



## *Diary of a Dirty Computer*

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Janelle Bullock, McNair Scholar, The Pennsylvania State University

McNair Research Faculty Adviser: Timeka Tounsel, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor of African American Studies and Media Studies  
The Pennsylvania State University

### **Abstract**

This paper explores how contemporary Black women artists use audiovisual resources and experimental forms of musical storytelling to construct a 21st century critical Black feminist mode of expression. Specifically, I examine Janelle Monáe and her visual album *Dirty Computer*. Using textual analysis and semiotic analysis, I approach *Dirty Computer* as a case study that demonstrates how Janelle Monáe, a Queer Black woman, uses commercial media as a platform for self-definition. Furthermore, my project is an autoethnography that considers my own experiences of the tensions that emerge in an attempt to make sense of the self as a Queer Christian Black woman.

### **Introduction**

Artists like Michael Jackson and Prince were well-known for integrating audiovisual elements into their work as music artists. *Thriller* (1982) and *Purple Rain* (1984) were more than musical triumphs, they were multimedia projects that thrust Jackson and Prince into superstardom. In fact, *Purple Rain* garnered an Oscar and two Grammy awards for its artistry and *Thriller* was a groundbreaking masterpiece that helped to integrate the MTV network, especially its 14-minute music video for the song that shared the album's title. By experimenting with artistic storytelling across different platforms, Prince and Jackson set the tone for an important genre in Black expressive culture—the music video—that would eventually become dominated by hip-hop artists. By the 1990s, music industry gatekeepers repackaged hip-hop as a heavily masculine, hypersexual, and aggressive genre steeped in stereotypes of Black criminality and caricatures of the Black poor. Within this narrow frame, 21<sup>st</sup> century music videos by commercial hip-hop and R&B artists developed a reputation for being gross exhibitions of violence, conspicuous consumption, and the sexual objectification of Black women. The video vixen emerged as a staple of this visual form of hip-hop culture and a reminder that Black women still had to contend with the male gaze as they attempted to express their sexuality in public culture.

Against this backdrop, contemporary Black women have breathed new life into the audiovisual form and reclaimed this medium as a critical artistic space. Beyoncé's self-titled visual album released to critical acclaim in 2013 and her follow-up project, *Lemonade* (2016), marked the artist as a more politically-oriented cultural producer. The success of these projects demonstrated the profitability of visual albums as an updated iteration of the music video and proved that there was an audience hungry for musical products that crossed boundaries in form and theme.

My study examines how a contemporary Black woman, artist Janelle Monáe, uses audiovisual resources and experimental forms of musical storytelling to construct a 21<sup>st</sup> century critical black feminist mode of expression. Monáe's 2018 release, *Dirty Computer*, was published by Bad Boy Records and features 14 tracks total. My study focuses on five of the ten tracks that Monáe dramatized for her audiovisual project, an artistic form that she refers to as an "emotion picture."

In an interview published on YouTube, Monáe described her term for the audiovisual project as a play on words (motion picture) that captures the style of the album and process of creating it. *Dirty Computer* is a narrative told in a similar fashion to that of a movie, featuring characters, a plotline and dialogue. Additionally, Monáe described the album as a culmination of emotions: "It was really just paying attention and being upset, being inspired, but being more angry," she said. "And love. I went from that angry place to realizing that love was the right decision for me to choose" (Monáe 4:43-4:58). In this paper I analyze the lyrics, symbolism, visual metaphors and aesthetic affordances of the album.

### **Literature Review**

I used three major theoretical frameworks to contextualize *Dirty Computer*, Black Feminist Thought, Queer Theology, and Afrofuturism. I then narrowed my focus according to the themes that emerged in my analysis. This literature review process is in line with an inductive reasoning/constructivist approach to inquiry.

#### *Black Feminist Thought*

Foremothers Maria W. Stewart, Ida B Wells, Anna J. Cooper, and far too many others to mention, forged the intellectual path for Black Feminist Thought beginning in the nineteenth century. However, the release of the Combahee River Collective Statement in 1977 marked a crucial point in the history of more recent struggles for Black women's liberation. The Collective consisted of politically radical black women who, dissatisfied with their exclusion from the social justice movements of the day, came together in Boston in 1974 to form their own organization. They focused their efforts on four key areas of concerns affecting black women: racism, sexism, heterosexism, and economic oppression. Importantly, these women articulated the struggle for liberation as a multifaceted effort that required Black women to confront an interlocking set of repressive forces.

The major source of difficulty in our political work is that we are not just trying to fight oppression on one front or even two, but instead to address a whole range of oppressions. We do not have racial, sexual, heterosexual, or class privilege to rely on, nor do we have even the minimal access to resources and power that groups who possess any one of these types of privilege have. (Combahee River Collective)

Through books, speeches, and other political action, women like those involved in the Combahee River Collective constructed and cultivated a Black female consciousness based upon the tenet of intersectional oppression. Furthermore, they understood that in fighting for their own liberation they would be confronting entire systems and structural forces that had been built upon their bondage. Their vision of liberation looked like access to better paying jobs, eradication of racism, and admittance into higher education. In a time where Black women were denied opportunities for self-improvement, these desires were bold.

