

Research Article

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“Okay ladies, now let’s get in formation!”: Music Videos and the Construction of Cultural Memory

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Abstract: This paper explores strategies for constructing and perpetuating cultural memory through music videos, using Beyoncé’s *Formation* (2016) and Janelle Monáe’s *Many Moons* (2008) and *Q.U.E.E.N.* (2013) as case studies. The medium’s idiosyncrasies create unique ways of communicating and remembering, explored here within a framework of Cultural Studies and Memory Studies. Easy dissemination and the limited length of most videos ensure a large, diverse audience. The relative freedom from narrative constraints enables the director to create original imagery, and most importantly, the medium allows an intricate blending of performance and performativity; while the videos evidently are performances, they are strongly performative as well, not only with respect to gender and ethnicity but in significant ways also cultural memory. A close reading of Beyoncé’s video *Formation* shows how she explicitly *does* the cultural memory of the New Orleans flooding. The videos by Monáe are shown to produce counter-memories, relying heavily on the strategy of Afrofuturism. As such, these densely woven networks of visual symbols become palimpsests of black lived experience and cultural memory, passed on to millions of viewers.

Keywords: Afrofuturism, Beyoncé, Janelle Monáe, New Orleans, performativity

The year 1981 saw the launch of MTV and with it the birth of the modern music video. Before long, research fields like Psychology and Media Studies started taking note of the impact music videos had on youth culture and in particular on social constructions of gender and ethnicity. Since the ‘80s, several such studies have looked at questions such as “How are constructions of gender reinforced through music videos?” and “How does aggression in music videos influence the audience?” (Jones 83-84; Turner 173-174; Wallis 160-161). These studies have highlighted aspects of cultural identity, youth culture and stereotyping. More recently, an increased interest in the concept of cultural memory has added a new perspective to the research of cultural artefacts and heritage, by studying the way memory pervades these objects.

This study takes the intersection of Cultural Studies and Cultural Memory Studies as its starting point, by exploring the medium of the music video in terms of the particular strategies it allows for the creation and sustenance of cultural memory. In doing so, I will focus solely on the visual content of the videos. This will enable us to take a close and detailed look at the visual language. Much can be said about the interaction between music, lyrics and images—multimodal discourse analysis provides useful tools for such analyses—but the images themselves are more than worthy of close inspection. My contention is that the music video, as a medium, possesses idiosyncratic characteristics, which set it apart from other film-based media, like movies or TV series. These idiosyncrasies open up medium-specific possibilities of constructing and propagating cultural memories. The element of performativity, as introduced by J. L. Austin and taken up by Judith Butler (see below), is essential to the medium. This is not to say that all music videos consciously or explicitly engage with cultural memory; to be sure, many of the

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music videos produced over the last few decades are little more than shallow attempts to promote the sales of pop albums. Nonetheless, some videos contain a depth and visual symbolism actively contributing to a collective cultural understanding of historical events. I will discuss the visual content of three videos which I believe illustrate some of the diverse processes in which cultural memory can play a role in music videos: Beyoncé’s *Formation* (2016) and Janelle Monáe’s *Many Moons* (2008) and *Q.U.E.E.N.* (2013).

The Music Video as Medium

Although the music video shares characteristics with the medium of film, some aspects set it apart in significant ways. First of all, the length of most videos, at 3 to 5 minutes, makes them easy to digest and to distribute. Furthermore, the rise of digital media has helped spread music videos, through platforms such as Youtube, Vevo and Vimeo (Vernallis 207-208). These platforms are typically used to distribute short-form content, making them ideal for the spread of music videos. Secondly, the medium can be said to enjoy a freedom of narrative constraint not quite as readily available to the medium of full-length film, a characteristic the music video shares with video art. While there are beautiful non-narrative films, such as *Leviathan* (2012) by Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel, these rarely make it into mainstream cinema. The medium of the music video is different in this respect. Although many music videos do use a (strongly simplified) narrative, is it equally common for videos to have (next to) no narrative frame, but instead string together a set of loosely connected visual signs. The videos discussed below, by Beyoncé and Janelle Monáe, are clear examples of the absence and presence, respectively, of a narrative.

