"Where the Computer Cannot Reach—Is Dreaming": The Imaginary & (In)visible Worlds

by Amy Foley

Abstract: This article explores the work of Janelle Monáe through, and with, the words and images offered by Ruha Benjamin in *Imagination: A Manifesto*, arguing that these and other Afrofuturist texts provide us with tools for reconceptualizing the visible world as dense, textured, and never wholly legible, consumable, or commodifiable. This essay asks us to dwell, to practice a temporary suspension, in the visualizations offered by these artists, as they invent new fictions for us to inhabit – fictions that work against the dominant narrative of visibility that says we can be made fully readable and comprehensible to power through proliferating mechanisms of technological surveillance. This false but enduring narrative, which often feels deceptively natural and inescapable, works to infantilize and depoliticize imagination, to thwart creative disruption, and to produce collective despair. While this essay acknowledges the very real, violent power entwined within this fiction – and the need to, at times, use this very narrative as a shield for survival in the present – it also argues that we must simultaneously recognize this *as fiction* and create *new fictions* so as to open ourselves to a future in which survival and flourishing are not contingent on complicity in the constrictive narratives that frame us today. As we are shaped in both the real and the imaginary, this essay contends, projecting new fictions is a crucial practice for making more liveable futures.

Keywords: politics of visibility; fictions of legibility; imagination; surveillance capitalism; technocracy; futurity; Afrofuturism; social imaginary

Résumé : Cet article explore l'œuvre de Janelle Monáe par l'entremise et au moyen des mots et des images proposés par Ruha Benjamin dans son livre, intitulé *Imagination: A Manifesto*, en soutenant que ces récits ainsi que d'autres textes afrofuturistes nous fournissent les outils pour conceptualiser le monde visible de nouveau, sous une forme opaque, texturée et qu'on ne peut jamais lire, ni consommer, ni commercialiser dans son intégralité. Cet essai nous demande de nous attarder sur les visualisations offertes par ces artistes, de nous arrêter temporairement pour ce faire, tandis qu'elles conçoivent de nouvelles fictions que nous pourrons vivre, des fictions allant à l'encontre du discours dominant de visibilité qui stipule qu'on doit nous rendre lisibles et compréhensibles de façon intégrale pour alimenter les mécanismes de surveillance technologique qui se multiplient. Ce récit inexact, mais immuable, qui nous semble souvent naturel, de façon trompeuse, et inévitable, s'efforce d'infantiliser et de dépolitiser l'imagination, d'entraver les perturbations créatives et de générer une impuissance collective. Bien que cet essai reconnaisse le pouvoir bien réel et violent, qui est inextricablement lié à cette fiction, et la nécessité, par moments, d'avoir recours à ce même récit comme bouclier pour survivre à la situation actuelle, il soutient également que nous devons simultanément reconnaître *qu'il s'agit d'une fiction* et créer *de nouvelles fictions* afin de nous ouvrir à un avenir dans lequel la survie et la prospérité ne sont pas conditionnelles à la complicité dans les récits contraignants qui nous encadrent aujourd'hui. Puisque la réalité et l'imaginaire nous forment de façon conjointe, cet essai soutient que prévoir de nouvelles fictions est une pratique primordiale pour concrétiser un avenir où il fait mieux vivre.

Mots clés : politique de la visibilité; fiction de la lisibilité; imagination; capitalisme de surveillance; technocratie; futurité; afrofuturisme; imaginaire social

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> Like fungi that seem to spring out of nowhere after a hard rainfall, social uprisings often appear spontaneous and spectacular. But as with mushrooms that grow out of a vast structure of mycelium threading, branching, and rooting beneath the forest floor, so, too, do revolutions rely on the long-term, often invisible networks of people working under the radar. Like mushrooms, the kind of imagination that can potentially transform toxic environments into habitable ones relies on a vast network of underground connections – with people, organizations, and histories.

> —Ruha Benjamin, *Imagination: A Manifesto* (2024, 122-123)

Hidden in Plain Sight: The Politics of Visibility in the Social Imaginary

In the early moments of Ryan Coogler's 2018 *Black Panther* film, viewers are introduced to the spectacular vision of Wakanda as T'Challa, Nakia, and Okoye return to their beloved country. As the ship and its inhabitants pierce through the hologram exterior, the hidden-in-plain-sight Wakanda appears, with its lengthy stretches of skyscrapers immersed in a solarpunk dream of silver and green, unfolding before characters and audiences alike. Wakanda's invisibility to the outside world plays an integral role in the 2018 film, the 2022 *Wakanda Forever,* and their comic antecedents. In order to successfully hide itself, the holographic projection that protects Wakanda from the outside forces of colonialism and white supremacy uses to its advantage the reiterated narratives of African otherness disseminated through those same channels of power. On the surface, Wakanda appears to be another "third world nation" and the landscape within which it is embedded is neither industrialized nor urban. The Wakanda that escapes visibility, instead, functions as a technological mecca forged by Shuri – creative inventor and genius sister to the Black Panther.

