



The Science-Fictional Janelle Monáe

Cheryl Morgan

*I'm an alien from outer space (outer space)
I'm a cyber-girl without a face a heart or a mind
(A product of the man, I'm a product of the man)*

Ci ci ci

*I'm a savior without a race (without a face)
On the run cause they? hit our ways and chase my kind
They've come to destroy me*

“Violet Stars Happy Hunting!” from *Metropolis: The Chase Suite*,
Janelle Monáe, 2007

Science fiction and popular music have a long tradition together. That's hardly surprising because the rise of pop and humankind's first ventures into space occurred around the same time. My first memory of the connection is from 1962 when a London-based instrumental group called The Tornados hit #1 on both sides of the Atlantic with a tune called “Telstar”. It was named after a pioneering communications satellite launched by NASA earlier that year. I'm part of the generation that had their minds expanded by Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars. But while I, and arguably the space program, have got old, pop music is as vibrant as ever, and so is its interest in science fiction. No one exemplifies that better than Janelle Monáe.

Monáe first burst onto the scene in 2007 with *Metropolis: The Chase Suite*, an extended-play collection comprising five songs (seven on the Special Edition). *Metropolis* introduced Monáe's alter-ego, Cindi Mayweather, an android revolutionary from the future. Mayweather and Monáe have been with each other in various forms ever since.

The core narrative of Cindi's story is one of illicit love. In the first song on *Metropolis* we learn that she has fallen in love with a human man called Anthony Greendown and that, as a result, she has been “scheduled for immediate disassembly”. The precise nature of her relationships will develop over time as Monáe becomes more confident, and feels more able to be open

about her own sexuality, but in all cases whom she loves, and in some cases the mere fact that she loves, is contrary to rules imposed by an oppressive society. It is also clear in *Metropolis* that Cindi is a made thing, a construct that can be bought and sold. She is a slave, and this makes the severity of her transgressions far worse.

Metropolis was followed in 2010 by a full-blown concept album, *The ArchAndroid*. This expanded on the story of Cindi and Anthony, and their lives in the city of Metropolis. The two sides of the album are titled “Suite II” and “Suite III”, showing that they are intended to follow on directly from the earlier work that forms “Suite I”.

The cover art from *The ArchAndroid* very deliberately reflects the image of Maria, the android revolutionary from Fritz Lang’s famous film, also called *Metropolis*. There was even a plan for a graphic novel to accompany the album. That seems to have come to naught, but there is some amazing concept art online.

When Monáe released her next studio album, *The Electric Lady*, in 2013, there was some expectation that it too would continue the story of *Metropolis*. Certainly the two sides are titled “Suite IV” and “Suite V”. While it is just about possible to construct a coherent narrative involving all these albums¹, as well as 2017’s *Dirty Computer*, I think it is easier to see Monáe as rebooting Cindi’s story with each new release. There is no canon as such, just a set of themes that are continually re-explored.

The Electric Lady is also a concept album featuring Cindi Mayweather, but Anthony Greendown appears to have vanished from the story. Instead Cindi is part of a time-traveling group of revolutionaries called Wondaland (named after Monáe’s production company). Other members of the group include Badoula Oblongata, an alter-ego of Monáe’s friend and collaborator, Erykah Badu. The album also expands upon issues of sexuality, first hinted at in the track, “Mushrooms & Roses” from *The ArchAndroid*. Monáe has stated that the song title Q.U.E.E.N. is an acronym and that the Q stands for Queer².

The 2017 album, *Dirty Computer*, takes us away from Cindi altogether, reinventing Monáe as a human woman called Jane. That this is actually the same person is indicated by the fact that Jane’s personal ID in her totalitarian world is 57821, the same as the serial number of the android Cindi Mayweather.

The story of *Dirty Computer* is once again one of forbidden love. Jane is shown to be having relationships with both the male character, Ché, and the female character, Zen. It is her love for them that finally helps her break the mind control being forced upon her.

