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# The Elements of Production: Myth, Gender, and the "Fundamental Task" of Producing Popular Music

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## **Abstract**

Using Antoine Hennion’s “anti-musicology”, this research project proposes a methodology for studying music production that empowers production choices as the primary analytical tool. It employs this methodology to analyze Kesha’s *Rainbow*, Janelle Monáe’s *Dirty Computer*, and St. Vincent’s *Masseduction* according to four, encompassing groups of production elements: musical elements, lyrical elements, personal elements, and narrative elements. All three albums were critical and commercial successes, and analyzing their respective choices offers valuable insight into the practice of successful producers that could not necessarily be captured by methodologies traditionally used for studying production, such as the interview. Further, as self-productions by female producers, these records confront and disrupt gendered perceptions of the production role that have mythologized and mischaracterized it in discourse. By unpacking the work of three radical producers, this thesis advocates for, and seeks to contribute to, reforming production discourse.

## **Summary for Lay Audience**

This project argues for reforming the study of music production by focusing on the choices made by producers. It uses Antoine Hennion’s “anti-musicology” methodology to accordingly analyze Kesha’s *Rainbow*, Janelle Monáe’s *Dirty Computer*, and St. Vincent’s *Masseduction* as production case studies. All three albums were critical and commercial successes, and uncovering the production choices behind those successes offers greater insight than traditional interviews necessarily could. This project further seeks to redefine how production is thought of and studied by focusing on the work of three female artist-producers, when the production role has historically been characterized as male.

## **Keywords**

Music production, production myth, production elements, anti-musicology, Hennion, Kesha, Janelle Monáe, St. Vincent.

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Thank you Sam, Zeljko , and recently Will, for your dear and dedicated friendship. Emilia, you inspired this research. Henry, I want to be you when I grow up. Thank you to my family, who take my calls even at musician hours. Finally, Francis Mahady, I will send you a copy.

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## Chapter 1

### 1 Introduction

“The *art* of record production is to realise a vision expressed by an artist’s articulation in a form that results from the producer’s perception.”

– Mike Howlett, “The Record Producer as Nexus”

Studying production is a fraught balancing act. Production historically confounds comprehensive definition, leading to discursive inconsistencies in not just “emerging” production studies, but the broader fields of popular culture, popular music, and musicology.<sup>1</sup> As Russ Hepworth-Sawyer and Jay Hodgson write in *Perspectives on Music Production*, “both tacit and explicit definitions of ‘music production’ offered in recent research often bear a tautological resonance: *record production is everything done to produce a recording of music*”.<sup>2</sup> While a well-intentioned effort to maintain a necessarily “broad” view of the production process, a definition of production worth universal utility must engage with the “numerous component procedures” encompassed within the production process, “each of which, while holistically realized, nonetheless requires its own specialized expertise(s).”<sup>3</sup> Hepworth-Sawyer and Hodgson argue that an understanding as generalized as the above, while not necessarily inaccurate, “simply doesn’t withstand sustained analytic scrutiny”.<sup>4</sup>

At the other end of the analytical spectrum is an equally misleading tradition of sonic abstraction, a fixation akin to what Robin James calls, “but what about the music?” criticism.<sup>5</sup> Attempting to scale back definitions of production for analytic purposes historically result in academics attempting to hold recordings separate from the socio-political contexts of their making, divorcing the musical object from the circumstances of

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<sup>1</sup> Russ Hepworth-Sawyer and Jay Hodgson, *Perspectives on Music Production* (Routledge, 2016), xii.

<sup>2</sup> Hepworth-Sawyer, *Perspectives*, xii.

<sup>3</sup> Hepworth-Sawyer, xii.

<sup>4</sup> Hepworth-Sawyer, xii.

<sup>5</sup> Robin James, “How Not to Listen to Lemonade” (Sounding Out!, 2016).

the musical act. This approach neglects the creative context of production in favour of focusing on production tools, particularly technical ‘gear’ and its processes, in similar pursuit of being “generic” and “depoliticized” that James observes in critical coverage of pop records.<sup>6</sup> Such an approach also fails analytic scrutiny, because, as James determines, “separating the music itself out from the political content misrepresents what music is and how it works”.<sup>7</sup> Production is not (only) about technical skills or equipment. In his 1983 article *The Production of Success*, Antoine Hennion establishes that pop songs<sup>8</sup> are “socio-sentimental” objects. The song’s elements can ultimately be considered either individually or in conjunction with one another, but the song itself is a multi-functional object, a hybrid of the artist’s expression and the needs of the public.<sup>9</sup> Considering these needs is, for Hennion, the producer’s “fundamental task”: to be successful, the song must deliver meaning in a way that the listening public perceives to be authentic, thus it is the producer’s responsibility to undertake “an organized quest for what holds meaning for the public”<sup>10</sup> and accordingly deliver what this musically necessitates from a record.<sup>11</sup> Such large-scale, socio-political considerations must thus be incorporated into any study of production, or to further apply James’ ideas:

“Digging deep into the music on *Lemonade* or any other pop song does not involve abstracting the music away from every other aspect of the work and its conditions of production. Digging deep into the music part of pop music means digging deeper into these factors, too.”<sup>12</sup>

The problematic impulse towards abstraction is also a particularly gendered one, which further complicates universal understanding of production.<sup>13</sup> As Paula Wolfe

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Hennion does not use the word pop to indicate a genre, rather as a short form of ‘popular’, the same ‘popular’ in ‘popular culture’.

<sup>9</sup> Antoine Hennion, “The Production of Success: An Anti-Musicology of the Pop Song” (Popular Music, 1983), 161.

<sup>10</sup> Hennion, 160.

<sup>11</sup> Hennion, 160.

<sup>12</sup> James, “Lemonade”.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.



summarizes, “The role of the music producer within the popular music industry has been recognised as a profession that is male dominated and strongly associated with notions of power and control”.<sup>14</sup> Brian Jones confirms that this perception is pervasive, indeed documents its persistence as a production “myth” where the always-male producer characterized as a sort of omniscient mechanic.<sup>15</sup> Absent a more tangible understanding of production to combat such a myth, the popular consciousness internalizes a narrow, hyper-masculine, technology-fetishizing concept of what it means to be a producer.<sup>16</sup> Thus, absent a more tangible understanding of production, scholars perpetuate such myths, muddying production study against the academic ethos of elucidation and documentation.<sup>17</sup>

This research project does not seek to explicitly *define* production, indeed posits that further attempts to comprehensively define production beyond Hepworth-Sawyer and Hodgson’s broad observation are somewhat futile given the expansive but detail-oriented nature of the profession. Though practicing producers could facilitate a more accurate understanding of production, and assist in debunking myths, Hepworth-Sawyer and Hodgson point that “their contributions are often “bracketed in quiet ways”, usually relegated to “‘trade’ oriented” interviews<sup>18</sup>. Thus by analysing the production of three massively successful albums – Kesha’s *Rainbow*, Janelle Monae’s *Dirty Computer*, and St. Vincent’s *Masseduction* – this research project seeks to develop a framework for studying production that is necessarily wide-ranging and functional, offering an alternative methodology to the interview for production study by empowering production

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Brian Jones, “The Power of a Production Myth: PJ Harvey, Steve Albini, and Gendered Notions of Recording Fidelity” (Popular Music and Society, 2018).

<sup>16</sup> The tendency to equate producers with engineers (the real gear operators) can be somewhat forgiven of people unfamiliar with production when the stages of the production process are, per Hepworth-Sawyer and Hodgson, called “pre-production”, “engineering”, “mixing and mastering” (commonly referred to as ‘post-production’), and “distribution” [*Perspectives*, xii]. A ‘pre’ and ‘post’ assume a ‘production’ in the center, and subsequently imply that concerns of distribution and reception are not the concern of ‘producers’. This, however, is not the case.

<sup>17</sup> See above.

<sup>18</sup> Hepworth-Sawyer, xiii.

choices as “sonic evidence of implied actions”<sup>19</sup>. Derived from the production elements defined by Hennion in his “anti-musicology” approach, this framework provides scholars with a universal analytical structure that doesn’t abstract production choices from their creative contexts, rather understands these contexts as analytically significant and accordingly makes room for them. All three records analysed in this project were commercial and critical successes. The production choices that made them so are discursive contributions if empowered in analysis.

This research project has a secondary contributive interest. All three records listed are largely produced by their female artists, so this project is an equal contribution to the study of female production and female *self*-production, notoriously underexplored areas of the production field<sup>20</sup>. Studying what female creators *do* is historically neglected, mirroring the voids in broader production practice addressed by Hodgson. Work by women further falls prey to the gendered quality of abstraction discussed above and larger discursive naturalization of female creative work<sup>21</sup>, elucidated by Paula Wolfe:

“...the territory which women are expected to inhabit, that of performer, that of singer, has in itself been depicted as ‘natural’ or ‘artless’... The woman artist is still assumed to be, until she overtly states her case as otherwise, ‘just the singer’, and to be ‘just the singer’ is seen as requiring none of the skill associated with mastering an instrument... or recording technology or music production.”<sup>22</sup>

This secondary focus is partly personal: like the women at the centre of this research project, I am a female producer and self-producing artist. My initial reaction to these records was instinctively stirring as much as professionally fascinating. All three albums seem to anoint their respective artists with an artistic gravity, a perception of authorship beyond mere performance, that feels both profound to listen to and fundamentally

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<sup>19</sup> Jones, 2.

<sup>20</sup> Paula Wolfe, “A Studio of One’s Own: Music Production, Technology, and Gender” (Journal on the Art of Record Production, 2012).

<sup>21</sup> Ann Powers, “A New Canon: In Pop Music, Women Belong At The Center Of The Story” (NPR, 2017).

<sup>22</sup> Wolfe, “One’s Own”.

different from female pop music norms. The professional duality of artistic production that these women embody poses moving analytical questions that the work of male producers does not similarly trigger: how would a female artist choose to produce herself if she was a qualified producer? How would a producer choose to make music if they were a female artist? This is the scholarly impetus for focusing on female production, also per Wolfe:

“...not only does an examination of women’s self-production practices provide a useful vehicle with which to aid our understanding of women’s minority status in music production, in the broadest sense, but... the very act of self-production, undertaken by a female artist, constitutes a bold statement for feminist popular music scholars and female artists alike.”<sup>23</sup>

As this research project seeks to make its own bold statements about the academic understanding of production, it seems appropriate to focus that analysis on producers whose work is inherently radical. *Rainbow*, *Dirty Computer*, and *Masseduction* can be understood in not only the context of their success, but the additional gendered obstacles that their creators had to overcome. This research project seeks to develop a framework to empower the choices of producers, and is invested in correcting the dearth of knowledge on female production; the latter is an effective way of undertaking to the former.

## 1.1 Methodology

This research project constructs its analytical framework according to Antoine Hennion’s 1983 article *The Production of Success: An Anti-Musicology of the Pop Song*. Though an older contribution to the literature, Hennion’s “anti-musicology” is one of few approaches that empower production choices as the primary analytical tool. He argues that the producer’s responsibility is not the record’s music per se, as the production myth discussed above would suggest, but the record’s reception<sup>24,25</sup>. Popular music

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Though the producer is indeed responsible for what the record *sounds like*.

records do not garner mass or critical appeal for simply the musical elements they contain; the expressive value of the work is comprehensive, especially in recorded form<sup>26</sup>. Further, successful works are not predicated on any one particular element, but the communicative power of the “empirical balance” of all production elements<sup>27</sup>. Functionally, production elements are contributions to the record’s message and receptive intentions. Therefore, production choices – deciding when, where, and how to invoke production elements – can be understood as communications if analysed in conjunction with one another. Hennion’s anti-musicology argues that what producers choose to do *says* something, and what they are trying to *say* can be understood without relying on interviews if one analyses production choices as such.

His encompassing elements of production are thus necessarily broad, making analytical space for the producer’s socio-political circumstances, i.e. creative context, and avoiding the impulse to abstract the sonic elements from the others. Hennion separates them into four categories: **musical elements**, which include rhythm section, orchestra backing, and melody. **Lyrical elements**, which are words, versification, and style<sup>28</sup>. The **personal elements** are image and voice. Finally, Hennion dictates that producers must consider ‘history’ and ‘story’, which I have grouped together as the **narrative elements**: a *sympathetic* persona, and “timeless” narrative<sup>29</sup>. Each element performs two roles. The first is connecting to other, related, elements for the sake of cohesive listening experience. The second is participating in the song as a whole to serve its, and by extension the album’s, message. The spacing of elements, where and how they are used in the song’s structure, dictates a large part of the latter<sup>30</sup>. The production of the rhythm

<sup>25</sup> Hennion, 174.

<sup>26</sup> Hennion, 160.

<sup>27</sup> Hennion, 164.

<sup>28</sup> Style is largely an approach to words and versification, thus I have incorporated the analysis of style into both of the other lyrical elements throughout this research project, rather than in its own analytical subsections.

<sup>29</sup> Hennion, 175.

<sup>30</sup> Hennion, 165.

section, for example, massages the song into the body of the listener, and also determines whether or not the song feels appropriately anchored (e.g. ‘groovy’, ‘driving’, ‘laid back’) for its lyrical/narrative/personal themes.

With this understanding, I conducted my initial research by listening to *Rainbow*, *Dirty Computer*, and *Masseduction*, before any other research into the records and their making to avoid confirmation bias. Over the course of several months, I listened to each record over fifty times in a wide variety of spaces, with a range of listening apparatuses, and to deliberately varying degrees of focus, though always in order: the track list itself is a production choice, so I chose to consume each record as that choice dictated. I made extensive notes about virtually everything that I noticed: the instrumentation; the sonic ‘space’; the aesthetic; the narrative evolution. I asked questions like, what is done in each production element versus in the other elements? When is this done? Is there a function performed, or something communicated, by choosing to use the elements this way? How does this make me feel? How? Why does that seem to be? What genres are leveraged, and where? What cultural moments or movements are referenced? What does or doesn’t seem congruous with my knowledge of the artists and their respective, prior work? Which guest artists are featured, and what do they contribute? What does all of this seem to say? I further analysed the auditory elements according to Albin Zak’s sonic dimensions: musical performance, timbre, echo, ambience, and texture<sup>31</sup>, asking further questions like, what is prominent in the mix? What is hidden or buried? What techniques or processing are used heavily? Where? Why does that seem to be? What was done sparingly, and the same follow up questions? Are there sounds that I cannot identify? How so? What does that seem to say?

My findings revealed many patterns, such as the narrative movements on *Dirty Computer*. Further research into the records’ making<sup>32</sup> confirmed that these patterns were intentionally constructed and inscribed. That further research from both primary and

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<sup>31</sup> Albin Zak, “The Poetics of Rock: Cutting Tracks, Making Records” (University of California Press, 2001), xii.

<sup>32</sup> Interviews with the producers, liner notes from the records, reviews of the record containing producer testimony, profiles including the same, etc.

secondary sources is incorporated throughout the following chapters is for the reader's convenience, and should be understood as supporting material included to pre-emptively combat criticism of conjecture (on my part) or serendipity (on the producers' respective parts). The production choices themselves stand as definitive, interpretable contributions. That all three of the producers at the centre of this research project are self-producers simplifies interpretation. The communicative vision for each album belongs to a singular, respective entity, with a single creative context, whose efforts are bolstered by a creative collective<sup>33</sup> of other supportive professionals.

Each chapter recount the self-producer's background and career to the point of her album's construction, followed by a production analysis organized according to the elements of production: distinct sections for the narrative, musical, lyrical, and personal elements, and subsections within each for their substrata. As each album has distinct messages communicated through its production choices, each chapter has a particular analytical focus. Hennion frames pop records as a "mixture" of three "raw materials": "music", "lyrics", and "character"<sup>34</sup>. Each album's production orients its mixture around one particular material and that material's related production elements. Kesha's chapter analyses the relationship between her production choices and perceived authorship. Character is the focus of the record's production, because the story that Kesha tells on *Rainbow* is authenticating in a way that her older work was not perceived to be. This chapter subsequently revolves around how *Rainbow* seized, told, and then responded to #FreeKesha, effectively re-branding Kesha as a critically legitimate artist. Janelle Monae's chapter analyses the relationship between her production choices and perceived humanity. *Dirty Computer* is assembled around the lyrics, because testimonial on Janelle Monae's lived experiences are humanizing in a way that the abstracted dimensions of her identity struggle to be. This chapter accordingly focuses on how the record's production confronts and responds to that dehumanization without being alienating. Finally, St. Vincent's chapter examines the relationship between her production choices and

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<sup>33</sup> Defined in the following section on methodology.

<sup>34</sup> Hennion, 162.

perceived intimacy. *Masseduction* is assembled around the music because of its ability to disorient, in parallel with Annie Clark's leveraging of St. Vincent as a persona that shields her person from scrutiny. This final chapter thus details how the record's production obfuscates without being hostile, maintaining the album's intimacy without being personally revealing.

## 1.2 Literature Review

Hennion's "anti-musicology"<sup>35</sup> from "The Production of Success: An Anti-Musicology of the Pop Song" is the analytical structure of this research project, empowering production choices as both interpretable communications and discursive contributions without the necessity of play-by-play interviews from the producers studied. Hennion's understanding of the production role includes musical/technical/socio-political expertise as much as emotional intelligence, a necessarily wide analytical foundation when this research project seeks to combat the tendency towards abstraction in historical production study. Hennion's term "creative collective" is how this project labels the respective production teams behind each record: a group of creative professionals who work as a unified production effort behind the vision of their artist-producer, though each executes disparate components of the production process according to their particular skillset.

Brian Jones' concept of production myth outlined in "The Power of a Production Myth: PJ Harvey, Steve Albini, and Gendered Notions of Recording Fidelity" lays the cultural foundation for the anti-musicological analysis by establishing the extent to which the identity of the producer influences a work's reception. Using the choices made on particular PJ Harvey records, Brian Jones determines that the mythic status of production has transformed records from "fixed texts" to "sonic evidence of implied actions"<sup>36</sup>. Producers can make production choices that not only serve a musical or aesthetic purpose, but a wield a greater legitimizing influence over the identity of the artist through the realities they evoke. All three of my self-producers are female, and accordingly forced to confront public perception of their female identities in their work and its

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<sup>35</sup> Hennion, 159.

<sup>36</sup> Jones, 2.

reception, making this article invaluable for understanding the ways which production myth works against them, but can also be co-opted to their advantage.

Hennion's dimensions of production are necessarily broad, thus not representative of the detail required to understand sonic manipulation in the production process, i.e. the practice of audio, mix, and mastering engineers. This research project fills in the details with *The Poetics of Rock* by Albin Zak, an excellent overview of those roles and their subsequent responsibilities, invaluable for understanding the functions and thus communicative possibilities behind the technical production choices made on the albums in this research project. This project references his dimensions of sound – musical performance, timbre, echo, ambience, and texture<sup>37</sup> – when analysing the musical elements.

When analysing the lyrical elements, Frith's *Performing Rites* chapter on "The Voice"<sup>38</sup> expands upon Barthes theory of vocal "grain", and relates them to Hennion's elements, providing the structure for unpacking the vocal production choices in this research project. Separate from the performance practice of vocal delivery, the way that the voice is produced to *sound* bears significance beyond the aesthetic qualities of timbre, creating multiple layers of texts in a single vocal performance. Given that all three female artists are primarily singers<sup>39</sup>, the dimensions of their vocal performances are arguably some of the most crucial production choices on their respective albums: the resonance of their communications rests in the voice, making it necessary to understand the voice beyond its instrumental/musical properties. When Frith argues we must hear the voice as "instrument", "person", "body", and "character", he similarly concludes that a vocal performance must be analyzed according to the melodies they produce, the persona of the voice, the embodied versification of the vocal performance, and the combination of these qualities as a participation in the record's narrative<sup>40</sup>.

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<sup>37</sup> Zak, xii.

<sup>38</sup> Simon Frith, "The Voice" (*Performing Rites*, 1996), 185.

<sup>39</sup> Or at least considered to be singers in equal standing to their other instruments.

<sup>40</sup> Frith, 187.



Hennion's definition of successful narrative production elements hinges on the reception of those elements as 'authentic'. "Authenticity Revisited: The Rock Critic and the Changing Real" by Hans Weisethaunet and Ulf Lindberg provides the working definition of authenticity for this research, primarily used in Kesha's chapter. Weisethaunet and Lindberg understand critical authenticity as both rock-derived and a fundamental duality of aesthetics and ethics: 'authentic' elements are seemingly organically contained in an artist's music, and 'authentic' music functions as a representation of the artist's authorship<sup>41</sup>. The acknowledgement of rock values as critical values allows for analysing the gendered and genre-d implications of authenticity (and the perception of it), a crucial dimension of reception that all three self-producers had to understand and accordingly work with.

Elizabeth Eva Leach's "Vicars of 'Wannabe': Authenticity and the Spice Girls" provides a further understanding of the other types of authenticity that Kesha's production team encode on *Rainbow*. Kesha heavily trades on the authenticity of "ordinariness" that this article attributes to the Spice Girls<sup>42</sup>. Indeed, Kesha's personas, both before and on *Rainbow* are similar to the Spice Girls, and she uses several of the same production strategies to mitigate similar perceptions of being vapid, a bad role model, and an unruly woman. The authenticity of ordinariness that Leach unpacks speaks to the particular identity that Kesha is communicating through her production choices.

Moving on to Janelle Monáe's *Dirty Computer*, "The Stage Hip Hop Feminism Built: A New Directions Essay" by Aisha Durham et. al serves a similar analytical purpose. Monáe's lyrics on the record are distinctly hip-hop feminist, to the point that her previous work is referenced in this paper from Durham and co., spanning intersectional dimensions of gender, race, and socio-economic status with a particular brand of frank,

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<sup>41</sup> Weisethaunet and Lindberg, "Authenticity Revisited: The Rock Critic and the Changing Real" (Popular Music and Society 2010), 465.

<sup>42</sup> Elizabeth Leach, "Vicars of 'Wannabe': Authenticity and the Spice Girls" (Popular Music, 2001), 149.

queer, sex positivity<sup>43</sup>. The recognizable branding of hip hop feminism speaks to the unapologetically intersectional identity that Monáe is advocating for through her production choices.

Further, Kesha Morant's "Language in Action: Funk Music as the Critical Voice of a Post-Civil Rights Movement Counterculture" is essential for analysing *Dirty Computer*'s music. The musical elements of the record trade heavily in funk rhythms and tones, linking contemporary socio-political content with past civil rights movements to bolster the perceptive authenticity of the album's messages. Understanding what these production choices say requires understanding the history of funk as both a method of communication and avenue for black self-determination, which is exactly what Morant unpacks in this article<sup>44</sup>.

