

Allie Caton, “Electric Ladies Will You Sleep”

Written for WS 305 C1 Fall 2017

Published in *Hoochie Reader*, vol. 2

Electric Ladies Will You Sleep?

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The science fiction genre has been used for decades to explore ideas about the future, often with reimagined cultural constructions. A branch of the expansive science fiction realm called Afrofuturism emerged as a way to explore specifically black experiences and stories about the past, present, and future through a futuristic sci-fi lens. Taking advantage of the genre, singer Janelle Monáe created a music-based story about a society that flourishes on the oppression and enslavement of androids. Through constructing this musical novel, Monáe builds a thoughtful and multifaceted critique of the unjust social realities of marginalized identities. In her narrative, Monáe uses the figure of a cyborg that embodies and controls multiple marginalized identities to represent the imprisonment contingent to these identities. She goes on to explore how the android body can be used as a tool for rebellion, and highlights the connections and implications that this form of android rebellion has for real life.

It's impossible to fully grasp the depth of any individual Janelle Monáe song without considering her larger body of work. Monáe's entire musical career has been solely focused on her android story that spans across seven suites, broken up across three albums. The story centers around an android cloned after Monáe named Cindi Mayweather. She is an indentured android who falls in love with a human, and becomes aware of the oppression that she and other cyborgs receive at the hands of humans. She grows to become a savior, travelling through time to free androids from an evil human organization called *The Great Divide*. All the while, the Droid Control

chases after her for her illegal behavior. The plot is convoluted and has many moving parts, but the overall utility of the story as a representation of black, marginalized identities and struggles is clear even from a surface-level listen.

Historically, artists and creators have used cyborgs to represent a number of social issues—specifically those about race, gender, and sexuality. Donna Haraway presents the figure of the cyborg as it relates to intersections of gender, race, and sexuality in her 1984 article “Cyborg Manifesto.” She argues that cyborgs “seem to have a natural feel for united front politics, but without the vanguard party. The main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins”(Haraway and Wolfe). It is their status as products of an oppressive society that makes cyborgs powerful tools for rebellion. Cindi Mayweather fully fits this description. She was made by a patriarchal, oppressive society, but rebelled against it in the name of justice for androids. In her article, “Posthuman Blackness and the Black Female Imagination,” Kristen Lillvis describes Cindi as “a free android associated with the Droid Rebel Alliance that seeks to disrupt the futuristic human-android hierarchy that echoes contemporary race, gender, sexuality, and class conflicts” (Lillvis). This is the foundation of Monáe's story. In its simplest form, it is a futuristic retelling of black history and present as well as a predictive narrative of black future.

Monáe's Afrofuturistic story is a departure away from its male-centric Afrofuturism predecessors, in that her story centers on a female android who is—literally and metaphorically—a black woman. By doing this, Monáe positions the black woman as the key to true and complete freedom. In the song, “57821,” a chorus of voices sings about Cindi, saying “You're the one, you're the one” and “May your light lead us all back to one/Indivisible sum.” They continue to sing “the sun has come,” utilizing the double entendre “sun” and “son” so as to equate her to the biblical messiah. Lyrics which posit Cindi, a

black android woman, as “the one” to save all androids and bridge the gaps of injustice support Kimberlé Crenshaw’s arguments about intersectionality. Crenshaw writes that “neither Black liberationist politics nor feminist theory can ignore the intersectional experiences of those whom the movements claim as their respective constituents” (Crenshaw). In centering a black woman in her story, Monáe exemplifies Crenshaw’s argument that without specific consideration of black women, racial and sexual freedom cannot be fully achieved.

While the story is clearly about being “other,” it goes a step further by portraying the realities of identities that are both black and other, namely being black and female. This harkens back to Crenshaw’s idea of intersectionality and the importance that it holds in activism and liberation movements. The focus on the black experience apparent both lyrically and musically. Monáe’s music doesn’t fit into one genre; but rather it encompasses a number of different genres—sometimes multiple in a single song. While some songs incorporate rock and techno elements, the backbone of her music is a mixture of funk, R&B, jazz, soul, and rap. No song better exemplifies this than “Tightrope,” where Monáe artfully mixes together hip-hop, funk, and a bit of jazz. As a musical story, the music is the most vital and important part of the narrative, and Monáe indisputably focuses on black culture. By relying heavily on these historically black genres of music, Monáe establishes a musical base that relies on black culture to create the foundation for the narrative.