In relation to these aspects, many videos present a high degree of hypermediacy, a strategy first discussed by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (Bolter and Grusin 6), in which the mediating presence of a medium is fully acknowledged, and the attention of the audience is in fact actively drawn towards the medium itself and away from the presented content. In music videos, downplaying the narrative is often offset by a foregrounding of the medium. Music videos can frequently be seen to use multiple technologies, including animation and computer-generated imagery, as well as effects like bullet time, kaleidoscopic distortions and morphing. Videos like Radiohead’s *Street Spirit* (1996), experimenting with slow motion and variable speeds, and The White Stripes’ *The hardest button to button* (2003), become strongly hypermediate as a result¹. The visual freedom and the hypermediate nature of the medium provide music video directors with an extensive set of tools to create succinct, emotionally powerful messages, which do not need narrative but can convey emotions, much like poems can, through placing together otherwise unrelated images (Vernallis 228).

Performative Performances

A third characteristic of the medium, most significant in the context of this analysis, is its performative nature. Performative utterances, as introduced by language philosopher J.L. Austin in the 1950s, do not just describe an external reality, but actively alter it. Saying “I do” at a wedding ceremony is not merely a use of words describing the situation, but is an act which *makes it so*. From language philosophy, the concept has since travelled to the fields of literature studies, critical theory, feminist theory and gender studies. It is the latter, in particular, in which the concept has taken on a more elaborate meaning. In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler uses the phenomenon to explain the construction of gender. Although it might seem like one’s gender is the expression of an inherent truth, it is, in fact, a construction, that becomes created, for and by everyone, through repeating acts of gender unconsciously copied from one’s cultural surroundings. As such there is no original gender that can be taken on or imitated, rather the notion of gender becomes created in the process of “doing” it (Butler 523-6).

¹ A good example of a feature film, exhibiting the same sense of hypermediacy, is Tom Tykwer’s *Lola Rennt* (1998), blending 35 mm recordings with animation, time loops and a strong emphasis on soundtrack, which makes the whole film feel like an extended music video.

It is this understanding of the concept that has recently made its way into the field of Memory Studies. Like gender, memory has no fixed original which can be copied and passed on. And like gender, the construction of memory is not about the recreation of a historical truth but is rather an answer to needs and desires in the present (Erl 8). As such there is no objectively correct memory; each individual constructs memories, both personal and collective ones, by taking up elements of expressions of memories seen elsewhere and in turn expressing these. On a cultural scale, the performativity of memory means that each representation of a memory (in for instance film, literature, museums, oral history, etc.) forms part of a dynamic and ongoing construction of that very memory.

The medium of the music video is no exception and is of particular interest in the construction of cultural memory. An intricate blending of performance and performativity characterises many music videos. The videos evidently are performances, carefully acted out through choreography, scenery and clothing, often involving a team of screenwriters, designers, choreographers and directors. At the same time though, the videos are strongly performative, most notably with respect to gender and ethnicity (Turner; Wallis). That is to say, the cultural codes used in the videos to communicate aspects of identity are taken from—but simultaneously construct—cultural identities and their meanings, passing these on to the viewers.

Although this holds true for other performance-based media like film as well, I would argue that the performativity of music videos is of a particular nature, due to the role of the starring artist(s). Most videos show the artists as actors as well as private persons; we see for instance Beyoncé act out particular roles in her videos, but at the same time we are looking at the private person and artist Beyoncé Knowles-Carter. This “twin-Beyoncé” can be said, in Butler’s terms, to *do her own* gender and ethnicity, reinforcing notions of what it is to be female and what it is to be black. This process differs from the construction of gender and ethnicity through fictional characters in film and advertisement. We are not just dealing with the fictional portrayal of identity here, but with the often exaggerated, but nonetheless ostensibly essential and true identity of the artist, lending the representation an aura of authenticity. Videos which use recordings of concerts, a common practice, as well as scripted scenes can be said to combine these two different aspects. A strong example of this is Taylor Swift’s *New Romantics* (2016), which shows a selection of “unedited” footage of her latest tour, combined with a voice-over by the artist telling us about the incredible memories the tour has left her with. We are invited to relate to the artist on a personal level, to see the private person behind the celebrity, all the while knowing that we are looking at a performance as well.

