion, sanity and insanity, and the past, present, and future create a large, interwoven matrix in the video, thereby continuing and reiterating the fundamentally empowering and questioning nature of her work.

## Chapter 5: The Visuals of “Tightrope”

The visual setting and costuming of the “Tightrope” video work in tandem with its dance and musical elements. The asylum is a crucial element in the mythology of the work. The future is represented as a time of oppression and enslavement. Cindi is abused and persecuted. But the past is not a safe retreat. Janelle is institutionalized for her abilities and her differences. The asylum’s inhabitants, based on the description provided, are artists and intellectuals rather than the truly mentally ill. Given the references to vaudeville and early 20th century African-American performers, this visual image serves as a metaphor for the strictures imposed on these performers by white audiences. But this is not its only possible reading.

The image of the asylum is partly representative of institutional control. Foucault’s seminal work on the social construction of madness and the disciplinary role of the asylum, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, was published ten years after the year in which the video is set. While a modern American mental health facility might not be a particularly meaningful symbol of repression and abuse, an all-black institution from the 1950s certainly is. The asylum is specifically described as a “federal facility” and the government is later named in the letter as the American government. The presence and behavior of the guards in the asylum as well as the content of Stellings’ letter indicate that the inmates are held against their will. The artwork that Janelle produces within the asylum that supposedly comprises the album is framed within as a product of an oppressive system. She becomes the madwoman locked in an institutional attic.

Here, the work parallels the central premise of the landmark work, *The Madwoman in the Attic: the Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. The authors argued that Victorian writers created angelic female protagonists with monstrous “maddened” doubles (187). Here, Cindi is literally a superhuman angel, destined to save the world while Janelle, from whom she is exactly duplicated, is locked in an asylum in the distant past. But the distinctions between these characters break down. Both are essentially different portrayals of Monáe as an artist. The characters also work in tandem; their stories are inextricably linked and Janelle is both narrator and protagonist.

The asylum also provides a connection to the cathartic, healing power of dance and music. The inmates are prevented from expressing themselves for the protection of the state. Artistic ability is treated as madness or illness and the patients have no control over decisions governing their bodies or their treatments. The nurse illustrates institutional control. Her retro nurse’s white dress and hat recall Nurse Ratched of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. This film’s dark exploration of the exploitative nature of mental institutions and the blurry distinction between sanity and disorder add to the themes of the video. The nurse pushes a cart of brightly colored pills. The pills are half red and half blue with a thin white stripe down the center. The pills are red, white, and blue -- America is conflated with the institution and the medicalization and persecution of artistic expression. These colors bear a second allusion: the infamous blue pill/red pill dilemma of *The Matrix*. The blue pill represents a state of blissful ignorance -- to live a delusion in a horrific reality. The red pill represents a difficult truth -- to confront the reality at great personal cost. This scene overtly alludes to *Alice in Wonderland*

(significantly, the rabbit hole is the source of truth here while above ground is the delusion). The idea of choosing reality or delusion recurs in science fiction (*Total Recall* features a similar scene complete with a red pill). In the Palace of the Dogs the pills are half red, half blue. Here, there is no choice between reality and fantasy; you must accept both or neither. Monáe presents to us an altered reality with elements of fact and fiction. Something that can be literally impossible but “believable on an emotional level.” This clash of reality and fiction plays into “The Afrofuturist strategy” that “highlights the magical qualities of black authenticity by articulating it to the equally fantastic anti-authenticity of white science fiction and playing with the resulting ironies” (Rollefson). “Tightrope” represents a world of science fiction in which magic is viewed as dangerous and subversive, while the distinctions between the two are endlessly visually deconstructed.

Behind the nurse we can see the mirror guards -- two dark, hooded figures. These creatures are a direct homage to *Meshes of the Afternoon*, a 1943 short film by experimental filmmaker Maya Deren. Deren is important to the video. She believed in self-creation and gave herself the (highly symbolic) name Maya Deren. *Meshes of the Afternoon* focuses on a young woman (Deren herself) in a house by the ocean. There is sound but no dialogue in the film. It depicts the woman sleeping on a chair and, possibly in a dream, she sees and chases a large hooded figure with a mirror face. The video is inter-spliced with household objects (a telephone, a phonograph, a key, etc). Certain images are looped or repeated, and there seem to be multiples of the woman in the house. The mirror-face eludes her, and she is apparently trying to kill her own sleeping body

when a man enters the house. The camera shows a broken mirror on the shore. The man sees the woman on the chair, presumably dead.

