RECALLING THE (AFRO)FUTURE: COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF SUBVERSIVE MEANINGS IN JANELLE MONÁE'S METROPOLIS-SUITES

> Everywhere, the "street" is considered the ground and guarantee of all reality, a compulsory logic explaining all Black Music, conveniently mishearing antisocial surrealism as social realism. Here sound is unglued from such obligations, until it eludes all social responsibility, thereby accentuating its unreality principle. (Eshun 1998: -4[1])

When we listen to music in a non-live setting, we do so via some form of audio reproduction technology. To most listeners, the significant part about the technology is not the technology itself but the data (music) it stores and reverberates into our ears (Sofia 2000). Most of these listeners have memories tied to their favourite songs (DeNora 2000) but if the music is at the centre of the history of a people, can the songs themselves be seen as a form of recollection? In this paper, I suggest that sound reproduction technology can be read as a storage of memories in the context of Black American popular music. I will turn my attention to the critical potential of Afrofuturist narratives in the field of memory-technology in order to focus on how collective memory is performed as Afrofuturist technology in Black American popular music, specifically in the music of Janelle Monáe. At play in the theoretical backdrop of this article are two key concepts: Signifyin(g) and collective memory, the first of which I will describe in simplified terms, while the latter warrants a more thorough discussion. After the introduction of those core concepts, I move onto a presentation of the narratives in Janelle Monae's music and its foundation in Afrofuturism. Finally, when reading two music videos, "Q.U.E.E.N." and "PrimeTime*",* I apply what Alexander Weheliye calls "thinking sound" in order to explicate how the lines between individual and collective memory can blur and evaporate. Thinking sound is "[the] interfacing [of] historically seemingly disparate texts in order to excavate their intensities (which only emerge in the process of juxtaposition and re-contextualization), much as DJs treat records in their mixes" (2005: 73).

"You can edit me, but the booty don't lie", Monáe raps on "Q.U.E.E.N." (Monáe 2013f: 5:40). Referenced in her statement is the centrality of bodied expression in Black American cultural history and the ways those expressions has historically been met with abject dismissal. The reason the booty "don't lie" is because the meanings conveyed through "the booty" persists despite the

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[1] In the introduction of Eshun 1998, he counts pages in reverse. What would usually be page 'i' is here page '-10', page 'ii' is '-9' and so forth.

dismissive "editing". It persists by means of Signifyin(g), a concept most notably investigated by Henry Louis Gates in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* from 1988. The term describes the long tradition of covert and subversive communication found in West African and Black American cultures. Signifyin(g) is an intracultural form of signification and interaction that exploits the gap between the denotative and figurative meanings of words, as well as the gap between signifier and signified, to transfer a meaning that purposefully circumvents people who are not members of a given culture. If you know the cultural codes, then you know, and if you do not, then you will be fooled or left confused and act accordingly. Put differently, dismissal does not latch on to Siginifyin(g) practices because the critiques levelled at, for instance, twerk or booty dance (such as allegations of objectification of women) fail to address the actual, that is, culturally coded, significance of such dances. Although Signifyin(g) is only mentioned sparingly throughout this article, the practice it describes lies as a theoretical undertow for this entire text. In Afrofuturist music, meaning is communicated from in between the signifier and the signified and from in between the denotative and the figurative meaning of words, which makes Signifyin(g) one of the genre's main modes of communication.

Collective memory is often understood as something other than a form of individual memory. Best described as a shared pool of information in the memories of members of a social group, the term has a long tradition within the study of cultural traumas, such as the Holocaust or chattel slavery. James E. Young prefers the term "collected memory", as "societies cannot remember in any other way than through their constituents' memories" (1993: xi). Other notable scholars such as historian Amos Funkenstein attest that groups or objects are unable to have memories—only individuals can remember (1989). Young and Funkenstein argue that collective memory should be seen as a sum of internal individual memories, while sociologist Maurice Halbwachs contends that "there is no point in seeking where memories are preserved in my brain or in some nook of my mind to which I alone have access: for they are recalled to me externally" (1992: 38). The argument against Halbwachs and the term "collective memory"—not the concept itself, but its status as actual memory—is that it frames the individual as "a sort of automaton, passively obeying the interiorized collective will" (Fentress and Wickham 1992: ix). Yet there is a significant difference between remembering and the isolative act that his critics call memory. Halbwachs writes, "it is not in memory but in the dream that the mind is most removed from society" (1992: 42), implying that the dreamer (the isolated rememberer) is unable to rely directly on the frameworks of collective memory, while individuals who are awake have the means to reconstruct memories from people and groups around them (Sutton 2012). In other words, the issue is

whether "memory" is an apt term for what critics see as a form of intracultural (historical) narrative.