Despite their rich intellectual projects and political organizing, Black women were still struggling to gain access to platforms to share their theories and uplift their voices in the latter decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1984, bell hooks, a Black feminist theorist and author, wrote: “We [black women] have not had access to the machinery of power that would allow us to share our analyses or theories about gender with the American public” (hooks 140). Thus, another key concern for Black feminists at the time was visibility and access to institutions that would allow them to publicize their counterarguments to those dominant philosophies which sought to rationalize and justify their oppression. Although Black women’s presence in public spaces of deliberation has grown since the time of hooks’ writing, their theories continued to be marginalized or discounted in favor of those who have been traditionally been recognized as knowers and experts.

*Dirty Computer* serves as contemporary response to the Black feminist struggle three decades prior. Janelle Monáe, a Queer Black woman, is using music videos as the mode of storytelling. In the process she embraced all of her identities publicly and made many statements about the oppression Queer Black women face. Traditionally, music videos aren’t thought of as critical intellectual products, however Monáe engages in Black feminist dialogue through lyrics, narratives, and visual metaphors. As a Black woman with access to the machinery of power of commercial media, Monáe is a bold figure in contemporary Black Feminist Thought. Not only is she resisting racial oppression, but experiences sexual and gender oppression too, as her foremothers of the Combahee River Collective did.

### *Afrofuturism*

Black science fiction novelist Octavia E. Butler wrote the novel *Kindred*, which was a vanguard for Afrofuturism in narrative form. Parliament Funkadelic, an Afrocentric Black American funk band headed by George Clinton, embodied the spirit of Afrofuturism in music. Both of these artists/groups are Black visionaries who create art that reflects their Afrofuturistic vision of the future. Writer Mark Dery coined the term Afrofuturism to “describe the self-conscious appropriation of technological themes in Black popular culture, particularly that of rap and other hip-hop representations” (Gipson 92). Afrofuturism is an appropriate theoretical framework for this research project because it accommodates the ways in which Black creatives generate and exist in futuristic, imaginative worlds. The emotion picture world of *Dirty Computer* is one such domain where Monáe lives vicariously through Jane 57821 as a Queer Black woman. Visual and technological themes of culture manifest in the emotion picture through wardrobe selections, lyrical content, and the metaphor of “dirty computers” as a representation of dehumanized and disposable subjects. This is a very large step for the world of science fiction because cisgendered heterosexual white men dominate the field. However, it can be argued that there is a relationship between Afrofuturism, feminism, science fiction, and technology because they “were initially dominated by white patriarchal standards: however, are now vehicles that are being used as liberating voices to express public consciousness” (Gipson 93). Monáe is part of a movement to reclaim white dominated spaces such as science fiction, to redefine philosophical ways of being.

Beyond an aesthetic practice, Afrofuturism also holds distinct political value in the sphere of Black expressive culture. Specifically, it “allows artists, such as Janelle Monáe to present new and innovative perspectives and pose questions that are not typically addressed in canonical works” (Gipson 92). Although musicians have and continue to use music videos to tell stories, Monáe offers a fresh perspective of what it means to be Black by addressing

pansexuality, Queer Theology, female erotic desire, police brutality, and other emerging topics of concern. Through the emotion picture she positions herself in a fictional world where the government tries to brainwash or cleanse her, because her rejection of societal norms has made her dirty or unacceptable. Working within the Afrofuturist paradigm Monáe not only accomplishes a creative feat with her project, but also redefines womanhood, queerness, and blackness. Monáe is creating new canons for Black expression to depart from. Afrofuturism serves as an autonomous space where she can explore, imagine, and discover herself.

### *Queer Theology*

To fully understand the framework of Queer Theology, one must familiarize themselves with the definition of Queer. Theologian Patrick S. Cheng proposes four definitions in his book *Radical Love*: Queer as an umbrella term for the LGBTQIA community; Queer as transgressive action, or Queer[ing] as “a methodological approach that challenges and disrupts the status quo” (Cheng 6); and Queer as an erasure of boundaries. By this definition *Dirty Computer* is a Queer body of work that disrupts the status quo and challenges the boundary of clean and dirty; masculinity and femininity; and fiction and reality. The world of *Dirty Computer* departs from reality, while simultaneously making social commentary about America.

Cheng’s definition is rooted in Queer Theory which views sexuality as something that is “continually undergoing negotiation and dissemination, rather than as a mere natural (let alone medical) fact” (Cheng 6). Cheng goes on to further explain the binary between homosexuality and heterosexuality denies the existence of the spectrum of sexuality. Jane 57821’s sexuality in the emotion picture erases the boundary between heterosexual and homosexual as she engages in a romantic erotic relationship with a man and a woman. Thus, reflecting the pansexual identity, she claims in reality. Her choice to include this personal detail in her fictional character actively engages in the dialogue of Queer Theory as she brings the spectrum of sexuality to life on the screen.