The space occupied by Shuri is one that has been violently, historically absent from the screen. In *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*, Ytasha Womack describes "the quest to see myself or browner people" (Womack 2013, 5) in the *Star Wars* trilogy, lamenting the brevity of Lando's screen time and the unmasking of Darth Vadar as not-James-Earl-Jones. Similarly, N.K. Jemisin's stark remembrance of watching the Jetsons and seeing a future in which Black people were entirely absent is not only about inclusivity but about the very perseverance of Black life into the future. Jemisin writes, "Thing is, not-white-people make up most of the world's population, now as well as back in the Sixties when the show was created. So what happened to all those people, in the minds of this show's creators? Are they down beneath the clouds, where the Jetsons never go? Was there an apocalypse, or maybe a pogrom? Was there a memo? I'm watching the Jetsons, and it's creeping me right the fuck out" (Jemisin 2013, n.p.). Jemisin illuminates the sinister, threatening nature of said futuristic depictions, which of course are culturally abundant. Shuri's place within Wakanda offers an alternative vision to what Ruha Benjamin refers to in her 2024 *Imagination: A Manifesto* as eugenics and "carceral" social imaginaries, which aim to expunge or arrest not only bodies, but result in the policing (including self-policing) of imagination itself. Shuri's presence—and her use of technology in playful, exuberant, and healing iterations—offers a vision of the future not premised on the present dominant fictions, which aim to contain or obliterate or police the Shuris within our collective imaginations.

Benjamin's manifesto also argues that an image has the capacity to "animate" the imagination and (de)naturalize (Benjamin 2024, 102) these eugenics and carceral fictions. The image of a Wakanda unfolded also offers viewers another story of the visible world, one that challenges notions of singular readability that have long

dominated the United States imaginary. The invisibility of Wakanda to the outside world is an exhortation to rethink resistance in a surveillance capitalist society, as its ability to evade surveillance insists that not everything can be visually captured and commodified by those who currently wield power. This is what Jarrett Martineau and Eric Ritskes call "fugitivity," which "finds its energetic potency in remaining illegible to power, incommensurable with colonialism, and opaque to appropriation, commodification and cultural theft. That which is fugitive proposes an insurgent force of dissident visibility; it is the hidden that reveals itself in motion" (Ritskes and Martineau 2014, V). Wakanda, like many Afrofuturist imaginings, bustles beneath the hologram of the visible and, in doing so, asks us to consider the politics of visibility as they pertain to other formative social imaginaries such as those articulated so beautifully by Benjamin in her manifesto.

The fiction that all that is true or real can be made visible on surfaces manifests in all our systems. It impacts the construction of borders, with statistics and cartography itself working to make bodies "visible to the state," making "a land's natural and human resources known or 'legible' to officials" (Ervin 2009, 156). These extend into other perceived threats to legibility and composition of the "face of the nation" more generally speaking, and the hearkening back to pure states of readability. We see this imaginary in operation whenever bodies are especially "ambiguous," hence decades of coercive and often secretive, literal re-shapings of bodies in the instances of infants born intersexed. This focus on the visible is what Elizabeth Grosz calls "biologically unwarranted," since biological sex, "is a much more complicated matter than the information afforded by vision" (Grosz 1996, 60). We can hear its resonance in the one drop rule, in the fears of "passing," in the Red and Lavender scares that sought to use visual signifiers to determine the truth of whether or not there were Communists or homosexual politicians and citizens "camouflaging"—a term used by J. Edgar Hoover in 1950—with the "normal" body politic. In 1950, one senator asked, "There is no quick test like an X-ray that discloses these things?" (quoted in Paton 2010, 58). These few but telling moments are emblematic of the social imaginary of the visible, inherently connected to what Benjamin characterizes as eugenics and carceral imaginaries, since in order to make visible or legible, the body cannot be in motion and must not threaten the supposed "pure" body politic. Visual distinction, so the story goes, is not only possible but necessary for the supposed "protection" of the readability of the surface of what is considered to be the "American body." The currents of this fiction run deeply through the United States and into the current political landscape in its rhetorical and imaginary constructions of otherness, in current-affairs language around immigrants, around trans identity, around protesters, around individuals born with autism—among so many other "others."

There is very real violence and coercion done in the name of this social imaginary of the visible world, and while we must combat these present violences in the forms of strategizing and organizing (Benjamin 2024, 16), work to transform the imaginary is also pressing, since these real harms are often perpetuated precisely through it. Benjamin's *Manifesto* argues that while the imagination should not be fetishized, it is to be taken seriously in working towards more liveable futures. While acknowledging we cannot "imagine ourselves out of the death-making machinery humming in the background," Benjamin also contends that, in attending to the harms themselves, "we may overlook the ideas and ideologies that continue to give rise to those harms again and again" (Benjamin 2024, 26-27). Thus, the work in, around, on the imaginary does not mean neglect of the "real" but means acknowledging that the real is very much framed within and executed through the fictions that are produced and that we, knowingly or unknowingly, inhabit. In Wakanda's world within a world, the motility within its surface is an alternative politics of visibility, one that appears across other Afrofuturist works as well. This politics has the capacity to contribute to a social imaginary not monopolized by those who currently monopolize (Benjamin 2024, 21) the means of production and distribution of resources in the present.

