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To the women in my life who inspire me every single day

Abstract

This dissertation contextualizes Afrofuturism within the realm of aesthetics of resistance.

Afrofuturism can be characterized as being a disruption within whitewashed epistemological discourses that are used to interpret and create new technologies and futuristic ideological paradigms. This project constructs a theoretical framework that posits the reconfiguration of Eurocentric ideals regarding racial politics, resistance and science fiction. This framework disregards post-race speculative discourses and instead focuses on constructing racial and ethnic imaginings in the future that reflect and resist the notions of inferiority that minoritized cultures are subjected to. The visual and textual aesthetics of Janelle Monáe's 'emotion picture' *Dirty Computer* are contextualized using this methodology as groundwork. Monáe's work is further interpreted as an example of liberation technology due to her construction of a futuristic representational apparatus that allows her to convey the idea of existence within the 'future imaginaries'.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank Dr. Justin Doherty and my supervisor Dr. Radek Przedpelski for their help and constant support during this past year. I am also extremely grateful to my family for their care and support.

Trinity College has been a remarkable and one of the most intellectually exhilarating experiences of my life. I will always be grateful for the brilliant faculty I was exposed to during my time here at this institution. David Scott, Robin Fuller, Joanna Rzepa, Justin Doherty, Radek Przedpelski and all the professors and academics who introduced me to new and fascinating methods for critical engagement with academia. You all have my deepest gratitude.

I am deeply indebted to my professors in Pakistan who, through their enthusiasm and generosity, armed me with the critical tools I needed to pursue my academic career. I extend my appreciation to my friends both in Ireland and Pakistan who have been a constant source of support for me, Mehr, ShahBano, Amna, Mariam, Alena, Alissa, Theresa and Dylan: these past few years would have been unbearable without you. I am truly thankful for your presence in my life.

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“The stars had one only task: they taught me how to read.
They taught me I had a language in heaven
and another language on earth.
Who am I? Who am I?
I don't want to answer yet.
May a star fall into itself,
and may a forest of chestnut trees rise in the night
toward the Milky Way with me, and may it say:
Remain Here!”

-Mahmoud Darwish 'Poetic Regulations'

Introduction

In 1993, Octavia Butler famously wrote in *Parable of the Sower* that it is the destiny of the oppressed to “take root among the stars.” While it sounds poetic and abstract in the literary sense, the political relevance of her words needs to be understood. The ‘oppressed’, that is the communities who have had their histories, their pasts, their traumas erased from public domains of historical knowledge and discourse need to make an effort to construct a space in the future through the use of apparatus such as ‘visionary fiction’. It would be pertinent to say that this visionary fiction includes an intimate exploration of the intersectional nature of gender, sexuality, capitalism, class, race, militarism, oppression and resistance. It is this exploration that leads to the decolonization of imagination which in itself is powerful due to its subversive nature as it further leads to decolonization to occur in any discipline.

The term, ‘visionary fiction’ is customarily not interchangeable with science fiction. However, this research project will be deviating slightly from this perception in order to distinguish between mainstream science fiction art and literature that reproduces and quite often reinforces the dominant narratives of power present today thus constricting the hypothetical yet expansive idea of a futuristic universe, and science fiction that serves the purpose of building a new, and freer world thus introducing the human imagination to the notion of multiple possibilities. The fiction that this research regards as being ‘visionary’ is one where the main arc of the narrative is focused on the idea of justice. Justice, in this sense is not the institutionalized and quite often sanitized idea that exists in the courts of today; instead it is the concept that has been present in literature, theater, and other literary and philosophical sciences since ancient times. This justice is moral, brutal and supports the victimized. However, in visionary fiction this is more political than moral or religious. One of the other clear distinctions between institutional justice and

justice as a free flowing concept is through the representations of the two ideas where the former is often portrayed through dystopic and overwhelming policing and the latter is more humanistic, rational and can be regarded as being abstract as there are no institutional grounds for it to exist in a society where power and by extension the law, is in the hands of the tyrants. One can say that activism and organizing in this sense are a form of science fiction due to the fact that both of these actions require the individual to step beyond the boundaries and structures that they have been brought up with and imagine new prospects for their community. Both of these actions are also focused around one integral question: ‘What kind of world do we want for ourselves?’

This research is focused on activism through aesthetics within the genre of science fiction, especially in the music video or ‘emotion picture’ *Dirty Computer* by Janelle Monàe, particularly focusing on how Afrofuturism, an aesthetic built through the intersection of afro-diasporic cultures, technology and science-fiction, legitimizes the relationship between art and the politics of liberation.

A term defined by critic Mark Dery in his 1994 essay “Black to the Future,” Afrofuturism is an aesthetic that instills the genres of science fiction and fantasy with the cultures of the African diaspora. While it is the release of the recent Marvel film ‘Black Panther’ that has pushed it to the mainstream, Afrofuturist works have been on the rise since the latter half of the 20th century. Spread across the mediums of film, literature and music, the aesthetic was an attempt to revamp the black way of ‘seeing’ and ‘perceiving’ identity through entertainment culture. Some examples include the writer Octavia Butler and the musician Sun Ra. Where Octavia Butler used the aesthetic as a way of combating racism in the rigid hierarchal institution of literature, Sun Ra articulated it as a way of considering a post-racial future. Both of these iconic figures have had an impact on modern artists like Beyonce, Erykah Badu, Janelle Monàe amongst others. In a

way, Afrofuturist projects have been an integral aspect within the framework of the creation of a black identity in the artistic landscape of the United States of America.

The overarching theme of this research is the exploration of the aesthetic of Afrofuturist works through the lens of the formation of identities in art, conveying the fact that creating space within the genre of science fiction is an attempt at resisting the previous set standards for artistic expression, a mission that had been previously undertaken by civil rights movements in the African diaspora. Within this research, the subject matter will be focused on Janelle Monáe's exploration of the intersection of racial identity and technology in her concept album *Dirty Computer*.

This dissertation is divided in five chapters, each of which is aimed at constructing a case for the relevance of Afrofuturist aesthetics within the present day social justice movements. The first chapter is focused on the concept of identity in the context of minority cultures, existing in civilizations that have been antagonistic towards them for a period of time. The chapter is divided into two sections: the first constructs a theoretical framework for discourse on the subject of identity and the politics of space, and the second is a brief explanation of intersectionality in modern day protest movements.

The second chapter is an intensive study of aesthetics of resistance, divided into two sections. The first section is concerned with the framework of resistance in academia and devising a theory of aesthetics of resistance. The second section is a historical case study recounting the Black Panther Party's use of art and artistic expression as a method of protest.

The subject of the third chapter is Afrofuturism. The chapter is distributed into two sections. One is dedicated solely to constructing a linear theoretical context of Afrofuturist theory. The second

section is an in-depth analysis of how Afrofuturist cultural productions legitimize the interface between race and technology.

The crux of the fourth chapter is the subject of Janelle Monáe and how she embodies Africana/black/African American resistance through her construction of fictional technospheres. The chapter is further structured into three sections. The first section is a literature review of Janelle Monáe's use of textual and visual apparatus within the realm of Afrofuturist aesthetics. The second section is an analysis of *Dirty Computer*, the 'emotion picture' and the third is an examination of Monáe's use of liberation technologies in her work.

The fifth and the last chapter is the conclusion that is the summation of the project along with the potential subjects for future research within the same field.

All in all, this dissertation is an attempt to place Afrofuturism as an aesthetic of resistance due to the potential it provides individuals, in this case black women, within marginalized communities who have had their histories erased previously, to have a place in the future, even if it is fictional, because what is art but a direct reflection of reality?

Politicizing Identity

Identity and Space

Existing in a culture that has been forced into identifying itself as a minority due to forced immigration has led to widespread identity crisis in the African American population, who quite often refer to the continent of Africa as being the motherland while remaining conflicted about their place in the United States of America leading to confusion regarding the idea of 'home'. This crisis is justified due to the fact that the land their ancestors were forcefully brought to and now they are legal citizens of, has not always treated them with the respect or given them opportunities that they rightfully deserve. This existential conflict regarding black identity and the politics of being 'seen' in America was referred to as 'double consciousness' by William Du Bois in his 1903 work *The Souls of Black Folk*:

“The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder...” (3)

In this sense, an individual of color does not have the freedom that a white person might have due to their position in a white majority culture that has sustained its hegemonic power structure through suppressing any culturally relevant production from minorities. Thus, for someone existing in this environment there is a certain disconnect between their perception and self-perception; when they look at themselves they see through the eyes of the white majority culture. They see themselves with all the negative stereotypes that white America has attached to their

existence. They are trapped in this frame of "double-consciousness" because they are forced to see themselves not just as a person, but as a *black* person.

Du Bois's discussion of "double-consciousness" initiated a self-determined discourse by and about a person of color to critically theorize what it actually means to be a racial or ethnic minority in the predominant state of white America. His work was seminal in introducing dialogue about the politics of representation and how that affects the larger social context of the country, factions of which constantly question the legality of the presence of non-white individuals. In order to strengthen his argument regarding the damaging ramifications of stereotypical tropes and lack of artistic production from the people of color, DuBois cites the example of the black artisan who is deeply conflicted between their need to express their unique perspective and life experiences through art which at the same time is marketable and acceptable to the broader population leading to them being constantly engaged in a battle of double aims (Edles and Appelrouth 352). After putting all their effort in creating an authentic expression of them-self which is eventually deemed as being unsuccessful, the artisan starts working on projects that are ideologically sanitized as far as any sort of true lived experience is concerned. These are the projects that are called 'successes' as they please the majority of the population, thus leading to a conscious and painful rejecting of true Self. This example illustrates the constant oscillation that the black struggle revolves around which is focused on somehow uniting the different fragments of their identity and somehow claim their own space within the larger strata of the social fabric.