Concluding with St. Vincent's *Masseduction*, James' understanding of the relationship between aesthetics, genre, and whiteness in "Is the Post- in post-identity the Post- in post-genre?" is of particular relevance to Annie Clark's production of St. Vincent's persona. Famously difficult to pin-down in terms of genre, this article supports the interpretation that St. Vincent's production choices seek to trade on a certain amount of post-genre markers for the critical legitimization they afford her as a white artist, when as a rock artist her femininity is delegitimizing<sup>45</sup>. These post-genre production elements speak to the post-identity identity that St. Vincent is leveraging through her production choices.

Rounding out this third and final production analysis, "Disorienting Guitar Practice: an Alternative Archive" by Joshua Hochman helps clarify *Masseduction*'s production focus on the musical elements, guitar melodies in particular. Hochman argues that St. Vincent's guitar work is an "evasive", "immaterial" guitar practice with queer virtuosity. Given that a significant amount of *Masseduction*'s emotional content is communicated through the

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<sup>43</sup> Aisha Durham, "The Stage Hip Hop Feminism Built: A New Directions Essay" (Signs, 2013), 721.

<sup>44</sup> Kesha Morant, "Language in Action: Funk Music as the Critical Voice of a Post-Civil Rights Movement Counterculture" (Journal of Black Studies, 2010), 74.

<sup>45</sup> Robin James, "Is the Post- in post-identity the Post- in post-genre?" (Popular Music, 2016), 25.

electric guitar, and not necessarily with a complimentary vocal line to clarify, Hochman's understanding of her queer guitar production allows for interpolating meaning and thus production intent from the "noise"<sup>46</sup>.

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<sup>46</sup> Joshua Hochman, "Disorienting Guitar Practice: An Alternative Archive" (Queer Technologies, 2016), 105.

## Chapter 2

### 2 Kesha's *Rainbow*

This chapter analyses the production of Kesha's third studio album, *Rainbow*. *Rainbow* both recounts and responds to Kesha's high profile legal battle with her former producer, and alleged abuser, Dr. Luke, leveraging country and gospel genre markers around a story of rebirth. *Rainbow* is an excellent record to begin this research with because it is Kesha's first foray into self-production, and her first album free from her alleged abuser. The record offers one demonstration of what a newly empowered survivor decides to say, and how a producer accordingly primes that message for success. Further, *Rainbow*'s reception was distinctly warm and nuanced, decidedly more so than Kesha's previous offerings. This suggests that the album said something different than her past records, a message that was not only widely understood, but received positively. As "...one becomes an author by force of the works that bear one's signature"<sup>47</sup>, so does Kesha become a critically legitimized author by the "excellent, inspiring, and career-shifting"<sup>48</sup> perception of *Rainbow*. The record's production is focused on legitimizing Kesha's voice as a storyteller, survivor, and 'newly credible'<sup>49</sup> artist, to the point that Billboard's initial review of the album is titled "Kesha's 'Rainbow' Album Proves She Was Right All Along"<sup>50</sup>. This chapter analyses the relationship between the album's production and the perception of Kesha's authorship, unpacking how a character-focused production approach functions and was successfully executed. An account of Kesha's creative contexts prior to *Rainbow*'s release prefaces the production analysis of the album, which follows Hennion's elements of production in four sections: narrative elements, musical elements, lyrical elements, and personal elements.

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<sup>47</sup> Weisethaunet, 468.

<sup>48</sup> Joe Lynch, "Kesha Reveals Pre-Grammys Crisis of Confidence In 'Rainbow: The Film' Documentary" (Billboard, 2018).

<sup>49</sup> To be elaborated on in the narrative elements section of this chapter analysis.

<sup>50</sup> Andrew Unterberger, "Album of the Week: Kesha's *Rainbow*" (Billboard, 2017).

## 2.1 Creative Context

Born Kesha Rose Sebert, Kesha was raised in Nashville by single mother Pebe Sebert, a talented songwriter, arguably best known for “Old Flames (Can’t Hold a Candle to You)”<sup>51</sup><sup>52</sup>. Kesha’s own songwriting ability is undeniable, including credits both with and for artists from Miley Cyrus to Alice Cooper<sup>53</sup>. She classifies herself as a “super feminist”<sup>54</sup>, crediting her ambition in part to the empowering influence of her mother, who is also part of *Rainbow*’s production team. Kesha’s public perception is, however, historically different than these grounded roots would imply. Despite her pointed testimony to Bill Werde in an early *Billboard* profile that “I’m not just a little pop moron”<sup>55</sup>, the tone of the piece verges on condescending. The profile opens by announcing, “Everything [about Kesha]... conveys... 'I'm not sure, but I may still be drunk'"”<sup>56</sup>, though four paragraphs later, Kesha explicitly says that she is “not” a “party girl”: “I’m... totally sober. I’ve gotten drunk before but... I don’t go to clubs. I don’t do drugs, but I think I’m a walking good time and I talk kind of funny, so people think I’m messed up all the time. I’m not.”<sup>57</sup>

Thinly veiled sexism is pervasive in critical coverage of Kesha’s early career. Kesha’s performance is technically “pitiful”<sup>58</sup> and generally “soulless”<sup>59</sup>, “insincere”<sup>60</sup>, “vapid and faceless”<sup>61</sup>. Kesha is purported to ask questions “loudly”<sup>62</sup>, and release “hearty man-burps”, as if her lack of conformity to norms of submissive femininity undermines her credibility<sup>63</sup>. That Kesha un-ironically uses the word “vagina” is perceived as vulgar<sup>64</sup>.

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<sup>51</sup> Taffy Brodessor-Akner, “Kesha, Interrupted” (The New York Times, 2016).

<sup>52</sup> Famously covered by Dolly Parton, Kesha first recorded a version of the song for her second studio album ‘*Warrior*’; Parton joins her for a duet reprisal on *Rainbow*.

<sup>53</sup> Brodessor-Akner, “Interrupted”.

<sup>54</sup> Bill Werde, “Ke\$ha: The Billboard Cover Story” (Billboard, 2010).

<sup>55</sup> Werde, “Ke\$ha”.

<sup>56</sup> Werde, “Ke\$ha”.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Jonathan Keefe, “Review: Ke\$ha, *Animal*” (Slant, 2010).

<sup>59</sup> Keefe, “Review”.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> James Reed, “Ke\$ha’s Time is Up” (The Boston Globe, 2010).

<sup>62</sup> Werde, “Ke\$ha”.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

That Kesha typefaces her name as “Ke\$ha” is perceived to indicate a lack of both social class and intelligence<sup>65</sup>. Reflecting on this era in a sombre 2016 profile, Taffy Brodessor-Akner of New York Magazine chronicles,

“It soon became clear that people thought she was something she truly wasn’t. They didn’t get that the dollar sign in her name was ironic — that it was not an image, but a kind of comment on image. They didn’t get that her talk-singing wasn’t an attempt at rap; it was its own thing, just a way she made music.”<sup>66</sup>

More uncomfortable<sup>67</sup> is the production narrative frequently parroted in these pieces. Producer Lukasz Gottswald, better known as Dr. Luke, largely facilitated Kesha’s meteoric rise to fame. Inspired by her personality in preliminary demo tapes, he signed her to his label, Kemosabe Records<sup>68</sup>, and produced her debut LP *Animal*. Kesha was already a “brilliant” songwriter in this stage of her career<sup>69</sup>; she is a primary writer on all of *Animal*’s tracks, and its primary performer. But the credit for the album’s platinum US (and multi-platinum international) status is overwhelmingly attributed to Dr. Luke for his ‘discovery’ of Kesha. Brian Jones establishes that the production role is traditionally associated with “technological aptitude”, “power”, and “control” in a historically “masculinized sense”, ideologically in direct opposition to the “feminized naturalness in vocal performance”<sup>70</sup>. This characterization, applied to Kesha and Dr. Luke, is unfortunate though hegemonically consistent. It becomes disturbing upon the realization

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Brodessor-Akner, “Interrupted”.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> If possible; I’m still stuck on the “hearty man-burps”.

<sup>68</sup> A subsidiary of Sony Music.

<sup>69</sup> Werde, “Ke\$ha”.

<sup>70</sup> Jones, 8.

that this dynamic places Dr. Luke in a position of power over Kesha and endows him with a greater credibility than her, which would prove to be allegedly dangerous<sup>71</sup>.

Kesha's massive commercial success was short-lived. Kesha's progressively erratic online behaviour, which she attributes to struggling against Dr. Luke and his increasingly controlling behaviour, frayed her (already) tenuous public image<sup>72</sup>. In her own words, "I was like, 'I am fun, but I'm a lot of other things.' But Luke's like: 'No, you're fun. That's all you are for your first record.'"<sup>73</sup> Court filings reveal that his controlling behaviour evolved into horrifying abuse over a short period of time, about which Kesha does not mince words when discussing it: Dr. Luke refers to her as a "fat fucking refrigerator" in one of the least offensive allegations<sup>74</sup>. Signed to an exclusive recording contract with Dr. Luke, and finding her complaints dismissed or explained away - attributed to her flaky, 'party girl' persona - Kesha believed she was trapped and attempted to press on<sup>75</sup>. Her sophomore album, 2012's *Warrior*, was poorly received. Dr. Luke's rougher, rock-focused production aesthetic alienated critics and fans alike, further tarnishing Kesha's public persona<sup>76</sup>. She pushed through the record's gruelling international tour while struggling with an eating disorder, and became so reclusive that it prompted online concern<sup>77</sup>. Dr. Luke's continuing abuse only accelerated her downward spiral, and Kesha checked into a rehab facility in early 2014<sup>78</sup>. Per Taffy Brodessor-Akner,

"She left treatment in March after two months. The first thing she did was remove the dollar sign from her name. "I'm just fun," she repeated, this time in a sour voice. "That's

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<sup>71</sup> In Werde's initial profile for Billboard, which the magazine would later call "apocryphally on-the-nose in retrospect" [Unterberger, *Rainbow*], Dr. Luke is quoted saying, "I've only written two songs I didn't produce... I can control the song a bit more by producing it. The next evolution of that was to just find an artist."

<sup>72</sup> Ellen McCarthy, "Everything you need to know about the case to #FreeKesha" (The Washington Post, 2016).

<sup>73</sup> Brodessor-Akner, "Interrupted".

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> Alice Vincent, "Kesha's comeback: a timeline of her bitter legal feud with Sony and producer Dr. Luke" (The Telegraph, 2018).

<sup>77</sup> Vincent, "Comeback".

<sup>78</sup> Brodessor-Akner, "Interrupted".

all I am. That's it. 'That's all you are. That's all you are.' ” She leaned toward me. “I was taking back my strength, and I was taking back my voice, and taking back my power, taking back my body. I'm just taking back my [expletive] life.

The second thing she did was file her lawsuit.”<sup>79</sup>

Kesha filed suit against Dr. Luke in both New York and Los Angeles, alleging more than a decade of detailed verbal, physical, sexual, and emotional abuse<sup>80</sup>. Bolstered by the testimony of her mother, who claims to have witnessed not only the alleged abuse on several occasions, but also upper management's “blind eye” towards it, Kesha further filed suit against Sony Records, parent company to Kemosabe, the label with which she was contractually bound to record her next six albums<sup>81</sup>. Unable to work with a company that facilitated her abuse and insisted on employing her abuser, Kesha petitioned the Supreme Court of New York to be released from her contract, and testified that she feared accepting Sony's offer to record with another producer would only result in the label burying the work in an attempt to force her continue to work under Dr. Luke<sup>82</sup>. In response, Dr. Luke, backed by Sony, sued Kesha both for defamation and her attempt to break her contract<sup>83</sup>.

While the Supreme Court of New York ruled in favour of Sony, concluding that Kesha was not obligated to work with Dr. Luke to fulfil her contractual obligations to the label, the case began trending on social media, spawning the hashtag ‘#FreeKesha’ on Twitter, Facebook, and other platforms<sup>84</sup>. Aside from the hundreds of thousands of Internet users siding with Kesha, many other major recording artists, including Lady Gaga, Lorde, Taylor Swift, and Ariana Grande, publicly voiced their support and condemned both Dr. Luke and Sony<sup>85</sup>. Particularly significant in the eyes of the #FreeKesha movement was Kelly Clarkson. A former artist of Dr. Luke's - the two co-wrote the smash single “My

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Vincent, “Comeback”.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> McCarthy, “#FreeKesha”.

<sup>83</sup> Vincent, “Comeback”.

<sup>84</sup> McCarthy, “#FreeKesha”.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.



Life Would Suck Without You” - Clarkson implied on Twitter that she too had suffered controlling behaviour from the producer<sup>86</sup>. She later stated in an interview that Dr. Luke, “[Is] not a good person”, adding fuel to the suggestion that Dr. Luke’s abusive tendencies were known, and that Sony had been complicit in Kesha’s abuse and censorship<sup>87</sup>.

Though Kesha’s L.A. suit was also ultimately dismissed, she received public collaboration offers from several high profile producers in the wake of the abuse allegations, and public pressure forced Sony to facilitate her return to the studio. Acting as her own producer for the first time, Kesha assembled a team of ten other producers to share her liberated vision: Ricky Reed, Nate Mercereau, Drew Pearson, Stuart Crichton, Brody Brown, Ryan Lewis, Jon Castelli, Ben Folds, Richard Nowels, and her mother Pebe Sebert. This team released the single “Praying” on July 6<sup>th</sup>, 2017. Kesha’s third studio album *Rainbow* followed on August 11<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

## 2.2 Production Analysis: Narrative Elements

Hennion argues that “pop songs do not create their public, they discover it”. Because pop songs<sup>88</sup> are socio-sentimental objects, their perceived meanings cannot be manufactured. Rather, they must be empathetically deduced by producers and delivered back to the audience in a way that feels authentic<sup>89</sup>. While the song’s elements can ultimately be considered either individually or in conjunction with one another, the song itself is a multi-functional object, a hybrid of musical elements and the needs of the public<sup>90</sup>. According to Hennion, the “fundamental task” of producing is delivering a creation derived from “an organized quest for what holds meaning for the public”<sup>91</sup>, thus the producer’s responsibility and goal is to pre-emptively identify that resonance and prime

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<sup>86</sup> Joyce Chen, “Kelly Clarkson: I Lost ‘Millions’ for Dropping Dr. Luke Co-Writing Credit” (Rolling Stone, 2017).

<sup>87</sup> Chen, “Millions”.

<sup>88</sup> And by extension albums, which are larger cohesive collections of multiple songs, released as a single work.

<sup>89</sup> Hennion, 160.

<sup>90</sup> Hennion, 161.

<sup>91</sup> Hennion, 160.

the production elements accordingly<sup>92</sup>. The #FreeKesha movement garnered an unprecedented level of public sympathy for Kesha, powerful enough to capture international media attention. Hundreds of thousands of people united in her defence despite her prior perceived lack of credibility. Per Brodessor-Akner,

“Kesha is no longer the artist we met in the late aughts: blazing dollar sign in her name in place of the S, gold Trans Am that she said she wanted to have continuous sex in, 24-7 party girl, dredged in oil and breaded like a schnitzel in glitter. Now she is someone... who wants to work and make music, just without the man she says raped her; now Kesha is a cause.”<sup>93</sup>

To quote Kesha herself in an online statement shortly after the lawsuit was filed, “Someone I work with has literally driven me into this disease, tortured me and [expletive] with me and my family... So I’m here taking time and getting my magic back dammit.”<sup>94</sup>

By pairing “timeless” (i.e. universal) narrative themes with sympathetic personae, a pop song has a succinct story tailored for mass identification and therefore mass success<sup>95</sup>. *Rainbow*’s production team recognized that #FreeKesha’s impact was largely due to its sympathetic narrative of deliverance. #FreeKesha’s success was largely predicated on the understanding that Kesha’s (poorly received) persona to this point was a result of Dr. Luke’s control, and that there was a more nuanced Kesha below the surface yearning to break free and tell her story. Ben Folds, one of *Rainbow*’s producers, implies as much in an interview:

“That’s what kills me, is the almost parable of her being held down for a little while... She’s the only performer I can think of that has gone from being packaged to real. Most of the time people start off, and it’s like their rawness is what breaks through, and then they have to continue to build that into a more polished commercial thing. What she’s

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<sup>92</sup> Hennion, 160.

<sup>93</sup> Brodessor-Akner, “Interrupted”.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Hennion, 175.

actually doing is the opposite, where she's now showing that actually, there is something really huge beneath the whole thing."<sup>96</sup>

This profile was released in October 2016, post-#FreeKesha and pre-*Rainbow*. Taffy Brodessor-Akner documents Kesha and her production team's struggles to release new music amid the lawsuit turmoil, name-dropping several songs that would be on *Rainbow*'s track list. The vocabulary is fitting: one interpretation of 'parables' is Jesus' teachings in the Gospels. The religious references is one of *Rainbow*'s themes: track four is literally called "Hymn"; the album's first single is called "Praying", released with an accompanying music video; the cover art, of Kesha walking naked through a body of water, evokes the imagery of baptism<sup>97</sup>. The collective effect of these themes is sobering but liberating, implying a sort of penance leading to absolution that matures Kesha's persona. The profile actually states that there are "...fewer leotards, no more general pantslessness" in Kesha's touring wardrobe as if this is a reflection of her parallel transformation from 'little pop moron' to respectable artist.

This is not to suggest that victims of abuse must repent to reconcile their survival. That implication fundamentally misunderstands what it means to be an abuse survivor, and is both abhorrent and equally unsupported by *Rainbow* and this analysis<sup>98</sup>. *Rainbow* does not attempt to deny Kesha's self-destructive contributions to her trauma. It locates the blame on that trauma's original source, her abuser, and allows Kesha to forgive herself as part of the healing process. Even as Kesha gets better, *Rainbow* communicates that there are no perfect survivors, making its narrative relatable and kind as much as optimistic and powerful, all attributes evocative of the #FreeKesha movement.

*Rainbow*'s narrative of rebirth is therefore not just a chronicle of what Kesha survived, but her subsequent response to that trauma. "Praying" is only the fifth song on the fourteen-track album, rounding out the survivor's reflection section after "Bastards", "Let 'Em Talk", "Woman", and "Hymn"; it is followed by "Learn to Let Go", "Finding You",

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<sup>96</sup> Brodessor-Akner, "Interrupted".

<sup>97</sup> Thanks to Jay Hodgson for this last insight!

<sup>98</sup> Brodessor-Akner, "Interrupted".

and then “Rainbow”<sup>99</sup>, all titles implying the progressive stages of a journey of self-recovery. The album’s self-titled track is Brodessor-Akner’s favourite, a piano-based ballad that Kesha wrote on a toy keyboard in rehab<sup>100</sup>, and as the self-titled track, is metonymic for *Rainbow*’s larger story. The combination of the name and style are indicative of strategic, narrative production choice as much as thoughtful, sentimental choice:

“The problem was, she said, there was no balance. Every song was a song about partying, and yes, that was who she was, Kesha says that was definitely who she was, but **she’s a real person having a complete human experience, and she wanted her album to reflect that.** “To this day, **I’ve never released a single that’s a true ballad, and I feel like those are the songs that balance out the perception of you,** because you can be a fun girl. You can go and have a crazy night out, but **you also, as a human being, have vulnerable emotions. You have love.**”<sup>101102</sup>

Kesha’s discoverable public wanted her to be free. *Rainbow*’s narrative says that she may not yet be, but will be, and is actively pursuing that freedom and self-love in a way that her discoverable public can approve of, that implies they were not wrong to believe in her. That this is the narrative Kesha herself chose to produce and tell was perceived as a credit to her character as much as her storytelling abilities<sup>103</sup>, comprehensively leveraging all of *Rainbow*’s production efforts as contributions to her newfound credibility.

## 2.3 Production Analysis: Musical Elements

*Rainbow*’s first single, “Praying”, uses the musical elements in service to the narrative elements. “Praying” is an uplifting, neo-gospel, power ballad that locates Kesha’s self-forgiveness in a damning chorus directed at her abuser: “I hope you’re somewhere prayin’/ I hope your soul is changin’/ I hope you find your peace/ Falling on your knees/

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<sup>99</sup> Kesha, *Rainbow*.

<sup>100</sup> Advertising this information in a major interview is, itself, emotionally-compelling and narrative-contributing.

<sup>101</sup> Emphasis mine.

<sup>102</sup> Brodessor-Akner, “Interrupted”.

<sup>103</sup> Lynch, “Crisis”.

Prayin”<sup>104</sup>. With such simple lyrics, “Praying”, and *Rainbow* as a whole, use deep, anthemic mixes to promote a perception of gravity in Kesha’s messages, and incorporate musical genre markers to authenticate the meaning of what Kesha sings beyond the lyrics’ limitations.

Per Hennion’s model, the musical production elements are melody, rhythm section<sup>105</sup>, and orchestra “backing”<sup>106</sup>. The function of the melody is to connect the song’s character to the music; the rhythm section’s function is physicality, literally pushing the song to resonate within the body of the listener and solidify their embodied connection to the communication; the orchestra backing’s function is to be whatever the song needs for that communication and character to seem cohesive and connected<sup>107</sup>.

Much of the rhythm section on *Rainbow* is not particularly different, functionally, from Kesha’s previous works. Consistent, pop rhythms cut in common time feature heavily on the album. While the overall tempo is more varied than previous records of Kesha’s, it is somewhat of a false range: songs like “Boogie Feet”, “Hunt You Down” and “Woman” are as upbeat and danceable as ever, mimicking an elevated heartbeat to promote one type of immersive listening experience. Others, like “Praying” and “Hymn”, are roughly half-time, fostering another driven, epic sort of equally-immersive listening experience. There is little tempo variation beyond these two pop norms. This production choices serves as a consistency to comfort the listener given the intense narrative themes being played with, and coheres *Rainbow* with Kesha’s previous body of work.

The tone of *Rainbow*’s rhythm section, though, is aesthetically diverse. Tracks like “Woman” and “Let ‘Em Talk” use an analogue production aesthetic with perceptibly ‘live’ snares, cymbals, and kick sounds<sup>108</sup>, where “Praying” has trendy, reverb-laden toms, and “Hymn” unabashedly incorporates sub bass and club beats. The bass,

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<sup>104</sup> Kesha, *Rainbow* (RCA 2017).

<sup>105</sup>Traditionally a combination of percussion and bass, which share a rhythmic relationship.

