Janelle Monáe and Billie Eilish as Models for Alternate Expressions of Gender in Female Led Pop Music

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Abstract

This thesis examines the expectations of women in the pop music industry, which emphasizes beauty and sex appeal over talent or musical content, and discusses how two contrasting pop artists, Janelle Monáe and Billie Eilish, confront those expectations. Relying on Judith Butler's theory of gender as a set of constantly replicated performances and Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectional feminism, I analyze how Monáe and Eilish perform gender through their personas, fashion, music videos, lyrics, and musical content, how these performances challenge the dominant culture's views of race, gender, mental illness, and sexuality, and how they help to expand the roles available to women in the pop music industry.

Janelle Monáe challenges the perception of pop music as surface level entertainment through her grand sci-fi concept albums, android personas, and use of genre as a tool to unify pop audiences of differing backgrounds. Her tuxedo "uniform" throughout the first part of her career, alongside the open sexuality of her persona in 2018's *Dirty Computer* and 2023's *The Age of Pleasure,* presents a diverse and fluctuating model for female pop performers and is especially important for Black performers and audiences, who are often presented with fewer options than white performers and audiences.

The dark themes and imagery of Billie Eilish's music, paired with her candid demeanor and uncomfortably honest lyrics portray the anxieties of youth in the 21st century. Her tomboyish fashion sense has become a core aspect of her persona and has been received by fans and critics as a symbol against the pop music industry's obsession with young female bodies and their sexuality. Eilish's involvement in every aspect of the writing process, from lyrics and composition to music production and recording techniques, has the potential to strengthen women's place as creators, authors, and engineers in the music industry – roles that women have historically struggled to be taken seriously in.

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Chapter One: Introduction and Literature Review

Section 1: Where are the New Femininities?

I first became interested in the topic of feminine branding in the pop music industry when I noticed that while male pop stars have been allowed to experiment with gender presentation in the context of their personas and performances for decades (and are seemingly rewarded for it), there are not nearly as many examples of gender experimentation in pop music performed by female pop artists. When reading about gender presentation in pop, I was presented with examples of male stars bravely defying hegemonic masculinity norms from all decades. According to Sheila Whiteley, in the 1970s, Mick Jagger "opened up definitions of gendered masculinity and so laid the foundations for self-invention and sexual plasticity which are now an integral part of contemporary youth culture."[1] This was continued by Robert Plant, whose "mane of golden curls, prominent genital display, and powerful, high-pitched rock scream, took over from Jagger as the new, improved, and sexually ambiguous frontman."[2] Glam rock, glam metal, and hair metal performers intentionally feminized their appearances as a way to signal their position as counter-culture bad boys, taking aspects of femininity and turning them into hypermasculine performances.[3] Then, there is David Bowie, who, through his "throaty voice, high cheekbones, reedy frame, and swaggering carriage, exemplified a meeting of the sexual ideals of male and female."[4] In the 2020s, more modern stars like Harry Styles and Bad Bunny

[1] Sheila Whiteley, "Little Red Rooster v. The Honky Tonk Woman: Mick Jagger, Sexuality, Style and Image," in *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender,* ed. Sheila Whiteley (Routledge, 1997), 67.
[2] Jack Burton, "'Dude Looks Like a Lady': Straight Camp and the Homo-Social World of Hard Rock," *University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture and Arts* 4 (Spring 2007): 9, https://doi.org/10.2218/forum.04.580.
[3] Maria Myer, "Purposefully Feminizing Masculinity: Femininity in male Role and Metal Stars 1950s-1980s," *The Compass* 10, no. 4 (2023): 33, https://scholarworks.arcadia.edu/thecompass/vol1/iss10/4.
[4] Christina Cauterucci, "Why David Bowie's Androgyny Was a Rare, Precious Gift," *Slate,* Jan. 11, 2016. https://slate.com/human-interest/2016/01/why-david-bowie-s-androgyny-was-a-rare-precious-gift.html.

are simultaneously praised for expanding what masculinity can mean for their generation, and hounded about whether or not they are straight and appropriating queer style and culture.[5] With these (and other countless) examples of male popular music stars, their androgynous styling, and their "new masculinities," one might expect to see a corresponding widening of styles available to women in the industry as well, but this has not been the case. Where are the corresponding "new femininities"? While women in harder, more masculinized genres like rock and punk are on average styled less femininely, there are still few examples of gender-bending in female led pop music. Alison Stone notes that while popular music has "long been a site in which musicians and audiences alike have found rich possibilities for exploring and experimenting with gender," such experimentation has been much more largely accepted in male musicians than in female musicians.[6]

Therefore, my thesis is concerned with unpacking how women's identities in pop music are typically constrained, and how, in contradiction to this, the artists I have chosen for my case studies, Janelle Monáe and Billie Eilish, have made performances of masculinity, androgyny, and queer femininity part of their personas and their music. As will become clear, pop performance is extremely gendered and does not easily allow for gender neutral language. In general, research on pop music tends to use binary gendered language, partly as a reflection of the strict way the pop musicians are sorted and marketed, and partly because gender neutral

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[5] You can see examples of this praise in multiple articles, including: Guy Pewsey, "Harry Styles is Rewriting the Rules of Masculinity on His Terms," *Grazia,* Jun. 21, 2021, https://graziadaily.co.uk/life/real-life/harry-styles-masculinity/*;* and Vanessa Rosales, "In Pink Florals and Short Shorts, Bad Bunny Champions a New Masculinity," *CNN,* Nov. 19, 2019, https://www.cnn.com/style/article/bad-bunny-fashion-machismo/index.html. There are also multiple articles addressing queerbaiting accusations, including Anna Marks, "Harry Styles Walks a Fine Line," *New York Times,* Aug. 27, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/27/opinion/harry-styles-identity.html; and Abby Monteil, "Bad Bunny Responds to Accusations That He 'Queerbaits' With Fashion," *Them,* Sep. 19, 2023. https://www.them.us/story/bad-bunny-queerbaiting-cassandro.

[6] Alison Stone, "Feminism, Gender and Popular Music," in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Religion and Popular Music,* ed. Christopher Partridge and Marcus Moberg (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 54-55.

language was not as common when some of this research was conducted. However, not all of the artists I will be discussing in my case studies are a binary gender: Janelle Monáe identifies as nonbinary and uses both gender neutral and feminine pronouns, but nevertheless, she is still counted as "female" in context of much of this research. For this reason, while I strive to be mindful of gender diversity in discussions about Janelle Monáe and nonbinary identities, it is not possible to avoid gendered language altogether. Throughout this thesis, I will frequently be using the binary terms of male/man/men, and female/woman/women in order to remain in line with how pop artists are described in the research and in pop media.

The strict way in which pop artists are gendered is a reflection of the opinions shared by the dominant culture, which has become increasingly divided regarding sex and gender diversity in recent years and has more recently hit something of a boiling point. Since I started my research in 2023, President Trump has taken office in the United States of America for the second time and has begun a campaign against research that centres the experiences of many oppressed, disenfranchised, or disadvantaged groups in America, including research centering on race, sexuality, and gender diversity. In January of 2025, he ordered the word "gender" to be replaced with "sex" in all federal policies and documents, reflecting his administration's policy to recognize only the birth sex, either male or female, of any individual. This came with an executive order that grants issued by the government should not promote "gender ideology."[7] While I am completing my degree in Canada, the politics of my country have always been deeply impacted by the politics of the United States, and I fear that any progress that we have made in 2SLGBTQI rights and acceptance the past few decades will be demolished in the next

[7] Meredith Wadman and Phie Jacobs," Trump's Ban on Funds to 'Promote Gender Ideology' Could Threaten Hundreds of NIH Research Projects," *Science Insider,* Jan. 24, 2025, https://www.science.org/content/article/trump-s-ban-funds-promote-gender-ideology-could-threaten-hundreds-nih-research-projects.

few years if we follow in the footsteps of our southern neighbour's plunge into right wing fascism. It is for this reason that I think any research into diversity of gender and sexuality, regardless of discipline, is more important now than ever.

The main methodology I will be applying to support my arguments is media analysis of the lyrics, imagery, genre, and musical content of Monáe's and Eilish's personas and musical output. It is important to note that content analysis is vulnerable to personal subjectivity; my interpretation of lyrical, video, or musical content may differ from others'. I am relying on the research of Kathleen Kennedy and Gillian Rodger, whose analyses of the gendered personas of Joan Jett and Annie Lennox have informed much of my own analysis.[8] My research, like the study of popular music more generally, overlaps with many disciplines, and therefore the sources I have gathered are not purely musicological in nature. My arguments are also informed by sociological, communications and media studies, and even psychological studies that overlap with music. The theories of Judith Butler, who pioneered the theory of gender as a constantly repeated performance of actions is of particular interest to this thesis, as is the theory of intersectional feminism, developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, which states that various oppressed identities interact with each other, making the Black female experience vastly different than the white female experience.[9]

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[8] Kathleen Kennedy, "Results of a Misspent Youth: Joan Jett's Performance of Female Masculinity," *Women's History Review* 11, no. 1 (2002), https://doi.org/10.1080/09612020200200312; Gillian Rodger, "Drag, Camp and Gender Subversion in the Music and Videos of Annie Lennox," *Popular Music* 23, no. 1 (2004), doi:10.1017/S0261143004000066.

[9] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity,* 10th Anniversary Edition (Routledge, 1999), doi:10.4324/9780203902752; Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," in *Feminist Legal Theories,* 1st edition (Routledge, 1997), doi:10.4324/9781315051536-2.

Section 2: Literature Review on Feminine Branding and the Expectations of Gender, Genre, Race, and Role in Popular Music

Much of the scholarship on depictions of femininity in pop music tracks how these depictions have changed over the decades. In 1985, Virginia Cooper scanned the song lyrics of the most popular songs from 1946, 1956, 1966, and 1976, and analyzed them for instances of stereotypical femininity. She searched for lyrical content that, among other things, positioned women as evil or harmful to men; emphasized physical characteristics of women, or described their attractiveness in detail; positioned women as needing men, or as the possessions of men; depicted women as sex objects; or depicted women as childlike or delicate.[10] Results of Cooper's study showed that descriptions of women's attractiveness and emphasis on physical characteristics rose steadily over all four decades.[11] As the oldest source I consulted, Cooper's article helps to illustrate that the pressure to conform to stereotypical femininity has been perpetuated within the music industry for many decades.[12] Jacqueline Warwick's book *Girl Groups, Girl Culture: Popular Music and Identity in the 1960s* also provides a valuable background for the pervasiveness of specific feminine ideals within pop music, as many of the expectations of youth, beauty, and femininity she discusses have persisted for solo female pop performers well into the 21st century.[13]

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[10] Virginia W. Cooper, "Women in Popular Music: A Quantitative Analysis of Feminine Images Over Time," *Sex Roles* 13, no. 9/10 (1985): 499, doi:10.1007/BF00287756.
[11] Cooper, "Women in Popular Music," 502-503.
[12] It should be noted that many of the sources that have informed this thesis use "the music industry" as a very broad umbrella term that encapsulates many different jobs and areas of expertise, including production, management, publication, performance, song-writing, marketing and sales, and much more. Like many of the authors cited in this work, I will be using the term "the music industry" to cover a broad network of actors, performers, jobs, and activities. When I speak about the expectations of the music industry it is not to suggest that the industry is a unified force that dictates what artists are and are not allowed to do in their music and performances, but that the expectations and broad trends that are prevalent within the industry are a reflection of the expectations of the general public and the political landscape that the art exists within.
[13] Jacqueline Warwick, *Girl Groups, Girl Culture: Popular Music and Identity in the 1960s* (Routledge, 2013), 7, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203940907.

A particularly in-depth source on how modern female pop celebrities are often branded and marketed according to strict feminine archetypes is Kristin J. Lieb's book *Gender, Branding, and the Modern Music Industry,* in which she sorts female pop artists into eleven different branded categories and outlines how they move between categories as they progress their careers. Lieb writes from a mass communications perspective and asserts that the vast majority of female pop stars start their careers as *good girls* and then are progressively sexualized in different ways according to which subsequent category they naturally fit into the most, which is decided not by talent, but instead by their beauty, sex appeal, race, or personal struggles. The pop artist may have some control over their branding, but they are ultimately constrained to sets of behaviour and personas that have worked for past artists. The options are especially limited for women of colour, who are often pigeon-holed into the racialized *exotic* category.[14] While many of Lieb's categories have specific qualifications, she outlines a few basic requirements that practically all women in the pop music industry must fulfill as part of their feminine brand: 1) they must be exceptionally gorgeous, 2) they must be willing to put their personal lives on display for their audiences, 3) they must be willing to use their personal narratives – struggles, successes, relationships, heartbreaks, etc. – to construct and maintain their careers, and 4) they must be willing to leverage their bodies, sexualities, and sexual availability to maximize their success.[15] Like Lieb, Patti Lynne Donze sorts artists into types, but her categories are much broader and focus more on the gendered genre archetypes encapsulating rock, country, indie, and pop, while all of Lieb's categories are confined solely to mainstream pop. In her article, "Popular Music, Identity, and Sexualization: A Latent Class Analysis of Artist Types," she identifies six female types and ten male types, and the fact that women have fewer options is a primary

[14] Kristin J. Lieb, *Gender, Branding, and the Modern Music Industry* 2nd edition (Routledge, 2018), 111-113.
[15] Lieb, *Gender, Branding, and the Modern Music Industry,* 110.

concern in her article. The types she identifies are highly dependent on race and genre, and artists that naturally fit with one type over the others have to construct their personas around the acceptable presentation and traits of that archetype.[16]

The importance of starting out innocent and the subsequent pressure to self-sexualize has been noted by other scholars as well, such as Shirley Whiteley and Lucy O'Brien. Whiteley, in her book, *Too Much Too Young: Popular Music, Age, and Gender,* discusses how young pop stars are sexualized for their youth and then criticized for growing up too quickly. She brings up Britney Spears as a modern example, who – after starting her career presenting as an innocent child star – quickly became known for skimpy school-girl outfits and sexy vocal delivery that contrasted heavily with her public insistence of her continued virginity.[17] In O'Brien's article, "I'm With the Band: Redefining Young Feminism," she explains that as women and girls in the music industry gain popularity, they face increased pressure from their labels and managers to modify their image to appeal to a larger demographic, which usually means marketing their sexuality if they were not already doing so.[18] Again, the degree of sexualization is dependent on race. Avery et al.'s article, "Tuning Gender: Representations of Femininity and Masculinity in popular Music by Black Artists," found that music made by Black women saw a continual rise in depictions of hyperfemininity from 1990 to 2010.[19] This, combined with Cecilia Bjorck's "Body-Space, Gender, and Performativity in Popular Music Practice," shows that white male pop stars are allowed more freedom in their image, and this freedom is extended less often to performers

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[16] Patti Lynne Donze, "Popular Music, Identity, and Sexualization: A Latent Class Analysis of Artist Types," *Poetics* 39, no. 1 (2011): 45, 48, doi:10.1016/j.poetic.2010.11.002.
[17] Sheila Whiteley, *Too Much Too Young: Popular Music, Age, and Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 52.
[18] Lucy O'Brien, "I'm With the Band: Redefining Young Feminism," in *Voicing Girlhood in Popular Music: Performance, Authority, Authenticity,* ed. Jacqueline Warwick and Allison Adrian (Routledge, 2016), 22.
[19] Lanice R. Avery, Monique Ward, Lolita Moss, and Dilara Üsküp, "Tuning Gender: Representations of Femininity and Masculinity in Popular Music by Black Artists," *Journal of Black Psychology* 43, no. 2 (2017): 182-183, http://doi.org/10.1177/0095798415627917.

who are neither white nor male. Bjorck discusses how androgyny and gender play are largely white male phenomena in popular music, and that other genders and races are more likely to feel pressured to constrain themselves to the gendered and racial stereotypes that they are assigned.[20] Likewise, Lieb's category of the *exotic* and Donze's category of the *femme fatale* are both racialized, being made up of mostly Black women, and are among the most sexualized category each author discusses.[21] Whiteley further notes that while overall, young stars are expected to maintain a certain degree of innocence, this period of innocence ends much sooner for young girls of colour than it does for white girls.[22]

Scholarship surrounding the gendered and racial expectations of reality competition TV shows such as *American Idol* and the *X Factor* can give us a unique look at how pop stars are constructed to mimic images that align nicely with mainstream pop and with the genre, gender, and race of the aspiring pop star. Amanda LeBlanc's master's thesis, "'You're going to Hollywood!': Gender and Race Surveillance and Accountability in American Idol Contestant's Performances," lays out the expected traits of white female contestants and Black female contestants. She tracks how contestants are either praised and rewarded for meeting those expectations or criticized and punished for going against them by analyzing the comments by judges and the performances that made it into the top or bottom three by number of audience votes. LeBlanc concludes that even if at the beginning of each season, the judges express a desire for "uniqueness" in the contestants, they systemically weed out anyone who differs too greatly from the expected qualities of a pop star of their race, age, gender, and genre, until the point in

[20] Cecilia Bjorck, "Body-Space, Gender, and Performativity in Popular Music Practice," in *Claiming Space: Discourses on Gender, Popular Music, and Social Change* (University of Gothenburg, 2011), 126-127.
[21] Lieb, *Gender, Branding, and the Modern Music Industry,* 140-143; Donze, "Popular Music, Identity, and Sexualization," 60-61.
[22] Whiteley, *Too Much Too Young,* 47-49.

the competition where audience votes decide who is eliminated. At this point, the audience continues the pattern of judgement and punishment established by the panel of official judges.[23] Ruth Deller, in her chapter "Gender Performance in American Idol, Pop Idol, and the X Factor," includes analysis on queerness in contestants. She notes that while male contestants' gay identities are simultaneously exploited and mocked for views and commercial success, lesbianism or deviant gender presentation is removed as an option for female contestants altogether, as they are expected to be desirable to men and relatable to women in order to have pop idol potential.[24] Both LeBlanc and Deller talk at length about how women on these shows have to carefully balance their perceived sexualities: they must be good looking, but not threatening, sexy but not slutty, and sensual but not provocative.[25] In short, they must embody the Madonna, not the whore. LeBlanc and Deller also both discuss how Black women are held to different standards than white women. In particular, Deller compares two contestants on *American Idol* who were penalized when nude photos of themselves emerged. While both faced criticism from the judges and from the public, only the Black woman was disqualified from the competition, showing that often, Black women are punished more harshly for deviating from the expected traits of a pop star than white women are.[26]

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[23] Amanda LeBlanc, "'You're going to Hollywood!': Gender and Race Surveillance and Accountability in American Idol Contestant's Performances" (Master's thesis, University of South Florida, 2009), 50-52, https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/etd/2057/.

[24] Ruth A. Deller, "Gender Performance in American Idol, and the X Factor," in *Adapting Idols: Authenticity, Identity, and Performance in a Global Television Format,* ed. Koos Zwaan and Joost De Bruin (Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series, 2012), 188.

[25] Deller, "Gender Performance in American Idol," 189-190; LeBlanc, "You're going to Hollywood!" 33-34.

[26] Deller, "Gender Performance in American Idol," 188. This contradicts slightly with research that shows that Black women are encouraged to self-sexualize and can be explained by the nature of *American Idol* and similar shows, which target a family audience, and therefore cannot display sexuality past a certain degree. It can be assumed that after achieving mainstream success, the aspiring stars of pop music TV shows would be pressured to self-sexualize like others in their field.

