

## 11 JANELLE MONÁE'S "IT'S CODE" (2013)

What an Afrofuture looks like per Janelle Monáe: "It looks like an orgasm and the big bang happening while skydiving as Grace Jones smiles."<sup>1</sup>

The last chapter investigated boundaries between a person's claimed sexual orientation as distinct from whether they perform particular sex acts. This chapter continues to interrogate how orientation can be expressed in sound, how coded references like musical tropes work to create communal belonging between listeners, including other artists, by way of shared musico-sexual orientations. Janelle Monáe's (b. 1985) song "It's Code" from *The Electric Lady* (2013) features one such passage. This recurring theme, which I identify as the "wobble warp," is doubly encoded, hardwired, while also sending a message to similarly wired listeners. Where Donna Summer's "Love to Love" struggles with the laboriously synthetic, and TLC's sample of that song in "I'm Good at Being Bad" subtly repositions Summer's song through digital cultural retrospectivism, Monáe's concept albums display explicit Afrofuturist flights of optimistic fantasy rooted in Black iconography and double meanings that flit across the "sonic color line."

*The Electric Lady* presents Suites 4 and 5 of Monáe's multi-album adventure, interfusing the artist's dreams with themes from Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927).<sup>2</sup> A prequel to *The ArchAndroid* (2010), the album tells the origin story of Monáe's loosely fictional alter ego, android Cindi Mayweather, or Electric Lady No. 1. She explains: "I started to think of a world where there were more electric ladies, there was a new breed of women."<sup>3</sup> Where the electroacoustics of the feminized voice isolate sound merely as reflexive iconography for

the patriarchal fantasy of power and control, what Laura Mulvey has deemed “the phantasmagoric space conjured up by the female body,” Monáe’s style-traveling pastiche of blues, R&B, hip hop, pop, and many more electronic currents reimagines the relationship between the human, the voice and the electronic. This chapter defines the “wobble warp” as a “quare” expression and coded mode of communication between this breed of women in Monáe’s song “It’s Code.”

### “IT’S CODE”

The lyrics of “It’s Code” tell a common story of scorned love. Cindi sings of her love for human Sir Anthony Greendown in a world where relations between humans and androids are forbidden. The “code” of the song’s title plays on the word’s two meanings: (1) computer/genetic code; (2) communication of coded messages. In the song’s verse Mayweather/Monáe sings: “Oh baby, it’s code / I want you to hold me, and love me until I want no more.”<sup>4</sup> A common interpretation of this passage imagines that “love” is programmed or encoded into the android. Mayweather is on the run, forced to leave her love, but obviously she still cares for him. The song also features “code” of another sort, a message to her lover.

Harmonically, Monáe’s opening verse oscillates stepwise between Gm9 and Am7 on successive downbeats for close to forty-five seconds. Melodically (as transcribed in figure 11.1a), Monáe’s verse begins with a scalar ascent (labelled Motive 1) B-flat C D E F, skipping to A, then “filling” in the “gap” by landing back on G slightly before the downbeat of the next measure (labelled Motive 2). Again, Monáe repeats the slightly varied opening melody.

At the end of the first verse, the harmony breaks away distinctively from its neighboring Gm9-Am7 oscillation for the first time. The passage begins harmonically as before on Gm (minus the seventh), but soon shifts to a 3–4–5 root progression (C D E) delaying the arrival of 1, Am7. Conditioned as we were for almost a minute that Am7 will succeed the Gm7 chord, we expect Am7 on the downbeat of the next bar with the word “played,” but in this spot Am7 does not sound and in fact it does not arrive for an additional two bars. Instead, the lyrics and melody support harmonic

Musical notation for Figure 11.1a. The staff is in G minor (one flat) and 4/4 time. The melody starts with a whole rest on G4, followed by an ascending line: G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), B-flat4 (quarter), C5 (quarter), D5 (quarter), E5 (quarter), F5 (quarter), G5 (half). A bracket labeled "Opening" spans the first two notes. A dotted line bracket labeled "Motive 1" spans from the first G4 to the F5. A solid line bracket labeled "Motive 2" spans from the C5 to the G5. Chords Gm9 and Am7 D7 are indicated below the staff. The lyrics "Love is gnaw-ing on my mind" are written below the notes.