The substantial use of all of these historically black genres (R&B, rap, hip-hop, funk, soul) goes hand in hand with lyrics that tell of the experiences of black people. However, the lyrics further expand the story to include all other marginalized identities as well. One of the earliest songs on the Metropolis album, “Many Moons,” has an entire section where Monáe reads off a laundry list of labels, stereotypes, and events. A handful of the words recited include “civil rights,” “civil war,” “hoodrat,” “broad nose,” “HIV,” “misfit,” “tomboy,” and “Jim Crow” (Monáe “Many Moons”). Right off the bat, the song lets listeners know that this story isn’t going to be about just being

black, but it’s about being black and gay, or a woman, or any other form of “other.” The song “Q.U.E.E.N.” is drenched in rhetoric that reflects the experiences of the LGBTQIA+ community with lyrics like “Am I a freak because I love watching Mary?” and “Is it weird to like the way she wear her tights?” Monáe uses the character “Mary” to signify sexuality and sexual experience throughout the narrative. By naming her here, Monáe makes a direct reference to same-gender attraction and exploration. So, while the base and focus of the story is about black identities, the lyrics offer Monáe a way to expand the narrative to include many other experiences and their intersections.

Though the saga seeks to represent every kind of “other,” there is a clear emphasis on the experiences of black women. Some of the most powerful lyrics come from a song titled “Locked Inside” where Monáe sings, “[S]he’s quick to fight for her man but not her rights/ even though it’s 3005” and “The color black means it’s time to die/ and nobody questions why”(Monáe “Locked Inside”). These provoking lyrics about being black and being a woman are littered throughout the entire saga—so much so that it’s impossible to view the saga as anything other than a story heavily focused on black women. While lyrics about gender and sexuality, like “Some say she can do all the things a man can do...We say a woman came to change the face of each and every room,”(Monáe “Ghetto Woman”) and “You got to wake up Mary/You’ve got the right to choose,” (Monáe “Sally Ride”) can be taken in isolation, their existence in the full context of a story analogous to the black experience makes it impossible to consider them without the intersection of race in mind.

Because the saga focuses on black women, Monáe’s use of a cyborg narrative is poignant. As Haraway explains, “‘Women of colour’ might be understood as a cyborg identity, a potent subjectivity synthesized from fusions of outsider identities” (Haraway and Wolfé). Whether Monáe is singing about sexuality or gender, all of these identities are “synthesized” with the black identity to create a story reflective of black people with doubly marginalized identities. As a cyborg, Cindi and all other androids are excluded from the group of

biological beings that humans belong to, and therefore are “othered” from the notion of the human organic. They are created from mechanics and technology, not from biological parts. They are essentially a product for human consumption. In the song “Violet Stars Happy Hunting,” Monáe/Cindi, sings, “I’m a product of metal/ I’m a product of metal/ I’m a product of the man.” In a physical sense, the androids are created by their human maker in order to inhabit certain identities like being a black woman. The android’s identities do not arise as a chance result of being born black or a woman, but rather as a deliberate decision on the part of their maker; they are created for the purpose of consumerism and marginalization.

Through this “otherness,” the artificiality of their creation liberates androids from natural, biological boundaries, but also serves as a prison made up of identities equally as artificial as their bodies. To contrast the artificiality of the android body, Monáe makes many references to God and other creationist themes. The contrast is most clear in the song “Q.U.E.E.N.” when she sings “Hey sister am I good enough for your heaven,” and “Will He approve the way I’m made? Or should I reprogram, deprogram, and get down?” This lyric brings up the idea that identity is constructed; that it was once programmed and can be reprogrammed or even deprogrammed. There is a clear link between this lyric and Haraway’s conception of the figure of the cyborg as “a kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self” (Haraway and Wolfe). Haraway’s argument also reinforces the use of the cyborg as a means of collecting multiple identities within one figure. A metaphor for reclaiming and redefining one’s own marginalization in attempt to break free of cultural stereotypes is exemplified by the android’s ability to reprogram themselves. However, this lyric also brings up an interesting notion of android power over selfhood that lends to a metaphor about the artificiality of identity itself. If the android’s identity can be willfully manipulated—or even eliminated—then idea that identity is something that is inextricably tied to oneself is shattered.

The idea of using the cyborg body to host and maintain multi-

ple identities first becomes a clear theme in “The ArchAndroid” album. The first suite in “The ArchAndroid” denotes a shift in lyrical rhetoric from songs about outright war, to a narrative arc that is less concerned with outward war and more focused on an inner one. Monáe moves from songs like “Dance or Die,” where she sings “War is in the streets and it’s an eye for an eye,” to the song “Cold War,” which is more concerned with the struggle of identity maintenance. In “Now We Want Our Funk Cut: Janelle Monáe’s Neo-Afrofuturism,” English and Kim describe the threat that exists to android identity. They write, “Cindi Mayweather...similarly combines the notion of freedom achieved through the technological with the notion of robot as the ultimate, malleable ‘other,’ perpetually subject to the domination and fetishization within a commodity culture and to reinsertion into familiar social categories and identities” (English and Kim). This perfectly sums up the dichotomy that Monáe is portraying through her androids: that they offer a vessel for multiple marginalized identities to exist, but also act as type of imprisonment that demands complicity and normativity within a commodified and stereotype-heavy culture. By thinking of the threat in these terms, identity maintenance becomes necessary. In “Cold War,” Monáe sings, “I’m trying to find my peace/ I was made to believe there’s something wrong with me, and it hurts my heart/ Lord have mercy ain’t it plain to see/ This is a cold war” (Monáe “Cold War”). Here she is clearly presenting the threats of belittlement, degradation, and a culture that promotes minority self-hate. The premise of the song “Tightrope” (Monáe “Tightrope”) is about maintaining balance in all areas of life, including one’s view of our self. On the one hand, Monáe describes an outright fight for freedom and liberation, but on the other hand she describes the struggle to maintain one’s sense of self within a culture that continually sets out to define one’s identity for them.