Queer Theology’s three definitions coincide with the three definitions of Queer. “First, Queer Theology is LGBT people ‘talking about God’. Second, queer theology is ‘talking about God’ in a self-consciously transgressive manner, especially in terms of challenging societal norms about sexuality and gender. Third Queer Theology is ‘talk about God’ that challenges and deconstructs the natural binary categories of sexual and gender identity” (Cheng 9). Simply put, Queer Theology is Queer people talking about God. *Dirty Computer* is a Queer Theological text because Janelle Monáe, a Queer Black woman, is its creator and includes conversations about God within the album’s (visual) rhetoric. These visual metaphors challenge traditional ways of thinking and talking about God by juxtaposing a Black woman in the place of Jesus. Monáe also challenges traditional ways of performing gender and sexuality as her character Jane 57821 raps about pussy in a suit. In conclusion, *Dirty Computer* serves a Queer Theological text that talks about God in a transgressive manner and erases widely accepted boundaries of sexuality and gender performance.

## Methods

I approached this project through the methodological framework of textual analysis and autoethnography. Textual analysis is appropriate for this study because it enables me to draw conclusions from non-traditional texts, such as an audiovisual album. This approach relies on the belief that there are multiple ways of interpreting reality and that we can only understand culture by also examining how we make sense of the world (McKee). Textual analysis is a methodology based in the constructivist philosophy which posits that reality is a construct of the human mind. Essentially, textual analysis allows me to approach texts with the mindset that they are constructions of another individual's reality, and the truths found in the texts are not universal due to this fact.

Additionally, I drew upon semiotic analysis, a method which interprets the meaning "behind signs and symbols, typically involving metaphors, analogies, and symbolism" (Film Analysis). I took screenshots from the emotion picture and analyzed the symbols to find the meaning and messages Monáe was conveying. Based on these frameworks, I interpreted data from an immersed standpoint. I used the tools of observation and analysis to draw conclusions.

I also approached this research project from the methodological framework of autoethnography. Autoethnography seeks to describe and analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience. "A researcher uses tenets of *autobiography* and *ethnography* to *do* and *write* autoethnography" (Ellis et al.). I chose to employ the research method of autoethnography because it allows my personal experience, emotion, and identity to play an integral role in the research process and product. My personal experience was a suitable addition to my project because as a Queer Black woman in America I resonate with the messages Monáe put in the emotion picture. Including myself in the research project as both subject and researcher acknowledges my insider's standpoint. I am both analyst and enthusiastic audience member, critic and fan. In this way, I recognize and embrace my "subjectivity, emotionality, and...influence on [the] research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don't exist (Ellis et al.). Ultimately, this project is not only about understanding Monáe or her project, it is also about understanding my own identity.

As a part of my study I recorded rigorous field notes every week for an hour a day. These notes include introspection, reflection, poetry, and journal entries. They effectively document the progress I made toward coming to the decision to employ autoethnography as a research method. It is my intention to "produce aesthetic and evocative thick descriptions of personal and interpersonal experience" (Ellis et al.). Therefore, I used my field notes as a tool to critically engage my interpretation of reality, self, and *Dirty Computer* as it relates to my experience. By employing textual analysis and autoethnography, I immersed myself into the fictional world of *Dirty Computer*, while focusing on myself as a research subject. I analyzed images, lyrics, and meanings in it from my unique standpoint as a Black Queer Christian Woman.

My standpoint as a researcher-subject is significant because I exist at the intersection of quarrelsome identities. Black people, Queer people, and women continue to be marginalized by the oppressive forces of white male supremacy. Christianity has been weaponized against Black people, Queer people, and Women for centuries, and I feel the effects of this power struggle in my body as I labor to harmonize my faith-filled self, with my Black self, my Queer self, and my Woman self. This project is made all the more complex by the fact that Christianity has been the cornerstone upon which my life is built; therefore, complicating my relationship with my sexuality. Thus, Janelle Monáe's very existence in the commercial entertainment industry as a Pansexual, Black woman, with a Baptist rearing is significant to me.

Her music speaks to a demographic of people whose rights have been stripped away. *Dirty Computer* specifically is an album that serves as a voice for the silenced. Textual analysis allows me the tools to absorb and interpret *Dirty Computer* from the inside of the dystopian universe, and autoethnography allows me to write from the unique standpoint of self.

### **An Introduction to Dirty Computer**

What exactly is a dirty computer? As described by Janelle Monáe, the term captures her theory about humans as beings with the capacity to be programmed like computers. It is her belief that we all come from dirt, and go back to dirt when we die.<sup>1</sup> Monáe also believes that our brains are similar to computers, as we are constantly downloading and uploading information from the world around us. However, computers come with bugs and viruses, which are the things that make us unique and special (Darden 9:05-10:00). For example, Monáe is a dirty computer because she is pansexual, a sexual identity that is unique to a community and falls outside the bounds of respectability. Her sexuality is considered a bug or virus to her computer, or brain.