This is, I believe, an essential reason why music videos often elicit such strong reactions (both positive and negative) to portrayed notions of cultural identity (including gender and ethnicity) and memory. It results, not uncommonly, in endless streams of blogs and internet discussions which tend to conflate the two sides of the artist’s persona. Lately, Beyoncé, in particular, has sent ripples through the online world. An excellent example of this “conflation of Beyoncé’s” can be seen in bell hooks’ blog post “Moving Beyond Pain.” There she discusses Beyoncé’s video album *Lemonade* in terms of the fictional narrative of the video as well as the personal life of the singer, the “non-fictional voice and persona” as she calls it (“Moving Beyond Pain”). In discussions of this kind, it is not merely the cultural artefact—the music video with its imagery, plotlines and characters—which is being analysed; the artist herself is held accountable for whatever her persona does or says in the video.

The conflation of performance and real life makes the concept of identity and its performativity an interesting one in music videos. The private individual identities of the artists become taken up into bigger cultural and subcultural identities represented by the performances. The way music videos play into and help construct cultural identities presents an interesting topic for thorough analysis. However, in this analysis, I am interested in identity first and foremost as it is constructed through—and in turn, helps to construct—cultural memory. It is my contention that music videos can, and in important cases do, use cultural memory to create a sense of cultural identity and belonging. This hinges on processes of inclusion and exclusion through access to shared group memory. Certain group memories become performed and in the process also performatively constructed.

Within a context of cultural and collective memory, this aspect of performativity in the music video is particularly interesting. As Astrid Erl and Ann Rigney point out, ““remembering” is better seen as an active engagement with the past, as performative rather than reproductive. It is as much a matter of acting

out a relationship to the past from a particular point in the present as it is a matter of preserving and retrieving earlier stories” (Erll and Rigney 2). The creative freedom and performative nature of the music video allow the artist to construct a visual and performative representation of memory, creating a sense of the remembrance of the event rather than a historical reconstruction of it. The double role as actor and private person, the blending of representation and presentation, reinforces the constructed memory, by seemingly saying “this is not just fiction, this is my life I’m showing you; trust these memories, they are my own as much as they are scripted!” A close look at Beyoncé’s *Formation* will illustrate this.

“My Daddy Alabama, Mama Louisiana”

How do these different characteristics interact in reinforcing or constructing cultural memory? A closer look at the video for Beyoncé’s song *Formation* (2016) will help clarify this since several of these aspects come together in this video. Released in the build-up to Beyoncé’s concert tour *Formation*, the video, which deals with the flooding of New Orleans in 2005, became a hit instantly and was extensively discussed online: in blogs, fora and social media. The video strongly appeals to a sense of shared identity amongst the black community of New Orleans (as we will see below) and does so by invoking a sense of group memory, only directly and fully understandable, supposedly, for this specific community. As such, the video can seem mysterious and unintelligible to “outsiders,” creating a division between in-group and out-group based on access to cultural memory. The numerous websites explaining the video, such as the explanation of the lyrics on the website of Genius (2016) testify to this divide. In the comical *Saturday Night Live* sketch “The Day Beyoncé Turned Black” (released on the SNL Youtube Channel on February 14, 2016, and viewed over 10.000.000 times) the white characters despair when they cannot understand *Formation*, leading one of them to say “Maybe this song isn’t for us.” With its recurring line “Okay ladies, now let’s get in formation” the song can be taken as an appeal to the supposed in-group to unite behind a shared cultural identity and memory. Beyoncé invites those who possess the cultural capital and memory to understand the images and lyrics to step in formation with her.

The imagery of the video refers directly to the effects of Hurricane Katrina hitting New Orleans, as well as to police brutality, typical Southern traditions and movements like Black Lives Matter. The video does not present a coherent plot; rather, it interweaves shots from different scenes, some of which are best described as *tableaux vivants*. No historical facts or narrative are provided, and the viewer is invited to piece together the references and visual citations; rather than narrate, the video seems to evoke an emotional response through the charged imagery. As such it is less concerned with what exactly happened and more with the emotional impact on and relevance for present-day culture, making it a good example of the construction and passing on of a (supposedly) shared cultural memory.

