

(W)holes of Your Heart: Trans Utopian Performance in Janelle Monáe’s “Pynk”

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ABSTRACT. This essay wields trans methods to trace the trans cultural production of Black feminist thought, specifically by asking the following question: what is trans about Janelle Monáe’s Black feminist theorizing in “Pynk?” Thinking of Black feminist studies *as* trans studies allows us to disorient the white, which is to say anti-Black, disposition of trans studies. In this analysis, I describe the trans utopian performance of Black feminist sociality, inhabitation, and fugitivity. Moreover, I delineate the trans critiques of sex/gender essentialism, individualism, the State, and the body embedded in Monáe’s film and suggest the radical potential of a Black feminist theory of interdependence, what Monáe calls the “holes of your heart.” I conclude “Pynk” is a Black transfeminist manifesto rooted in abolitionism and in search of ecologies of emancipation from colonial aspirations to an asocial, “self-possessed” body.

Black Feminism as/is Trans

Tediously, Black feminists problematize white feminism’s notions of pre-social, static, and singular womanhood, all the while imagining and theorizing new ways of forming more intricate and expansive conceptions of gender. Black feminism has long affirmed perpetually remapping gender identities untethered to determinism (Green & Bey, 2017, p. 443). Oftentimes, cisgender Black feminists have committed to theorizing in ways that forge, or at the very least hold, some space for trans and gender deviant life and possibilities. For Christina Sharpe (2016), “Euro-Western gender is incapable of holding onto Black flesh” (p. 30); thus, Blackness is a critical vantage point from which to illuminate the failures, instability, and always already racialized orientation of gender. Because Black cisgender

women's subjectivity has been coordinated outside of "womanhood" and even "gender" by hegemonic gender metrics, Black feminism offers trans-gender theories that destabilize the coherence of wo/manhood.

This essay is a trans reading of Janelle Monáe's *Dirty Computer*, specifically the aesthetics and lyrical rendering of her song and music video "Pynk," a visual clearly invested in Black feminist inquiry and cultural knowledge production. I come to this work as a trans, non-Black undergraduate scholar critically engaged with the field of transgender studies. I hope to influence its movement to divest from a commitment shared with queer theory to its anti-Black silences and neglect, so that it may instead seriously and deeply understand trans and Black relationalities (Green, 2017). Importantly, I want to note that Black and trans identities are not mutually exclusive and often are co-constitutive.

In "Blackness and the Trouble of Trans Visibility," Che Gossett (2017) articulates a limitation of nominal cisgender identity in how "the grammar of 'cisgender' lacks the explanatory power to account for the colonial and anti-Black foundational violence of slavery and settler colonialism through which the gender and sex binary were forcibly rendered" (p. 186). So, the *cisgender* of "cisgender Black women" exists in name only under a Western paradigm of gender. They continue, "Blackness troubles trans/gender, [B]lackness is trans/gender trouble" (Gossett, 2017, p. 185). Gossett's thoughtful intervention and Sharpe's—who tells us of the crisis of Blackness defined by its contentious relation to and against (cisgender/hetero) normativity (Gossett, 2017, p. 30)—are necessary points from which to understand Janelle Monáe's theorizing in "Pynk" as *trans*, not as a subscription to white feminist notions of women's subjectivity. These notions include hegemonic cisgender femininity, equating a vulva and the capacity to reproduce children to womanhood, pink, weaponizing identity to appeal to state surveillance

and carcerality regimes, and other political endeavors largely relying on essentialized notions of what a woman, in essence, *is*. Rather, Monáe’s Black feminist theory is a visual, lyrical, and affective representation of the ruinous/creative potentiality of Black feminist (under)worlding and sociality after the ends of the World (Gumbs, 2018, p. xi). “Pynk” is *World-transing*: across, beyond, and through. Monáe seeks not to settle in this moment-space but to create and imagine lifeways otherwise, elsewhere, and in other times. For this world and its deathly regimes, “Pynk”—which is to say Black/feminist/queer/trans life and imagination—is trouble, a crisis.