<sup>106</sup> Hennion, 171.

<sup>107</sup> Hennion, 171-175.

<sup>108</sup> Though mixed with such perfect production that the likelihood these hits are samples is high. I am not saying that these ARE live drums; I am saying that they *sound* like live drums.

meanwhile, is usually an expansive pad sunk into the low mids of mixes, an agent purely promoting the embodiment of *Rainbow*'s grooves. These rhythm section production choices testify to the extent that genre aesthetics are important to *Rainbow*'s narrative as a means of authenticating Kesha's 're-born' persona. The bass, not paid much attention by the average listener, is generally allowed to occupy a structurally pop/club role as it always has in Kesha's music. The percussion, however, is far more prominent in most mixes, so its tonal quality is dependant on what will sound congruous with the other genre-d musical elements around it. The arguably most visible percussion on the album is tambourine with a decided bluegrass and country aesthetic on "Hunt You Down" and "Godzilla", fitting for Kesha's Nashville roots.

These choices match the production approach to the record's orchestra backing. While many of *Rainbow*'s tracks contain synth pads<sup>109</sup> and electronic instruments in comparable density to Kesha's previous albums, the album's overall instrumental aesthetic is shifted from pop to country, neo-soul, and blues-rock. Lead lines under the vocals are played on twangy guitars, choirs pad out choruses, and mixes deviate from the dripping, lush pop reverb of Kesha's past to a dryer, edgier stereo soundstage where the nuances of 'live' instruments take focus: plucked strings, naturalized decay, and obvious pick attack in guitar solos. This diverse instrumentation qualifies as orchestra backing because none of these instruments ever receives a structural melody in any song. The vast majority of these instruments make an unobtrusive, aesthetic contribution, suggesting that invoking the authenticity implied by neo-soul, folk, country, and blues-rock – more than functionally contributing to musical structures – is exactly why *Rainbow*'s production team choose such instrumentation.

The production approach was solidified even before *Rainbow*'s release, on the single "Praying". Borrowing from the historical "southern dream of freedom", styling the song as neo-soul, "combines the gospel "truth" and longing for freedom with everyday

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<sup>109</sup> Chords that follow the song's harmonic structure, usually played on a keyboard or keyboard-triggered MIDI device, for the sake of 'padding' out the mix. Pads are generally mixed to avoid being heard as an additional instrumental 'part' by the listener, rather to enhance the perception of sustain, density, and richness of the other instrumental parts.

danceable experiences.”<sup>110</sup> The choral choruses over a half-time signature are massive and full without sounding too slick. The verses are just as carefully assembled with piano; Kesha’s forward, dry vocals; and lyrics about over-coming self-loathing. These musical choices ascribe an intimacy and embodiment of “Praying’s” pseudo-religious message to Kesha’s voice, elevating the listener’s perception of Kesha from mere singer to blessed messenger. Released with a music video tailored to the album’s narrative<sup>111</sup>, “Praying” began the process of authenticating Kesha’s re-born persona and her storytelling, a metamorphosis completed on *Rainbow*.

As a result, as much as *Rainbow* is musically a pop album in terms of structure, it isn’t produced to necessarily *sound* like a pop album, allowing Kesha to benefit from the folk authenticity implied in the record’s genre aesthetic. Because “...artists’ reputations are a sum of the values we assign to the works they have produced”<sup>112</sup> her previous dance pop about relationships, clubs, and party drugs were received as inauthentic for their seeming lack of more profound emotional content<sup>113</sup>. Although the shock value of *Animal* initially drove positive commercial reception, it was never well received critically. *Warrior* came across as much of the same and failed to make a major impact of any kind. Though *Rainbow* has a mass-supported narrative to tell, the credibility of that narrative depends on whether or not the music is perceived to cohere with it<sup>114</sup>. Contemporary rock and pop criticism is heavily invested in “the tropes of “feeling” and “true” expression collected from the folkloric renditions of the meaning of the blues.”<sup>115</sup> This ‘truth’ is largely performative, and conceptualized as a connection between singer and song so inherently reflexive of the artist’s experience that it can be recognized, felt by proxy, by the listener. ““Truth,” in this context, also contain[s] the idea that music express[es] more than the

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<sup>110</sup> Weisethaunet, 475.

<sup>111</sup> Worth its own comprehensive analysis, though outside the bounds of this project.

<sup>112</sup> Weisethaunet, 468.

<sup>113</sup> See creative context, and the “vapid and faceless” etc. criticism.

<sup>114</sup> Hennion, 171.

<sup>115</sup> Weisethaunet, 470.

individuality of the performer: it [is] taken to represent the sentiment of the social oppression of a whole group of people.”<sup>116</sup>

By borrowing musical elements from folk-authenticated genres like neo-soul and country, *Rainbow* sonically legitimizes Kesha’s re-born persona as her ‘true’ self<sup>117</sup>, authenticating her work as credible testimony, and implying its worth<sup>118</sup> to fans and critics alike. Such legitimization through genre markers can also be extended to the songs on *Rainbow* that deviate from the theme of deliverance and self-empowerment. That these divergent songs are included on *Rainbow* is faithful to Kesha’s stated intent to create a well-rounded album that reflects the range of the human experience, not a narrative inconsistency<sup>119</sup>. Nonetheless, the production team doubles down on their folk, country, and blues-rock choices in melody to reinforce this authenticity.

Given Kesha’s prior discography of pop and dance records, an album weighted exclusively with post-traumatic, dark, musical themes could alienate the devoted fan base who helped garner the international attention for #FreeKesha in the first place<sup>120</sup>. *Rainbow* subsequently has many songs, arguably over half of the record, that have nothing to do with recovery, only parties, fun, and the light-hearted experiences that Kesha’s ‘Animals’<sup>121</sup> enjoyed in her previous work. This creates a fine balancing act for the production team. Kesha’s historical body of work is dominated by simple, catchy melodies, and uncomplicated versification. To radically adjust either in service of the album’s genre play could be a step too far outside of Kesha’s fans’ comfort zone, indeed could come across as a genre appropriation of sorts that could be poorly received. Understanding that melody is the structural ‘face’ of the pop song<sup>122</sup>, *Rainbow*’s production team stuck with simple melodies, minimally adjusted versification<sup>123</sup>, and just

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<sup>116</sup> Weisethaunet, 470.

<sup>117</sup> Literally: #FreeKesha.

<sup>118</sup> Of time, money, emotional investment, etc. etc.

<sup>119</sup> Brodessor-Akner, “Interrupted”.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Kesha’s fans self-identify as ‘Animals’, after both her first record’s name and general reputation for unruliness [Brodessor-Akner, “Interrupted”].

<sup>122</sup> Hennion, 171.

<sup>123</sup> More on this later in this analysis.



gave several of those melodies to authenticated guest stars for their implicit endorsement of Kesha's 're-birth'.

"Woman", "Let 'Em Talk", and "Boogie Feet" are, for example, tenuously connected to the more intense emotional content on *Rainbow*. While "Woman" could arguably be a lighter side of Kesha's empowerment story, "Let 'Em Talk" and "Boogie Feet" are derivative, lyrically, from Kesha's prior singles "Blah Blah Blah" and "Tik Tok". However, both "Let 'Em Talk" and "Boogie Feet" feature guest contributions from Eagles of Death Metal, the California hard-rock band<sup>124</sup>. By featuring their guitar riffs prominently in the mix, the band's rock credibility distinguishes "Let 'Em Talk" and "Boogie Feet" from the vapid party pop of Kesha's past and groups them with critically legitimized blues-rock, even if those guitar riffs are a purely aesthetic contribution to otherwise pop songs. This re-affirms Kesha's right to party, so to speak, and gives her oldest fans a slight variation on their favourites while further authenticating Kesha's re-born persona by its collaborative proximity to other bonafide musical authors. The Dap Kings horn band provides the same service on "Woman", injecting the civil rights connotations of jazz and funk music by carrying the melody of the refrain, transforming the song about dancing with a group of girlfriends into a song about transcendent female independence.

Dolly Parton is arguably the most iconic guest on *Rainbow*. As one of the most legendary country singers, her duet with Kesha on "Old Flames" implies the establishment stamp of approval on Kesha's new embrace of her Nashville roots. Especially significant considering *Warrior*'s extended release contained a cover of the same song sung by just Kesha, Parton's guest slot on *Rainbow*'s version of "Old Flames" is a valuable endorsement of Kesha's re-birth, from another woman no less. Parton's melodic contributions also lend legitimacy to the presence of love songs on *Rainbow*. Given the harsh critical treatment of Kesha's older songs about relationships<sup>125</sup>, Parton's presence on not just *a* song, but also an unabashed love song, conveys establishment approval for

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<sup>124</sup> A doubly authentic band: by rock formation standards as white men, and in terms of *Rainbow* as trauma survivors (of a terrorist attack on their 2015 Bataclan concert in Paris).

<sup>125</sup> Keefe, "Review".

the diverse subject matter on *Rainbow* too. Kesha's production team accordingly borrows from Parton's particular brand of kitsch country – emphasizing Kesha's southern accent and midrange twang – for the vocal production on “Hunt You Down”<sup>126</sup>, “Boots” and “Finding You”, all songs about deeply meaningful, presumably romantic, relationships with others.

It is in these songs sung by just Kesha herself that *Rainbow* is most careful. Having discovered a public willing to invest in Kesha's narrative reclamation of nuanced personhood, “Boots” and “Finding You” use heavy folk, country, and blues-rock genre markers throughout the musical elements. This lets Kesha sing about other people without ever losing the focus on her own story, and thus her audience. Both songs make use of featured country/gospel instruments to set the aesthetic stage: wailing guitars in “Finding You”; unsettling strings in “Boots”; the same dry, intimate versification from “Praying”; and do so on lead lines that follow modal scales to avoid being too major<sup>127</sup>. “Finding You” in particular uses prominent ‘blue’ notes in the guitar line to cast a melancholy that subconsciously underlines *Rainbow*'s priorities. Kesha may be searching for love, but not at the risk of telling her story and finding herself, and so that romantic search is “not [in] this life”<sup>128</sup>.

## 2.4 Production Analysis: Lyrical Elements

Per Hennion, the connection between melody and lyrics is what makes a pop song seem authentic on a surface level of listening<sup>129</sup>, and *Rainbow*'s melodies serve the lyrical elements: words and versification. Versification is how the singer delivers the words to fit with the music, functioning as the emotional connection between the words and the music; the words themselves function as the contemporary perspective for the pop song's

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<sup>126</sup> This song is featured as the song being played on Kesha's car radio at the start of the music video for “Woman”.

<sup>127</sup> Major chord progressions are typically associated with ‘happy’ messaging, which in the context of a song about a relationship could risk and invoking the prior connotation of boy-craziness, undermining *Rainbow*'s more profound narrative intentions.

<sup>128</sup> Kesha, *Rainbow*.

<sup>129</sup> Hennion, 171.

timeless narrative<sup>130</sup>. Words are one of the most detail-oriented parts of the production process. Vocabulary reflects the singer's persona while attempting to not only remain simple and original enough to memorize, but also to disguise the pop song's communicative intentions, lest the performance come across as manipulative as opposed to authentic<sup>131</sup>. Words construct the song as much “outside the text as through it”, and their meaning depends less on their organisation in the text than on the social context they evoke<sup>132</sup>.

The lyrical production of *Rainbow* trades heavily on another form of authenticity. While the musical elements are more subversive, borrowing from other genres to evoke historical folk authenticity, the surface level, lyrical elements appeal to the discovered public through what musicologist Elizabeth Leach refers to as the authenticity of “ordinariness”<sup>133</sup>. Kesha's appeal to her original fan base was her unapologetic commitment to being a ‘regular’ person in the face of both the expectations of her famous image and her gender: she was not refined, neat, or quiet, was more than occasionally self-destructive, and she genuinely seemed to accept and *like* herself anyway. With #FreeKesha and *Rainbow*, the authenticity of ordinariness became especially important to communicate to Kesha's new community of supporters, whose support was garnered on their personal sympathy for Kesha. Leach's comments about the Spice Girls are applicable to Kesha's appeal to her fans:

“It is the 'ordinariness' that they promote which diffuses the charge of commercialism or artificiality, which is appealing. This ordinariness, which stands in direct conflict with their actual fame, serves both to diffuse fame's negative connotations and promote its accessibility to the audience”<sup>134</sup>

*Rainbow*'s words speak to this production choice. Kesha dispenses with poetics in favour of frank vocabulary, leveraging her feelings and experiences in first person over more

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<sup>131</sup> Hennion, 180.

<sup>131</sup> Hennion, 164.

<sup>132</sup> Hennion, 177.

<sup>133</sup> Leach, “Wannabe”, 149.

<sup>134</sup> Leach, 149.

widely interpretable ideas, descriptions, or narratives beyond her own perspective. “Hymn” self identifies in the chant-able refrain, “This is a hymn/For how we live”, literally redefining acceptable existence in favour of how Kesha, having grouped herself with the audience and ordinariness, already lives<sup>135</sup>. Among this ordinariness, there is still nuance, serving to reinforce Kesha’s narrative of re-birth, and her desire to break out of the creative box she was previously confined to:

““TiK ToK,” ...was written to be more nuanced and more definitively ironic at first. But her producers and co-writers on the song, Dr. Luke and Benny Blanco, had to keep her image in mind. She says of Dr. Luke: “I remember specifically him saying: ‘Make it more dumb. Make it more stupid. Make it more simple, just dumb.’”<sup>136</sup>

“Learn to Let Go” addresses the disparity between Kesha’s public image and private suffering by declaring that she “Gotta practice what I preach”, inviting the listener into the ‘off-brand’ traumatic experiences and self-awareness that she previously hid<sup>137</sup>.

“Boogie Feet” reneges on the sentiments of “dumb” “Tik Tok”: where Kesha previously declared that she only partied with rockstar look-alikes and all the luxurious trappings associated, now she only needs friends and good music to dance to in order to have a good time<sup>138</sup>. The album’s title track, “Rainbow”, is a further invitation to the listener to find *Rainbow* representative, confirming Kesha’s sympathetic appeal. From the chorus, “I’ve found a rainbow, rainbow, baby/ Trust me, I know, life is scary/ But just put those colours on, girl/ Come and play along with me tonight”; and from the pre-chorus, “And I know that I’m still fucked up/ But aren’t we all, my love?/ Darling, our scars make us who we are.”<sup>139</sup> The lyrics on *Rainbow* also refuse to naturalize Kesha’s feelings along traditionally feminine norms. She declares in “Boots” that “Wedding bells made me want to die”, and “Hunt You Down”, though tongue-in-cheek, is thoroughly committed to its

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<sup>135</sup> Kesha, *Rainbow*.

<sup>136</sup> Brodessor-Akner, “Interrupted”.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Kesha, *Rainbow*.

hyperbolic concept even when it becomes unflattering to the narrator, unapologetically aggressive despite norms of femininity dictating otherwise

Most satisfying, personally, is the album's opening track. "Bastards" is a sweetly-sung, nearly four minute-long, string of expletive-peppered sentiments on perseverance, succinctly summarized by the refrain of "Don't let the bastards get you down"<sup>140</sup>. Upon first listen to *Rainbow*, "Bastards" is hyperbolic and acerbic, a black humour development on Kesha's historical tongue-in-cheek-ness summarized with a common saying for the refrain. It becomes further nuanced in the context of the #MeToo, a female empowerment movement that went viral in the months following *Rainbow*'s release; #FreeKesha is often connected to #MeToo for sharing similar values, themes, and timing in the popular cultural consciousness. Quotes from the television adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale*<sup>141</sup> became memes, greetings, and popular sayings associated with #MeToo, a not entirely ironic reflection of how women were attempting to reclaim how they were represented, controlled and censored. Derived from a mock, pseudo-Latin pun featured in both the novel and television show, "Don't Let The Bastards Grind You Down" is one such saying. With this socio-political context<sup>142</sup>, "Bastards" has a genuinely earnest undercurrent to the dark lyrical humour that makes it a beautifully produced opener for the nuance of the rest of *Rainbow*.

The production team's commitment to the authenticity of ordinariness extends through the album's versification. Kesha showcases her vocal abilities more on *Rainbow* than any other record in her discography, a demonstration of freedom as much as a technically skilled performance. Billboard reflects on this in their review of the album, commenting, "...it's practically unthinkable that she was mostly consigned to sing-speaking her way through the majority of her musical career."<sup>143</sup> This new vocal virtuosity is still thoughtfully done with the simple melodies discussed above, often confined within a

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Based on the novel by Margaret Atwood, the show revolves around women in a dystopian, patriarchal society who have been enslaved because of their gender.

<sup>142</sup> The television adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* premiered in April 2017: "don't let the bastards grind you down" entered the social media lexicon well before the release of *Rainbow*.

<sup>143</sup> Unterberger, "Rainbow".

limited range to let the lyrics be the listener's focus and then performing impressive variations sometimes multiple octaves above, like the final chorus of "Praying"<sup>144</sup>. At the same time, some vocal idiosyncrasies are preserved, including a laugh that obfuscates a lyric in the second verse of "Woman"<sup>145</sup>. This speaks to Kesha's self-awareness even in her newly liberated mastery; a nuance of graciousness that humanizes her vocal evolution, and reinforces that she still does not take herself too seriously post-rebirth, a further credit to her re-born persona's perceived authenticity and thus credible authorship.

## 2.5 Production Analysis: Personal Elements

The most critical versification choices interact with Hennion's final elements of the pop song: the personal elements, summed as 'persona', a combination of image and voice that is ultimately related to the narrative elements<sup>146</sup>. The relationship produced between versification and persona is what authenticates the singer to the music beyond the topical story<sup>147</sup> and solidifies Kesha's relationship with the larger themes and movement she leads on *Rainbow*. Kesha's vocals are mixed: altered beyond the raw performance, but imperceptively so without a raw vocal to compare. Thus versification analysis is inherently entwined with voice analysis through the vocal production. For instance, reverb is used very carefully and sparingly on *Rainbow*: the hyper dry, forward vocals on "Rainbow", "Bastards", and "Praying" all portray Kesha in a perceptively intimate, raw setting where the listener can truly hear the parameters of her voice. Stripped of the usual pop production and wet reverb<sup>148</sup> it becomes apparent that Kesha has excellent vocal tone and control, made all the more impressive when she hits the octave runs discussed above.

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<sup>144</sup> Kesha, *Rainbow*.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Hennion, 182.

<sup>147</sup> Hennion, 183.

<sup>148</sup> Short for reverberations, reverb is the sum sound of the reflections made by soundwaves bouncing around whatever space sound is being made in. Standard recording practice requires tracking vocals in a reverb-less room for the sake of ease in later mixing, but these entirely 'dry' tracks often sound unnatural to the ear, requiring a certain amount of reverb to be added back in during the mixing process. Pop production traditionally incorporates large amounts of these 'wet' reflections into the vocal production for aesthetics, because wet reverb smooths the voice and obfuscates its embodiment, creating a lush, pure tone.

Most of the album's songs also lean heavily on country vocal styling, embracing Kesha's natural twang<sup>149</sup> and no longer using equalization to subtract the lower resonances of her voice. This lends a gravity to her tone that feels more authoritative: the etymology of authenticity is predicated on the prefix of 'auto' as literal "self-", and its associated concepts of authority and/within authorship. Thus the country, blues-y, authoritative vocal styling reinforces the legitimacy of Kesha's newly born authorship<sup>150</sup>. This country treatment of the voice also helps connect the authenticity of ordinariness, and thus the lyrics, to Kesha's persona. As Leach testifies,

"...the symbolic construction of authenticity for country music defined it in opposition to 'pop'. The 'authenticity markers' within this frame were heartfelt, personal song lyrics that seemed to speak autobiographically for the singer. These were combined with self-revelatory articles in fan magazines and liner notes, promoting the accessibility of the performer and the personal nature of the performer-fan relationship"<sup>151</sup>

By rejecting her previously pop vocal production and embracing the ethos of the country voice on *Rainbow*, Kesha brings her persona full circle to #FreeKesha and ultimately #MeToo. She becomes not a star on a pedestal, but a real woman who speaks "as" and "with" her audience instead of the traditional rock model that would presume to speak "for" them; #KeshaToo<sup>152</sup>.

Critics, media, and the general public alike began to extend the benefit of the doubt to Kesha and take her seriously when #FreeKesha effectively rehabilitated her image from a party girl to survivor of oppression<sup>153</sup>. In parallel, the producers of *Rainbow* cultivate Kesha's new artistic image in a way that attempts to mollify some of the more problematic elements of their other authentication strategies, safeguarding her new credibility. In particular, "The notion of the "folk" [authenticity] carries a historical

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<sup>149</sup> Kesha has Nashville roots; see creative context.

<sup>150</sup> Weisethaunet, 465.

<sup>151</sup> Leach, 143.

<sup>152</sup> Leach, 150.

<sup>153</sup> Not that party girls aren't already women worth defending in theory, but misogyny is one hell of a thing.

baggage of conceptions of the Other, which are embedded in positions of social inequality and class”<sup>154</sup>, not to mention that the deliverance gospel and soul sonically construct is a deeply racial one, derived from the experiences of black Americans escaping slavery.

As a white woman, Kesha’s leveraging of these elements for her own narratives is fraught at best and appropriative, exploitive, at worst. As a counter-measure, *Rainbow*’s album art conjures an image of Kesha as an alien pursuing a flying saucer, and on the album closer, “Spaceship”, she sings by casting herself as an alien just trying to be loved and practice self-love among the random cruelty of earth. Whether or not this is a poetry that Kesha genuinely feels is self-representative, the alien imagery is self-othering in a way that’s generally relatable, and engages with the Otherness implied by folk authenticity as a less problematic stand-in for its historical racist, classist undertones.

Kesha’s styling for the *Rainbow* promotional materials also embraces Otherness in terms of gender, once more leveraging the country aesthetic. Her historic “general pantslessness” is replaced with stylized suits evocative of rockabilly and country traditions as much as a male gender role<sup>155</sup>. There are significantly fewer feather accessories and platform shoes, instead heavier jewellery and stacked-heel boots that are both seemingly more practical for performance and perceptively heavier, invoking a more masculine, authoritative weight to her image.

Most intimate of these production choices is in regard to makeup, especially glitter. In the early phases of her career, glitter – and the implications of ultra-feminine gender performance and heavy, verging-on-distorting make-up that traditionally accompanied it – was a distinct part of Kesha’s image. In their first profile, *Billboard* reflected that Kesha was ...“wearing a faux fur coat... about a pound of glitter and not much else that I can see”<sup>156</sup>. Others mention “...her ways of distorting her looks with glitter”<sup>157</sup>, how much

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<sup>154</sup> Weisethaunet, 480.