Monáe came out as pansexual in April 2018, the day before she released *Dirty Computer*. The album responds to a question she raised in an interview, “What is it like to live in a society that is constantly trying to cleanse you?” (Darden 10:00-10:03). Within the project narrative, Monáe plays the protagonist Jane 57821 who lives in a world where the government is abducting dirty computers, erasing their memories, and cleansing them of their bugs and viruses with a gas called “the Nevermind.” At the beginning of the emotion picture government officials seize Jane 57821 at the House of New Dawn and scroll through her memories like thumbnails and delete them. Each memory is a music video from songs on the album *Dirty Computer* and represents the bugs that are sully Monáe’s brain. The protagonist resists their attempts to rob her of her identity as the narrative unfolds in three parts: the Reckoning, the Celebration, and the Reclamation. Part one explores Jane’s recognition of the ways that she deviates from acceptable norms. The songs in the Celebration focus on the various parts of the self that constitute Jane’s identity and seek to uplift the communities who share those identities. The Reclamation section of *Dirty Computer* considers activism, protest, voice, and irony with a focus on reclaiming culture.

All three sections of the album are important in that they represent self-actualization, self-love, self-realization and the evolution of Janelle Monáe. Previous to the release of *Dirty Computer* Monáe released *The ArchAndroid* where she created a musical persona named Cindi Mayweather, a part-human-part-android, Afro-futuristic, revolutionary activist. Songs like “Mushrooms and Roses” and “Sir Greendown” hinted at her pansexual identity, but when confronted with questions about her queerness in 2010 she responded “I only date androids. Nothing like an android, they don’t cheat on you” (Hoard). *Dirty Computer* serves as a confirmation and celebration of Monáe’s public declaration of her identity. This album is urgent because it speaks out against injustice in a moment in history where people are facing oppression and opposition every day; especially women, people in the LGBTQ community, and people of color. The project speaks directly to the current U.S. presidential administration and leadership of this country who maintain the physical, legal, economic, and social injustices impacting vulnerable communities. For example, legislators have cut funding for essential women’s health organizations like Planned Parenthood and passed laws making it illegal for women to abort pregnancies, even in cases of rape and incest. Black women are paid 61 cents in comparison to white men’s dollar and black transwomen are murdered at an alarming rate.

According to the HRC, 27 transwomen were murdered in 2018, a majority of them were women of color.<sup>2</sup> The clear injustice that people in these communities face is undebatable.

**Queer Theology in Dirty Computer: *Crazy Classic Life, Don't Judge Me, and So Afraid***

The following image is a screenshot is from the second song on *Dirty Computer*, “Crazy, Classic, Life,” Jane 57821 and other dirty computers in the community are pictured having a celebration at a large mansion. The mood is lighthearted and playful as the camera pans to capture shots of people laughing, dancing and posing. This particular moment is a change of pace from the moments that precede it because the dirty computers are sitting instead of dancing. This image is a contemporary replication of Leonardo da Vinci’s depiction of the Last Supper.



Obviously, there are similarities and differences between both images. For example, in the Last Supper the disciples are in conversation with one another about Jesus. The painting depicts the moment when Jesus revealed that one of his disciples would betray him<sup>1</sup> and the disciples are trying to identify the traitor. In the emotion picture the dirty computers are not in

conversation with one another, rather they are looking straight at the camera in a way that destroys the barrier between the emotion picture and the audience, or breaking the fourth wall, while discussing police brutality and racial discrimination.

*Handcuffed in a bando  
White boy in his sandals  
Police like a Rambo  
Blow it out, blow it out like a candle, Sambo  
Me and you was friends, but to them, we the opposite  
The same mistake, I'm in jail, you on top of shit  
You living life while I'm walking around moppin' shit  
Tech kid, backpack, now you a college kid*

On the other hand, both of these moments depict a time where the head of the table is making an important statement. Jane 57821, a black woman, is at the center of the table, the same position of Jesus at the Last Supper. Through this positioning, Monáe likens herself to Jesus as a voice for the socially disinherited. Lyrically she is speaking on behalf of marginalized identities and is seen as a champion in her community. Jesus was arrested and put to death because of who he is, however, he resurrected.<sup>2</sup> Jane 57821 was abducted by the government who attempted to cleanse her, but in the end, she was able to resist and break free. Jesus and Jane 57821 are similar in that they pose a threat to societal norms. Their activism and resistance disrupt the status quo.

Much like in Queer Theology Jesus transgresses the boundary between God and human. He is God and the Son of God at the same time<sup>3</sup>. His mere existence is a miracle and a witness to the love and power of God. Jesus troubled the status quo to the point of his death and resurrection. Similarly, Jane 57821 disrupts the boundary between android and human, as she is a cross between android and human, and the government tries to take her humanness away from her. Both Jesus and Jane 57821 disrupt what is common, and bridge the gap between binaries.

While Crazy Classic Life carries its punch through visual elements, the subversive power of Don't Judge Me lies in the song's lyrics, which constitute a dialogue between Jane 57821, her lover, her church family, and God. The record is rich with references to the Christian faith tradition and features the protagonist poetically serenading her lover, another woman. Although she does not outright state that she is in fact in conversation with another woman, context clues in the song and emotion picture reveal the gender of her partner.