The idea of 'taking up space' becomes integral when conceptualizing the need to critically analyse the dilemmas of existing in such a climate. According to Richard Hartshorne, the concept and idea of 'space' "...is a universal of human existence, an external coordinate of

reality, an empty grid of mutually exclusive points...an unchanging box within which objects exist and events occur" (Gregory 768). David Harvey, further examines the problematic of the subject by interrogating an individual's construction and production of 'space', asking how "different human practices create and make use of distinctive conceptualizations of space"(Gregory 769) In the academic field, some social scientists analyze and evaluate the concept of 'space' as having a real, concrete, and physical manifestation while others choose to understand the idea of space as being "imagined and symbolic" (Kao and Do Rozario 317). However, despite the difference of opinion present regarding the question of approaching the notion of 'space', it is important to understand the fact that space, is in its essence "...gendered, racialized, socio-cultural, political, economic, etc., all acting individually or in combination with each other" (Gregory 769).

It is in the communities existing within these conceptualized ideas of space that the notion of hybrid identities is introduced through the different levels of attachment that an individual shares with their idea of 'home' culture, which in the context of the black population is Africa. This idea of 'hybridity' is evoked through the culturally internalized interactions as a result of this interplay of two different ideas of culture. According to Homi Bhabha, there is a mutual dependence on both the part of the cultures of the 'home' and the 'new home' in creating a sense of a 'shared culture'. In his work 'The Location of Culture', Bhabha suggests that there is a "third space of enunciation" in which cultural systems are designed (245). He uses this claim to validate the creation of a new inclusive critical framework and way of formulating the concepts of the identity of the Self and the Other:

"It becomes crucial to distinguish between the semblance and similitude of the symbols across diverse cultural experiences -- literature, art, music, ritual, life, death -- and the social specificity of each of these productions of meaning as they circulate as signs within specific contextual

locations and social systems of value. The transnational dimension of cultural transformation -- migration, diaspora, displacement, relocation -- makes the process of cultural translation a complex form of signification. The natural, unifying discourse of nation, peoples, or authentic folk tradition, those embedded myths of cultures particularity, cannot be readily referenced. The great, though unsettling, advantage of this position is that it makes you increasingly aware of the construction of culture and the invention of tradition" (247).

Through the use of words like "diaspora, displacement, relocation", Bhabha conveys the "...dynamic nature of culture, and the flimsy consistency of the historical narratives that cultures rely upon to draw boundaries and define themselves" (Yazdiha 32). In this sense, the concept of 'culture' cannot be defined in or of itself instead, it is supposed to be scrutinized keeping in mind the context of its creation and subsequent evolution that later leads to the construction of an individual's habitus.

This conflict of identity, due to embodying a hybrid existence, is also the result of the erasure of historical narratives because of their 'uncomfortable' nature and the threat they present to the idea of nationhood to countries whose histories are riddled with institutionalized subjugation and violence. However, it is the uncomfortable nature of such events and their effects on the social and cultural strata in the contemporary world that makes the representations of their survivors integral to any production of meaningful art. Janelle Monáe is an example of one such survivor who confronts history and contextualizes it in the present and the future.

A Note on Intersectionality

Social justice and the movements it incorporates depend on the idea of 'frameworks' that encompass the oppressive structures within which any sort of discrimination occurs for example racism and gender related issues both of which have almost always been understood as being unfair. However, the fact that these two oppressions are understood as absolutes is problematic in itself due to the disregard that it conveys to the nuances beyond these two ideas of social

tyrannies. An example of this is the general perception that all women go through similar experiences of gender discrimination. This is where the concept of 'intersectionality' comes in. Intersectionality comes into play when there are other oppressive factors that have an active role in allowing the subjugation of a certain community. These factors include race, gender, socio-economic class, sexuality, education, rural-urban divide. A white woman's experience of discrimination will be completely different from that of a black woman's. It is extremely easy to say that since both of them are women the judgement they face in social and professional situations will be exactly the same while the reality is that both of them will be treated differently due to the mainstream perception of their respective races.

Intersectionality is a term, first used by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in her black feminist legal scholarship, that addressed the void left by a generic understanding of oppression that did not take into account the fact that there are communities that face multiple levels of discrimination thus resulting in lack of any substantial legislation that protect these particular people. As a basic definition, intersectionality mainly refers to the ways in which issues like race, class, gender, sexual orientation, age, religion, and other locations of diverse social group membership impact lived experiences and social relations. The term, in particular, focuses on the fact that social group identities are mobile in essence and is not simply fixed on one certain aspect of their physical bodies' appearance. According to bell hooks, an intersectional approach to feminist theory and practice "challenged the notion that 'gender' was the primary factor determining a woman's fate" (13). This revisionist interpretation of the feminist movement has helped introduce inclusivity not just in the professional sphere but also in various social justice movements across the world today. It is important to understand that intersectionality is not about equating oppressions or reduce their experience to be the same for each and every individual. Instead,

intersectionality as a concept conveys the existence of the interaction of oppressions within them resulting in the fact that in order to fully grasp the realities of one oppression, it is integral to examine another.

Aesthetics of Resistance: Theory And Praxis

Resistance through Art and Artistic Expression

Before embarking on constructing the case for the relevance of the aesthetics of resistance it is integral for the purpose of this research, in the larger framework of social politics to understand the interpretation, which quite often is problematic, of resistance as a concept in academia. While Michel Foucault's work on state, power and how it operates structurally is vital to the contemporary understanding of how society works, he disregards the notion of resistance as functioning within a power structure of its own instead of just being located within the larger one of the state and its various appliances.

According to Foucault "...where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (95). This perception of resistance and dissent has encouraged most of the anthropological academic research to 'romanticize' these ideas into being a part of everyday life. For example, every act (eating, dressing, gestures) might potentially be seen and understood as a form of resistance thus leading to a very limited and constricted understanding of the concept itself. Lila Abu-Lughod, warns against this reductive attitude towards resistance studies. She insists on the importance of studying resistance as a "diagnostic of power." (42) This approach is integral to the understanding of the power structure within which, and against which, the actors are consciously strategizing and struggling. Similarly, Sherry Ortner explained the discomfort with 'resistance studies' and suggested that one needs to shift the focus on the broader political, cultural, and economic context which lead to 'cultures of resistance' emerging. Also, integral to this aspect is the internal politics and subjective perceptions and experiences of those who are actively

producing, marketing, and consuming them. This research is based on the music entertainment industry that operates on the principles of capitalism; therefore, one cannot disregard the fact that there is an economic framework within which this performance of resistance functions. Having addressed this, it is still important to maintain the fact that while the economic aspect of resistance through the entertainment industry is important, it does not mean that the impact that these performances have is inconsequential as compared to the effect of more radical means of protest, as they do contribute to the mainstream visibility of minority cultures that have been ostracized for so long.

Antonio Gramsci, one of the pioneers of political theory, in his *Prison Notebooks* went beyond the usual understanding of power, that located the concept within the economic and class paradigm, and instead focused on the role of culture within the existing power structures thus coining the term 'cultural hegemony'. This concept stressed upon the need for the working class to construct a shared culture that would stand in direct opposition to the norms set by the bourgeois. According to Gramsci, any sort of resistance (class based at that point in history) had to move beyond its own perception of power and its operations which were, at the time, alleged as only being built on the economic-corporate model. His argument was that in order to leave an impact on the dominating forces one had to take into consideration the importance of an intellectual and moral ethos in strengthening the movement. The origin of a consciousness of resistance is culture. This includes both, culture in an aesthetic sense, and culture in an anthropological sense which primarily refers to the social norms set by the tyrannical authoritarian structures. These two views of 'cultures' are not entirely distinct; the former has an effect on the latter and vice versa. The emphasis on the need for a shared culture is one that has been expanded upon by critical theorists through multiple interpretations of Gramsci's work.

One of the ways that this notion has been rendered is through the concept of a visual culture constructed through the experience of subjugation and resistance.

The notion of artistic expression as being relevant to politics has been an integral aspect of political philosophy due to the fact that both of these concepts, in theory, are focused on the idea of imagining and creating a mass culture. Jacques Rancière in his work *The Politics of Aesthetics* addresses this relationship between these two significant aspects of culture generation. He explains the psychology of political movements as being based on the struggle of an unrecognized party for equal recognition in the state and its various institutions. The construction of an aesthetic consciousness automatically becomes important in this confrontation due to the fact that the conflict is mainly about the mass perception of society; what is considered as being acceptable in terms of dialogue and, visual language and communication.

Jacques Rancière explains how art is used by society to determine its own sense of inclusivity and exclusivity, mainly by regulating language, that requires them to decide what enters it and what does not, as well as who has access to it and who produces it. All in all, art, as a whole, conveys a ‘distribution of the sensible’. He explains that art:

“...is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience. Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time” (13).

Art has its own structure of production and perception, and any sort of evolution in aesthetics causes an epochal change in the way people understand and reflect on society and its various institutions. In a way, art and literature become tools in the hands of both the oppressed and the oppressor used to address their discord in the public sphere thus ‘creating’ a sense of exclusivity in their respective circles. This occurs when those perceived as the ‘other’ to the state’s Self

contest the mainstream ideologies. Politics, in this sense, is ‘created’ when the actors concerned raise awareness of the concepts, spaces and subjectivities that were “not previously identifiable within a given field of experience, whose identification is thus a part of the reconfiguration of the field of experience” (35).