<sup>155</sup> Brodessor-Akner, “Interrupted”.

<sup>156</sup> Werde, “Ke\$ha”.

<sup>157</sup> Brodessor-Akner, “Interrupted”.



money she may or may not have spent on glitter<sup>158</sup>, and even in the post-#FreeKesha-pre-*Rainbow* era, how her fans demonstrate their devotion to her by wearing glitter, making showers with glitter, and dancing in deluges of glitter shot out of canons<sup>159</sup>.

*Rainbow*'s promotional materials don't dispense with the glitter, but include it thoughtfully: touches of glitter eyeliner, accents on cheekbones, and woven throughout Kesha's hair (which looks much more 'naturally' styled than *Animal*'s teased, half-braided concoctions). Glitter is most often used to accent Kesha's natural freckles, which were virtually always buried under layers of foundation and contour in previous promotional cycles. The comprehensive effect is still edgy and fun, but with nuance, revealing of Kesha's humanity and 'imperfections'<sup>160</sup>, which is cohesive with *Rainbow*'s story, *Rainbow*'s narrative, and Kesha's testified artistic goals. This image conveys a sense of meeting Kesha for the first time, or the first authentic time, that is both moving and recognizable to the discovered public that stood up for her in the first place.

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<sup>158</sup> McCarthy, "#FreeKesha".

<sup>159</sup> Brodessor-Akner, "Interrupted".

<sup>160</sup> I do not imply that freckles are an 'imperfection' per se, but they do not conform to a white supremacist, hegemonic standard of beauty that demands flawless, pale skin. Therefore not covering them up does imply a certain extent of choosing not to conform to feminine beauty standards (at least in North America).

## Chapter 3

### 3 Janelle Monáe's *Dirty Computer*

This chapter focuses on the production of Janelle Monáe's third studio album, *Dirty Computer*. *Dirty Computer* reflects on and responds to Janelle Monáe's reality as a queer, formerly working-class, American woman of colour, leveraging expositional words and diverse versification in the context of contemporary politics. *Dirty Computer* is vital research for this project because it juggles intersectional themes and the tensions between them. The record offers one demonstration of what an artist with a complex, sometimes contradictory, lived experience chooses to say, and how a producer accordingly chooses to prime that message. Further, *Dirty Computer* is both Monáe's most personally revealing album to date, and the first that she performs as herself as opposed to an alter ego; it was received with glowing praise. This suggests that the album effectively humanized Monáe beyond her android past in a way that was widely understood and sympathized with despite the systemic prejudice against her queer, black, and female, identity. *Dirty Computer*'s production uses genre to connect Monáe's voice to larger civil rights movements, walking a fine narrative line to assert her humanity without being perceived as aggressive. This chapter analyses the relationship between the album's production and the perception of Janelle Monáe's identity, unpacking how a lyrics-focused production approach functions and was successfully executed. An account of Monáe's creative contexts up until *Dirty Computer*'s release prefaces the production analysis, which follows Hennion's elements of production in four sections: narrative elements, musical elements, lyrical elements, and personal elements.

#### 3.1 Creative Context

Born and raised in Quindaro, a primarily black and working-class community outside of Kansas City, Kansas, Monáe comes from a large, blue-collar, "devoutly Baptist" family<sup>161</sup>. Family members describe Monáe as outgoing and talented virtually from birth,

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<sup>161</sup> Brittany Spanos, "Janelle Monáe Frees Herself" (Rolling Stone, 2018).

becoming the regular star of her high school stage productions<sup>162</sup>. She missed performing only one starring role, Dorothy in *The Wiz*, because the audition was at the same time that her mother needed a ride to work<sup>163</sup>.

The delineation between Quindaro and the nearby, primarily white and wealthy suburbs of Kansas City is one of Monáe's earliest memories of reckoning with identity and cultural tension<sup>164</sup>. She pursued post-secondary education in New York City, wrestling with cultural alienation as much as the expense, prompting a move to Atlanta, where she still lives<sup>165</sup>. A brief stint working at an Atlanta *Office Depot* has become legend among her fans: Monáe was fired for using company computers to respond to fan correspondence, an experience that largely inspired the song "Lettin' Go". The song attracted the attention of Big Boi, and then Sean Combs, launching her major label career<sup>166</sup>.

Her 2007 EP *Metropolis: Suite I*, 2010 debut LP *The ArchAndroid*, and 2013 follow-up *The Electric Lady* all received glowing critical reviews and solid commercial success, but coverage of her persona from this period is underwhelming. Monáe is "an artist you knew about but never truly knew"<sup>167</sup>, implying both a relative obscurity and lack of accessibility. The Guardian's characterization, "the Grammy-nominated Prince protégé who cloak[s] her experimental R&B in layers of Afrofuturist myth under an android alter ego, Cindi Mayweather"<sup>168</sup> attributes her success to Prince's guidance instead of her own ingenuity, and equates her lack of personal accessibility with 'hiding'. The same reviewer asks, "...she was famed for her live shows. But who was she, really?"<sup>169</sup> This is not to suggest that Monáe was a bonafide superstar at this point in her career, but Rahawna Haile at *Pitchfork* interrogates the portrayal in the context of *Dirty Computer*,

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<sup>162</sup> Spanos, "Frees".

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Hannah Davies, "The Best Albums of 2018: No. 3, Janelle Monáe's *Dirty Computer*" (The Guardian, 2018).

<sup>168</sup> Davies, "No. 3".

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

“...To listen to *Dirty Computer* and look at Monáe’s pallid chart history is to ask whether this is an industry willing to make room for black women who don’t belt their wounds, those with slightly smaller, albeit gorgeous voices. What does it mean to be a newly out queer black woman of Monáe’s stature making a pop album in 2018 when there is no precedent?”<sup>170</sup>

Monáe is accustomed to performing, navigating, and confronting otherness. Asked about her android alter-ego Cindi Mayweather in 2010, she testified that “I chose an android because the android to me represents ‘the other’ in our society”, and “I can connect to the other, because it has so many parallels to my own life – just by being a female, African-American artist in today’s music industry”<sup>171</sup>. This cultural cognisance is documented in her activism. She released the 2015 protest song “Hell You Talmbout” with her artist collective *Wondaland*, a “visceral”<sup>172</sup> recounting of the names of black Americans victimized by racially motivated violence and police brutality. She founded *Fem the Future*, a social justice organization dedicated to female advocacy in the music industry<sup>173</sup>. She spoke passionately at the 2017 Women’s March, and introduced Kesha at the 2018 Grammy Awards<sup>174</sup>.

The literal phrase ‘dirty computer’ is a reflective allegory of this social justice experience as much as an extension of Monáe’s canonical Afrofuturist aesthetic<sup>175</sup>. Monáe conceptualizes the human brain as a computer<sup>176</sup>, and revealed that after *The Electric Lady*’s release, she struggled with self-loathing and anxiety. She viewed herself as a ‘dirty’ computer, encoded with alienating, socially repugnant ‘viruses’ – blackness, femaleness, queerness – and felt increasingly uncomfortable in her body and identity for

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<sup>170</sup> Rahawna Haile, “Janelle Monáe: *Dirty Computer*” (Pitchfork, 2018).

<sup>171</sup> Tim Grierson, “Why Janelle Monáe’s ‘Dirty Computer’ Film Is a Timely New Sci-Fi Masterpiece” (Rolling Stone, 2018).

<sup>172</sup> Katie Presley, “Janelle Monáe Releases Visceral Protest Song, ‘Hell You Talmbout’” (NPR, 2015).

<sup>173</sup> Spanos, “Frees”.

<sup>174</sup> Kesha performed a riveting version of “Praying” among a crowd composed of both other women in the music industry and fellow survivors of gendered violence. Why this moment was powerful should be clear, given the context of the previous chapter.

<sup>175</sup> More on Afrofuturism later in this chapter.

<sup>176</sup> This is both biologically sound and evocative sci-fi imagery.

its cultural implications. On November 8<sup>th</sup>, 2016, when alleged sexual predator Donald Trump was elected President of the United States, Monáe confirmed that ““For the first time... I felt scared.” Overnight, she went from living in a country whose president loved her music and had her perform on the White House lawn to one where it felt like her right to exist was threatened.”<sup>177</sup>

With the support of therapy, Monáe chose to embrace being a ‘dirty computer’, finding a narrative of self-liberation in the acceptance, yet simultaneous fear, of the heightened social stakes surrounding her existence<sup>178</sup>. The resulting album is significantly more personal than her previous works, freeing her “flawed”, “messy” human self from its “immaculate” android persona<sup>179</sup>. Monáe built a production team of twelve other producers to share this vision: Nate ‘Rocket’ Wonder, Chuck Lightning, Jon Jon Traxx, Nana Kwabena, Jon Brion, Roman GianArthur, Wynne Bennett, Mattman and Robin (Mattias Per Larsson and Robin Lennart Fredriksson), and Organized Noise (Rico Wade, Ray Murray, and Sleepy Brown). They released the record’s first two singles, “Django Jane” and “Make Me Feel”, on February 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2018. *Dirty Computer* followed in full form on April 27<sup>th</sup>, 2018<sup>180</sup>.

### 3.2 Production Analysis: Narrative Elements

Monáe found critical success in her earlier career by simply creating her narratives, obfuscating her own humanity in favour of an android alter ego, Cindi Mayweather. That alter ego was largely created out of insecurity, and “served in part as protective armour. “It had to do with the fear of being judged,” she says. “All I saw was that I was supposed to look a certain way coming into this industry, and I felt like I [didn’t] look like a stereotypical black female artist.””<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Spanos, “Frees”.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> *Dirty Computer* was released with an accompanying “emotion picture” visual album, worth its own comprehensive analysis. This analysis will consult the visual album where relevant, but any study of the emotion picture otherwise is beyond the bounds of this research project.

<sup>181</sup> Spanos, “Frees”.

After spending time in therapy working on self-acceptance, Monáe felt empowered to leave behind the alter ego and liberate her personal self with *Dirty Computer*, reflecting in a *Beats 1* interview that, “I’m flexing different muscles...there’s a different way that I’m expressing myself and allowing myself to be a complete human being... For the first time, people are getting an understanding of who I am and the many sides of me”; “I needed to break out of feeling to be like I needed to be anybody’s image.”<sup>182</sup> The production choice to be narratively transparent is courageous, especially considering that Monáe’s narrative in particular is effectively unprecedented in contemporary popular music. An openly queer woman of colour making genre-confounding music is both a generally compelling story and an inherently risky one. Per Haile,

“The story has no end in sight... because Monáe is one of its first authors... “For the culture, I kamikaze” she proclaims on “Django Jane,” a rap song full of trap hi-hats that dunks on the patriarchy and her haters. Monáe understands how much she’s risking even today by being out.”<sup>183</sup>

Despite their historically vocal support, Monáe repeatedly worries in interviews about her religious family’s reaction to *Dirty Computer*’s revelation that she is queer, to say nothing of the rest of her international audience, and the other marginalized dimensions of her identity – femaleness, blackness, a working class upbringing – that pose their own receptive challenges. But true to her testament in “Django Jane”, she and her production team chose to go all in and craft a story of embodied tension, interrogating what it means to be a queer, working-class woman of colour in the United States in 2018.

On a surface level, this can read as protest music, and the lyrical elements section of this analysis delves further into the social justice that Monáe advocates with *Dirty Computer*’s words. But *Dirty Computer*’s production team isn’t just posing the question of what it means to be American: the album is both reflecting on and responding to what it means when your denotative body, and its attributes, have a connotative meaning

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<sup>182</sup> Beats 1, “*Dirty Computer* Album Interview [Part 1]” (Apple Music, 2018).

<sup>183</sup> Haile, “*Dirty Computer*”.

outside of your control. Per Hennion, successful narrative elements are a combination of timeless narrative themes and a sympathetic persona. *Dirty Computer*'s narrative is an evolution, a maturation of Monáe's Afrofuturism that is congruous with the person she is publicly confirming, literally outing, for the first time. The record is not a just rumination on what it means to *be* the Other, but what it means to be *Othered*.

*Dirty Computer* chooses to build its narrative around the theme of "percussive tension", a foundational theory of hip-hop feminism<sup>184</sup><sup>185</sup>. Drawn from both the musical element of 'percussion' that is structurally integral to hip-hop music, and the literal force implied by the word itself, percussive tension is "...the tension between competing and often contradictory political and cultural projects... like hip-hop and feminism...[it] is percussive in that it is both disruptive and generative."<sup>186</sup> Monáe confirms this, describing in the Beats 1 interview that *Dirty Computer* is assembled in four narrative movements: the record's first four songs – "Dirty Computer" through "Screwed" - are the "reckoning", the "sting" of confronting the cultural implications of being a "dirty computer", and the prejudice and cruelty that come along with it<sup>187</sup>. The next five songs – "Django Jane" through "I Like That" – are celebratory, embracing one's identity as a dirty computer<sup>188</sup>. "Don't Judge Me" through "I'm So Afraid" convey the fear associated with being out, the dark undercurrent of risk that accompanies being a dirty computer<sup>189</sup>. "Americans" is the reclamation to round out the album and arrive at self-acceptance<sup>190</sup>.

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<sup>184</sup> "... A generationally specific articulation of feminist consciousness, epistemology, and politics rooted in the pioneering work of multiple generations of black feminists based in the United States and elsewhere in the diaspora but focused on questions and issues that grow out of the aesthetic and political prerogatives of hip-hop culture." Hip hop feminism is a post-civil rights movement that understands popular culture as a "site for political intervention to challenge, resist, and mobilize collectives to dismantle systems of exploitation." [Durham, 722].

<sup>185</sup> A chapter in Durham's article on hip hop feminism is named after one of Janelle Monáe's song titles from an earlier record, neat foreshadowing for *Dirty Computer*'s subject matter.

<sup>186</sup> Durham, 724.

<sup>187</sup> Beats 1, "Album Interview".

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

Embracing percussive tension in storytelling is ideologically “brave”: invoking tenants of hip-hop feminism requires *Dirty Computer* to be prepared to “fuck with the grays”, to faithfully document and refuse to make value or essentialist judgements about life experiences, even where those experiences can undermine or contradict one another<sup>191</sup>. Including the vulnerable, but unwavering, song “Don’t Judge Me” in the track list underscores *Dirty Computer*’s commitment to this bravery. Percussive tension is also an inherently creative narrative, because it allows ideas/objects/etc. that are not “traditionally” put together, or are not perceived to “fit” together, to be used in conjunction anyway<sup>192</sup>, much like the genre diversity and distinct narrative movements on *Dirty Computer*.

For this narrative to be successfully received requires a sympathetic persona, predicated on perceived authenticity, trustworthiness, and lack of ulterior or artificial motivation<sup>193</sup>. *Dirty Computer*’s production team chose to dispense with the androids and leverage Janelle Monáe herself, the naturalized centre of the album’s intersectional tensions, grounding *Dirty Computer*’s tension in a sophisticated self-determination. Grierson confirms that “Assert[ing]” one’s “individuality” against hostile forces/institutions is “a common tension in dystopian sci-fi”<sup>194</sup>, so this narrative production binds Monáe’s lived experiences to her historic aesthetic and casts her as a protagonist, inspiring sympathy. Janelle Monáe should be considered an American success story: she was born and raised in the United States, has accrued wealth and celebrity as an exceptional musician, and her music actively participates in American genres<sup>195</sup>. Janelle Monáe’s female, black, queer body is not, however, congruous with America’s sense of identity and self. This is the contemporary application that *Dirty Computer* uses to contextualize its narrative: self-determination at odds with the American Dream, leveraging Janelle Monáe’s embodied intersectionality and experiences as evidence. Monáe confirms this: “Strip away the

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<sup>191</sup> “Hip-hop feminists insist on living with contradictions, because failure to do so relegates feminism to an academic project that is not politically sustainable beyond the ivory tower” [Durham, 723].

<sup>192</sup> Durham, 724.

<sup>193</sup> Hennion, 177.

<sup>194</sup> Grierson, “Masterpiece”.

<sup>195</sup> More on this shortly.



makeup, strip away whatever you know about Janelle Monáe. At the end of the day, I'm a young black women living in America, and these are things that matter to me"<sup>196</sup>. The Guardian declared *Dirty Computer* a "...state-of-the-nation treatise on American identity in 2018" as much as "a coming-out record"<sup>197</sup>. Monáe doubled down on this production strategy in another interview: "[Dirty Computer] is just talking about the right to the American dream, you know, the pursuit of happiness; aren't we all supposed to have it? Do we all have it? No."<sup>198</sup> Indeed, the pre-chorus refrain in the album's second track, "Crazy, Classic, Life" asserts, "I am not America's nightmare/I am the American dream."<sup>199</sup> But 'classic' is a powerful word with undercurrents of respectability and fitting in. For Monáe to actively pursue classic-ness implies that classic-ness is not a thing that has been associated with, or expected for, her. Though the myth of the American dream is amassing fame and fortune as Monáe explicitly raps about achieving, *Dirty Computer* insists that because Monáe isn't white, male, or heteronormative, her success is perceived as unwelcome, even threatening. Though Monáe is the American dream personified, she has to reassure an unnamed audience that she is not America's nightmare.

This narrative should not just be analysed for what it is, but how Dirty Computer's production team chose to deliver it. Monáe says that she's "...going to make you empathize with dirty computers all around the world"<sup>200</sup>, but also that she "hopes not to destroy the oppressors but to change their minds"<sup>201</sup>. This builds on previous, thematically similar, comments on her aesthetic production choices: "I thought science fiction was a great way of talking about the future... It doesn't make people feel like you're talking about things that are happening right now, so they don't feel like you're talking down to them."<sup>202</sup> For instance, the album's closer, "Americans", is an ultimately empathetic song despite its sarcastic chorus. Between verses that summarize Monáe's

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<sup>196</sup> Spanos, "Frees".

<sup>197</sup> Davies, "No. 3".

<sup>198</sup> Beats 1, *Album Interview*.

<sup>199</sup> Janelle Monáe, *Dirty Computer* (Bad Boy Records, 2018).

<sup>200</sup> Spanos, "Frees".

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

<sup>202</sup> Grierson, "Masterpiece".

(primarily negative) experiences on the rest of *Dirty Computer*, and a call for justice on behalf of marginalized groups, is the jangle of:

“I pledge allegiance to the flag/ Learned the words from my mom and dad  
 Cross my heart and I hope to die/ With a big old piece of American pie  
 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 / I'm American”<sup>203</sup>

This is excruciatingly careful songwriting. By neatly laying the verses side by side with a chorus that facilitates all types of readings<sup>204</sup>, and writing the bridge to speak strictly for advocacy without overt condemnation of any other side or political perspective, “Americans” bridges American cultural tension, and all of its identities, while refusing to explicitly condemn any of them<sup>205</sup>. By straddling this line of being provocative without being perceptively angry, *Dirty Computer* prevents Monáe from being perceived as ‘radical’, ‘aggressive’, or ‘threatening’, her largest barriers to receiving and retaining the sympathy necessary for her narrative to be successful. This was an intention of the production team, evident in a Quincy Jones quote included in the track notes: “Anger doesn’t get anything done, so you have to find out: How do you make it work?”<sup>206</sup>

Monáe and her production team seek to further reinforce the credibility and palatability of her messages by adding other, respected activists in voiceovers. Martin Luther King Jr., reciting the Declaration of Independence, accompanies “Crazy, Classic, Life”. This organizes *Dirty Computer*’s narrative, bookending the majority of the album’s content literally within its contexts, placing all of the songs save the first between the socio-

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<sup>203</sup> Monáe, *Dirty Computer*.

<sup>204</sup> One could hear this chorus as the cultish chanting of stereotypical patriarchal, right-wing, small-government, gun rights enthusiasts from hell. It can also be heard as a darkly cheerful satire of traditional American values. Not conducive to a truly neutral reading, but certainly not overt in advertising which reading is the preferred/dominant one unless the listener already holds that ideological perspective.

<sup>205</sup> A choice reflective of hip-hop feminism.

<sup>206</sup> R.D., “Janelle Monae’s Dirty Computer...” (The Economist, 2018).

political context of the times, that is between “Crazy, Classic, Life” and “Americans”<sup>207</sup>. It also validates Monáe’s testimony about her lived experiences through cohesion and proximity to one of the United States’ most beloved civil rights leaders. The sections of the Declaration that King is reading emphasize the dimensions of American identity, “... exceptionalism, freedom, and equality”<sup>208</sup> at the core of *Dirty Computer*’s percussive tension. The record posits that Monáe undeniably embodies the first, but her literal body inhibits her ability to embody the latter two.

“Americans” goes a step further, employing a King sound-a-like to recite an entirely new verse, heavily influenced by Barack Obama’s 2008 “A More Perfect Union” speech<sup>209</sup><sup>210</sup>, which Monáe explicitly references in the track notes. Invoking a speech by the first black president of the United States, considered pivotal for American race relations, is a production choice that casts seriousness and sober intent; the unvarnished, unapologetic nature of hip hop feminism makes a decisive mark. This voiceover also legitimizes Monáe’s perspective, this time as the album’s last word. “A More Perfect Union”, written partially to address controversial remarks made by Obama’s then distinctly pro-black pastor<sup>211</sup>, is about teamwork and forgiveness across differences as defining pillars of American-ness, the transcendent power of American values even in the face of racial tensions. *Dirty Computer*’s story implores its listeners to attempt understanding, but also makes an effort not to push them away while doing so.

### 3.3 Production Analysis: Musical Elements

*Dirty Computer* is a musically diverse album, borrowing from funk, hip-hop, rock, electronic, and R&B conventions. The interplay between the socio-political connotations

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<sup>207</sup> Only the record’s introductory track, “Dirty Computer”, sits outside these bookends/contexts this way, and it is a significantly shorter, washy song that serves as the album’s abstract of sorts, essentially introducing the concept of the album and then allowing the rest of *Dirty Computer* to follow separately, with all of the remaining songs that pertain to Monáe’s personal experiences contained between “Crazy, Classic, Life” and “Americans”.

<sup>208</sup> Callegari, “Welcome to Janelle Monáe’s America” (New America, 2018).

<sup>209</sup> Monáe, *Dirty Computer*.

<sup>210</sup> A lyrical analysis of this verse follows in the lyrical analysis of this chapter.

