

Critical Analysis: Racialized Kinesthetics and Female Empowerment in Janelle Monáe's *Dirty Computer*

The Hip-Hop genre creates a source of discourse based on issues of race, gender and overall 'otherness.' Janelle Monáe's *Dirty Computer* directed by Andrew Donoho and Chuck Lightning, imagines a future world in which 'otherness' and individuality is stripped away from marginalized groups of 'cyborgs.' Monáe's use of movement in her music video, "Django Jane" creates a parallel between colonial trauma and present racial disparities. In reference to Alesandra Szaniawska's "Gestural Refusals, Embodied Flights," I will explore how Janelle Monáe's "Django Jane," uses movement as a form of activism for black, female empowerment. I will also examine the ways in which kinesthetics is inherently racialized, and how Monáe reclaims her agency as a black, queer woman.

In her article, "Gestural Refusals, Embodied Flights," Alesandra Szaniawska explores the relationship between race and technology (Szaniawska 41). Szaniawska references scholar, Louis Chude-Sokei, who identifies the connection between colonial anxieties cast upon black women's bodies, by the white oppressor, resulting in the representation of black female bodies as machines in Science Fiction (Szaniawska 41). Szaniawska explains that Monáe's depiction of Jane as a cyborg, is a reclamation of the "otherness" projected onto her, therefore creating a visualisation of the possibility for "black, queer futurity" (Szaniawska 41). This potential futurity, where people of colour sit in positions of power is also depicted through Monáe's inclusion of movement.

"Django Jane" begins with the opening of French doors, into a loft-like palace where Jane and other women of colour are seated. An initial parallel that one can draw is between the construction of this opening shot, along with sequences in Beyoncé's "Formation." There is a

specific shot in “Formation,” where Beyoncé and the dancers around her, are sitting in a Victorian style living-room, with costumes reminiscent of the same era. Despite the difference in costume and set, there are striking similarities between these two shot compositions. Firstly, both Monáe and Beyoncé are positioned in the center, with other women of colour sitting around them, at various levels. Both shots consist of the camera tracking into the group of women, ending with a closeup of Monáe and Beyoncé, respectively. A significant difference is the artists’ opposing portrayals of the reclamation of black female bodies and their agency. Beyoncé reimagines colonial histories of oppression and attempts to rewrite the past, whereas Monáe uses influences from Afrofuturism to visualize a future reality for people of colour. Despite their different approaches, both Monáe and Beyoncé share the same goal in creating a space for women of colour in positions of power, through representation onscreen.

In the opening shot in “Django Jane,” the women’s stillness specifically signifies a need to pause and reflect on the systemic oppression, still prevalent in structures of power. The stagnant bodies resemble statues in a museum, which speaks to the immutable colonial histories of women of colour, and the stereotypical portrayal of the black female body as “captive and fragile” (Bisschoff 608). Szaniawska explains that colonial ideologies depict people of colour as “passive objects,” whose bodies have historically been looked at through a “scientific gaze” (Szaniawska 44). In the video, it is clear that the loft-like palace, filled with colourful drapes and plants, is covering up a lab consisting of magnifying glasses and test tubes. This imagery signifies a reclamation of power and agency, as the statuesque positioning of these women, is a form of liberation. The notion of black female bodies taking up space in a structure previously denied to them, is a depiction of performance activism (Szaniawska 36). Here, Monáe is

redefining black femininity, in creating narratives of a future consisting of women in positions of power, in which younger black generations can aspire towards achieving.

As the camera zooms into a closeup of Jane, the beat drops in the song, and the camera cuts to Jane, now sitting on a white throne, as she raps, “yeah, yeah this is my palace” (Janelle Monáe, “Django Jane”). Monáe juxtaposes the idea of stillness as resistance, with the idea of movement as resistance. In this shot, the dancers are now positioned around Jane moving robotically to the beat. Although the movement is simple, when done synchronously, the sequence evokes the idea of protest. These movements progressively become more exaggerated throughout the video. Each sequence of bodily movements ends with the dancers posed in different positions, mimicking the statuesque arrangement in the first shot. This stop-start motion throughout the video can be seen as activism in preserving depictions of the “humanity” of black women (Szaniawska 40).

One cannot examine black bodies in movement, without acknowledging the 1830’s and 40’s caricature of Jim Crow, an African American farmer, who was made to look like a buffoon in minstrel musical shows, played by white men in blackface. Thus, constructing the idea of black movement as a spectacle for white entertainment. Monáe’s use of overexaggerated movements, plays on this idea of spectacle, and uses satire in a form of resistance. The video shows brief shots of Jane and the dancers huddled together, jumping in towards the camera, on beat. This visualisation of women of colour uniting in a fight for equality, emphasizes the overarching message in Monáe’s song; the reclamation of black female excellence. Szaniawska states that Monáe’s incorporation of movement in her performances, creates a disruption of the “static space” (Szaniawska 45). In regard to *Dirty Computer*, this “static space” can be seen as

the society which allows systems of oppression to continually be weaponized against marginalized groups.

Overall, Janelle Monáe's "Django Jane" is an example of performative activism, in which both stillness and movement are forms of resistance. Monáe's fight for black female empowerment and feminist ideologies, are captured within the performative movements of her and the other women of colour, throughout the video. Monáe's reference to Afrofuturism and the similarities between the cyborg and the "othered," highlights the necessity for more black female bodies in systems of authority, to assist in the abolition of systematic oppressions.

Taylor Parchment
Film 330
Professor Keren Zaiontz
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Parchment 5

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