While the sources I have discussed so far are mainly concerned with the ways in which celebrities are pressured into maintaining appropriate personas, some scholarship on femininity in pop music focuses instead on how audiences respond to hypersexualized and hyperfeminine depictions of women in the music industry. The sources I have consulted discuss whether self-sexualization promotes "good" or "bad" behaviour in audiences, and they position the pop stars as either "good" or "bad" role models. Because pop music targets a demographic of young women and girls, scholarship that focuses on audiences often centres around what young girls think about sexualized female pop stars. This includes Sue Jackson and Tiina Vares' article "'Too many bad role models for us girls:' Girls, Female Pop Celebrities and 'Sexualization,'" Sarah Dougher's chapter "When Loud Means Real: Tween Girls and the Voices of Rock Authenticity," and Bridget Coulter's article "'Singing from the Heart:' Notions of Gendered Authenticity in Pop Music." All of these authors come to the conclusion that even though young girls are uncomfortable with the sexualized presentation of female pop stars and prefer pop idols that uphold a "good girl" image, self-sexualization remains to be the accepted standard in female led pop music.[27] According to both Lieb and Deller, this is such an ingrained fact that women who enter the industry are not only already prepared for the construction of their feminine brand to occur, but may even participate in constructing it themselves, which gives the process a perceived element of choice.[28] Deller goes further to say that the way that women in the music industry are consistently rewarded for replicating hyperfeminine behaviour works to convince

[27] Bridget Coulter, "'Singing from the Heart:' Notions of Gendered Authenticity in Pop Music," in *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Music and Gender,* ed. Stan Hawkins (Routledge, 2017), 273-275; Sue Jackson and Tiina Vares, "'Too many bad role models for us girls:' Girls, Female Pop Celebrities and 'Sexualization,'" *Sexualities* 18, no. 4 (2015): 488-489, doi:10.1177/1363460714550905; Sarah Dougher, "When Loud Means Real: Tween Girls and the Voices of Rock Authenticity," in *Voicing Girlhood in Popular Music: Performances, Authority, Authenticity,* ed. Jacqueline Warwick and Allison Adrian (Routledge, 2016), 191-207, doi:10.4324/9781315689593-13.
[28] Lieb, *Gender, Branding, and the Modern Music Industry,* 17; Deller, "Gender Performance in American Idol," 188.

them that they are performing feminism. The idea is that in this modern age, women are now "allowed" to express their sexuality through their actions, fashion, and, in the case of pop stars, through their music, at a higher degree than was previously acceptable. Therefore, to express one's sexuality to the highest level you can becomes the feminist choice.[29]

Donze notes that the expectations of female pop musicians depend on, among other things, genre conventions. As the performers I have chosen for my case studies jump between highly different genres, it is important to discuss some of the ways in which the expectations differ and fluctuate between these genres. Mainstream pop, as we have already discussed, has some of the strictest expectations of gender and sexuality, but also has lower expectations of talent and authorship than other genres. Pop music is often thought of as music for young women and girls and is therefore viewed as less serious than genres associated with masculinity, like rock and punk. Pop performers are not often thought of as composers, producers, or songwriters, and the music they perform is assumed to be superficial and trivial.[30] Therefore, pop singers are not expected to be particularly skilled or well-trained. Diane Pecknold and Jacqueline Warwick both discuss how youthful and untrained voices became emblematic of teen and young adult pop. Warwick discusses how many girl group singers in the 1960s and 1970s were encouraged to maintain a vocal style that was thin and somewhat nasally because it sounded more authentically "teenaged."[31] Pecknold discusses the contradiction in how young female pop stars are encouraged to maintain this type of vocal style but simultaneously mocked for being untalented and pitchy.[32]

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[29] Deller, "Gender Performance in American Idol," 189.
[30] Simon Frith, "Pop Music," in *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock,* ed. Simon Frith, Will Shaw, and John Street (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 95; Warwick, *Girl Groups,* 5.
[31] Warwick, *Girl Groups,* 34.
[32] Diane Pecknold, "'These Stupid Little Sounds in Her Voice': Valuing and Vilifying the New Girl Voice," in *Voicing Girlhood in Popular Music* 1st edition, ed. Jacqueline Warwick and Allison Adrian (Routledge, 2016), 79-80, doi:10.4324/9781315689593-7.

While the expectations of rock and alternative music are largely not relevant to my thesis, it is important to discuss how authenticity is assumed in these genres where it is discredited in pop music. Warwick suggests that one of the reasons pop music is taken less seriously than rock is because of the genres' different approaches to album creation. In album-oriented rock, the albums are assumed to be made up of songs that are representations of the artists' lives and careers. Concept albums especially, are seen as grand works of art meant to be consumed in full, and the songs on them are pieces of a larger work of art, like movements in a symphony. On the other hand, pop releases are more centered around the production of singles, and albums are often thought of as collections of singles packaged together rather than a set of cohesive songs.[33] Rock's connection to resisting dominant structures has given women in rock music more leeway to defy gender and sexuality norms than women in mainstream pop. Jodie Taylor points out that masculine, dyke, or otherwise subversive aesthetics are relatively common for women in punk, alternative, rock, or goth subcultures, but are uncommon in mainstream pop.[34] This can even be seen in teen crossover pop/rock acts like Avril Lavigne, whose loose connection with the grunge/rock subgenre allowed her to experiment with a more masculine appearance even within mainstream pop.[35] However, being a woman in a more "authentic" genre does not necessarily grant her assumed authenticity. Even women participating in rock genres are assumed to be uninvolved in the music writing process and are instead assumed to be singing songs written by another (male) member of the band.

The expectations of the more independent singer-songwriter are similar to rock in that singer-songwriters are considered the author of their own works as well as the main performer.

[33] Warwick, *Girl Groups,* 96-97.
[34] Jodie Taylor, *Playing it Queer: Popular Music, Identity and Queer World-Making* (Peter Lang Verlag, 2012), 51.
[35] Mark D. Pepper, "Revisiting Avril Lavigne: Intersections of Subculture, Gender, Youth, and Authenticity," *Journal of Popular Culture* 52, no. 2 (2019): 422, doi:10.1111/jpcu.12782.

The production style is usually much more stripped down than pop production, often consisting of mostly acoustic instruments played by the artists themselves, and a close-mic'ed recording style that maintains some of the qualities of a live recording.[36] As a confessional genre, it is connected with authenticity in that it is assumed that the lyrics reflect the author's real life in some way; with femininity in that it is highly emotional and private; with masculinity through its assumptions of authorship and artistry; and with whiteness, dating back to antiquated beliefs that Black people are stronger and have less of a need for emotional release and confession.[37] Rupert Till notes that Black singers are rarely labeled as singer-songwriters even if they fulfill all of the expectations of one. They are far more likely to be defined by Black genres like soul, R&B, jazz, or hip-hop.[38]

The genres of R&B and hip-hop have their own set of gendered expectations. As noted earlier, Avery et al., found that the expectations of hyperfemininity and hypersexuality in female led Black music has been rising steadily for decades. Similar studies comparing the lyrical content of R&B and hip-hop with mainstream pop have found that not only do the R&B/hip-hop genres contain more references to sex, but the references tend to be more explicit.[39] Themes of promiscuity, agency around female pleasure, and bragging about sexual prowess are noticeably more common in the R&B/hip-hop genres than in pop, and many of the sexual encounters

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[36] Sarah Boak, "The Female Singer-songwriter in the 1990s," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Singer-Songwriter,* ed. Katherine Williams and Justin A. Williams (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 291-292, doi:10.1017/CCO9781316569207.024.

[37] Rachel Sykes, "Confessional Poetry, Confessional Pop: Gender, Race, and the Lyrics Form in Modern American Writing and Music," in *The Routledge Companion to Music and Modern Literature* 1st Edition, ed. Rachael Durkin (Routledge, 2022), 378-379, doi:10.4324/9780367237288-37; Megan Berry, "Gender Identity, the Queer Gaze, and Female Singer-Songwriters," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Singer-Songwriter,* ed. Katherine Williams and Justin A. Williams (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 246, 248, doi:10.1017/CCO9781316569207.023.

[38] Rupert Till, "Singer-Songwriter Authenticity, the Unconscious and Emotions (feat. Adele's 'Someone Like you')," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Singer-Songwriter,* ed. Katherine Williams and Justin A. Williams (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 295, doi:10.1017/CCO9781316569207.027.

[39] Marybec Griffin, Adele Fournet, Angela Zhai, and Dianney Mascary, "There's Some Whores in this House: An Examination of Female Sexuality in R&B/Hip Hop and Pop Music, 1991-2021," *Sexuality and Culture* 28, no. 2 (2024): 616, doi:10.1007/s12119-023-10136-5.

described in R&B/hip-hop songs were casual in nature.[40] Griffin et al. attribute these increased expectations of hypersexuality back to the stereotypical image of the Black Jezebel, which perpetuates the belief that Black women are naturally more sexually aggressive and insatiable than white women. In contrast, the sexual messages in white mainstream pop music are more likely to be rooted in Judeo-Christian values of sex within the confines of a relationship.[41]

Finally, there are also expectations of women's role in music writing, production, and technology that span all genres. Any role that is considered technical within the field of music is assumed to be masculine, which is why the role of the vocalist, which involves the least amount of technology possible, is such a feminized role. Women who work in the music industry have been heavily discouraged from participating in more technical roles, most notably in music production and audio engineering.[42] In 2016, Marion Leonard conducted interviews with women working in masculinized fields of music, including in management, music production, and audio engineering, and found that they were expected to adjust their behaviour to fit in more smoothly with their male colleagues, which included ignoring a culture of sexist jokes and taking on more masculine traits at work. Performing this type of boyishness lends the women working in these spaces more credibility within their field and was almost considered a necessity.[43] Alternatively, women involved in music production or electronic music find they often have to sexualize themselves or remain invisible in the scene.[44] In addition, Freida Abtan, in her article "Where is She? Finding the Women in Electronic Music Culture," found that women's accomplishments

[40] Griffin et al., "There's Some Whores in this House," 617-622.
[41] Griffin et al., "There's Some Whores in this House," 625.
[42] Stone, "Feminism, Gender and Popular Music," 58.
[43] Marion Leonard, "Girls at Work: Gendered Identities, Sex Segregation, and Employment Experiences in the Music Industries," in *Voicing Girlhood in Popular Music: Performance, Authority, Authenticity,* ed. Jacqueline Warwick and Allison Adrian (Routledge, 2016), 44-45.
[44] Freida Abtan, "Where is She? Finding the Women in Electronic Music Culture," *Contemporary Music Review* 35, no. 1 (2016): 54, doi:10.1080/07494467.2016.117676.

and skills in the field of electronic music are often attributed to their male colleagues. Even if women are listed in the credits of an album or track, it is assumed they took a background role.[45]

On the subject of masculinity in female led pop, a number of case studies on women who perform female masculinity exist, but there are not many on pop musicians of the 2010s and 2020s. Instead, earlier musicians such as k.d. lang and Annie Lennox are often cited. Gillian Rodger's article, "Drag, Camp and Gender Subversion in the Music and Videos of Annie Lennox," details how Lennox's performance of female masculinity explicitly challenged the gender norms of the 1980s and 1990s. Rodger concludes that while her performances of gender-bending and drag brought a broader range of sexualities and gender to the pop stage, very few women in pop since have played with gender to a similar degree.[46] "Engendering Charisma: k.d. lang and the Comic Frame," by Tracy Whalen discusses how k.d. lang performs masculinity while still embodying a feminine type of charisma.[47] This subtle softening of her butch image simultaneously worked to mitigate some of the pushback she received for being an out lesbian in the conservative landscape of Canadian country music, and created space for women to be masculine in the popular music world.[48] Additionally, there are more examples of female masculinities in already masculinized genres like metal, rock, and punk. Kathleen Kennedy lays out the ways in which Joan Jett defied gender norms in the 1970s to 1990s and argues that she used her performance of female masculinity to claim space in a male-dominated genre.[49] Avril Lavigne, as an intersection between teen rock and pop, presents another interesting case study. In

[45] Abtan, "Where is She?" 54.
[46] Rodger, "Drag, Camp and Gender Subversion," 26.
[47] Tracy Whalen, "Engendering Charisma: k.d. lang and the Comic Frame," *Intertexts* 18, no. 1 (2014): 10-11, doi:10.1353/itx.2014.0003. According to Whalen, the stereotypical characteristics of charisma are most often thought of as being masculine because of the connection between charisma in men and positions of power. Women achieve the status of charismatic by instead embodying appropriately feminine qualities like humility, martyrdom, pleasantness, and collaboration.
[48] Whalen, "Engendering Charisma," 24.
[49] Kennedy, "Results of a Misspent Youth," 89.

his article, “Revisiting Avril Lavigne: Intersections of Subculture, Gender, Youth, and Authenticity,” Mark Pepper argues that while Avril Lavigne pushed against pop’s gender norms with her fashion of baggy pants and men’s ties, she could not escape the gendered notions of authenticity present in the genres of pop and punk. She dealt with bad faith criticisms that he says were fueled by a misogynistic desire to label her as being as inauthentic as possible by unfairly comparing her to punk when a comparison to rock (which by the 2000s was starting to lose its grip on claims of authenticity) would have been more accurate.[50]

Section 3: Case Studies

The case studies I present as the bulk of my thesis focus on Janelle Monáe and Billie Eilish, who, in contradiction to pop standards, have made the performance of androgyny, masculinity, and queer femininity part of their personas. These two artists cover a contrasting discography of subgenres while still maintaining a broader focus on pop. Janelle Monáe is a multi-genre artist, but is most often classified as R&B, hip-hop, and pop, and Billie Eilish has been classified as pop, EDM, and trap.[51] The first case study on Janelle Monáe examines the androgynous fashion of their early career and their more feminine styling starting in 2018; their android alter-egos, Cindi Mayweather and Jane57821; and how these relate to their nonbinary identity and their identity as a Black performer in pop music. I will also discuss the ways in which Monáe uses shifts between genres to challenge perceptions of gender, race, and class in her music. In chapter three, I will discuss how Billie Eilish’s image in her early career worked to obscure her gender and protect her from the sexualization encouraged in the music industry; the contrast between this presentation and her singing voice; and the gender fluidity she displays in

[50] Pepper, “Revisiting Avril Lavigne,” 419-422.
[51] Genre categorizations were taken from Pitchfork reviews of the artists’ albums.

her lyrical themes, use of genre, music production, and visual styling. This case study demonstrates how music critics and audiences idolize, sexualize, and discredit artists based on their youth, gender, and mental health status. Both of these artists have contributed to the broadening of gender presentations available to women in pop music, and it is my hope that the next generation of pop musicians will benefit from their varied roles within the industry.

Chapter Two – Do Androids Dream of Electric Ladies?: The Gender, Sexuality, and Racial Politics of Janelle Monáe

Introduction

A more detailed examination of the gender expectations of Black female artists in pop music is important in order to fully understand how Janelle Monáe challenges those expectations with her various personas. As discussed in chapter one, both white and non-white pop artists must contend with certain expectations, but nonetheless, as a Black woman in pop/hip-hop, Monáe is expected to operate under a different set of standards than her white peers. As discussed in the introductory chapter of this thesis, pop stars are divided into categories that are highly dependent on their gender, age, race, physical appearance, and genre, and they are expected to build and maintain their personas with these categories in mind. All sources that took race into account are in agreement that Black women are more likely than white women to be exoticized and hypersexualized and that this tendency towards hypersexualization has been increasing over the past thirty years.[1] This suggests that Black women have had to increasingly self-sexualize in order to achieve success in the predominantly white market of American mainstream music, and reflects the popular music industry's tendency to "flanderize" its stars.[2]

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[1] Patti Lynne Donze, "Popular Music, Identity, and Sexualization: A Latent Class Analysis of Artist Types," *Poetics* 39, no. 1 (2011): 44-63, doi:10.1016/j.poetic.2010.11.002; Lanice R Avery, Monique Ward, Lolita Moss, and Dilara Üsküp, "Tuning Gender: Representations of Femininity and Masculinity in Popular Music by Black Artists," *Journal of Black Psychology* 43, no. 2 (2017): 159-191, https://doi.org/10.1177/0095798415627917; Kristin J. Lieb, *Gender, Branding, and the Modern Music Industry* 2nd edition (New York: Routledge, 2018); Marybec Griffin, Adele Fournet, Angela Zhai, and Dianney Mascary, "There's Some Whores in this House: An Examination of Female Sexuality in R&B/Hip Hop and Pop Music, 1991-2021," *Sexuality and Culture* 28 no. 2 (2024): 610-631, doi:10.1007/s12119-023-10136-5.

[2] Flanderization is a term in visual media that describes the process through which a single trait (or handful of traits) of a character is exaggerated over the course of the work until the character becomes a caricature of itself. The word is a reference to Ned Flanders in *The Simpsons,* as throughout the series he was transformed from a regular do-good-neighbour-type who happened to be Christian into a dogmatic evangelical bible-thumper in later seasons. https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/Flanderization.

When a certain aesthetic achieves success for multiple artists in the same genre, it is replicated and exaggerated in new artists, leading to more extreme renditions of that same persona type. A particularly helpful study in this regard is Avery et al.'s "Tuning Gender: Representations of Femininity and Masculinity in Popular Music by Black Artists," published in 2017. The study examined the most commercially successful songs performed by Black artists between 1990 and 2010 for themes of hypermasculinity and hyperfemininity and found that representations of Black men as hypermasculine and Black women as hyperfeminine rose steadily for the duration of the study.[3] Both Avery et al. and Donze refer to this replication of the "gangsta" image that white America associates with Black music as "hyper-gangsta-ization."[4] Furthermore, Griffin et al.'s study on female sexuality in the lyrical content of R&B/hip-hop and pop music provides a valuable comparison between genres that are primarily Black and genres that are primarily white, as around 84% of artists in the R&B/hip-hop sample set identified as Black and 82% of artists in the pop sample set identified as white.[5] Griffin et al. examined the lyrics of each song in the study for themes of sexual promiscuity, female agency around sexual pleasure, metaphorical sex, bragging about sex, and sex within relationships, and found that the R&B/hip-hop sample set contained more sexually explicit content than the pop sample set.[6] Themes of female agency around sexual pleasure, celebration of promiscuity, and bragging about sex were noticeably more common in the R&B/hip-hop set, while mentions of sex within the confines of a relationship and metaphorical sex (for example, fantasizing about a potential sexual partner) were noticeably more common in the pop set.[7] Griffin et al. concluded that the nature of sexual messaging in

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[3] Avery et al., "Tuning Gender," 159-160.
[4] Donze, "Popular Music, Identity, and Sexualization," 47; Avery et al., "Tuning Gender," 167.
[5] Griffin et al., "There's Some Whores in this House," 615-616.
[6] Griffin et al., "There's Some Whores in this House," 617.
[7] Griffin et al., "There's Some Whores in this House," 617-623.

songs by Black artists perpetuates the stereotype that Black women are inherently more sexually aggressive than white women, and in contrast, the sexual messaging in white female pop music is more likely to subtly encourage acceptable sexuality rooted in Judeo-Christian values.[8]

Janelle Monáe entered the pop music scene in 2007 with the independent release of her first EP, *Metropolis: The Chase Suite.* She signed with Bad Boy Records soon after, who rereleased an expanded version of the EP in 2008. Her first full-length album, *The ArchAndroid,* was released in 2010. According to the results of Avery et al.'s study, during this period of time, depictions of hyperfemininity in Black-led female pop music were at their peak, and Monáe would have been under considerable pressure to maintain an image that reinforced stereotypical Black personas. Nevertheless, she presented herself very differently than her peers. In this chapter, I will examine how Janelle Monáe has used clothing – androgynous, masculine, feminine, and even nudity – and android personas to make political statements about women's place in pop music, queer rights, reproductive rights, and race relations in America, thereby broadening the options available to Black female artists in the next generation of pop music. I will also show how Monáe plays with genre conventions and musical style in order to support the messages sent by her persona and image.

This chapter is split into three sections. In the first two sections, I discuss how Monáe has used fashion and persona creation to help broaden the roles and personas available for women in the music industry. Her more androgynous looks, spanning from 2007 to 2017, use a mixture of traditional menswear, most notably her tuxedo, and feminine accessories to provide commentary on the gendered expectations of her industry. Monáe's signature tuxedo critiques stereotypes of class and race in America by simultaneously evoking wealth and service work. Though this

[8] Griffin et al., "There's Some Whores in this House," 612-625.

"buttoned up" persona defies the sexualization normalized in pop music, Monáe uses her platform to consistently defend women who choose to present as more sexual. I will close part one with a discussion on how the themes, lyrics, and genres in Monáe's music support the politics of this persona.

In part two, I discuss how from 2018 to 2024, Monáe updates their persona and introduces more feminine aspects and how they use gender fluidity to push back against political threats to bodily autonomy and queer rights. The music, lyrics, and interviews that accompany their 2018 album *Dirty Computer*, and their more ostentatious costuming act as direct objections to President Trump's policies from 2017 to 2020 that opposed women's rights, reproductive rights, and queer rights. The freer wardrobe of her new persona also critiques gender essentialism and counters accusations that her previous wardrobe was playing into respectability politics. This is evident in the music videos accompanying Monáe's 2023 album *The Age of Pleasure,* which use nudity to celebrate and normalize body positivity, queer attraction, and sexual freedom.

The third part of this chapter discusses how the android personas that Monáe uses in her concept albums contribute to her activism in regard to sex, gender, race, and sexuality. Monáe uses androids in her work as stand-ins for all oppressed groups in America, with her first character, Cindi Mayweather, focusing on race and class, and her second character, Jane57821, focusing on gender and sexuality in addition to race. These personas reflect Monáe's changing outlook on American politics and how her strategy for activism has changed between the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations. In the last part of this section, I will outline how a nonbinary reading of Monáe's androids provides important representation for nonbinary individuals and spreads general awareness about gender diversity.

Finally, this chapter requires a note about pronoun use and gender identity. Monáe identifies as pansexual and nonbinary, meaning she experiences attraction to all genders (or perhaps attraction regardless of gender) and does not identity with a singular gender herself. When she first came out as nonbinary in 2020, she did not specify any change in personal pronouns, however, she has since changed her preferences to both she/her and they/them pronouns.[9] It is my experience that when given multiple pronoun options, most people default to perceived gender when discussing nonbinary individuals, both for increased clarity and because they may feel uncomfortable using neutral pronouns or switching between multiple sets. Because Monáe was assigned female at birth and does not present as outwardly masculine, most sources refer to her only with feminine pronouns, even after she updated her preferences. I believe it is worth risking confusing some readers in an attempt to normalize varied pronoun use, which is why throughout this chapter, I will be switching between using she/her and they/them pronouns to refer to Monáe.