<sup>211</sup> Widely perceived as anti-white.

of these genres is a reflection of the record's intersectional themes: different genres are used to leverage different musical elements, literally building sonic multitudes that can support the weight and diversity of the *Dirty Computer*'s lyrics. To fully unpack all of the potential implications of these individual genres is beyond both the scope of this chapter and each genre's respective relevance to *Dirty Computer*'s production, so this analysis focuses on what the record's production team picked and chose to use from each genre, and where they chose to put these selections, per this research project's directive to study what producers *do*.

As established in the previous chapter, Hennion's musical elements of production are melody, rhythm section, and orchestra 'backing'. The rhythm section on *Dirty Computer* evolves in parallel to the narrative movements established in the previous section. The title track opens with a 'live' sounding drum kit. Though heavily compressed and mixed to the point that it may very well be constructed out of samples, the album's production team chose to ground the introductory tracks with a perceptible kick, snare, and other percussive elements that occupy the traditional rhythmic space, and frequency spectrum range, of toms and cymbals.

These 'real' drums quickly become more obviously mixed in "Crazy, Classic, Life" and "Take A Byte", where the 'snare' crispness verges on an effect because of the amount of decay mixed in, but the 'kick' is nonetheless panned straight down the mix centre, its top transients emphasized to sound like a perceptible 'hit', evocative of a pedal on skin. "Jane's Dream" is a nebulous transition, rhythm section-free, but "Screwed" picks right up where the 'drums' left off. On "Django Jane", the start of *Dirty Computer*'s second narrative phase, the production team begins a transition into drum tones that evoke old school hip hop, peppering "Pynk", "Make Me Feel", "I Got the Juice" and "I Like That" with outrageous 'snares', and 'kicks' that are more evocative of 808s<sup>212</sup> than the hearty thuds of the kick tones the record began with. This percussion is leveraged prominently

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<sup>212</sup> Derived from the Roland TR-808, a programmable drum machine whose sounds were a staple of 1980s hip hop for their exaggerated, manipulated effect. '808' colloquially refers to a sub bass-heavy breed of obviously electronic drums (often indeed derived from the original TR-808), particularly when used in hip hop, trap, rap, or electronica.

in the mix, ‘coming out’ from its previous obfuscation, a perceptively cheeky nod to *Dirty Computer*’s narrative movement of celebrating out-ness. The bass frequencies simultaneously evolve from undefined pads of low frequency information in the first few songs to a percussive element inextricably linked with the kick at this point in the record. By “Don’t Judge Me”, a ‘standard’ drum kit returns<sup>213</sup>, complete with a definitively separate, round-wound bass sound typical of finger-style jazz and funk bands. Aside from the rhythm section-less interlude of “Stevie’s Dream”, this rock-ness holds through the end of the record, even escalating to a muted stadium rock vibe for a few verses of “I’m So Afraid”, cymbal flourishes and all.

This parallels the record’s story, using genres as stand-ins for cultural ideologies. A rock-sounding drum kit sonically evokes the hegemonic power of whiteness, maleness, and heteronormativity. Per Morant, black music has historically “...operated as a tool to send coded messages throughout the group”<sup>214</sup>, funk and hip hop beats evoke a legacy of African-American, post-civil rights era protest that is empowering and identity affirming for Monáe. Funk music “... paved the way for improved self-esteem and community esteem, challenged societal social norms, and, most important, created an avenue for self-definition”<sup>215</sup>. *Dirty Computer*’s subsequent self-definition begins with, to use Monáe’s word, ‘reckoning’ with hegemony. The progressive manipulation of a rock drum kit into a funk one, for the purposes of self-expression as a non-white/male/rock artist, endorses the disruption of hegemonic structures. Morant affirms that this is congruous with funk’s tradition of leveraging “...experiences of everyday life to challenge the dominant power structure and ideology of the time period”, exactly as *Dirty Computer* seeks to do<sup>216</sup>.

The second narrative movement on the record is about celebrating one’s self-determination, even if it is hegemonically disruptive. Funk rhythms function as a critical voice during this movement, implying a “...deliberate reaction to - and rejection of - the

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<sup>213</sup> Still thoroughly mixed and affected, but the point stands.

<sup>214</sup> Morant, 72.

<sup>215</sup> Morant, 72-73.

<sup>216</sup> See ‘making people empathize with dirty computers’ in the previous analytical section.

traditional Western world's predilection for formality, pretence, and self-repression."<sup>217</sup> The upbeat, optimistic vibes featured on sex-positive songs like "Take A Byte", "Screwed", "Make Me Feel", and "I Got the Juice" implicitly endorse the songs' respective messages as much as influence the body of the listener to participate, to dance and groove. The tonal quality of percussion in this second narrative section is equally evocative of hip hop, which further participates in the legacy of funk's critical voice and cultural influence. Morant documents that funk's critical voice, as any protest medium, "...must reinvent itself and find ways to continue to make an impact and remain visible"<sup>218</sup>; hip hop was one such re-invention.<sup>219</sup>

The rock drum kit returns by the record's third movement, and reaches its most conventionally rock point in "I'm So Afraid", wielding aesthetic influence through "Americans". This return acknowledges the harsh reality of being out, and the associated risks of living in a body that disrupts hegemony that self-love cannot necessarily overcome. Thus the rhythm section passes stronger judgement on the harsh reality of embodying intersectional identities than more surface-level production elements could. Strong criticism of hegemonic institutions in more forward mix elements could be interpreted as radical, aggressive, or threatening, whereas listening to *Dirty Computer*'s first few tracks is not to miss, nor particularly notice, the percussion. But once the listener is treated to the playfulness of finger snaps and tongue clicks on "Pynk" and "Make Me Feel", a return to the snare on "Americans" feels noticeably heavier. Such a let-down promotes wistfulness for the funk and hip-hop beats, which inspires empathy for the genre and the people it represents to the listener, serving *Dirty Computer*'s goals.

Any analysis of funk on *Dirty Computer* must acknowledge the influence of Prince in the musical elements, especially "Make Me Feel". Spanos confirms that "Monáe was good friends with Prince, who personally blessed the album's glossy camp tone and synthed-out hooks"<sup>220</sup>. Monáe "sorely missed" his mentorship "during the production process",

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<sup>217</sup> Morant, 75.

<sup>218</sup> Morant, 78.

<sup>219</sup> Morant, 80.

<sup>220</sup> Spanos, "Frees".

and found it “difficult” writing the record without him, after his untimely death<sup>221</sup>. However, Spanos clarifies that while “Rumours spread that Prince co-wrote the single “Make Me Feel,” which features a “Kiss”-like guitar riff, “Prince did not write that song,” says Monáe<sup>222</sup>. That *Dirty Computer*’s funk evokes Prince is a testament to the love that Monáe has for him, not her dependence on him.

Returning to the musical elements, the social commentary in the rhythm section is contrasted with optimistic orchestra backing, composed of mostly electronic pads and nebulous MIDI elements. Familiar to fans of Janelle Monáe beyond *Dirty Computer*, leveraging electronica in the orchestra backing’s deep mixes is where *Dirty Computer*’s production team flexes Monáe’s android-era aesthetic. The electronica is a quiet contrast to the traditional genres that do the bulk of the rhythm section’s work, forming a percussive tension in the album’s mixes that can resonate with the lyrical elements addressing similar tensions in Monáe’s lived experiences. This sculpted intersection of funk, hip hop, and electronica in the structural elements of the album’s songs, forward-looking while traditionally influenced, evokes Afrofuturism, “...an epistemology that both examines the current problems faced by blacks and people of colour more generally and critiques interpretations of the past and the future<sup>223</sup>. According to Morris, Afrofuturism posits that,

“...not only [will] blacks... exist in the future, as opposed to being harbingers of social chaos and collapse, but in "recovering the histories of counter-futures" Afrofuturism insists that blacks fundamentally are the future and that Afrodiasporic cultural practices are vital to imagining the continuance of human society.”<sup>224</sup>

The treatment of the album’s orchestra backing as an Afrofuturistic vehicle sounds like a natural evolution given Janelle Monáe’s body of work prior to *Dirty Computer*, mirroring that of her persona in the record’s story. Monáe’s previous albums certainly play with

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<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

<sup>223</sup> Susana Morris, “Black Girls Are from the Future: Afrofuturist Feminism in Octavia E. Butler’s “Fledgling”” (*Women’s Studies Quarterly*, 2012), 153.

<sup>224</sup> Morris, 153.

genre, but the dominant production aesthetic on those records is unabashedly futuristic and biased towards electronic music production values as a means of control and sanitization<sup>225</sup>. *Dirty Computer* relegates the electronic-sounding instrumentation to a largely a supporting role.

All fourteen songs sport dense-sounding, lush arrangements, and crystal clear production values. *Dirty Computer* is Monáe's most personal album to date by far, and so in its developed intersection of Monáe's android aesthetic with her human multitudes, the listener hears a distinct shift from the sort of projected, 'objective' aesthetic of her older characters to a more personally potent, humanized sound, a self-determination rather than a series of costumes. This is further reinforced by *Dirty Computer*'s structure: there are very few actual breaks between songs on the album. The production team opts consistently for songs to quite literally blend into one another, such as "Screwed" and "Django Jane", or at the very least gently evolve from one to the next because of the omnipresent, lush orchestra backing.

Such nuances provide a missing link between the Janelle Monáe of albums past and the Janelle Monáe of *Dirty Computer*. As Janelle Monáe grows as an artist, she continues to invest in the Afrofuturistic vision and the necessity of black cultural contributions. On her most personal album, she is unafraid to apply those visions against the reality of her black life, and make music that shares Afrofuturism's optimistic aesthetic while still dedicating space to the sometimes-traumatic experiences of the "highly-melinated"<sup>226</sup>.

*Dirty Computer*'s melodies, third and final of the musical elements, are approachable, contrasting with the sophistication and complexity of the other musical production choices. Only two types of instruments receive melodies distinct from the orchestra backing and lead vocal line. Classical strings (composed of indistinguishable instruments) serve to add aesthetic contrast to rapped lyrics in "Django Jane", and lead the first few instrumental sections in "Don't Judge Me". But the dominant melodic force on *Dirty Computer*, apart from the vocal melodies, is the electric guitar. There are classic

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<sup>225</sup> As established in the narrative section of this analysis.

<sup>226</sup> Monáe, *Dirty Computer*.



metal lead lines and chuggy riffs in “Screwed”, “Pynk”, and “So Afraid”; sassy Prince derivatives on “Make Me Feel” and “Americans”; and a wailing solo that eclipses even the strings at the climax of “Don’t Judge Me”. These guitar parts are not compositionally radical, and some of the most overtly classic rock parts are purposefully buried in the mix, such as the solos in “So Afraid”. This occasional burying in the mix allows other traditionally marginalized genres to ‘walk over’ rock conventions, evoking the disruption of hegemony analysed in the funk/rock production of the rhythm section.

But such carefully “mannish”<sup>227</sup> interpretations of secondary melodies, that could have theoretically been given to any other instrument, suggest that *Dirty Computer*’s production team is using the electric guitar to address another element of Monáe’s intersectional identity to be built upon in the lyrics: gender performance, specifically with regard to masculinity. Jack (then Judith) Halberstam’s theory of female masculinity argues that the breed of social power and dominance normally conceptualized as masculinity is not tied to gender, but perceived that way because of patriarchal cultural influence<sup>228</sup>. Monáe is fond of “screwing”<sup>229</sup> with gender as much as systems of power, and a shrieking series of pinch harmonics at a song’s emotional high point feels like a power move, choosing to channel the electric guitar’s hyper masculine dominance and ferocity. Ducking those same harmonics under the vocal line, refusing to even let them compete with the voice of the singer when present, feels like a greater power move: Janelle Monáe is *so* masculine that she puts ostentatious guitar parts in her songs and then calmly sings right in front of them. That kind of implied confidence and authority confronts the passive, lacking tropes associated with normative femininity, and reinforces Monáe’s “free-ass” approach to her gender performance, gender identity, and sexuality<sup>230</sup>.

Simple, pop-y, lead vocal melodies are produced to add inoffensive polish in contrast with this playing with gender. The backing “Oh”s on “Crazy Classic Life” and “So

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<sup>227</sup> Ibid.

<sup>228</sup> Judith Halberstam, “An Introduction to Female Masculinity” (Duke University Press, 1998), 2.

<sup>229</sup> Monáe, *Dirty Computer*.

<sup>230</sup> Spanos, “Frees”.

Afraid”, and gang unisons on “Take A Byte”, “Screwed”, “Pynk”, and “Americans”, all add dimension without any distracting harmonies or polyrhythms when the larger mixes are already deep and intense. The lead vocal melodies use pleasing intervals and minimize the frequency of large jumps between distant notes; chorus melodies repeat themselves faithfully; and bridge developments don’t deviate too far from the sonic homes of verses. The vocal melodies echo the intention of *Dirty Computer*’s persuasive, never aggressive, narrative strategy. A veneer of pop mitigates the harshness/queerness of some of the other melodic contributions and vocal versification, and lightly smooths the musical genre play, making the album sonically safe and accessible for the listener on a topical level. In combination with the other musical elements, *Dirty Computer*’s melodies complete a diverse musical foundation from which lyrics can be received without defensiveness and thus inspire sympathy (even if their subject matter is pointed), yet still feel congruous with the music and thus be perceived as authentic.

### 3.4 Production Analysis: Lyrical Elements

*Dirty Computer*’s lyrical elements are the focus of its production, the communicative centre that all of the rest of the album’s intersectional work is done to support and legitimize. All of the intersectional threads buried in other elements are brought together through the words and versification. Supported by the album’s story, the versification plays heavily with queerness and sex positivity. By further invoking the tenets of hip hop feminism and, in cohesion with the critical voice of funk music, disrupting traditional gender roles and respectability politics, the versification is produced as a dedicated space for Janelle Monáe’s queer identity. Per Durham, “...the persistence of respectability politics often impedes hip-hop feminism’s attempts to formulate an unapologetic pro-sex stance among black and Latina women”<sup>231</sup>, especially with regard to queer sexualities, gender presentations, and sexual orientations. Durham elaborates,

“Because black and brown bodies have been historically configured as excessive, with unrestrained desires, this narrative of excess and pathology has seriously limited how

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<sup>231</sup> Durham, 724.

black and brown sexualities can be made intelligible in popular culture and academic discourse, both of which tend to represent women of colour either as ladies and queens or as bitches and whores.”<sup>232</sup>

Rather than attempt to circumvent this dichotomy and thus continue to give it power, or seek to directly disprove its stereotypes and risk being perceived as confrontational<sup>233</sup>, *Dirty Computer*'s production team lean into “screw[ing]”<sup>234</sup> with respectability, sexuality, and gender, embracing the percussive tension and contrasts, mirroring their treatment of the electric guitar in the musical elements. Monáe uses masculine, chest-supported drawls in the verses of overtly sexual songs like “Take a Byte”, and assertive shouts in the equally innuendo-laden “I Got the Juice”. Co-writer Pharrell Williams is a guest performer on the latter, and uses a submissive, flirtatious, vocal delivery in the song's bridge, perceptively reversing hegemonic gender roles. Monáe sounds just as comfortable performing normative femininity, using breathy falsetto and gasping melisma in “Pynk”, “Make Me Feel”, “Screwed”, and “I Like That”. The effect is a vocal delivery that averages out to a sound that's “Powerful with a little bit of tender”, a perceptively authentic performance of a spectrum of gender<sup>235</sup>.

Darker songs, such as “Don't Judge Me”, “So Afraid”, and “Django Jane” round out the album's performance diversity, allowing Monáe to flex impressive range and vocal technique as she transitions from hip-hop rapping, to rock belting, to R&B crooning, to gospel runs, to the deliveries already discussed, sometimes in single songs. *Dirty Computer*'s production team consistently chooses to align particular versifications with their associated genres, so that this vocal diversity comes across as resounding with the music, necessarily flexible, as opposed to flaky or sporadic. Raps rest on harder, more heavily produced rhythm sections; soaring electric guitars usually support impressive belts. The most vulnerable, mid-range vocal performances are virtually entirely in songs

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<sup>232</sup> Durham, 725.

<sup>233</sup> And risk invoking the stereotypes of the angry black woman, the raging feminist, and the socially usurping working class person, all perceptively threatening characters that would harm *Dirty Computer*'s efforts.

<sup>234</sup> Monáe, *Dirty Computer*.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid.

featuring other artists, whose presences serve as a tacit endorsement, allowing Monáe the freedom to sound perceptively ‘female’ without undermining other aspects of her identity.

The flexibility of Dirty Computer’s versification is both a testament to Janelle Monáe’s abilities as a vocalist<sup>236</sup> and a perfect production vehicle for the second lyrical element, words, where all of the album’s ideas are displayed. Addressing sex positivity, “Screwed” bridges the reckoning and celebration with humorous nihilism through dark, sex-positive wordplay: “Let’s get screwed/I don’t care/We’ll put water in your guns/We’ll do it all for fun”; literally ‘make love, not war’<sup>237</sup>. “Pynk” is cuter, listing the colour of pink body parts with sweetness as much as sexual implication<sup>238</sup>. “Make Me Feel” and “I Got the Juice” are intently pansexual in their gaze, always leveraging the gender-neutral “you” to address the objects of Monáe’s affections<sup>239</sup>. The relationship between sexual liberation and political liberation is further emphasized with the bridge breakdown in “Screwed” where Monáe coolly raps “See everything is sex/Except power, which is sex/You know power is just sex/Screw me and I’ll screw you too/.../Now ask yourself who’s screwing who”, polished off with a verse that tiredly concludes “I’m tired of Hoteps<sup>240</sup> trying to tell me how to feel”<sup>241</sup>, a subtle hip-hop feminist critique of less intersectional forms of advocacy.

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<sup>81</sup> More on this in the voice analysis, part of the personal elements section.

<sup>237</sup> Monáe, *Dirty Computer*.

<sup>238</sup> The vulva imagery in its music video is worth its own comprehensive analysis.

<sup>239</sup> Monáe, *Dirty Computer*.

<sup>240</sup> ““Hotep” is an Egyptian word that means “at peace.” It’s basically the Egyptian “What’s good?””. However, “Over the past decade or so, the working definition of “Hotep” has morphed into an all-encompassing term describing a person who’s either a clueless parody of Afrocentricity... or someone who’s loudly, conspicuously and obnoxiously pro-black but anti-progress.” As Damon Young elaborates with, particular relevance to Monáe’s use of the word in *Dirty Computer*, “So wait, you said Hoteps are very pro-black, right? Right! But you also said they can be anti-woman. At least, anti-feminism and social progress, right? Right! And anti-gay, too, right? Right! Hmm. Do they not realize that gay people and women are black people, too? That’s a great question. How can you be pro-black when your pro-blackness only recognizes and benefits like 30 percent of black people? That’s an even better question.” [Damon Young, “Hotep Explained” (The Root, 2018)].

<sup>241</sup> Monáe, *Dirty Computer*.

Words are where *Dirty Computer* references popular culture the most, providing contemporary applications for its narrative of percussive tension. “Screwed” ties Oscar Wilde to the funk criticism of upper middle class African Americans in the wake of the civil rights movement, to the Facebook warriors of today<sup>242</sup>, blending seamlessly in “Django Jane”. Titled as a gender-bent allusion to Jamie Foxx’s character in Quentin Tarantino’s 2012 film about a former slave turned bounty hunter, and one of the first singles from the album, “Django Jane” is fast, coolly-delivered rap on the cultural tensions at the core of queer, working class, female blackness (- *See Appendix A* -)<sup>243</sup>. The other songs on *Dirty Computer* are similarly detailed. The popular culture references alone include: Daft Punk’s album *Random Access Memories*, another Pharrell co-production that features funk guitar work from the legendary Nile Rogers, a fellow artist of color; the racial caricature Sambo, evoking ‘benevolent’ racism in popular culture, and American institutional racism; Vincent Van Gogh, a gifted artist who was undervalued and deeply misunderstood in his life because of his mental illness, but celebrated in death; “You try to grab this pussycat/This pussy grab you back”, a direct jab at the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, who bragged about committing sexual assault using this crude language; the political controversy surrounding the Second Amendment<sup>244</sup>; and others.

The words are consistently unapologetic, another brave production choice given the controversial nature of the subject matter and Monáe’s unprecedented tackling of it. Durham confirms this, arguing that “...[C]hallenging respectability politics is far from a simple enterprise. There are often serious reprisals for people of colour, and women of colour in particular, when [they] freely express... agency and desire.”<sup>245</sup> But the production team commits to their narrative, however deliberately inoffensively, and that includes truths about the inherent dangers, structural prejudices, and cultural biases

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<sup>242</sup> Young, “Hotep”.

<sup>243</sup> It frankly demands its own in-depth lyrical analysis for tackling so much of *Dirty Computer*’s intersectional material in a single song, but for the limitations of this analysis, the following appendix visualizes the various themes of identity touched upon and their intersections.

<sup>244</sup> Monáe, *Dirty Computer*.

<sup>245</sup> Durham, 725.

Monáe faces simply for existing in her body. “Take A Byte” is about unapologetic sexual agency, playfully promising “I won’t tell” as it invites the listener to participate, the visual album making the titular lyric literal through an Eve and the apple allegory<sup>246</sup>. “Don’t Judge Me” is more self-deprecating, but nonetheless retains a dignity, following after “I Like That” which literally breaks down the imperfect dimensions of her personhood that Monáe like about herself anyway: “I’m always left of centre<sup>247</sup>/And that’s right where I belong/I’m the random minor note/You hear in major songs”, ending with “I always knew I was the shit”<sup>248</sup>. The refrain of “I Got the Juice” is “You’re Number One/And don’t you doubt it”. “Django Jane” evokes old-school gangster rap as it proudly lists all of the awards and career successes that Monáe is achieving in music, film, and broader cultural influence.

As much as the lyrics stand up for Monáe’s intersectional identity, they also consistently return to a humanist theme, underscoring a universal humanity that contributes to the album’s sympathy-inspiring efforts. “Pynk” concludes with “Pink is the truth you can’t hide” and “We’re all just pink”, and the themes of self-love in so many other songs can be read as love letters to femaleness, blackness, and queerness as much as to the listener. Tying all of the record’s themes together, literally and metaphorically, is the final verse of “Americans”:

“Until women can get equal pay for equal work/This is not my America  
 Until same gender loving people can be who they are/This is not my America  
 Until black people can come home from a police stop without being shot in the head/This  
 is not my America/  
 Until poor whites can get a shot at being successful/This is not my America....  
 ... Until Latinos and Latinas don't have to run from walls/This is not my America  
 But I tell you today that the devil is a liar/Because it's gon' be my America before it's all  
 over”<sup>249</sup>

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<sup>246</sup> Monáe, *Dirty Computer*.

