Research Article

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Janelle Monáe's Sartorial Reconceptualization of the Black Gendered Body

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Abstract: Janelle Monáe is known for her black and white attire, pompadour hairstyles, James Brown-inspired dance moves, android alter-ego (Cindi Mayweather), and bent toward Afrofuturism. Monáe is also known for her politics. Her participation in countless Black Lives Matter rallies and the Women's March on Washington and her advocacy for the LGBTQI+ community prove a determination to use her platform to draw attention to social justice issues impacting those marginalized by white supremacy, sexism, homophobia, and misogynoir. Monáe's politics have been expressed both at the podium and through her distinctive attire. This discussion considers the radical nature of Monáe's sartorial choices and draws attention to how a black queer woman uses clothing as a text to transgress gender norms and to engage in a discourse of disrespectability politics, which reconceptualizes the black gendered body.

Keywords: gender, race, respectability politics

> Clothes mark the point at which the inner and outer vision meet … Clothing is the outer expression of an inner identity, an imaginative vision transformed into tangible form for others (and ourselves) to see. Dress enables people to identify themselves-socially, sexually, morally aesthetically – to be recognized or to be misrecognized. (Alison Laurie)

Janelle Monáe is known for her black and white attire, pompadour hairstyles, James Brown-inspired dance moves, android alter-ego (Cindi Mayweather), and bent toward Afrofuturism. Monáe is also known for her racial and gender politics. Her participation in countless Black Lives Matter rallies and the Women's March on Washington and her advocacy for the LGBTQI+ community prove a determination to use her platform to draw attention to social justice issues impacting those marginalized by white supremacy, sexism, homophobia, and misogynoir. Monáe's race, sex, and gender politics have been expressed both at the podium and through her distinctive attire. Although she claims she is not overtly political, as scholar Melissa Harris-Perry argues, "the internal, psychological, emotional, and personal experiences of black women are inherently political" (5), and thus, by virtue of being a black queer woman in a patriarchal white supremacist nation, corporeally Monáe is inextricably linked to the political discourse on race and gender. The following discussion considers the radical nature of Monáe's sartorial choices and draws attention to how a black queer woman uses clothing as a text to transgress gender norms and to engage in a discourse of disrespectability politics, which reconceptualizes the black gendered body. While the primary focus here is on Monáe, a brief discussion of black queer musicians Gladys Bentley and Meshell Ndegeocello acknowledges that Monáe is working within an established tradition of women who force audiences to reconcile with diverse definitions of black womanhood.

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Janelle Monáe's Colorful Beginning

Like many black artists, Monáe, a native of Kansas City, Kansas, began her career performing in the church. Although she was a child of humble beginnings (her parents were working-class), her bold ambition led her to New York City, where she attended the American Musical and Dramatic Academy (AMDA). Unfortunately, Monáe viewed AMDA as too restrictive of her creative expression, and she left the program and moved to Atlanta, where she worked on music and joined with other creatives to establish Wondaland, a multi-media entertainment collective. In 2006, she met Big Boi of OutKast Records, who featured her on a number of singles and the 2006 *Idlewild* soundtrack. A year later, she met rapper and music producer Puff Daddy who signed her to the Bad Boy Entertainment label. Puff Daddy, a veteran A&R scout with a roster of successful talent, was accustomed to creating the look and sound for his artists (Total, Mary J. Blige, 112, and Faith Evans among others), but Monáe was adamant about maintaining control of her aesthetic choices, both sonically and sartorially. According to English and Kim, even though Monáe signed a deal with Bad Boy Entertainment, she released her albums with Wondaland, her own independent label (228). Her first musical recording, *Metropolis: The Chase Suite* (2007), had mild success, but the first album, *ArchAndroid* (2010), earned a Grammy nomination. The second album, *Electric Lady* (2013), featured collaborations with Prince, Solange, and Erykah Badu. In 2016, she made her film debut in Barry Jenkins' highly acclaimed *Moonlight*, and in 2017, she starred in *Hidden Figures*. In 2018, she released her third album *Dirty Computer*.