Section 1: The Suit Era (2007-2017)

a) Monáe's Androgynous/Mixed Visual Style

With their early commitment to full coverage tuxes, a black and white colour palette, and short hair worn in a pompadour, Monáe deliberately presented an image that was markedly

[9] As well as her go to joke response, "I identify as a free-ass-motherfucker!" https://www.vice.com/en/article/janelle-Monáe-rolling-stone-interview/.

different than what was expected of a Black artist in pop in the 2000s (see figure 1).[10]

Figure 1: Janelle Monáe in the official music video for "Many Moons"

In an interview with *Rolling Stone,* Monáe says that coming up with a "uniform" helped them to stand out and protected them from their own insecurities: "It had to do with the fear of being judged. 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."[11] They built aspects of their image after multiple Black musicians, such as James Brown, Prince, Michael Jackson, Grace Jones, and the general styling of the Black jazz musicians of the early 20th century.[12] Tracey Walters compares Monáe's signature look to Gladys Bentley, a gay musician active in the United States from the 1920s to the 1950s.[13] Despite facing legal repercussions in a time when cross-dressing

[10] "Janelle Monáe: 'Many Moons' Official Short Film (HD)," posted by "Janelle Monáe," Apr. 4, 2009, YouTube video, 6:28, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EZyyORSHbaE.
[11] Brittany Spanos, "Janelle Monáe Frees Herself," *Rolling Stone,* April 26, 2018, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/janelle-Monáe-frees-herself-629204/.
[12] Jasmine Hines, "Incorporating Intersectional Musicality within the Classroom: Black Feminism through Nina Simone and Janelle Monáe," *Journal of Popular Music Education* 4, no. 3 (2020): 317, doi:10.1386/jpme_00034_1.
[13] Tracey Walters, "Janelle Monáe's Sartorial Reconceptualization of the Black Gendered Body," *Open Cultural Studies* 6, no. 1 (2022): 325, doi:10.1515/culture-2022-0164.

and homosexuality were illegal, Bentley wore suits and tuxedos both on and off stage, and cross-dressing was a large part of her act. Because new personas are often built upon the personas of previous successful performers, Bentey's decision to continually challenge expectations of straight femininity in jazz performance made it easier for later performers to challenge those same expectations in other forms of popular music.[14] Likewise, Monáe's decision to reject feminine and sexualized branding in modern pop has broadened the roles available to women in pop today. While Monáe has never faced jail time for wearing the "wrong" clothes, appearing queer can still threaten a woman's career in pop music, especially in 2008 when Monáe was first building her persona. Amanda LeBlanc, in her master's thesis about gender and race surveillance in *American Idol,* discusses the lack of lesbian representation on the show. She theorizes that because the competition requires its female contestants to be relatable to other women and to be attractive to men, women that appear too "dykish" or who are too gender non-conforming face disadvantages from the show's judges and from the audience. LeBlanc found that these women were more likely to be criticized by the judges for their appearances and ended up in the "bottom three" in audience votes more often than those who correctly performed their assigned gender and assumed heterosexual identity.[15] The same principle applies to Monáe, who has dealt with frequent insults to her appearance and has had to field leading questions about her sex life, sexuality, and relationships for appearing too masculine.[16] In a 2013 interview with The Breakfast Club, she was told she "wears more pant suits than Hillary Clinton," was asked whether Prince had ever seen her naked, and was questioned about whether she ever dated or had

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[14] Walters, "The Black Gendered Body," 325.
[15] Amanda LeBlanc, "'You're going to Hollywood!': Gender and Race Surveillance and Accountability in American Idol Contestant's Performances," (master's thesis, University of South Florida, 2009), 27-28. https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/etd/2057/.
[16] There are many examples of this, and Monáe addresses it herself in the lyrics of quite a few of her songs, including in her 2018 song "Django Jane," which includes the lyrics, "Runnin' outta space in my damn bandwagon, remember when they used to say I look too mannish?"

trouble with relationships.[17] While the interviewers didn't directly question her sexuality, it was obvious they were fishing for information on what types of bodies she was attracted to and whether she had sex with men or with women.

Despite facing mocking comments about appearing "mannish," Monáe prefers not to think of their clothing as being "for men." Instead, she refuses to assign clothing a gender, saying "I don't believe in menswear. I just like what I like… I think it's time for someone to redefine what a woman can wear, and how she can dress and wear her hair."[18] Tracey Walters defines Monáe's style as gender-blending. Her tuxes lack the feminine elements that female performers often include in their menswear inspired looks, like deep necklines, form-fitting pants, or bodysuits, and instead are meant to de-emphasize both femininity and masculinity. She also accessorizes her outfits with frilled blouses and feminine jewelry and wears noticeable makeup (particularly doll-like eye makeup and red lipstick). This blending of styles "creates an appearance of gender non-conformity and a visual resistance that challenges accepted and expected dress."[19] Walters also suggests that Monáe embodies authority, power, and leadership with her use of masculine-coded accessories like epaulets and military inspired hats.[20] Her choice to wear kufis, captain's hats, and other symbols of power frame her as the one in charge of her own image. Adding to the sense of neutrality, in her earlier music videos, she is often surrounded by both male and female performers wearing similar suits. Her 2010 music video for "Tightrope" features Monáe and her back-up dancers, both male and female, dancing through the halls of a

[17] "Janelle Monáe Interview On The Breakfast Club Power 105 1 FM," posted by "The Breakfast Club," Sep. 18, 2013, YouTube video, 20:06, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=809cdPgUKiw.
[18] Walters, "The Black Gendered Body," 327.
[19] Walters, "The Black Gendered Body," 327.
[20] Walters, "The Black Gendered Body," 328.

mental hospital wearing identical tuxes. Because all of the dancers are wearing similar cuts regardless of gender and body shape, the tuxes take on the gender-neutral quality of a uniform.[21]

b) Monáe's Message of Class Solidarity

Monáe's choice to call her tuxedo a "uniform" is an intentional one that highlights a key part of her politics: solidarity with the Black working class. While the tuxedo is seen as a luxury clothing item today and serves as a symbol of class and wealth, that was not always the case. Throughout the 19th and into the 20th century, tuxedos were considered only semi-formal and were worn by both the upper classes and employees in the service industry. Monáe has even said that her mother used to work a catering job that required her to wear a tux.[22] It was also standard attire for many working-class performers and was especially popular amongst Black jazz musicians.[23] Monáe is aware of the class implications of the tux and her early commitment to them while she constructed her performance persona was initially meant to be an homage to her working-class upbringing and served as a reminder that she was essentially a public worker.[24] When asked about her choice of clothing in her interview with The Breakfast Club, she said, "I love tuxedos. I think [they're] classic and transcendent. I like to think of it as walking art with a message… they keep me humble, they keep me balanced, and they let me know that I still have work to do in our community. When you see that uniform on, I'm working."[25]

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[21] Miller, "All Hail the Q.U.E.E.N.: Janelle Monáe and a Tale of the Tux," *NKA* (Brooklyn, N.Y.) no. 37 (2015): 65, doi:10.1215/10757163-3339728. See the video for "Tightrope" here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pwnefUaKCbc.
[22] Terry Gross, "Janelle Monáe Explores Masculine and Feminine Energies on 'The Age of Pleasure,'" *NPR,* Jul. 4, 2023, https://www.npr.org/2023/07/04/1185342616/janelle-Monáe-explores-masculine-and-feminine-energies-on-the-age-of-pleasure.
[23] The *Gentleman's Gazette* has a decade-by-decade guide on black tie and the history of the tuxedo that tracks its steady promotion from informal to formal wear and acknowledges its prevalence in jazz bands as standard attire. See https://www.gentlemansgazette.com/tuxedo-black-tie-guide/black-tie-tuxedo-history/jazz-age-tuxedo-1920s/.
[24] Hines, "Incorporating Intersectional Musicality," 317.
[25] "Janelle Monáe Interview On The Breakfast Club Power 105 1 FM," posted by "The Breakfast Club," September 18, 2013, YouTube video, 20:06, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=809cdPgUKiw. Wording edited for clarity.

Monáe's commitment to class solidarity extends from her image and into her songwriting, most notably in her songs "Mr. President" (2008) and "Ghetto Woman" (2013). "Mr. President" is written from the point of view of a working-class person who is questioning the president's priorities. Monáe starts off with a dedication referencing her own working-class background and a statement of solidarity: "This song is for my mama / This song is for you."[26] She goes on to criticize the president for prioritizing military spending over the education budget, the rich over the poor, and pride over compassion. "Ghetto Woman" is also partially autobiographical and describes how hard Monáe's mother had to work as a single mom while Monáe was growing up. She defends Black women from racist stereotypes depicting them as "welfare queens," lazy workers, and bad parents with the autobiographical section,

> Living with a mom and my grandma who used to feed us
> We would move around the city place to place
> The landlord comes for the rent face to face
> Her eyes too heavy from working nights as a janitor
> She'd keep it to herself and nobody could understand her.[27]

It is also worth noting that this section of the song is the only part that is rapped, which is a genre that originated with Black American artists, and Monáe is speaking here to Black people about their shared experiences. In this song she also addresses the extra pressure that comes from being unfairly judged while dealing with the insecurities of poverty with the line, "Carry on ghetto woman / Even when the news portrays you as less than you could be."[28]

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[26] Janelle Monáe, "Mr. President," on *Metropolis: The Chase Suite (Special Edition),* released in 2008, streaming audio, Spotify.
[27] Janelle Monáe, "Ghetto Woman," on *The Electric Lady,* released in 2013, streaming audio, Spotify.
[28] Janelle Monáe, "Ghetto Woman."

c) Monáe and Respectability Politics

Monáe's choice of clothing has always been about expression of free will. They have consistently defended artists who self-sexualize while simultaneously using their wardrobe to present artists and audiences with other options. When questioned about their intention behind their persona, they said, "there were no women who performed fully clothed – still to this day there aren't. To me, that was a problem… I want to be in control of my body. I don't ever want a man or woman to tell me to dress that way. I think it's up to me."[29]

While Monáe has been criticized for not dressing according to the gendered expectations of the music industry, she has conversely been praised for dressing modestly in comparison to her peers, who are often framed as bad role models for young women. Compliments on the way Monáe conducts herself have often doubled as insults to other Black women in pop music. For example, in an interview promoting her 2013 album *The Electric Lady,* Monáe is called "wholesome," and the interviewers compare her concerts directly to those of mainstream hip-hop artists, which they call "ratchet," a term that holds negative connotations of race, class, and sexual promiscuity and was commonly leveraged against artists like Lil Kim, Nicki Minaj, and Cardi B. in the 2000s and 2010s. [30] Because of their vastly different aesthetics, Monáe was frequently compared to these artists throughout the beginning stages of her career.

As I discussed earlier, Black women in the pop music industry, and especially those in rap or hip-hop, are pushed to portray qualities that line up with the slang definition of ratchet: they should by hyperfeminine, hypersexualized, and crass, and their portrayal in pop music is an extension of how they are represented in the cultural marketplace in general. The writings of bell

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[29] Walters, "The Black Gendered Body," 329.
[30] "Janelle Monáe Interview On The Breakfast Club Power 105 1 FM," posted by "The Breakfast Club," September 18, 2013, YouTube video, 20:06, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=809cdPgUKiw.

hooks explain that the racist perception of Black people as primitive with a freer sense of sexuality has resulted in an expectation of hypersexualization and exploitation of Black women in the public eye. She draws connections between contemporary representations of Black women as sex objects to depictions of them as animalistic savages dating back hundreds of years.[31] Monáe's classic suits present the opposite of this image. In her article, "All Hail the Q.U.E.E.N.: Janelle Monáe and a Tale of the Tux," Monica Miller suggests that in a misogynistic and racist industry, Monáe had to fight to have her music be the focus rather than her body and sexuality, and the tux was one way to achieve that. She describes Monáe as consistent, classic, and appropriate.[32] This harkens back to the establishment of Motown groups in the 1960s. Warwick describes how Motown was known for the polished and professional appearance of its performers, which was meant to "create African American pop stars who could integrate white America's most upscale performance venues."[33] Berry Gordy Jr., the founder of the Motown record label, employed etiquette instructor Maxine Powell to head a finishing school for Motown acts to teach them how to properly dress, act, dance, and conduct themselves "respectfully." The goal was to present an outstanding version of Blackness that reflected class, style, and refinement,[34] a strategy often referred to as "respectability politics," in which members of an oppressed group strive to appeal themselves to their oppressors by distancing themselves from stereotypical or problematized aspects of their community. Because she deviates from the stereotypical styling of Black female pop artists, Monáe has been accused of tailoring her look to

[31] bell hooks, "Selling Hot Pussy: Representations of Black Female Sexuality in the Cultural Marketplace," in *Black Looks,* 2nd edition (Routledge, 2015), 62.
[32] Miller, "All Hail the Q.U.E.E.N.," 66.
[33] Jacqueline Warwick, *Girl Groups, Girl Culture: Popular Music and Identity in the 1960s* (Routledge, 2013), 51, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203940907.
[34] Paul Sorene, "Diana Ross and Maxine Powell's Motown Charm School," *Flashbak,* March 26, 2015, https://flashbak.com/the-motown-finishing-school-created-diana-ross-and-the-supremes-buttocks-32894/.

appear respectable.[35] However, there are a few other ways to dissect her modest appearance. In "Alter Egoing: The Shifting Affects of Janelle Monáe," Larissa Irizarry uses Moane's identification with the working-class struggle and her strong belief in class solidarity to counter criticisms that she is engaging in respectability politics. Differentiating "proper" middle-class Black people from the Black working class is an essential part of respectability politics in Black communities, and since Monáe's adherence to wearing a tux is her own symbol of the working class, it does not fulfill that class division.[36] For Walters, Monáe's gender blending separates her from respectability politics because gender nonconformity is neither expected nor acceptable as a Black woman in pop music, and therefore cannot be "respectable."[37] Finally, we should consider Monáe's feelings on the topic. On multiple occasions, they have denied that their presentation should be considered any more respectable than other women in pop music. In The Breakfast Club interview quoted earlier, Monáe tentatively pushed back against the interviewer criticizing "ratchetness," saying there is nothing wrong with being ratchet "in small doses," but she avoids further confrontation, perhaps because it was still early in her career.[38] A decade later, in an interview with the same two hosts, Monáe delved deeper into their feelings about the subject:

> I love wearing suits. I feel sexy… But the [number] of times people would say 'why are you wearing that suit?... Why won't you show more of your skin? Just wear a dress, be more feminine, take off that monopoly man suit.' And I've laughed, but I don't think it's funny to try to police… to criticize anybody based on how they dress. I've never liked the

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[35] Monáe talks about this briefly in a 2023 interview with The Breakfast Club: "Janelle Monáe On Bodily Autonomy, Non-Binary Identity, The Age of Pleasure + More," posted by The Breakfast Club, June 9, 2023, YouTube video, 46:54, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gf5jrx78gF8&t=1972s.

[36] Larissa Irizarry, "Alter Egoing: The Shifting Affects of Janelle Monáe," *Lateral Journal of Cultural Studies* 11, no. 1 (Spring 2022): 9, https://www.jstor.org/stable/48748050.

[37] Waters, "The Black Gendered Body," 324, 327.

[38] "Janelle Monáe Interview On The Breakfast Club Power 105 1 FM," posted by "The Breakfast Club," September 18, 2013, YouTube video, 20:06, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=809cdPgUKiw.

respectability politics of it… I always felt like I had to defend why I wore a suit for 10+ years.[39]

A conversation surrounding musical style and genre is also relevant to respectability politics and class solidarity. Genre exists on a hierarchy, with some genres viewed as more artistic, cultured, and worthwhile than others. Genres that are culturally or statistically Black, like rap and hip-hop, have been assigned a lower status than genres that are primarily white. At the same time, feminine genres like pop are considered less artistically valuable than the more masculine rock and roll. Many of the sources I have consulted discuss the various ways that certain bodies are encouraged towards specific genres and archetypes, and race and gender are inescapable parts of this. Donze uses rock and country as examples of genres that are performed primarily by white people for a white audience, and she points out that Black women have a difficult time constructing marketable personas in those genres.[40] The same dynamic can be observed in top performing female pop artists (82.3% white) and R&B artists (84.4% Black), as shown by Griffin et al.'s study on female sexualization in pop and R&B.[41] Outside the world of popular music, Western art music was historically – and continues to be – a largely white and male area of music. However, assigning race to genres is a contentious issue. On the one hand, it is reductive because it implies that certain people are naturally at a disadvantage in certain genres and it reaffirms previously enforced racial boundaries.[42] On the other hand, eliminating conversation around the "boundaries" of genre gives the impression that they have been torn

[39] "Janelle Monáe On Bodily Autonomy, Non-Binary Identity, The Age of Pleasure + More," posted by The Breakfast Club, June 9, 2023, YouTube video, 46:54, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gf5jrx78gF8&t=1972s. Edited for clarity.
[40] Donze, "Popular Music, Identity, and Sexualization," 49.
[41] Griffin et al., "There's Some Whores in this House," 615-616.
[42] Anna Bull and Christina Scharff, "Introduction," in *Voices for Change in the Classical Music Profession: New Ideas for Tackling Inequalities and Exclusions* ed. by Anna Bull and Christina Scharff, (Oxford University Press, 2023), 5, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197601211.003.0001.

down and "masks the stubborn boundaries that remain in the new music scene, particularly those of gender and race."[43]

With this in mind, we can consider Monáe's musical style and use of genre in relation to respectability politics and class solidarity. Starting with her first EP in 2008, *Metropolis*: *The Chase Suite,* and continuing to her most recent album *The Age of Pleasure* (2023), Monáe has consistently mixed genres along both racial and gendered lines. *Metropolis: The Chase Suite* begins with an orchestral introduction and takes inspiration from sci-fi and film music, including Fritz Lang's 1927 experimental film *Metropolis,* from which it gets its name.[44] Throughout the rest of the tracks, Monáe continually references Western art music practices. "Cybertronic Purgatory" heavily resembles an operatic aria with its sparse accompaniment and melismatic singing style. The next track, "Sincerely Jane," references film music from the 1960s and 1970s with its brass stings and orchestral interludes, as well as more direct samples from Marvin Gaye and Stevie Wonder.[45] It also features an interlude that replaces the strings in the orchestral backing with the type of record scratching that was popularized in the 1980s by Black DJs, which blurs the genre once again. This pattern of mixing white and Black genres is continued in *The ArchAndroid* (2010), which begins with an orchestral overture that ends with audience applause, evoking the live experience of a classical music concert. The inclusion of overtures in Monáe's albums also suggests the way she envisions her work being consumed, as overtures are

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[43] Anne C. Shreffler, "'Afterword' in 'Boundaries of the New: American Classical Music at the Turn of the Millennium,'" *Twentieth-Century Music* 16, no. 3 (2019): 444, https://doi-org.uml.idm.oclc.org/10.1017/S1478572219000288.
[44] Monáe's first full-length album, *The ArchAndroid,* also heavily references the film *Metropolis.* Further connections to the film, whose plot revolves around issues of class inequality, will be discussed in depth in section three of this chapter.
[45] Monáe samples lyrics from Marvin Gaye's "Save the Children" and an instrumental riff from Stevie Wonder's "Superwoman (Where Were You When I Needed You,)" https://www.whosampled.com/Janelle-Mon%C3%A1e/Sincerely,-Jane/.

introductions to larger orchestral works whose purpose is to prepare the audience for the concert experience and prime their ears to the main themes to come. From this, we can assume Monáe is trying to encourage deeper listening and expects their audience to listen to their albums in full and uninterrupted, something that is more common in album-oriented rock than pop music geared towards singles.

Apart from Western art music, *The ArchAndroid* (2010) cycles through multiple other genres, including soul, R&B, funk, folk, and rock and roll. Many of the tracks, including "Dance or Die," "Locked Inside," and "Tightrope" are most easily categorized as R&B or soul, while others sample styles and are more difficult to label. "Oh Maker" is in ABAB form, with the A section based in folk rock and the B section merging gracefully into R&B. The next song on the album, "Come Alive (War of the Roses)," samples B-52's "Rock Lobster," and Monáe matches that energy with rock and roll screams in her vocals. The closing track, "BaBopByeYa," is another fusion of multiple genres. It begins with a jazzy "big band" orchestral intro and vocals, but at around the 2:40 mark, the music transitions into a Latin dance complete with Spanish lyrics. For the rest of the nearly 9-minute song, Monáe switches between and blends these two styles, along with further references to Western art and film music. Monáe's second full-length album, *The Electric Lady* (2013), leans more into the traditionally Black genres of R&B and soul but still includes the overtures that announce the first and second halves of the album, although this time they are called "electric" overtures and include prominent electric guitar and keyboard alongside more traditional orchestral instruments.

Monáe's consistent returns to Western art music with consideration to its history of Eurocentrism, white supremacy, and elitism, could present a contradiction with her lyrics that focus on the Black working class. However, when taken in conjunction with everything else

about Monáe's persona – her tuxedo as a reference to service work, her stylistic and musical references to Black musicians and her immersion in Black genres, and her references to a film that famously critiques class relations and the oppression of the working class – this argument quickly loses its validity. Since the characters and plots depicted in Monáe's concept albums represent the universality of struggle and resistance (which will be discussed in greater detail in the third section of this chapter), it is likely that her mixing and blending of gendered and racialized genres are likewise meant to serve the goal of bridging the gap between diverse groups and highlighting the universality of oppression.