**Figure 11.1a**

Ascending hexachord B-flat—G (Motive 1) with leap followed by “gap fill” (Motive 2), opening Verse 1, Janelle Monáe’s “It’s Code” (0:12–0:17).

Musical notation for Figure 11.1b. The staff is in G minor (one flat) and 4/4 time. The melody starts with a whole note G4 (labeled "wobble"), followed by an ascending line: A4 (quarter), B-flat4 (quarter), C5 (quarter), D5 (quarter), E5 (quarter), F5 (quarter), G5 (quarter), A5 (quarter), G5 (quarter), F5 (quarter), E5 (quarter), D5 (quarter), C5 (quarter), B-flat4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), G4 (quarter). A dotted line bracket labeled "Motive 1" spans from the first G4 to the F5. A solid line bracket labeled "Motive 2" spans from the C5 to the G5. A box labeled "'wobble warp'" is placed over the G5 note. Chords Gm9 and Am7 are indicated below the staff. The lyrics "(You) You in some - one el - ses arms." are written below the notes.

**Figure 11.1b**

Ascending hexachord (Motive 1) with leap followed by “gap fill” (Motive 2) and “wobble,” continued Verse 1, Janelle Monáe’s “It’s Code” (0:59–1:04).

prolongation, as we hear the text “Cause when I turn back around” together with the 3–4–5 “turnaround” figure that mirrors this text.

“You” finally arrives emphatically on the downbeat in the backing vocals, represented with parentheses in figure 11.1b. The sustained A precedes the lower B-flat, as before, preparing for a reiteration of Motive 1, which proceeds as before through C D E F, skipping to A, and then finally back to G on “arms” (Motive 2). This time, however, G is muddled by a murky vibrating “wobble” hinting at A-flat. This is the only time in the song we hear this melodic hesitation, which importantly is preceded by a “gap fill.” Together, (1) the scalar lead in, (2) “gap fill,” and (3) punctuating pitch “wobble,” form what I’m calling the “wobble warp” trope.

To distinguish the “wobble warp” from other reminiscent sections of the song, I refer to two other instances of Motive 1, one immediately after the “wobble warp” in the pre-chorus, and once again in the instrumental interlude thereafter.

In the pre-chorus (figure 11.2), Motive 1 ascends as before, this time on different pitches through a B-flat minor scale, C D-flat E-flat F. Then, leaping as before to C before returning to B-flat, now 3 in G minor, the motive prepares our ears for Motive 2, but no “wobble” sounds. The passage leads to a 6–4–1 harmonic root progression back to G minor. Although the pre-chorus version recurs throughout the song, the “wobble warp” version only sounds once in the vocals.

In the instrumental interlude leading out of the chorus (figure 11.3) we again hear preparation for the “wobble warp,” beginning on the word “You,” recalling figures 11.1a and 11.1b, but the lyric trails off into a light jazz flute rendition of the melody omitting the melodic “wobble,” evading the expected resolution. I want to suggest that the gap fill in figure 11.1b, so

Motive 1 var.

Pre-Chorus

Motive 2

Bbm7 (Eb m7) Bbm7

move. But I was scared to fall in love

**Figure 11.2**

Ascending scale suggesting a variation of Motive 1, with leap followed by “gap fill” lead up to a “wobble” that never arrives, pre-chorus, Janelle Monáe’s “It’s Code” (1:11–1:15).

Chorus

Instrumental Interlude

Bmaj7 Fm7 Bb7 Gm9

Ba - by it's code ba - by it's co - - de. (You)

**Figure 11.3**

End of chorus through arrival on “You” preparing for Motive 1 but evaded by instrumental interlude, Janelle Monáe’s “It’s Code” (1:39–1:46).

audibly unique to the rest of song, is a sonic trope linked to the song's title: "It's Code." Not coincidentally, the song's chorus touts "Baby it's code" over and over on a descending tetrachord, an inversion of Motive 1. As we will see, encoded in the music is a key to hearing *quarely* across multiple contemporary R&B/hip-hop crossover songs. But code for what?