I adopt my understanding of collective memory from Halbwachs by viewing memory as a matter of how minds work together in society and how their operations are structured by social arrangements. Since "it is in society that people normally acquire their memories [and it] is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories", the concept of collective memory goes beyond the traumas of slavery and centuries of oppression (Halbwachs 1992: 38).

By recognizing collective memory as more than just a sociological concept, Halbwachs' understanding of the term leads to a broader cultural or inscribed embodied memory in which "our modern devices for storing and retrieving information … all require that [bodies] do something that traps and holds information, long after the human organism has stopped informing" (Connerton 1989: 73). Put differently, memories are inscribed between bodies, and reproductive technologies allow these memories to be accessed and reinscribed to new bodies after the original body stops communicating.

Instead of applying memory theory directly, I engage with the music and the subject of memory from different angles to highlight the diversity and significance of recollection in Black American popular music. Memory theory thus serves as a theoretical framework that binds the technological, performative, and musicological approaches together. Rather than use memory theory to discuss whether a collective memory is a 'real' memory or not, I show that Black and Afrofuturist praxis disrupts, short circuits, and deforms the entire premise of the question. Looking through the prism of race, sound, and technology enables a reinterpretation of the term "collective memory" as actual memory within the discourse of Black American popular music.

LITERAL AND FIGURATIVE AFROFUTURIST NARRATIVES

Afrofuturism is difficult to pin down, as it exists in several forms—aesthetic movement, political framework and praxis, artistic frame of reference, and academic discourse—that all intersect and overlap. There are as many definitions as there are Afrofuturists, but common ground can be found. Ytasha Womack, author of *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*, broadly defines the term as "an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation" (2013: 9). In this context, I would describe it as an aesthetic that draws on science fiction, historical fiction, fantasy, magical realism, and Black mythological and folkloric traditions (e.g., Yoruban, Akan, Igbo, Mandé, Vodou/hoodoo, Dogon, and ancient Egyptian mythology) in order to renegotiate perceptions of past, present, and future and navigate these temporalities *simultaneously*. Put plainly, when Afrofuturists address the future, they also

address the past and present. Memory, as a concept, is thus upset because it is no longer necessarily tied to the past. This is the case with Janelle Monáe, although her focus is aimed more toward Black American history and less toward a mythological pre-American homeland.

Monáe presents Afrofuturist narratives in her five *Metropolis*-Suites, some of which I will analyse and interpret in this article. The stories are told mainly through three albums, *Metropolis: The Chase Suite* (2008a), *The ArchAndroid* (2010a), and *The Electric Lady* (2013c). Monáe claims that an evil group called the Great Divide, who uses time travel to oppress and hinder equality, sent her, who is part android, back to our present from the year 2719. With a strand of Monáe's DNA, the group's members create Cindi Mayweather in this future. Cindi is an android from the city of Metropolis who was built with a "rock-star proficiency package and a working soul" that made her a worldwide superstar (Monáe 2008b). However, Cindi falls in love with a human, Sir Anthony Greendown, an act punishable by death, as we are told on the track "March of the Wolfmasters": "You know the rules! She is now scheduled for immediate disassembly…. Fun rules today: No phasers. Only chainsaws and Electrodaggers!" (Monáe 2008a). Forced into exile, she founds an underground revolution to create equality for all. Cindi turns out to be the prophetic ArchAndroid whom—in a direct quote from Fritz Lang's 1927 science fiction film *Metropolis*—Monáe calls "the mediator between the mind and the hand, which is the heart" (quoted in Andrews 2010).

The double narrative of Cindi and Monáe[2] is told via several forms of media. Most of the story is presented through the sonic, visual, and lyrical elements of the music, but other elements of the narrative unfold through interviews, album liner notes, promo images, music videos, and posts on social media. When I write "narrative" in this article, I thus reference not only the actual plots but also the means by which they are told. I take the stance that the stories contained in Monáe's works should be understood as both literal and figurative statements. This demands some elaboration.