*Come, let me kiss you right there  
Wake you up like sunrise  
On the backs of your thighs*

*I'm gonna pray you this prayer  
That I keep in my mind  
As a lovely reminder*

In the first triplet Jane is speaking to a romantic partner. Tones of affection, intimacy, and sensuality ring out as she paints a picture of waking her lover with kisses at sunrise. In the second triplet Jane is in dialogue with another entity or God, *I'm gonna pray you this prayer*. In the Christian faith, prayer is simply speaking to God. It could be a request or an expression of thanks, but it ultimately boils down to communication with God (Jeremiah 3:33, Philippians 4:6).



In this situation, Jane is praying as a means of conjuring a pleasant memory and expressing thanks to God for her lover.

*Even though you tell me you love me  
I'm afraid that you just love my disguise  
Taste my fears and light your candle to my raging fire  
Of broken desire*

*But don't judge me  
I know I got issues  
But they drown when I kiss you*

This stanza illuminates a relational and internal conflict. Jane is struggling to accept love because she is hiding part of herself. Much like the previous section, Jane is in conversation with two different people, and it switches midway. Jane is talking to her family in the first five lines, and to a lover in the second three. She oscillates between her Queer self, and the self that she has presented to her loved ones as a means of survival. She wants to live in her truth and be authentic in her relationships, however, she holds back due to fear of judgement. Hers is a common plight of a closeted Queer person who has not yet come out to their family. From the standpoint of a queer black woman within a closet, *I love you's* sound muffled. *Is it me? Or do you love my disguise?* In addition to securing acceptance from family and community, the protagonist also longs for approval from God.

*Don't judge me  
Baptize me with ocean  
Recognize my devotion*

*The water's perfectly good  
Let's reintroduce ourselves  
From a free point of view*

The first line could be interpreted as Jane asking her loved ones not to judge her. However, the following five lines in this stanza suggest that she is in conversation with God. She references baptism, a deeply Christian tradition, and continues to use it as a point of reference. Biblically, water baptism is an act in which an individual who has dedicated their life to Jesus Christ is immersed into water by a clergy member. This tradition symbolizes the death of the old or sinful self and the emergence or liberation of a renewed self that is sanctified through Christ. The apostle Peter wrote that “water is a picture of baptism, which now saves you, not by removing dirt from your body, but as a response to God from a clean conscience. It is effective because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” (1 Peter 3:21). According to the Bible, baptism is an act where an individual is sanctioned through Christ and made holy in God’s sight. If Jane is indeed in conversation with God in this stanza she is pleading to the Lord for a closer relationship, and recognition of her devotion.

Jane also seeks liberation. *The water's perfectly good* references the ocean in which she pleaded the Lord to baptize her. However, this time she is immersed in the water and invites her lover to join her. It can be inferred that the Lord granted her request, because water baptism represents freedom from guilt. Here Jane is enticing her lover to free herself and remain in intimate relationship with her on a new level. It is an invitation to her lover to be

baptized. Baptism represents a clean consciousness. Themes of dirtiness and cleanliness are prominent in the emotion picture, as dirty computers are being abducted by the government to be cleaned. This invitation is urgent then because Jane wants to be free with her lover on her own terms.

Underneath this track is a softer track of the sound of the ocean and the emotion picture presents footage of Jane 57821, Zen, and Ché frolicking on the beach in love. While this is a depiction of queerness and polyamory, she is well aware that these identities are condemned in most churches.

*If I'm gon' sin, it's with you.*

This line speaks to the larger issue of homophobia in the church. Janelle Monáe was raised in a Baptist church and trained in the belief that homosexuality is a sin. This doctrine had a lasting effect on Monáe that internalized homophobia and created a binary requiring her to choose between their faith and who she wants to love. Lyrically, Jane addresses this binary by making a choice to love, which ironically, is the pure form of God. This choice circumvents the binary that the church imposed on her because unapologetically choosing to love is choosing to be in God.<sup>3</sup> This line resists the doctrine she, and many other queer people of color, was exposed to, and offers an alternative understanding of God's love unlimited by traditional norms of gender and sexuality.

Despite New Testament scriptures which show Jesus to be “virtually indifferent about matters of sexuality” (Douglas 90), some Christians argue that homophobia is biblically unsound. Monáe's work is therefore groundbreaking in that it includes queer people in sacred spaces, rejecting the notion that homophobia is a core element of Christianity. In her book *Sexuality and the Black Church*, Kelly Brown Douglas theorizes the ‘canopy’ of homophobia and heterosexism in the Black church community. She states,

Black people often argue that the Bible makes clear that homosexuality is a sin. By invoking biblical authority, they place a sacred canopy, a divine sanction, over their views toward gay and lesbian persons. This canopy renders homophobia practically intractable. The Bible becomes, then, a tool for censoring a group of people, in this case, gay men and lesbians (90).