Another aspect of dissent through art is described by Charles Tripp in *The Power and The People* that mainly suggests that there are three particular links between interventions of the artistic kind and the idea of a politics of resistance. First, art “has a powerful way of signaling presence” and “reclaiming public space,” which directly conveys to the state their limitations in governance. Secondly, these artistic interventions are instrumental in creating “a powerful shared vocabulary” that can initiate inter-societal solidarities and lead to the formation of collective identities through social movements. Lastly, art generates “a common, mutually reinforcing imagery” which is highly influential in challenging established dominant, hegemonic narratives and creating alternative interpretations and imaginaries of past, present, and future. The art of resistance, in this sense for Tripp, does not only confront the governing status quo through the formation of alternative political messages; it also disrupts the idea of ‘high’ culture that has been established through a hegemonic understanding of aesthetic forms while at the same time acting as visual evidence of political, social, and cultural imaginaries and identities that are symbolic of the awareness of dissent against the regime and its enforced understanding of the relationship between society and state. All in all, through both Tripp and Rancière’s interpretation of the aesthetics of resistance, this understanding of the constant interaction of politics and arts is integral in establishing the contemporary view of how social movements have been constructed over time.

Within the context of Africana Studies, Franz Fanon, in his works on cultural hegemony and racism, discusses how the deliberate dehumanization of the oppressed occurs when the subjugated group imitates the dominant body's culture, due to the social and political perception of its superiority, resulting in alienation through this form of cultural imperialism and forced assimilation. In this sense, Fanon in his essay 'Racism and Culture' states: "The oppressor, through the inclusive and frightening character of his authority, manages to impose on the native new ways of seeing, and in particular, a pejorative judgment with respect to his original forms of existing" (38). In order to 'regain' a sense of history and a cultural and political identity, the oppressed look to the modes of artistic production as a tool in generating a distinct community with its own set of ideologies and principles that directly oppose the dominant narrative. The results of these artistic productions are integral in the process of creating a distinct language for a community that is working towards an emancipatory goal. This conscious construction of identities through a collective imagery is one that has been employed by activists time and again. Afrofuturist projects, in this sense, can be taken as an example of a subjugated culture and people reclaiming their space in the mainstream narrative of storytelling and visibility in media.

Visual Protest of the Black Panther Party

However, before focusing on the importance of Afrofuturism as an aesthetic of protest, it is imperative to understand the history of black liberation movements and how the intersection of artistic expression and protest led to the creation of a visual language within the Africana struggle in the United States of America. One of the most active efforts in regard to this aspect of protest was undertaken by The Black Panther party, active from 1966 to 1982. Their use of artistic expression can be taken as an example of the construction of an 'alternative' discourse of aesthetics. The politics of the Black Panther Party was one that was focused on the idea of being

visible in society. This rigorous struggle to be “seen” and recognized was what drove the members to create an image and rhetoric that went beyond the stereotypes prevalent in the entertainment and marketing industry. According to Bederman, the motivation for creating a separate artistic dialect to express protest against institutionalized and blatant racism was the fact that the mainstream society is so entrenched in the dominant and established cultural and political paradigms that are regulated by those in positions of authority that only “certain types of truths” and “certain possibilities for action” are “imaginable.” However, the possibilities for “dissent and resistance always remain” (24).

The Black Panther Party focused on creating an alternative culture opposing the dominant paradigm of the white society, conveying a sense of vibrancy of Black culture through the use of its own language thus claiming agency over their representation in the media, politically and socially. This language was articulated both visually and textually in the pages of the Black Panther newspaper which was a trusted institution of the Black Panthers, perceived by the community as an “instrument of political education” for the main purpose of “countering misinformation,” due to it being completely “free from the distortion, bias, and lies of the oppressor controlled mass media.” (Foner 13). The paper comprised of information concerning the Party’s ideologies, news, and political editorials. The layout was encoded with cultural signs and various visual images that proved to be accommodating towards the black community members most of whom was not literate in the Western education system, and communicated in a language that was not recognized as being universal. However, the African American visual and linguistic vernacular used in the newspaper could easily be deduced by the members of the community. An article in May, 1968 described the significance of having an ‘alternative’ visual narrative as far as conveying their ideological message is concerned explaining, “The Black

Panther Party calls it revolutionary art-this kind of art enlightens the party to continue its vigorous attack against the enemy, as well as educate the masses of black people- we do this by showing them through pictures” (Foner 19). Some of the most significant pieces published in the Black Panther newspaper were designed by its primary artist and ‘Minister of Culture’, Emory Douglas. The encoded visual signs and text in the images of Emory Douglas led to an important cultural discourse within the African American community of the time. His artwork illustrated the ‘myth’ of the party, paying tribute to the signifying tradition of Black figurative linguistic use. The usage of traditional signifiers of the African American visual paradigm, along with employing techniques such as parody and racial role-reversal was common in his creations.

The use of visual iconography and art as a way of conveying the Panther ideology was a direct attack on the concept of the white man’s information structures that relied on a standardized system of language, script and vocabulary. As has been stated before, this also served as a way to communicate directly with the Black community, most of which was not very well versed in the linguistic traditions of the dominant social group. Most of the visuals depicted in the newspaper were focused on a conscious reconstruction of black masculinity as being one that was aggressive and portrayed a sense of revolutionary rage as opposed to the previously regarded notions of passivity and non-violence that were supported by Martin Luther King Jr but had also been parodied by the white people in positions of creative power within the art and film community.

This visual nature of the Black Panthers’ ideology can be seen as a precursor to the contemporary Black Lives Matter movement, most of which has been focused on photography, graphic art and ‘memes’ as these mediums provide them with the means to convey their message

directly to the public all over the world without getting into the trap of language and translation that automatically places limitations on their audience.

This construction of an aesthetic narrative is concerned with the field of visual activism, a form of street protest that is directly influenced by visual mediums of communication and is focused on transmitting meaning through visual means. This particular term ‘visual activism’ is borrowed from Zanele Muholi who initiated the use of “...this phrase as a flexible, spacious rubric to describe her own practice, which documents and makes visible black lesbian communities in South Africa” (Bryan-Wilson et al 8). Furthermore, the framework of ‘visual activism’ and the relationship between political art and activism is conveyed through scenes where political dissent is portrayed through the use of images and performance arts that point out direct and subliminal meanings.

All in all, the idea of ‘visual protest’ has evolved from the use of banners and newspaper images in the Black Panther paper to a thematic reconstruction of visual mediums like film, photography and graphic art thus becoming integral to liberation movements rising in the tense socio-political world of today. Artistic and literary endeavors in the aforementioned mediums reclaim the public sphere aesthetically by contesting the dominant elite concerns and representations and at the same time providing the masses with a more familiar vernacular in the themes and subject being discussed. It is important that in order to gain some sense of political effectiveness, an aesthetic consciousness needs to engage with the ordinary, everyday life of the common citizen. Film and other visual mediums need to be active in signifying political issues and not be allocated to just being art that is not contextualized within the racial and spacial politics of the contemporary world.

For Nicholas Mirzoeff, “visual culture activism [involves] creating, and performing... in urban public space and across social media networks to involve, extend, and create a political subject” (279). Hence, the relevance of the argument that it is through the construction of unique artistic signifiers that a community gains agency over its politics, both internal and external. All in all, it is within this historical context of employing aesthetics as protest and resistance by the black community that Afrofuturist art, music and film build a subject wholly engaged with the past, the present and most importantly the future through the conscious reconstruction of the history and the very real torment of its real life subjugation.

Afrofuturism: Politics, Race and Technology

Afrofuturism: Past and Present

It was during the 1950s that science fiction works in magazines and literary texts started to come up with the presumption of a color-blind future, in their attempt to depict all humankind "as one race, which has emerged from an unhappy past of racial misunderstandings and conflicts" (James 47). This assumption is what led to the complete absence of any narratives that were primarily focused on people of color from the entire genre of science fiction. The engineers of the genre itself were engaged with other sanitized plotlines that were concerned with colonizing the solar system or building enhanced versions of robots. The theme of race was relegated to the domain of more 'serious' genres and hence was neglected in science fiction, leading to its problematics and their discussions being as marginalized as the characters of colors themselves.

This deliberate exclusion of people of color from the world of science fiction steadily became more prominent, resulting in artists like Gil Scott-Heron, deciding to address the prejudicial inclusion of just one race in space. His 1970 track "Whitey on the Moon" conveyed the contrast between the corporate profiteering of the US space program and the impoverished lifestyle of urban black communities: "I can't pay no doctor bill (but Whitey's on the moon)/Ten years from now I'll be payin' still (while Whitey's on the moon)."

Artistic endeavors within mainstream science fiction were riddled with a 'color-blind' perception of the future. This was an attempt by the white producers to exclude people of color as subjects with complex storylines and personalities. Due to the inhumane and cruel nature of the history of race in the United States, the most common omission in the science fiction narratives was the

trauma and cultural heritage of the black community, the majority of who were the descendants of the survivors of the West-African genocide, the Middle Passage, and slavery. The need to gloss over this historical trauma was greater than addressing minority representation which in turn led to tone-deaf and often unrealistic portrayals of black characters in comic books, literature and other artistic endeavors (Bould 2007).

This deliberate stripping of both fictional and real African Americans of their social roles, identities and histories resulted in superficial themes becoming prevalent in the cultural production within the genre of science fiction. Despite of the creation of plotlines about the destructive nature of prejudice and the need for a new, more inclusive world for the aliens or the androids who have been mercilessly subjugated by the humans, the science fiction works of the time were woefully lacking in any sort of self-awareness regarding their art being a reflection of real life; the realities of racialized hierarchies and oppressions. This was explained in the brief discussion of race and science fiction offered by Scholes and Rabkin during the 1970s:

“...because of their orientation toward the future, science fiction writers frequently assumed that America's major problem in this area-black/white relations-would improve or even wither away.... The presence of unhuman races, aliens, and robots, certainly makes the differences between human races seem appropriately trivial, and one of the achievements of science fiction has been its emphasis on just this feature of human existence.... [Its] tacit attack on racial stereotyping ... has allowed science fiction to get beyond even "liberal" attitudes, to make stereotyping itself an obsolete device and the matter of race comparatively unimportant. Science fiction, in fact, has taken the question so spiritedly debated by the founding fathers of the United States-of whether the rights of man included black slaves as well as white slave-owners-and raised it to a higher power by asking whether the rights of being end at the boundaries of the human race.” (188-89)

The main problem with this approach towards fiction is that it makes sure to validate and normalize the discussion of race and prejudice in extremely abstract terms while consciously stifling any active engagement with real, material conditions regarding racial hierarchies in both historical and contemporary sociological landscapes. By portraying racism as a historical

ideology that burned itself out, instead of one that is still the cause of an extensive amount of injustices being faced by the African American community, mainstream science fiction of the time avoided any sort of confrontation between the structures of racism and its own complicity in pandering to them. This neglect led the wider population to believe that impoverished minorities had little to no role to play in the genre's futuristic imaginaries. The only way to remedy this issue was to have voices of color create their own space in this futuristic world.