It is impossible to discuss Monáe’s music without taking into account the accompanying videos. This has been the case right from the start, where the video for “Many Moons” on *Metropolis* shows a depraved and decadent audience of rich people attending a droid auction. In it Monáe plays the roles of both Cindi and Lady Maestra, the “Master of the Show Droids”, who rides into the auction on a white horse wearing fox-hunting gear. Neither Maestra nor many of the other characters featured in the video (named in subtitles) feature in the song lyrics. The videos, therefore, provide additional worldbuilding for the stories told by the songs.

¹ I did so for a presentation at Åcon X. It required a fair amount of creativity.

² <https://www.fuse.tv/videos/2013/09/janelle-monae-queen-interview> accessed 22/Dec/2019

Monáe describes the song videos that she produces, which have played significant roles in all her album releases, as “emotion pictures”. The single “Tightrope” from *The ArchAndroid* features a video set in an asylum, called The Palace of the Dogs, where artists are sent to be re-programmed. The video for “Q.U.E.E.N.” from *The Electric Lady* is set in a museum full of captured time-travelling revolutionaries. Cindi and Badoula turn up and rescue them during the song.

For *Dirty Computer* Monáe produced a 46-minute narrative film that tells the story of the album. The part of Zen is taken by actress Tessa Thompson, with whom Monáe has been rumoured to have a relationship. The place of the asylum from *The ArchAndroid* is taken by a futuristic hospital called The House of the New Dawn in which deviants such as Jane, Zen and Ché have their brains reprogrammed.

So much for the story, but how does Monáe’s work stack up as science fiction? Is she breaking new ground, or just mining well-trodden tropes?

The first thing to note is the sheer brilliance of her output across a range of disciplines. Her music is extremely highly rated, but she also has a hand in the video production, and is a great dancer and an accomplished actress. She’s only 34, so we can probably look forward to another decade or two of ground-breaking music and film from her.

She certainly knows her science fiction well. Rooting her story in the tradition of Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* is evidence of a reverence for the history of the field. She’s also well versed in time-travel literature, as such themes are a key element of the Cindi Mayweather story. Indeed, I’m wondering whether the sudden fashion for time-war narratives that we saw in 2019 is, in part, inspired by the framing of the video for “Q.U.E.E.N.”³.

As a storyteller, Monáe is not afraid to experiment with form. One of the key features of *The Electric Lady* is a series of interludes that feature outtakes from an android-run radio station, WDRD. These are exercises in worldbuilding. Indeed, as they are presented as extracts from the media of the story world, they count as a form of John Dos Passos’s technique of including fake newspaper cuttings and the like in his novels. This technique was used to great effect by John Brunner in novels such as *Stand on Zanzibar*, and has become a standard part of the science-fiction toolbox.

Another interesting aspect of Monáe’s story-telling is her refusal to be bound by canon. When she first began the *Metropolis* saga it appeared that she was embarking on what she hoped to be a long-running series of stories in the same world, and featuring the same characters: the Cindi Mayweather Universe, perhaps. However, she has since taken a much more flexible approach to the story.

It could be argued that this is evidence of a failure to build a coherent and continuing storyline, but rebooting is hardly new these days. Companies such as Marvel and DC have been forced into it by the simple impossibility of telling a continuing story about the same set of characters over many decades. Retellings of fairy stories have become fashionable in novels, comics, and TV. In interviews about her latest novel, *The Starless Sea*, Erin Morgenstern talks specifically about the techniques of storytelling in role-playing worlds (whether

³ I note that *Electric Lady* predates William Gibson’s *The Peripheral*, though obviously Gibson would have been working on that book for some time.

on paper or electronic) that allow every player's path through the story to be different.

The most important aspect of Monáe's work, however, is her use of androids as a metaphor for various forms of discrimination. Science fiction is replete with examples of using androids as metaphors for race, for gender, and even for sexuality. Monáe uses them for all of these, sometimes at the same time, as well as having them literally be androids.