Performing Pynk Theory

We join Monáe in her mode of theory: performance. As a work of Black feminist thought, definable as an intellectual project “aim[ing] to find ways to escape from, survive in, and/or oppose prevailing social and economic injustice” (Collins, 2000, p. 9), “Pynk” demonstrates a will to be unbound in survival. In Janelle Monáe’s “emotion picture,” *Dirty Computer*, Jane 57821, played by Janelle Monáe, describes dirty computers as a population persecuted to be *cleaned* if “[one] refuse[s] to live the way they [the colonial “cleaning” project] dictated...if [one] showed any form of opposition at all. And if you were dirty, it was only a matter of time” (Monáe, 2018). Here, to be “dirty” is a problem of temporality. Failing to be absorbable into the confines of master/settler chronology is the reason for one’s body and memory, or *bodymind*, to be swiftly sterilized by the *Nevermind*. This technology, operated in the film by two white men, called “Cleaners,” is designed and utilized to erase the memories of dirty computer subjects: the trans, queer, Black, Indigenous, women, disabled, fat, and all else who (corporeally and materially) oppose and resist the imperatives of master/settler science.

To read Monáe’s use of vulva imagery and notions of “pussy power” through trans hermeneutics reveals the limits and failures of white feminist conceptions of the “pink pussy.” She is informed by and indexes the historical and ongoing affinities previously mentioned between Blackness and transness. “That moment ‘Ain’t I a woman?’ had to be addressed by Sojourner Truth, the moment she had to bear her breasts to prove that she was [a] woman, was already a queer, a trans moment” (Green & Bey, 2017, p. 439). What we see is the rehearsal of Black transfeminist togetherness, a ritual performed to enact Black feminist futurity beyond and after an imagined coherence, imposition, and immutability, of worldly womanhood. Instead, she undermines the fantasy of fixity by “wearing” and removing the, importantly, pink (or white woman’s) vulva as a theatrical engagement with the racial inadequacies of gender. This moment, when thought about alongside Green and Bey, is trans. Monáe elucidates the certainty that Black feminist worlding is always already trans utopia in that its action, or movement, indexes trans potentialities.

Pynk Restin’ and Black Feminist Fugitivity

Black feminist metaphysical fashioning of the future, as stated previously, poses specific challenges to ontological fixity: searching and inhabiting ever-changing alterity and precariousness. Found in the visual, we see Monáe and her outlaw collective inhabiting the seemingly abandoned *Pynk Rest-Inn*. Taking place after the end of the World, this encounter is invoked and made possible through Monáe’s imaginative memory. She conjures what might be freedom dreams, visions, memories, or narratives located in the realm of possibility and potentiality. This fully unknowable longing for being present—together, radically, without the imposition of carceral taxonomies and fixed rubrics of identity manufactured by modernity and Man—describes

the colossal violence of enslavement, and it speaks to the ingenuity and resourcefulness of Black feminist fugitivity.

The indecipherability of Monáe's freedom dreams to civil logics is made clear in the ways the white men operating the *Nevermind's* interface articulate the obscurity of Monáe's radical envisaging, suggesting its illegitimate form of thinking/being. One of the "cleaners" asserts, "I don't even know what this is. It doesn't even look like a memory" (Monáe, 2018). The other white operator interjects and insists he delete the (non)memory regardless of its indiscernible taxonomy: "Just pull the content and keep it moving" (Monáe, 2018). The incomprehensibility of Monáe's imaginary elucidates the fugitivity of Black feminist worldmaking, escaping assimilation into the Western metrics of being/dreaming/theorizing.

"Pynk," alongside Alexis Pauline Gumbs' (2018) experimental poetic analysis, emphasizes that

everything is everything. You can have breathing and the reality of the radical black porousness of love (aka Black feminist metaphysics, aka us all of us, us) or you cannot. there is only both or neither. there is no either or. there is no this or that. there is only all. (Gumbs, 2018, p. 7)

Knowing this, Monáe and her collective "leav[e] traces of us (the notion of us that entangles all being, which Gumbs offers) down the Boulevard" (Monáe, 2018) and subsequently all other spaces, places, and landscapes inhabited, if only momentarily, by the collective. In the video, we see the pink filter flickering as the encounter between the collective and the site of landing is staged. The landscape, an agential entity itself, welcomes and greets the fugitive Black feminists.