It was in the post-war and post-Civil Rights Movement eras that African American writers and artists began to seriously reflect on the fluctuating nature of racial dynamics due to the rapidly evolving social and technological changes. This particular shift in which the experience of minorities became digitized and mechanized explains how technology became a language of sorts for the new literature and art emerging from the African American community. This language studied social dynamics and relationships between humans and their external conditions through the use of futuristic themes like trans-human anamorphosis, digital souls and cyber space. These thematic devices are based on the exploration of humanity and its conflicts outside the general understanding of its phenotypic boundaries. The result of this reexamination of the human experience is seen in the availability of tools and frameworks for writers and academics to demystify the various deterministic views of race which have prevailed since the beginning of time sociologically speaking. Afrofuturism, as an aesthetic and a philosophical framework has in this sense proven itself to be a response to the archaic notions of race and has led to a steady but blatant conceptual transformation of humanity with a particular focus on race through the attempt to locate the presence of black culture in a world that is hyper-progressing in the field of technology.

It was Mark Dery who first introduced the term ‘Afrofuturism’ in his 1993 essay “Black to the Future” which discussed the absence of black voices in mainstream science fiction works of art and literature. He defined Afrofuturism as a form of “speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture—and, more generally African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future” (180). While Afrofuturist works had existed before the term was suggested, it was after Dery’s essay that an increasing body of scholarship on the subject started to emerge in order to expand upon Dery’s initial conceptualization of the term by contextualizing it within medium and genre specific themes.

In the *Oxford Companion to Science Fiction*, De Witt Douglas Kilgore defines this aesthetic movement by stating that, “Afrofuturism can be seen as less a marker of black authenticity and more a cultural force, an episteme that betokens a shift in our largely un-thought assumptions about what histories matter and how they may serve as a precondition for any future we may imagine” (8). This definition is particularly relevant because it predicts the future of the aesthetic and the projects it will give birth to which will in their essence contest the idea of the linearity of time and will as a result subvert the mainstream binary of primitivism and modernity. Lonny Avi Brooks suggests the blurring of this dichotomy when he writes that “Afrofuturism as a basic framework suggests promising directions for reinvigorating our language to speak about racial identity in the deep past and the long-term future” (153). In this sense, the impact of Afrofuturist texts lies in their subversion of the notion of a post-racial future where cyber technology and hyper modernity has only allowed the white population to survive and at the same time racialized others to disappear completely. Another important aspect of the sociological impact of Afrofuturist projects on the racial framework of the contemporary world is the focus on

reclaiming historical narratives, in particular the ones that revolve around collective traumas such as slavery in United States and the effect that time period has had on African diaspora.

While it is important to consider the active engagement on part of Afrofuturist texts with the history of racism, slavery, colonialization, and the subsequent systemic oppression, as well as the image, or the lack thereof, of racialized bodies in fiction set in the future, it is also absolutely vital to analyze the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality present within the framework of Afrofuturist philosophy. Susana Morris, in her essay “Black Girls Are from the Future: Afrofuturist Feminism in Octavia E. Butler’s *Fledging*,” argues that one of the most important similarities that Afrofuturism and black feminism share is the resistance to systemic oppression and erasure, so much so that they are “symbiotic” (153). According to her, “Afrofuturist feminism” is integral as “a literary tradition in which people of African descent and transgressive, feminist practices born of or from across the Afrodiaspora are key to a progressive future.” Furthermore, Afrofuturist feminism “offers a critical epistemology that illuminates the working of black speculative fiction in vital ways” (153). Morris, as an example for her theory applies it to the works of Octavia Butler, who she sees as being an author engaging in both, Afrofuturist aesthetics and the concerns of black feminism, namely race, gender, sexuality, and ability (154-55). Apart from literature, Afrofuturist thematic concerns have found a space in the contemporary world of digital art and multimedia.

Intersection of Race and Technology

An important aspect of Afrofuturist productions is the conceptualization and function of technology. Technologies are understood to be “the variations of human augmentation. They extend the human ability to realize some specific purpose” (Coleman 184). In this sense, the

existence of everyday objects like electric lights, cars and cell phones is limited to the sole purpose of amplifying and engaging human senses and communication, along with other biological and social practices. This statement infers that technologies as a whole have a very close relationship with humans as they are the ones who construct tools which are then employed to accomplish a variety of tasks. The purpose of the existence of these tools is to function with the objective of satisfying human needs. Therefore, humans “are continuously supplemented by technologies and techniques” (183).

The informal use of the term ‘technology’ refers to “high technology,” which can be defined as the category of machinery that is perceived as being most advanced within the context of a particular time period. The definition of technology has been confined within Western societies to mainly include certain consumer products; examples include smart phones, cameras and social media, and futuristic industries like robotics and nanotechnology. From the standpoint of Africana communities, technologies are defined as both, physical and spiritual entities that are consciously created, used, and maintained for the advancement of the community’s social, cultural, and personal sensibilities. Within this worldview as well, technologies are meant to serve humanity. However, this is where this perception deviates from the Western understanding of the same subject; technologies are also mechanisms that preserve *nzuri*, an axiological concept that recognizes the intrinsic goodness of an object and its ability to keep balance and order in relationships between individuals and between beings and their environment (Welsh-Asante 9). An example of this idea of balance through technologies is the Africana spiritual system Santería. According to George Lewis, “Santería is designed to facilitate communication between humans...and ancestors, and prepare the neo-Yoruban (Nigerian) Afrofuture” (142). For the

purpose of this research, it can be described as a device or a set of systems the purpose of which is to help expand the potential of communication with the intangible world.

Despite the fact that the Africana communities had a developed perspective and structure of inquiry regarding the position of technology, racist and white supremacist ideological frameworks instigated and promoted the myth that it is the white race that is to be credited for being the bearer of technological agency, and that it is only them who have the systems and methods that can encourage more technological advancements and innovation in the modern society. The Western/colonialist paradigms classify devices, constructed through their own agendas and research methodologies, as ‘high technologies’. The reason for doing this is to designate a system of hierarchy, as far as social and cultural evolution is concerned, and to establish their notion that not all technologies are relevant to the Western view of progress. Technologies deemed as not being “advanced,” due to their intangible source material and existences, hence being empirically immeasurable, are categorized within the colonialist system as being primitive.

This perception of the dichotomy between the concepts of “high technologies” and “primitive technologies” subtly creates a hierarchy that categorically defines Western/colonial cultural creations as being superior to other communities’ notions about technologies: “The concept of Western technology involves a masked essentialism and immanence that cement the relationship between European man and modern technology. And posit that any participation in the technological revolution must necessarily import European culture.” (Diawara 148)

This classification of technologies determined by their ‘worth’ to the White/colonialist cultural progress is also meant to create a divisive narrative within society where those who employ

‘progressive’ technologies are termed as being ‘future-oriented’, and those who do not ascribe to the “progressive” methods are called ‘backward’. Communities of color throughout history, especially African people, have never been regarded as being an integral part of the progression of humanity by the European nations, despite the fact that these communities have their own distinctive technological agency. Instead, they are stripped from having any access to ‘modern’ technological tools and education and worst of all their innovative discoveries and inventions are either ignored or stolen and later ‘updated’ within the Western tradition: “The implications of this hierarchy have been devastating to the cultures of Africa which are normally seen in binary opposition to Western culture and technology.”(Diawara 148)

This altered record of history and fabricated documentation of creations has been instrumental in distorting the reality that the African people are “a central contributor to technology development in world history and present day” (Wright 49). Even within the African communities themselves, there are individuals who believe their own race is inferior in the field of technological production and that “they are non-participatory in the incipient technosphere” (Everett 132). This misleading perspective constructed over time that African people’s technologies have no space within the context of the contemporary era “strips Black people of technological agency. It inherently closes down discussions about the ways African American people consume and use technology, and conceals the reasons that Black people produce meanings for technological artifacts, practices, and knowledge that regularly subvert the architected, or constructed, meanings of [Western] technology.” (Fouché 641)

During the Black Arts movement in 1963, renowned poet and playwright Amiri Baraka encouraged discourse regarding the power, both cultural and political, of words. His argument was based on the idea of recognizing them as a symbolic bond between the ideologies of a

certain culture and the entity that is to be described. Words have the agency to construct a power dynamic that have real life implications on the way the subject or object being described is treated, for example by calling Africans heathens, their treatment as slaves is justified (Baraka 169). Baraka delivers a theoretical foundation for the inference that words are technologies. He says, “Words have users, but as well, users have words. And it is the users that establish the world’s realities” (168). In this sense, words can be interpreted as instruments of manipulation that affect the systems of analytical agency employed by an individual to comprehend their environment. However, it is integral to add the fact that in order for words to function effectively, they need to be oriented from a particular cultural framework. The worldview of an entire culture will consistently flow through words, much like it does through other practices and tools used by cultural agents. Technologies, within this structure, “are influenced by the values, attitudes, beliefs, ideologies, and behavior of their creators and by the cultures in which they are created, developed, and deployed” (King 773).