In the opening shot of the video, we see Beyoncé, dressed in typical Southern country dress, on top of a floating New Orleans police car in a flooded street. Mixed into the intro of the song, we hear a quote by the black bounce artist Messy Mya, who asks us: “What happened at the New Orleans?” This New Orleans artist was murdered in 2010, and in the context of this video, the quote seems to refer both to the chaotic aftermath of the New Orleans flooding as well as to the comedian’s unsolved murder. At the end of the video, we return to this scene, as both the car and Beyoncé disappear under water. Another quote can be heard in the background, this time taken from the documentary *Trouble the Water* (2008); we hear a man say “Girl, I hear some thunder” followed by a woman’s voice, calling out: “Golly, look at that water boy, oh Lord!”

In this scene alone, the various symbolic references—the police car, dress, flooded houses and quotes—tie together cultural references taken from different elements of New Orleans’ history and cultural identities. The memory of Katrina is foregrounded and becomes embedded in a broader context of memories and emotions of black experience in this city in the South. In subsequent scenes, this blend of cultural references becomes even more elaborate, as images of New Orleans marching bands, Mardi Gras Indians, bounce dancing, Louisiana Voodoo and Southern belles are woven together. The representation of cultural identities in the imagery is imbued with a strong sense of shared memory, even if the exact identity of the

target group remains unclear (a point we will come back to below). The Mardi Gras Indians and Voodoo practices, in particular, are cultural elements with origins stretching far back into the past, some invented, some clouded in (religious) mystery and passed on through oral traditions.

The celebration of Mardi Gras, with its parades of people wearing costumes and masks, is a defining element of the city of New Orleans. Participants organise themselves in *krewe*s, with strict hierarchies and identifying marks. The black communities of New Orleans have developed their own type of *krewe*s, the Mardi Gras Indians. According to the Mardi Gras organisers' website:

[t]he Mardi Gras Indians named themselves after native Indians to pay them respect for their assistance in escaping the tyranny of slavery. It was often local Indians who accepted slaves into their society when they made a break for freedom. They have never forgotten this support. ("Mardi Gras Indians History and Tradition")

The emphasis on remembering is explicit in this description, as is the direct link to Native American origins, but the historical connection is fraught with difficulty (Berry). The "local Indians" would have been southeastern Indians, but the headdresses and costumes are derived from Plain Indians' iconography; and although names of *krewe*s and *krewe* leaders often refer to Indian names, the chanting and "Indian talk" resemble French and Caribbean phrases and styles (Lipsitz 103-10). Here the historical facts are secondary to the sense of a shared cultural memory, or as George Lipsitz describes it: "Mardi Gras Indian traditions are not a matter of establishing precise origins or maintaining authentic folk forms; rather they seek to unite the present with the past in a dynamic, yet continuous process" (Lipsitz 111-2).

A similar case might be made for the Voodoo practices, particular to New Orleans. In a rather ominous scene in the video we see Beyoncé clad in black, her neck and wrists covered in silver jewellery resembling the veves worn by Voodoo practitioners when dealing with the Loa, the Spirits. While Janell Hobson interprets this as a channelling of the loa Maman Brigitte (Hobson), the exact identification is not necessary to understand the scene as referring to Voodoo practice. The emphasis on New Orleans in the video leads the viewer to recognise this as Louisiana Voodoo, a religious practice originating in New Orleans, most known for the nineteenth-century priestess Marie Leveau (Bilinsky 11). Like the Mardi Gras Indians, this religious tradition is a hybrid one, with historical roots in African religious culture as well as in Catholicism and Spiritualism.

Both these practices rely heavily on the distinction between in- and out-group, those who have been initiated into the secrets of the tradition's community and those who have not and can therefore not understand the symbolic language necessary for participation. The creation of a shared cultural identity here relies on oral traditions of remembering and storytelling. In less explicit ways other cultural practices referred to in the video, marching bands, bounce music and resistance against police brutality, also require initiation, through knowledge and experience. In the video, this in-group, this imagined community, seems to become the collective owner of the new memory of Katrina. At present, the flooding of New Orleans, only about a decade ago, is still well within the realm of Jan Assmann's communicative memory (focusing on the oral history of the 80-100 years directly following the event; Assmann 56). The video seems to say: it is this same community, this same in-group, which can and will preserve the memory of this catastrophe; this is a community strongly grounded on cultural memory and oral traditions and they will tell this story.