In the parts of Afrofuturism that I excavate, literal and figurative modes of inquiry are symbiotic. The critical potential of Afrofuturism would be severely weakened if one focused on only one of those aspects. For instance, if one understands Monáe's androids solely as being figures for the oppression of ethnic, racial, and sexual minorities and women, then it is just that: a metaphor. It is not *real*. There is a gap between the signifier (android) and signified (oppression) and

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[2] Note that there are other narrative layers in the story, such as that of present-day Monáe being an escaped inmate of the Palace of the Dogs Asylum, and the fact that most of the story is framed in letters from the asylum warden, Max Stellings. As Ytasha Womack notes, "her music's mythology has a mythology" (2013: 75)

the one cannot explain the other. Yet, if one understands Monáe's claim to androidhood solely as literal then the statement loses critical potential. She will be an android and nothing more. The robot will not be able to connect to the social issues that she wants to engage with.

However, when the two modes of questioning (literal and figurative) embrace one another they both become intensified. For instance, when Monáe claims to be an android one has to acknowledge a few things. First, Monáe is *Black* which means that the androidal ontology becomes embedded with Black history, culture, and existence. Second, because she is an android, Black history, culture, and existence becomes infused with the technology and thingliness of the android. In "Many Moons" androids are sold at an auction to the highest bidder. Such a perspective aligns well with the way in which Black subjects has been positioned as "western modernity's nonhuman other" (Weheliye 2014: 31). Building on political scientist C. B. MacPherson, Weheliye argues that Black Americans were always androidal and posthuman. MacPherson defines the liberal subject in Western Enlightenment tradition as "the proprietor of his own person, or capacities, owing nothing to society for them. . . . The human essence is freedom from the will of others, and freedom is the function of possession" (quoted in Weheliye 2002: 23). This relegates chattel slaves to somewhere outside "human essence", and thus implicitly conceptualizes them—and their descendants—as "nonhuman". In relation to the Enlightenment tradition and its heritage, then, the chattel slave is in closer proximity to a contemporary harvesting vehicle than to the farmer operating said machine, but such an insight requires a both literal and figurative line of inquiry into the relationship between Blackness and the android. The androids in "Many Moons" are thus not just robots and chattel slaves in the coffles are not just human slaves. Robots are auctioned off like slaves, and slaves are sold off like robots, i.e., things. Put simply, Afrofuturism allows one to perceive Black Americans as the most literal iterations of the nonhuman, because they were never allowed into the human category to begin with.

These insights result in a renegotiation between what is considered "real" and what is considered "fiction". Afrofuturist scholar Tobias van Veen designates the negotiation between literal and figurative as the epistemological condition of Afrofuturism: "Afrofuturism itself arises from a set of historical conditions—the trauma of slavery…., but also through a shared set of non-Western belief systems and occult beliefs—that question the supposed impermeability between reality and fiction, *precisely from* [a perspective of] *irreal conditions*" (van Veen 2013: 13, original italics). Being an android or a nonhuman is "irreal". Nevertheless that is categorical reality for the chattel slave as he or she does not belong to the category "human". As such, the real becomes fictional or "irreal", but the fictional also becomes real. The negotiations between reality and fiction ingrained in the

relationship between literal and figurative provokes questions about who writes history and what counts as facts. An Afrofuturist line of questioning allows a positionality *exterior* to history, because history itself is a real fiction/fictional reality; a narrative written by someone which produce a supposed objective "reality". As Professor Griff of Public Enemy states on "Countdown to Armageddon": "Peace! Armageddon, it been in effect, go get a late pass" (Public Enemy 1988). Referenced is the fact that for Black Americans, the apocalypse happened a long time ago with Middle Passage. Everything after 1619 is a post-apocalypse. Post-apocalyptic literature, movies, and TV series are way off in their imagining the end of the world as a future event. In the words of Afrofuturist jazz innovator and philosopher Sun Ra: "It's after the end of the world, don't you know that yet?" (Coney 1974: 00:00:08-00:00:30). Afrofuturism thus provokes a reconfiguration of history where new perspectives are enabled.