In his article “Technology and Ethos,” Baraka states that, “Machines have the morality of their inventors” (157). This statement was a reference to the African American struggle for liberation from the oppressive nature of the ‘high technology’ of the white community that held the sensibility and the supremacist notions of racial politics. The machines that were the result of this technology contained essential components of language and programming that inferred white cultural domination and racism. Afrofuturist Ann Everett relates her experience of facing the “racist ghost in the machine” whenever she switched on her computer. The startup screen displayed the words: “Pri. Master Disk, Pri. Slave Disk, Sec. Master, Sec. Slave” (125). Thus she was subjected to the reminder of the historical trauma of her community on a daily basis. While Everett does ponder upon the intention and the cultural background of the computer

programmers, she also asserts: “Even though I do not assume a racial affront or intentionality in this peculiar deployment of the slave and master coupling, its appearance each time I turn on my computer nonetheless causes me concern” (125). Although it is impossible to prove that there is an ‘agenda’ of sorts on part of the manufacturer to reinstitute social hierarchies, this example is significant regarding the prevalent notion of a culture that is supportive of ideologies of domination in these technologies.

Baraka’s proclamation regarding machines having the subjective morality of their creators, can also be construed as a form of encouragement to the African American people, in order to inspire them to participate in innovation and creation so that they are able to “make forms that express Africana people truthfully and totally” (157). He elaborates his assertion by explaining: “those of us who have freed ourselves know that our creations need not emulate the white man’s. [If we are] freed of an oppressor, we must be ‘free from the oppressor’s spirit,’ as well” (156-157). Meaning that since the tools of the oppressor are a reflection of the ideology of oppressor, in order to achieve some form of liberation African American communities should construct technologies that are concerned with African values. All in all, if machines do mirror the ethics of their inventors, then the technologies produced by the African American people will be vital in conveying the unique sensibilities and characteristics of their particular cultural and social context.

This interpretation of a tools’ function within its society is instrumental in assembling a discourse of the ‘threat’ being faced by the African American community as far as white technologies are concerned. This ‘threat’ extends to their agential power and the potential to manufacture apparatuses that will help in the production of Africana futures. Keeping this fact in mind, John Jennings constructs his argument for Afrofuturism being an epistemological

discourse that studies the purpose of technologies from an Africana perspective. It “embraces the myriad of ways that Africana people acquire technological agency by being resourceful, innovative, and most important, creative” (Fouché 641). Furthermore, he claims that Afrofuturism imparts its version of reality through the use of a ‘pantechnological’ framework.

Within this framework, Afrofuturism creates its methodology based on the assumption that “everything can be interpreted as a type of technology” (Chambliss) and that the majority of human productions “function as prosthetics that produce various effects relating to Africana agents’ needs.” (Loss). It is through this perspective that one can recognize that the inventions and devices being studied possess the ability to be assembled, used, “hacked into, decoded, and made to function for a new agenda” (Loss). This treatment of everything as being “tool-like” dislocates the common assumptions that material items do not have an operator, their existence is on the “outside” of a cultural construction, or that they possess a singular version of a universal meaning. Overall, any academic endeavor to contextualize social ideas and constructs from a pantechnological standpoint “reconceptualizes how they fit into larger patterns of meaning and power” (Coleman 185).

Within the paradigm of Western philosophical discourse, theories of race, class and gender are not often regarded as devices of human agency. Studying “[social constructs] as a technology relocates [them] from being a trait, into a tool,” (Coleman 185) and links them with a particular user. “... [Technologies] are fundamentally human endeavors and much is lost in an examination of the products of those endeavors whenever technologies are separated from the people who made them.” An example of this is the understanding that race functions as if it has no creator, therefore it leads to the assumption that its existence is not indicative of a specific worldview. (King 773). However, if race is studied within the theoretical framework of a technology, then it

automatically points towards the existence of a user. Consequently, relating the Western social structure to the conscious creation of the concept of a hierarchal race concept, “adds functionality to the subject, helps form location, and provides information.”(Coleman 192-193).

Filmmaker Cauleen Smith conveys her idea of Blackness through a pantechnological perspective. She claims, “[Blackness] has been used as a technology against us [African Americans] – being marked with certain race determines your movement, access, and privileges.” (Womack 137). Her comment identifies the structure of race as being “disruptive technology” focused on altering sociocultural and personal dynamics which in turn lead to individuals being “interrogated by a system based on biological representation and networks of power” (Coleman 178). Within this concept it can be concluded that the main objective of the creation and use of race is to construct a social structure that is based on the practices of privilege and disenfranchisement. This is why scholars in the field of Afrofuturism utilize a pantechnological framework in order to locate the technological characteristics of the Africana community. This approach follows the doctrines of ‘emergent strategy’, which refers to a series of actions established using the philosophical ideas in the fictional works of Octavia Butler (Imarisha, Brown, & Thomas 280). Emergent strategy is a method that “aligns with nature, forms and maintains relationships, builds resilience, embraces adaptability and change, and develops complexity from simple interactions” (280). Its premise is based on encouraging discourse regarding complex ideas through the interpretation of “relatively simple concepts,” (288) thus assessing everything as a potential agent of change.

Janelle Monáe: Embodying Protest In the Future

An Academic Review of Janelle Monáe's Technosphere

Janelle Monáe is a relatively new subject within the realm of academic inquiry. Most of the academic literature based on the performative aspect of her career is focused on analyzing her music and costumes in regards to the position they hold symbolically or historically. In “Now We Want Our Funk Cut: Janelle Monáe’s Neo-Afrofuturism,” *Africana Literary theorists* Daylanne English and Alvin Kim argue that Monáe promotes the idea of a neo-Afrofuturism that conveys “a fresh, funky optimism that promises not so much to “remove” as to *move* *Africana* people, even in the context of contemporary capitalism”(229). This theorization of neo-Afrofuturism originates from, but also at the same time transcends, the initial conceptualization of the concept as an aesthetic that addresses the intersection between race, technology and the future. However, according to English and Kim Monáe’s approach to Afrofuturism is very similar to conceptual artist Paul D. Miller’s (also known as DJ Spooky) who categorized it as a “renewal of tools of skepticism.”(122) Her performance of *Africana* visionary fiction “produces a profound critique of current social, racial, and economic orders and imagines a less constrained Black subjectivity in the future.”(217)

The main argument around which English and Kim construct their paper is that Monáe deviates from the assumption of a post-racial, post-colonial utopian future; instead, she focuses specifically on personifying the hyper embodiment of the identity of a black woman while refusing to adopt the transcendental escape that had previously been used by both, liberal technoculturalists and Afrofuturist musicians, for example George Clinton and Parliament/Funkedelic (P-Funk). The main artistic and political motivation, according to English and Kim, behind the

works of the previous Afrofuturist artists was to induce a sense of transcendence from the realities of the overwhelmingly racist and emasculating dystopian society that was entrenched in the subconscious of their Black audiences thus conveying an “unadulterated blackness and Black joy” (220). There was little to no attempt in efforts to include progressive female narratives within this genre of transcendental music. Therefore, the ability and the access to move beyond racism were allocated to the domain of masculinity, excluding black women.

While Monáe’s music, much like that of most 21st century Africana music artists, originates from the sound and visual aesthetic of P-Funk, she includes a sense of self-awareness within her expression through her conscious acceptance of her ability to be a ‘commodity’ using it in a world fixated on reproduction, to multiply her identity construction in order to “exhibit new liberatory possibilities” (218). In her performances and the ensuing political discourses, Monáe creates an excess of signification through her attempt at representation. She is blatant in the use of her performance texts to produce multiple layers of meaning that invoke the audience to feel and perceive a broader spectrum relating to personal emotions and intellectual ethos that are an integral step in understanding the experience and the struggle of a community that has been marginalized throughout history: “She aims to convey the power of cyber identity –one that recognizes the paradoxical tension of resisting and embracing ones relationship to the system – as a method to subvert the oppressive powers of the state.(225)”

It is through this obvious effort on her part to inspire her black audience to “transform” rather than “transcend,” that English and Kim reach the conclusion that while Monáe does, in a chronological and aesthetic manner, connect to the lineage and the subsequent legacy of sublime Black funk liberation, her expression of the same is slightly deviates in the sense that it puts the

spotlight on conveying a multilayered and intersectional conception of “hyper” humanity from the socio-cultural position of a Black female.

Monáe’s distinctive approach to the idea of technological agency is one that has been the subject of interest to academics. There is a repeated sense of affirmation that while Monáe does derive her music and visual conceptions from the mainstream understanding of the speculative practice of Afrofuturism, her attraction lies in enhancing the political aspects of its previous iterations.

Monáe’s deliberate production of potential strategies to question and discard white heteronormative cultural standards is done through her adoption of a gender neutral resistance comprising of a “both/and” approach to her costume design and her overall android persona.

She also does not blatantly separate her identity from the system of oppression that she wants to transgress. Instead, she carefully appropriates whatever technological advancements are at the core of its progress, in order to operate as a “spook sitting by the door” (Reich 325), meaning she works as double agent of sorts.

