

# Gender Definition and Expressions of Sexuality in Janelle Monáe's "Pynk"

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As the opening notes of Janelle Monáe's "Pynk" plays, Janelle and a car full of women roll down a sandy, pink desert road in a convertible. In a convertible similar to *Thelma and Louise's*, it seems as though they just completed the jump from one side of the canyon to the other. The PYNK Rest Stop and Inn is displayed in the style of a drive-in movie theater sign, pointing to a drive-in movie theater. The twist on the western is introduced and the music video to "Pynk" begins with soft snaps in the background and a cast comprised of women of color.

"Pynk" fits in a long tradition of music videos becoming a kind of political pop, existing in conversation with conventions left over from the 1980s and '90s. Its cast is made up entirely of black and other non-white women who are often featured in a state of undress and close ups of underwear-clad behinds are



Monáe introduces the viewer into the world of "Pynk" (screenshot from 0:20)

not uncommon. Quick cuts between scenes show the women to be perpetually in action, as the background and featured characters often make eye contact with the camera. The characters are laughing and playful, throwing a beach ball in the pool and posing cheekily in matching sunglasses. These scenes give the impression that the women have control over their own actions. These choices are a

direct response to '80s and '90s hip-hop that exploited women (especially black women) as accessories to the artist. Anderson (2018) writes of this tradition:

The black woman's backside has been fetishised [sic] as an object of mute and even contemptible spectacle, certainly since the rise of commercial hip hop in the 1980s...More recently, the "black bottom" has been weirdly appropriated by Kim Kardashian at one extreme and Miley Cyrus at the other. In Monáe's video, black women's bottoms are presented playfully as something both for and about black women, as she and Thompson alternately rise from an undulating sea of upturned backsides.

By establishing black women as the holders rather than receivers of a sexualizing gaze, "Pynk" works against exploitative videos like Sir Mix A Lot's "Baby Got Back," in which he objectifies the bodies of black women dancing around him. In the candy-colored world of "Pynk," women express desire for each other and themselves rather than men. In fact, no men appear in the video. "Pynk" works against presuppositions that hip-hop and pop music videos are, as shown by Sir Mix A Lot or Miley Cyrus, purely about the erotic pleasure of the viewer, or sometimes of the male singer. Exploitation of black female bodies is a tradition of the genre, as they are "formed into inanimate objects for a visual experience through their clothing, dancing, actions, and sometimes speech" (Forte 2017). When Monáe rubs actress Tessa Thompson's<sup>1</sup> head as it appears between her vulva-esque pants, in a nod to clitoral stimulation, her

action asserts the validity of women's position as the bearer rather than the object of desire.



Thompson acting as the clitoris in Monáe's anatomical costume in "Pynk" (screenshot from 1:03)

In the same scene, "Pynk" highlights female sexual pleasure to argue that women should not be ashamed of receiving it and, as is further implied, to not be ashamed of self-stimulation nor receiving sexual pleasure from another woman. Monáe is joined in her vagina pants by unnamed dancers costumed in the same way, placing them on a level of equality to suggest that, though Monáe is singing the background music, she is not the only character whom the video's arguments apply to. The scenes in which Monáe does not appear are similarly frenetic and active as the ones she is featured in, establishing the world of "Pynk" as nearly utopic—an all-woman, anti-hierarchical paradise.

In the album notes for "Pynk," it is described as "a brash celebration of creation. self love. sexuality. and pussy power!" It asserts that "PYNK is the color that unites us all, for pink is the color found in the deepest and darkest

<sup>1</sup> Thompson appears in the video for "Pynk" as well as Monáe's music video "Make Me Feel," an ode to sexual fluidity, and her video album *Dirty Computer*.

nooks and crannies of humans everywhere... PYNK is where the future is born" (Sodomsky, 2018). The pink filter on the video—and, of course, the pink *Thelma and Louise*-esque convertible, pink pool floats, pink sunglasses, pink costumes, and pink desert backdrop—acts as a visual reminder of the color pink's association with womanhood and femininity, as well as with the vagina, which repetitively acts as a synecdoche<sup>2</sup> for women.

The lyrics of the chorus, sung breathily by Monáe and punk artist Grimes, argue for the same yonic imagery and exercises of sexuality:

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

With the color scheme, lyrics, vulva pants, and the underwear that asserts that the vagina is "Great Cosmic Mother" and "grabs back" (a reference to Trump's "grab 'em by the pussy" comment, thus establishing the video as a political response) in block lettering, the music video "reclaims, among other things: the colour [sic] pink as a deeply powerful feminine symbol; the vagina as a universal place of origin" (Anderson, 2018). "Pynk" works within the framework that the body is a political object and that pop music is a place to make a political statement to the President of the United States.

In a continuation of political action, the purposeful misspelling of the title—"pink" with a y instead of an *i*"—alludes to the feminist action that (phonetically) excludes men from female spaces by spelling "women" as "womyn." This nod ties Monáe's song to feminist ideology by, title alone (if the repeated vaginal imagery was not enough), aligns itself with the feminist movement, specifically the third-wave.



Monáe drives a pink convertible through a pink landscape (screenshot from 0:02)

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<sup>2</sup> A figure of speech in which a part is made to represent the whole.



Though Monáe pays homage to the term without referencing the cultural criticism of it as trans-exclusive<sup>3</sup>, she and Tessa Thompson each made statements that, while the video is not subtle about its nods to “pussy power,” the video praises women both with and without vaginas.



Tweet from Thompson, 2018



Tweet from Monáe, 2018

Acknowledgements to trans women exists discreetly in the video, most notably as one shot shows an unidentified woman swinging a pink baseball bat between her legs as a phallic image. In scenes in which Monáe and others appear wearing their vagina pants, a few women always appear without the pants as well. Here, the video references intersectional feminism by including women who hold more than one marginalized identity.<sup>4</sup>

At the end of the video, it returns to a previously used, wide-shot of Monáe and Thompson leaning against each other in the desert, alone. The peaceful shot is immediately juxtaposed by several quick cuts: an untying string bikini, popping bubble gum, and two final, hyper-saturated close-ups of Monáe’s face and the flower-lined roof of a building. This pairing establishes Monáe as narrator and creator of the world of “Pynk” by showing them in conjunction, both with the same bright pink lighting and almost alienating, zoomed-in lens. “Pynk” ends with a final assertion that its titular color is a stand-in for women and for female sexuality. As Monáe’s face and voice fade out, the lyrics leave no question to the video’s, and presumably Monáe’s, opinion on the subject: “Pink is my favorite part.”

3 The term “womyn” has been adopted by trans-exclusive radical feminists (women who exclude transgender women and non-binary people from the feminist movement and from women-only spaces) who use it as an excuse to prevent trans women from accessing female spaces by claiming they are not “womyn-born-womyn” and thus, not allowed. Because of this history, the use of the term in feminist movements, writing, or online platforms is often criticized by trans activists and allies.

4 Forte (2017) writes of intersectionality that “instead of only being discussed in terms of race and gender, other elements must be considered: citizenship, religion, ethnicity, disability, sexuality, class, age, colorism, etc.”

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