Monáe's work taps into the angst that many Black Queers face when they come out to their church family and carves out space for them to question and critique the doctrines that condemn them.<sup>4</sup>

What does it mean to be afraid of loving yourself? Monáe poses this question to listeners in “So Afraid,” which is found in the Reclamation portion of *Dirty Computer*. Moving beyond the struggle between imposed expectations and interior longings discussed in “Don't Judge Me,” the Reclamation discusses the importance of owning one's identity and resisting oppressive forces, especially fear. This track delves deep into her fears and champions vulnerability as a model for others who share her anxieties. Unlike “Don't Judge Me,” the song features the protagonist in conversation with herself and reads as a tear stained dairy entry.

*And I'm afraid  
Ah, I'm so afraid  
Ah, what if I lose?  
Is what I think to myself  
I'm fine in my shell  
I'm afraid of it all, afraid of loving you*

In a podcast interview where she explains the meaning of this song, Monáe revealed that she is afraid of loving herself, loving other women, and loving her country (Hirway 2:45-2:55). She acknowledges that she would be safer if she stayed in her comfort zone, in the closet, where she does not have to be reveal her norm-bending beliefs and experiences to the world. However, by releasing this song on the album she is doing the exact opposite; being vulnerable and presenting her feelings under the harsh light of public scrutiny. Monáe believes that there is power in vulnerability, and she admires people who share their stories and practice this act of intentional exposure.

Despite the public nature of the song, Monáe also reveals that she is comfortable in her shell, the private place where she loves her Queer self in silence. Repeatedly Monáe has expressed that her church believes that anyone who identifies as queer is a sinner who is going to hell. Monáe heard these messages all of her childhood and internalized them; it was only within her shell, shielded from the outside world, that she felt safe to live authentically. Through therapy Monáe worked through what her sexuality meant to her and came to peace with the fact that her loved ones may never understand it (Sewell). In an interview in *them* magazine Monáe stated, “I leaned into the idea that if my own church won't accept me, I'm gonna create my own church” (Sewell). Thus, she battles with the tension between desiring to own her sexual identity and fearing it at the same time. This tension builds up to a sonic climax or explosion on the chorus of the second half of the song. Metaphorically speaking, the musical explosion is Monáe’s emergence from her shell and into the public, much like the album release.

### **Black Feminism in Dirty Computer: “Django Jane” and “Pynk”**

Django Jane, and Pynk are the sixth, and seventh songs on the album *Dirty Computer*. Each of these songs celebrate different aspects of Monáe’s identity, especially her role as an activist guided by Black feminist politics. Patricia Hill Collins defines Black feminism as “a process of self-conscious struggle that empowers men and women to actualize a humanist vision of community” (Collins 39). I believe that a humanist vision of society is a place where people exist in harmony. It is a dream where individuals are valued, respected, and taken care of regardless of their race, sexuality, or gender. *Dirty Computer* is dedicated to self-actualization and struggle against oppressive forces to imagine such a community. Through song, Monáe is an advocate for a humanist society where all people have an equal chance to opportunities and access to resources.

Django Jane is a song inspired by anger, frustration, and empowerment. The lyrics evoke power through their demands for change in the form of an aggressive rap delivery.

*We gon' start a motherfuckin' pussy riot  
Or we gon' have to put 'em on a pussy diet  
Look at that, I guarantee I got 'em quiet  
Look at that, I guarantee they all inspired*

In an interview Monáe expressed that she put this line in the song because she is a big fan of the Russian punk protest band Pussy Riot. They are a feminist band who advocates for the LGBTQ community and women. This line pays homage to the work that they do for women and other marginalized people across the globe. The second half of the stanza expresses the power that women have in society. In the context of a heterosexual relationship, there is power in a woman withholding sexual favors and pleasure from her male partner. This sentiment resonates with a famous Greek comedy by Aristophanes called *Lysistrata*. In the

comedy, Lysistrata and other women in the area withhold sex from their male partners in order to persuade them to end the Peloponnesian War (LYSISTRATA). The play speaks to the power men and women have in society. Men have the power to start wars, and women hold the power to end them. *Look at that, I guarantee I got 'em quiet.* This line emphasizes the power women have over men sexually, while suggesting that men do not have control over their sexual appetites. This power places women in a position that is empowering, yet women across the globe do not have equal access to resources for self-actualization. Despite the inequality women face in the world, they are a powerful force to be reckoned with, and lyrically, Monáe acknowledges that strength in the song.

*A-town, made it out there  
Straight out of Kansas City, yeah we made it out there  
Celebrated, graduated, made it pass/fail  
Sassy, classy, Kool-Aid with the kale  
Momma was a G, she was cleanin' hotels  
Poppa was a driver, I was workin' retail  
Kept us in the back of the store  
We ain't hidden no more, moonlit nigga, lit nigga*