<sup>247</sup> A pun on the political spectrum; Monáe identifies as left-wing.

<sup>248</sup> Monáe, *Dirty Computer*.

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*

Afrofuturism, American-ness, blackness, femaleness, queerness, and economic status are presented as seamlessly interwoven, a sympathetic demonstration of the multitudes of Janelle Monáe's identity. This concluding verse is *Dirty Computer*'s last word, naturalizing Monáe's authority to tell the nuanced stories that she does, lending perceptive authenticity to her voice through its "grain"<sup>250</sup>.

### 3.5 Production Analysis: Personal Elements

The first of Hennion's personal elements is voice. *Dirty Computer*'s chooses to produce Monáe's voice by focusing on its "grain". Simon Frith interprets Barthes' theorization of a "grained" voice as "...a voice with which, for whatever reasons, we have physical sympathy"<sup>251</sup>. Indeed, "As listeners, we assume that we can hear someone's life in their voice - a life that's there despite and not because of the singer's craft, a voice that says who they really are, an art that only exists because of what they've suffered"<sup>252</sup>. *Dirty Computer*'s narrative is built on the lived experiences of its artist, and the vocal production is consistent, reinforcing Monáe's central identity. Frith claims that "To recognize a voice... is to recognize a person"<sup>253</sup>. Thus it is especially important amid the density of the record's other production elements that Janelle Monáe always sound like the same person, the consistent, naturalized centre of *Dirty Computer*'s themes.

Despite the wide range of versification and genre play, Monáe's voice is mixed to occupy near-identical space in the stereo soundstage in every song. Never buried in the mix but never soaring over it, the lead vocals are always just forward enough to sound intimate without sounding self-absorbed, so the listener hears the embodied limitations of Monáe's performance as much as how smoothly she executes the versified range discussed above, reinforcing her humanity. Allowing Monáe to showcase masterful capabilities is also authenticating in terms of genre norms: such vocal ability opposes the stereotype of the lacking female pop singer, inoculating Monáe from perception of this

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<sup>250</sup> Frith, 191.

<sup>251</sup> Frith, 192.

<sup>252</sup> Frith, 186.

<sup>253</sup> Frith, 191.

image despite the pop melodies she sings. The EQ curve<sup>254</sup> applied never seems to perceptively change from song to song either, allowing the versification range discussed above while maintaining a sense of overarching consistency. The perception promoted by these choices is that Janelle Monáe is singing in different places in her vocal register, but with consistent reinforcement that it is indeed Janelle Monáe who is always singing.

Reverb and compression sound subtle, quietly shimmering just around the edges of the lead vocals. This is not to say that the vocal production is not heavy, rather that *Dirty Computer*'s production team makes sure that it never *sounds* heavy or obfuscating, at least where the lead vocals, and thus the album's perceptible authorship, are concerned. The backing vocals are doused in stylized R&B shimmer, the traces of individual articulations heavily smoothed and subsequently blending with the orchestra backing. But perceptible transparency is key for an authentic author<sup>255</sup>. Similar to the treatment of Kesha's voice on *Rainbow*, this approach to the vocal production makes the physicality of Monáe's voice undeniable, its embodiment prominent in the dryer edges of her articulation, the sparing decay refusing to gloss over her Midwestern accent. This production approach is sonically authenticating for its participation in the vocal myth Frith catalogues, allowing Monáe's voice to function as an indication of "body", "person", and "character" as much as a musical instrument<sup>256</sup>.

This leveraging of the body and embodied experiences speaks to how *Dirty Computer*'s production team seeks to orient the production of her image, Hennion's other personal dimension, in this new phase of her career. Monáe testified in 2010 her android persona served as a vehicle to "break out of... boundaries" with when her own identity felt lacking and culturally fraught<sup>257</sup>. Monáe's "black and white" uniform "used to be [her]

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<sup>254</sup> A mixing tool that allows for adjusting the amplitude of particular frequencies in a track. Typically, the particular EQ (short for equalization) manipulation ('curve') applied to an artist's voice varies from song to song, to best marry the vocal line with each song's different mix even if it risks sounding minutely different than other vocal performances.

<sup>255</sup> Weisethaunet, 465.

<sup>256</sup> Frith, 187.

<sup>257</sup> Grierson, "Masterpiece".



camo”<sup>258</sup>, but having achieved so much success, feeling ready to publicly consider herself a “free-ass motherfucker”, the android persona becomes allegorically resonant with the institutions that oppress Monáe’s humanity and individuality. *Dirty Computer*’s conception of Janelle Monáe’s image is the destruction of her former, android self; the breakdown of the delineation between her “immaculate”<sup>259</sup> public image and her true humanity in all of its tense reality<sup>260</sup><sup>261</sup>. The effect is sympathetic and ideologically resonant with American values of freedom, diversity, and self-determination, which supports *Dirty Computer*’s story, *Dirty Computer*’s narrative, and Monáe’s artistic goals.

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<sup>258</sup> Janelle Monáe, *Dirty Computer*.

<sup>259</sup> Spanos, “Frees”.

<sup>260</sup> Grierson, “Masterpiece”.

<sup>261</sup> *Dirty Computer* was accompanied by an “emotion picture”, half short film half visual album, that elaborates beautifully on this image production. While analyzing that film is beyond the scope of this analysis, but it clearly shares Monáe’s artistic vision in harmony with the album itself.

## Chapter 4

### 4 St. Vincent's *Masseduction*

This chapter focuses on the production of St. Vincent's third studio album, *Masseduction*. *Masseduction* is produced to confound genre norms, using queer guitar work through the projected persona of St. Vincent to disrupt critical coverage of its creator, Annie Clark. *Masseduction* appropriately rounds out this research project because of how it produces persona: where the other artists in this project produce personas that are supposed to be representative of themselves, Annie Clark constructs and encourages focus on St. Vincent as a separate entity. The record offers one demonstration of what an artist who wants to be intimate – but doesn't want to be personally revealing – says, and how a producer accordingly primes that message for success. *Masseduction* is Annie Clark's most personal work to date, yet she took great care to maintain plausible deniability between its emotional content and her person. Further, despite this lack of perceived personal expression, antithetical to our understanding of what makes a successful persona<sup>262</sup>, the record received glowing critical reviews. This suggests that the album still said something that was both interpretable and resonant. The record's production is used as a means of control, focusing on delineating and policing Clark's boundaries without inhibiting her ability to communicate. The purpose of this chapter is thus to analyse the relationship between the album's production and the perception of intimacy with regard to Annie Clark versus St. Vincent, unpacking how a music-focused production approach functions and was successfully executed. A recount of Clark's creative contexts up until *Masseduction*'s release prefaces the production analysis of the album, which follows Hennion's elements of production in four sections: narrative elements, musical elements, lyrical elements, and personal elements.

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<sup>262</sup> To be elaborated on in the narrative section of this chapter.

## 4.1 Creative Context

Like the other chapters in this research project, this chapter begins by asking a question of ‘who’ to give the following analysis creative context. Unlike the other chapters in this research project, there are two necessary questions to comprehensively round out that creative context: ‘who is St. Vincent?’ versus ‘who is Annie Clark?’ Born in Tulsa, Oklahoma and raised in Dallas, Texas, Annie Clark is the creator behind St. Vincent<sup>263</sup>. One of eight siblings and step-siblings, Clark credits both the relative chaos of her upbringing<sup>264</sup> and uncle Tuck Andress, half of the jazz duo Tuck & Patti<sup>265</sup>, with facilitating her early musical experimentation<sup>266</sup>. The pull of the guitar is a foundational memory: “Guitar was one of those things, those callings... It just hit me. I would draw guitars, and make guitars, when I was five years old. I was completely obsessed with the shape. I loved it. I was in love with it even before I started to play it.”<sup>267</sup>

Clark’s transformation into St. Vincent is consistently mythologized from this point forward: she attended Berklee College of Music, dropping out after three years, and then toured with Polyphonic Spree and Sufjan Stevens<sup>268</sup>. A move to New York City inspired the stage name St. Vincent: “St Vincent’s hospital was where “Dylan Thomas died drunk”, as [Nick] Cave sang in There She Goes, My Beautiful World”<sup>269</sup>. St. Vincent’s first LP, *Marry Me*, debuted in 2007, followed by *Actor* in 2009; *Strange Mercy* in 2011; *Love This Giant*, a collaboration with David Byrne, in 2012; and *St. Vincent* in 2014<sup>270</sup>. The records were consistently well received critically, and St. Vincent’s commercial success grew steadily, with *St. Vincent* winning a Grammy for Best Alternative Album<sup>271</sup>. A GQ profile refers to her rapid elevation in star status after her self-titled record as

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<sup>263</sup> Brad Angle, “St. Vincent Talks New Album and Why She Wore a “Bikini” on Her Guitar World Cover “(Guitar World, 2016).

<sup>264</sup> Carrie Battan, “St. Vincent on Her High-Profile Romances and Her Confessional New Album” (Vogue, 2017).

<sup>265</sup> Both of whom, incidentally, contribute subtle performances to a few tracks on *Masseduction*.

<sup>266</sup> Angle, “Bikini”.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid.

<sup>269</sup> Tom Lamont, “St Vincent: “I’m in deep nun mode”” (The Guardian, 2017).

<sup>270</sup> Molly Young, “St. Vincent and the Art of Never Being Boring” (GQ, 2019).

<sup>271</sup> Angle, “Bikini”.

“hockey stick growth”<sup>272</sup>. Bolstered by the elaborate praise of the likes of Byrne, St. Vincent’s commercial profile skyrocketed in the wake of numerous, high profile performances across the popular culture spectrum: fronting Nirvana’s surviving members at their Rock and Roll Hall of Fame induction; joining the Dallas Symphony Orchestra for a performance at SOLUNA Festival; guesting on Taylor Swift’s 1989 World Tour alongside Beck; playing the American national anthem for an NFL promotion; and performing at David Lynch’s request for Festival of Disruption<sup>273274</sup>.

Praise for St. Vincent is extensive. She is a “guitar genius”<sup>275</sup>, “modern-day rock star”<sup>276</sup>, and “post-modern guitar hero”<sup>277</sup>. Her genre-blending compositions are “expertly crafted”<sup>278</sup>; her guitar work is “truly exciting”<sup>279</sup>. St. Vincent is described as “prodigious”<sup>280</sup>, a “hybrid of musical virtuosity and high-minded aesthetic reinventions”<sup>281</sup>, a “vanguard of critically beloved indie rock” and compared to the likes of David Bowie<sup>282</sup>. She designed a custom Ernie Ball Music Man guitar that bears her name, which has “...become one of the brand’s best-selling guitars, and has inspired a who’s-who of taste-making artists, including Beck, Dave Grohl, Josh Homme and Taylor Swift, to request St. Vincent models from Ernie Ball.”<sup>283</sup>

Annie Clark does not receive the same treatment from profilers, critics, and reviewers, suggesting that how she is perceived is distinct from her persona. The differences can be subtle: St. Vincent is “enigmatic” because she is “experimental”<sup>284</sup>, whereas Annie Clark

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<sup>272</sup> Ibid.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid.

<sup>274</sup> Per Festival of Disruption, [festivalofdisruption.com/](http://festivalofdisruption.com/), “Festival of Disruption is a music, art, film & creativity festival with artists hand-picked by David Lynch. Proceeds go to The David Lynch Foundation.”

<sup>275</sup> Young, “Boring”.

<sup>276</sup> Battan, “Confessional”.

<sup>277</sup> Angle, “Bikini”.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid.

<sup>280</sup> Young.

<sup>281</sup> Young, “Boring”.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid.

<sup>283</sup> Angle, “Bikini”.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid.

is an “enigma” because she is “beguiling”<sup>285</sup>. One is a comment on what St. Vincent *does*, where the other is a comment on who Annie Clark *is*. Anne Powers argues that this inconsistency in critical focus reflects a historical, sexist dynamic:

“[There is] the idea that men “do,” while women “be.” This distinction is at the core of the conventional gender binary. Women are linked to the natural and the timeless, while men innovate and make history. Men build civilizations and create great works, while women animate spaces and connect people with their nurturing souls and alluring energy.”<sup>286</sup>

Other commentary can be interpreted as anything between fawning and backhanded. Multiple profiles either imply or outright declare that Clark’s commercial success is ultimately indebted to her famous ex-girlfriends and their famous friends<sup>287</sup>. At the time of *Masseduction*’s pre-release promotional campaign, Clark’s relationship with supermodel Cara Delevigne had recently ended. Though Clark deftly sidestepped questions about the breakup in most interviews with general reflections on fame and visibility, virtually all of the pieces researched for this chapter had a breathlessly-written paragraph or two stuffed in about the former couple. One notes that Clark is still single<sup>288</sup>.

That Clark refuses to delineate her sexuality or gender identification according to binaries of gayness or straightness, maleness or femaleness, is treated as laudable though somewhat lofty, as if there is intentional aloofness in the ambiguity that is queerness<sup>289</sup>. While St. Vincent’s navigations of queerness are inextricably entwined with her kaleidoscopic brilliance, Clark’s sexuality is played for shock value rather than insight; one profile opens with a wide-eyed recount of her musings about oral sex and facial piercings<sup>290</sup>. While St. Vincent is characterized as genius, Clark is characterized as a

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<sup>285</sup> Angle, “Bikini”.

<sup>286</sup> Powers, “New Canon”.

<sup>287</sup> Lamont and Young, for starters.

<sup>288</sup> Batton, “Confessional”.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid.

<sup>290</sup> Lamont, “Nun Mode”.

“queer beauty icon”, whose physical form and sense of style are meticulously scrutinized and fetishized. A review describes four separate facial features at length, concluding that her “bare” face is a “powerful statement”<sup>291</sup>. Her artistic success is credited to “wild visual transformation[s]”<sup>292</sup>. One performance is chronicled as “at least 80 percent leg”<sup>293</sup>. Another piece chooses to include the exchange: “I’ve got the beaded panties if you ever need ‘em,” she said to Clark. “They might fit you. They’re *tiny*.”<sup>294</sup>

Per her music, Clark’s compositional thoughtfulness and range of influences - perhaps an effect of the higher education that interviewers are fond of reminding that she failed to complete – are a “high-brow streak” that comes across in description as vaguely pretentious. Her creative abilities are described in infantilizing language: she plays “a zillion” instruments, which does not confront the reality of skill required to master a record’s worth of instrumentation. Her creative contributions are also minimized. Jack Antonoff’s contributions to *Masseduction* are repeatedly referenced in ways that imply the album is as much his work as Clark’s. He is indeed the other half of *Masseduction*’s production team, however, his songwriting credits pale in comparison to Clark’s; he does not perform; and he does not hold all three of those roles simultaneously as she does<sup>295</sup>.

To interpret these characterizations at face value, the way that readers are encouraged to perceive Clark is not necessarily flattering, sometimes uncomfortably intimate, and not particularly insightful about her work. Less vapid tidbits about Clark sneak through: she appeared on the cover of *Guitar World* wearing a t-shirt printed with a cartoon-rendered, bikini-clad body to confront the magazine’s history of using scantily clad models for gear advertising<sup>296</sup>. She enthusiastically talks about modular synths, reverb modellers, and sample algorithms with obvious competence<sup>297</sup>, and is an unusually, diversely qualified female artist and self-producer, yet such discussion of her skills is few and far between.

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<sup>291</sup> Batton, “Confessional”.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid.

<sup>294</sup> Angle, “Bikini”.

<sup>295</sup> St. Vincent, *Masseduction* (Loma Vista, 2017) [liner notes].

<sup>296</sup> Angle, “Bikini”.

<sup>297</sup> Angle, “Bikini”.

This is the implied distinction between St. Vincent and Annie Clark: St. Vincent is an artist; Annie Clark is a woman. This is the public perception Clark was forced to confront as her “fundamental task”<sup>298</sup> when producing her fifth studio album, *Masseduction*, which was released on October 17<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

## 4.2 Production Analysis: Narrative Elements

For the purposes of this analysis, the narrative elements should not just be analysed for what they are, but how *Masseduction*'s production team chose to deliver them. Unlike the other albums in this research project, which have narratives with clear personal connections that their respective creators advertise, *Masseduction* seeks to confound personal connection to Annie Clark. This was Clark's intention when producing the record. Lamont at the Guardian confirms,

“...Clark is far too... determinedly non-specific as a lyricist – to admit to anything like that. “I don't love it when musicians speak about their records being ‘diaries’ or ‘therapy’,” she says. “It removes that level of deep instinct and imagination that is necessary in order to make something that transcends.” She adds that such ways of talking too often become “erroneously gendered, in the sense that the assumption from the culture at large is that women only know how to write things autobiographically, or diaristically, which is a sexist way of implying that they lack imagination.”<sup>299</sup>

*Masseduction* carefully avoids expositional lyrics; indeed there is little accessibility and few revelations in the surface level production elements. As a result, it is difficult to pull any particular elements from the album and quantify a personal connection to their narrative purpose without verifying each choice with Clark herself. “New York” reveals that an “old crew”<sup>300</sup> of friends used to live on Astor, but it is common knowledge that Clark has lived in New York City for years. That she has had friends come and go within this period is unremarkable pending other signifying information. “Happy Birthday, Johnny” seems the most ‘diaristic’, and is sung empathetically to a (presumed, never

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<sup>298</sup> Hennion, 160.

<sup>299</sup> Lamont, “Nun Mode”.

<sup>300</sup> St. Vincent, *Masseduction*.

specified) friend of Clark's struggling with addiction and mental illness<sup>301</sup>. It names Clark in "Annie how could you/Do this to me?" and alludes to St. Vincent's stardom with "You saw me on magazines and tv", but beyond these scant bits of personal information is constructed of vague poetry about wistfulness and support<sup>302</sup>.

This promotes a separation between the artistic and the personal, reinforcing the duality of St. Vincent and Annie Clark already established in the critical coverage of Clark vs. St. Vincent. Albin Zak argues that the preoccupation with what artists are trying to *say* through their personas is a value of rock criticism<sup>303</sup>. Given the rock-/guitar-heavy composition of St. Vincent records, seeking *Masseduction*'s meaning in Clark herself can somewhat be forgiven of music journalists. However, though Clark confirms that all of her records are "about [her] life"<sup>304</sup>, she also testifies that giving more tangible details risks overshadowing the music itself because of the gendered attention that her personal life attracts. This is a critical creative context for *Masseduction*, which plays primarily with themes of sex, sexuality, loss, and existentialism. Vogue calls the record "a sexed-up, overblown return to the 1980s"<sup>305</sup>, and Clark admits that the album is "more overtly sexy than anything I've ever done"<sup>306</sup>, elaborating, "*Masseduction* is... pretty first person. You can't fact-check it, but if you want to know about my life, listen to this record."<sup>307</sup> How does Clark release an album about those themes without tacitly encouraging media attention on her sex life and failed relationships? St. Vincent is thus both an artistic persona and a solution to this problem that Clark can use to effectively inoculate her music from her gender.

As the "fundamental task" of the producer is to identify their discoverable public and accordingly deliver a work that is as much created from the needs of the public as the

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<sup>301</sup> Ibid.

<sup>302</sup> Ibid.

<sup>303</sup> Zak, 26.

<sup>304</sup> Lamont, "Nun Mode"

<sup>305</sup> Battan, "Confessional".

<sup>306</sup> Ibid.

<sup>307</sup> Elias Leight, "St. Vincent Previews New LP 'Masseduction' With Kinetic 'Los Ageless'" (Rolling Stone, 2017).



expressions of the artist<sup>308</sup>, Annie Clark confirms that this strategy was a deliberate choice. In terms of this chapter's anti-musicology, this would suggest that the cultural climate that *Masseduction* was produced in was not necessarily safe, or respectful of Clark's boundaries, for her to do otherwise. This extra caution would require an according level of professional consideration for every choice made on *Masseduction*, and should be noted as a further credit to Clark and her production team, given the album's success.

According to Hennion, a successful story is made when a timeless narrative is told by a sympathetic persona<sup>309</sup>. The narrative elements of an album do not necessarily have to be personally revealing to be perceived as authentic and thus successfully received, just *sympathetic*<sup>310</sup>, and this seems to be the production strategy leveraged on *Masseduction*. Void of personal specifics, *Masseduction*'s ruminations on sex, sexuality, loss and existentialism could be perceived as resonant, relatable, even timeless, by a wide variety of listeners; they could also be perceived as a disjointed collection of random musical thoughts. The key to resonance and coherence is the sympathetic persona<sup>311</sup>. In the case of *Masseduction*, that persona does not have to be a person who inspires sympathy through their lived experiences, just a guide to the album's journey whose identity is perceived to be simultaneously congruous with its themes, yet not threatening to the wide interpretation of experiences that listeners may find in the songs. *Masseduction* accordingly paints St. Vincent as a sort of post-identity persona, reinforcing the perception that her lack of specificity is an indicator of "omnivor[ous]" inclusiveness. Her post-genre blend of pop structures and experimental rock aesthetics is mastery at its most diverse, and thus most desirable, even sexy, fitting for the album's themes. As James observes:

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<sup>308</sup> Hennion, 160.

<sup>309</sup> Hennion, 175.

<sup>310</sup> A seemingly contradictory statement, given how much of our working definition of authenticity is built on the perceived truthfulness of an artist's expression; I will defend this shortly!

<sup>311</sup> Hennion, 187.

“Omnivores demonstrate the openness to diversity... and this openness to diversity is a marker both the overcoming old-fashioned attitudes, and thus also of elite status. Both explicitly and implicitly, omnivorous taste uses the same post- as post- identity politics: ...the overcoming of obsolete investments in purity and the preference for an aesthetically pleasing, respectable mix.”<sup>312</sup>

This “aesthetically pleasing...mix” is key. James continues:

“...post-identity concepts of diversity perform their political function – hiding white supremacist patriarchy behind faux inclusion – by manifesting as an aesthetic phenomenon. Equality and fairness are traditional measures of justice; post-identity discourse replaces them with beauty.”<sup>313</sup>

James clarifies that “...not just any concept of beauty” will serve this post-identity purpose<sup>314</sup>. Beauty in the post-identity sense is defined by “cosmic race”, i.e. anti-black, beauty standards<sup>315</sup>. The St. Vincent persona thus leverages the cultural fixation on Annie Clark’s body as a production tool.