### BEING QUEER, HEARING QUARE

The "wobble warp" trope sounds in songs that could be said to embody a queer Black aesthetic. It's not that the songs are somehow representative of queer Black individuals, but rather the "code" performs a wink at those who get it—at those who have been acquainted with its symbols through repeated exposure. For this reason, transcriptions of these momentous occasions are only so helpful, listeners who really get what the trope is about acquire this understanding by internalizing the trope via repeated hearing, sometimes, themselves performing it by singing along with recordings or independently. Queerness thus becomes affective in the way people in the know hear and pick up on queer significance to those with common ground. As Gayle Murchison explains, Janelle Monáe's music "provides examples of quare black music and the way black music (or any listener) can be 'hair-yuh' and 'quare-yuh' (i.e., 'here [or, to pun, hear] and queer,' in African American Vernacular English . . .)." <sup>5</sup> Whereas, some may hear the "wobble warp" simply as vocal vibrato, others may hear its electronic resonances with the Minimoog (discussed later), and still others may associate *quarely* with its cross-genre reach. All this is to say that affect is context dependent. Situational knowledge is important in figuring out what qualities are taken on or expressed by a given trope and *to whom*. <sup>6</sup> My aim is to highlight a quare bent on the "wobble warp" and to theorize the trope as more than mere figuration.

Queerness as a classification (musical or nonmusical) is in itself a term full of contradiction. In reclaiming "queerness" from its derogative historical connotations, queering can arise through resistance and opposition to oppression, as a refusal to conform—as we note from its comparisons to parody and antisocial behavior in the last chapter. A contradiction herein is

that, collectively, this nonconformity also becomes something of a unifying descriptor, uniting through irreconcilable difference—Sedgwick’s minoritizing outlook from chapter 9. The “wobble warp” embraces this collective nonconformity by hinting at regularity in the figuration’s sound, in its dwelling at the porous bounds between genre, chronology, and technology—whether acoustic or electric.

Homosexuality is not criminalized in the United States, yet many queer folks still seek solace in the secrecy of coded messages and furtive glances, especially as anti-discrimination laws have remained in flux.<sup>7</sup> Dance music enthusiasts and scholars alike have examined how experiencing Electronic Dance Music (EDM) collectively fosters a strong communal bond among those listeners and dancers. EDM emerged simultaneously as both a musical and social phenomenon, with historical ties to underground or private dance spaces in disco clubs and urban house parties (chapter 6), as well as the more public venues of block parties and the Black church. Underground music and dance clubs have long served as uniting safe havens for the LGBTQIA+ communities in geographic regions ranging from Berlin to Nigeria, Chicago to Singapore. In many parts of the world there remain laws criminalizing same-sex dancing and even certain ways of looking, let alone physical contact that could be interpreted as sexual.<sup>8</sup> Private musical spaces afford safety to those individuals faced with violence and excluded elsewhere for expressing a nonconforming gender identity or for participating in sexual activities that would have been denied or suppressed as queer or deviant in spaces in which heteronormative behaviors were expected. Safe havens like discotheques, according to Brian Currid, could therefore replace the biological bonds of blood with an alternative, more transient notion of family.<sup>9</sup> One is not necessarily born into this family, but rather one subscribes voluntarily by way of inter-musical participation, a mode of belonging with possible resonances in the secondary, more public arenas above.

Although queer hip-hop artists often rap about sexuality,<sup>10</sup> their music is not necessarily sexually explicit in the way that “pornorap” or “dirty rap” are.<sup>11</sup> Those genres, for instance, are sexually connotative on account of graphic lyrics and music videos with explicit visuals more than any specific musical associations (see, for example, videos by CupcakKe or RoxXxan).