Images by which to "animate imagination" towards more liveable futures through a new politics of visibility are present in other Afrofuturist works beyond Wakanda and are especially apparent in the recent work of Janelle Monáe. In her short fiction collection *Memory Librarian*, Monáe insists that "the world we see is not the only one" and that "the escapes we yearned for might not exist in this one line of time, in this single, part-seen world" (Monáe 2022, ix), further insisting that "beyond time and memory—where the computer cannot reach

is—dreaming" (ix). This declaration refuses the idea that all can be made visible to power. It is also a reclamation of imagination and a glimmer of what bell hooks, in 1989, called "radical openness." hooks explained: "If we only view the margin as sign marking the despair, a deep nihilism penetrates in a destructive way the very ground of our being. It is there in that space of collective despair that one's creativity, one's imagination is at risk, there that one's mind is fully colonized, there that the freedom one longs for is lost" (hooks 1989, 20). Janelle Monáe's written, musical, and cinematic compositions and the theatrical roles take hooks' motion as instructive, as seeking and making queer non-singular spaces in which to desire, dream, and live. Furthermore, Monáe's work offers us a new vision of vision itself, crucial to the work of rethinking and re-envisioning possibilities. The use of imagery—within literature, film, music, or amalgamations and transmedial interactions within these and other genres—that offer a more plural politics of visibility (such as in Monáe's work) can re-shape not only on how we understand each other, ourselves, history, and memory, but how we can envision possible futures.

A Brief Introductory Note on the Artist's Vision: Living in the Rabbithole

Before delving into the recent book and cinematic appearance made by Monáe, it is worthwhile to take a moment to explore the artist's queer sense of time and space more broadly. "The Memory Librarian," the first full story in the collection of the same name—*The Memory Librarian and Other Stories of Dirty Computer* (2022)—world-builds across multiple story lines and through various co-authors writing alongside Monáe. The collection intersects with the narratives portrayed in Monáe's 2018 album likewise bearing the title *Dirty Computer* and its accompanying emotion video, a film of approximately 50 minutes (matching the album length) in which each song possesses its own video but also works to develop a shared world – the same world (but also not) which in turn presents itself in the 2022 literary collection. It would not be quite accurate to use the words *enrich* or *enhance* to describe what happens with the meaning(s) of the narratives as one turns back (and/or forward) from the book to the album, or from the album to the emotion video, or from the emotion video to the book, or whichever direction one is looking. Especially in its heterogenous formats, Monáe's work also fits the world-building model of transmedia, which tends to be associated with mammoth franchises such as *Star Wars* or even the Marvel multiverse where the storytelling across multiple genres directly benefits massive corporations, though simultaneously functions as a creative and decentralizing, potentially more participatory, means of engaging with or producing narratives (Jenkins 2024). Hassler-Forest (2017) uses Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of "heteroglossia" to characterize the incessant shifting between personas in Monae's storytelling and inability of the audience to pin down an authoritative or stable centralized narrative, as one can often do in the case of large franchise narratives. This significantly differentiates Monáe's work from said franchises in a decolonizing practice.

While Hassler-Forest characterizes Monáe's work as intentionally troubling the authoritative narrative usually locatable within transmedia consumption, and therefore also opening a "modest" (Hassler-Forest 2017, 389) potential for more imaginative modes of being, he also depicts an ambivalent relationship between Monáe's work and capitalism. Noting the intentionality in crafting and packaging an image that results in her "successful circulation as a pop icon" (Hassler-Forest 2017, 386), Hassler-Forest criticizes the artist's statements as lacking any substantial criticism of capitalism. Monáe's newer work in *The Memory Librarian*, however, is decidedly less ambivalent, taking direct aim at the capitalist machinery that would suck the very dreams from its constituents – if only it could.

Elizabeth Freeman defines chrononormativity as "a mode of implantation, a technique by which institutional forces come to seem like somatic facts" (Freeman 2010, 3). This echoes Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus and Sara Ahmed's later characterization in which the repetition of the labour to (re)produce certain lines of history and modes of being is, in the repetition, what "makes the work disappear" and come to feel like somatic truth (Ahmed 2006, 56). Monáe plays endlessly with undoing this *seeming* or this *feeling* like somatic fact. Refusing to present a singular "character" or public persona, the artist inhabits and builds in both imaginary and real spaces, at once deconstructing the line between them. Monáe has infamously dressed as numerous

Alice in Wonderland characters for public events and her own studio is called Wondaland. Further, Wondaland itself embodies this anti-chrononormativity: "The label's headquarters feature red-painted walls with clocks stuck in different hours" (Monday 2018). This whimsical transformation of the physical space reinforces the transmedial elements of Monáe's storytelling and her ways of being *in* and *out* of characters, refusing to be a one, singular "Janelle Monáe," and concretely manifests the imaginative act of being and dreaming other than the ways deemed normatively possible. Monáe's visions encourage the audience to experience what feels like fact, as feeling less factual, a decolonizing practice essential to combatting authoritarian and oppressive forces that lead only to an obliteration of futurity and livability. The "somatic fact" of chrono (and other forms of) normativity is no less invention and fiction than Alice's white rabbit, "lest we forget, designing cruel, oppressive structures involves imagination too" (Benjamin 2024, 39). But believing or remembering this requires practice. Engaging the work of Monáe is just one means of participating in this practice.