Eshun would call Monáe's music *sonic fiction*, which is a way to explore narratives and histories by de-theorizing sonic media. He writes, "Like a headmaster, theory teaches today's music a thing or 2 about life. It subdues music's ambition, reins it in, restores it to its proper place, reconciles it to its naturally belated fate" (Eshun 1998: -4). Here, music being "[restored] to its proper place" refers to signification, that is, to music as carrier of stable meanings, e.g. statements akin to "these notes means this thing and nothing else". The de-theorization of sound mentioned by Eshun, which is really an argument for the multiplicity of possible meanings in music, is similar to an argument made by Weheliye. Weheliye argues that interpretation of sound historically has been treated as signification, which "does not offer much in the way of theorizing the endemic difference between reading the score or listening to a recording" (2005: 36). Put differently, music—especially black music—is also something other than language and should be interpreted as such. Therefore, I suggest an interpretation of Afrofuturist music that perceives its narratives as an oscillation between the literal and figurative aspects of Afrofuturism. When Monáe states that she has been sent back from the future and has a superstar android clone in that future, one must interpret all sides of the statement. On the one hand, it can be seen as an autobiographical figure for life lived as a black woman in the United States; on the other, to de-theorize and reach the other side of Enlightenment tradition theory and really understand the depth of the figure, one must perceive this statement as literal truth. Put differently, interpreting Afrofuturist narratives should be done from a singular, equalized epistemological point of departure.

ROBOTIC PRESENTS

On April 13th, 2015, a man tweeted Monáe, "girl stop being so soulful and be sexy … tired of those dumbass suits … you fine but u too damn soulful man"

(Gorenstein 2015). The tweet objectifies black female bodies, framing them as commodities. The tweet becomes a complex statement because it is aimed at Janelle Monáe—a cyborg, an android, a time traveller, a Black woman. The message was delivered in a cyberspace; a technological space where the body—the entire basis of the stereotype—is cut off from the rationality of the mind.

This separation of rationality and embodiment mirrors what Lindon Barrett calls the "signing voice" and the "singing voice", "where the former represents the literacy of the white Enlightenment subject" and traditional structuralist signification "and the latter metonymically enacts blackness, embodiment, and subhumanity" (Weheliye 2005: 37). By not only having a body but by being a body, black subjectivity appears as the antithesis to the Enlightenment subject. The flinging of bodied stereotypes toward Black women in a disembodied cyberspace reproduces the supposed dichotomy between signing- and singing voices. It enacts Monáe's blackness as "embodiment and subhumanity" within a disembodied 'rationalised' space and bars her from "the literacy of the white Enlightenment subject".

To the tweet, she responded, "sit down. I'm not for male consumption", thus refusing to be commodified (Gorenstein 2015). By telling him off, Monáe reminds him of the history of oppression and exclusion faced by Black woman, while claiming her body as exclusively her own; it does not belong to her builders/objectifiers. The tweet aimed at Monáe played on stereotypes of black women where they are framed as Jezebels (promiscuous, sexually voracious), Sapphires (domineering, "angry Black woman"), or wise but less physically attractive Soul Sisters. The "soulful" stereotype is often projected onto performers such as Nina Simone or Aretha Franklin in the way they are framed as asexual soothsayers, and the "sexy" stereotype is mapped onto performers who play with traditionally feminine physical traits such as Rihanna, Cardi B, or Donna Summer. Hortense Spillers refers to such stereotyping as "naming". She writes, "'Peaches' and 'Brown Sugar', 'Sapphire' and 'Earth Mother, 'Aunty', 'Granny', God's 'Holy Fool', a 'Miss Ebony First, or 'Black Woman at the Podium' […]. My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented" (1987: 65). Put differently, these stereotypes—these reductive representations of a Black woman—are not individual to Spillers, but rather made to represent all Black women in America. Therefore, the interpellation of Black women via such names constitutes a collective memory. By recalling a collective memory shared by Black American women—the memory of being "named"—she refuses to be what Fentress and Wickham called "a sort of automaton, passively obeying the interiorized collective will" in the beginning of this paper (1992: ix). This automaton claims agency. On Twitter, Monáe's name is "Janelle Monáe, Cindi" thus illustrating the connection between Cindi and Monáe. The reigning power structures and The Great Divide force(d) stereotypes on Black Americans and the

androids, and in her reply Monáe is telling them that they have to deal with the consequences of those actions, and that those old stereotypes belongs to the androids now to do with as they please.

Cindi is the living embodiment of the consequences the signing voice have for perceptions of Black American culture whose primary cultural signifier is the singing voice (Barett 1998: 59). She has been built, owned, and produced, but when she, by means of her singing voice, Signifies upon her makers who are constituents of the signing voice, she is punished severely. She is also punished for amplifying the fact that the two voices can be bridged. An android falling in love with a human and singing about it transcends the border between the two voices, precisely because it is an act of both signification and embodiment.

