

These Dreams are Forever

Janelle Monáe's Metropolis as Historiography of Black Feminism

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Abstract

Janelle Monáe's *Metropolis Suite* offers its listeners a view into a dystopian world that marries elements of futurism with past and current conversations about oppression and freedom. The analogy of black folk as androids is central, pervasive and interchangeable. Like the concept of enslavement, androids were 'constructed' in the minds of their masters to serve capitalistic systems, and their masters are (over time) forced to come to terms with the fact that something much more human lies underneath their abstraction as machinery. Lyrically, stylistically, in the impassioned ballads and in the small details, Janelle Monáe practices and educates her listenership about Black Feminism, showing how the liberation of the most oppressed creates routes for the liberation of all. Moreover, Monáe calls us all to action toward a better future with a carefully hedged politic of radicalism and self-empowerment.

Introduction

Janelle Monáe caught my attention with her voice, she captured my mind with her lyrics, and she won my heart with her politics. Monáe is an American musician, mogul, actress and songwriter from Kansas City, Kansas. The majority of her discography consists of *Metropolis*, a three-album musical drama divided into five suites, which blends the lines between music, fable and politics. With shoe-tapping dance hall anthems, operatic ballads, unapologetic rap, dissonant punk and shimmering orchestral overtures, the *Metropolis Suite* cannot be surmised succinctly in style nor tone. It follows the story of an android (Cindi Mayweather) who falls in love with a human (Anthony Greendown) and is sentenced to death for this crime[1]. Cindi escapes her initial surprise to become a fugitive[2], then an underground

musical icon[3], then a society shaking radical[4], fighting for her freedom and the freedom of her people through myth and music.

Evoking images and ideas from Fritz Lang's Weimar classic by the same name, *Metropolis* centers and shares the same themes of class, love and revolution[5]. Additionally, though both have central imagery of mechanical women, Monáe questions the the construction of women by their society: "I'm a product of metal? I'm a product of the man." [6]. Rather than having mechanical women as a means of controlling the proletariat, as in Lang's work[5], Monáe's Android heroine realizes her mission and capability to win the freedom of the oppressed. Though both *Metropolis* works center around protagonists learning about how capitalism is predicated on the exploitation of the oppressed, their plots and lenses could not be more different. Unlike in Lang's work, Monáe centers the Woman as the revolutionary leader, rather than filling that role by dispossessed aristocracy. Unlike in Lang's work, Monáe realizes freedom for her characters on their own terms, by their own means, without the need for establishment validation. Unlike in Lang's work, Monáe's heroine saves herself.

Though these contrasts are a starting place for a discussion of Monáe's work, they mainly begin to shed light on how Monáe's choices are painstakingly deliberate. It can be difficult to consider the profound consequences that Monáe's *Metropolis* presents, often so buried underneath layers of distracting musical excellence. But make no mistake: in *Metropolis* Monáe has chosen to rewrite a classic. She is making a deliberate and strategic decision to center an othered woman as the focal point of social and radical change. She is taking an established masterpiece of world cinema, and challenging not only its plot, but its epistemology.

The *Metropolis Suite* is embodied Black Feminism. Through fiction and musical fusion, Monáe has the freedom and power to construct elaborate parables that are opaque and transparent, varried but consistent. Moreover, by tracing and naming Black Feminist ideas and motifs through the three albums, we see an intentional and deliberate historiography of Black Feminism, through its three waves. In this paper, we will discuss how Monáe crafts a story which mirrors the history of Black Feminism, we will show how she uses the standpoint of an 'ordinary' android to demonstrate the extraordinary potential of the oppressed individual, and we will enumerate how her music empowers and educates her listeners on Black Feminism without ever relying on theory. Monáe paints the Android a path to humanity, the dispossessed a path toward establishment, and the oppressed a path to freedom. We will trace out these paths.

The Chase Suite: Voice, Violence and Dissemblance

- Escaping physical violence "You know the rules!"[1] "You know the rules!"[6] NAMES Cindi as 57821, not by her self assigned name. Connection to Lynching. "An outlaw, out running the law"[29]

- Place of Black Women in many contexts (Many Moons) "A pretty face makes a pretty picture, but fall in love and they are coming to get you"[6] "And when the world just treats you wrong // just come with me and I'll take you home" [2] "I keep my feet on solid ground. Freedom! Your free but in your mind, Your freedom's in a bind!"[2]

- Mr. President as a self-critical look at the society, cyclicity of poverty, respectability politics (as a means toward oppression, mothers) Cycle of Poverty "Fuel is running low, and I've got places to go"[7] "Ghettos keep a crying out to streets full of zombies // Kids are killing kids and then the kids join the army"[8] "These kids round' killin each other, they lost they minds, they gone. They quittin' school, making babies and can barely read. Some gone off to their fall, lord have mercy on them."[9]

- Deference to the rights and voices of black men as an established norm "Let me just hear ya squeak."[6]

- Smile (Dissemblance!) "Smile, though your heart is aching // Smile, even though it's breaking."[10] "Smile, through all fear and sorrow // Smile and may be tomorrow // You'll find the sun come shining through // For you."[10] "You must keep on trying // Smile, what's the use of crying // You'll find that life is still worthwhile // If you just smile."[10] "I know I'm mysterious sometimes, and you are mysterious too."[11]

The ArchAndroid Suite II: Performance and Women growing to own Activism

"When you get elevated, they love it or they hate it... They tryin' to take all of your dreams but you can't allow it."[8] "Just keep rebelling away, you gotta dream it away // Because the weatherman on TV ain't creating the weather."[8]

"Run on for your life or you can dance you can die // She's praying in the sand like she's the last samurai"[8]

"Call me weak, or better yet you can call me // you can call me your hero, baby."[12]

Women as leaders of activism "This man wants to see another jubilation // And that man wants us in emancipation // And then there is the man who wants a stronger nation // You see we really got to and i think that we ought to // Protect the mind from degradation // Sow in the seeds of

education // They run from us, are we that dangerous? // There's a war in all the streets and yes the freaks must dance or die!"[8]

Locked Inside -> Abusive Relationship. "I'm locked inside a land called foolish pride // where the man is always right // he hates to talk but loves to fight // is that alright?"[13]

"I'm trying to find my peace. I was made to believe theres something wrong with me!"[14] "This is a cold war, do you know what you're fighting for."[14]

The ArchAndroid Suite III: Naming Love and its Limits

"Tell me are you bold enough to reach for love?"[2]

- Love, original sin, opening her eyes to the world.