In Saidiya Hartman's (2018) article, "The Anarchy of Colored Girls Assembled in a Riotous Manner," she delineates ways Black life, specifically Black womanhood and girlhood, articulates a "wayward experiment," or, as

she borrows from W.E.B. DuBois, an “open rebellion” against society (p. 470), a trans modality that embodies being present in multiple worlds beyond *the* (singular) World. She tells of the lives of Esther Brown and her friends, offering an undertheorized history, “unthought” especially because of the ways Black woman- and girlhood is conceived as the antithesis to the very fabric of civil society, a “social problem”:

This latent history has yet to emerge: A revolution in a minor key unfolded in the city and young black women were its vehicle. It was driven not by uplift or the struggle for recognition or citizenship, but by the vision of a world that would guarantee to every human being free access to earth and full enjoyment of the necessities of life, according to individual desires, tastes, and inclinations... To appreciate the beautiful experiments of Esther Brown and her friends, one needs first to conceive something as unimaginable and unprecedented as too fast girls and surplus women and whores producing “thought of the outside,” that is, thought directed toward the outer bound of what is possible. (Hartman, 2018, p. 471)

Dirty Computer tells the story of Jane 57821 and *her* friends. This story is one that shares a central Black feminist theme with Hartman’s reading of Esther Brown’s life in the brutal city: imagination and refusal are the only ways out. Wielding Hartman’s methodology, critical fabulation, Monáe summons visionary fables of trans’ futures, promises, and utopias—what she calls “paradise found” (Monáe, 2018)—beyond the hold of the *Nevermind*, an embodiment of settler colonialism and chattel enslavement, to intervene and explicate oppositional narratives and theorizations produced by Black women often neglected as part of the radical canon.

It is useful to think through José Esteban Muñoz’s (2009) use of Ernst Bloch’s “concrete utopias.” Distinct and unlike ahistorical, “abstract utopias,” they are, rather, “relational to historically situated struggles, a collectivity that is actualized or potential” (Muñoz, 2009, p. 3). The

utopian horizons Monáe speculates are rooted in historical/contemporaneous/future Black transfeminist insurgencies, “truth you can’t hide,” and legacies that cannot be lost (Monáe, 2018). “Dreams will get you through. even if you stopper up your mouth and tighten up your behind. you are not airtight. however shallow you make your breathing, the depth is there” (Gumbs, 2018, p. 199). Black feminist visions and life is imminent in its resurgence and is bound to survive the might of the state. Monáe articulates a kind of failure within the colonial project of sterility, asserting it cannot “neutralize” the porous, loving, riotous force of Black feminist worlding.

For Hartman, the violent conditions of the World are meaningfully processed by looking to the lives and creativity of Black women. She expresses, “state violence, surveillance, and detention produce the archival traces and institutional records that inform the reconstruction of these lives; but desire and the want of something better decide the contours of the telling” (Hartman, 2018, p. 470). Considering Hartman’s insight, Monáe’s inhabitation of a Black transfeminist utopian future is revealed to be a refusal to abide by anti-Black and transgender antagonistic logics, surveillance, and captivity imperatives leveled by the anti-Black cisheteropatriarchal entity, the *Nevermind*.

The (W)holes of Y(our) Heart(s)

Monáe’s “Pynk” is a theory of fugitive survival in the face of colonial might and enslavement by becoming, landing, inhabiting, and departing in such a way that does not rely on the state or *a singular* state of being. It is a yearning gesture, movement embodying trans utopian future worlds, perpetually landing at various sites to rest and rehearse. Monáe employs “Pynk” as a methodology for thinking freedom in what Hortense Spillers has called “non-being” after the ends of the World, one Jane 57821 queerly fantasizes fleeing from due to its engulfment in the

quotidian and structural violence of Man: racism, cisheterosexism, ableism, capitalism, and more.