By following the artist down the rabbit hole, Monáe's audience might find themselves in a state of disbelief, as what we deem "real" and believable are predominantly a product of state-sanctioned conditioning. Entering Monáe's imaginative canvas, we might also suspend our disbelief (in other ways of being)—as fictions also call us to do—and then linger in this suspension. Like the many iterations of *Alice in Wonderland*, themselves transmedial in nature, we might arrive somewhere we cannot yet quite imagine or articulate. As Alice is asked repeatedly—"Who are you?"—we might call to mind an answer given by Monáe when asked about her sexuality: "I'm nonbinary, so I just don't see myself as a woman, solely. I feel all of my energy. I feel like God is so much bigger than the 'he' or the 'she.' If I am from God, I am everything" (Monáe 2022). Monáe engages the audience in this inquiry: what if we practice suspending our disbelief that we could be, that we in fact are, "everything"? Alice is both in the real and present and within the imaginary outside normative space, time, and perception. As Monáe's vision so wonderfully reveals, so are we all.

"All the Brilliant Bugs . . . Under our Surveilled Surfaces": A Textured Politics of Visibility

The introduction and first two stories of the sci-fi collection of short stories *Memory Librarian* establish the world of The New Dawn, a state aiming to see and control all behaviours, thoughts, and desires through the implementation of pervasive visual and memory surveillance technologies. New Dawn separates "clean" citizens from "dirty computers," whose memories require erasure, a process called "torching." New Dawn enforces conformity by tracking down "deviants" and "cleaning" them with the memory-destroying drug "Nevermind." The 2018 video narrative of Monáe's album *Dirty Computer* also features several depictions of the drug Nevermind, an indispensable technological tool of the authoritarian government regime. Nevermind serves as a memory eraser, illustrated in the form of a literal fog as it is administered in the music video (Monáe 2018).

While the drug is an essential component of the totalitarian regime that seeks the death of the human subject (hence referring to humans as "computers"), its use is only one means of executing surveillance capitalist practices in the New Dawn world. Memories can be sold at what are essentially ATM machines and drones collect memories in most public spaces. Ultimately, upon giving up these memories, the population becomes "more 'clean,' computerized, and tractable" (Riggins 2020, 2). In an imagined future where memories can be exchanged for cash or food, the multiple gathering and surveillance technologies are brought together by the state to create a repository of these memories, over which "Head Librarians" preside. This is the ultimate dream of surveillance capitalism: humans reduced to useable data, converted into sellable information. There is no apparent escape. Everything can be mined, from even the deepest parts of us, for consumption. For many today, this too feels like an embodied truth. However, Monáe insists the reader imaginatively engage the senses to wrench this "truth" from the body. Foucault's notions of panopticism as they circulate today often centralize the successful functionality of the disciplinary mechanism even without complete or absolute surveillance, resulting in passive conformity to the status quo. However, Foucault insists in his description of the panopticon that "a real subjection is born mechanically from a fictitious relation" (Foucault 1977, 202), thus pointing out

the relationship established is in fact a *fictitious* one: the inmates are not always visible to the guard; their actions *are* discontinuous; the surveillance itself is never complete. The guard cannot always be watching, even if he is no longer a singular person but a host of big tech companies and other corporate tentacles of the neoliberal creature. The promises borne in the nature of this relationship *as fictitious* are essential for imagining a future in which we don't "buy" that all we can do, want, and dream can be both constructed or designed for us and then made visible and thenceforth bought or sold into the flow of capital.

In *Memory Librarian*, readers are likewise assured that surveillance and control are always incomplete. Memories are entered into the system of capital, bought and sold; however, they are also hidden and squandered. There are "memory hoarders" who avoid the city and drones and seemingly omnipresent surveillance technologies. Head Memory Librarian—Seshet, who holds the occupation of custodian of "repository of memories" for the citizens of Little Delta—likewise mystifies her superiors. Seshet, a Black woman who finds herself uniquely in power in a world still dominated by white, male, cis-hetero, able-bodied power, takes a trans lover, named Alethia, and thus deviates in a world where "deviants" are marked with codes intended for "cleaning." While Seshet's queer deviation is noted by her superiors and remarked upon as a deviation that can be overlooked, those surveilling her still don't see *everything*. Seshet muses that her supervisor "cannot know what truly happened last night, just the outward appearance of it [. . . .] He cannot know the *feel* of what has happened to her, that explosion ongoing beneath her breast, the way her fingers itch to call Alethia" (Monáe 2022, 23). The outward appearance is part, but not all, of the real. Like Wakanda, there is something that cannot be confiscated by the white, heteronormative, colonial machine of capital. Philosopher of perception and embodiment, Maurice Merleau-Ponty declares, "What we call the visible is [. . .] a quality pregnant with texture, the surface of a depth, a cross section upon a massive being, a grain or corpuscle borne by a wave of Being" (Merleau-Ponty 1969, 136). Merleau-Ponty's assertion of density and depth is a countercurrent to America's dominant narratives of itself and its constituents, which rests on the primacy of a visible surface that is (or was once, at some prior historical point) readable and should, if morally "good," be made readable (again). Seshet's claim over her memory (as textured) is likewise a claim over herself (as textured) and defies this dominant "logic" (and politics) of visibility. Readers in the process are too pulled inextricably into this textured world and compelled into a practice of disengaging from said "logic."

