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Comparative Analysis: Childish Gambino's "This Is America" and Janelle Monáe's "Turntables"

The Hip-Hop genre has always been inherently political. The genre allows artists to speak on things that may not otherwise be spoken about. There is no topic off limits when delivering their messages and perspectives to society through catchy beats and rhymes. For hundreds of years the United States (US) has battled with racism, slavery, sexism, corrupt presidencies, police brutality, and a surplus of mass shootings. These are just a few of the many unforgettable sociopolitical events to occur throughout history and specifically within the past several years.

According a "pioneer" in Hip-Hop, KRS-One, Afrofuturism gives artists an outlet to "make worlds with words" (Daniels 1). The visual and acoustic inclusion of Afrofuturism in Hip-Hop, create a space for discourse based on the past and present issues regarding race, gender and overall themes of 'otherness'. In reference to Nathalie Aghoro's research article "Agency in the Afrofuturist Ontologies of Erykah Badu and Janelle Monáe," I will explore how Childish Gambino's "This is America" and Janelle Monáe's "Turntables," use references to Afrofuturism in conjunction to the fears and anxieties within the former and current political climate.

Before analysing these music videos alongside Nathalie Aghoro's article, I first want to discuss Elizabeth Wheeler's text, "Most of My Heroes Don't Appear on No Stamps," in regard to KRS-One's ideas on Afrofuturism. Something that stands out in Wheeler's text is her statement that for many adolescents living in inner cities in America, Rap is a 'reality check...the only language worthy of trust' (Wheeler 214). This idea is comparable to KRS-One's statement that Afrofuturism has the ability to makes 'worlds with words' (Daniels 1). The 'world' that Hip-Hop artists create through their music, is one that Wheeler highlights as trustworthy for people in marginalized groups.

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Nathalie Aghoro's research article examines the musical qualities and visual aesthetics linked to Afrofuturism and the works of Erykah Badu and Janelle Monáe (Aghoro 330). Aghoro explains that Afrofuturistic aesthetics are exclusive to the black experience, as it relies heavily on the idea of otherness and visuals within science fiction (Aghoro 331). Aghoro states that in displaying these images of alienation, these artists are reclaiming their agency and power in their shared experiences as black beings in white spaces (Aghoro 331). Aghoro concludes that Afrofuturistic visuals and 'utopian ideas' are crucial aspects to social reform through the use of media (Aghoro 339). Childish Gambino and Janelle Monáe are well-known for including Afrofuturism in their work. Although Childish Gambino's "This is America" does not explicitly refer to the future or incorporate futuristic visuals, there is a sense of urgency in his performance, which inspires a need for change.

Childish Gambino, won "Record of the Year" at the 2018 Grammy's for his song "This is America." The music video, directed by Hiro Murai, also won a Grammy Award for "Best Music Video." The themes in the video range from the idolisation of guns in the United States to slavery and violence against black bodies. Gambino depicts the sociopolitical anxieties felt in 2018, through an exaggerated and surreal performance. Although the video mostly references past and present events, it has a futuristic quality, as the song and video act as a warning, for future generations, to be aware of media's ability to manipulate any given situation.

In the video, it is clear that Gambino is playing a couple of roles. The first being the complex role of 'America' herself, who represents the notion that 'the show must go on,' regardless of the violence and destruction in the background. This could be a critique America's tendency to sweep their inherent racial prejudices under the rug. The problem that Gambino is

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highlighting here, is that in order to move on, America must address their biases and the underlying issue of systemic racism inherent in their political structures. However, Gambino is also playing the role of the ‘caricature’ or puppet. He is playing along and trying to make it out alive. This is evident in the final shot of Gambino running in terror trying to get out of the building. The dichotomy between the two roles shows the power struggles at play here, as many people of colour attempt to be “woke” and protest for their rights, however, there is still the fear that in speaking out about injustices, their lives are at risk of being taken, in which they are forced to ‘dance’ alongside American patriarchal structures.

In the opening shot of the music video, there is a black man sitting on a chair playing a guitar. Gambino moves toward the man (who is now sitting with a bag over his head). His facial expressions combined with his larger-than-life movements and concluding pose are resemblant of Jim Crow (an 1830’s and 40’s caricature of an African American farmer, made to look like a buffoon in minstrel musical shows and played by white men in blackface). Although Gambino is presenting an exaggerated reality, the reference to the past here, acts as an ‘expression of cultural critique’ (Aghoro 331). In his criticism of the past Gambino is also drawing a parallel to the present racial disparity. Gambino then proceeds to shoot the man in the back of the head, and calmly hands the gun over to a kid handling it with care in a red cloth.

There are many things at play here as the unexpected violence has been displayed so vividly to the viewer. Not only is there imagery of another innocent black man dying at the hands of ‘America’, there is also a clear message that guns are valued over human lives. This is made evident in Murai’s decision to use a red coloured cloth to handle the guns after the shootings in the video along with the visual of the man’s body being aggressively dragged off in the

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background. The red cloth could be representative of the republican ideals and values in regard to gun laws in the US. Gambino proceeds to entertain the viewer and distract them from the horrific events happening behind him by smiling and dancing toward the camera. In doing so, Gambino critiques the way in which the media uses entertainment as a distraction from the ongoing violence in the United States. This is highlighted through the juxtaposition of the song's uplifting and soulful tone compared to the grim and eerie warehouse, where the chaos unfolds. This idea of entertainment as a means of distraction is specifically apparent during the song's first bridge, where Gambino sings:

We just want the money,
Money just for you...
Girl you got me dancing...
Dancing and shake the frame
(Childish Gambino, "This Is America")

Gambino is referring to America itself as 'girl,' who is 'shaking the frame' and distorting reality. Thus, averting society's attention toward the 'money-making' entertainment industry as a diversion.