This video contains several key parallels to *Tightrope*. The doubling of the woman is comparable to Janelle/Cindi. She is also essentially confined to the house during the film; it, like the asylum, serves as a glorified prison. There is also no clear distinction between reality and fantasy in the film; it explores the interior experience of the individual mind. John David Rhodes writes of *Meshes*, “[C]inema will matter because, in Deren’s medium-specific account of its power, it will, according to its nature -- and if it is manipulated with serious intention -- engage us in the mediation of the universal and the particular” (Rhodes 113). Likewise, the microcosm of the asylum and the sprawling mythology of the overall work each direct the viewer/listener back to a contemplation of deeper issues of freedom and selfhood.

Deren also manipulates the viewer’s perceptions of time and space by cutting and abruptly redirecting the camera movement. The soundtrack to the film was written by Teiji Ito who, Wendy Haslem writes, “makes *Meshes* appear like a music video before its time.” Rhythm is specifically important here:

The drumbeat is synchronized to movement and to the cut. When Deren takes one of her many short journeys along the path or up stairs, the sound of her steps is overlaid by Ito’s drumbeat metonymically standing in for and amplifying her movement. Inspired by Eisenstein’s notion of rhythmic montage, the editing and movement are accentuated by the rhythm of the soundtrack.

Monáe’s work shares this emphasis on rhythm. The synchopated beat of “*Tightrope*” influences the dance and dance is a focus of the narrative. It also shares a connection to

Haitian voodoo. Deren spent the latter part of her life in Haiti documenting voodoo rituals. Her work was incorporated in the documentary *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*. Voodoo is mentioned in the lyrics of “Tightrope” and alluded to with the appearance of Baron Samedi towards the end of the video. Both dance and drumming play a major role in voodoo rituals. Indeed, “Vodou life revolves around the dance” and “Vodou drumming provides fuel for the dance and guides participants in their movement” (Wilcken 194, 195). The style and art of voodoo are clear influences here and they speak to other issues within the work. Voodoo is associated with “blackness,” nature, mystery, and forbidden or dangerous knowledge. Here, it is conflated with dancing, which is forbidden for its association with magic and “subversive” practices. *The ArchAndroid* is about dealing with perception and reality, history and myth, fact and fiction; voodoo is a rich source for these issues.

The inclusion of Baron Samedi highlights an additional connection to voodoo -- costuming. Several figures in Haitian voodoo are depicted in tuxedos, including Samedi. But the choice of costume is more complex. Monáe typically performs in a stylized tuxedo or finely tailored suit. In an interview with *New York Magazine*, Monáe described her tuxedo as her performing uniform and a tribute to her “mother, who was a janitor, and [her] father, who drove trash trucks. It pays homage to how they put on a uniform every day and turned something into nothing” (Milzoff). This constructs the tuxedo, typically a symbol of affluence, as a working class homage. It is also a throwback to a time when tuxedos were the typical costume of entertainers.

Of course, tuxedos have never been a common costume for female entertainers. Certain 20th century female icons are associated with it -- perhaps most famously

Marlene Dietrich, but Josephine Baker and Katherine Hepburn also wore them. Cross-dressing has a particular significance in the African American community. In Marjorie Garber's *Black and White TV*, she points out that for black men, transvestism has long been associated with minstrelsy, oppression, and degradation (280). However, there is a clear double-standard in this regard. While men in women's clothing is broadly seen as degrading or deviant, women in men's clothing is often interpreted as rebellious and bold. Men's elevated status in a patriarchal society makes their association with femininity a degradation; when women dress as men they aspire to greater power and freedom. Monáe's work does relatively little to examine issues of masculinity or male sexuality; it is very much focused on the stories of its female protagonists. Men are only mentioned incidentally or to further the story (the off-screen love interest Anthony Greendown, for example). But a woman in a tuxedo is still a strong statement. Garber points out that escaping slave women often dressed as men, which furthers the association between transvestitism and female freedom. Cindi, also depicted in a tuxedo, is literally an escaping slave in the story, and both women use performance and illusion in order to maintain agency.