Ana Dragojlovic and CL Quinan identify a related, significant connection between the politics of visibility and (under)representation in history and narrative. They suggest that there is essential memory work to be done in aiming to give voice to those who have been silenced across history but that there must be caution taken in that "investments in unmasking archival silences might be trapped in a romance of making visible," when, in fact, full representation and visibility are "inevitably partial" (Dragojlovic and Quinan 2024, 5). Thus, while troubling the surfaces of history and attending to its concealments is necessary work, so at once is the repudiation of the fiction of visibility also necessary work in making space for more ways of being. While we can acknowledge that Seshet's memory of Alethia is queer in that it makes visible a narrative of queer desire, we must still acknowledge that even Seshet's memory can never be complete. It too is only partial, only a "cross section upon a massive being" in Merleau-Ponty's prior words, and the reader's relation to the text in the queer remembrance itself forces readers into a queer relation. This is an act of practice that destabilizes the habitus that tells us memory, narrative, visibility, embodiment, or identity can be made whole unless, of course, this also queers our associations with wholeness, as in Monáe's aforementioned assertion that, "if I am from God, I am everything," and thus, impossibly always and never "whole," infinitely textured.

The exposure of the fictional relation between the see-er and the seen echoes throughout *Memory Librarian*, with the initial illustration of the New Dawn exposing its limitations and insisting on the existence of "those parts of us we encrypted—the clandestine networks of love and expression, curiosity, and desire. All the brilliant bugs, the dirty circuitry, under our surveilled surfaces" (Monáe 2022, X). This visual, poetic claiming of something that cannot be owned or seen by the state echoes the assertion of identity and visible surfaces themselves as dense, as complex, as not fully decipherable. When Seshet leaves the "Obelisk" at the center of Little Delta, venturing into the downtown, she finds herself in "the dirty thick of it"—a space which is not visible

from the central tower observing Little Delta: there are teenagers as there are septuagenarians; women don suits and men sport dresses and many defy any visual identifiers of gender; people of black, brown, and beige hues bustle about. Further, "the new crowd is high on some kind of drug, singing songs she's never heard of in harmony, finishing one another's sentences" (Monáe 2022, 14-15). Outside the city center of surveillance and memory theft, life pulses and spaces of non-conformity not only exist but thrive and flourish and make space for passion and laughter and love.

Monáe's gorgeously eclectic and flourishing communities disrupt the panoptic model that cannot successfully force them into line, and into the line of sight. They are in more than one world at once, in the "opening" (hooks 1989) where both oppression and resistance cohabitate. This is echoed again when Seshet visits the "up-side-down kingdom" run by Doc Young, grand master of underground parties featuring "Nevermind-remixes," forms of co-optation which queer disciplinary mechanisms of the state in order to share memories, create dreams, see sound, and hear colour (Monáe 2022, 24). Here, Seshet witnesses (and later partakes in) a sort of joyous "radical opening" of tech: "Three people wearing VR headsets lie beneath the screen on thin pallets. Seshet pauses to stare at the projection, which looks like a memory but must be a lucid dream, somehow shared between the three people on the floor" (Monáe 2022, 58). If most canonized science fiction has reinforced future dreams of the fully dystopian surveillance capital state, thereby projecting the structures *and fictions* of the present into the future, this captivating visual image of shared lucid dreaming reminds readers that we can and *must* work together to project futures otherwise. While the New Dawn value system of currency dictated by the "surface" world (which, in fact, is the same world) insists that only memory extraction is valuable, Doc Young informs Seshet that she cannot sell her memories there, in the "upside-down kingdom," as they only "deal in dreams" (Monáe 2022, 52). Thus what Seshet witnesses is much, again, like that of Alice, where worlds exist within worlds. The vastly different value systems and rules by which these worlds operate are emblematic of the real and imaginary worlds that Monáe calls us paradoxically to inhabit, so as to uninhabit—or dis-embody—the "habitus" and to "decode the imaginative justifications that make those social hierarchies seem natural, durable, and deserved" (Benjamin 2024, 64), hierarchies that are at least partly perpetuated by the stifling of the imaginary within the real.