The notion of singing is especially important in Black American history because music was the primary way to insist on Black American humanity up until the latter half of the 20th century (Radano 2013; Cruz 1999). Only through music and sound, could Black Americans bring with them a humanness that whiteness could fetishize, commercialise, and stereotype, but not deny nor own (Radano 2013: 311).

This supposed dichotomy between signing and singing relates to the technological history of blackness. Mark Dery, the cultural critic who first coined the term *Afrofuturism* in 1993, writes:

> African Americans, in a very real sense, are the descendants of alien abductees; they 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; and technology is too often brought to bear on black bodies (branding, forced sterilization, the Tuskegee experiment, and tasers come readily to mind). (1994: 180)

By being abducted to foreign lands and later being forced into the notion of blackness—thus becoming the new alien—Black Americans were kept in a constant state of otherness by technological means. Monáe's figure of the android as an oppressed entity and Weheliye's nonhuman Black American are made perfectly clear by the word "robot", which derives from the Czech word "robotnik"[3] and means "forced labor", "corvée", or "slave". This leads to the implied, though never explicitly spoken, point of Weheliye and other Afrofuturist scholars: posthumanism is nothing new; it has been around ever since the first slaves were taken but was described only after technology began to affect *white* bodies with devices such as telephones, radios, and cameras. As such, the black body is always already a robot, an android.

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[3] First used in the play *R.U.R.* (*Rossum's Universal Robots*) by Karel Capek in 1921.

Monáe's android thus works as a figure for the oppressed in society, and she names it a *new other*. For her, androids are not an *if* but a *when*, as she makes clear in an interview with Okayplayer.com:

> Computers will have mapped out our brains, and basically be able to duplicate our senses; how we feel; how we speak, and I think that they're gonna be the new minority. . . . Androids will be the new black, the new gay, the new woman, and I've always wanted to be on the right side of history with androids, which is why I speak positively about them. (2014: 01:53–02:18)

Here, her android—and, by implication, her entire narrative—takes on a more literal form. Monáe presents her android as real, and if that statement is understood literally, then the android can no longer be considered to reside only in the realm of fiction; it has now migrated towards the territory of reality. This reality is a socially and historically constructed one, but one with real consequences. When she states "androids will be the new black," she is effectively equalizing the history of the category "Black" and the (future) history of the category "android". Being a character in her own narrative—one who is familiar with androids—she has a memory of these future events, the androids as subhuman. This is an inverse memory, meaning one of the future; it is a collective memory of a past as slaves being mirrored in the future android and vice versa.

When artists such as Michael Jackson "remember[s] the time" (from "Remember the Time," Jackson 1992), the sound of Afrofuturist memory constructs an equivalence between time travel and collective memory and frames it as something that is specifically Black precisely because of the clash between past and future narratives found in Afrofuturist music videos. Monáe's suppressed android and its figurative other (present-day Black folk) remember back and forth in time. Jackson's collective recollection of a mythological past—where his own future-ness grants him magical powers in the music video—mirrors Black American history and the ways in which racialized subjects have been forced into opposite temporalities simultaneously: that of the past and that of the future.

Monáe brings these aspects out of the narrative of the albums and into the real world. In a 2014 interview, the following interaction takes place between *The Guardian*'s Paul Lester and Monáe (Lester in italics):

> *You once said: "I'm part-android." Has that revelation haunted you?*
> No. It's true. I am part-android.
>
> *Really?*
> Absolutely.
>
> *In a metaphorical sense, you mean? In the sense that we are all wired up to some big theological or epistemological mainframe? Or in the literal sense that you're part-machine?*

> Oh yeah. I am rewarded with singularity. My mind works at an exponential rate.
>
> *But you don't have actual electrical cables running under your epidermis, do you?*
> I am the Electric Lady. Have you listened to my album, *The Electric Lady*?

Here, Monáe establishes herself as an actual android from her own narrative. Her answers take on a different meaning when considering the question posed to her just before the questions quoted above: "Are you the lovechild of David Bowie and Fritz Lang?" to which she replies, "The lovechild? My mother is a black woman from Kansas" (Lester 2014). This statement on its own is a wake-up call for the journalist trying to place Monáe in a white context. She follows up on this statement of having human origins by stubbornly claiming that she is part android and rewarded with singularity, embodying an oscillation between the human and the nonhuman and the way they intertwine. She proudly insists on her heritage as a Black American woman as she simultaneously enacts her origin—a collective, embodied memory—as a racialized subject from the future. The conclusion here should not be that Monáe is deluded or eccentric, but that to be both born and raised in the real world by real people while being an android is entirely possible, because androids exist—just look at Monáe.