Performance is often key to survival. For escaping slaves, "[c]ross dressing was a necessity, not a pleasure, and though it called for improvisation, it was not in itself 'liberating' for a women in disguise" (Garber 284). Male costume created an important illusion, but it also highlighted the fundamental disenfranchisement of the female body. It was also merely another component of an existence that required constant awareness of social patterns and a performance of correct behavior. Indeed, "[t]ransvetism, deployed strategically as disguise, uncovers as it covers, reveals the masquerade that is already in

place” (282). Monáe’s narrative may be female-focused, but there is a clear emphasis on androgyny in both the content of her work and its visual style. Cindi is, after all, a cyborg, not a woman and while her romance to a wealthy man may seem prosaic, her sexuality is considered deviant within her society. Monáe herself told *Rolling Stone* that she “only date[s] androids” (Hoard). Her style and sexuality distinguished not so much by masculinity but by sheer oddity. Of course, her style would be rather unremarkable on a male musician. Her typical pompadour hairstyle is essentially Little Richard’s with a little Bette Davis thrown in. Her suits and saddle shoes are tailored update on those of Chuck Berry and James Brown. But the consistency and conviction with which she as an artist embodies this style avoids accusations of gimmicky costuming.

Monáe maintains this style in *Tightrope*. It is also the costume of nearly every other dancer/inmate. This shared style creates a visual sense of community in the asylum. The nurse’s costume is bulky and unflattering and she wears thick glasses with translucent plastic frames. She is dressed in all white. The mirror guards are in all black. Thus, the black and white tuxedo visually bridges the representative of medicalization and institutionalization with the more mystical symbols of an unknowable repressive force. Again, this is truth vs. fiction, reality vs. perception. The mirror guards seem to wield the most power here as the nurse goes to them to inform on the dancers. But the key to their power seems to lie in the image of the mirror. When Janelle dances through the walls of the asylum, she finds herself in a natural setting at twilight. She looks around her in wonder and the sun breaks through the trees of a wood. The mirror guards appear behind her and she walks demurely into a rock, back through the walls of the asylum, through the hallways (past Baron Samedi), and into her room. The mirrored faces may be

read as Janelle's own ultimate deference to the laws of the institution -- she does not resist or flee. Or she may know that resistance is futile in this situation; the guards are symbols of a much larger repressive system. This relates to another visual element of the video: grass. Early in the video we see an inmate reading *Grass: The Yearbook of Agriculture 1948*. Grass has multiple connotations. Perhaps the most obvious is to marijuana, heavily associated with counter-culture and personal freedoms. But grass can also grow in unlikely and inhospitable places. It represents survival. Walt Whitman used these associations in *Leaves of Grass*. Grass was a symbol of unity and democracy as it grew throughout the country. He also took a seemingly simple, overlooked object and created images and associations that were complicated, forbidden, and often strange. Grass is an appropriate symbol for this asylum, filled with the downtrodden.

When Janelle returns to her room at the end of the video we see her type for a moment at her typewriter and then glance over a set of blueprints on her desk. The prints have "The Palace of the Dogs" handwritten in the lower left corner and we can see Janelle's room labeled just above it. There is also the word "NOTE" and then "Walls [unclear] finish [unclear] Were never completed. Not needed." The implication here may be that walls were simply ineffectual given the inhabitants apparent ability to walk through them. But it also implies that there is another force keeping the inmates there. In Max Stelling's letter he refers to the 1954 as "not just a year but an army." The issue is not that the inmates are physically barred from exiting the asylum. They are caught within a culturally repressive timeframe. This use of time travel alludes to the work of Octavia Butler (directly referenced in the Droid Commandments). In her novel *Kindred*, the protagonist is inexplicably sent back in time to assist her white, slaveholding

ancestor. White science fiction typically glorifies the adventure of time travel, but for the black characters in Butler's work it is akin to a death sentence. The connection between the African American protagonist and her white ancestor also directly links a moment in history to an individual's contemporary identity. History is not simply a collection of potential fictional settings; the fictional 1954 serves as a synecdoche of racial oppression and institutional corruption. However, this specific year also represents the possibility of change. This is the year of *Brown vs. the Board of Education* and the era of civil rights. The year may be an army, but an army in service to the ArchAndroid herself.