Self-described queer rappers or hip-hop artists like Monáe, Stas THEE Boss (discussed in the next chapter), Guayaba, or Frank Ocean, tend to draw their roots from so-called consciously rapped lyrics, using interpolative and intertextual associations across musical streams to advance sexual content via multiple constitutive dimensions, whether lyrics, music, technical processing, quotation, and any number of mechanisms operating simultaneously, such as the multiple modalities in which Monáe expresses her “code.” Though explicit lyrics can certainly also express queer sentiments—for example, when trans rapper Mykki Blanco in “Wavvy” declaims topless, bedazzled in belly dancer jewels: “I scalp these haters . . . I cut throats.” What is usually meant by “queer” in this context, in the words of C. Riley Snorton, is a “politics of disidentification and disavowal” to the heteronormative nuclear structure.<sup>12</sup> And, as I wrote in the introduction to part II: “‘norms’ of performance come to influence expectations of how audiences receive codes, whether sexual, musical, or racial, since norms dictate whether codes are perceived as facilitating or disrupting the performance framing.” In the case of quare codes, norms of “disidentification and disavowal” are formed and passed on via sonic tropes like the “wobble warp.” Though music theory writ large still perpetuates the marginalization of Black (musical) aesthetics from academic music-theoretical discourses,<sup>13</sup> the designation of a “quare” outlook instead forms a cohesive analytical orientation from which to understand and interpret the queer underpinnings that link musical expressions.

Francesca Royster’s *Sounding Like a No-No? Queer Sounds and Eccentric Acts in the Post-Soul Era* uniquely examines what’s “quare”-ly audible in different popular electronic musics, most notably in music by Prince, Stevie Wonder, Grace Jones, and Janelle Monáe.<sup>14</sup> Royster draws from Imani Perry’s imagery on alienation and Tricia Rose’s optimistic hip-hop imaginary to theorize “eccentric” and “quare” elements in Stevie Wonder’s music, writing:

While Wonder’s *Journey through the Secret Life of Plants* doesn’t sound at all like the dynamic, pared down aesthetic of much early rap, both emerge out of a context where “social alienation, prophetic imagination, and yearning intersect,” in Tricia Rose’s words. Despite the characterization of *Journey* by many of its critics as (only) airy or otherworldly, we might, in particular, connect Wonder’s exploration of return in this project, in addition to its other

themes, to rural landscapes and knowledge, and to Africa, as a response to the deindustrialization and burned-out city landscapes that have also influenced hip-hop graffiti, breakdancing, rap, and DJing.<sup>15</sup>

Royster relishes in the joy of Wonder's success, his forward-sounding synthesizer-driven music links to hip hop through Afrofuturist flights of fancy. Yet, she cautions also that an artist's aspirations to break through are limited by gendered notions of nonconformity:

In popular culture (and often played out in everyday life), black male genius has its limits concerning where it can go and what it can do. For one thing, the term genius in the world of black music is almost always used synonymously with male (with the exception of Billie Holiday, thanks to Farah Jasmine Griffin), and its most embraced and best-known models are reassuringly and zestfully masculine, deeply loyal and embedded in the world of men. Black male musical genius is often connected to sex and the seductions of power. . . . The stories we tell about black male genius are bigger than life, mythological.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, concludes Royster: "black geniuses are exceptions to the rules of racism," an exceptionalism that does not extend to Black women.<sup>17</sup>

Hip-hop scholar Gwendolyn Pough summarizes society's stereotypical representations of Black women as loud, gesticulating, and angry.<sup>18</sup> Royster's chapter on Grace Jones shows how she defies and resists such labels, her fans characterizing the performer as "Alien Grace. Detached Grace. Frozen Grace.' She is often seen as an emblem of cold steel androgyny."<sup>19</sup> Through this lens, Jones come to exude antisocial characteristics. A mature woman's self-assured standoffishness contrasts so starkly with the angry Black woman as to make her *quare*.

From the heteronormative perspective, standoffishness commonly characterizes lesbians who are perceived as avoiding the sexual complacency and prowess society often expects of women. Tying this popular image of subordinate women to an instrumental and choral composer, musicologist Elizabeth Wood revealed hidden messages in music by lesbian composers. Ethyl Smyth was said to have communicated cryptically through music as a way of warding off unwanted scrutiny and "to escape, deny, and transcend gender."<sup>20</sup>



In this sense, Black women's insubordination is doubly articulated via sex/gender/sexuality as well as race, both of which become identified as alien and detached characteristics—an affect they attempt to capture in sound by encoding nonverbal messages via performative gestures. The refrain: hair-yuh and quare-yuh.