"This time I shall be unafraid // And violence will not move me"[15] "I see beyond tomorrow // This life of strife and sorrow // My freedom calls and I must go."[15] "Love is such a novelty // A rarely painted masterpiece // A place few people go or ever know"[16] "Sir Greendown // Let's leave in an hour // Meet me at the tower // Ride your horse"[17]

"May this song reach your heart // may your ears love the sweet melody // Every note, every chord // I've arranged it for you and for me."[29]

"I've got this terrible fixation // ... // want to keep it in the realm of fantasy"[30] "Take her back to wondaland, she thinks she left her underpants"[31] "Once you go, its hard to come back"[31] "This is my life. We belong here, stay the night."[31]

The Electric Lady Suite IV: Queerness, Performance and Activism

"They keep us underground working hard for the greedy, but when it's time pay they turn around and call us needy."[18]

- Rejection of Violence, unite in love "I use my words when stones come around."[2] In an interlude, 'Bop Bot Say What' proposes violence as a means to redress the agreed upon inconsistencies of ruling logic: "hitting us all up in the head and wondering why we don't think straight"[19]. "I'm praying for the man sitting without much time // May he understand the clock will never rewind // Wisen him and sharpen him and give him a motto // hate no more, said he must hate no more"[8] "Sudanese and Congolese who put the roll in the rock // From here to Sudan, Metropolis to Iraq"[8]

- Activism "March to the streets 'cause I'm willing and I'm able"[18] "Wake up Mary"[44] "Melanie 45221, Assatta, 8550."[19] "Keep leading like a young Harriet Tubman"[18] "Day dreamers please wake up, we can't sleep no more."[9] "Electric Ladies will you sleep? Or will you preach?"[18]
- Queerness "Is it peculiar to like the way she wears her tights?"[18] "Would your god accept me in my black and white? Would he approve the way I'm made? Or should I reprogram reprogram and get down?!?"[18]

The Electric Lady Suite V: Dissemblance, Self Empowerment and Victory

Empowerment: "Oh make it rain, ain't a thang and the sky to fall (The silver bullet's in your hand and the war's heating up)" [2] "She'd keep it to herself and nobody could understand her // Even when she thought that she couldn't she carried on // She couldn't imagine both of her daughters here all alone"[20] "I wish they could just realize // That all you've ever needed was someone to free your mind // Carry on Ghetto Woman // Cause even in your darkest hours I still see your light" [20]

Victory, Struggle, Empowerment and Energy "To be victorious, you must find glory in the little things"[42] "Cause when the rain falls // My seed will grow // I'll be further to my dreams tomorrow"[42]

Non-reliance on Dieties: "Indivisible Sum // Here's the book, now the saga's begun"[4] "A long long way to find the one // We'll keep on dancing till she comes // These dreams are forever"[8] "I want to know if you believe Cindi Mayweather is not only just electric lady, number one and all, but also the ArchAndroid?"[3] "Heaven is betting on us."[11] "Take me to the river, my soul is looking for a word from God. Oh God, like a rose in the cold, will I rise?"[44] Ending on a celebration of her unique features [?], and a party[46]

Meta Analysis: Self Naming, Performance, Epistemology

- Self Naming and categorization "She who writes the movie owns the script and the sequel."[18] Labels, Categories Monáe has frequently worked with an Atlanta based group, Jaspects. Their collaborations, including *My First Love*, *Peachtree Blues* and *2012*, feature Monáe's stunning voice over the band's signature modern jazz sound[?][?]. In her 2009 collaboration with the Atlanta group Jaspects, Monáe's song *2012* implored listeners to ask what freedom means to them, and how they actualize it for themselves and for others. Though she is not featured on the title song of the album "The Polkadotted

Stripe", freedom within the context of the album revolves around the idea of false definitions. "We see black or white, polkadots or stripes. Freedom we deny, lets open our eyes." [?] Monáe questions dichotomies and categorization throughout the Metropolis suite, through explicit and subtle means. Though not always as clear as in Q.U.E.E.N. ("Categorize me, I defy Every Label" [18]), On her own style, Monáe refuses to adhere to categorization which undermines the potency of her work: "We're growing up in the iPod generation in terms of genres. I do away with labels and categories. I don't believe in them ... That was created by man." [21]

"Categorize me, I defy every label." [18] "I Just want to be, as free as I can be." [?] "We see black or white, polkadots or stripes. Freedom we deny, lets open our eyes." [?]

- Interactions with Whiteness ALL OF [3].

- Episotomology "Add us to equations but they'll never make us equal." [18] "Because the booty don't lie" [18]

- Calls to Wake up "Day dreamers please wake up, we can't sleep no more." [9] "Electric Ladies will you sleep? Or will you preach?" [18] "Just wake up, Mary, Have you heard the news? Oh, just wake up, Mary, You got the right to choose" [44]

Misc/Unassigned

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