This work is not just important from the point of view of science fiction. It also spills over into Monáe's private life, and into activism in the wider world. With *Dirty Computer* due to be released, Monáe did an interview for the leading rock-music magazine, *Rolling Stone*⁴, in which she confirmed the rumours about her sexuality. She began the process of coming out from behind the mask of Cindi Mayweather and becoming a role model for her queer fans. She told the magazine:

I want young girls, young boys, nonbinary, gay, straight, queer people who are having a hard time dealing with their sexuality, dealing with feeling ostracized or bullied for just being their unique selves, to know that I see you.... This album is for you. Be proud.

The emotion picture too begins with a call to the marginalised and misfits. The very concept of a “dirty computer” is someone who has failed to conform to society's expectations of a perfectly functioning cog in the machine. Such people are said to be infected, and in need of cleaning, which is what happens in The House of the New Dawn.

You were dirty if you looked different. You were dirty if you refused to live the way they dictated. You were dirty if you showed any form of opposition at all.

Monáe's pansexuality is clearly on display in the emotion picture, as it shows her romantically involved not just with Zen, but also with the young man called Ché. As the three of them appear to be a family unit, the film can also be taken as a defence of polyamory.

A measure of the level of intersectionality involved in the *Dirty Computer* project can be gauged from the video for the song “PYNK”. First, the entire concept is avowedly feminist and concerned with female empowerment. The video, with its trademark “vagina pants”, deliberately references the iconic artwork “God Giving Birth” by the Swedish feminist painter Monica Sjöö⁵. Although the song is called “PYNK”, the dancers in the video are not pink-skinned, they are black. And perhaps most significantly, not all of them wear the vagina pants. Monáe has explained that this is a shout out to the transgender community and is intended to support the notion that it is not necessary to have a vagina to be a woman⁶.

Since then Monáe has flirted with a trans identity herself. On January 10th, 2020 she joined in with a Twitter meme celebrating the famously queer

⁴ <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/janelle-monae-frees-herself-629204/> accessed 15/Mar/2020

⁵ Monáe acknowledges the influence of Sjöö in the sleeve notes for the album.

⁶ <https://people.com/style/janelle-monae-says-shes-working-on-mass-producing-those-vagina-pants/> accessed 15/Mar/2020

animated TV series *Steven Universe*. Her tweet was a simple hashtag: #IAmNonBinary. Asked what she had meant by this, Monáe told *The Cut*⁷:

...it resonated with me, especially as someone who has pushed boundaries of gender since the beginning of my career. I feel my feminine energy, my masculine energy, and energy I can't even explain.

The idea of “cleaning” is itself deeply political. In an article for the website, *Mic*, Natelegé Whaley draws three parallels from history⁸. First, there is racial cleansing, in which white people have sought to purge people of colour from their communities by various means from simple violence to eugenics programs of forced sterilisation. Then there is cultural cleansing, by which children from Indigenous backgrounds in colonised countries were sent to white-run boarding schools where they would have their own culture erased and white culture imposed upon them. Finally, there is the closest thing to the mind-altering treatments of *Dirty Computer*, the idea of conversion therapy. In this, LGBT+ people are given treatments such as aversion therapy and electroshock therapy in an attempt to “cure” them of their presumed deviant nature.