Monáe’s confrontation with the multiplicity of the intersectional relationships within her identity is best portrayed through her music video *Cold War*, released in 2010. In “This Safer Space: Janelle Monáe’s ‘Cold War,’ Shana Redmond explains how through the emphasis on the fluid nature of her position as a participant in theoretically contradictory discourses, she directly challenges the conformist social ideology regarding “...dichotomies of black/white, inside/outside, past/present, etc.” (394) Monáe uses the performative aspect of her body as a text to “protest challenges to black political cultures.” (406)

The medium of a music video is integral to the construction of the performance as a “platform for display and critique” (399). However, Monáe removes the ‘distraction’ of having a linear, or

any narrative, for that matter. Instead, the song is performed by her person, juxtaposed against a black background with the camera focused on her face, cropping the rest of her body below the neck. Monáe chooses not to wear her chosen ‘uniform’, comprising of a black and white tuxedo with saddle shoes, an ensemble she often dons during public appearances. All that is visible are her bare shoulders, neck, and unadorned face. It is through this deliberate removal of visual ‘noise’ that the focus of the viewer is shifted to reading “the layers of history, identity, and resistance” (394) the meaning of which is derived from the presentation of her body and the song lyrics.

The visibility of a Black female body is almost always regarded as being pertinent to the understanding of the history of oppression and resistance of the Africana people. Her lyrics convey both, the struggle of being seen and perceived as a black woman, and the problematic legacy of the Cold War that encouraged a nationalist discourse of marginalization and (racial and ideological) supremacy upon the actions of ordinary and prominent citizens (395). It is this aesthetic amalgamation of her lyrics and body that allows “Monáe to sensitize her audience... to collapse the epistemological distance between the history, identity, and resistance embedded in the visual language of her body” (399). In this sense, the visibility of her body can be interpreted as both: a text about the black experience negotiating American racism on a personal, social and institutional basis, and the proud legacy of African American women’s fight for liberation from patriarchy.

In her case study of the music video for the track *Cold War*, Redmond builds upon English and Kim’s interpretation of Monáe’s approach to the concept of technological agency. English and Kim theorize that Monáe has the benefit of knowing to wield the tools of technological knowledge, that operate both in an inclusive and exclusive capacity, in order to better represent

herself and black women as a whole as agents of resistance and liberation. Redmond, in her paper, builds upon this interpretation and explains exactly how Monáe specifically works from an Afrofuturist position when she uses any trope commonly used in science fiction in order to interrogate issues regarding black identity that are rooted in both contemporary and historical times.

According to Redmond, Monáe contorts the idea of linearity in time and space, bringing forth the past to disrupt uncontested meaning in the present. In other words, she shifts the focus on the “everywhere-ness and concrete experience” of the Cold War, and “makes her non-nationalized Black feminine body a landscape for its battles (401).” The paper suggests that Monáe’s use of the technique of framing and positioning the perspective of her viewer to only look upon her face conveys a sense of visual disruption that goes beyond the image projected on the screen, confronting the automated response of her audience which is to instill her with inhumanity. By limiting the visuals, she forces her viewers to directly engage with her presence and her lyrics. In this way, one can interpret this visual disruption as a step towards creating a space to centralize the discourse regarding the struggles of interiority and the ever constant battle of visibility that is fought on numerous fronts of the multiplicity existing inside and outside of a black woman’s presence.

In her work “Means of Detection: A Critical Archiving of Black Feminism and Punk Performance” Elizabeth Stinson examines the use of performance within the realm of Black feminism in order to uncover the racial and gender archives of ‘punk’. She derives her argument from absence of marginalized voices in the mainstream history of punk which predominantly consisted of white, cis- male-bodied individuals claiming a “homogenized fuck-your’s-articulations, spit-in-your’s-face symbolism, and aesthetics of disorder” (299). Stinson explains

that it is important to acknowledge the absence of the black experience within this genre as the genealogy and archive of punk itself was not found on the basis of white subjectivity. By the very nature of its erratic structure, “punk cannot be comprehended by its origin nor its supplements or by its presence and what is absent (277)”. Her argument is focused on the idea that the methodology of historicizing and archiving punk music should also hold in regard and “recognize the Black feminist subtext in punk and analyze the meaning of the punk archive through the complexities of black feminist punk performance (277)”. It is only after acknowledging and working on these two aspects that the punk archive can fully “address the supplemental force of race in punk while steering the punk archive in a more plural and political direction. (277)”

The paper further extends this argument by stating that it is through the sonic performance of the Black female punk artist that any form of transformation and disruption occurs in the incessant standardization of punk which had, in its essence, become a white patriarchal project instead of the inclusive artistic resistance it was supposed to be. This ‘disruption’ in the mass perception concerning the invalidity of black voices within this genre occurs through the verbal and visual articulation of a Black female presence using punk vocabulary and aesthetic. Stinson likens this form of aesthetic resistance to a literal black hole as it is the “embodiment of both energy and distortion (278).

After acknowledging their blatant exclusion from the social and artistic discourse, Black female punk artists further complicate the intention of punk to embed the genre with various alternative “...significations of sound, sexuality, gender, and race” (276). It is through realizing the re-articulation of marginalized gender and race identities in the genealogy of punk that the Black

female punk sonic performance is interpreted as a “means of detecting alternative spaces of sexuality and performance” within the entire genre.

Because of Monáe’s use of Afrofuturist tools to construct speculative identities and multiple universes for the black community, Stinson includes Monáe in her literature review examining punk archival discourse and its shortcomings. She explains that Monáe is integral in the production of “a supplement space for archiving black performance,” that both connects and reproduces the historical context of black oppression with her music, lyrics, costumes and the persona of Cindi Mayweather that she adopts.

Monáe disturbs the temporal linearity that exists between her performance of Self, and the various references she makes alluding to political, historical, and cultural contexts that are an intrinsic aspect of the Black female experience. Because of the repeated articulations of both, imagined and embellished realities in her lyrics and visual aesthetic, she manages to inscribe new meanings signifying the types of spatial and temporal connections existing within the aforementioned references. An example of this is seen at the end of the ‘emotion’ picture (a collection of various music videos within one narrative) *Many Moons*, when Monáe performs the “Cybernetic Chantdown.” Cindi Mayweather, her persona, in a trance starts to list two-word phrases conveying the existence of political, historical, and cultural products such as "Civil Rights, Civil War," "STD, quarantine" "Tomboy, outrage" and "White House, Jim Crow." It is through the vocalization of these words in her constructed Afrofuturist universe that Monáe is able to disengage them from linearity of time and recorded history thus contextualizing the past in terms of contemporary and recent events. In short, she wields time through her actions in order to address simultaneously the presence of these events and experiences as historical, contemporary, and futuristic objects.

Stinson further explains that Monáe makes use of her sonic performance to “mediate a genealogy” (300) that actively resists through its very existence located outside of linear chronological structures; and constructs new meanings to the relationships between the past, present, and future. Monáe is a representation of a sort of punk archiving that exists “...without a known origin and resists patterns of domination, binaries, and neoliberal pop economies of ambivalence.” (301). Stinson points toward the absence of any feminist intersectional voices in the recorded history of punk through her description of Monáe’s technological agency of simultaneously inhabiting and creating multiple connections of historical, political, and cultural methodologies.

The academic engagements focused on Janelle Monáe’s performance convey the various ways through which she has an impact on the textual meaning making of both, how she is perceived by the audience and the representation of Black women and their struggles. English and Kim posit their interpretation that she is an Afrofuturist artist who chooses to exist and embrace the uncomfortable space of a revolutionary agent working against and with the capitalist system. The writers engage with the idea that Monáe uses her identity to alter the understanding of Africana/black consciousness in order to initiate some sort of deliberation upon the future of the minority being threatened by the machinations of white supremacist ideology that is once again gaining momentum in the mainstream social discourse.

Redmond’s paper utilizes Monáe’s identity performances as a way to construct conceptual perspectives for strategizing a collective racial resistance to stereotypes. The artist’s lyrics and visuals provide her audience with a set of alternative actions that can be embraced by black women in order to create a new consistent consciousness through the construction of frameworks of perception for their future representations in mainstream media.

Lastly, Stinson situates Monáe's performance of identity within the label of disruptions that is sorely needed in order for any progress in the understanding of history and aesthetics. Much like the celestial body of a Black hole that ruptures the inner structures of entities nearby, Monáe's representation of an aesthetic agent of resistance destabilizes the very existence of rhetoric that situates white supremacist narratives above those of people of color, and at the same time emanates attitudes that are not dependent upon a fixed understanding of various human experiences like gender.

Overall, the literature present on Monáe conveys that she, through her performance texts, is able to engage with the multidimensional oppressions within the context of her music videos. This dissertation will however explore the way the artist through her aesthetics and narrative of resistance is able to construct space for dissent creating the potential for liberation in the Africana community.

Dirty Computer – An Analysis

Before examining the case study chosen for this dissertation, it is integral to understand why the thematic concern of race is one that perpetually haunts a person of color producing an academic or artistic work. It is due to the fact that the locus of their self-perception is the color of their skin; the darker the skin the lesser the access to economic and cultural faculties. In direct contrast to this reality is the depiction of whiteness in media, business models, film and other artistic endeavors as not being categorized within the paradigm of an 'other' racial identity; it is shown as the sole axis around which other identities and races are constructed within a hierarchical structure of power resulting in both economic and psychological privilege. After studying the legal system with regard to prospective immigrants' racial identities, and from his

own subjective life experience comprising of existence on the periphery of whiteness as a multiracial Latino, Haney Lopez (2006) concluded the following:

“Whiteness exists as the linchpin for the systems of racial meaning in the United States. Whiteness is the norm around which other races are constructed; its existence depends upon the mythologies and material inequalities that sustain the current racial system. The maintenance of Whiteness necessitates the conceptual existence of Blacks, Latinos, Native Americans, and other races as tropes of inferiority against which Whiteness can be measured and valued.” (132)

This idea of whiteness as being the sole signifier of adherence to social norms and regulations is one that is challenged through the works of Afropunk and Afrofuturist artists like Janelle Monáe who along with opposing this concept also try to deconstruct the supremacist psychology behind it. *Dirty Computer* is Monáe’s attempt to address these issues.