That being said, despite the invoked sense of community and cultural identity, it remains unclear exactly who the target group is. Is the video speaking to African Americans in particular, or to Southerners, "ladies," New Orleans residents, etc.? The music video seems to speak to a specific in-group, but remains evasive about the exact nature of this group. This conflation of memories and therefore of cultural identities of those who share these memories is potentially dangerous, to say the least. Beyoncé has been criticized for shamelessly appropriating memories and stories that are not hers to claim or tell, aligning herself with communities that might not agree with this portrayal of shared identity ("New Orleans is the Prime Ingredient in Beyoncé's Viral Video 'Hot Sauce'"; "On 'Jackson Five Nostrils,' Creole vs. 'Negro' and Beefing Over Beyoncé's 'Formation'"; "Dear Beyoncé, Katrina is Not Your Story"). An important element of this criticism, exemplified by the web post "Dear Beyoncé, Katrina is Not Your Story," is the way in which lyrics and images seem to imply a seamless connection between Beyoncé's individual life and memories and

the cultural memory of the New Orleans disaster. The performative complexity of the medium, discussed above, is key in this respect.

Although we see Beyoncé act out various roles throughout the video, from Voodoo priestess to Southern Belle, both lyrics and images make it very clear that we are watching the private person Beyoncé Knowles as well as her many fictional look-alikes. In the first verse of the song (repeated a few minutes later) we hear Beyoncé sing “My daddy Alabama, mama Louisiana, you mix that negro with that creole make a Texas bama,” referring to her personal history and cultural identity. Although the lyrics of the song do not deal with the flooding of New Orleans, the combination of lyrics referring to family roots and images referring to broader history seem to weave Beyoncé’s personal narrative together with shared memories of the disaster. Aisha Durham suggests that Beyoncé has been playing up her Southern femininity in videos like *Check on it* (2005), emphasising her Southern roots to frame her music within the narrative of hip hop from the “Dirty South” (Durham 42). A similar fusion of personal life and appropriated cultural identity might be said to take place in *Formation*.

The conflation of acted roles and private person is added to by the fact that Beyoncé’s own daughter features in the video. Not only is she included, but she is also playing a role herself in a choreography—albeit a very simplified one—with two other girls; the backdrop and clothing relate this scene to the scenes of Beyoncé and her Southern belles. By aligning her own background and family history with a black New Orleans community, represented through typical cultural practices, Beyoncé seems to fit her own personal memories into the collective memory of the city and community. She was raised in a middle-class household in a Houston suburb (Durham 42) and was not directly affected by Katrina. But the blend of imagery representing the events and their cultural context, combined with the authenticity of her private person, lend to the performative nature of the visualisation of the cultural memory of this event. She seems to (want to) represent the black New Orleans community whose memory of Katrina has permanently altered its identity.

Finally, the importance of memory and the strategies of sharing these becomes emphasised through the hypermediacy and emphasis on different media in the video. Post-production has heightened the video’s hypermediacy, i.e. the explicit focus on medium rather than the content shown through the medium (Bolter and Grusin 6). The very first shot, the parental advisory warning, shows a computer screen on which the warning is typed; the image breaks up as if through some malfunction, and we move to Beyoncé standing on top of the police car. The scene showing Beyoncé in cornrows and fur circling a deserted parking lot breaks up much as an old VCR recording would. Colour filters and temporary purple or red hues suggest damaged film, similar to home recordings. The formation of dancers in the parking lot is made to look like an old-fashioned amateur video, of the type my parents used to make when I was little. The sign “play” is clearly visible in the lower right corner, and there is a strong distortion and blue hue.

Apart from this emphatic hypermediacy, the general importance of mediatisation is shown by the different techniques of recording, featured in the video. Paparazzi are shown with old fashioned folding cameras, walls of the sets representing the 19th-century Antebellum South are covered in painted portraits of black ancestors and around three and a half minutes into the video a man holds up an issue of the newspaper *The Truth* featuring Martin Luther King on the front page. The array of media used in the video—documentary material, photography, amateur recordings, newspapers, paintings—represents the various ways in which we try and record as well as construct memories, both on an individual and a collective level. We all know the surprise of discovering that a cherished memory is in fact based on a photo rather than an actual memory and our cultural memory of events such as 9/11 has become inextricably linked to amateur videos of the event. Much like our own individual memories are built on photos, stories, visual symbols and descriptions of events, the cultural memory addressed in this video is constructed of bits and pieces taken from diverse sources.