Here Monáe is paying homage to the city and parents that raised her. She is proud of her Kansas City roots and her working-class parents who she saw go to work every single day to provide for her. To this day she wears black and white attire while performing to honor her working-class roots and to signal that she is no more dignified in the spotlight than those who labor on the margins of society. While Monáe has climbed the ladder of success in her career and starred in two Oscar-winning and Oscar-nominated films, *Hidden Figures* and *Moonlight*, the use of “we” indicates that the support and love of her community are crucial to her success. In keeping with this homage to vernacular culture, references to Kool-Aid and kale have cultural significance and represent more than nourishment. Kool-Aid serves as a cheap alternative to store-bought juice and is a widely accepted beverage in the Black community for various gatherings from cookouts to the dinner table. It is made of artificial fruit flavored powder, sugar, and water. It is a relatively cheap drink, (99 cents per pack at Walmart), and is available to purchase in bulk. In the context of the song, Kool-aid represents Blackness. Kale is a leafy vegetable in the same family as cabbage. In the past decade it became very popular. In fact, according to the Department of Agriculture kale production increased nearly 60% between 2007 and 2012 (Turrow). Kale is a pricier purchase at Walmart at around three dollars per pound. In the context of the song kale represents refined taste and classiness. Monáe is communicating that she is Black and classy at the same time, and has no trouble embodying both traits.

*Runnin' outta space in my damn bandwagon  
Remember when they used to say I look too mannish  
Black girl magic, y'all can't stand it*

After all of her success as a singer, artist, and actress Monáe's fanbase has grown exponentially. However, she will not forget when critics would call her too masculine because of the way she dressed and performed gender. Despite all of the negativity, her Black girl magic reigns on. Black girl magic has been described as a way to “celebrate the beauty, power, and resilience of Black women” (Wilson). Despite what the critics have to say about Monáe's appearance, she continues to stay true to herself as a Black woman.

Her resilience and authenticity in the public eye is a prime example of Black girl magic. At the same time, Monáe's power is based in the fact that, as a Black feminist, she does not adhere to conventional standards of femininity and respectability. She is known for wearing black and white suits to red carpet events and wearing her hair in unique styles that highlight the kinky volume. Through presentation and expression Monáe resists hegemonic standards of beauty and adopts a counter-normative expression of Black femininity.

*Made a fandroid outta yo girlfriend  
Let's get caught downtown in the whirlwind  
And paint the city pink, paint the city pink  
And tuck the pearls in, just in case the world end*

In addition to resisting proscriptions for pop female music artists in attire, Monáe also makes a feminist maneuver by retaining her erotic agency. Specifically, she expresses her prowess as a talented artist and a sexual woman who is able to steal girlfriends. Sexual prowess and ability to “steal yo girl” is a common male theme in rap music. Monáe is flipping the script by adopting a masculine attitude as a Black woman. The last two lines in this stanza are in reference to her hit single Pynk, which she released before *Dirty Computer*. All in all, this line expresses that Monáe is not going to run from modern racism in America. She states that she is here to stay and is going to speak her truth and empower those who also live in theirs. She makes herself known as a Black woman who stands up in the face of injustice against her people. Painting the city pink can be understood as making her mark on the world as a Black feminist. “Pynk” is a feminist icon in song form. Monáe celebrates femininity, sexuality, and queerness in a catchy tune that embodies pride. The video celebrates black womanhood and vaginas.



“Pynk” is the seventh song on *Dirty Computer*, but Monáe released the video to this song prior to the release of the album. It went viral immediately with a grand total of 13 million views on *YouTube*; “Pynk” broke the internet. The pussy pants, as seen in the previous image, have become so popular that Monáe has hinted at making them available for purchase. It is important to note that not all women in this image are wearing pussy pants. This is an intentional decision on Monáe's part. She is sending the message that not all women have vaginas, thus including transwomen in the celebration of femininity. However, the lack of actual transwomen in the music video could be deemed as controversial, despite the effort Monáe has made to include the transgender community.

The “Pynk” music video is full of vagina centric imagery, some are playful, and others, as depicted in the following image, are more political.



These panties are a direct response to the current President's infamous comment, "grab her in the pussy" (Makela). He made this comment in 2005 in a conversation about taking advantage of women because of his position of power and fame. The video clip went viral in 2016, months before he was elected into office. There was a national uproar in regards to these comments. "I grab back" became a rallying cry of outraged women nationally. Monáe's inclusion of this statement is political and timely. This image breaks the fourth wall of the dystopian universe and directly speaks to current issues in the United States.

*Pink like the inside of your, baby  
Pink behind all of the doors, crazy  
Pink like the tongue that goes down, maybe  
Pink like the paradise found*

*Pink when you're blushing inside, baby  
Pink is the truth you can't hide, maybe  
Pink like the folds of your brain, crazy  
Pink as we all go insane*

*Pink like the lips around your, maybe  
Pink like the skin that's under, baby  
Pink where it's deepest inside, crazy  
Pink beyond forest and thighs*

*Pink like the secrets you hide, maybe  
Pink like the lid of your eye, baby  
Pink is where all of it starts, crazy  
Pink like the halls of your heart*

Traditionally, the color pink is associated with the female gender from birth, but Monáe argues that we all have a little pink on the insides of us. For example, tongues, hearts, and eyelids are universal human traits that share the color pink. However, in the context of this song the color pink means a lot of things. *Pink is the truth you can't hide,*

*maybe*. Here Monáe is equating pinkness to her queerness, which is something she is not willing to hide anymore. The video much like the song is full of double entendres such as *Pink beyond forest and thighs* where she is talking about the color of vaginas “beyond forest” or pubic hair “and thighs.” This song is a staple in the Black feminist community because Monáe is expressing and loving her blackness and femaleness out loud. It seems that she has no trouble embracing her masculine and feminine energy as she makes the sonic shift from “Django Jane” to “Pynk.” Both of these songs illuminate her identity as a complex Black woman who has a lot to say about blackness, queerness, and femininity. All humans are born from women, who harness feminine or “pink” energy. We all come from pinkness, and it is to be celebrated.