Section 2: The Pynk Era (2018-2023)

a) Monáe and Gender Fluidity

Starting in 2018 with the release of the album and accompanying short film *Dirty Computer,* Monáe shifted to a more colourful and feminine wardrobe that played with fluidity in gender presentation. Like the black and white suits, which represented Monáe's working-class upbringing, their new clothing also served a purpose: challenging right-wing opinions on queer rights, bodily autonomy, women's rights, and reproductive rights.[46] The clearest example of fluidity in gender presentation in *Dirty Computer* (2018) rests in a comparison between the music and accompanying music videos for the songs "Django Jane" and "Pynk." In "Django Jane," Monáe abandons her black and white uniform for the first time. However, her wardrobe in this video is still markedly different than most pop music stars in her sphere and utilizes the image of the Black dandy. While Irizarry compares Monáe's earlier style to the Black dandies of

[46] Walters, "The Black Gendered Body," 330.

the 1930s, I think a more modern interpretation of the term is especially applicable to Monáe's costuming in "Django Jane." A dandy is a man who pays close attention to appearance and social standing. It carries an effeminate connotation and can be used to label gay or gender nonconforming men as vain. Dandyism has also been used by Black men in order to counter widespread beliefs that they were uneducated and uncultured, which is the type of dandyism that Irizarry associates with Monáe's standard tuxedos.[47] However, while Black dandyism can be a way to appear respectable and to perform an appropriation of whiteness, Monica Miller suggests that framing it as just engaging in respectability politics does it a disservice. Instead, Black dandyism represents its own style and cultural identity separate from whiteness. According to Miller, it "functions as a kind of a visible sign of the modern Black imaginary, a kind of a 'freedom dream.'"[48] In particular, modern Black dandyism is defined by a combination of typical formal wear (suits, waistcoats, bow ties, and hats) with atypical colours or patterns and ostentatious or excessive accessories. Monáe embodies this type of dandyism in the music video for "Django Jane," in which she appears in various jewel-toned suits with matching kufis and plentiful gold jewelry (see figures 2 and 3).[49] The kufi that Monáe wears in the video is

[47] Irizarry, "Alter Egoing," 9.
[48] Monica Miller, *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity* (Duke University, 2009), 221.
[49] "Janelle Monáe – Django Jane [Official Music Video]," posted by Janelle Monáe, Feb. 22, 2018, YouTube video, 3:16, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mTjQq5rMlEY; S Holland Murphy, "Meet the Black Dandies," *D Magazine,* Dec. 15, 2017, https://www.dmagazine.com/publications/d-magazine/2017/december/black-dandies-dallas-fort-worth/.

significant because it is a symbol of masculinity and authority in many African cultures, and it reinforces Monáe's own power.[50]

Figure 2: Janelle Monáe in the official music video for "Django Jane"

Figure 3: Black dandies pose for D Magazine

[50] Walters, "The Black Gendered Body," 328.

Reclamation of authority is very obviously a main theme of "Django Jane." The name references the Tarantino film *Django Unchained* (2012), a revisionist Western that follows a former slave who becomes a bounty hunter and uses his newly honed abilities to kill various slavers and free their slaves. Monáe embodies this reclaimed authority in their music as well as their costuming. "Django Jane" sits lower in their vocal range than many of their other songs and they put special effort into their enunciation. It is also Monáe's first song that is entirely rapped, placing it firmly in the Black masculine sphere. Her vocal costuming supports the themes of the song, which is about Monáe's accomplishments as a Black woman in the public eye and the power of Black women in general. She references her critical acclaim, awards she has won, movies she has starred in, and organizations she heads, as well as her aspirations to continue making award-winning art. She also references the work of other Black actresses and artists who have inspired her with lines like "I got away with murder, no scandal, cue the violins and violas" (a nod to the TV shows *Scandal,* starring Kerry Washington and *How to Get Away with Murder,* starring Viola Davis). The lyrics contain more general references to the experiences of Black womanhood, including the universality of having your accomplishments overlooked. The line "they been tryin' hard just to make us vanish / I suggest they put a flag on a whole 'nother planet" is a reference to the 2016 film *Hidden Figures* (starring Monáe), which is about Black women's role in the 1960s space race, and how that role has historically been ignored and downplayed. "Django Jane" is about many things but is overall "a response to [Monáe] feeling the sting of the threats being made to [her] rights as a woman, as a Black woman, and as a sexually liberated woman."[51]

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[51] Rebecca Bengal, "'You don't own or control me': Janelle Monáe on Her Music, Politics and Undefinable Sexuality," *Guardian,* Feb. 22, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/music/2018/feb/22/you-dont-own-or-control-me-janelle-Monáe-on-her-music-politics-and-undefinable-sexuality.

In sharp contrast to “Django Jane,” the music video for “Pynk” features Monáe and the rest of the cast dressed very femininely, with a lot of bright colours (especially pink) and in clothing that highlights biology. In fact, biology seems to be a main focus, as evidenced by the infamous “pussy pants” featured in the music video, and the pink dress that Monáe wears that outlines her breasts and exaggerates her hips (see figures 4 and 5).[52] Her vocal costuming in this song is markedly different than it is in “Django Jane.” “Pynk” sits higher in her vocal range, is in her head voice, and sounds much breathier than many of her other songs, all of which are qualities associated with femininity. Unlike “Django Jane,” it leans into the feminine genre of melody-centric pop music. This merges with the music video and the overall message of the song, which is a celebration of feminine eroticism. Lyrics like “pynk like the tongue that goes down, / pynk like the paradise found,”[53] are obvious references to sexual acts and the content of the video makes it clear that these acts do not require a man. There are no men in the video at all, and right after Monáe sings about “going down,” actress Tessa Thompson (Monáe’s long-time collaborator and co-star in the *Dirty Computer Emotion Picture),* places her head between Monáe’s legs while Monáe pushes her down. The video contains many other innuendos, such as a finger in a donut hole or rubbing the inside of a grapefruit, and since the hands have painted nails and presumably belong to a woman, the visuals suggest either self pleasure or sex acts between women. While many of the women in the video are dressed suggestively and both the lyrics and video content suggest sexual acts, other parts of the video make it clear that the women participating are not meant to be objectified. The clothing worn in the music video are revealing but are not what would be considered conventionally attractive and are instead steeped

[52] “Janelle Monáe – Pynk [Official Music Video],” posted by Janelle Monáe, Apr. 10, 2018, YouTube video, 4:28, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PaYvlVR_BEc.
[53] Janelle Monáe, “Pynk,” on *Dirty Computer,* released in 2018, streaming audio, Spotify.

in irony. At minute 2:15, Monáe reveals they are wearing a pair of men's briefs that say "SEX CELLS" across the front. A comical amount of pubic hair spills from the briefs, poking fun at the expectation that women must remove their body hair in order to sell their sexuality.[54] Another woman is wearing underwear that says "I GRAB BACK," a direct response to President Trump's infamous "grab em' by the pussy" line.[55]

Figure 4: Janelle Monáe wears vagina pants in the official music video for "Pynk"

[54] "SEX CELLS" takes on a double meaning here, as the misspelling of the word "sells" also suggests the biological aspect of sexual reproduction.
[55] "Pynk," posted by "Janelle Monáe," April 10, 2018, YouTube video, 4:28, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PaYvlVR_BEc.

Figure 5: Janelle Monáe in the official music video for “Pynk”

However, Monáe has faced some criticism regarding the specific messages she is sending about gender and sex. A popular interpretation of “Pynk” is that it is not only about freedom of sexuality and celebration of the feminine, but also about reproductive rights. Many commentators draw a connection between Monáe’s pussy pants and the Pussyhats that were popularized leading up to the 2017 Women’s March, and which quickly gained meaning as commentary on reproductive rights. While the Pussyhat movement was largely considered a success, it was criticized for centering whiteness and cisness in discussions about women’s rights, as to many, it seemed to equate womanhood with having a vagina.[56] In addition, Monáe’s intentional misspelling of the word “pynk,” might be a reference to the alternate spellings of “womyn” and “wombyn” that are common in some radical feminist circles that seek to remove the “men” from “women.”[57] Unfortunately, these circles often equate biological sex and gender and assume all women must be born with a womb and a vagina, which excludes trans women

[56] Julie Compton, “Pink ‘Pussyhat’ Creator Addresses Criticism Over Name,” *NBC News,* Feb. 7, 2017, https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/pink-pussyhat-creator-addresses-criticism-over-name-n717886.
[57] Meg Matthias, “Gender Definition and Expressions of Sexuality in Janelle Monáe’s ‘Pynk,’” *RhetTech* 1 no. 5 (2019): 40-44, https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/rhettech/vol1/iss1/5.

and may forcibly include trans men. This does not seem to be Monáe's intention with the pussy pants. She told *People* magazine: "[those pants] just represent some parts of some women. There are some women in the video that do not have on the pants, because I don't believe that all women need to possess a vagina to be a woman… I wanted 'Pynk' to be a celebration of women who are unique, distinct, and different."[58]

Where "Django Jane" is about power, accomplishments, and Black girl magic, "Pynk" is about freedom of sexuality and femininity. The stark differences between the music and accompanying videos for these two songs makes it apparent that Monáe is comfortable with switching between more masculine and feminine presentations and using changes in gender presentation to send specific messages with her music.

b) Monáe, Nudity, and Rejecting Respectability

As discussed earlier in this chapter, Monáe was both praised and mocked for her commitment to dressing modestly. While most of the criticism consisted of bad faith jabs to her appearance, some of it was because her modesty was being interpreted as an attack on less modest women. Monáe's shift to a style that bared more skin can be seen as a way for her to combat those accusations,[59] and Monáe herself has indicated this did play a role in her rebranding: "I've never been into respectability politics and I think that there were people who tried to use my image to defame and denounce other women who were expressing themselves by showing their skin. We all want autonomy."[60] Her rebrand coincided with her more vocal themes

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[58] Kara Warner, "Janelle Monáe Says She's 'Working On' Mass Producing Those 'Vagina Pants,'" *People,* May 1, 2018, https://people.com/style/janelle-Monáe-says-shes-working-on-mass-producing-those-vagina-pants/.
[59] Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, "Pussy Power and Nonbinary Vaginas," in *The Color Pynk: Black Femme Art for Survival* (University of Texas, 2022), 48-49, doi:10.7560/321157.
[60] "Janelle Monáe On Bodily Autonomy, Non-Binary Identity, The Age of Pleasure + More," posted by The Breakfast Club, June 9, 2023, YouTube video, 46:54, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gf5jrx78gF8&t=1972s.

of sexual freedom, same-sex love, and casual sex and nudity in her lyrics and music videos, starting with *Dirty Computer* (2018).

Monáe's newest album, *The Age of Pleasure* (2023), takes this sentiment to a new level. It is resplendent in its celebration of free sexuality and body positivity. In each video released for *The Age of Pleasure,* women and men of all shapes, sizes, and ages revel in their natural bodies. While the video for "Water Slide" is full of nudity and suggestive and sexual content, Monáe's inclusion of all types of bodies challenges the narrow definition of beauty that is most often showcased by mainstream media (especially in female-led pop music) and encourages her audience to redefine what beauty can mean to them. The theme of the album is pushing back against fear and choosing joy and pleasure. In Monáe's case, this means seizing love in all the forms that she wants, regardless of social convention. She is pansexual and nonbinary, and has recently confirmed that she is also polyamorous, three things that are misunderstood and villainized in culturally Christian societies. By being so open about these aspects of her identity, Monáe refuses to be respectable.[61]

In *The Age of Pleasure* (2023), Monáe combines the visual refusal to be respectable with celebration of queer joy and shared Black heritage. The album's musical style is heavily influenced by Pan-Africanism, a political or cultural movement that positions African nations as having shared histories, cultures, and interests, and stresses the importance of collective action and unity between cultural groups.[62] In an essay about Janelle Monáe and queer joy, Eve Galanis describes the album as Pan-African in how it mixes hip-hop, jazz, reggae, Motown, funk, and

[61] Eve Galanis, "Janelle Monáe's Age of Pleasure: Black Queer Joy as Resistance," *Intersectionality, Past and Present* (blog), Dec. 21, 2023, https://intersectionalhistories.com/essays/janelle-Monáes-age-of-pleasure-black-queer-joy-as-resistance/.

[62] Peter Kuryla, "Pan-Africanism," *Encyclopedia Britannica,* Feb. 13, 2025, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Pan-Africanism.

Afrobeat, and as a symbol of queer joy in the way it celebrates Black love and sexuality.[63] This is clear in the amount of and diversity of Monáe's collaborators on the album; almost half of the tracks include a featured artist and all of them are Black artists representing aspects of African music and African diaspora. Seun Kuti of the band Egypt 80 (featured on the tracks "Float" and "Know Better"), and CKay (featured on "Know Better") are Nigerian Afrobeat and R&B musicians. Queer Black hip-hop artist, Doechii, is featured on "Phenomenal," and Grace Jones, a Jamaican multidisciplinary artist with a distinct androgynous style known for modeling and acting as well as singing, is credited as a main artist and writer of the song "Oooh La La." The song "Rush" features African-American actress Nia Long and Ghanaian-American singer Amaarae. In each video released for the album, Black bodies of all genders, sexualities, ages, and body types populate the screen in a show of unity and acceptance.

c) Monáe's Music as a Response to American Political Policies

The first Trump administration (2017-2020) and the Biden administration (2021-2024) also played a large part in Monáe's changing image in *Dirty Computer* (2018) and *The Age of Pleasure* (2023). The results of the 2016 election changed Monáe's perception of America, and the fact that so many people were willing to vote for a president that threatened their existence on multiples levels (on issues of race, sexuality, sex, and gender) scared them. They told *Rolling Stone,* "I felt like if I wake up tomorrow, are people going to feel they have the right to just, like, kill me now?"[64] However, they felt the way forward was through solidarity and peace rather than anger, which is why many of the songs on *Dirty Computer* (2018) are celebratory in nature. Songs like "Pynk" and "Django Jane," which I have already talked about at length, call out

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[63] Galanis, "Janelle Monáe's Age of Pleasure."
[64] Spanos, "Janelle Monáe Frees Herself."

racism and sexism in American culture, but above all else, they are celebrations of Black womanhood. According to Spanos, "[Monáe] hoped not to destroy the oppressors, but to change their minds."[65] For example, the song "Americans," one of the more politically overt songs on the album, is a tongue-in-cheek conversation between Monáe and a typical Republican voter, meant to spark conversation and bridge the gap between the two sides. On one side, Monáe, playing the part of a male Republican voter, sings, "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,"[66] which suggests that the speaker has never thought critically about why he recites the pledge of allegiance and is just doing what he was taught. He is also holding out for a future in which he gets a bigger slice of the "American pie," suggesting that regardless of his supposed privilege of being white and male, he does not currently feel privileged. In response, Monáe answers "You see my color before my vision / Sometimes I wonder if you were blind / Would it help you make a better decision?"[67] She is saying the man is letting his preconceptions about race rule his decision making and suggests that his voting patterns are not even helpful to himself. It is very unlikely that he will ever get a bigger slice of the American pie, because the American Dream is dead. This is reinforced by the spoken-word section of the song, a sample taken from a sermon by Reverend Sean McMillan, which includes lower-class white Americans in his affirmations for a better America:

> 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

[65] Spanos, "Janelle Monáe Frees Herself."
[66] Janelle Monáe, "Americans," on *Dirty Computer,* released in 2018, streaming audio, Spotify.
[67] Janelle Monáe, "Americans."

This is not my America.[68]

Monáe's *The Age of Pleasure* (2023) takes a short break from political discourse and delves deeper into positivity and celebration. In an interview with The Breakfast Club promoting the album, Monáe explains that in previous albums, she was grappling with the political situation and social instability she saw in the United States, and with the rise of extreme right-wing ideology under Trump. With *The Age of Pleasure* and with a less volatile president in power, she wanted to recharge with pure pleasure and fun, which functioned both as a way to inspire others and to prevent activist burnout.[69] Monáe is involved with an organization called Everyday People, which is a brown and Black collective with pan-African aspirations, and this is what inspired them to write *The Age of Pleasure.* They wanted it to be the soundtrack to the atmosphere of Black joy that they were experiencing with Everyday People.[70]

Section 3: The Androids

a) Androids as a Tool for Discussing Oppression

Monáe first introduced androids into her work with the character of Cindi Mayweather in her 2008 EP *Metropolis: The Chase Suite,* which, along with her following two full-length albums, takes inspiration from Fritz Lang's 1927 film *Metropolis.* Monáe's third full-length album, *Dirty Computer* (2018), breaks away from the *Metropolis* series but maintains androids as a theme. It follows the story of an android named Jane57821, and her quest for personal freedom. The albums' connections with science fiction and dystopian genre conventions has led

[68] Janelle Monáe, "Americans."
[69] Janelle Monáe On Bodily Autonomy, Non-Binary Identity, The Age of Pleasure + More," posted by The Breakfast Club, June 9, 2023, YouTube video, 46:54, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gf5jrx78gF8&t=1972s.
[70] "Janelle Monáe On Bodily Autonomy, Non-Binary Identity, The Age of Pleasure + More," posted by The Breakfast Club, June 9, 2023, YouTube video, 46:54, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gf5jrx78gF8&t=1972s.

many to label them as Afrofuturist, a term which describes the way technology and fantasy are used to explore Black resistance, subjugation, and oppression through the lens of speculative fiction.[71] According to Tobias Van Veen, aliens, cyborgs, and androids are especially common in Afrofuturist narratives because they take the Black struggle to be considered human and expand it into the future, confronting the reality that dehumanization will always be a driving force of oppression.[72] Janelle Monáe uses Afrofuturism to explore the intersections of race, class, and gender, and to offer solutions to the problems facing African Americans in the 2000s and 2010s.[73]

In the narrative of *Metropolis: The Chase Suite* (2008) and the albums *The ArchAndroid* (2010), and *The Electric Lady* (2013), Cindi is an android on the run from law enforcement; first for the crime of falling in love with a human, and then for leading a revolution and advocating for android rights. In this world, the androids are a slave demographic and can be sold, bought, modified, or disassembled by their owners. According to Monáe, the androids of these albums represent a universal marginalized identity, and can be used as a stand in for women oppressed by the patriarchy, racialized minorities, marginalized sexualities, and other oppressed social classes.[74] This is most evident in her 2013 song "Q.U.E.E.N." which stands for Queer Community, Untouchables, Emigrants, Excommunicated, and Negroid, and addresses the general lack of representation afforded to these groups in mainstream media.[75] Many of the

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[71] Meina Yates-Richard, "hell you talmbout: Janelle Monáe's Black Cyberfeminist Sonic Aesthetics," *Feminist Review* 127, no. 1 (2021): 37, doi:10.1177/0141778920973648.
[72] Tobias Van Veen, "Vessels of Transfer: Allegories of Afrofuturism in Jeff Mills and Janelle Monáe," *Dancecult* 5, no. 2 (2013): 10, doi:10.12801/1947-5403.2013.05.02.02.
[73] Grace D. Gipson, *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness* ed. Reynaldo Anderson and Charles Jones (Lexington Books, 2015), 93.
[74] "Janelle Monáe On Bodily Autonomy, Non-Binary Identity, The Age of Pleasure + More," posted by The Breakfast Club, June 9, 2023, YouTube video, 46:54, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gf5jrx78gF8&t=1972s.
[75] Irizarry, "Alter Egoing," 3.

scholars who have written about Monáe's body of work, such as Gabriel Ellis, Larissa Irizarry, and Meina Yates-Richard, have linked this concept to Donna Haraway's essay "A Cyborg Manifesto."[76] Haraway uses the analogy of the cyborg to imagine a future utopia where race, class, gender, and sexuality cease to be important distinctions between people. According to Haraway, because the cyborg is a hybrid that blends the organic and mechanical, it blurs boundaries between human/machine, natural/artificial, and physical/non-physical, and represents the fusion of all types of people, which of course, includes all oppressed identities.[77]

Monáe includes all oppressed identities within their androids, but in the narratives of *Metropolis: The Chase Suite* (2008), *ArchAndroid* (2010), *The Electric Lady* (2013), and *Dirty Computer* (2018), Cindi Mayweather, Jane57821, and most of the other androids are played by Black actors. Although a few scenes in Monáe's music videos show skin colour as a customizable aspect of androids, their consistent depiction as Black combined with Monáe's allusions to the treatment of the Black community (and more specifically, Black women) in the United States is relevant to Haraway's idea of the cyborg. Haraway identifies women of colour as the most effective example of the cyborg identity because they contain fusion identities within the status of "outsider." Because the "norm" in American culture and media is white and male,

[76] Gabriel Ellis' review in Carik Vernallis, Gabriel Ellis, Jonathan Leal, Gabrielle Lochard, Daniel Oore, Steven Shaviro, Maeve Sterbenz, and Maxwell Suechting, "Janelle Monáe's *Dirty Computer* Music Video/Film: A Collective Reading," *Journal of the Society for American Music* 13, no. 2 (2019): 250-271, doi:10.1017/S1752196319000154; Larissa Irizarry's "Alter Egoing,"; and Meina Yates-Richard's "hell you talmbout."