In addition to creative remixes, authorities in Monáe's story face another enormous obstacle in the "exponential growth" of "false memories gumming up the collection" (Monáe 2022, 23) and "half-dreams clogging the system" (Monáe 2022, 61). These turn out to be not just the result of drug-induced dreaming but also the deliberate obfuscation of memory as product by learned practices of memory falsification, doctoring, duplicating. These practices are leaked through a rogue AI and Library employee, contributing to the vision of a future in which the fictional relation of the panoptic machine can be imaginatively, creatively undermined by the creation of new fictions. Furthermore, it is ultimately revealed that Alethia, Seshet's trans lover and infamous Nevermind remixer, is currently working on a concoction that is in fact not remix at all but something "completely new," an "antidote" to the memory-washing and white-washing of histories employed by New Dawn in order to sanitize and make for docile citizenry. This resonates with how Cover and Prosser characterize spaces of queer memory in the form of formal and informal, personal and community archives (Cover and Prosser 2024, 3) that challenge authoritative and singular narrative and memory of the past. Both the remixing and the confounding of the memory-collecting make it impossible for authorities to determine which memories are "real" and which are fabricated for the purposes of "clogging" and "confusing" the system. The invention of new fictions thus trouble the persistence of the "old" fiction that memories are ultimately intelligible and readable. The memory archives in this science fiction are typically controlled by authorities who wipe out history when it is beneficial to them—much like we see the attempted erasure of much of US history today in order to perpetuate a "clean" version of the past. In the disruption of those archives, the remixes make the human-information-collection process illegible and therefore also not available for commodification. Furthermore, it creates *new* fictions as part of this mechanism of resistance while simultaneously gesturing to the audience for the proliferating *more* new fictions.

Monáe's insistence that there is thriving, pulsing life beyond what can be surveilled asks us to imagine ourselves with the complex, dense, and networked selfhood that cannot be ultimately extricated, shored up, made "pure" or fully comprehensible—either to outside surveillance, or even to our own eyes (or within our own narrative of self). Again, it beckons readers to engage in a practice of suspending disbelief in all of us as "everything." As with *Memory Librarian,* Monáe's role in the film *Glass Onion* refuses to neatly package itself and become readable – again asking viewers to engage in practices of challenging that which feels like "somatic fact."

Glass Onion: Queer Memory & the Inscrutable Gaze

In Rian Johnson's 2022 Netflix film *Glass Onion: Knives Out*, Miles Bron—a white, cis, able-bodied, male, Silicon Valley mogul—at first appears to be a creative tech genius. However, it turns out Miles has stolen all the ideas and products that have brought him wealth and fame. Most prominently, Miles stole the very idea for the tech giant Alpha from Andi, played by Monáe. Furthermore, he pays others to come up with supposedly imaginative puzzles and designs then passes them off as his own. Nothing of his is original—only bought or stolen. This story line speaks not just to the long history in the US of cultural appropriation but to techno-preneurs the likes of Elon Musk who have taken via exploitative buyout or outright theft. For example (and this is just one), the April 2022 issues of both *Entrepreneur* and *Afrotech* expose the exploitation of Riz Nwosu, who brought his idea of the Cyberbackpack to Musk, who then turned around and immediately trademarked it for his own company and profit (Rodgers 2022).

While this is a recent example of a Black man whose imagination was exploited for the profits of a white man, this exploitation reaches back to the Transatlantic Slave Trade during which "as noncitizens, enslaved Black people could not own property, including intellectual property, and were denied related opportunities for compensation" (Bethea 2021, 23). History is likewise rife with stories of Black women such as Ellen Eglin, a domestic servant in Washington, DC, who sold her clothes wringer—essentially, an early technological iteration of the washing machine—to an agent for just $18 in 1888, which resulted in great financial gain to the agent (Peterson 2019). When asked about why she sold, in an inquiry made by a short-lived publication called *The Woman Inventor*, Eglin stated: "You know I am black and if it was known that a Negro woman patented the invention, white ladies would not buy the wringer; I was afraid to be known because of my color in having it introduced in the market, that is the only reason" (quoted in Peterson 2019).

Whether through coercion, manipulation, or more obvious theft, white "technopreneurs" have historically and repeatedly profited from the often-hidden imagination and creativity of non-white people. While the 2016 film *Hidden Figures* problematically holds up a white savior as the real civil rights activist (Hassler-Forest 2022, 33), Monáe's presence in this film alludes to what viewers encounter in *Glass Onion*: the hidden (often deliberately) or stolen labour and invention of Black people over the course of US history. This calls to mind Ahmed's assertion: "History cannot simply be perceived on the surface of the object, even if how objects surface or take shape is an effect of such histories" (Ahmed 2006, 41). This offers a powerful reflection on dominant ideologies of history, visibility, and identity as they interconnect to perpetuate systems and values that seem to have simply "appeared" but instead hide embedded labour—and this includes the labour necessary to trivialize and police the imagination.