Circling back to the physical war for liberation, Monáe is careful to not incite actual violence as a means of resistance. There are lyrics that, at first listen, do sound violent and aggressive, but it is clear

from the actual lyrics that the only means of “fighting” that Monáe demonstrates is dancing. A great example of this exists in “Dance or Die” as referenced earlier. Lyrics like “Run on for your life or you can dance you can die” and “There’s a war in all the streets and yes the freaks must dance or die!” paint a picture of an actual, physical war, but the only means of fighting is dancing. In Monáe’s war, it’s not fight or flight; it’s fight or dance. This theme of resistant dancing is found throughout the entire saga and in the visuals. In a short memo video, the Droid Control gives an update on their search for Cindi and her continued “violations of protocol.” The Droid Control creates a simulation of her illegal actions which looks a lot like dancing. Upon their discovery of Cindi’s continued dancing, the “arrest of Mayweather is now [their] highest priority” (Monáe “Cindi”). Through these visuals and lyrics, Monáe portrays dancing as the most threatening act against those in power, which has incredible metaphorical implications.

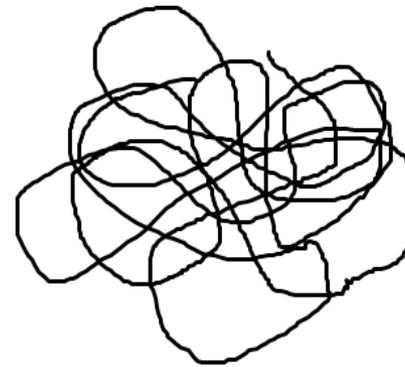
Dancing is one of the most fully embodied forms of expression that exists. Few other acts use the entire body to express emotion, feeling, or meaning in the way that dancing does. By using dance as a means for resistance and liberation, the androids set out to reclaim their black bodies from a culture that creates, uses, and views them as commodities—a notion that holds true in real life examinations of black female bodies as well. Akeia Benard analyzes the popular view of black female bodies in her article “Colonizing Black Female Bodies Within Patriarchal Capitalism,” by explaining that the “colonization and propagandizing of Black eroticism of Black female sexuality” plays the dominating role in defining “Black femaleness” (Benard). Thinking about the ways in which black female bodies are commodified in the mass media, the porn industry, the news media, and any other product of society that involves the viewing of black bodies, it makes sense that Monáe used something as bodily as dancing to be her main form of “violence” against oppression. Dancing is bodily and emotive, two things that are serious threats for institutions wishing to control people both physically and mentally.

Not only is dancing used to fight external battles, but to fight internal battles as well. The song “Dance Apocalyptic” is about continuing to dance in the face of hardships while also acting as a callout song for “upper class problem” cultures. The song lists a number of difficult, critical situations that are characteristic of lower-class life such as making enough money to pay rent, bland and unhealthy but affordable food, and even the apocalypse. As a response to all these situations, Cindi sings, “But I really really wanna thank you for dancing ‘till the end, you found a way to break out,” commemorating the oppressed for their continued positivity, drive, and existence in the face of their circumstance. She also tries to ensure continued action by singing, “But I need to know, if the world says it’s time to go/ Tell me, will you freak out?” (Monáe “Dance”). In this line she urges the androids to continue dancing—even in the face of something as devastating as the apocalypse—as a means of sustaining their mental freedom until the very end.

By building this intricate, compelling narrative of identity expressed through technology, Monáe creates a real version of the musical weapons program that exists in her story. Throughout the arc of her three records, Monáe builds an entire story that tells of the enslavement, liberation, and leadership of androids through which she explores the realities of—and future possibilities for—real black women. The mere existence of these records and this story that so clearly echoes reality makes Monáe’s music subversive by default. One can only hope that in the future, stories about actual black, human women can be told and be as accepted as the more popular form of storytelling that places black women as robots, aliens, or other forms of fantasy others. Stories like Monáe’s that tell of black experiences through androids cultivate understanding through entertainment, which will hopefully pave the way for stories about real, human, black people to be equally palpable to the greater public. By creating this astonishing and uninhibited narrative, Monáe has created a musical weapon for black liberation and white education. 🖤

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"I am not free while any woman
is unfree, even when her shackles
are very different from my own."

—Audre Lorde