[77] Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism," originally published in 1985. (University of Minnesota Press, 2016). http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/warw/detail.action?docID=4392065. Cyborgs and androids are two different concepts in science fiction media. In general, androids are fully robotic synthetic humanoids and cyborgs (short for cybernetic organisms) have organic components. However, Monáe's androids blur that line because they are described as having organic as well as inorganic aspects and are capable of human emotion and biological impulses, two things fully robotic beings are assumed to be incapable of in most science fiction media. For this reason, I am using the terms android and cyborg to mean essentially the same thing.

women of colour are doubly separated from the norm by being both non-white and non-male.[78] Monáe shows this dual outsider status in many ways through the themes in her lyrics and music videos, demonstrated by the following three examples. During Monáe's first EP and first two full-length albums, the character of Cindi Mayweather falls in love with a human man and is persecuted for pursuing a mixed-race relationship, a clear reference to anti-miscegenation laws in the United States. After she is taken into custody, she is presented alongside other androids in a slave auction which takes the form of a stylized fashion show in the music video for "Many Moons" (2008). Not only do the slaves on the runway reflect how Black women's bodies have been viewed as commodities for white consumption since the days of chattel slavery, but Cindi is resold into slavery as punishment for committing a crime, something that is still allowed to happen in the United States into the 2020s as per the thirteenth amendment. Finally, in the music video for Q.U.E.E.N." Cindi and a companion (played by Erykah Badu) find statues of themselves on display at a museum that portrays them as dangerous and violent instigators, despite Cindi's in-universe insistence on peaceful resistance. This is similar to how American media has often framed protestors as violent when they are Black, but peaceful when they are white.

The androids can also represent oppression through labour and wage inequality. The character of Cindi Mayweather can be read as an equivalent to the character of Maria from Fritz Lang's *Metropolis.* In the film, Maria lives in the undercity with the rest of the working class, where she works as a prophet and preaches about a prophesized mediator who is destined to bring the working class and the ruling class together in unity. Likewise, Cindi becomes a prophet of the android class and promotes peaceful demonstrations of resistance through music and

[78] Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," 54.

dance. In *Metropolis* (1927) the mediator is Maria's love interest, Freder, son of the city's wealthiest businessman, and Freder uses his class and influence to advocate for better conditions for the working class after he falls in love with Maria. Monáe reverses aspects of Maria's and Freder's roles by making Cindi the prophesized mediator as well as the prophet and by lessening the role of her human love interest, who disappears part way through *The ArchAndroid* (2010) and is never mentioned again. While this is left up to interpretation, it can be assumed that he either lost interest in his lover or was unwilling to risk his wellbeing for her to aid the revolution. By shifting the responsibility of leading the revolution to a member of the oppressed class, Monáe is making the political statement that those in positions of privilege are not often equipped to be the spokespeople for the oppressed, and those with wealth do not often fight for those without it.

Jane57821 is a separate character from Cindi Mayweather and is the protagonist of Monáe's 2018 album and accompanying short film *Dirty Computer.* In the narrative of the album/film, she is captured by an authoritarian government for being defective, which in this case means that she displayed nonconforming and nonmonogamous sexuality, and to "fix" her, her memories of noncompliance are deleted. Where Cindi Mayweather is a way to explore oppression based on race and class, Jane57821 draws clear parallels to conversion therapy is more about oppression based on gender, sex, and sexuality.[79] The music video for "Crazy, Classic, Life" shows Jane, her love interest Zen (played by Tessa Thompson), and a group of other androids at a party. Many of the partygoers are gender-nonconforming and are visibly queer: some men wear makeup and glittery clothes, some women have short hair or shaved heads, there is a whole group of Ziggy Stardust impersonators, and various same-sex couples

[79] Irizarry, "Alter Egoing," 16.

dance closely together. In a scene reminiscent of police raids on gay clubs in the 20th century, law enforcement raids the party and arrests as many androids as they are able to while one officer announces over loud-speaker, "surrender at once. Any attempt to escape will be met with severe and overwhelming force."[80]

b) Androids as a Response to American Politics

Discussions of oppression are inherently political and so are Monáe's androids. Irizarry examines how both of Monáe's android alter egos critique different aspects of gender and race politics in America. According to Irizarry, Cindi Mayweather represents Monáe's pessimistic view of being a woman in America, while Jane57821 represents her shift to more optimistic political action and progress through a united front.[81] Irizarry positions Cindi Mayweather as an expression of Afropessimism, a critical framework that argues that the full emancipation of Black people in the United States will likely never occur because the livelihood of the country depends on the continued subjugation of the Black population.[82] Irizarry reads Cindi Mayweather as a tool to discuss Black political disappointment in Barrack Obama's presidency (2009 to 2016). The hope felt by many Black Americans coming out of George W. Bush's presidency (2001 to 2008) and into Obama's contrasted sharply with their lived experiences; they felt that Obama could have been doing much more to address the worsening epidemic of police brutality against the Black population.[83] In an op-ed for the *Guardian,* Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor writes,

> [President Obama] turned out to be very different from candidate Obama, who had stage-managed his campaign to resemble something closer to a social movement. He had

[80] "Janelle Monáe – Crazy, Classic, Life [Offical Music Video]," posted by "Janelle Monáe," December 12, 2018, YouTube video, 6:22, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cx30_oXJDaY.
[81] Irizarry, "Alter Egoing," 3.
[82] Siddhant Issar and James Padilioni, "'To Address Black Suffering is to Destroy the World' An Interview with Frank B. Wilderson, III on Afropessimism," *Interfere* (November 2020): 93-113.
[83] Irizarry, "Alter Egoing," 12-13.

> conjured much hope, especially among African Americans – but with great expectations came even greater disappointments.[84]

This frustration manifests in the story of Cindi Mayweather, which as discussed earlier, revolves around a theoretical future in which androids, depicted as primarily Black, are enslaved and subjected to state-sanctioned violence. This is further evidenced by songs throughout *Metropolis: The Chase Suite* (2008) and *The ArchAndroid* (2010). "March of the Wolfmasters" (2007) is a spoken word introduction announcing that a warrant is out for Cindi Mayweather's arrest and that bounty hunters are free to start their hunt. Monáe stresses the extreme state-sanctioned violence that androids are subjected to with the line, "The Droid Control Marshals are full of fun rules today: no phasers, only chainsaws and electro-daggers!" which suggests an intentionally lethal amount of force.[85] "Locked Inside" (2010) further references police violence against Black people with the lines "killing plagues the citizens while music slowly dies / I get frightened, see, I get frightened," and "the color black means it's time to die / and nobody questions why."[86]

In general, *Dirty Computer* has more to do with gender and sexuality than Monáe's previous albums, but that does not mean Monáe abandons commentary on race altogether. Like in her previous android narrative, most of the androids in the world of *Dirty Computer* are portrayed by Black actors, and the two employees in charge of erasing Jane's memories are white men who laugh cruelly at her memories before erasing them. "Crazy, Classic, Life" begins with a scene of Jane and Zen being pulled over while driving, seemingly for no reason – or in other words, for driving while Black – and being harassed by law enforcement.[87] In addition,

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[84] Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, "Barrack Obama's Original Sin: America's Post-Racial Illusion," *Guardian,* Jan. 13, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jan/13/barack-obama-legacy-racism-criminal-justice-system.
[85] Janelle Monáe, "March of the Wolfmasters," on *Metropolis: The Chase Suite (Special Edition),* released in 2008, streaming audio, Spotify.
[86] Janelle Monáe, "Locked Inside," on *The ArchAndroid,* released in 2010, streaming audio, Spotify.
[87] "Janelle Monáe – Crazy, Classic, Life [Official Music Video]," posted by "Janelle Monáe," December 12, 2018, YouTube video, 6:22, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cx30_oXJDaY.

when a "dirty" android is captured and altered to become "clean," they lose their protective hairstyles like braids, cornrows, or bantu knots, and are instead made to wear their hair straightened and pulled back, with cage-like structures over their heads, signifying the stifling of their expression of race through their hair (see figure 6).[88]

Figure 6: Janelle Monáe and Tessa Thompson in Monáe's Emotion Picture "Dirty Computer," showing two androids. The android on the left, Zen (played by Tessa Thompson), has been "cleaned," and the android on the right, Jane (played by Monáe), is still "dirty."

Monáe's approach to political issues in their music shifted during Trump's first presidential term from 2017 to 2020 and throughout his next two presidential campaigns (2018 to 2020 and 2022 to 2024). As noted earlier, their hope was to change minds through unity rather than anger.[89] The songs in *Dirty Computer* (2018) and *The Age of Pleasure* (2023) are focused on exploring women's rights and bodily autonomy, which were on the verge of being

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[88] "Janelle Monáe – Dirty Computer [Emotion Picture]" posted by Janelle Monáe, Apr. 27, 2018, YouTube video, 48:37, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jdH2Sy-BlNE; "Janelle Monáe On Bodily Autonomy, Non-Binary Identity, The Age of Pleasure + More," posted by The Breakfast Club, June 9, 2023, YouTube video, 46:54, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gf5jrx78gF8&t=1972s.
[89] Spanos, "Janelle Monáe Frees Herself."

dismantled. However, the music itself is extremely optimistic and revolves around affirmations of power, strength in numbers, and freedom of sexual expression. "Pynk," among other songs on these two albums, pushes the clear message that women's health, bodies, sexuality, and pleasure should not be defined by men.[90] As discussed earlier, the music video for "Crazy, Classic, Life" deals with serious topics to do with sexuality and race, but as is the case with "Pynk" and "Django Jane," the lyrics and music are still upbeat and celebratory. This contradiction of imagery and musical content is a key feature of the *Dirty Computer Emotion Picture,* as in the plot segments in between each music video, Jane57821 is shown being captured, strapped down to a gurney, drugged, and subjected to having her memories combed through and erased by her oppressors. Her mind needs to be "cleaned" so that she is more compliant.[91] This draws parallels to how women and queer people have historically been the target of harmful asylum treatments like shock therapy and lobotomies to cure them of their deviation from the norm, and is a stark contrast to the upbeat music and lyrics of *Dirty Computer.*

c) Androids as Representation for Genderless and Nonbinary Beings

Although Monáe only came out as nonbinary after she had already moved on from her android personas, a nonbinary reading of her androids has always been present. As beings without a biological sex, androids present an opportunity to represent gender variance because any expression of gender would occur without the assumed biological element. As beings that are fully constructed, they can also demonstrate how gender also exists as a construction. Any gender that an android does exhibit would have to be programmed into them or cultivated by

[90] Irizarry, "Alter Egoing," 17-18.
[91] "Janelle Monáe – Dirty Computer [Emotion Picture]," posted by "Janelle Monáe," April 27, 2018, YouTube video, 48:37, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jdH2Sy-BlNE.

themselves. However, depictions of androids and other robot characters in media have remained surprisingly stereotypical and gendered. Marianne Zumbarge, in her article "Fembots: Female Androids in Mainstream Cinema and Beyond," discusses the sexualized history of female androids in media, from the robot A.I.s in the film *Ex Machina* (2014), to the burlesque performers in *Metropolis* (1927), to the gun-wielding fembots in *Austin Powers* (1997). She notes the stark contrast between those types of androids and masculine coded android characters in *RoboCop* (1987) or *The Terminator* (1984). "Female" androids tend to be confined to roles as domestic servants, sex objects, or sexy mankillers, and "male" androids are powerful in more traditionally masculine ways.[92] Monáe's androids are still gendered (as they are played by actors with gendered bodies), but they subvert the tropes outlined by Zumbarge because while they are often dehumanized as servants and possessions, they are very seldom objectified or framed as domestic servants. They also never leverage their sexualities to commit violence, even as they rebel against their oppressors.

Monáe's identity as nonbinary only furthers a nonbinary reading of her androids, which has the potential to provide valuable representation of gender variance. According to Anamarija Šporčič in their article about nonbinary representation in science fiction, many of the problems nonbinary people face stem from a general misunderstanding or ignorance from society. This extends to their ability to describe their own experiences, as they might not have the understanding of gender variance to do so. Representation in media can help to address and alleviate injustices against nonbinary people that result from this lack of understanding.[93] Šporčič

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[92] Marianne Zumbarge, "Fembots: Female Androids in Mainstream Cinema and Beyond" (master's thesis, Vanderbilt University, 2018), 1-3, https://docslib.org/doc/9003693/fembots-female-androids-in-mainstream-cinema-and-beyond.
[93] Anamarija Šporčič, "The (Ir)Relevance of Science Fiction to Non-Binary and Genderqueer Readers," *ELOPE* 15, no. 1 (2018): 51-53, doi:10.4312/elope.15.1.51-67.

also notes that the science fiction genre is uniquely suited to this because of its ability to suspend the audiences' disbelief and encourage them to accept new information. While other genres, such as fantasy, are not overly concerned with plausibility, the science fiction genre introduces foreign, and even impossible concepts as logical and scientific, which better primes the audience to accept new concepts as possible and applicable to the real world.[94] Whether intentionally or not, Monáe's inclusion of androids in narratives that are based heavily on science fiction tropes, along with their performance of more fluid gender identity and the commentary on gender in the content of their albums can help introduce the general population to greater gender variance than what is seen in most music media.

Conclusion:

Through her shifting personas and wide use of genre, Janelle Monáe has helped to expand the roles available to various disenfranchised groups in pop music. As a Black woman in pop, she spent the first decade of her career defying the industry's expectations of hyperfemininity and hypersexuality. During this time, she also defied the genre expectations of her race. While much of her music was centered around the culturally Black genres of R&B and hip-hop, she was constantly playing with genre, particularly with how she melded the conventions of Western art music seamlessly alongside R&B, hip-hop, rap, rock, and folk. This mixing of Black and white genres demonstrated a key part of her philosophy: solidarity amongst all oppressed groups regardless of race.

[94] Šporčič, "(Ir)Relevance," 58.

In the next part of their career, from 2018 to the present, Monáe shifted their persona to reflect new ideals. Having proved that they could pursue a career in music outside the expectations of their race and gender, they used a new, more feminine persona to demonstrate political support for diversity in sexuality and gender expression. In particular, their 2023 album, *The Age of Pleasure,* explores themes of sexual freedom and the pursuit of pleasure. Furthermore, Monáe's use of Black genres and their focus on collaborations with Black artists of diverse backgrounds in this album demonstrates a political alignment with Pan-Africanism and unity against oppression.

The android personas that Monáe builds many of her albums around spread a similar message. She uses androids to represent a universal Other, and the stories surrounding Cindi Mayweather and Jane57821 detail how Othered groups are controlled and mistreated by unjust governments. While extreme violence is used against both personas, they both demonstrate peaceful means of protest and promote unity between oppressed groups. One oppressed group that androids can represent is genderqueer or transgender individuals. As beings without biology, they can demonstrate how biological sex is not inherently linked to gender expression and that gender is a learned set of performances. When taken in conjunction with Janelle Monáe's staunch support of the LGBTQ community, her depiction of a non-gendered character could spread general awareness of, and increase acceptance of gender diversity in her audience.

Chapter Three: The Gender's a Little Blurry: Billie Eilish and the Gender Blurring Effects of Image, Experimentation, and Genre

Introduction:

Billie Eilish was fourteen when her breakout song, "Ocean Eyes," went viral on SoundCloud in 2015, but she never intended it to be found by a broad audience. It became a surprise hit and catapulted Eilish into the beginnings of a successful career as a bedroom pop musician. After her viral entrance into pop stardom, she quickly built a persona that set her apart from other major pop celebrities of the late 2010s, which include big-name artists like Taylor Swift, Miley Cyrus, and Ariana Grande. In contrast to these artists, she became known for her minimally styled but unnaturally dyed hair and her monochromatic outfits consisting of mostly oversized t-shirts, basketball shorts or baggy pants, beanies, sneakers, and puffy outerwear (see figure 7).[1] On top of this, her music reflects a much darker state of mind than what top pop artists are generally known for. My thesis explores how Eilish's nontraditional, gender-blurring image and experimental music has opened up space for alternate expressions of femininity in a sphere that is generally known for enforcing strict archetypes regarding youth, gender, and sexuality.

[1] Billie Eilish, *WHEN WE ALL FALL ASLEEP, WHERE DO WE GO?*, Darkroom/Interscope Records, 2019, CD.

Figure 7: Album cover for Billie Eilish's 2019 album *WHEN WE ALL FALL ASLEEP, WHERE DO WE GO?*

In her book, *Gender, Branding, and the Modern Music Industry,* Kristen J. Lieb outlines how female pop artists are encouraged to follow strict guidelines and career trajectories based on what has previously led to successful careers in pop performance. She lays out the expected lifecycle of female pop musicians entering the music industry and explains how artists are mainly categorized according to age, race, and appearance. To construct her expected lifecycle, Lieb conducted interviews with 21 industry professionals between 2006 and 2012 about the branding process of women in pop music, how personas are created, changed, and maintained, and how these artists are treated and received by the industry and by their audiences. Fifteen interviews were redone in 2017 and five interviews with additional industry professionals were

added for the second edition of the book in order to determine if the industry was experiencing significant change.[2]

According to Lieb, the general trend of female pop stars is that they start their careers early and end them (or pivot into a different industry) much earlier than their male counterparts. Upon the start of their careers, they are typically funneled into the *good girl* category: their sexuality is hinted at, but their youth and innocence are at the forefront of their personas. While stars cannot stay in this stage indefinitely, almost all of Lieb's participants agreed that the *good girl* stage is extremely important for establishing a career in the music industry, and that skipping it runs the risk of coming on too strongly and leaves no way for the pop star to effectively ramp up their image in the future.[3] All *good girls* age out of this category as they approach adulthood and their sex appeal is gradually accentuated as they transition into a persona type that allows for a more targeted type of sexualization.[4]

Similarly, Sheila Whiteley's 2005 book, *Too Much Too Young: Popular Music, Age and Gender,* discusses how the music industry exploits and sexualizes youth, especially when it comes to young girls. This is exemplified in the early career of Britney Spears, who maintained an innocent image for a number of years before quickly becoming known for being a "sexy schoolgirl."[5] It's worth noting that the "sexy schoolgirl" costume has remained a staple in sexualizing young women and girls because according to Whiteley, it exemplifies the fantasy

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[2] Lieb, *Gender, Branding, and the Modern Music Industry* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 108-109.
[3] Lieb, *Gender, Branding, and the Modern Music Industry,* 115-132. Throughout this chapter, Lieb describes various artists whose early personas were received as too sexual or too deviant to maintain a lengthy career. Many of her participants stressed that one of the benefits of the *good girl* image is that it is mild enough to be gradually intensified as the artist reaches adulthood.
[4] Lieb, *Gender, Branding, and the Modern Music Industry,* 116-118.
[5] Sheila Whiteley, *Too Much Too Young: Popular Music, Age and Gender* (Routledge, 2005), 52-53.

that blends virginity and experience.[6] Whiteley also notes that young celebrities may be pressured to follow rules set by their handlers because they are often their family's main breadwinner and are taught that their family's well-being depends upon their continued success.[7] Lieb and Whiteley both determined that age was one of the most significant factors in constructing a pop star persona, and it is the most relevant to a discussion about Billie Eilish and her unlikely image, since she entered the industry at a young age and has come into adulthood under the watchful gaze of viral fame.

Age is also relevant to a discussion regarding social media, online life, and body image among female youth. As a teen girl posting her music content online, Billie Eilish was operating under the expectations felt by most women her age in a world dominated by social media and online life. The public nature of social media has brought the constant surveillance of celebrity life to the general public, which has had a profound effect on young girls. In a 2019 article about fame in the digital age, Liz Pelly explains that through the all-seeing gaze of social media, the social rules that were once limited to the ultra-famous now apply to regular people as well, and that faced with constant reminders of online fame, teens feel increased pressure to commodify and market their own bodies.[8] This increased body-awareness has led to increased body negativity overall. Nearly all women in Western society deal with unrealistic body expectations and the increased body dissatisfaction that comes with it, but it is an especially growing problem among adolescent and teen girls. A 2024 survey of 21,277 participants from Australia, Canada, Chile, Mexico, the United Kingdom, and the United States reported that 55% of adolescents ages

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[6] Whiteley, *Too Much Too Young,* 53.
[7] Whiteley, *Too Much Too Young,* 30, 53.
[8] Liz Pelly, "In the Era of Teen$Ploitation: Our Capitalist Media Culture of Youth Without Youth," *The Baffler* 35 (May-June 2019), 36-41, https://www.jstor.org/stable/26639746.

10 to 17 felt dissatisfied with their bodies and that the rate of dissatisfaction rose with an increase in social media screen time.[9]

Billie Eilish has been very open about the ways in which negative body image has affected her, leading to many articles dissecting her career and body image as a symptom of poor mental health.[10] My thesis is more concerned with how Eilish's music and image has been received by audiences and how she has presented an alternative to the quintessential teen-pop persona rather than dissecting her body image. In part one I discuss how Eilish's depictions of mental health conditions in her music, lyrics, and image have made her a relatable celebrity figure across generations. In addition, she has helped to broaden the definition of successful femininity in pop music through her honest portrayal of mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression, and body dysmorphia – conditions that women in the public view are often discouraged from discussing. Part two of this chapter explores how Eilish's feminine rebrand in 2021 confronts the control that men in power exert over women and reinforces the importance of choice in persona creation. I will also discuss how Eilish has used her image and her music to advocate for environmental action and increased respect for celebrities' rights to privacy (and respect for women's bodies in general). Finally, part three delves into how Eilish blends themes of masculinity and femininity into her music through her lyrics, vocals, production style, and use

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[9] Karen Hock et al, "Body Weight Perceptions Among Youth From 6 Countries and Associations with Social Media Use: Findings from the International Food Policy Study," *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics* 125, no. 1 (2024), 29, doi.org/10.1016/j.jand.2024.06.223.