While the false narratives in *Glass Onion* perpetuated by Bron, the white Alpha "owner," recall these acts of historical and violent theft of bodies and labour, Bron's pretentious nature is also repeatedly pointed out to critique the Silicon Valley rebranding of dehumanization, theft, and exploitation under capitalism as genius and creativity—as the product of a true "dreamer." Monáe (as Andi, as Helen) challenges this narrative directly in the film with a dexterous handle on what Benjamin calls the "ability to detect bullshit [. . .] the difference between New Stories of collective well-being and Faux Fables deciding our collective fate" (Benjamin 2024, 21). Helen (as Andi) discerns that what Bron and his fellow "disruptors" are selling are Faux Fables that offer

no real alternative to the capitalist nightmare that extracts from, and obliterates, humanity. Bron's misuse of words such as "reclamation," his invention of words that sound smart but are not in fact words, such as "inbreathiate," the information that he paid someone not only to design the invitation puzzle boxes sent out to the "disruptors" but also the murder mystery itself: these revelations all reflect how capitalism and neoliberalism package themselves as more complex than they are, engaging the public by presenting the various technological products of a surveillance capitalist society as beneficial, as breaking the status quo, as progressive, even as humanitarian. They are Faux Fables of freedom and "breaking the status quo" that clamor to turn people into products through unchecked data mining and advertisement. This neoliberal trick of surveillance capitalism also turns these products into supposedly dense objects (offering individuality or expression for instance) while reducing people to readable singularities (in the imaginary). Bron's "inner circle" of what he terms "disruptors" demonstrate likewise neoliberal re-packaging of status quo reiterations – for instance, a misogynistic social media influencer who claims he is "radical" because he believes that the "breastification of America" is leading to a breakdown in the "natural order." The wielding of technological and rhetorical weapons to convince the masses that the extent of dreaming is what can be bought, sold, and repackaged may cause great despair in viewers, as this mirrors what we see today. There is no real "breaking with the status quo." Yet, this despair is broken by Monáe's presence in *Glass Onion*.

While there is much to unpack in this beautiful and imaginative film, it is worthwhile for the purposes of this particular inquiry, to sit with the complexities of "willful eccentricity" and the queerness of space and time that characterize Monáe's characters' (plural) complexities within the film. At the beginning, the audience (and other characters) believe her at that time to be Andi, the co-founder of Alpha who was cheated out of her company share in spite of the fact that the company was actually Andi's idea. The audience and characters are introduced to Monáe as Andi and it is not until about halfway through the film that the onion starts to unravel. Viewers find out that Andi has been dead since the film opened and that the character presented as Andi was in fact her twin sister Helen, who has been masquerading as Andi unbeknownst to the majority of partygoers at Bron's private island and unknown to film viewers. As the past is then re-remembered later in the film, Monáe also plays the role of Andi, since there are flashbacks to Andi's murder at the hands of Miles Bron. In Monáe's own summary: "I played Helen, I played Andi, and I played Helen pretending to be Andi. And then I played Helen being Andi and the audience not knowing that there was any difference—so essentially four characters, or four different energies. And I knew that it was going to be the greatest challenge in my film career thus far" (quoted in Schulman 2023).

This speaks back to the opening image noted in this essay – the moment in which Wakanda reveals itself, reinforcing the notion of a "part-seen world." Not only does the visible prove to hold a much greater complexity in the identity of Andi/Helen/Monáe but also within the film structure itself, where the latter half of the film literally shows us that the world we just saw was not the only one, that other narratives were embedded, enfolded, yet to be told, not visible on the immediate surface. Like the Nevermind remix, Helen's recasting of the audience and character memories thwart the systemic telling of history that leave out the theft, the violence, and the silencing of those who seek to present history in its less "clean" version. Helen's retelling is a form of queering memory in that the memories themselves possess "a unique capacity to reverse the flow of time and to undo expected chronologies, thereby queering temporality" (Dragojlovic and Quinan 2023, 4). This queering happens likewise in *Memory Librarian* when, for instance, Seshet recalls her own queer memory with Alethia—in which the memory recording cannot capture the "explosion" beneath her breasts or the itch of her fingers—and thus queers the memory, both a noun and by extension a verb, as an act of remembrance and an undoing of the present. While this queering unfolds in the reading and in the film, the audience must engage in history, memory, and visibility queerly as well, a valuable practice in unearthing our perceptions of being in the world.

The final shot in *Glass Onion* refuses resolution. The cinematic moment features Andi/Helen/Monáe peering directly, unflinchingly, at the viewer, her look inscrutable. There is a deep perplexity inherent to this moment. In some ways it echoes the Mona Lisa's gaze, a visible that holds texture and depth, capable of appearing as one