Placing images of cultural practices and historical events together in tightly structured sequence like a music video creates the suggestion (or illusion) of association between these images. *Formation* is a case in point. The video functions like a nexus of cultural references which seem to suggest a body of cultural (and personal?) memories, linked through their relevance to a (supposed) black New Orleans community. As such, the video acts a *lieu de mémoire*, an artefact which contains and represents a shared memory, but

simultaneously leaves it open to multiple interpretations and contestation. The notion of performativity is particularly apt in this respect. Much like Butler argues that there is no original gender and that all gender is, in fact, a construction created by perpetually quoting cultural practices, the construction of memory is not about the facts, the original events, the history. It is about an emotional understanding of that history in light of present-day contexts, in this case, for instance, blending in with the Black Lives Matter movement. As such there is no original memory: it is an ongoing process of construction and reconstruction.

Time Travelling Rebels

“It’s hard to stop rebels that time travel.” The voice at the start of Janelle Monáe’s music video *Q.U.E.E.N.* (2013) seems to explain the reasons behind the artistic strategy of the musician. In 2008 Monáe released her first major record, *Metropolis: Suite I (The Chase)*, the first in a series telling a story set in the year 2719, about the female android Cindi Mayweather. This alter ego of Janelle Monáe has become the leader of a rebel formation of androids in the city Metropolis (an explicit reference to Fritz Lang’s expressionist film from 1927), creating “a rebellious new form of pop music known as cybersoul.” She has, much against the rules of the dystopian society, fallen in love with a human. The albums *The ArchAndroid: Suites II and III* (2010) and *The Electric Lady: Suites IV and V* (2013) continue the saga. We are told that Janelle Monáe is, in fact, her future self from the year 2719, in which she has been kidnapped and cloned to create the android Cindi Mayweather, after which the true Janelle has been sent back to our times by the evil authorities of Metropolis (see liner notes of *The ArchAndroid*). Meanwhile, “back” in 2719, Cindi Mayweather has become the mythical ArchAndroid, “sent to free the citizens of Metropolis from the Great Divide, a secret society which has been using time travel to suppress freedom and love throughout the ages” (liner notes of *The ArchAndroid*).

As in *Formation*, references to the past and the future are here meant to evoke a body of shared cultural memories, belonging in this case to the African-American community whose history and cultural identity has been shaped by slavery. The complex collection of albums, text, songs and videos that make up the narrative forms a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, presenting an elaborate allegory based on science fiction tropes like alien abduction, time travel and androids, all directly referring to practices of slavery. Although the work is highly innovative and has been praised for its creativity, Monáe is building on Afrofuturism, an aesthetic mode that has been around since the 1950s. The term, coined by Mark Dery in 1994 (34), is used to describe visual arts, music, literature and other expressions of culture which are seen to address “African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future” (Dery 180). Elaborate future scenarios are crafted, using elements like alien abduction, android slavery and underground resistance in dystopian societies, to talk about a shared African-American sense of the past in terms of the future.

The aesthetic strategy of Afrofuturism is closely linked to notions of contested and counter-memories. Taking control of narratives about the future and changing these opens up space to change narratives of history as well; linear time folds in on itself, as a future of alien abduction and android slave trade on far-away planets has already happened to those whose ancestors have lived through the Middle Passage. When Janelle Monáe sings about androids of the future, she is singing just as much about African slaves of the past and about those who suffer oppression in the present. In her own words: “I speak about androids because androids represent, to me, a new form of “the other.” And I love speaking about the future because it gives us all a chance to rewrite history and do what’s right” (Van Veen 13). Again, as with *Formation*, it is not the historical, factual narrative that needs reconsidering, but the presence and legitimacy of a cultural memory of this past, the way in which its emotional impact bears upon the present, as an essential element in the construction of cultural identities.