[10] There are many examples of this including *Glamour's* article, "Billie Eilish Opens Up About the Body Issues That Led to her Wearing Baggy Clothes," https://www.glamour.com/story/billie-eilish-opens-up-about-the-body-issues-that-led-to-wearing-baggy-clothes; *Teen Vogue's* article "Billie Eilish Reveals the Reason for Her Baggy Clothes," https://www.teenvogue.com/story/billie-eilish-baggy-clothes-calvin-klein; and a master's thesis by Vilma Cechova titled "Billie Eilish: A Case Study of Negative Body Image, https://is.muni.cz/th/deqj0/Billie_Eilish_A_Case_Study_of_Negative_Body_Image_Archive.pdf.

of genre, and how shifting between the feminine and masculine aspects of her persona challenges the control over image and branding that the industry exerts over female artists.

Section 1: Eilish's Baggy Clothing and Dark Image

a) Negative Body Image and Gendered Depiction of Mental Health

While Billie Eilish cultivated a persona that contradicts the expected image of a teen pop star, she did not necessarily choose her wardrobe with that in mind. According to Eilish, her style was influenced both from her desire to protect herself from sexualization as a minor in the public eye and by her body dysmorphia.[11] Vilma Cechova, in her thesis, "Billie Eilish: A Case Study of Negative Body Image," discusses Eilish's choice of clothing as a coping mechanism to deal with her negative self image. She connects Eilish's baggy clothes with the practice of body avoidance, which includes tactics like avoiding or covering mirrors, wearing clothes that are too large, avoiding having photos taken, and covering specific body parts.[12] As discussed in the introduction to this chapter, young women and teens can feel immense pressure to fit into beauty standards, especially with the rise of social media and its depictions of altered or enhanced bodies. This reality is reflected in multiple of Eilish's songs, most notably in her 2016 track "idontwannabeyouanymore," which contains the lyrics "if teardrops could be bottled, there'd be swimming pools filled by models," and "tell the mirror what you know she's heard before: I don't wanna be you anymore."[13] As previously established, issues with body image affect over

[11] Jessica Holmes, "Billie Eilish and the Feminist Aesthetics of Depression: White Femininity, Generation Z, and Whisper Singing," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 76, no. 3 (2023): 810-811, doi:10.1525/jams.2023.76.3.785.
[12] Vilma Cechova, "Billie Eilish: A Case Study of Negative Body Image" (master's thesis, Masaryk University, 2023), 46-47, https://is.muni.cz/th/deqj0/Billie_Eilish_A_Case_Study_of_Negative_Body_Image_Archive.pdf.
[13] Billie Eilish, "idontwannabeyouanymore," on *dont smile at me,* released 2017, streaming audio, Spotify.

half of young women and girls, and Eilish's music and image would resonate with this demographic. Her openness about her relationship with her body encourages a sense of solidarity between Eilish and her fans and reminds them that they are not alone in their struggles. Similarly, while her fashion choices were not necessarily meant to be inspirational, she presents an image of femininity to her audience that is counter to the highly curated images they see from most other pop music stars and on social media in general, which may lead them to feel less pressure to conform to the extreme and unattainable standards of hyperfemininity.

Eilish often expresses feelings of depression, anxiety, and fear in the subject matter of her music and in the imagery of her music videos, which are influenced by horror tropes. Examples include special effects like ink flowing from her eyes and mouth, scenes featuring blood and needles, and themes of self-harm and suicide. In her article for the *New Yorker,* Doreen St. Felix talks about how Eilish has faced criticism for romanticizing depression and death in her music and visuals. However, St. Felix argues that the dark themes in her music are precisely what make her attractive to her primarily young female audience. According to St. Felix, "Eilish's creepy confrontations of loss, fear, uncertainty, and death are just what younger listeners need. A generation that was born into a war and is accustomed to having videos of massacres autoplay on their devices should have limited patience for prefab bubblegum pop."[14] Likewise, Susannah McCullough and Debra Minoff, hosts of the YouTube channel *The Take,* analyze why they think Eilish gained popularity so quickly, and they argue that Eilish's depictions of dark topics are more multigenerational. One of their main theories is that she represents the universal feelings of anxiety and fear that accompany the surreality of our modern world. While this can be connected

[14] Doreen St. Felix, "Billie Eilish and the Changing Face of Pop," *New Yorker,* April 26, 2019, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/billie-eilish-and-the changing-face-of-pop.

to classic teen angst, increased anxiety is becoming an issue for many other generations, as people of all ages have started thinking more about climate change, political instability, international conflicts, and other human-made challenges that face our present and our future. According to *The Take,* "Eilish captures this in music that pairs the horrors of 21st century life with the timeless agonies of being young."[15] This view is shared by multiple other scholars such as Jessica Holmes, who compares Eilish's focus on depression and female angst to female emo and alternative artists of the early 2000s, like Hayley Williams of Paramour and Amy Lee of Evanescence.[16] She also notes that accusing Eilish of romanticizing depression places an unfair burden on Eilish, who is barely an adult herself, to accept responsibility for the mental health of her audience, and that it discounts the ability of her fans to separate fact from fiction.[17]

Eilish often creates characters within her songs, exaggerates situations, and uses narrative style music videos, all of which help separate fact from the fictive horror of her music. In one of Eilish's first singles, "bellyache" (2017), a young woman (played by Eilish) has just murdered her friends and is on the run from police. It is obvious that this event is not real and that the song is instead a way to take the feeling of guilt, represented by Eilish's bellyache, and exaggerate the situation around it. Exaggerating negative emotions to an uncomfortable degree remains to be an important aspect of Eilish's image. The music video for "bury a friend" (2019), takes place in a building that resembles an insane asylum from classic horror movies. In the video, Eilish plays both a monster under the bed and a patient, and as a patient she is dragged around by unseen forces and manhandled by disembodied hands that forcibly medicate her by stabbing needles into

[15] "Billie Eilish – The Anatomy of 21st Century Angst," posted by "The Take," Mar. 24, 2020, YouTube video, 16:20, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fNArWk3-Rc8.
[16] Holmes, "Billie Eilish," 808.
[17] Holmes, "Billie Eilish," 800-801.

her back.[18] The lack of control Eilish has over her own body throughout the music video could represent the apathy felt by many people who suffer from depression, and this is made even more apparent by Eilish repeating the lyrics "I wanna end me."[19] Depression is also a major theme in the song "everything i wanted" (2019). In the music video, Eilish is in a car with her brother in the passenger seat. She drives the car into the ocean, sinking it with her and her brother still inside. Along with the visuals of an attempted self-drowning, the lyrics contain references to committing suicide with the line "thought I could fly so I stepped off the Golden."[20] The themes in Eilish's music are certainly extreme, and the fear that such themes in music can influence the behaviour and mental state of teens is not a new one. While it is far from the first iteration of this, in the early 2000s, pop-emo music was thought to worsen the symptoms of depression in youth (particularly in young women) for the same reasons as Eilish's music and was even dubiously linked to high profile teen suicides.[21] However, there is little proof that such things can intensify feelings of depression and anxiety in audiences. Aaron Anastasi posits that emo music provides a safe way for adolescents to process their anger, bitterness, and sadness through its lyrical content and compares the music to religious laments, which often provide catharsis and relief to those suffering from difficult emotions and circumstances.[22]

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[18] Holmes, "Billie Eilish," 800-801.
[19] "Billie Eilish – bury a friend (Official Music Video)," posted by "Billie Eilish," Jan. 30, 2019, YouTube video, 3:32, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HUHC9tYz8ik.
[20] "Billie Eilish – everything i wanted (Official Music Video)," posted by "Billie Eilish," Jan. 23, 2020, YouTube video, 4:48, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EgBJmlPo8Xw.
[21] Most notably in 2007, the suicides of two teen girls, Stephanie Gestier and Jodie Gater, were attributed to the "suicidal cult" of emo music. Coverage of the case can be found on *The Sydney Morning Herald* here: https://www.smh.com.au/national/tragic-last-words-of-myspace-suicide-girls-20070424-gdpzbc.html. Of course, emo music is far from the first example of this in popular music. For example, in 1985, the Parents Music Resource Center, campaigned against a number of mainstream and alternative artists for promoting harmful behaviours like suicide, rape, sadomasochism, and occult worship. Emo music of the early 2000s was chosen as a comparison because genre's primary audience of teen girls aligns with Eilish's primary audience.
[22] Aaron Anastasi, "Adolescent Boys' Use of Emo Music as Their Healing Lament," *Journal of Religion and Health* 44, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 305, 309-310, doi:10.1007/s10943-005-5467-9.

b) Eilish and Broadening Attractive or Successful Femininity

As well as having a thematic connection with emo music, Eilish can be similarly compared to other alternative music figures of the early 2000s. In his article about Avril Lavigne, Mark Pepper discusses how the Canadian pop-punk star played a role in challenging gendered social norms in the early 2000s by introducing menswear to her outfits and displaying interests in the typically "masculine" hobby of skateboarding. Pepper stresses the importance of showing young girls that they can find role models outside of hyperfemininity: "From dressing down to skateboarding to spitting on paparazzi, Lavigne's image provided an intriguing difference that simply did not mesh with popular culture's construction of femininity as prettiness and passivity."[23] Other sources also brought up Avril Lavigne in opposition to the expected image of young pop fame. Sue Jackson and Tiina Vares interviewed young girls on what makes a pop celebrity a good role model, and some of their responses highlighted Avril Lavigne because her provocative image relied on anger, language, and alternative fashion rather than sexuality.[24]

With her baggy menswear and her interests in music production (a notoriously male-dominated field which will be discussed in further detail in part three), Billie Eilish represents the same type of figure for the youth of the late 2010s and 2020s, and this is a connection that Eilish herself has acknowledged.[25] It is undeniable that fans and critics see Eilish as an alternative to the expected pop-star image in the same way as Lavigne. Haley Krischer calls her way of styling herself against the male gaze the "anti-Britney Spears, the anti-Katy Perry,"[26] The

[23] Mark Pepper, "Revisiting Avil Lavigne: Intersections of Subculture, Gender, Youth, and Authenticity," *Journal of Popular Culture* 52, no. 2 (2019): 426, doi:10.1111/jpcu.12782.
[24] Sue Jackson and Tiina Vares, "'Too Many Bad Role Models for Us Girls': Girls, Female Pop Celebrities and 'Sexualization,'" *Sexualities* 18, no. 4 (2015): 492, https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460714550905.
[25] Marianne Eloise, "From Avril Lavigne to Billie Eilish: a Recent History of Pop's Alt-Girls," *The Forty-Five,* Oct. 5, 2020, https://thefortyfive.com/opinion/from-avril-lavigne-to-billie-eilish-a-recent-history-of-pops-alt-girls/.
[26] Holmes, "Billie Eilish," 789.

Take says that her rejection of sexist standards of celebrity is one of her main appeals to young women,[27] and Jon Pareles, critic for the *New York Times,* says she is "the negation of what a female teen-pop star used to be."[28] While Eilish may have never meant for her tomboy image to send a particular message to other girls, she is aware that she has become something of a role model for women and girls who don't identify with the traditional image of the female pop star. In a 2020 article with *Vogue,* Eilish said,

> Maybe people see me as a rule-breaker because they themselves feel like they have to follow rules, and here I am not doing it. That's great, if I can make someone feel [freer] to do what they actually want to do instead of what they are expected to do. But for me, I never realized that I was expected to do anything… Nobody told me that shit, so I did what I wanted.[29]

Eilish's importance in the pop sphere goes further than providing a stylistic alternative to the standard pop celebrity figure; she also shows her young audience that success can include "imperfect" people. For many decades, women that have achieved success at a young age have been expected to perform innocence and perfection to maintain their image, and deviation can affect their careers in very negative ways. Despite being an adult in the early 2000s, Britney Spears was hounded constantly about the state of her virginity and every aspect of her life was picked apart by tabloid magazines. When she suffered a manic episode in 2007, her career almost instantly came to a halt and her display of mental illness caused her to lose control of her career and personal life for over a decade. While smaller mistakes and imperfections may not ruin a career, young women in popular music are still judged very harshly for displaying their "messier" realities. In Lieb's lifecycle model, she identifies the category of the *hot mess* as one

[27] The Take, "Billie Eilish – The Anatomy of 21st Century Angst," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fNArWk3-Rc8&list=WL&index=13.
[28] Holmes, "Billie Eilish," 789.
[29] Rob Haskell, "Billie Eilish's Vogue Cover: How the Singer is Reinventing Pop Stardom," *Vogue,* Feb. 3, 2020, https://www.vogue.com/article/billie-eilish-cover-march-2020.

of the most publicly derided categories a pop star can find herself in, and it is populated by artists dealing with crises brought on by untreated mental health issues, addiction, or by traumatic life events.[30] Both Lieb and Holmes note that mental illness is a very gendered subject. In young women, depression is pathologized, mocked, and discredited, while in men it is often lauded as part of the reason for their artistic genius.[31] This point is corroborated by William Cheng, who discusses how women's gender, age, sexuality, and race are all used to discredit their mental health struggles. He too uses Britney Spears as an example, and shows how her race as a white woman, which would usually grant her privilege, was instead used to dehumanize her by connecting her missteps inextricably to her "white trash" upbringing.[32] Similarly, George McKay, in his book *Shakin' All Over: Popular Music and Disability,* discusses that while ableism affects both men and women in the music industry, it seems to affect women to a more extreme extent, meaning that while select disabled men are able to achieve success in their music careers, disabled women are seemingly barred from entering the industry altogether.[33] Likewise, Eilish's gender, race, and age have contributed to her mental illness and her music being discredited in the media. Her white teenage-dom has led her to being labeled as manic and overly sensitive, as well as unserious and untalented. This is clear in the online treatment of Eilish and her fans in the late 2010s and early 2020s, where on sites like Reddit and 4chan, Eilish has been mocked for her display of mental illness and her fans have been similarly mocked for relating to these themes in her music. As seen in the example below, race is a frequent factor in memes

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[30] Lieb, "Gender, Branding, and the Modern Music Industry," 152-153.
[31] Lieb, "Gender, Branding, and the Modern Music Industry," 152-153; Holmes, "Billie Eilish," 791, 802.
[32] William Cheng, "So You've Been Musically Shamed," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 30, no. 3 (2018): 71, doi:10.1525/jpms.2018.200004.
[33] George McKay, *Shakin' All Over: Popular Music and Disability* (University of Michigan Press, 2013), 92.

mocking Eilish and her fans (see figure 8).[34]

White girls after listening
to their first Billie Eilish song:

Figure 8: Meme titled “I’m ready depression” on imgflip.com by user “Berky.”

c) Eilish as a Uniquely Authentic Figure to Adolescents

Though she has had to deal with a few bad faith publications and online criticism, Eilish’s career overall has not been affected by her perceived imperfections. This could be a sign that the industry is slowly growing to be kinder to its stars, but has also been influenced by how Eilish has presented her insecurities, disabilities, illnesses, and experiences to the public. None of the “imperfections” discussed so far have been leaked by paparazzi, as is a common feature of

[34] Figure 8 shows a meme created by user “Berky” on imgflip.com, titled “Billie Eyelash,” https://imgflip.com/i/6kqynj. Race is often attached to criticisms of teen girl’s interests mainly because mainstream culture is largely white. A “basic” American teen girl is assumed to be white, and the interests of Black teen girls are largely ignored (and therefore escape this type of mocking). Eilish’s (pre-fame) identity as middle-class and white served as the basis for mocking her music as being “basic” and “just for (dumb/unserious) teenage white girls.”

the *hot mess* trope, and have instead been brought up by Eilish herself, which has kept Eilish in charge of her own narrative and has earned her a reputation for being an authentic celebrity figure. In Lieb's model, while female celebrities that experience unattractive "messy" behaviour risk being labeled a *hot mess,* celebrities that turn their various struggles into relatable parts of their persona, like Eilish has, often fall into the *survivor* category, and they are received as being uniquely authentic, relatable, and sympathetic.[35] The importance of relatability and authenticity is brought up by other scholars as well. For example, in her 2017 study on how young girls perceive authenticity in pop music, Bridget Coulter found that authenticity was a major factor in which artists girls viewed as good, both as role models and as musicians. The girls Coulter interviewed repeatedly indicated that an artist was authentic if her social media presence, interviews, and supplementary material matched her on-stage persona; her music displayed real talent and emotional vocal performance; the themes and lyrics in her music were true to her personality and to events in her life; and the artist contributed to writing her own songs.[36] While the girls in the study initially claimed image was not a factor in determining authenticity, their responses to Coulter's questions indicated otherwise. Specifically, they associated heavy makeup, wigs, cosmetic enhancements, and sexualized imagery with being inauthentic, and more natural makeup and modest clothing with authenticity.[37]

According to the parameters set out in Coulter's study, Eilish's music fits with a lot of what young women and girls perceive as authentic. First, her candour in interviews and on social media present the same personality as her on-stage persona. According to Laura Snapes, the way

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[35] Lieb, *Gender, Branding, and the Modern Music Industry,* 163.
[36] Bridget Coulter, "'Singing from the Heart:' Notions of Gendered Authenticity in Pop Music," in *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Music and Gender,* ed. Stan Hawkins (Routledge, 2017), 269-273. I use "her" here because while male artists occasionally came up in Coulter's discussions with the participants, they were mainly concerned with the authenticity of solo female singers.
[37] Coulter, "Singing from the Heart," 273-275.

she opens up in interviews about her mental health frames her as more authentic and in charge of her persona than other pop stars.[38] Second, her music is personal, partially biographical, and emotional both in subject matter and musicality. Her signature soft and breathy singing style, the thinness in her voice in its upper register, and her close mic'ed vocals give the impression that she is holding back tears.[39] Third, she is credited as a writer and co-producer on almost all of her songs, meaning she has a lot more control over her music than many other female pop stars are assumed to have. Furthermore, much of her early music was written and produced using at-home recording equipment and without the help of professional lyricists, songwriters, and producers, which both adds to her authenticity and sends the message to her fans that musical creativity is not limited to those with a lot of money and resources. As for her persona itself, her desexualized, nontraditional image and its consistency on and off the stage present as authentic and unforced. All of this together leads her audience to feel like they get to know the real Billie Eilish and helps them expand what they believe is acceptable femininity.

Section 2: Eilish's Feminine Rebrand

a) The Double-Edged Sword of Showing Skin

In 2021, Eilish made an extreme change to her persona with the release of her second album, *Happier Than Ever.* She premiered her new image in a photoshoot and interview promoting her album with *Vogue* magazine, where she traded her oversized hoodies and basketball shorts for a soft pink lingerie set consisting of a corset, long gloves, and sheer tights

[38] Laura Snapes, "'It's All About What Makes You Feel Good': Billie Eilish on New Music, Power Dynamics, and Her Internet-Breaking Transformation," *Vogue,* May 2, 2021, https://www.vogue.co.uk/news/article/billie-eilish-vogue-interview.
[39] Holmes, "Billie Eilish," 814-815.

(see figure 9).[40] While Eilish remained relatively covered up as far as celebrity photoshoots go (her stomach and chest were covered, as were much of her legs), this look was still a far cry from what her audience had come to expect of her, and she faced criticisms that she was selling out and becoming "just like any other pop star." Billie Eilish commented on the backlash:

> No matter what you do, it's wrong and right. Wearing baggy clothes, nobody is attracted to you, you feel incredibly unlovable and unsexy and not beautiful, and people shame you for not being feminine enough. Then you wear something more revealing and they're like, 'you're such a fat cow whore.' I'm a slut and I'm a sell-out and I'm just like every other celebrity selling their bodies… It's a crazy world for women and women in the public eye.[41]

This echoes the "double-edged" sword of sexuality that I discussed in chapter two of this thesis. Like Janelle Monáe, Eilish defends both her more "modest" style and those that show more skin, which reinforces to her audience their right to choose how they present themselves.

[40] "Billie Eilish: It's all about what makes you feel good,'" *Vogue,* June 2021, photographed by Craig McDean, https://www.vogue.co.uk/news/article/billie-eilish-vogue-cover.
[41] Megan Agnew, "Billie Eilish: 'I tried too hard to be desirable,'" *Sunday Times,* Jun. 18, 2022, https://www.thetimes.com/article/billie-eilish-i-tried-too-hard-to-be-desirable-sfpfvzd0q.

Figure 9: Billie Eilish on the June 2021 cover of *Vogue.*

Eilish's shift into a more feminine style was abrupt, and because of this, questions about whether she had chosen to change her image or whether she had been pressured to conform to industry standards circulated the internet. Although individuals are responsible for exercising their own agency, they might not recognize when constraints are placed on them by overarching institutional structures.[42] It is not possible to unravel Eilish's own internal biases and internal pressures and determine to what extent she exercised agency in revealing more skin. It can be useful, however, to examine different reactions to this photoshoot, which represents a shift in Eilish's music, persona, and career. Amy Caulfield, in her thesis on female identity, reads the

[42] Mary Wren, "Agency and Neoliberalism," *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 39, no. 5 (Sep. 2015), 1232, doi:10.1093/cje/beu047.

photoshoot as Eilish exercising control over her own body in a powerful way. According to Caulfield, the way Eilish is posed influences the meaning. Her shoulders are squared and facing the camera, which is set slightly below eye level to her, a stark contrast to how women are often portrayed in sexualizing shots – looking up at the camera from a subservient position or facing away in order to direct away from the face and towards the body. The quote from Eilish on the cover, "It's all about what makes you feel good," reinforces this position of control.[43] Additionally, Caulfield suggests that Eilish's previous persona may have been less of a free choice and more of a defensive move: that Eilish felt so strongly that by being in the public eye she was opening herself up to judgement and unwanted sexualization that she felt the need to restrict her behaviour and her wardrobe beyond what would be considered reasonable.[44] In a piece for *Rolling Stone,* Angie Matroccio connects Eilish's new look directly with the material in *Happier Than Ever.* Rather than seeing it as a shift away from her dark aesthetic, she sees it as leaning into a different type of darkness – using the likeness of Old Hollywood with pin curled blonde hair, 1950s style lingerie, and adherence to traditional gender roles, to critique how women are manipulated both in and out of the music industry.[45] The lyrical content of the album supports this view. A few of the songs, "Your Power," "Happier Than Ever," and "Male Fantasy" have to do with women who have been treated badly by men in power, specifically if there is a significant age difference between them. In "Your Power," Eilish sings,

> You ruined her in a year, don't act like it was hard
> And you swear you didn't know
> No wonder why you didn't ask
> She was sleepin' in your clothes

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[43] Amy Caulfield, "Global Pop-Star or 'Just Somebody's Daughter?': Billie Eilish and Representations of Contemporary Female Identity" (master's thesis, Dún Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology, 2023), 51-52, https://hdl.handle.net/10779/iadt.25212146.v1.

