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“I only date androids”

*Janelle Monae, 2010*

Janelle Monae is a popular American R&B, pop, and electronic musician. They are widely known and celebrated for their eclectic musical discography, extravagant performances and visuals, and sophisticated, futurist themes and narratives. As of now, in their two-decades long career, Monae has authored 6 albums, 23 singles, 18 music videos, and a book, with a prominent concept among all these works being “androids” and “otherness.” In this paper, I will lay out the overall narrative that runs through these works to provide context, describe the different layers of analysis that exist when approaching Monae’s work, and, finally, discuss the implications their work has on the discourse on robot rights. Mainly, we will see that Monae’s work can be interpreted as an assertion of similitude between humans and robots.

Monae’s album series “Metropolis” could be seen as an interconnected, complex science fiction saga that tells the story of Cindi Mayweather. In the dystopian world of Metropolis, 2719, humans and androids live together. In this reality, androids are enslaved, oppressed, and ousted. However, an ordinary citizen – Android #57821 – by the name of Cindi Mayweather has committed a sin so grave, she is now to be subjected to an even worse fate (Sandifer). Cindi “has fallen desperately in love with a human” named Anthony Greendown and is scheduled for disassembly, the equivalent of a capital punishment in Metropolis (Joseph II and Irvin III). Bounty hunters are out to catch and surrender her to the state. Just like in Isaac Asimov’s “I, Robot” series, which have strongly influenced Monae’s work, there are clear rules that engender the human/droid apartheid of their respective universes, and breaking the rules leads to destruction (Romano). This is where our story takes off – Cindi decides to escape. While on the run, she begins to observe issues, anomalies, and aberrations within her society. She finds solace in spaces with other malfunctioned or “dirty” computer through music and love. Eventually, Cindi becomes the “ArchAndroid” – the liberator of Androids.

There is more context and content to the story, but these are the main elements that are illuminated specifically in their musical works. While an obvious sci-fi storyline, this is also a depiction of the current reality of humans. As Monae stated themselves, “I speak about androids because I think the android represents the new other…You can compare it to being a lesbian or being gay man or being a black woman” (Romano). Robot love is called queer itself in one of Monae’s albums, indicating how that kind of love may lead to the same repercussions as queer love in our world (Joseph II). Monae’s depiction of real world “othering” of minorities successfully translates into the othering of androids in Metropolis. There is a very specific point in which the line between the world of Cindi and the world of Monae becomes blurry, however, when in the last projects of theirs – “Dirty Computer” – they sing, “your code is programmed not to love me, but you can’t pretend” (Monae et al.). This pun on humans and robots results not only in a giggle from the listener, but also in the realization that as humans, we are programmed too. We are programmed by culture, legislation, and societal pressure to be, act, and speak a certain way. While this idea of societal indoctrination and suppression has been explored extensively by a variety of artists, Monae does not stop there as they equate that programming of humans to the programming of androids. We are them - one way or another. Similarly, the creation of the androids and the laws that differentiate their rights from humans in Metropolis mirrors the historical creation of concepts of race, gender, and sexuality. This has led to the suppression of those minorities through the implementation of laws and regulations on the bases of those concepts to manipulate them and establish a power structure. Monae is able to erase the difference between androids and humans, thereby allowing the audience to consider the current state of the discourse on robot rights.

Now, many people participating in the debates on robot rights believe that because robots are created by us, do not possess feelings, and do not have a concept of self-worth, they do not deserve rights. Additionally, they claim that providing robots with those rights might endanger humanity and our own liberty. The reasoning behind these debates is based on the perceived difference between humans and androids, with the former having the “right-worthy” features (such as emotions) the latter does not. Monae themselves does not advocate for one side of the debate or the other: they simply created a sonic and visual world where the depiction of androids, their behaviors, and treatments are comparable to those of humans in the real world. As they shared, “Only by realizing that the android and the human are one and the same can we begin to celebrate the faulty programming inside us all” (Romano). This begs the question - if we are so similar, do androids really deserve no rights?

Works Cited

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