The “wobble warp’s” coincidence with music by queer-identifying performers of electronic music and in queerly identified spaces marks it historically as both electronic and queer while remaining an unnegotiable facet of Black experiences within these spaces, hence *quare*. The trope's gendered and racial origins are inseparable from the “wobble warp” as sounding effect and therefore essential to its hearing and its transhistorical and intergeneric confluence.

### ENCODING QUARENES IN “MANY MOONS”

Monáe's “It's Code” is track 12 of *The Electric Lady* and the first song of Suite V (after the Overture). Set in a future which forbids interspecies relationships between androids and humans, the series follows Mayweather through her love affair with the human Sir Anthony Greendown, the ensuing trial, and the verdict sentencing her to disassembly. Alongside futuristic themes of robots, time and space travel, and assembly-line capitalistic production, Monáe's albums also convey an allegory for Black oppression via imagery, drawing on blackface minstrelsy, slave auction, commoditized sex, and miscegenation (as conveyed via the law against interspecies coupling)—imagery that provokes critique and simultaneous reclamation.

Traveling back to the first installment, Gayle Murchison proclaims Monáe's *Metropolis* series “a successor to [Patti] Labelle and other Afrofuturist funkateers and funkmeisters.” Echoing Mark Dery's foundational definition of Afrofuturism, *Metropolis* is a “speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth century Technoculture.”<sup>21</sup> However, she distinctly emphasizes women's contributions to an Afrofuturist genealogy whose scholarly scope does not historically feature many women, whether this

failing is from the typical neglect or from an aesthetic vantage, in that Afrofuturist theorists have failed to recognize Afrofuturist traits as these are expressed by women.<sup>22</sup>

Not only does Murchison's analysis enrich definitions of Afrofuturism with a feminist perspective, but her contribution also highlights queer themes in this music thus augmenting the analytical intersectional breadth.<sup>23</sup> Murchison echoes Black feminist theorists like Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks to offer "quare feminist critique" as a mode of musical theorization that "troubles the way in which the music industry offers black female bodies on a continuum from eroticized to hypersexualized."<sup>24</sup> Following Murchison, I acknowledge a deferential power distribution in how music is used to create sexual tension. I hear certain sounds like the "wobble warp" trope expanding how we witness queer musical belonging expressed sonically, where the trope becomes a way of communicating *quarely* to those in the know at the same time as music, in all its ephemerality, easily evades the scrutiny of those seeking to sever the continuity of these connections. Specifically, Murchison's analysis identifies "quare emancipations" in gestures and symbols particular to the "Afrofutur" as articulated by Monáe's performances. In Dery's words from 1994, it is "perplexing" that

so few African-Americans write science fiction, a genre whose close encounters with the Other—the stranger in a strange land—would seem uniquely suited to the concerns of African-American novelists. . . . 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).<sup>25</sup>

Since Dery's proclamation, we observe many more Afrofuturist contributions. Situating *quare*-ness in proxy to Afro-diasporic themes of being alien and alienation, Murchison credits Monáe with "appropriat[ing] visual symbols of white masculinity, wealth, and power to call out and push back against oppression," honing in on the scene of the "annual android auction" from the short film released for "Many Moons" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch>

?v=Yy-ugv9kxG0) from Monáe's debut album and Suite I of the collection, the *Metropolis* EP (2007).<sup>26</sup>

Whereas Monáe's fictional future forbids relations between androids and humans, this particular scene in "Many Moons" highlights dimensions of class oppression by showing how laws become enforced as a means of empowering some by way of the oppression of many others. The Black androids in the auction scene are not prized merely for the value of their labor or skills but for their visible attractiveness, even if interspecies relations are forbidden. One white human couple sits in the audience seeking to purchase a suitable mate (slave?). The couple's lascivious gaze and visible excitement features in several shots. Murchison describes the moment they decide to purchase (Monáe as) Suzie Scorcher (3:26–3:40):