However, the most political track on the album must be the final one, the anthem “Americans”. It is also playing at the end of the emotion picture as Jane and Zen rescue Ché and escape the House of the New Dawn. Following the emotion picture there are a number of interviews with the cast and crew. Monáe’s co-writer on the project, Chuck Lightning, states that the idea of the film was to imagine life in a future America that had succumbed to “the worst impulses of our current President.”⁹

The song embodies resistance against that possibility. On the one hand, it channels traditional right-wing views of what it means to be American:

I like my woman in the kitchen
I teach my children superstitions
I keep my two guns on my blue nightstand
A pretty young thang, she can wash my clothes
But she'll never ever wear my pants

But on the other it calls for the right of all citizens, including all dirty computers, to call themselves American:

Love me, baby, love me for who I am
Fallen angels, singing "Clap your hands"
Don't try to take my country, I will defend my land
I'm not crazy, baby, naw, I'm American

That this is seen as a necessary call for rebellion is clear from Monáe’s cast interview at the end of the emotion picture, in which she says, “Freedom is not free, it comes with a price¹⁰.”

⁷ <https://www.thecut.com/2020/02/janelle-monae-afrofuture.html> accessed 15/Mar/2020

⁸ <https://www.mic.com/articles/189099/janelle-monae-s-dirty-computer-visual-album-is-a-queer-afrofuturist-love-story-about-resistance> accessed 15/Mar/2020

⁹ *Dirty Computer, The Emotion Picture: Director's Cut*, Amazon Prime, accessed 15/Mar/2020

¹⁰ *Dirty Computer, The Emotion Picture: Director's Cut* ibid

As a result of her outspoken support for the queer community, Monáe has been granted the Equality Award from the USA's Human Rights Campaign. A presentation should have taken place at the HRC's Los Angeles Dinner in March, but at the time of writing this event is in doubt due to the coronavirus crisis¹¹.

In a tradition that stretches from Mary Cavendish through HG Wells to Octavia Butler and beyond, Monáe has expressed her advocacy for human rights through the medium of science fiction. In a 2010 interview with *The Colorado Springs Independent*¹², Monáe, was asked about her use of science fiction in her work to make political points. She responded as follows:

You know, people who always try to divide you and categorize you and say, "Oh these people are not good enough to be with these people." Because being a black African-American woman and knowing my history, with how slavery happened and evolved and over time it morphed into something else, you know, whether it's discrimination against people that are gay or lesbian or straight or, you know, androids or cyborgs. So I think that it's just really about us doing away with all the labels and categories and just accepting each other for who we are as individuals.

The importance of this intersectional approach to android allegory has been commented on by Tempest Bradford in an article for the Twelfth Planet Press website¹³. Bradford also situates Monáe's output firmly in the tradition of AfroFuturism in that her work both celebrates black culture and points towards a hopeful future in which people of colour can not only exist¹⁴, but thrive.

In taking this approach Monáe's science fiction can be seen as being at the cutting edge of developments in the genre that have seen women, people of colour, and queer people gaining increasing respect over the past decade. It puts her on a par with authors such as NK Jemisin, Aliette de Bodard, and Charlie Jane Anders as flag bearers for marginalised communities. Given the much wider reach of popular music compared to written fiction, it can be argued that she is the most important of them.

Cheryl Morgan is a writer, editor, and publisher. She is the winner of four Hugo Awards and is the owner of Wizard's Tower Press. Her non-fiction has appeared in a variety of venues including *Locus*, the *SFWA Bulletin*, the *Science Fiction Encyclopaedia*, *Vector* and *Strange Horizons*. Her fiction has appeared in a number of small press magazines and anthologies. Cheryl was a Guest of Honour at the 2012 Eurocon in Zagreb and the 2019 Finncon in Jyväskylä. She was a keynote speaker at the Worlding SF academic conference at the University of Graz in 2018.

¹¹ <https://www.hrc.org/blog/hrc-to-honor-genre-bending-artist-janelle-monae-with-the-hrc-equality-award> accessed 15/Mar/2020

¹² <https://www.csindy.com/coloradosprings/art-and-soul/Content?oid=1739497> accessed 22/Dec/2019.

¹³ <http://motherofinvention.twelfthplanetpress.com/2018/07/02/androids-and-allegory/> accessed 22/Dec/2019.

¹⁴ Of course in far too much early science fiction people of colour were entirely absent from the future.