SIGNIFYIN(G) GRAMOPHONES

> It's hard to stop rebels that time travel. But we on the Time Council pride ourselves on doing just that. Welcome to the Living Museum, where legendary rebels from throughout history have been frozen in suspended animation. Here in this particular exhibit, you will find members of Wondaland, and their notorious leader, Janelle Monáe, along with her dangerous accomplice Badoula Oblongata [Erykah Badu]. Together they launched Project Q.U.E.E.N., a musical weapons program in the twenty-first century. Researchers are still deciphering the nature of this program and hunting the various freedom-movements that Wondaland disguised as songs, emotion-pictures, and works of art. (Monáe 2013f: 00:00-00:52)

This speech by the announcer at the Living Museum opens the video to "Q.U.E.E.N.," Monáe's first single from *The Electric Lady* (2013c). During the speech, a passage from the second movement of Haydn's 1761-1765 Cello Concerto no. 1 in C (Hob. VIIb/1) is playing. This classical reference is complemented by a fly on Monáe's coffee cup and a skull on the gramophone—*vanitas* motifs that, like Haydn, are an integrated part of Western history and cultural tradition. Here Monáe and the rest of her Wondaland crew are the real *vanitas* motifs. The fly is on Monáe's cup, and the skull gramophone belongs to her (as seen in the "Electric Lady" music video [Monáe 2013b: 01:13]). Even before the song has begun, the video has identified it as a song of protest: the

vanitas-skull's pointy gold tooth, serving as the needle on the gramophone, literally inscribes rebellion against the vanity, arrogance, obliviousness, and oppressiveness of Western tradition into the disc.

To interpret the gramophone, I juxtapose Monáe's song and video with Adorno's 1934 essay "The Form of the Phonograph Record" [*Die Form der Schallplatte*]. In this essay, Adorno writes, "The phonograph record is an object of that 'daily need' which is the very antithesis of the humane and the artistic, since the latter cannot be repeated and turned on at will but remain tied to their place and time" (2002: 278). For Adorno, the gramophonic record can, in theory, be repeated an infinite amount of times and in an infinite amount of places[4]. It lies outside the realm of the human and of the arts, both of which are tied to a specific single event and place. Like a flash drive, the phonographic disc is a memory device. Adorno (2002) continues:

> There is no doubt that, as music is removed by the phonograph record from the realm of live production and from the imperative of artistic activity and becomes petrified, it absorbs into itself, in this process of petrification, the very life that would otherwise vanish.[5] (279)

When the record is put on in the video (Monáe 2013f: 00:47), Monáe awakens from her petrification; from the way she was "suspended in animation" as described in the intro to the video. Here the disc enacts precisely the opposite of Adorno's petrifying scenario: Instead of enacting a "process of petrification", the gramophone and the union between needle and disc *remove* or *reverse* the petrification-process. This is not 'art' in an Adornite sense; it is technological music. What is "suspended in animation" (cf. the introductory speech) or petrified by the phonograph, however, is Haydn, whose music stops the instant the gramophone begins to play. Haydn—here, serving as figure for Western Enlighenment tradition—has never had his identity and music technologically instrumentalised and externalised the way Black Americans have. Adorno posits, "The dead art rescues the ephemeral and perishing art as the only art alive" (2002: 278). Like the gramophone disc, Monáe is not connected to a single temporality or spatiality but exists in many at once because of her narratives, because of her status as both android and non-android, and because of her split personality

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[4] For the sake of the argument, I do not differentiate between the gramophonic disc and the digital file. While a disc or cylinder certainly loses fidelity over time, for Adorno, it was 'eternal' just like a digital file (in theory) is.

[5] It should be mentioned that Adorno does see the critical potential of the phonograph, although it is not relevant here. He continues, "The dead art rescues the ephemeral and perishing art as the only one alive. Therein may lie the phonograph record's most profound justification. … For this justification reestablishes … an age-old … relationship: that between music and *writing*" (2002: 279, original emphasis).