[44] Caulfield, "Global Pop-Star or 'Just Somebody's Daughter?'" 55-56.

[45] Angie Matroccio, "Billie Eilish Would Like to Reintroduce Herself," *Rolling Stone,* Apr. 24, 2024, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/billie-eilish-hit-me-hard-and-soft-mental-health-fame-1235003585/.

But now she's got to get to class.[46]

The lyrics suggest an older man is dating a girl who may still be in school. In an interview with *NPR*, the interviewer commented on the themes of womanhood in *Happier Than Ever* and asked Eilish when she realized that being taken advantage of was a near universal experience for women. Eilish answered, "I don't even know when I realized it… ["Your Power" is] about many different situations I've witnessed. Some lines are about my life, some lines are about things that I've seen, some lines are just general things that I've noticed about women being taken advantage of."[47]

Finally, we should consider how Eilish's opinions on this photoshoot has changed over the last few years and what insight that can give us on agency and choice. In the original 2021 interview with *Vogue* that accompanied the photoshoot, she said the photos were her way of empowering herself after constant comments about her body and her clothing:

> Suddenly you're a hypocrite if you want to show your skin, and you're easy and you're a slut and you're a whore. If I am, then I'm proud… Let's turn around and be empowered in that. Showing your body and showing your skin – or not – should not take any respect away from you.[48]

In 2024, however, Eilish held a different view on both the album and the photoshoot. She told *NPR* that while she was writing *Happier Than Ever,* she was struggling with her identity and felt very unstable with herself: "[During the dawn of covid] I was with myself so much that I couldn't see myself objectively anymore. And then I dyed my hair blonde and I immediately was like 'oh, I have no idea who I am.'" She went on to clarify that she did not regret that era, but that it didn't end up feeling like "her."[49] While Eilish occasionally wears more revealing and

[46] Billie Eilish, "Your Power," on *Happier Than Ever,* released in 2021, streaming audio, Spotify.
[47] Lulu Garcia-Navarro, Andrew Craig, and Melissa Gray, "Billie Eilish Can't Wait to See the Future," *NPR,* Aug. 1, 2021, https://www.npr.org/2021/08/01/1022878842/billie-eilish-interview-happier-than-ever.
[48] Snapes, "It's All About What Makes You Feel Good."
[49] Matroccio, "Billie Eilish Would Like to Reintroduce Herself."

feminine clothing at public events such as premieres, award ceremonies, and galas, she has continually returned to her baggy and boyish aesthetic for album promotions, music videos, and live performances, signaling that for the most part, Eilish associates her performance persona with more masculine styling.

b) Connecting Eilish's Image and Music to Her Advocacy

Billie Eilish and Janelle Monáe have dealt with very similar public responses to their personal styling. Both have received conflicting feedback for their unconventional choices in persona construction, and both have responded by stressing the importance of personal choice and a woman's right to be respected regardless of what they wear. Like Monáe, the praise that Eilish received for committing to modesty contained negative messages about other women, oftentimes shaming them for dressing immodestly. Eilish has been outspoken about how she will not be used to put down other women. In an interview with *Vogue,* she said, "It's like [they say], I'm so glad that you're dressing like a boy so other girls can dress like boys, so that they aren't sluts.' I can't overstate how strongly I do not appreciate that at all."[50] Shortly before Eilish released her second album in 2021, she released a short film called "Not My Responsibility," which directly critiqued the media's obsession with her body and the bodies of women in general. In the film, Eilish is in a dark room with a large tub filled with black water. She's seen from the waist up wearing an oversized black sweatshirt. As she slowly takes off her layers of clothing, a voiceover recites a poem detailing her experiences:

> Some people hate what I wear
> Some people praise it
> Some people use it to shame others
> Some people use it to shame me.
> But I feel you watching
> Always

[50] Haskell, "Billie Eilish's Vogue Cover."

> And nothing I do goes unseen
> So, while I feel your stares
> Your disapproval
> Or your sigh of relief
> If I lived by them
> I'd never be able to move.[51]

Near the end of the video, Eilish is wearing just a bra and jewelry as she sinks below the surface of the black water, hiding her body from the camera once more. The poem confronts how women are pulled between oppositional ideas of attractiveness and ugliness, and modesty and indecency, and how they cannot ever hope to please everybody. At the end of the poem, Eilish asserts that how women are perceived by society is largely out of their control with the lines "is my value based only on your perception? / Or is your opinion of me not my responsibility?"[52]

Eilish has also spoken out about stars who have been victimized by fame in ways that she has not, alluding to Britney Spears in comparison to herself, as many others have:

> As a fan growing up, I was always like, 'what the fuck is wrong with them?' All the scandals, the Britney moment. You grow up thinking they're pretty and they're skinny; why would they fuck it up? But the bigger I get, the more I'm like 'oh my God, of course they had to do that.' In my dark places I've worried that I was going to become the stereotype that everybody thinks every young artist becomes, because how can they not? Last year, when I was at my lowest point during the tour in Europe, I was worried I was also going to have a breakdown and shave my head.[53]

In another interview, she states that she wishes she still had the type of privacy afforded to regular people: "I look back at who I was, when fewer eyes were on me. I grieve that. I strive to be that kid again."[54] This desire to have her privacy, and that of other female celebrities respected, comes across in her song "OverHeated" (2021), in which she describes the anger she

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[51] "Billie Eilish – NOT MY RESPONSIBILITY – a short film," posted by "Billie Eilish," Mar. 26, 2020, YouTube video, 3:41, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZlvfYmfefSI.
[52] "Billie Eilish – NOT MY RESPONSIBILITY – a short film." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZlvfYmfefSI.
[53] Haskel, "Billie Eilish's Vogue Cover: How the Singer is Reinventing Pop Stardom."
[54] Jen Wang, "Our Future: Billie Eilish on Climate Activism and Radical Hope," *Vogue,* Jan. 4, 2023, https://www.vogue.com/article/billie-eilish-climate-activism-january-cover-2022-video.

feels towards predatory paparazzi and tabloid tactics. She references the danger they represent and how they have driven celebrities to extreme action in the past with the lyrics:

> I don't really wanna know why you went there
> I kinda don't care
> You wanna kill me?
> You wanna hurt me?
> Stop being flirty
> It's kinda working
> Did you really think this is the right thing to do?[55]

Eilish has returned to this topic in her third and most recent album, *HIT ME HARD AND SOFT* (2024), with the song "THE DINER," which is written from the point of view of a stalker and describes several real situations Eilish has dealt with in the past. In "THE DINER," the stalker waits outside her house, breaks in when he knows it's empty, and leaves a calling card to intimidate her. He's arrested but gets released on bail and goes right back to Eilish's house. The song ends with a threat and a whispered voice reciting a phone number.

> I memorized your number, now I call you when I please
> I tried to end it all, but now I'm back up on my feet
> I saw you in the car with someone else and couldn't sleep
> If something happens to him, you can bet that it was me.
> 310-807-3956
> 310-807-3956.[56]

Eilish's frankness about the right to privacy and the importance of setting boundaries with fans and paparazzi has paved the way for other celebrities, such as Chappell Roan, to set those boundaries as their own careers take off. Roan gained widespread popularity in 2024 after the release of her first album, *The Rise and Fall of a Midwest Princess* (2023), and has since become known for her no-nonsense attitude towards interactions with paparazzi and fans. While neither

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[55] Billie Eilish, "OverHeated," on *Happier Than Ever,* released in 2021, streaming audio, Spotify.
[56] Billie Eilish, "THE DINER," on *HIT ME HARD AND SOFT,* released in 2024, streaming audio, Spotify.

celebrity has cited each other's influence directly, Chappell Roan has stated that Eilish reached out to her when she achieved viral fame to offer her advice and solidarity.[57]

Although Eilish has used her lyrics, personal statements, and music videos to bring attention to issues surrounding mental health, she prefers not to think of herself as a mental health advocate. In her words, "It's really weird when you are in the middle of something and somebody asks you to be the advocate for [it]. I understand that it's important, and I understand that it's an epidemic and it needs to be talked about, but I don't want to be the role model for depression."[58] However, that does not stop others from regarding her as an important figure in mental health awareness. Holmes compares Eilish to other popular "sad girl" pop singers like Lana Del Rey in that she confronts the same topics of depression and female angst, but she differentiates her from them because to Holmes, Lana Del Rey portrays depression through themes of being victimized by men, and she accompanies her music with images that play into sexualizing mental illness. In contrast, Eilish portrays depression as a disorder with more complex causes and effects than a troubled love life. Additionally, early in her career, she specifically avoided performing for the male gaze, and her lyrics, though dark, championed bodily autonomy and condemned abuses of male power. According to Holmes, by being open about her own issues, portraying realistic causes and effects of depression, and by removing sexualized imagery, Eilish actively works to destigmatize mental illness.[59]

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[57] Samantha Olson, "Chappell Roan Reveals Sabrina Carpenter, Lady Gaga, and Billie Eilish Reached Out to Support Her," *Cosmopolitan,* Sep. 10, 2024, https://www.cosmopolitan.com/entertainment/music/a62135752/chappell-roan-sabrina-carpenter-lady-gaga-billie-eilish-support/.
[58] Matroccio, "Billie Eilish Would Like to Reintroduce Herself."
[59] Holmes, "Billie Eilish," 810.

In an interview with *Rolling Stone,* Eilish says she would rather be known for her environmental advocacy than for mental health awareness.[60] In her first album, Eilish used her established dark image to critique world leaders' apathy regarding the climate crisis. Her music video for "all the good girls go to hell" features Eilish as an angel with large white wings. She falls into an oil spill and drags herself across the ground, her wings and body dripping with black tar. Every step she takes is a struggle: her legs shake, and she stumbles forward uncertainly. She rubs her hands, coated in oil, over her face and pulls at her own skin uncomfortably. As she sings the lyrics "hills burn in California / my turn to ignore ya / don't say I didn't warn ya." The oil spill behind her bursts into flames, which follows the trail on the ground towards her. She catches fire and her wings burn and spasm. The video ends with Eilish standing motionless, having burnt herself out as the fire spreads outwards throughout the hills behind her (see figure 10).[61]

Figure 10: Billie Eilish in the official music video for "all the good girls go to hell."

[60] Matroccio, "Billie Eilish Would Like to Reintroduce Herself."
[61] "Billie Eilish – all the good girls go to hell (Official Music Video)," posted by "Billie Eilish," September 4, 2019, YouTube video, 3:41, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-PZsSWwc9xA.

In addition to "all good girls go to hell," Eilish has participated in other climate-focused projects, including hosting a series of climate-awareness events in London in 2022 that combined the efforts of various musicians, sustainable fashion designers, and climate activists. The event, called Overheated, is a reference both to Eilish's song of the same name, and to rising global temperatures, and was accompanied with a documentary on which Eilish is credited as an executive producer. Both the film and the 2022 live event centered the experiences of Indigenous peoples and people in the global South, whose ways of life are affected more heavily and dramatically than those in the global North.[62] Eilish has continued to hold Overheated climate summits yearly since 2022 and has used her fame and her ability to draw in large crowds to amplify the voices of the lesser-known advocates that participate in the summits. Eilish has specifically tried to use her platform to address the epidemic of climate anxiety among youth. While people of all ages experience anxiety due to the climate crisis, young people in particular report feeling overwhelming anxiety and hopelessness, and report feeling powerless to enact change because of their lack of political representation.[63]

Section 3: Eilish and Blending of Gender in Her Music

a) Contrasting Masculine Image with Themes of Young Femininity

The balancing of gender in Eilish's art goes much further than what we can see in her image and extends into her poetry and musical style. In her thesis, "Contradictions of the Body:

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[62] "OVERHEATED THE DOCUMENTARY: A film for a critically overheating planet | Full Documentary," posted by "Overheated," Jun. 14, 2022, YouTube video, 37:57, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4suoAkkZy7c; Wang, "Billie Eilish on Climate Activism and Radical Hope."

[63] Matroccio, "Billie Eilish Would Like to Reintroduce Herself;" Brishti Basu, "The Kids Are Not All Right: How Young People Are Dealing with Increasing Climate Anxiety," *CBC,* Aug. 23, 2023, https://www.cbc.ca/news/science/climate-anxiety-wildfires-teens-1.6944352.

How Billie Eilish Negotiates Gender, Power and Embodiment as a Teenage Pop Icon," Emma Walker talks about Eilish's talent for pairing dark, violent, or serious subject matter, which is often associated with masculinity, with lighthearted and even childish (or feminine) elements.[64] An early example of this is in the song "bellyache" (2017), which is about a person on the run from the police after just having murdered all of her friends. In comparison to the violence suggested by the lyrics, the music is very light, opening with Eilish's soft and breathy voice, a simple drum loop, and acoustic guitar. She giggles lightheartedly while singing the words "I'm too young to go to jail, it's kinda funny."[65] The word "bellyache" is also relevant here, as it is a childish word that brings to mind a kid complaining to a caregiver. The whole song presents a contradiction between the childish and feminine innocence she is supposed to display as a (then) underaged girl in pop music with themes of anger and physical violence that are more often associated with masculinity. The vocal style Eilish displays in "bellyache" is typical of her overall musical output, especially early in her career, so it is also important to analyze how that has affected both her rise to fame and her critical reception.

According to Holmes, feminine-coded speaking patterns, including uptalk, vocal fry, high voices, and breathiness, are frequently used as excuses to undermine women's intelligence and authority, and women who speak or sing in these ways are assumed to be weaker than women who adopt (or naturally have) more masculine-coded vocal patterns.[66] Likewise, Diane Pecknold explains how young girls' voices, and women who have maintained girlish qualities in their voices, have been labeled nasally, whiney, or shrill, and how women are often criticized and

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[64] Emma Walker, "Contradictions of the Body: How Billie Eilish Negotiates Gender, Power and Embodiment as a Teenage Pop Icon" (Master's thesis, Swarthmore College, 2020), 11, http://hdl.handle.net/10066/22965.
[65] Billie Eilish, "bellyache," on *dont smile at me,* released in 2017, streaming audio, Spotify.
[66] Jessica Holmes, "The 'Manic Pixie Dream Girl of the Synth Pop World' and Her 'Baby Doll Lisp:' Grimes and the Disabling Logics of the Feminization and Infantilization of Lisping," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 31, no. 1 (March 2019): 151, https://doi.org/10.1525/jpms.2019.311011.

scrutinized for using production techniques like autotune and pitch correction.[67] However, not only are they punished socially for their vocal depictions of femininity, they are also encouraged to maintain them because of longstanding music industry standards. Citing various girls' groups from the 1950s and 1960s, as well as more modern solo female vocalists, Pecknold explains how music producers have a history of cultivating deliberate performances of "girlness" in adult women's voices in order to signal their youth and appeal to a demographic of young women and girls.[68] She relates their vocal strategies back to the content of their music as well, which was most often about the uncertainty and intensity of young love and was likewise meant to resonate with a younger demographic.[69] I have already discussed how the subjects Eilish explores in her music attract a younger audience, albeit in a different way than Pecknold's examples, and her vocal practices are relevant here as well. In general, Eilish's voice, especially in her earlier music, is soft, high, and at times breathy, all of which have contributed to harsh skepticism from music critics and internet lurkers alike. The following screenshots (and many others) can be found on the Reddit board r/unpopularopinion, where countless threads with titles such as "Billie Eilish is over-rated," "Billie Eilish can't sing," and "Billie Eilish has zero talent for a musician," litter the r/unpopularopinion board, and while you can find similar posts about any and all popular male artists, they are usually accompanied by commenters defending the subject of the post against unfair criticism. In the many posts denigrating Eilish as talentless, the majority of the comments are in agreement, and many take on a misogynistic tone (see figures 11, 12, and

[67] Diane Pecknold, "'These Stupid Little Sounds in Her Voice': Valuing and Vilifying the New Girl Voice," in *Voicing Girlhood in Popular Music: Performance, Authority, Authenticity,* ed. Jacqueline Warwick and Allison Adrian (Routledge, 2016), 77, doi:10.4324/9781315689593-7. It is relevant to point out that while autotune has become a fixture of music recording and is used to various degrees by almost all artists in recording studios, men are seldom the subject of this scrutiny, nor is their talent usually called into question.
[68] Pecknold, "These Stupid Little Sounds in Her Voice," 79.
[69] Pecknold, "These Stupid Little Sounds in Her Voice," 81.

13).[70] In addition, Eilish has acknowledged the at times overwhelming criticism her voice has received online in various interviews, telling *NME,* "everyone [on the internet] thinks I can't sing,"[71] and stating in an interview with *Vanity Fair* that while it does bother her, "you don't have to be shouting to be good at singing."[72]

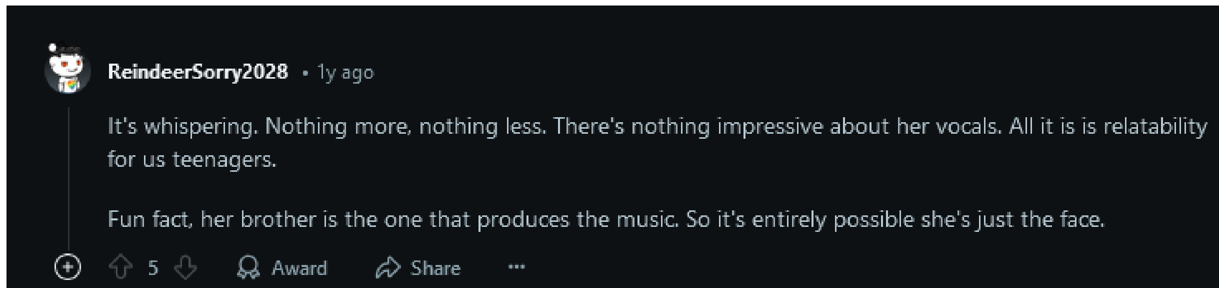

Figure 11: Comment on a Reddit thread titled "Billie Eilish can't sing."

[70] Figures 11 and 12: screen captures of comments on a Reddit thread titled "Billie Eilish can't sing," https://www.reddit.com/r/unpopularopinion/comments/1bbrm8e/billie_eilish_cant_sing/; Figure 13: screen capture of comments on a Reddit thread titled "Billie Eilish is overrated," https://www.reddit.com/r/unpopularopinion/comments/e79ywn/billie_eilish_is_overrated/. While not all online content (particularly when it is anonymous) should be taken at face value, these screen captures display very typical online reception of Eilish's voice, which intersects with multiple other ways young women's interests, talents, and experiences are denigrated. In just these examples, her talent as a singer and composer is questioned, she is called ugly, she is sexualized, she is accused of being a "nepo baby," and her music is insulted for being just for "13 year olds going through fake depression phases." These excerpts from Reddit, along with public acknowledgement of similar comments by Eilish herself, prove that this type of commentary is widespread enough to take notice of in this thesis.

[71] Will Richards, "Billie Eilish Addresses Online Criticism: 'Everyone thinks I can't sing on the internet," *NME,* March 12, 2020, https://www.nme.com/news/music/billie-eilish-addresses-online-criticism-everyone-thinks-i-cant-sing-2624511.

[72] "Billie Eilish: Same Interview, The Third Year | Vanity Fair," posted by "Vanity Fair," Nov. 25, 2019, YouTube video, 24:19, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YltHGKX80Y8&t=6s.

Figure 12: Comments on a Reddit thread titled "Billie Eilish can't sing."

Figure 13: Screen capture of comments on a Reddit thread titled "Billie Eilish is overrated."