The videos *Many Moons* and *Q.U.E.E.N.* both exhibit Afrofuturist characteristics, though in different ways. In *Many Moons*, an official short film, we are present at the annual android auction, where androids walk along a catwalk and are sold to the elite of Metropolis, while Cindi Mayweather performs on stage. The blend of historic slave auction, present-day fashion show and futurist androids results in a conflation

of time layers; lingering emotions from the past combine with anxieties about the future to make us aware of wrongs in the present. On the background screens behind the singing Cindi Mayweather we can just make out news recordings from what seem to be previous wars, old fragments of film showing us marching soldiers, bombs being dropped and people protesting. As in *Formation*, this amalgamation of fictional narrative and documentary material of real-world historical events emphasises the act of remembering through recording. We cannot make out exactly what is being shown on the screens; the relevance of the images lies, rather, in their emotional tinting of the narrative and their reference to the assumed reliability and truthfulness of media like photography and film.

Q.U.E.E.N. is part of the same overarching narrative, but like *Many Moons*, it tells its own independent story. From the voice-over, at the beginning of the video, it becomes clear that we are visitors to the Living Museum, “where rebels from throughout history have been frozen in suspended animation.” Upon entering, we see an array of black people, from different era’s, placed throughout the white museum space as exhibited objects. The museum is run by the Time Council which prides itself on stopping “rebels that time travel,” amongst whom “members of Wondaland and their notorious leader, Janelle Monáe.” We watch as two young visitors distract the guards and help the frozen rebels come back to life. The acts of rebellion of these exhibited “objects” consist of dancing and singing, a “musical weapons programme” recalling the importance of these kinds of bodily resistance during times of slavery.

Again, time layers become confounded, as the video is set in the future but shows us the rebel leader from that future’s past, i.e. our current present. A group of women dance around in fashion and make-up from the ‘60s and two men in African tribal body paint and loincloths accompany the singer; at one point, one of them is briefly but unmistakably jumping in the well-known style of the Maasai. Traces of African origins, resistance against slavery and freedom movements of the ‘60s are rolled into one, connected through the shared emphasis on dance. This focus on the continuity of bodily resistance, as part of the cultural identity and memory of the African-American community, is best described as a form of group muscle memory.

In addition to the actions of the characters, the setting, the museum, also evokes associations with the resistance against grand narratives. The space of the museum has traditionally been a conveyor of history and memory. The rise of the ethnography museum, in the second half of the 19th century, coincided with colonial practices which provided stories and artefacts from far-away lands and peoples. The knowledge presented by these museums has been centred around Western grand narratives, supporting ideas of cultural evolution and Western dominance. In this video the museum space becomes a site of resistance, as the objects—the docile bodies of the African-American “others” put on show—break away from hegemonic memories and rebel through dance, while Monáe is singing “Am I a freak for dancing around? Am I a freak for getting down?”

The “black other” has historically been put on display in dead, preserved state, such as the “negro of Banyoles”—the stuffed corpse of a member of the San exhibited in the Darder Museum of Banyoles until 1991. In addition, people have been displayed as living museum objects in human zoos and world exhibitions; famous examples include Ota Benga and Saartje Baartman, brought over from other continents and put on display as ethnographic treasures. In *Q.U.E.E.N.* the objects seem, at first, impressive pieces of taxidermy, but when the music starts playing they quickly become living objects. However, instead of confirming narratives of cultural evolution and Western supremacy, the objects run amok and undermine these narratives. The museum as memory palace becomes distorted as the exhibited objects start dancing around, breaking up the order of the exhibition and therefore the discursive narrative on display. While maintaining a grand narrative was achieved through oppression of these displayed bodies, it is through these same bodies that resistance and counter-narrative are produced.

In both videos by Janelle Monáe, *Many Moons* and *Q.U.E.E.N.*, the body plays an essential role, as it becomes inscribed with memories of earlier objectification, in auctions or museums, and of resistance. Led by Monáe, who tells us she is going to “keep leading like a young Harriet Tubman” because she is “tired of Marvin asking [her] ‘What’s going on?’” dance becomes a method of breaking free from grand narratives and of forging counter-narratives and counter-memories. This focus on dance as a mode of resistance is a common cultural trope, found for instance in the novel *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) by Ishmael Reed, in which a

dance virus is spread by black musicians in the '20s, or in the documentary *Paris is Burning* (1991), in which vogue dancing is an essential element of a black gay cultural identity as well as an alternative to street fighting in the '90s.