(narrative Monáe versus 'real' Monáe). Thus, Monáe's "dead art", her music, is revealed as the only art that is still alive because of its Signifyin(g) nature. It exists between levels of meanings and communicates via the gramophone because that object is also "suspended in animation" by both moving and not moving. Or perhaps it is, rather, suspend*ing* in animation as a result of being both descriptive and prescriptive: the former by simply fulfilling its function by playing music, thus petrifying Haydn, and the latter by animating the characters in the video, thus both petrifying and awaking simultaneously. As such, the object—the gramophone—is no longer just an object, as it gains agency in its critical potential for rebellion.

When the specific gramophone is seen in the "Electric Lady" video (which, plot-wise, takes place before "Q.U.E.E.N."), it establishes that moment as being important to the narrative. You can imagine the supplementing text for this artefact at the museum in "Q.U.E.E.N."—that it was vital for the rebel movement. This reveals the Signifyin(g) gramophone not just as memory-technology but also as being related to memory itself. The gramophone is a collective memory. Moreover, it is a time machine that gives physical form—sound waves—to these memories because it allows these events to be moved in space and time. However, it diverges from regular memory by not having a specific point of origin. A record has no single point of origin because a recording is made in many sessions and manipulated by technology; thus, the record's point of reference is the act of playing it, the memory of an origin, and its temporal displacement.

This type of recollection, the rootless memory, mirrors the history of Black Americans, whose roots were corroded by the institution of slavery; slavery, in turn, was reshaped into the new point of origin. Monáe replants these roots in (an) American (hi)story by means of technology. As Weheliye writes, "African American history is 'in the Mix,' and it appears as a groove that indexes both the indentations found on the surface of phonograph records and those somewhat more elusive grooves in the vernacular sense" (2005: 73).

THE SOUND OF ROBOTIC MEMORY

The song "PrimeTime" is, according to the liner notes, inspired by "Cindi's favourite memories at the Electric Sheep Nightclub" (Monáe 2013d). The video informs the viewer that it stars "Janelle Monáe as Cindi Mayweather" (Monáe 2013e). Monáe's claim of being part android melts the barrier between her and Cindi, thus rendering the interviewer's question ("but you don't have actual electric cables under your epidermis, do you?" [Lester 2014]) redundant because the *performer*—the *real* Monáe—is androidic in nature. What separates Cindi from other characters in popular music is that she is not an aspect of Monáe.

While she is based on Monáe's DNA, Monáe always refers to Cindi as her own person, with Monáe existing as a character in the narrative alongside Cindi.

I would like to use "PrimeTime" as an example of how robotic memory *sounds*: a relatively slow beat of 100 bpm with electronic drums, a present attack in the bass drum, and a clear delay-plugin on the very tight snare that lies on top of a four-chord progression (||: G$^\#$ | Fm | Cm^7 | D$^\#$:||). Everything is covered in reverb and delay, sonically mirroring the concept of recollection by means of sound waves copying themselves through time while decaying like memories. The amount of reverb and delay as well as the differences in vocal timbre in the chorus create cluster-like harmonies in the sonic background, where one sung phrase in the choir and groove echoes into the next. Some of the vocal tuning is slightly off and there are a sub-bass kick drum and relaxed mid-range synths, establishing a smooth but cluttered soundscape.

If this is the sound of robotic memory—which it is, according to the liner notes—it is surprisingly similar to cultural and historical perceptions of human memory as dreamlike, decaying, ethereal, and mystical. The stereotypical notions of a robotic voice are not present in Monáe's vocals. There are no obvious vocal effects other than reverb and delay, and the warm timbre and mellow rhythm of the melody are at a stage where it is impossible to distinguish robotic voices from real human voices. This opens up a radical, albeit familiar, potential narrative: not that androids and humans are equal to each other, as reflected by similar soundscapes, but that culture itself is both a possibility and a reality for the technological nonhuman entity. In this case, an Afrofuturist form of artificial intelligence (A.I.) is sonically able to "retain information and reconstruct past experiences, usually for present purposes [which] is one of the most important ways by which our histories animate our current actions and experiences" (Sutton 2012: 1).

While Sutton is not talking about A.I. or anything even remotely posthuman, the quote also applies to the gramophone discussed earlier, which both retained Monáe and gave agency to the entire song. This allows the sonic aspect of the memory (i.e., the sound of the particular song) to be seen as media interface, as technology, and as materiality before it is seen as human. The song acts as a sonic memory of an oppressed past that serves to connect other individuals who share in similar collective memories. In this way, robotic memory is the sonographic negative of a slave song. It is not the only way to prove humanity (cf. Radano), but it is a way to insist on something else.