“Pynk” is not a set essence, but a queer analytic, trans gesture; it embraces the unintelligibility and ungovernability of Blackness. “I wanna fall through the stars. Getting lost in the dark is my favorite part” (Monáe, 2018). It is not a fixed destination; it is not light. In “Where Black Feminist Thought and Trans Feminism Meet,” Kai M. Green (2017) writes, “Black feminists [ask] for a reconstitution of the terms and the terrain, not simply for an assigned role or designated place on the already existing lands” (p. 439). In the tradition of Black feminism, this is a fundamental call to action for a radically oppositional theory of knowing one another and the worlds we inhabit. The critique of the violent technologies of Western compartmentalization emanates from and through what Hortense Spillers (1987) calls the “captive community,” or otherwise the dirty computers, experiencing the conditions of being (in) the “living laboratory”:

This profitable “atomizing” of the captive body provides another angle on the divided flesh: we lose any hint or suggestion of a dimension of ethics, of relatedness between human personality and its anatomical features, between one human personality and another, between human personality and cultural institutions. (Spiller, 1987, p. 68)

The trans aim of Monáe’s Black feminism is to obliterate “the capacity for distinction—inside/outside, private/public—[what] would come to be racialized by those that could, according to Western thought traditions, be self-possessed and, thus, possess things” (Crawley, 2018, p. 5). The logic of capture, containment, and objectification in any capacity are antithetical to trans utopian endeavors. Accordingly, a biologically essentialized womanhood is in direct odds with Black feminism. As Crawley notes, Western thought has severed ontologies for proprietary reasons, and Monáe’s “Pynk” allows us to think

being-with, everything *is* and *as* everything, as a refutation to this colonial logic: to be whole in the face of colonial fragmentation.

“Pynk” collapses the desire for purely representational politics, especially those that actively maintain the borders of what it means to exist as the subject (Butler, 1990, p. 8). As such, I want to think about trans more expansively. Green and Bey (2017) say, “Trans is a disruptive orientation, but it is not... specific to transgender bodies...; rather, [it is] a method or mode of engaging time, history, people, things, places with an openness and an acceptance of the excesses that are constantly being created and unaccounted for” (p. 448). Conversely, Christina Sharpe’s (2016) “In the Wake” extends Omise’eke Tinsley’s assertion that “the Black Atlantic has always been the queer Atlantic,” adding that “the Black and queer Atlantic have always been the Trans* Atlantic. Black has always been that excess...” (Sharpe, 2016, p. 30). She, importantly, restates what this means:

Slavery trans all desire as it made some people into things, some into buyers, sellers, owners, fuckers, and breeders of that Black flesh. That excess is here writ large on Black bodies—as it is with the process of subjection. And it is that point, post the “rupture of the world,” at which, Dionne Brand tells us, we, whether we made that passage or not, are “transform[ed] into being. That one door [the door of no return] transformed us into bodies emptied of being, bodies emptied of self-interpretation, into which new interpretations could be placed.” (Sharpe, 2016, p. 32)

The anti-Black logic of racial capitalism and slavery parasitically consumes Black lifeways, and this is what Sharpe calls life in “the wake of slavery.” Che Gossett explains, “The violence of the gender binary has been imposed on us via the settler colonial site and bio and necropolitical laboratory of the slave ship and the plantation complex” (Gossett & Filar, 2016). Put another way, transgender antagonisms and anti-Blackness,

actualized by (settler) colonization and slavery, are entangled and seek mutual consolidation until they are both uprooted. Thus, refusal, or abolitionist imagination, a Black transfeminist technology for thinking and realizing survival, is a necessary route to freedom.

Through poetic form, Gumbs (2018) renders the anxieties of refusing this World, which is to say engagement in anti-fat misogynoir in the chapter “baskets of no” of *M Archive*, “we broke the earth and now we fall through time. because marching on a line we thought was forward only called up the urgency of the abyss... *you cannot live like this cannot breathe the air here*” (p. 139). Gumbs alarmingly illustrates a planet whose destruction and uninhabitability is brought about directly through a carceral worldview that harshly constitutes, distinguishes, and disentangles the fat Black woman’s being from the very *being* of everything and everyone else, to cast her, even if one is a fat Black woman, into a state of “non-being.” She declares, “it is a lie from the devil. it will never work. it is killing us all” (Gumbs, p. 146). Her proclamation are words by which “Pynk” lives. Anti-fat misogynoir are the very conditions of possibility for the World. “Pynk,” cannot live here, it has already fled this World for others that, at least temporarily, do not replicate carceral binaries and individualism. “Pynk” requires ontological porousness and imbricated relationality, “holes of your heart” (Monáe, 2018). Monáe theorizes radical ways of loving that do not obscure the specificity of historical and quotidian violence specifically targeting Black communities. To Monáe, love is not a liberal project, but one that requires deep-seated, holistic care and does not deny the full range of human emotion: anger, worry, and sadness.