To be clear, this analysis is not arguing that Annie Clark is a white supremacist, or produces St. Vincent to appeal to white supremacists. However, this analysis *is* arguing that St. Vincent is produced to participate in a patriarchal, white supremacist institution of beauty, seemingly because it interacts nicely with the queer production of her post genre music, a dynamic that James (rightly) critiques for its racial prejudice. What matters to this research project is not whether the production choice to do so is ‘good’ or ethical; it was a *successful* choice, and though the socio-political implications of that success are foreboding and worth further interrogating, they are beyond the bounds of this project<sup>316</sup>.

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<sup>312</sup> James, 25.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>314</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>315</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>316</sup> To be absolutely explicit, this research project does not remotely, in any way shape or form, endorse white supremacist ideals, prejudices, or institutions. This methodology is simply concerned with uncovering and elucidating the function of successful production choices.

Clark's small stature, euro-centric features, and near-translucent whiteness in particular, are well documented and often fixated on. How Clark chooses to dress those features from album to album serves two complimentary production purposes: first, to both reflect, and thus reinforce, the musical themes on each individual record. Second, to characterize St. Vincent's "shape-shifting"<sup>317</sup> as fundamental to her persona, thus legitimizing each reinvention as yet another masterful-because-it-is-disparate-but-[whitely]beautiful execution; her perceptible artistic consistency is being excellent, musically and visually, in an increasing number of ways.

This is Clark's intention: "I can't think of anybody where I go, 'What's great about that artist is their consistency... Anything that stays the same for too long dies. It fails to capture people's imagination."<sup>318</sup> Clark creates a "mood board"<sup>319</sup> and outlandish concept for each record, a hyperbolic aesthetic interpretation with which to contextualize her emotional themes: "*Strange Mercy* was Housewives on Pills. *St. Vincent* was Near-Future Cult Leader."<sup>320</sup> *Masseduction* is "[t]he Cramps play a mental institution"<sup>321322</sup>. Thus, *Masseduction*'s story is a combination of timeless themes and a sympathetic persona, sympathetic in its contemporary context. Those themes are the ruminations on human intimacy discussed above, and that persona is St. Vincent in her latest re-invention, this time a campy, tongue-in-cheek-punk iteration.

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Production choices are not made in a cultural vacuum, rather the opposite, so they should be understood as such, even if that understanding reveals dysfunction and prejudice. James' article is a critique, and though this research project does not engage with that criticism, it finds her observations accurate and references them accordingly.

<sup>317</sup> Young, "Boring".

<sup>318</sup> Ibid.

<sup>319</sup> Battan, "Confessional".

<sup>320</sup> Leight, "Kinetic".

<sup>321</sup> Battan, "Confessional".

<sup>322</sup>The Cramps were a psycho-rockabilly group associated with the CBGB punk scene in the 1970s and 1980s.

### 4.3 Production Analysis: Musical Elements

*Masseduction*'s production is organized around its musical elements: the rhythm section, orchestra backing, and melody. Where expositional lyrics could be too forthright for Clark's creative tastes, and the album's narrative prefers to trade more in themes than stories for presumably the same reason, musical elements can be potently laden with meaning while being less easy to interpret. Clark doesn't worry about her records betraying her personal privacy for this reason, saying, "Songs are Rorschach tests anyway. They say more about you than the person who made them."<sup>323</sup> This is not to suggest, however, that *Masseduction*'s musical elements don't say *anything*. Rather, as musicologist Sadie (Joshua) Hochman establishes, analysing "evasive"<sup>324</sup> works such as Clark's underscores the impetus to use anti-musicological, anti-abstracting methodology. Hochman writes that as one "...Autostraddle article bemoans Clark's evasiveness", it also "...omits "answers" hinted at through Clark's guitar playing", choosing to exclusively analyse more tangible surfaces of music videos and lyrics when "if you look at the music, so many of the answers have been there all along"<sup>325</sup>.

The majority of *Masseduction*'s musical communication is conducted through a sort of queering, blending and confounding both genres and their encoded components. Per Hochman,

"As an act of disorientation, this alternative virtuosity critically reorganizes "conventional" object placement... disorientation is a moment "in which you lose one perspective, but the 'loss' itself is not empty of waiting; it is an object thick with presence"... A queer virtuosity is implied, as the "loss" or "failure" of convention is complemented by the emergence of a new object."<sup>326</sup>

Understanding that queer production is disorienting, but not randomly chaotic, is key. The queer production choices that Clark makes are intentional, meaning that what they

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<sup>323</sup> Battan, "Confessional".

<sup>324</sup> Hochman, 105.

<sup>325</sup> Hochman, 102.

<sup>326</sup> Hochman, 103-104.

broadly evoke is what Clark wants the listener to hear and feel. Hochman argues that this queer excellence is St. Vincent's consistency in regard to the electric guitar. This analysis - given its comprehensive definition of production elements - goes further: queering is not limited to St. Vincent's guitar playing. Her guitar, as the instrument that receives melody outside of the vocal line, is simply the signature face of a queer production approach that permeates all of the musical elements. Clark does not produce the musical elements according to traditional genre interpretation, but this seems to be because she finds traditional structures oppressive, not because she doesn't have anything to say.

Though St. Vincent is guitar-wielding, *Masseduction*'s rhythm section's aesthetic is generally electronic-sounding, historically not congruous with the drum kit + bass guitar that accompany the electric guitar in rock and pop norms. All of the percussive elements are heavily processed, subverting their traditional roles. The perceptive 'kick' on most of the record's songs is thump-y, but with constrained transients and harmonics, so that the overall effect is muted and club beat-evocative, tying into the 1980s mood board. Bass frequencies are enmeshed with this 'kick' for the majority of the record. This combination forcefully promotes embodiment of *Masseduction*'s rhythms, pushing its structures into the body of the listener. It also further segregates the album's rhythm section from a traditional drum kit + bass production where the two instruments are identifiably disparate.

High frequency elements are similarly distorted and queered. 'Snares' have little to no signature crack or snap when they are perceptively percussive hits, and the rhythmic role traditionally occupied by a snare is just as frequently performed by samples, sometimes processed to the point of illegibility: claps; curated beats of distortion; what sounds as much like a high hat as a cowbell in "Fear the Future"; a choir shouting "Boys!/Girls!" on "Sugarboy"; and pronounced synths breaking with the orchestra backing to perform a percussive function; are just some of the alternatives. The sonic spectrum space traditionally occupied by cymbals receives some obfuscated, cymbal-like sounds, as well

as textural samples, more multi-purpose synths, church bells in “Hang On Me”, and what seems like a heavily processed gong or china cymbal<sup>327</sup> on “Saviour”.

The record does have moments of rhythm section clarity, and these moments are such a contrast to the otherwise experimental production that their inclusion implicates significance. “Pills”, for instance, transforms from club beats into a swooping bass synth and live-sounding drum kit by the end of the song, but is mixed to sound like sonic devolving as it does so, ending perceptively more chaotic than it began. This is coupled with a bridge/outro verse that melodically departs, and lyrically evokes a nihilistic escape like the high one might experience abusing drugs as a coping mechanism. The resulting implication is self-aware: Clark is not incapable of participating in genre norms, she just chooses not to. Further, the production choice to equate queered music with sonic home, and hegemonic music with self-destructive highs, suggests that this genre queering is a metaphor. The rhythm section is foundational and structural, and Annie Clark is capable of participating in hegemonic norms and structures, but chooses not to. *Masseduction* sounds as if Clark finds self-subjugation to those norms to be more discomforting, or even just boring, than flouting them all together, as overtly sexy and yet “awkward” as flouting them may be<sup>328</sup>.

This queer production approach continues in the orchestra backing. The sounds filling the density of the album’s mixes are void of a tangible aesthetic beyond a general absence of live-ness, a soothing lack of structure or classic genre influence. The majority of sonic space around the behind the guitars and vocals is nebulous, homogenous, and aesthetically faithful to the distorted mixing and processing applied to the rhythm section. Glimpses of other instruments are offered: classical strings briefly emerge on “New York”, “Slow Disco”, and “Dancing With A Ghost” (supported by woodwinds on the latter). Lush choirs of backing vocals offer a subtle pop polish to the choruses of “Los Ageless” and “Savoir”, but are so enmeshed with the lead vocal double-tracking that any distinguishing idiosyncrasies are virtually impossible to hear. “Happy Birthday Johnny”,

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<sup>327</sup> A sonically harsh staple of modern metal music.

<sup>328</sup> Hochman, 95.

“New York”, and “Smoking Section” similarly offer clear piano lines in quiet moments, only to be eclipsed and absorbed by their respective mixes. Even defining the stereo soundstage density, let alone its parameters, is difficult given the queer production. This is congruous with St. Vincent’s body of work. NPR, describing her catalogue in 2018, concludes, “Forget the glass ceiling. Inside a St. Vincent song, you don’t even know where the floor is.”<sup>329</sup> Hochman concurs, “What seems like a synth line might turn out to be a guitar. What seems like a guitar might just be the sound of your own imagination.”<sup>330</sup>

Though this production is disorienting, it serves a purpose: the rhythm section’s tempos vary wildly from song to song, seeming to serve only the micro-narratives each track contains rather than attempting to participate in an overarching pace of the album. The orchestra backing’s lack of definition insulates and thus mitigates these fluctuations in unobtrusive sonic weight, so that Clark’s artistic perspective remains consistent, albeit diverse, matching her kaleidoscopic persona. The odd instrumental contributions add novelty and interest, and define the micro-narratives of songs so that the album doesn’t blend together into one bewildering experience.

*Masseduction*’s subject matter and creative context add a layer of implied meaning to the “disrupt[ive]”<sup>331</sup> musical production, especially with regard to melody. Compared to the other records in this research project, the melody instruments are almost separated from the orchestra backing, an extreme interpretation of the delineation between lead and supporting instruments. *Masseduction* seems to give virtually all of its non-vocal melodies to guitar and some synth, sometimes guitars triggering synth sounds. This may not be the case; the amount of distorting effects pedals, MIDI triggering, signal processing, and mixing involved on the record is deliberately obfuscating; but the album is nonetheless produced to *sound* so.

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<sup>329</sup> Sasha Geffen, “St. Vincent Is The 21st Century’s Guitar Vanguard” (NPR, 2018).

<sup>330</sup> Hochman, 102.

<sup>331</sup> Geffen, “Vanguard”.

Clark's use of the electric guitar first and foremost speaks to the "gender fluidity and sexual fluidity"<sup>332</sup> that she refuses to detail in interviews. The electric guitar is unduly loaded with gendered meaning in popular culture and thus popular music; research refers to it as the "technophallus" for the raw sexuality that it historically exudes<sup>333</sup>. This research, however, interprets the sexual and gendered implications of the guitar as inherently binary, either male or female<sup>334</sup>. As Hochman understands,

"The complexly (im)material presence of her guitar on record affords Clark a playful and radical evasiveness, speaking through guitar technique while also positioning herself, critically, outside of its history. She exemplifies a technical competence that—"devoid of wonky jazz chords or lengthy bouts of virtuoso shredding"...—does not register with the instrument's normative masculinity."<sup>335</sup>

This queering can be read as a value of punk, speaking to both Clark's influences and attitude towards socio-political norms and institutions. Hochman elaborates, "Punk's being "continuously and productively confused and conflated"... with queer refusal owes much to its significant investment in the synthesizer and the frequent use of irony, which detaches its performers from the guitar's iconicity"<sup>336</sup>. Though those arguments were made before *Masseduction*'s release, they are consistent with the record's mood board, perceptive self-awareness, and relentless conflation of guitar lines with synth sounds.

As melody is the musical element that the rhythm section and orchestra backing support, *Masseduction*'s music is united behind the electric guitar and its queer insistence. The song structures seem as fluid and multi-faceted as the rhythm section and orchestra backing, but use a deceptively traditional verse-chorus form to accommodate the guitars, grounding abrupt endings; dramatic fade-outs; bridge departures that never return; and intro samples that enter ferociously, only to never be heard from again. Catering to the guitar (and to a secondary degree, synth) so beyond the other musical elements suggests

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<sup>332</sup> Hochman, 102.

<sup>333</sup> Hochman, 97.

<sup>334</sup> Hochman, 97.

<sup>335</sup> Hochman, 102-103.

<sup>336</sup> *Ibid*, 98.



that what it communicates is of great significance, even on par with the vocals. Hochman confirms:

“Rather than build foundations with her guitars and her electronics, then top them with her singing, she mimics her instruments with her voice, or vice versa; it often sounds as though she is dueting with the guitar... The guitar, for Clark, is not an appendage, not a phallus, not an extension of the body. It is its own body with its own voice... a peer and not a tool...”<sup>337</sup>

Like a person recounting the breadth of their life experiences, Clark’s guitars are diverse in every musical sense, from technique to tone to the harmonic nature of the melodies themselves, but they are unilateral in their perceptive emotional intensity. “Hang On Me” uses heavily processed guitars, mirroring the rhythm section’s mix treatment, to add structural dissonance to its epic power progressions. “Pills” has a jaunty refrain evocative of nursery rhymes, funky guitar picking with electro-pop tone in the verses, an oozy-distorted guitar solo, a section best described as an industrial breakdown, and polishes off with twangy, yet washy, guitars for the final section discussed above.

The guitar solo in “Masseduction” is structured around shrieking dive-bombs<sup>338</sup>, a nod to 80’s hair-metal, and the frenetic melody in “Sugarboy” is performed by what sounds like a synth in the verses, but transforms into a both virtuosic and deeply weird solo that implies manipulated guitar. “Los Ageless” builds layers of terse, chug-y riffs; the emotional climax of “Happy Birthday Johnny” is a languid guitar solo with heavy delay; “New York” leverages a more indie rock tone; the ascending leadline in “Savoir” almost mirrors Marvin Gaye’s “Lets Get it On”, yet is synth-like, evoking a more darkly-seductive feeling. The guitars in “Fear The Future” are almost distractingly distorted, wielding their feedback to overwhelming effect by the song’s bridge. Heavy palm muting

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<sup>337</sup> Geffen, “Vanguard”.

<sup>338</sup> A guitar technique achieved using a whammy bar (also called a tremolo bar or vibrato bar), where an open string strike is manipulated into a rapid descent in pitch, mimicking the elevation of a fighter plane as it dives. Dive bombs are often accompanied by the use of harmonics, most commonly pinch harmonics, which give the pitch bend a shrieking quality reminiscent of live munitions.

on “Smoking Section” hulks reminiscent of the famous “Pirates of the Caribbean” film theme until its final section, where a ringing, Stratocaster-like clarity emerges to finish the record.

This list is by no means comprehensive, neglecting other assorted low-fi wailing, trashy distortions, percussive picking, and the relative chaos forged by the incorporation of all of these sounds in not only the same album, but often simultaneously in the same song. The comprehensive effect implied by this cacophony is deeply moving, even emotionally exhausting, and its communications are undeniable. Though these guitar worlds correspond with the micronarratives of their songs, they are executed with power and attack that implies profound investment from Clark. She may not fear the particular scenarios articulated in “Fear the Future”, but she is struggling to process overwhelming anxiety about something. The self-destructive impulses of “Smoking Section” are vital and recognizable even if the club with the titular section doesn’t exist. “Pills” *sounds* like the tinged mania of losing yourself to overwork and self-medicating as a result, the personal specifics made virtually meaningless by the accuracy of Clark’s frenzied sonic portrait. “Los Ageless” is at once hazy and made up, evoking a smoggy paradise that you know is bad for you as much as beautiful, but disappointing, people. The climax of “Masseduction” mirrors an orgasm, guiltily. “New York” is a poignant love letter to bittersweet transitions that resonates beyond the context of Manhattan. These raw sentiments bake vulnerability into the relative chaos of Clark’s queer production approach. Hochman notes that,

“Noise, sounded within the context of the disorienting guitar practice, critiques the non-existence of a world completely outside guitar iconicity leaving not just documentation, but an archive of memories, feelings and lived experiences. The guitar, in these performances, is a vehicle for becoming, as well as a vehicle for undoing and unlearning its history.”<sup>339</sup>

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<sup>339</sup> Hochman, 105.

Hochman further concludes that guitar history specifically, and music criticism broadly, “will need to account for queerness’s immateriality and evasiveness”<sup>340</sup>. “Evasiveness” and “immateriality”<sup>341</sup> can be used to describe the St. Vincent persona as much as the queer guitar playing that Clark produces under the St. Vincent moniker. There is significance in that parallel. The evidence is strong that Clark constructs St. Vincent to protect both herself and her work from her femininity, because her feminine presentation invites violating and misplaced attention that she is historically powerless to stop. Annie Clark can be interrogated, even without her consent, and indeed can be perceived as rude or less authentic in terms of rock tropes if she is not confessional. St. Vincent, as a construct, both refuses and disrupts the concept of artistic interrogation, allowing Annie Clark to retain control of her boundaries. Musical elements similarly refuse interrogation without personal testimony, and disrupt critical discourse’s fixation on what songs definitively ‘say’ while nonetheless communicating emotions truthfully. *Masseduction*’s musical elements are produced to evoke journeys of self-discovery, navigating social roles that one may not necessarily fit, and coping with the highs and lows of relationships. Choosing to execute these intimate emotions in the musical elements is a protective act, implying that Clark has discovered her audience, and determined that it cannot be trusted with the personal dimension of her creations, at least not explicitly. Whether this distrust is linked to perceived femininity, queer performance, or perhaps some other cultural intolerance is a question for Clark, and beyond the interpolative bounds of this research. Clark’s use of the electric guitar as the delivery vehicle for these messages, though, does communicate through its creative “longing” that she wishes the circumstances could be different, even if they are not yet<sup>342</sup>, as Hochman describes:

“Disorientating guitar practice delicately balances refusal with hope, sounding failure through both negativity and idealism. By refusing to think linearly within the (hetero-) normative history of guitar practice and idealistically longing to repurpose the nuts and bolts (or, in this case, strings and strums) of guitar performance, these guitarists gesture

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<sup>340</sup> Hochman, 105.

<sup>341</sup> Hochman, 105.

<sup>342</sup> Hochman, 93.

towards an emergent intersection of guitar identities and practices that remain invisible to the history of guitar heroics.”<sup>343</sup>

As the other primary receiver of melody, *Masseduction*'s vocal melodies are primarily composed of 'duets' with the guitar. Verse and choruses rarely deviate from diatonic progressions that move in parallel with the guitar lines and harmonic progressions. "Pills" has quick, singsong-y ascensions that morph into long, harmonic sustains in the outro section; "Fear the Future" matches its guitar line almost note for note, the repetition of "Come on sir, just give me the answer" fixating on the same note for as long as the guitar chugs there; "Sugarboy" does the same with the dirge of "I am a lot like you/I am alone like you"<sup>344</sup>. "Young Lover" even matches the dramatic harmonics of the guitar solo, sweeping to a scream at the emotional climax. The first verses in "Smoking Section" and "Los Ageless" go further, literally pulling Clark into pure vocal fry, the melody uncompromisingly following the guitar part even when it dips below Clark's capable range.

This reinforces the perception that the guitar line itself is an alternative 'voice' on the record, indeed may perhaps have (unusually) greater significance than the lead vocals if its melodies can force inconvenience for the lead vocalist, who is usually the pop record's star<sup>345</sup>. The production of the lyrical elements, to be analysed shortly, further limits the perceptive "grain"<sup>346</sup> of the lead vocals for the sake of maintaining the intangibility of the St. Vincent persona. The guitar work, due to the quantitatively unverifiable nature of its communications, is not so limited, and subsequently more perceptively intimate and "grained"<sup>347</sup>.

At the risk of spoiling the lyrical analysis, this research argues that to hear the vocal melody on *Masseduction* is to effectively hear St. Vincent. To hear the guitar melody on *Masseduction*, however, is to more so hear Annie Clark. This is not to imply a

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<sup>343</sup> Hochman, 105.

<sup>344</sup> St. Vincent, *Masseduction*.

<sup>345</sup> Hennion, 184.

<sup>346</sup> Frith, 191.

<sup>347</sup> Frith, 191.

comparison or make value judgements between the two sets of melodies, rather to conclude that they are produced to communicate at differing levels of intimacy, echoing the implications of Clark's other production choices. The seemingly most intimate are purposefully buried from the tangible production elements, incorporated through the music to be just out of definitive reach of prying inquirers. As much as Clark herself may wish that she could be more forthcoming with those emotions, her production expertise guides her to choose otherwise, the implications of which this analysis will continue to explore.

#### 4.4 Production Analysis: Lyrical Elements

Hennion's lyrical elements are versification and words. Words are the contemporary translation through which the more tangible elements of a record's story are communicated, the vocabulary cohering an artist's persona with their messages as much as the vocal performance itself binds them to the rest of the music<sup>348</sup>. This means that on *Masseduction*, the function of the words is to assist with constructing the persona of St. Vincent in the context of her latest re-invention.

For all of the complexity and queering that Clark chooses to produce in the musical elements, the corresponding lyrics leverage frank, simple language. Each song on *Masseduction* has its own micro-narrative, and the words chosen carefully respect the boundaries of these small worlds. The lyrics of choruses and refrains – the song sections usually repeated and thus traditionally where the song's central messages are located – are consistently general enough to invite broader interpretations from listeners, but their corresponding verse lyrics usually maintain the micro-narrative context and reinforce a literal interpretation.

For instance, the refrain of "Masseduction", the record's title track, is "I can't turn off what turns me on/I hold you like a weapon"; the bridge lyric is "Oh what a bore to be so adored"<sup>349</sup>. Given the creative context of Annie Clark's critical reception, a double-edged

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<sup>348</sup> Hennion, 186.

<sup>349</sup> St. Vincent, *Masseduction*.

sword of adoration and fetishization, these lyrics could speak to the dark undercurrent of risk associated with fame predicated on the fickleness of critics, and the sexualized nuances that come with that risk for a female-presenting, queer-identifying artist. But the song's verse lyrics simply describe erotically charged characters inhabiting an unspecified space where sexual things presumably happen: "A punk rock romantic" is "slumped on the kitchen floor"<sup>350</sup>. "Lolita is weeping"; "teenage Christian virgins" are "holding out their tongues" while "paranoid secretions" are "falling on basement rugs"<sup>351</sup>.