Just like "Q.U.E.E.N.," the "PrimeTime" video opens with a key moment that forces an interpretation of the rest of the events on the screen and in the speakers. At the Electric Sheep Nightclub, Cindi programs a black gynoid (female android) dancer to twerk (the other choices are "ratchet", "motor booty", and "burlesque A/B") at 100 bpm and activates her by pressing a red button on the

gynoid's left temple. In other words, she accesses a digital memory storage device and makes the gynoid act out these the information provided by the data/recollections. The dance, the tempo, and the sonic and visual fluidity that govern the video form a collective memory that Monáe is able to access and enable but is unable to transform. This act embodies a rigid, primitive pre-singularity that determines how androids act.

The narrative in the video centres on Cindi, who is working as a waiter at the Electric Sheep Nightclub. She flirts with a male guest (played by Miguel), and they sing about getting out of their current situation. At around the 02:45 mark another patron puts his hand on Cindi's waist/hip-area with obvious sexual intent, to which she responds by slapping his hand away and chastising him. After her boss comes over to tell her to calm down, she quits on the spot.

The Electric Lady is a prequel album, and this song, as noted, contains Cindi's favourite memories. This is her rock star myth, her origin story. Cindi is the oppressed android who fought against the system and gained a voice by becoming a world-famous artist. As mentioned earlier, however, Cindi was built with a "rock-star proficiency package" (Monáe 2008b). Her memory of starting from the bottom and fighting her way to rock star status is part of her programming. The uniqueness of the rock star can easily be replicated and installed in other androids, thus encouraging or forcing a specific behavioural pattern, and rebellion is not achieved solely by "making it." Simply getting to the top was obviously the Great Divide's plan all along.

CONCLUSION: THE REINSTATEMENT OF COLLECTIVE MEMORY AS MEMORY

The notion of time travel within Black American culture is already linked to collective memory. For centuries, people have been forced into two different temporalities: that of the embodied, primal, noble, 'rhythmic,' and savage past on the one hand, and the science fiction nightmare of forced sterilisation, branding, and technological experiments on the other. The sound of this divide is Black American music, which is inherently tied to notions of humanity and nonhumanity.

In Monáe's works, each song is a memory because it is laid out in narratives, told by a time traveller, as though the events in the narrative have already taken place in the future. By constructing herself as a technological entity (part android), Monáe herself becomes a collective memory storage device, like the Signifyin(g) gramophone that kick-starts her soul in "Q.U.E.E.N." (Monáe 2013f). *All* of the videos from *The Electric Lady* have these storage devices at their outset: the gramophone in "Q.U.E.E.N.," the music that only begins after Cindi pushes Start on the gynoid in "PrimeTime" (2013e), the eight-track cartridge in "Electric Lady" (2013b), and the live concert in "Dance Apocalyptic"

(2013a). Although obvious, it is worth noting that this music—not just the videos—is an impossibility without a collective memory playback device such as a stereo or a computer. In the case of Monáe, Afrofuturist music thus has memory not just as a concept but also as a condition, as the music is the direct result of a playback by means of a collective memory device[6].

Cindi's whole notion of self and the root to her rebellious nature is conjured and exists only as a built-in memory, as seen and heard in "PrimeTime." That does not mean that her recollection is fictional or unreal, however. It is a memory in the sense that it is individual—as Funkenstein, Young, and Fentress and Wickham describe it—since Cindi *does* remember whether it actually happened or not. Nonetheless, the collective and embodied part is not erased just because the rock star proficiency package and working soul are installed within her body and are duplicable. If one accepts Cindi and the android as a figure for Black Americans, Monáe's *new other* steps in as an *androidized* subject constructed through a technological and sonic collective memory that blurs the reality/fiction divide. Through the scope of Afrofuturism and sonic fiction, collective memory is reinstated as *real* memory because it is individual to Cindi, and because Cindi the android should be taken literally. These collective memories both navigate and blur the different narratives and histories of Black American pasts, presents, and futures.

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[6] Many questions still need to be answered. For example, an examination of social media as a collective memory bank would greatly benefit Afrofuturist and popular music studies, as Afrofuturist music rarely only employs sonic technology, but integrates it with other media. Also helpful would be an investigation of how and if music works differently as a cultural memory device in diasporic cultures.

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