### Conclusion

In lieu of a more traditional conclusion, I offer the following as a final statement of how I was able to apply Monáe's theories of identity, liberation, and structural oppression to my own journey of confronting the multiple selves occupying my body. These selves include my Queer self, Black self, Woman self, and Christian self. Although my existence is a combination of all four of these identities, I wanted to give each part of myself an opportunity to speak. “Dear Janelle” is a letter from my Queer self (QS) to my Christian self (CS).

*Dear Janelle  
It's been a while since you looked me in the eyes  
You know why*

The first line is an introduction from my QS to my CS. It's important to note that in the song I am addressing myself by my first name. I did this to show that my CS and QS occupy the same body and are seen as the same person in the world. People perceive me as Janelle, however, there is underlying tension between my inner selves that the song communicates. When it comes to operating in the world, my CS has maintained superiority to my QS for a greater portion of my life. One of the many factors that shapes this power dynamic is my Christian upbringing. I devoted my life to Jesus Christ at a very young age, and my parents brought my siblings and I to church almost every Sunday. Before I was aware of my sexual identity, I was familiar with Christianity. For years I did not fully acknowledge my budding Queerness, and this stanza speaks to that neglect. To this day, there are instances where I doubt my judgment and revert back to repressing my queerness for the sake of comfort.

*It's Janelle  
I'm the part that you always try to hide  
Why'd you lie?  
So I took a little time  
To decide if I wanna stay alive*

Similar to the previous stanza, this section speaks to the neglect of my QS experiences. It also represents the introspection that I underwent in attempts to negotiate with my QS. There were times when I doubted that these parts of me were authentic. This doubt had a lasting effect on the most vulnerable part of myself, leading her to contemplate suicide.

*And I decided  
That I feel how I feel*

*And I love who I love  
And I like what I like  
And I can't take it off  
No I won't take it off  
And I won't turn and run*

*The words you try to hurt me with  
Sound better with your tongue  
When they're sung  
When they're sung  
When they're sung*

The first seven lines represent the truth that my QS lives in. I love who I love and I feel how I feel. Despite the doubt and invalidation, I endure. I perform this part of the song in a soft falsetto voice to represent flying over negativity and existing at the highest level of truth. *The words you try to hurt me with sound better with your tongue* is a direct response to the harmful things that my CS has said to my QS to keep her silent. This line is about turning pain into beauty.

*Dear Janelle  
It's been a while since I've seen the sun shine  
Without the clouds*

I was diagnosed with anxiety and depression in early July. These mental illnesses can affect productivity and result in isolation. I have had days where I don't leave my room and I feel like a dark cloud is in the way of the sun. My QS is dealing with the symptoms of depression in this line. It doesn't make it easier that her validation is under constant reevaluation by my CS.

*Hey Janelle  
I'm the part of you you can't figure out  
Without the music*

Writing songs, playing my bass, and singing are therapeutic outlets that benefit my mental health. Music is a tool that I use to understand the hurting parts of myself.

*So I took a little time  
I figured out that I wanna stay alive*

*And I decided  
That I feel how I feel  
And I love who I love  
And I like what I like  
And I can't make it stop  
No I won't make it stop  
And I won't turn and run*

*The words you try to hurt me with  
Sound better with your tongue  
When they're sung*



*When they're sung  
When they're sung*

*Dear Janelle  
It's Janelle  
Love Janelle  
Ohhh ooo*

The last four lines of the song imitate the format of a letter. *Dear Janelle, It's Janelle, Love Janelle*. This song is literally a letter to myself written with love and honesty; I wanted the end of the song to reflect that truth.

“Dear Janelle” is similar to “So Afraid” in tone and message. Repeatedly, “So Afraid” reads as a tear stained diary entry and “Dear Janelle” evokes a similar tone as it is derived from my field notes. “So Afraid” speaks to fears and anxieties, and “Dear Janelle” faces a level of anxiety. Both songs express vulnerability, fear, and love.

Analyzing *Dirty Computer* forced me to face some hard truths about myself. I see myself in Jane 57821's pain, bravery, and frustration. I am a dirty computer. I have bugs and viruses, but those are the things that make me special. I am more than my pain. I am a survivor of it. I am a witness. I occupy a unique standpoint of self. My experience is unique and shared. Janelle Monáe inspired me to understand the importance of telling my story on my own terms. This project is a reflection of that decision. I am different and I am not alone. I am a dirty computer.

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