When looking at Gambino's costume; grey pants and dull shoes, it is comparable to the old confederate uniforms. Gambino's choice to wear this uniform, which has deeply rooted connotations of white supremacy, slavery and racism, acts as reclamation of his agency and power, as a black man. This is further emphasized as he wears two gold chains, which could

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have two meanings. This first being in line with the theme of slavery, as they act as shackles and chains holding him back. This imagery can also be seen as Gambino taking his power back, as he shows that he is successful and can afford to have nice things that his ancestors once could not.

In regard to form and structure, the first minute and forty-five seconds of the video is shot continuously. Murai's inclusion of this shot allows the viewer is to feel like they are living the moment with Gambino. In the first shot, the camera tracks closer to Gambino as he moves towards it, which emphasizes his power and dominance. The camera moves with Gambino as he dances and speaks directly to the viewer in majority of the video, this indicates to the viewer that they are now a part of this conversation. In the final shots of the video, Gambino is clearly terrified, running for his life out of the warehouse. The camera is first running with him from behind but switches to show his face as he runs towards it. This visual depicts Gambino waking up from a trance-like state, and into a scary reality. Through his awakening, Gambino is taking back his agency and power (Aghoro 331), through 'othering' himself and fighting for a life free of violence and fear.

It is hard to not draw comparisons between the events which took place in 2018 and the recent political state in 2020. Not only is police brutality being reported more frequently, along with ongoing racism and violence, there is also anxiety surrounding the Covid-19 virus and the upcoming US presidential election. This year's events have sparked a so-called 'revolution,' as the wrongful deaths of many at the hands of the police, including George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, have led to cities across the world protesting for systemic reform. Janelle Monáe is one of the many artists who have used their platforms to release music in support of the Black Lives

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Matter Movement and protests against the systematic oppression visible within the patriarchal structures in the United States.

Monáe released her music video for “Turntables,” directed by Child, in September 2020, for the Amazon Original Movie *All In: The Fight for Democracy*. Director Child has directed music videos for artists such as Big Sean and Issa Rae, among others and is said to draw on inspiration from directors such as Spike Lee and Malik Sayeed. This song/ video is based on the start of a new revolution, where BIPOC are standing up in the face of oppression and fighting the structures of power. The video is interlaced with imagery of past and present protests and speeches by black leaders such as Stacey Abrams and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

The video begins and ends with Monáe walking along an empty beach in a beige trench coat and a military cap. Monáe is often seen in her trademark tuxedo, which she has expressed, represents a sense of uniformity, however in the context of this video, her neutral costume and sleek appearance alludes to the idea that she is a part of the middle ground. She is a mediator of sorts, able to travel between past, present and future. This link between eras is the focal point of Monáe’s video and embodies Aghoro’s thoughts regarding the inclusion ‘utopian’ visuals, as a catalyst for social change, through the media. Monáe and Child are also highlighting the parallels between past protests and political anxieties in the United States and the current protests, including the Black Lives Matter movement and the rising anxieties surrounding police brutality and white supremacy.

The imagery of the record turning along with the spinning frames of Monáe singing in front of the American flag, represents the ever-changing political climate. There is a clear sense of optimism, specifically in regard to the use of Virtual Reality. Child and Monáe create moment

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of detachment between their present reality and the future reality of the little girl watching. This acts as a symbol of hope for a future in which black people are no longer physically living with these deep-rooted fears and anxieties.

Monáe expresses the importance of climate action, throughout the video. Accompanying Monáe's lyrics "if you f*** up the kitchen, you should do the dishes," there are visuals of Monáe dragging trash out of the ocean, close ups of oil rigs and greenhouse emissions being released into the air. In this moment Monáe touches on the fact that older generations have created a mess for younger generations to clean up, which has caused a major amount of fear and anxiety around the effects of climate change. Monáe uses imagery of a woman with a gas mask covered in flowers, creating a lineage between wearing a gas mask to protect oneself from toxic air qualities in the future, and the present reality of wearing a gas mask to protect oneself from the police tear gassing peaceful protestors.

The video switches between visuals of Monáe through the Virtual Reality headset, the future black family household and raw footage from the past and present protests. When the camera is focused solely on Monáe, she is shot from low angles as the camera zooms in and out and tracks in closer to her. In doing this, Child depicts Monáe as a powerful figure, who is demanding everyone's attention as her sentiments hold value and must be heard. Throughout the video black men and women are shot with close up and low angles, which reinforces the fact that black bodies deserve the agency and authority that they have previously been deprived of in white spaces.

In one of the last shots, there is a girl wearing a white dress, holding a red umbrella as sparks are flying down on her. The red, white and vaguely blue colours within this visual, could

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be read as a disassembling of the American flag. The sparks representing the stars falling, which could imply that through this revolution, the structures of power which have been built on systemic racism will crumble. However, this could also be read as the little girl shielding herself from these structures of white supremacy. In the final shot, Monáe manages to pull a statue of a futuristic goddess from the ocean. This imagery, along with the statues of racist leaders being torn down, displays a message of resilience and power in black (female) voices.

Both music videos display the same level of urgency. Although they differ in terms of gender representations and in some of the additional themes, both videos put emphasis on topics such as police brutality, racism, and political tensions. In “This is America,” although there was limited female representation, Gambino did feature SZA, a black female R&B singer, in one of the final shots. Monáe on the other hand did not only did she use her platform to represent black men and women, Monáe also included individuals with disabilities and members of the LGBTQ+ community. Both videos create conversations around racial and political issues and anxieties prevalent in today’s society and act as educational discourses for future generations.

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