Dirty Computer is Monáe’s third album, released alongside a forty-six minute film or ‘emotion picture’ (as Monáe calls it) of the same name comprising of a musical narrative structure. The video deviates from her previous work where she adopts the persona of an android Cindy Mayweather; this time she is human. Regarding her previous films, Monáe addresses her choice to play an android by stating in an interview with the *Chicago Tribune* in 2010 that:

“I chose an android because the android to me represents ‘the other’ in our society, I can connect to the other, because it has so many parallels to my own life – just by being a female, African-American artist in today’s music industry. ... Whether you’re called weird or different, all those things we do to make people uncomfortable with themselves, I’ve always tried to break out of those boundaries.” (‘Janelle Monáe’s android power’)

In the ‘emotion’ picture, *Dirty Computer*, Monáe is explicit in her illustration of the rigid social boundaries that have had a historical hold over her right to self-expression. This time she does not adopt the guise of an android; she is a human being with a past, a present and a questionable future. On the surface, the visuals of the film are arresting as is the music and lyrics. It is also littered with references to mainstream and indie science fiction literature, the most obvious of which are Fritz Lang’s 1927 film *Metropolis* and Octavia Butler’s literary narratives of situating

black voices in the midst of futuristic universes that she employs in her works time and again. This is also the first time that Monáe includes her pansexual reality within the narrative of both her lyrics and her visual plot from the perspective of a human character. The ‘emotion’ picture, *Dirty Computer* can be understood as the artist’s attempt to examine the various personal, emotional and feminist aspects of the dystopian narratives that have not always been fully addressed, thus adding this piece of work to the category of visionary fiction.

The storyline revolves around a citizen who discovers love and experiences intense danger due to her existence in a totalitarian society. That citizen is ‘named’ Jane 57821, and is someone who has seen her world alter drastically as her fellow citizens have their ‘humanity’, which in this case refers to their history and free will, forcibly removed from them. Humans are, in this fictional context, referred to as "computers," thus explaining the title of the film and the music album. Jane 57821 chooses to become an "outlaw" a label under which she is free operate outside the rapidly disintegrating modes of self-expression within the society around her. Despite the steady merging of minds and machines around her, she is adamant in clinging to her human self. In Monáe’s own words, "She’s an outlaw because she’s being herself." Free will and basic human autonomy, in this case, are a punishable offence, as is stated in the voiceover at the very beginning of the film: "They started calling us computers. People began vanishing. And the cleaning began. You were dirty if you looked different. You were dirty if you refused to live the way they dictated. You were dirty if you showed any form of opposition. At all. And if you were dirty... it was only a matter of time."

The viewer is soon introduced Jane 57821, who has been taken under duress to a facility to be “cleaned.” The sterile environment and the dehumanizing technique adopted by the technicians that required getting rid of names and opting for a string of numbers for the purpose of

documentation are a direct reference to the setup of George Lucas' first film, *THX 1138*, where human beings have been forcibly devolved into sterile, efficient robots completely devoid of emotion. However, in the futuristic world of *Dirty Computer*, the point of this erasure of emotions is not to get rid of feelings altogether; it is the "wrong" kinds of human feelings that need to be removed lest they 'damage' the various social constructs that have been put in place so carefully by the invisible authorities.

In Jane 57821's case, she is selected due to her forbidden lesbian romance with Zen, played by actress Tessa Thompson. The crux of the film's main action involves two anonymous white male workers working in a sterile environment trying to erase Jane's memories. The movie switches chronologically, cutting to those "memories," which are in fact the music videos for the album's singles.

While the core narrative concern of the film is the forceful erasure of Jane's 'outlaw' consciousness, it is the music videos or the 'memories' that are integral in constructing the viewer's empathy with the characters and horror at the violence being inflicted on screen. These memories are set in the past illustrating the romance between Jane and Zen before their capture. The first few memories find Monáe constructing a countercultural space in order to amplify black female identities and collectives. The first memory that is wiped from Jane's 'dirty computer' is the music video for the album's second track, "Crazy, Classic, Life." Similar to Stinson's interpretation of Monáe's work as being a conscious effort at creating space for black rebellious visionaries within the overarching structure of resistance politics, this particular song and its visuals operate primarily to mediate the position of communities of color in the visible and aesthetic nature of youthful rebellion. This rebellion has rarely ever included black

individuals as autonomous agents of conflict; their representation has been reduced to being props whose sole reason for existing is the transcendence of the white community.

The video features Monáe's band of black afro-punks walking uninvited into a party of well-known counter-cultural figures including visibly indifferent white Bowie doppelgängers. The absence of black bodies within the visuals of this scene in video conveys what academics of color are already aware of: our history and memories, much like Jane's, have been deliberately erased through centuries of cultural imperialism and forced assimilation. Apart from the manipulation of histories concerning minority cultures, another underlying referent in Monáe's work is that of double standards when it comes to pushing cultural and aesthetic boundaries; while white people are celebrated for being 'rebellious', black individuals are often punished for the same transgressions. She raps, "Me and you was friends, but to them, we the opposite," noting that for "the same mistake, I'm in jail, you on top of the shit." Towards the end, Monáe laments that "All I wanted was to break the rules like you," as the police halt the party. This one scene illustrates the familiar dynamics of this dystopian future where yet again it is the black people who become the targets of state violence. "Crazy, Classic, Life" is just one of the visual representations of the racialized limitations that are placed on the notion of living and creative expression.

Monáe continues her mission to reclaim previously exclusionary spaces by reimagining and reconstructing masculinist visions of black revolutionary thought. "I'm tired of hotepts trying to tell me how to feel," Monáe states in the video for "Screwed" before progressing into the world of "Django Jane," where she personalizes various facets of black power iconography. For example, Huey Newton's wicker chair is altered into becoming a white floral throne, while Monáe's costumes of tailored suits evoke the Nation of Islam, which are paired with white

stiletto boots. The video is essentially the fusion of the radical philosophy of resistance that the Nation of Islam embodied with the aestheticism of Rhythm Nation, as the artist molds and at the same time attempts to transcend the overwhelmingly masculine myth of resistance that is popular within the black revolutionary imagination. Throughout, *Dirty Computer*, the viewer occasionally experiences the auditory simulations of an invisible black orator who speaks using the rhetoric of Martin Luther King Jr. but presents a much more extensive and inclusive vision of justice and equality than he or Malcolm X articulated, that includes labor rights, queer liberation, mobility for white communities living below the poverty line, an end to state brutality and immigrant rights.

The first half of the film is focused on establishing black female voices within cultural events and constructs existing in history and real time. These are the same canons that quite deliberately excluded black female voices from their records. The second half of the film, however, finds Monáe building her own aesthetic landscapes. An example of this is seen in the video for “Pynk,” which is meant to centralize the theme of intimacy within the paradigm of black womanhood. On the surface, this particular video is a celebration of the diversity in black bodies; female, trans and intersex. However, what separates this idea of feminine intimacy and ‘girl power’ from other hip-hop and R&B artists is Monáe’s reorientation of the trope. In other mainstream videos on the surface, women are portrayed as collectively celebrating their bodies for themselves but at the same time the spectacle of ‘sisterhood’ is aimed towards a male audience. This is understood by either the lyrical content (TLC’s ‘Baby-Baby-Baby’), or the visual signifiers present. Compared to the sanitized concept of body positivity and female-centric collectives in other music videos, Monáe’s vision of black female intimacy is uncomfortable for those who prefer the notions of mainstream beauty aesthetics. The video shows Monáe

surrounded by a group of joyful black women, as she sings that she “got the pink” referring to pink as “the lips around your, maybe” and “the skin that’s under, baby,” The video is filled with much more explicit and blatant referents to female anatomical features including pants legs outfitted to look like vaginas. The video is unapologetically sexual as it constructs space for the plethora of intimacies that can exist between black women ranging from platonic to sexually polyamorous.

Some of the most poignant scenes in the films are those that explore the mythic sisterhood of Monáe and her group of Afropunks. Not just because of the visible nature of black bodies occupying spaces that had been previously denied to them but also because these images are what separate Monáe from her contemporaries and from the artists and filmmakers in the past. For example, Beyoncé’s own concept album film *Lemonade*, while conveying a very vast literary-cinematic vocabulary in order to depict black female intimacy, falls short of being truly radical due to the artist’s focus on her devotion to her husband hence using a male figure as an anchor for her own identity. Monáe is aesthetically inspired by Julie Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust* —inferred through her use of costumes that are a direct reference to the characters in the film. However, she also borrows the thematic concern of the film regarding black feminist collectives not just for the black visibility in her own video but to decentralize the social conventions of love, family, and respectability which were a part of the original film by constructing them through her intimacy with Zen. The reason for doing this is to confront the exclusion that individuals like Monáe have suffered from mainstream black communities due to these very same notions. It can be concluded that it is when *Dirty Computer* stops using various points of historical and cultural references fully and instead starts subverting the themes and aesthetics used by the artists of the past that it becomes a radical piece of lyrical and visual work.

Liberation in Alternative Futures

An important aspect of Monáe's use of resistance in the thematic structure of her work is through her construction of intersectional liberation technologies. She conveys the view that in order to attain justice and emancipation it is integral for the black community to be agents of their own liberation. This is due to the fact that if most of the aesthetic and political actions are undertaken by non-black communities or allies, it will not lead to a self-determined reality.