The wife whispers in her husband's ear. As Mayweather [singing] asks, "Are you bold enough to reach for love," we observe a *quare visual exchange* between the white couple and the black droid, Scorcher, a scene that is followed by Mayweather's rap, modeled on Madonna's "Vogue."<sup>27</sup>

What Murchison refers to here as a "quare visual exchange" is the mutual acknowledgement between the couple and the droid about possibly engaging in illicit activities of interspecies mingling, which are "queer" because the activities transgress established societal norms. The exchange becomes *quare* when taking into account a non-diegetically coded meaning arising from uneven power dynamics between the auctioned and the buyers. In this regard, Francesca Royster points to Monáe's android persona Cindi Mayweather, the auction master in "Many Moons":

Monáe's creation, the android Cindi Mayweather is another eccentric tactic used to address issues of power specific to the music industry: the dehumanization of the commercial marketing of black performance, the ways that capitalism manages to appropriate the underground, and the always present push back of that underground to keep creating. . . . The auction is the site of multiple exchanges of power and desire, and we watch while the androids are traded between men and women competing for power and visibility. . . . "Many Moons" captures the rebellious energy of black *quare* musical performance, but it also speaks to the power of black performance to meet and produce the demands of pleasure seekers, sometimes to the point of their own destruction.<sup>28</sup>

“Square,” in the ways both Royster and Murchison refer to Monáe, is not merely a sexual “orientation” but an “eccentric” aspect of identity, in the sense that E. Patrick Johnson means when he writes in *Black. Queer. Southern. Women*: “While folks may have whispered about them, their dalliances with the same sex did not necessarily make them ‘lesbian’ as much as it did just another eccentric whose membership in and contributions to the community outweighed their sexual behavior.”<sup>29</sup> This notion of eccentricity is uncompromisingly intersectional, as pointillistic in individual instances as it is historical in its adherence to communal integrity.

In the closing of my introduction to part II, I interrogated the limited and limiting white supremacist spectator perspective. I examined the one-sided perception by which performers become enslaved via a lens that elevates the white human couple’s intentions and restricts Black experiences to a collective singular existence rooted in histories of alienation and/as racialized oppression. The “eccentric” breaks away from this mold, to “push back” with agency, exerting desire and a will to insist on private and personal boundaries, whether sexual or otherwise. In this sense, the “code” is both encoded, and hence predetermined, as well as formed via ever-changing linguistic, gestural, visual, and sonic exchanges. The transmorphography of the “wobble warp” is one such articulation.

Where previously I examined how distance reinforces imbalances between the empowered and oppressed, codes become tools for radical resistance in opposition to presumed racialized norms. In this sense, “code-switching” has been used by wanderers in the diaspora as a means of distantiation, for security and protection. Monáe says she created Cindi Mayweather as a voice through which she could express frustrations with and vulnerability about social injustices, like racial inequality and sexual oppression, to those for whom these messages had empowering effects. However, in a 2018 interview for *New York Times Magazine*, Monáe divulged why she abandoned her alter ego in recent albums like *Dirty Computer*:

The public . . . doesn’t really “know Janelle Monáe, and I felt like I didn’t really have to be her because they were fine with Cindi.” When Prince died in April 2016, she started to rethink how she would present herself. “I couldn’t

fake being vulnerable. In terms of how I will be remembered, I have anxiety around that, like the whole concept about what I'll be remembered for."<sup>30</sup>

Thinking back to Donna Summer and TLC, who, as we have seen, leaned into the sexual ventriloquy of the electrified, Monáe recognized the problems of this pattern and identified a solution that could dissolve the stereotypical iconography of “robo-diva R&B,” one that seems perhaps counterintuitive: being real. Monáe’s recent performances aspire to collapse the distance between her real and performed selves. Who, anyway, can really separate the art from the artist?

In the next chapter, I delve deeper into the musical resonances of the “wobble warp’s” codes as they resound through electrosexual currents of not-so-distant pasts and futures.



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# Sex Sounds

## Vectors of Difference in Electronic Music

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