Fortunately, the mostly online criticism has done little to limit Eilish's reach. Similar to Pecknold's observations about the vocal practices of girl groups, Eilish's "girlish" qualities have also contributed to her popularity with young women. Her close mic'ed and breathy "whisper singing" style reads as being intensely intimate and emotional, and the low volume of her voice encourages listeners to engage in deeper listening in order to take in the lyrical content.[73] But unlike the vocalists Pecknold discusses, who embody femininity in their appearances as well as in their lyrics and vocal style, Eilish pairs her singing with more stereotypical male qualities in both image and music production. As the first part of this chapter was concerned primarily with image and lyrical content, I will focus my attention now on musical style and production.

b) Gendered Experimentation in Eilish's Music

As I discussed in the literature review, genres, musical style, and roles within music making all have gendered connotations. In this section, I will discuss the ways in which Eilish's production style challenges the expectations of gender present in the mainstream music industry. While her voice itself is feminine, Eilish often layers her voice and applies heavy distortions to it, which achieves a gender-blurring effect. Sometimes, this distortion results in a robotic quality to what is clearly Eilish's voice, but other times, it results in a voice that is unrecognizable and can be read as male. The first iteration of the chorus in "bury a friend" (2019), features Eilish's voice layered and robotic, which could signify the dehumanization of the situation being depicted in the music video, but in the second and third repetitions of the chorus, a distorted and pitched down voice runs underneath Eilish's already altered vocals. The credits of "bury a friend" lists rapper Mehki Raine as backup vocals, but his voice is distinctive and he only joins

[73] Holmes, "Billie Eilish," 814-815.

Eilish in the intro and in the verses. It is more likely that the layered voice in the choruses is Eilish's own, pitched down into a masculine-sounding register, which blurs her gender within the context of the song.[74] Conversely, in other songs, Eilish leans into the prototypical femininity of her voice. On the song "8" (2019), her voiced is pitched up to sound high and childlike. The lyrics similarly reflect somebody who is feeling small and vulnerable: the speaker begs for attention from somebody who is emotionally unavailable. Eilish sings, "wait a minute, let me finish / I know you don't care, but can you listen?" and "so I think I better go / I never really know how to please you / You're looking at me like I'm see-through."[75] These lines suggest the invisibility of femininity and the way women, especially younger women, are often infantilized, overlooked, or ignored in romantic relationships. The contrast in vocal quality between "bury a friend" and "8" show that Eilish uses pitch bending to both heighten the femininity of her voice and to hide it.

Vocal distortion is only one way that Eilish experiments with sound in her music. All sorts of non-musical noises, like laughs, giggles, environmental noise, and samples from other media, have shown up in Eilish's songwriting, and she is often responsible for sourcing these samples. Whether fairly or not, this type of experimentation with sound is associated with male composers and songwriters. According to Alison Stone, any role that is technical is considered more masculine, and this type of music production involves a lot of technical processes.[76] In multiple ways, women are discouraged from experimenting with production and electronic music

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[74] According to Eilish "bury a friend" is written from the perspective of the monster under your bed, which explains the haunting sound effects, the possession imagery in the music video, and the monstrous layered quality to the vocals. This does not mean that a gendered aspect cannot be read into it as well, which is the angle I am going for in this reading.

[75] Billie Eilish, "8," on *WHEN WE ALL FALL ASLEEP WHERE DO WE GO?* released in 2019, streaming audio, Spotify.

[76] Alison Stone, "Feminism, Gender and Popular Music," in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Religion and Popular Music,* ed. Christopher Partridge and Marcus Moberg (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 58.

and Freida Abtan outlines two of the main challenges that women face in these areas of work: they have to choose between sexualizing themselves or being invisible in modern music culture, and their work and their skills are often misattributed to their male collaborators. It is assumed that the woman's role (if any) was minor in comparison to the men they sometimes work with.[77] She cites *Pitchfork's* 2015 interview with Bjork, in which Bjork says her work on recording and producing her own music is dismissed and discredited, even though she has more experience in electronic music than many of the male collaborators she works with.[78] In Eilish's case, her main collaborator has been her brother Finneas, who shares songwriting credit with her on many songs, and is credited for much of the music production. Regardless of how insistent he has been that Eilish is involved in much of the production process and that she frequently contributes her own ideas and techniques,[79] critics of Eilish often assume that she is merely the face of the music and that she contributes none of her own ideas, as shown earlier in figure 11.

Eilish's first full-length album *WHEN WE ALL FALL ASLEEP, WHERE DO WE GO?* (2019), is full of the types of non-musical sounds that are associated with masculine experimentation. "bad guy" features the sound of an Australian pedestrian crossing throughout much of the track, which Eilish recorded on a whim because she thought it sounded interesting and later decided to include on a track,[80] and "bury a friend" features the unpleasant sound of a dental drill, recorded by Eilish at one of her dentist appointments.[81] The sound is viscerally

[77] Freida Abtan, "Where Is She? Finding the Women in Electronic Music Culture," *Contemporary Music Review* 35, no. 1 (2016): 54, doi:10.1080/07494467.2016.117676.
[78] Jessica Hopper, "The Invisible Woman: A Conversation with Bjork," *Pitchfork,* Jan. 21, 2015, https://pitchfork.com/features/interview/9582-the-invisible-woman-a-conversation-with-bjork/.
[79] Leila Fadel and Phil Harrel, "Billie Eilish Finally Remembers Who She Is," *NPR,* May 17, 2024, https://www.npr.org/2024/05/17/1251790138/billie-eilish-finneas-hit-me-hard-and-soft-interview.
[80] "Billie Eilish and Finneas Break Down Her Hit Song 'Bad Guy,'" posted by "Rolling Stone," Dec 16, 2019, YouTube video, 11:41, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kpx2-EMfdbg.
[81] "Billie Eilish's 'bury a friend' Samples a Drill She Recorded During a Dentist Visit," *Genius,* April 1, 2019, https://genius.com/a/billie-eilish-s-bury-a-friend-samples-a-drill-she-recorded-during-a-dentist-visit.

unpleasant and so made its way into a song full of unpleasant imagery and themes of mental illness. Similarly, the sound of Eilish's father sharpening knives was included in "you should see me in a crown" (2017), a song that was inspired by Eilish's fascination with the psychopathic character of Moriarty in BBC's television series *Sherlock.*[82] Some of these sounds were recorded by Eilish spontaneously, but other times, the experimental inclusions are more planned. "bury a friend" also features the sound of breaking glass played over lyrics that say, "Step on the glass, staple your tongue,"[83] and "my strange addiction" features dialogue samples from the popular TV show *The Office,* included simply because Eilish claims that watching *The Office* became her strange addiction.[84] By taking an active role in writing her own music, contributing to the production, and sourcing nontraditional samples in her break-out album, Eilish is helping to break down the barriers that have affected women's opportunities for experimentation and self expression in their music.

Compared to her earlier music, Eilish's second album, *Happier Than Ever* (2021), is much more distinctly feminine. As many of the experimental features in her first album were created in service of Eilish's creepy aesthetic and dark image, it makes sense that with a shift to a more traditional pop persona came a shift to music that was more typical for a female pop icon. This album lacks many of the experimental electronic elements of *WHEN WE ALL FALL ASLEEP WHERE DO WE GO?* Eilish's vocals are more natural with much less vocal distortion, and many of the songs focus on relationships and breakups. The majority of the tracks on

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[82] Rebecca Schiller, "Billie Eilish Explains How 'You Should See Me In A Crown' Was Inspired by BBC's 'Sherlock,'" *Billboard,* Nov. 6, 2018, https://www.billboard.com/music/pop/billie-eilish-video-interview-you-should-see-me-in-a-crown-8483538/.

[83] Billie Eilish, "bury a friend," on *WHEN WE ALL FALL ASLEEP WHERE DO WE GO?,* released in 2019, streaming audio, Spotify.

[84] Clare Palo, "A Brief History of Billie Eilish's Extremely Gen-Z Addiction to 'The Office,'" *Vulture,* April 5, 2019, https://www.vulture.com/2019/04/billie-eilish-the-office-obsession-explained.html.

Happier Than Ever lack the creepy undertone that Eilish had become known for, achieved by combining unsettling non-musical samples, vocal distortion, dark lyrics, and the horror aesthetics of her music videos. *Happier Than Ever* is also much more acoustic, with more songs that heavily feature acoustic guitar and ukelele, and while these instruments did feature on her first album, their acoustic nature was usually offset by layered vocal effects that distorted her soft and feminine voice. In *Happier Than Ever,* she maintains her signature vocal style without many of the obvious factors that countered its femininity, including her new image discussed in part two of this chapter. All of this, combined with the confessional style of her lyrics and her involvement in the writing process, place this album in the singer-songwriter genre, which has its own gendered connotations. As discussed briefly in the literature review portion of this thesis, singer-songwriter is a genre mainly branded as feminine, but holds masculine qualities as well, most notably in the assumptions of authorship and artistry that come with it. However, there are other ways in which singer-songwriters often perform masculinity in pop music. Sarah Boak states that female singer-songwriters' release of anger in confessional songs is a way in which they negotiate more credibility as artists.[85] A classic example of this is post-breakup songs like Alanis Morissette's 1995 hit "You Oughta Know," which the artist likened to an armour of anger that protected her during an incredibly vulnerable time in her life.[86] In comparison, Eilish's post-breakup confessional songs are stark in their emotionless quality. There are multiple songs on *Happier Than Ever* that can be described as post-breakup, including "Lost Cause," "I Didn't Change My Number," and "Therefore I Am," but they are devoid of the gendering emotions of

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[85] Sarah Boak, "The Female Singer-Songwriter in the 1990s," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Singer-Songwriter,* ed. Katherine Williams and Justin A. Williams (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 259, doi:10.1017/CCO9781316569207.024.
[86] Tina Benitez-Eves, "The Scornful Story Behind Alanis Morissette's 'You Oughta Know," *American Songwriter,* Jun. 1, 2023, https://americansongwriter.com/the-scornful-story-behind-alanis-morissettes-you-oughta-know/.

either anger or sadness. As she tells a previous lover that they aren't worth her time, her sympathy, or the notoriety she brings them, her voice is monotone, robotic, and uncaring, and by extension, emotionally ungendered.

Eilish's 2024 album *HIT ME HARD AND SOFT* features a different type of experimentation. The album constantly shifts styles and industry critics label different aspects of it bedroom pop, R&B, soft-rock, and EDM. It begins in a very similar confessional style as her previous album, *Happier Than Ever* (2021) with the track "SKINNY," which is a soft acoustic track about body image, before taking a hard turn into synth-pop with "LUNCH," an upbeat track about same-sex attraction and oral sex. A few songs, such as "THE DINER," return to Eilish's old aesthetic with an intentionally creepy production style and dark subject matter. A heavy echo and panning effect is applied to Eilish's vocals, making it sound like the stalker in the song is coming from multiple directions, and faint whispering and moaning can be heard throughout, which adds to the sinister atmosphere.

At times, Eilish shifts styles and genres mid song. For example, "L'AMOUR DE MA VIE" begins as a down-tempo song with easy listening/jazz elements and utilizes Eilish's natural voice before transitioning suddenly into an upbeat electronic dance song with heavily processed autotuned vocals three and a half minutes into the track. Another example is "BITTERSUITE," a song made up of three short contrasting movements. "BITTERSUITE" is obviously a play on words, evoking the bittersweet feeling of loving someone who does not return your affections while also suggesting "suite" as a musical form. A suite contains multiple short movements that, depending on the era, could be different dances or could be a collection of movements that revolve around a common theme, in this case, the theme of unrequited love. The first movement is a short pop synth song ruminating on unrequited love, which then transitions into the second

movement, a bossa nova section that turns the unrequited love into a dangerous obsession. This is represented by the neurotic repetitive movement between two notes in the verse while Eilish sings similarly obsessive lyrics like "I don't need to breathe when you look at me," and "can't sleep, have you underneath all of my beliefs."[87] Almost four minutes into the track, Eilish switches up the style again. The tempo slows dramatically and then transitions into a theme that leads right into the closing song of the album. This blend of different styles, aesthetics, vocal techniques, and production effects bridge the gap between Eilish's more masculine-coded first album and her more feminine second album and challenges the binary view of gender present in the music industry.

Conclusion:

Through her non-sexualized image, honest representation of mental illness, and blending of masculinity and femininity in both her visual persona and in her music, Billie Eilish has helped to broaden the personas available to young pop idols and has provided an alternative model of young femininity to her audience of largely adolescent girls and young women. Since she first found success accidentally, she did not yet have a management team to provide input on her image, music, and persona as she navigated the release of her first EP, and this is one reason she has been able to maintain an image that is so different than the average teen female pop star. The accidental nature of her success, and the subconscious part of her persona construction has also contributed to Eilish being received as particularly relatable and authentic as a celebrity

[87] Billie Eilish, "BITTERSUITE," on *HIT ME HARD AND SOFT,* released in 2024, streaming audio, Spotify.

figure. Eilish has used her popularity to advocate for issues that she is passionate about, most notably for environmental action. She has held multiple climate summits targeting her main demographic of young adults and adolescents and has addressed the climate crisis in her musical output as well as in documentaries, interviews, and campaign videos. Eilish has also pushed for celebrities' rights to privacy, citing inappropriate fan behaviour and predatory paparazzi practices as two things that disproportionately cause harm to female celebrities.

Eilish's distinct vocal style fits many of the teen pop tropes (it is high, light, and at times breathy or whispered) but she blends aspects of femininity and masculinity into the production style, and as her voice has developed, she has incorporated a more mature singing style, both of which subtly challenge the expectation that young women should sound pretty, universally relatable, and inexperienced in their vocal delivery. At times, the intimate and emotional subject matter of her songs, particularly those about messy breakups, conflicts with her emotionless delivery and removes the gendered connotations of both anger and sadness. In addition, her inclusion of non-musical sounds and her growing interest in audio production confronts preconceptions that women lack the talent and skill necessary to produce technically complex music.

Concluding Thoughts

Throughout this thesis, I have discussed the ways in which women are a tightly controlled commodity in the pop music industry even though pop music has historically been a space rich with opportunities for gender experimentation among male artists. Female performers have faced limitations to their personas and music that have not affected male performers to the same degree. These limitations are based on sex, gender, age, and race, and these factors are used to determine what types of personas female artists are encouraged to craft and what genres they are marketed within. The case studies I presented as the bulk of my thesis demonstrate how two artists, Janelle Monáe and Billie Eilish, have built careers that push back against the limitations that women often face in the industry.

Janelle Monáe, as a Black artist in the pop/R&B/hip hop space, would have been under considerable pressure to build her persona in accordance with industry standards, particularly in the late 2000s to early 2010s when she was first gaining traction. Black female artists in R&B and hip hop are often encouraged to craft personas that rely almost entirely on sex appeal and promiscuity, stemming from racist stereotypes that Black women are more inherently sexual than white women. Instead, Monáe constructed a persona that was visually the opposite of industry expectations, wearing formal menswear as a "uniform" for the first decade of her music career. Later in her career, especially in 2023 with the release of her album *The Age of Pleasure,* Monáe shifted to a persona with a freer sense of sexuality and gender, which she used to celebrate and normalize body positivity, queer attractions, and sexual freedom.

Many of Monáe's lyrics and music videos criticize the ways different groups are treated in the United States, including women, Black people, queer people, and poor and working-class

families. Songs such as “Mr. President” (2008) and “Ghetto Woman” (2013) address issues of race and class by critiquing government inaction to reduce poverty and confronting the American stereotype of Black mothers as irresponsible “welfare queens.” In other songs, including “Django Jane” and “Pynk” (both from 2018), Monáe comments on Black womanhood and celebrates Black femininity in their lyrics while poking fun at heteronormative and misogynistic societal expectations with the over-the-top stylization of their music videos.

Monáe’s concept albums use plots influenced by Afrofuturism and general science fiction to confront the systemic racism, homophobia, and misogyny present in the highest offices of the United States. Monáe’s android personas, Cindi Mayweather and Jane57821, serve this purpose as well. Androids are constructed beings with no biological sex or gender, and Monáe’s androids are shown to have a fluid sense of gender as well as being able to change the colour of their skin at will, which suggests that race as well as gender is socially constructed, and allows Monáe’s androids to serve as commentary on any number of oppressed groups. Throughout their career, Monáe has used their concept albums as a tool to play with genre conventions, frequently blending contrasting genres like Western art music and hip-hop. Their use of orchestral instrumentation and music inspired by Western art traditions combined with their tuxedo uniform, focus on Black genres like rap and R&B, and the political themes running through their lyrics and music videos challenge the music industry’s habit of confining Black artists to Black genres. Monáe uses this complex blending of styles to promote solidarity between diverse groups and to highlight shared struggles between them.

Billie Eilish presents a different case study that focuses on gender, youth, and mental illness in pop music. Apart from obvious differences in race and the contrasting expectations of genre that come with it, Eilish achieved widespread fame in a vastly different way than Monáe.

Unlike Monáe, who pursued a career in the music industry intentionally and directly, Eilish achieved accidental viral online success while releasing music independently on SoundCloud with the help of her brother, Finneas. She entered the pop music sphere in 2015 when she was 14 years old, and as a young teen, she was expected to present a youthful image that appropriately blended young sexuality and innocence. Instead, she created a persona that is gritty and macabre and her "uniform" consisted of baggy men's street clothing that completely hid her figure. Like Monáe, Eilish reconstructed her persona to reflect a more traditional feminine image a few years into her career, which she also used to promote sexual freedom and to critique the double standards imposed upon women in the public view. Her new look, which was modeled after 1950s Hollywood aesthetics, satirized traditional gender roles by pairing the pin-up model appearance with lyrics that criticized male power and control over women.

Eilish's earlier songs often revolved around themes of mental illness and self-doubt, characterized by self-deprecating lyrics and horror-influenced music videos. This honesty in portraying the messier aspects of mental illness led her mostly young, female audience to regard Eilish as an authentic and relatable role model and has the potential to alleviate the stigma associated with mental illness in youth. She frequently uses her platform to critique American policies and the general misogyny that permeates everyday life, but her lyrics are much darker and less optimistic than Monáe's consistent messages of unity and perseverance. For example, the song "all the good girls go to hell" critiques government inaction to the climate crisis but is utterly hopeless in tone, offering no solutions or platitudes beyond "I told you so."

Many of Eilish's songs blend aspects of femininity and masculinity in their lyrics, themes, and musical style. She has a stereotypically feminine voice and utilizes vocal patterns associated with young femininity, such as whisper-singing and vocal fry, but she often alters her

natural voice with layers of heavy vocal distortion that blur her perceived gender. In addition, Eilish is known for experimenting with non-musical sounds in her songs, which is a male dominated form of music creation. Like Monáe, Eilish blends different musical styles even within the same song, which she often does to drive the narrative of the piece. Her experimentation with vocal filters, non-musical noise, and shifting genres and styles can help expand the roles available to women writing and producing their own music in the pop music sphere.

On the surface, Billie Eilish's career and musical output looks quite different than Janelle Monáe's, although their personas and lyrics often critique the same political and societal views. Monáe and Eilish received very similar types of criticism for their initial, more masculine-coded personas and their deliberate shifts into more feminine presentations. Early in their careers, they were praised by some commentators for the way their nontraditional personas challenged the sexist depictions of women most often seen in mainstream media, but were called ugly or manly by others. Their efforts to diversify their personas with more feminine presentations led to a similar dichotomy between backlash and commendation: they were both accused of selling out by those who appreciated their earlier aesthetics while others saw the move as an expression of body positivity and free choice. The reactions to Monáe's and Eilish's bodies, either fully clothed or bare, exemplify the Madonna—Whore dichotomy: the polarized perception of women as either innocent, nurturing, and pure Madonnas or seductive, promiscuous, and sinful Whores. Both artists have pushed back against this limiting characterization by continually affirming women's rights to choose how they present themselves publicly without facing judgement.

Through the themes of their albums and through their lyrics, Monáe and Eilish both criticize the dominant political views of the United States government and general public,

although they target different concerns. Throughout her career, Janelle Monáe's focus has shifted between defending queer rights, women's rights, and confronting the more unique issues that Black people (especially Black women) face. Billie Eilish also discusses women's rights in her work, but because her experiences as a woman in the music industry have differed from Monáe's, she focuses more on issues surrounding mental health, privacy, and general misogyny.

Monáe and Eilish have both played with the expectations of race or gender (or both) in genre, but they aren't the only modern pop performers in the pop music space doing so. Doechii, a queer rapper from Florida, has been gaining popularity in the spotlight since one of her tracks, "Yucky Blucky Fruitcake," went viral in 2020. Her 2024 album *Alligator Bites Never Heal,* won the Grammy for Best Rap Album at the 2025 Grammy Awards, making her the third woman to win in that category since its introduction in 1989.[1] While her persona isn't as strict as Monáe's in terms of style, Doechii often wears suit-inspired outfits in live performances and photoshoots, and she's been very outspoken about various current human rights issues.[2]

Another performer who has only recently achieved widespread success that deserves more academic attention is Chappell Roan, although she does not fit the constraints I set for myself in this thesis. My original goal was to highlight female pop artists that make masculinity part of their visual personas and Roan performs the type of heightened femininity that is common in drag spaces. She considers herself to be a drag artist and comparisons can easily be drawn between her and artists like Lady Gaga, Annie Lennox, and Dolly Parton. Roan is an openly gay femme artist that takes a lot of inspiration from country music, which is a genre that

[1] Quinci Legardye, "Doechii Wins Best Rap Album at the Grammy's," *Marie Claire,* Feb. 2, 2025, https://www.marieclaire.com/culture/music/2025-grammys-doechii-wins-best-rap-album/.
[2] Most recently, she used her award speech at the 2025 BET awards to criticize military response to the LA ICE protests. See Doechii's acceptance speech here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d-oNo1T23Rs&t=1s.

has historically not been very friendly to queer performers and audiences. It is my hope that giving more academic attention to female pop performers who push the boundaries of race, gender, and genre will pave the way for new pop musicians to introduce more diversity in pop personas.

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