Moving away from a focus on Monáe alone, some observations concern both Beyoncé's and Monáe's performances. In Beyoncé's *Formation*, the use of dance as a pseudo-military strategy is made explicit in the artist's singing to her dancers (and her audience): "Ok ladies, now let's get in formation." The double meaning, as a military tactic and a reference to choreography, emphasises the force of cooperating bodies. Falling back on this tradition of black rebellion through music and dance, seen in the videos by both artists, connects the present to an (emotionally not so) distant past of slavery and oppression and seems to invoke a forceful "cultural muscle memory." In that sense, the emphasis on the body becomes performative of the cultural memories woven into Beyoncé's and Monáe's videos. The memories and their corresponding emotions become passed on through types of dance (be it bounce, traditional African dance, jazz, hip hop, etc.) specific to the cultural communities who "own" these memories.

Like Beyoncé in *Formation*, Janelle Monáe is also seen to take up different roles and characters in the videos. In fact, her use of alter ego's as well as the role her "real" identity plays in the narrative of her suites is even more elaborate than the conflation of Beyoncé's performed roles and private person. The "real" Janelle Monáe, as seen in interviews, becomes part of the fictional narrative, to such an extent that she quotes her fictional alter ego Cindi Mayweather both in interviews and in her music videos (the title of the song *Many Moons* is taken from a "quote" by Cindi Mayweather). The videos, as well as the performances and interviews, blend Monáe's personal life with the fictional narratives she has created. Her personal experience and memories of being a black woman in a society which perpetuates a history of discrimination become performative of a large cultural memory. The lingering echo of slavery, of being sold and put on display, is taken up into the artist's personal memory. As a result, the performance in the videos becomes performative in a personal manner. Like Beyoncé, Janelle Monáe does not merely act out the roles of auctioned slave or rebellious museum object; she is actively *doing*, performing, her personal experiences as well as the collective memories that have come to shape these personal experiences.

Conclusion

The medium of the music video lends itself very well to the visual representation of memory. The length of most videos, the loosely woven or even absent narrative and the creative freedom and range of visual devices make it possible to foreground the emotional impact of cultural memories while leaving the exact historical narratives largely out of the picture. In addition, the blending of performance and performativity—the double identity of the artist in most videos, as private person as well as performer—makes the presented identities and memories more complex. In the case of the discussed videos, the private identities of the artists become taken up into a wider cultural identity through an appeal to a shared body of cultural memories.

While cultural identity can be represented and constructed in various ways (in music videos as much as in other visual media), my focus here has been the use of cultural memory in creating such identities. The visual signs in these videos can only be fully understood by those who possess the necessary cultural codes, in this case, the body of cultural memories—of Katrina, slavery, religious practice, New Orleans history, etc. It is not the historical facts which allow the audience to thoroughly understand the videos, but rather an emotional connection to the cultural memory of these facts. Despite the problematic nature of these shared memories and identities—who is in, who is out, whose identity is intended here?—this strategy provides the music videos with an exceptional emotional force.

As Astrid Erll points out in *Memory in Culture*, remembering is a *process*, endlessly repeated by people in the present, instead of a fixed, stable abstraction. As such, "[i]ndividual and collective memories are never a mirror image of the past, but rather an expressive indication of the needs and interests of the person or group doing the remembering in the present" (Erll 8). Likewise, the references to past atrocities in Beyoncé's and Monáe's videos do not form a direct reflection of historical events. They express the current

needs and fears of a group of people who share and are still influenced by a cultural memory of this past. The construction of these memories is not about the historic facts; it is about the emotional relevance of those events to present-day experience of being black in a society with an ongoing history of slavery and oppression.

In addition to relying on cultural memory to address a particular audience, the videos also reinforce and help construct this cultural memory. The videos do not merely represent but performatively create these memories. Rather than presenting historical narratives, the three videos discussed above all emphasise the emotional effect of cultural memories which are never fixed but are forever constructed and reconstructed through the context of present-day concerns and events. The videos seem to speak on behalf of communities tied together through shared cultural memories and therefore identities. They invite their audiences to align personal memories with these collective ones, to never forget but instead to share these memories and keep them alive, to unite behind them and “get in formation!”

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