Conclusion

Racist ableist cisheteropatriarchy conceives of the hole as an absence. However, for Evelynnn Hammonds, “the black hole is not empty; it is a dense and full place in space”

(Hammonds, 1994). Similarly, Monáe’s “holes of your heart” are the eventful site of radical love, “discursive and material [terrain] where there exists the possibility for the active production of speech, desire, and agency” (Hammonds, 1994). Monáe refuses such a model of deficiency, and alternatively, together with Hammonds, articulates the capaciousness of the hole, insisting the potentiality of porous flesh and being, where breathing and all chemical components that constitute life flow through in a binding thread of being. To restate Gumbs’ powerful statement, “everything is everything” in Monáe’s Black feminist worldview. “Pynk” is a critique of rugged individualism, clarifying the way such a façade is meant to eliminate our integral responsibility to one another. We cannot be whole without porousness, the holes of our hearts that radically connect us.

In “Transmateriality,” Karen Barad (2015) expertly describes the “ontological indeterminacy” of matter, a theoretical worldview shared by “Pynk” in its insistence on the mutual implications of ontology:

radical openness, an infinity of possibilities, ... is at the core of mattering. How strange that indeterminacy, in its infinite openness, is the condition for the possibility of all structures in their dynamically reconfiguring in/stabilities. Matter in its iterative materialization is a dynamic play of in/determinacy. Matter is never a settled matter. It is always already radically open. Closure cannot be secured when the conditions of im/possibilities and lived indeterminacies are integral, not supplementary, to what matter is. In an important sense, in a breathtakingly intimate sense, touching, sensing, is what matter does, or rather, what matter is; matter is condensations of responses, of response-ability. (Barad, 2015, p. 401)

Further engaging the notion of “radical openness,” Kai M. Green and Marquis Bey (2017) offer an analysis of mutual interdependency and radical openness as “one of the only ways the abolitionist goal of the “end of the world” can

transpire, as Black and trans feminisms do the really hard stuff of imagining what we must become, and what we must give up, in order for the beings who have not yet been allowed to emerge to do so” (Green & Bey, 2017, p. 448). Green and Bey describe the material vitality and stakes of abolition and bringing about the ends of the World. Gumbs (2018) writes of the universe as a Black woman and for this reason the World seeks separation. Meanwhile, Barad indicates the transness of matter, both sharing a critique of the colonial imperative to dominate and possess. Following this logic, for Black trans persons to *matter*, being must be conceived of as radically open, interconnected, and mutually dependent: *everything is everything*.

Abolitionism, a politics that necessarily tends to Black trans life, is (radical) love, attentive to the violence enacted by oppressive colonial regimes of subjection, such as the *Nevermind* in “Pynk.” Reading Monáe’s Black feminist love dreams in “Pynk” as trans utopia requires this notion of radical openness—worlds and life where “the holes of [our] heart[s]” allow for a free flow of connectivity untethered to the individualistic, biologically essentialist idea of static, singular being separate from the Earth and fat Black trans women. In these otherworlds, “asociality,” as Ashon Crawley (2018) mentions, or the “modern construction of a way to think resistance to relation” (p. 5), is not the objective for *being/thinking*. The opposite is true for “Pynk,” a metaphor for Black transfeminist utopia: sociality, a radical being-with, is ongoingly sought. “Pynk” is a theory of loving radically by way of refusal; it demands political action. “I don’t wanna hide my love... Maybe this love will indoctrinate... The way you feel, yeah I feel the same way... Deep inside we’re all just Pynk” (Monáe, 2018). By way of imagination, Monáe conjures portals to trans worlds where love, radical openness, and ontological indeterminacy are activated. Once located, however, sites do not become a permanent location to settle; rather, a

celebration ensues. Then, soon, as we see at the end of “Pynk,” a fugitive escape begins.

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