world and then as another, as directly referenced in the film, when the painting is acquired on loan by Bron and admired by Monáe's character(s). Yet, it is also more, or rather something else; the look is not only the making of Monáe into a modern Mona Lisa. Fixed on viewers, the look forces the audience to wonder what Monáe knows that they do not know. While the viewer has been given the "real identity" of the character at this point, how sure are we? Given the queer accountings of time(s) and space(s) already encountered in viewing, which disrupted notions of who was who and what actually unfolded, there could be great density to what might be withheld or unknown as Monáe peers out mysteriously. Maybe she is not, as promised, Helen? Or is this actually Monáe, directing her gaze straight (queerly) at us? Monáe's final look in *Glass Onion* is a call towards the artist's vision: the vision of a world whose structural disruption is possible through both a recognition of the visible world as textured and as always part-unseen, and through a radical imagination that thrives in the space of this recognition. Like the nature of the artist's transmedial work, or her character's reclamation of dreaming, it is a deliberate ask to practice living in the suspended disbelief, to live in the "everything" of identity and visibility that cannot be shored up and made into a singular thing that possesses an authoritative locus of truth. While the practice of lingering within these suspensions of what has been made to feel like truth may seem merely a philosophical thought experiment, there are significant material consequences to how both visibility and identity are understood.

Conclusion: Dreaming in Fiction(s) of the Real

As the US currently faces potentially unprecedented levels of authoritarian control, protecting oneself within the dominant fictions will surely be necessary, at least at times. Yet even in these moments, the fictions themselves must not be protected; their disruption will need to be ongoing. Political power in the United States has consistently, historically leveraged itself through not only surveillance but through a mythology that the visible can be an ultimate teller of truth. Ways of being that contest this mythology are often violently expelled in some fashion because they jeopardize the way bodies themselves might be understood as complex, as inextricably connected to other bodies or histories, as identities that are in their very nature all in states of constant flux and change—of transition. Hence we see the vile and violent backlash against individuals who identify as —or, for that matter, those who appear they might be—trans. While it is necessary to use the dominant fictions of visibility, memory, and identity for physical safety or for a sense of belonging and community in the present, it is also necessary to engage in the practice of radical imagination of a world in which that fiction no longer feels like the real. As Cover and Prosser point out, identifying memories of "being queer" as an essentialism is often a trope that functions "as an effect of cultural demands for coherent, intelligible and recognizable identities (Cover and Prosser 2024, 18). Partly, the concept of being hidden-in-plain-sight also makes room for the present *use* of these fictions while also, in the "corpuscles" beneath the surface, working to decolonize and destabilize the power the fiction holds over our bodies in the world.

To enter into, to experience, the deconstructive work of Monáe and other Afrofuturists—to play within the destabilization of the current politics of visibility—is not to ignore the power that does exist: the power to deport, to revoke rights, to obliterate funding, to limit access, to confiscate desperately needed resources, to censor, to imprison (and to pardon), even to kill. It is not to disengage with the dangerous scope of what *is* visible and surveilled, nor to ignore the eugenics and carceral imaginaries at work in politicians and technocrats who seek to extract copious amounts of data about taxpayers, immigrants, those with autism, and so many others. This is not to trivialize the real threats posed to non-conforming bodies and identities during this (or any other) administration. Rather, it is to say that, while acknowledging the violent potentials and realities of this political power, we must also refute the lies that claim it is capable of making all that is inscrutable or unreadable into something legible. While the push back against these present violences *must* be pushed back against in the present, we must also push back against the fictions that drive and permit these actions to persist in the first place: narratives that have long attempted to shore up a coherent and cohesive "America" that is pure, clean, a priori ("great again"), and something fully intelligible.

This likewise returns us to the image that frames this essay, yet another image in which to let our imaginations dwell. Benjamin's (2024) imaginative manifesto gives us the lush visual of the mushrooms and its threaded roots and branches. The capacity for fungi to thrive—to turn inhospitable environments into ones where life can flourish—is borne out of that which is out of sight. In addition to characterizing the networks of the imaginary as invisible yet necessary and real, this dazzling, mystical, yet concrete description also *does* what Benjamin call for: it contributes to a body of new images and, with it, has the capacity to "animate" the imagination and denaturalize dominant fictions that insist on the visible as the only real. Monáe's work likewise does what Benjamin calls for: it creates new fictions and offers literary and cinematic snapshots to linger on and within, snapshots that invite us to denaturalize the fictions that aim to eradicate and "purify," that aim to arrest and categorize and make legible to power. These snapshots invite us to denaturalize our vision of the visible world: Wakanda's holographic surface; Wondaland's painted clocks stuck in different hours; the queer memories that cannot be captured; the collective dream projection; the inscrutable gaze of Janelle Monáe; the mushroom's branching interconnected network not visible on the surface. We desperately need images that ask us to re-orient ourselves to our bodies and identities as complexly textured and inherently unstable. We desperately need art that asks us to practice reimagining what have come to feel like embodied truths. We desperately need new fictions to live by and in such that the fictions we inhabit—and feel inhabited by—are not, in the future, those that constrain and threaten bodily integrity in the present. We are always living in both the real world and in the fictions that bind our existence in that world. Thus like Alice, we at once inhabit multiple worlds. This is a political time, for so many, of intense despair. As hooks (1989) astutely reminds us, our minds and imaginations are at stake in this "space of collective despair" and the possibility of liveable futures hangs in the balance. Working to create new fictions is as consequential now as ever.

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