"Hang On Me" refrains "Hang on me/Yeah, hang on me/'Cause you and me/We're not meant for this world"<sup>352</sup>. This could be interpreted as Clark reaching out to listeners who feel similarly constrained by cultural norms and structures, offering her tacit alliance and support. This interpretation is underscored by a rare interview where, when asked about "Hang on Me", Clark responds earnestly:

"In some ways, doing the work that I do is about reinventing a value system. More or less, there's a ubiquitous value system in America, these markers that signify your rite of passage into... validity... But I always felt a little bit like an alien cocking my head to the side at various cultural milestones, going, "I would never aspire to that"... That's not any sort of indictment on other people's mile markers, they're just not mine; those markers aren't a threat to me, and my choices shouldn't be a threat to them. I just had to eschew one paradigm to be free enough to construct another."<sup>353</sup>

However, the verses indicate that the song is simply the alcohol-fuelled poeticism of someone reaching out to a close relation, and begging them not to hang up the phone: "I know you're probably sleepin'/I got this thing I keep thinkin'/Yeah, I admit I've been drinkin'/The void is back and I'm blinkin'"; I know you hate my hysterics/I promise this time it's different/I won't cry over from the kitchen/Just please, oh, please don't hang up

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<sup>350</sup> Ibid.

<sup>351</sup> Ibid.

<sup>352</sup> Ibid.

<sup>353</sup> Ryan Dombal, "St. Vincent Breaks Down Every Song on Her New Album, *Masseduction*" (Pitchfork, 2017).

yet”<sup>354</sup>. “Los Ageless” could be a contemplation of how fame warps one’s sense of identity, and subsequently is destructive for relationships: “How could anybody have you and lose you/and not lose their mind too”; “I’m a monster, you’re my sacred cow”<sup>355</sup>. But at face value, it is a dark-humour critique of the characters that Clark people-watches in Los Angeles, struggling with “unwritten memoirs”, “hang[ing] out” in “bars”, and aspiring to be “sunset superstars”<sup>356</sup>. This production technique is exercised on almost all of *Masseduction*’s songs, also including “Saviour”, “New York”, “Sugarboy”, “Fear the Future”, “Slow Disco”, and “Smoking Section”.

From a marketing perspective, the production choices surrounding vocabulary are common sense. Colloquial language gives experimental music an accessible edge, mitigating the extent to which listeners may feel alienated by the queer disorientation in the musical elements. But the production choice to inscribe levels of interpretation into the lyrics goes further, corresponding with the production choices of the other elements. The broader song themes reflected in choruses and refrains are presented in a way that is open to more intimate levels of interpretation and inference, should the listener choose to listen to the song with that intent and regard for creative context, but the consistent returns to the titular subject matter in the verses implicitly endorse the boundaries of listeners who choose to simply take St Vincent’s music at face value. *Masseduction*’s words are produced to accommodate all levels of engagement with Clark’s work, leaving it up to the listener to define their own engagement while implicitly endorsing all potential levels of engagement as valid. This coheres with Clark’s rare, testified intentions about defining one’s structures, boundaries, and exposure.

The versification then coheres the words with the complexity and relative chaos of *Masseduction*’s musical elements. “Hang on Me” has a sense of tension and restraint, incorporating an edge of fluttering falsetto with the occasional swell into a full-chested clarity. “Pills” is equal parts spoke-sung and grandly sung, evoking musical theatre as much as vaudeville. “Happy Birthday Johnny” and “New York” are earnest and clear.

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<sup>354</sup> Dombal, “Breaks Down”.

<sup>355</sup> Ibid.

<sup>356</sup> Ibid.

“Masseduction” features breathy, perceptively female gasps in the bridge; “Smoking Section” has a gravelly, perceptively male drawl; “Sugarboy” alternates between both. There are further vocal effects outside of the explicit lead vocal performance, including shouts in “Sugarboy” and screams in “Young Lover”. The comprehensive effect is emotionally intense and masterfully executed, perfectly congruous with the guitar work.

The vocal mixing, however, is less disorienting, effectively alternating between just two general approaches. Verse vocals are usually produced to sound dry and forward in the mix, enunciating the embodied parameters of the lead vocal to the extreme and implying an intense degree of intimacy between the listener and the vocalist. This effect is so powerful that it overshadows the occasional guest vocal – like that of Tuck and Patti Andress on “Los Ageless”, “Saviour”, and others, for instance – situating St. Vincent’s voice as the focus of the song, and strongly associating the St. Vincent persona with the verse content.

In contrast, the other vocal mixing approach used consistently on *Masseduction* is usually produced in choruses and lyrical bridges. St. Vincent’s vocals are this time allowed to be nearly eclipsed or buried by the massiveness of her songs’ mixes, the embodied definition of her voice all but lost to lush double-tracking, washy delays, and the general volume of everything else going on. This evokes a disembodied purity to her sustained notes in particular, which are more often a feature of the simpler chorus lyrics, effectively removing the body from the vocal performance just as the vocal messages are at their most widely interpretable, and thus most dissociated from the St. Vincent persona.

#### 4.5 Production Analysis: Personal Elements

Per Hennion, an artist’s persona is a combination of their image and voice. Where the other artists in this research project chose to produce their personas as perceptively faithful (i.e., authentic) self-reflections, Annie Clark makes exactly the opposite production choices, and yet is equally, if not more so, critically well received despite her



“artifice”<sup>357</sup>. In terms of voice, this is likely because of how carefully Clark produces St. Vincent’s voice to be distinct from her own, indeed leverages St. Vincent as *Masseduction*’s primary vocalist.

Frith observes that when musicians are both composer and performer, “...it is the performing rather than the composing voice that is taken to be the key to character.”<sup>358</sup> Thus the voice on *Masseduction* is generally produced to sound embodied and “personally expressive”<sup>359</sup> when it is reflecting St. Vincent’s literal narrative themes and their least personal interpretations. In contrast, the versification of *Masseduction*’s more widely interpretable, and perhaps more personally revealing, messages is produced to mitigate the implications of embodiment, sounding ‘grain-less’ as a result.

Frith is adamant that popular music’s hegemonic values “assign” bodies to voices, even the perceptively grain-less<sup>360</sup>, so *Masseduction*’s holistic vocal production invites the assumption that St. Vincent is also the singer of those more general messages, just slightly overwhelmed by the level of chaos she has wrought in the music in those moments. Attributing *Masseduction*’s voice exclusively to St. Vincent coheres with Frith’s theory that hearing a voice is “to recognize a person”<sup>361</sup>, harmoniously binding *Masseduction*’s narrative voice to its narrative persona, and thus evoking a resonant consistency in persona that is both perceived as authentic despite its lack of definitive personal investment from Clark, and neatly disregarding of Annie Clark per her wishes.

The image of St. Vincent’s persona similarly circumvents suggestion of artifice because it successfully participates in post-identity discourse, leveraging the fetishization of Annie Clark’s body with the post-genre fluidity of her musical sound to promote critical embrace. Per James, “cosmic beauty” (i.e. anti-black beauty) is equated with desirable values of diversity and authenticity in popular culture, the same way that experimental variations on hegemonic genres like pop and rock are equated with desirable values of

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<sup>357</sup> Hennion’s word, and I’m sticking with it [Hennion, 185].

<sup>358</sup> Frith, 185.

<sup>359</sup> Frith, 186.

<sup>360</sup> Frith, 192.

<sup>361</sup> Frith, 191.

authenticity and diversity in popular music<sup>362</sup>. What is beautiful is whiteness plus a perceptive twist that does not undermine white supremacy; what sounds good is pop/rock plus an experimental twist that does not undermine the institutions of pop/rock<sup>363</sup>. St. Vincent performs queerness, but nonetheless does so as cisgender-presenting white person wielding an electric guitar. Thus St. Vincent performs queerness beautifully, her queer artistry and white, Eurocentric, cisgender-presenting body in a mutually beneficial, symbiotic relationship. Her queerness adds an edge to her persona without entirely undermining her ability to participate in hegemonic, critical values of Eurocentric, white beauty. Her beauty mitigates the otherwise disruptive nature of her queerness. Because beauty is equated with value in popular culture's post-identity discourse, she is thus queer but not 'too' queer, perfectly queer to be perceived as valuable. St. Vincent's over-the-top costumes only serve to reinforce the hegemonic appeal of both her queer performance and its beauty, because they are modelled on a thin, white, relatively tall frame. The comprehensive effect is disorienting without being alienating, which is cohesive with *Masseduction*'s narrative and Clark's testified artistic goals. St. Vincent's image impels fascination and conveys intense communication without letting anyone get too close.

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<sup>362</sup> James, 23.

<sup>363</sup> James, 29.

## Chapter 5

### 5 Conclusion

Hepworth-Sawyer and Hodgson begin *Perspectives on Music Production* with two invitations. First to researchers, encouraging “novel and inclusive methodological approaches to the study of record production, encompassing professional, creative, interpretive and analytic interests”<sup>364</sup>. Second, they address professional producers, seeking to empower “contributions... which elucidate their own creative practice, and in whichever ways they deem most relevant to scholarly considerations of their work.” This research project demonstrates that it is possible to glean some of the knowledge of the latter from recordings if the former is structured to empower production choices as the primary analytical tool.

Such a methodology depends on researchers willing to develop their understanding of production beyond its myths. In the *Journal on the Art of Record Production*, Mike Howlett affirms that effective producing requires a skillset built on both “authority” and “evaluation”<sup>365</sup>. For Howlett, “the essential role [of the producer] is creative and involves choices” informed by musical/technical/socio-political expertise as much as emotional intelligence<sup>366</sup>. Howlett’s arguments do not delve as deeply into the elements of production as Hennion, but he posits that the producer has an equivalent, foundational responsibility to Hennion’s ‘fundamental task’: critically exercising “empathy”<sup>367</sup>. It can be tempting to minimize or naturalize this empathetic production work as “instinctive”, or a “gut feeling”<sup>368</sup>. Robin James documents that abstracting musical works for analysis, in this case studying records as self-representative musical objects as opposed to deliberately constructed musical acts, has (misleading) appeal for being a “depoliticized”,

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<sup>364</sup> Hepworth Sawyer, xiii.

<sup>365</sup> Howlett, “The Record Producer as Nexus” (*Journal on the Art of Record Production*, 2012).

<sup>366</sup> Howlett, “Nexus”.

<sup>367</sup> Howlett, “Nexus”.

<sup>368</sup> Howlett, “Nexus”.

implicitly more ‘rational’ or ‘objective’, form of study<sup>369</sup>. But though the work of producers can seem unwieldy because it is difficult to quantify, employing methodologies modelled in this research project offer further research opportunities in the fields of production, popular music, musicology, and sociology.

This research project understands production choices, per Jones, as “sonic evidence of implied actions”<sup>370</sup>. Empowering these choices as discursive contributions and professional testimony creates insight into the work of successful producers.

Documenting their decisions, intentions where possible, and subsequent reception is invaluable for promoting further innovation in the profession; correcting the mythic mischaracterization of the profession; and deepening our understanding of both the denotative production profession and connotative production role.

Beyond elucidating how and why producers have been successful, Hennion argues that, “Pop songs hold up a mirror to their age in the truest sense of the word, for they provide it with a blank screen on which its desires are reflected.”<sup>371</sup> Production choices say something about the socio-political contexts of their making, and if the public receives a recording well, the validity of those communications is heavily implied. Production choices, if analysed in anti-abstracting, comprehensive methodologies like this anti-musicology, can become graspable pieces of popular music and thus revealing tools for studying broader popular culture.

For instance, Kesha’s first act as a self-producer was to prioritise defending her authorship, implying that Kesha and her production team, in executing their “fundamental” responsibility, determined that their discoverable public did not trust Kesha. Seeing her music as representative expressions of her self – because her public persona is supposed to be herself – the discoverable public needed to be reassured of Kesha’s trustworthiness before they were willing to invest in both her and her music. Given this creative context, such a production choice could make common sense: Kesha

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<sup>369</sup> James, “Lemonade”.

<sup>370</sup> Jones, 2.

<sup>371</sup> Hennion, 192.

was not perceived as particularly credible prior to *Rainbow*, and enhancing her credibility could only serve advance her career by improving her reception. But her lack of credibility in her early career was due to a combination of the historically sexist connotations of her pop genre; the relative simplicity of her music's composition; her persona's failure to comply with feminine norms of submissiveness and sexual respectability; and the perceived vapidness of her subject matter due to a lack of darker narrative content. None of these reflect a fundamental lack of skill or objective artistic failure, but criticism insisted on framing Kesha's authorship in terms of her perceived moral 'qualification' for that authority, as opposed to simply her creative contributions. Kesha's audience likes her best when she is celebrating her life because she is an abuse survivor, not when she is celebrating her life because it is fun and beautiful.

*Dirty Computer* confronted similar socio-political realities when Monáe and her production team prioritised defending her humanity. This implies that they, also executing their "fundamental" responsibility, determined that their discoverable public was likely to dehumanize Monáe for one or more dimensions of her identity. Given that creative context, such a production choice could be explained: Janelle Monáe was perceived as so wrapped up in her android persona that listeners may have needed assistance to sympathize with her in a 'new' form. While true, a comprehensive analysis of *Dirty Computer* reveals that Monáe's android persona was easy for many listeners to engage with because it avoided the reality that Monáe is a (newly out) woman of colour. With the android pretence removed, Monáe's persona is forced to contend with the white supremacy, misogynoir, and queerphobia that are grossly prejudiced against her body. That in such a body Monáe advocates for others like her further provokes bigotry and discrimination, and criticism still insisted on framing her worth in terms of her exceptional achievements and ability to succeed despite institutional oppression, instead of just her literally embodied identity and lived experiences. That her music does not participate exclusively in genre norms associated with voices of colour (the soul singer who "belts her wounds"<sup>372</sup>, for instance) is a further complication that critics struggled to

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<sup>372</sup> Haile, "Dirty Computer".

quantify until she had similar-sounding contemporaries<sup>373</sup>, suggesting unconscious discomfort among even the perceptively ‘woke’ with an artist like Monáe self-determining beyond hegemonic structures.

Annie Clark grapples with similar cultures revealed in *Masseduction*’s production, where Clark and her production team prioritised thoroughly scrubbing her person from the album. Knowing that perceived personal authenticity can be a significant contribution to an artist’s success suggests that there is a significant reason Clark, an experienced self-producer, continually chooses to produce her records ‘without’ her person. That Clark is a private individual could explain such production choices, but even *Masseduction*’s press kit was produced to pre-empt unwelcome attention, implying that Clark has endured prior transgressions and boundary violations. *Masseduction* implies that Clark and her production team, in executing their “fundamental” responsibility, determined that their discoverable public was, to some degree, not safe for Clark. Seeking to find personal representation in her music, that discoverable public is fixated on intimately knowing Clark, uncovering her. Criticism insists on fetishizing St. Vincent’s image as a means of acquiring access to Clark’s intimate self, both instead of acquiring consent and despite her historical refusal to give consent. Thus Clark continues to use the persona of St. Vincent as a mediator. St. Vincent satisfies the public curiosity and impulse to fetishize Clark’s ‘beautiful’ body, maintaining the rock-value illusion that Clark is explicitly confessional on her records when she buries the intimate dimensions of her work away from prying eyes. Her guarded, yet earnest, responses in interviews confirm this.<sup>374</sup> These choices reflect an undeniable cultural disregard for women’s boundaries, consent, and authority to control those parameters of intimate access.

This research project thus reveals that out of all of the conceivable things that these women could have chosen to communicate through their respective self-productions, they chose to prioritize communicating that they are credible, that they are human, and that they are unsafe. As a result, it can be inferred that popular culture does not believe

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<sup>373</sup> Ibid.

<sup>374</sup> Lamont, “Nun Mode”.

women, dehumanizes women, and violates women. These female artists presumably feel this way, given that they communicated so through their music, and this research argues that listeners also likely feel this way en masse, given how successfully commercially received and perceptively culturally resonant these records were. While these conclusions are effectively common knowledge, they demonstrate the capability of the anti-musicology methodology.

In this way, this research project seeks to use that methodology to address its secondary concern. This research project does not purport to address all of the struggles faced by female producers, indeed the production analysed is from a small sample of work conducted by three inordinately wealthy self-producers, which undisputedly privileges the wide recognition of all three albums at least as much as their respective achievements. But this methodology has strengths to offer to the study of female production as much as production itself. Female producers like the professionals analysed in this research project have working knowledge of how to succeed in their field despite the documented obstacles against them. Methodologically empowering production choices is one way to access their expertise, and more direct than the traditional interview format.

Further, this research project has documented the extent to which masculine production myths interfere with representative production study. These myths also dissuade women from pursuing production, and alienate those who inhabit it. Empowering production choices in analysis combats such mythic mischaracterization, in large part by revealing the importance of stereotypically 'feminine' skills in the production role, like emotional intelligence and critical empathy. Thus as this research project seeks to participate in the growing movement to re-define production study, it makes space for women in production going forward.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Visual Lyrical Analysis of “Django Jane”

#### Legend:

*Celebrating feminism/female empowerment*

*Celebrating afrodiasporic heritage*

*Celebrating queer identity*

*Working class background*

*Monáe’s achievements*

*Struggle against sexism/Mysogynoir*

*Struggle against racism*

*Struggling against queerphobia*

*Broad political/institutional resistance*

*Themes of American exceptionalism, freedom, overcoming obstacles, etc.; the myth of the American Dream*

*Popular culture references (accompanied by a footnote)*

Yeah, yeah *this is my palace*, champagne in my chalice

*I got it all covered* like a wedding band

Wonderland<sup>375</sup>, so my alias is Alice

*We gon’ start a motherfuckin’ pussy riot*<sup>376</sup>

*Or we gon’ have to put ‘em on a pussy diet*

Look at that, *I guarantee I got ‘em quiet*

Look at that, *I guarantee they all inspired*

*A-town, made it out there*

*Straight out of Kansas City, yeah we made it out there*

*Celebrated, graduated, made it pass/fail*

*Sassy, classy, Kool-Aid with the kale*

*Momma was a G, she was cleanin’ hotels*

*Poppa was a driver, I was workin’ retail*

*Kept us in the back of the store*

*We ain’t hidden no more, moonlit nigga, lit nigga*<sup>377</sup>

*Already got a Oscar for the casa*

*Runnin’ down Grammys with the family*

*Prolly give a Tony to the homies*

*Prolly get a Emmy dedicated to the*

*Highly melanated, ArchAndroid orchestrated*

*Yeah, we highly melanated, ArchAndroid orchestrated*

<sup>375</sup> Monáe’s artistic collective, based in Atlanta, is called Wondaland.

<sup>376</sup> Pussy Riot is an all-female band from Russia known for staging political protests in support of feminism and human rights.

<sup>377</sup> *Moonlight* was the 2018 Oscar for Best Picture winner, and a critically lauded film for its nuanced portrayal of black queerness.

Yeah, Gemini they still jammin'  
 Box office numbers, and they doin' outstandin'  
 Runnin' outta space in my damn bandwagon  
 Remember when they used to say I look too mannish<sup>378</sup>  
 Black girl magic, y'all can't stand it  
 Y'all can't ban it, made out like a bandit  
 They been trying hard just to make us all vanish  
 I suggest they put a flag on a whole 'nother planet

Jane Bond<sup>379</sup>, never Jane Doe<sup>380</sup>  
 And I Django, never Sambo<sup>381</sup>  
 Black and white, yeah that's always been my camo<sup>382</sup>  
 It's lookin' like y'all gon' need some more ammo  
 I cut 'em off, I cut 'em off, I cut 'em off like Van Gogh<sup>383</sup>  
 Now, pan right for the angle  
 I got away with murder, no Scandal<sup>384</sup>  
 Cue the violins and the violas  
 We gave you life, we gave you birth  
 We gave you God, we gave you Earth  
 We fem the future, don't make it worse  
 You want the world? Well, what's it worth?  
 Emoticons<sup>385</sup>, Decepticons, and Autobots<sup>386</sup>  
 Who twist the plot?  
 Who shot the sheriff, then fled to Paris  
 In the darkest hour, spoke truth to power?  
 Made a fandroid outta yo girlfriend  
 Let's get caught downtown in the whirlwind  
 And paint the city pink, paint the city pink

<sup>378</sup> A line that interacts with both the historical sexism and queerphobia that Monáe has faced because of her “free-ass” gender performance.

<sup>379</sup> A feminized play on words of the name James Bond, fictional super spy.

<sup>380</sup> ‘Jane Doe’ is the traditional multiple-use name for unidentified or anonymous women in the United States, including unidentified corpses.

<sup>381</sup> See the *Lyrical Elements* for developed definitions of Django and Sambo.

<sup>382</sup> A reference to the tuxedo uniform of Monáe’s android persona, Cindi Mayweather.

<sup>383</sup> Also referenced in depth in *Lyrical Elements*.

<sup>384</sup> *How to Get Away with Murder* and *Scandal* are popular television shows where the lead characters are formidable women of colour; both shows are produced by Shonda Rhimes, a celebrated television producer/mogul and woman of colour.

<sup>385</sup> More colloquially known as ‘emojis’, emoticons are cartoon representations of human expressions and emotions used to accompany messages sent by text mediums, like text messages, emails, and social media posts/tweets/etc.

<sup>386</sup> The Autobots and Decepticons are the protagonistic and antagonistic, respectively, warring factions of giant robot creatures in *Transformers*.

And tuck the pearls in, just in case the world end

And nigga, down dawg

Nigga move back, take a seat, you were not involved

And hit the mute button

Let the vagina have a monologue<sup>387</sup>

Mansplaining, I fold em like origami

What's a wave, baby? This a tsunami<sup>388</sup>

For the culture, I kamikaze<sup>389</sup>

I put my life on a life line

If she the G.O.A.T. now, would anybody doubt it?

If she the G.O.A.T. now, would anybody doubt it?

Do anybody got it? Do anybody got it?

I say anybody got it?

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<sup>387</sup> The Vagina Monologues is a popular play, episodic in organization, that leverages the voices of women of all ages, races, and sexualities as they recount their lived experiences in terms of gender, sexuality, and other feminized themes. The New York Times calls it "...the most important piece of political theatre of the last decade" [Isherwood, "Difference"].

<sup>388</sup> The American Democratic (more left wing) party campaign to re-take both the House of Representatives and Senate from the Republican (right wing) party in the 1028 midterm elections was called 'the blue wave'.

<sup>389</sup> Kamikaze pilots were WWII fighter pilots who flew suicide missions on behalf of the Japanese Imperial Army.

## Curriculum Vitae

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**Post-secondary Education and Degrees:** The University of Western Ontario  
London, Ontario, Canada  
2013 – 2017, B.A., Major in Popular Music

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*The Anxiety EP*; *Rage Popcorn*; *Mezzanine* [Nameless Friends]; *A Toast* [Nameless Friends]  
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**Publications:**

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