It is only by the black community's assertion of their heritage, culture and creativity that they can create spaces for themselves in the widespread social sphere. This type of resistance is effective as it allows the community to control the social perception of their identity in a variety of cultural forms like film, theater, literature, dance and academia. Africana liberation mainly requires "possessing control over one's words and images in order to influence the cultivation of future ideas, and contributes towards the longevity of the culture" (Zachery 146). John Jennings asserts that the black community that has existed under oppressive structures has the ability to acquire skills and knowledge regarding tangible and intangible technologies with the potential of being used as tools of self-defense against the annihilation of their identity. He states:

"Throughout history, Black people, particularly oppressed Black people, have instantly noticed the affordances of various types of technology while under various forms of control. The most important affordances of these liberation technologies have always been freedom, equity, and agency." (qtd. in Loss)

The framework of a pantechnological perspective is one that has been discussed earlier in this dissertation. Liberation technology is an extension of that same concept. From the time of the Black Panther Party, the Black Arts Movement, Pan-Africanism, Black Power and the Civil

Rights Movement, the Africana community is one that has been consistent in creating and curating their image in the media and politics as a way of pushing back against the stereotypes that had been prevalent within the sociocultural paradigm of the time.

Therefore, the history of black cultural resistance is one that is vital within the framework of this project due to the fact that there is a linearity that is required for any community to build/re-build its history and cultural anchorage, which can help evolve its sensibilities and ideologies. For example, Emory Douglas and the subversion of racist stereotypes is important in the history of Africana aesthetics due to the way they molded the cultural consciousness of the black protestors and the ordinary people to establish the idea of resistance, and even the desire to participate, in their minds. This was a direct attack on the notions of white supremacy widespread at the time by letting the authorities know that since the black community had been excluded from the mainstream political and artistic productions, they had formulated their own information and knowledge structures to communicate. Jennings suggests that the reason for this cultural innovation on part of the oppressed community was due to the fact that during their lived experiences in dehumanizing period of history like slavery and Jim Crow segregation, Africana people learnt to behave as technologists. They gained intimate knowledge of the tools used by the institutionalized system of discrimination and through this awareness they began to create or acquire mechanisms, the purpose of which is to achieve “freedom, equity, and agency.” The use of the term liberation technology is therefore used to define the various strategies, and productions that are integral to the emancipatory existence of the black community.

Within the context of Monáe and *Dirty Computer*, the ‘liberation technologies’ employed by her are conveyed through her creation of mythologies for those individuals who are the marginalized within the marginalized. They are given a history, an aesthetic and a culture through Jane’s

performance in the film. Monáe's use of techniques, such as bricolage, alternate worlds, and future-oriented ontologies, enables her to deconstruct and reconstruct her place in the world to attain an identity that is separate from being relegated to the position of the racialized Other.

Two of the primary concerns in Janelle Monáe's work are space and time. In *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*, Ytasha Womack builds upon the case for the relevance of Afrofuturist productions within sociopolitical discourse, arguing that black cultural producers are forced to create a space both literally and figuratively, in which they can think freely in order to control the terms of their own representation in media and society. It is through the creation of these spaces that black cultural producers are able to reveal themselves to the world as being multidimensional, agentive subjects unanchored to the normative order that formulates their identity to signify their existence as alien, invisible, and marginal objects. In this sense, Afrofuturist works can be characterized as cultural productions that are primarily focused on recovery and healing, along with strategizing against the psychological and historical traumas unfolding in contemporary times.

Monáe's work signifies the fact that the 'future-imaginaries' are radical constructions that are able to reframe the conceptions of race, time, and the idea of belonging within mainstream modes of cultural and political representation. Monáe's deliberately disrupts the essentialist perception of her physical self as a black female yet aesthetically androgynous performer by projecting her Self into a futuristic universe where she is able to exist simultaneously in multiple dimensions, spaces, and times. It is through this undertaking that Monáe is able to build a representational apparatus in order to create an allegorical presence for transcendence in a fictional context that also has substantial implications in the contemporary reality. Through her music and her 'emotion picture', Monáe while, addressing her listeners, inspires them to further

construct the creative authorship that has helped enable her own metamorphosis. Monáe's work, however, is not limited to just a representation of those individuals are made to feel like outsiders or aliens, but also conveys the need to inhabit spaces of alterity. She, in short, exemplifies Donna Haraway's belief that "one is too few and two is only one possibility" due to her demonstration of the transformative potential of unsettling the social and cultural binaries between black/white, female/male, homo/heterosexual, future/present (Haraway 180).

In a way, the world that she constructs in *Dirty Computer* is a futuristic Underground Railroad that is meant to forge new methods of being, new methods of navigating, and new methods of seeing oneself in relation to the rest of the world. While many might argue that the concept album is just another example of pop music, it is important to recognize its potential as a tool that assembles alternative future-oriented ontological methodologies that are able to deconstruct and reshape Du Bois's notions of "double consciousness" hence having a transformative impact on the viewer – an impact that is subsequently responsible for generating innovative views and interpretations of real life socio-cultural politics.

Conclusion

What would the world look like if the idea of its progress and prosperity was based on an Ethnocentric point of view rather than a Eurocentric one? This is the question that initiated the conception for this research project. Afrofuturism, in an attempt to answer this question, is treated as an aesthetic inquiry into real life contexts of social justice and racial politics within the epistemological framework constructed in this dissertation.

Afrofuturism can be interpreted as a reaction to the imposed dominant ideals of science, technology and art that have been used to justify racism or the centrality of the Western expression. In this sense, Afrofutures represent the potential of counter-futures that are free of Western power. It is a medium that recognizes that inequality within racial politics is based on political, economic, social, and technical modes of progress. Based on the concept of 'visionary fiction', it builds its version of emancipation by separating time and space from current reality, therefore giving birth to a new objective reality that allows the notion of diverse perspectives of possibilities within its universe.

This dissertation built its case to reconfigure Afrofuturist aesthetics within the paradigm of aesthetics of resistance because of the potential they present regarding the creation of new liberatory technological projects. This is due to the fact that these aesthetics allow the Africana people to occupy space and reframe their identities within the discourse of futuristic, artistic and technological works. The concept of Afrofuturism is classified as a theoretical perspective that allows the interrogation of the idea of technological agency within the Africana community, the lens of which has almost always been Eurocentric.

The work of Janelle Monáe is used as an example of an identity performance that depicts the figure of a black female emulating the ideas of sexual, political and gender based emancipatory practices. The image of Black womanhood she portrays is one that conveys the multifaceted and dynamic view of intersectional liberation that the Africana community can be a part of both in the present and in the future.

The frameworks, aesthetic, political and technical, that have been studied for the purpose of this dissertation have the potential to be used for the purpose of critically studying other futurisms. In my future research, I want to examine the aesthetic of ‘Desifuturism’, (‘Desi’ is a term for a person of South Asian origin), that is geographically located in South Asia, not just because of my own affinity with the region but due to the neglect that critical aesthetic practices have suffered because of the political and economic unrest. This region has a rich history of utopian futuristic texts like *Sultana’s Dream*, published during the 20th century, that subverted the concept of the *zenana* (a secluded place allocated for women in a specific section of a house) by imagining a world where the men are the ones sequestered while the women efficiently run society through the use of scientific innovation and reason.

While there is no lack of primary material to be studied, both textual and visual, what the Desifuturistic paradigm is missing is original scholarship based on critiquing and evaluating the genre within the context of the South Asian social and cultural structures that are vastly different from those in Europe and the United States. One of the motivations behind this research was to familiarize myself with constructing an academic inquiry that is able to situate speculative fiction in the sphere of social justice, in order to answer the question: why is it important to deconstruct our subjective notions of the future in order to evaluate our present?

Reflection

Culture Studies is a field that has famously been known as being predominantly Eurocentric in its approach to studying values and belief systems that are non-Western. While this might not be done on purpose by some academics, it is still one of the factors that have led to the creation of an environment of exclusion as far as critical understandings of minority cultures is concerned as the bias, conscious or unconscious, that is present in the research is one that works in a subliminal manner and undermines or worse treats the subject as an exotic concept.

This research project was undertaken as an attempt to construct a piece of academic work that builds upon, mostly, on the endeavors of academics of color. While having a trans-cultural approach to academia is important, it is also essential to understand the frameworks of power, both racial and academic, under which knowledge being produced. The word ‘produced’ is essential to use here as this act is consciously done. Another term that the methodology of this research is focused on is ‘trans-cultural’ as opposed to ‘multicultural’. According to Slavoj Zizek, multiculturalism:

“is a disavowed, inverted, self-referential form of racism, a "racism with a distance"-it "respects" the Other's identity, conceiving the Other as a self- enclosed "authentic" community towards which he, the multiculturalist, maintains a distance rendered possible by his privileged universal position. Multiculturalism is a racism which empties its own position of all positive content (the multiculturalist is not a direct racist, he doesn't oppose to the Other the particular values of his own culture), but nonetheless retains this position as the privileged empty point of universality from which one is able to appreciate (and depreciate) properly other particular cultures-the multiculturalist respect for the Other's specificity is the very form of asserting one's own superiority. (44)”

This is not to say that this research does not take up the problematics of visual culture and critique that have been presented by scholarship produced under Western paradigms, the theoretical framework is quite liberal in the use of works of theorists like, Ranciere and Foucault, on the concepts of aesthetics of resistance and structures of power. However, they have been

reinterpreted within the black diasporic culture, specifically located in the United States of America for the purpose of this research.

This dissertation forced me to reflect on a few questions, some of which are existential in the academic sense: First, is the interest in cultural frameworks that are quite unfamiliar to the researcher (for example, non-Western cultures) ethically warranted, and is it possible to fully understand and do justice to these cultures? The second question is mainly related to the subjective nature of research: Is it possible for scholars and research to exist as institutions that are able to critically analyze culture despite being an active participant in this culture and its subsequent struggles? The third question is regarding the relevance of the field of aesthetics: Is culture really the most significant subject to investigate in the face of crippling global economic and social inequality and exploitation? Why is studying aesthetics so integral to furthering human knowledge?

The very construct of academic research and methodology is one that needs to be more political in nature due to the rising phenomenon of propaganda and right wing extremism that has hindered human development as a whole. Academia is the one field where critical thinking is encouraged leading to hope for social change in the foreseeable future.

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