## Chapter 6: Call for Further Study

To believe in *The ArchAndroid* is to believe that ours is a society with a history of brutal oppression and the potential for future corruption and moral ruin. But it is also a belief in the power of art to strengthen a community, heal emotional wounds, and create something so inexplicably beautiful that it seems like magic. A belief in *The ArchAndroid* is a belief in the power of the Afrofuturist aesthetic to openly question what it means to be an acceptable body, an authentic artist, and a complete person.

Monáe walks the line, the tightrope, between innocuous entertainer and cultural agitator. She takes on the role of Janelle who repeatedly warns us about our impending doom. Janelle is Monáe's Cassandra figure. Her forebodings get her locked up. She is suspended in time and space within a mental asylum where her warnings are dismissed as the mad ramblings of a failed artist. The work confronts the fear of both artistic oppression and the mockery of a disbelieving audience. The character of Janelle allows Monáe to take on a persona with the ethos of an ageless time traveler with special insight into our future. To ignore her is unquestionably foolish; to ignore her is to give into prejudice about what kind of person she appears to be.

The album is a fiction -- farcical play of invented words and fantastical moments. But it is also deeply serious. Cindi is a slave of the future; her existence is a testament to the uneasy status of societal laws and civil rights. Her cyborg body creates a space in which Monáe can explore issues of femininity, sexuality, empowerment, and victimization outside of the normalizing cultural codes ascribed to a black, female, human body. This fiction is a physical manifestation of Donna Haraway's metaphoric image of the cyborg. As Haraway writes, "Liberation rests on the construction of the

consciousness, the imaginative apprehension, of oppression, and so of possibility.... This is a struggle over life and death, but the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion (Haraway 1). By presenting a personal story in an obviously imagined reality, Monáe highlights the blurred line between social history and personal narrative. She recreates her own body as something physically constructed by society to be used and controlled and then subverts that society's intent by allowing her alter ego to break laws, exceed physical limitations, and create radical social change. Her cyborg persona allows her to play with her physical form, adopting both highly feminine and extremely androgynous styles. Furthermore, the association with cyborg technology makes her an unknown quantity; she can no longer be subhuman as she is not human at all.

Artificial intelligence has always symbolized both possible destruction and possible redemption for mankind and Monáe exploits these associations. She uses her own physical form as the template for the cyborg race thereby demonstrating a woman's ability to break free from multiple images assigned to her form to create something new and forbidden. This is a particularly powerful component of Afrofuturist art as "the image of the black female robo-diva R&B singer deconstructs the good girl/bad girl and nature/technology hierarchies that white patriarchy has used to discount and devalue the voices and accomplishments of black female artists ( James 419). Cindi becomes dangerous to her society when she fails to follow their rules, a clear metaphor for the strictures imposed on artists today.

Monáe's work demonstrates connectivity. The music, lyrics, dance, and visuals of "Tightrope" work in tandem to produce its overall effect. We learn that art is power and

perception is subjective. We are also given clues to a rich cultural lineage within the music and dance. She draws from vaudeville, Haitian voodoo, mainstream and experimental film, and science fiction. Her musical allusions contain so many elements of 20th century American music that it becomes impossible to categorize her into a single musical genre. Her work is about defying limits -- the inmates of the asylum achieve impossible physical feats, Janelle walks through walls, Cindi travels through time. Likewise, the work itself defies categorization.

There is clearly a great deal more to be discovered in Monáe's work. Her explorations of genre and her use of transmedia and multiplatform storytelling and musical production to further her narrative give her work a extremely modern aspect. Likewise, her unusually rich use of allusion that includes popular culture, American folklore, Greek mythology, musical history, and science fiction demands further explication and analysis. Her use of technology and dance in constructing a subversively embodied identity place her within evolving paradigm of the Afrofuturist view of the body. *The ArchAndroid* opens up a space for us to explore and examine our own perceptions of time, the body, and selfhood.

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