Throughout the years, Monáe distinguished herself with her funk/R&B melodies and with her black and white signature color palette. Whether stripes, polka dots, or color blocks, Monáe wore black and white to photoshoots, red carpet appearances, and during performances. In an interview with *Variety Magazine*, Monáe revealed she was drawn to the black and white color palette right as she began her music career, first because the colors are androgynous and compliment her non-gender-conforming identity, and second because of the practicality of the two colors. Essentially, wearing black and white alleviated the pressure of selecting outfits for shows, especially on a limited budget. To fans, the media, and fashion experts, at first glance, Monáe's designer ensembles were nothing more than a fashion statement and a marker of individuality. But as Monáe explained in 2012, her trademark suit was a uniform intended to articulate a coded message of struggle and perseverance.

In 2012, while accepting a Black Girls Rock Award, Monáe shared her parents wore uniforms to their blue-collar jobs, so she wore a uniform to "honor them:

> When I started my musical career I was a maid … My mother was a proud janitor, my stepfather worked at the post office, and my father was a trash man. They all wore uniforms. This uniform reminds me I have work to do. And that's why I stand here today in my black and white and I wear my uniform to honor them […]" (Monáe Black Girls Rock)

Monáe's uniform also signifies her working-class roots and pays homage to several generations of her family who have remained tied to the service industry. In a 2018 interview with *Marie Claire* magazine, Monáe describes the daily ritual of watching her mother, Janet, dress in one of her three uniforms: one for her job cleaning homes, one for her job as a hotel maid, and the last for her janitor's position. None of these jobs paid well, and her mother struggled to make ends meet, but she was tenacious and carried out her duties with dignity. Monáe admired her mother's attitude: "She never talked down about her job and we respected her because she was doing work that needed to be done. Without cleaners, our whole community would fall apart" (Pascoe). Thus, it is clear that Monáe has always viewed the uniform with pride. Donning a uniform, long equated with men and women who work in service, brings visibility to the working-class poor involved in a billion-dollar shadow economy that pays most of its workers on average $12 an hour. These individuals who make up a large percentage of our workforce, and who endure the exploitation of their labor, are overwhelmingly black and brown people. Monáe was not the first to use clothing to align herself with the working class. Fifty years prior, young women and men of the civil rights group, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, wore denim as a mark of solidarity with the field laborers whom they tried to mobilize to engage in voting rights (Ford 640). Monáe's uniform is not solely a signifier of her solidarity with the working class; it is also a radical statement about the sexual politics of misrepresentation and the reconstruction of black womanhood.

Methodology

Black feminist theory (respectability/disrespectability politics and black feminist thought) and queer theory (gender analysis), along with a close analysis of Monáe's songs lyrics, album covers, interviews, and attire worn in videos, on stage, and on the red carpet, provide the methodological framework for this analysis of how Monáe's sartorially upends a socially prescribed definition of respectable womanhood. Black women's respectability politics, as defined by scholars such as Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Victoria Wolcott, and Patricia Hill Collins et al., are rooted in social mores dictated by Victorian society. A respectable woman was pious, virtuous, demure, chaste, and a credit to her race. According to Wolcott, for some generations, the notion of respectability was intertwined with racial uplift and efforts of social inclusion (Wolcott qtd in Harris 213). Thus, women were expected to exhibit appropriate decorum – expressed in dress, language, and mannerisms. Crunk feminist Brittney Cooper has critiqued the strictures of respectability politics. Cooper argues, "respectability as a political project has failed black women, and continues to disallow the access that we have been taught to think it will give" (220). Juxtaposed against the rigidity of respectability politics is what Cooper defines as "disrespectability politics." Although it connotes negativity, disrespectability politics is the antithesis of respectability politics. It empowers women to live unbound by the shackles of respectability and the judgment of others. In essence, disrespectability allows individuals to define self-respect according to their own standards (or not). Finally, disrespectability politics embraces the open expression of what would be considered by others as improper: sexual impropriety, nudity, suggestive dancing, bawdy language, or mannerisms (Harris 214). In the groundbreaking study *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (1998), Angela Y. Davis's examination of classic blues singers of the 1920s and 1930s offers strong examples of women who shirked respectability politics by singing about same-sex desire, divorce, and sexual exploits (Davis). These blues women gave black women an alternative definition of womanhood to admire, and they gave them visibility and the recognition that it was ok to express thoughts and feelings deemed immoral or unnatural. Similar to these blues women, Monáe's clothing, music, and sexual orientation are counter to the tenets of respectability politics, and as such, she sets her own criteria for defining black womanhood.

Monáe's identity politics are discussed through the lens of queer theory, which helps position the central argument detailing Monáe's subversion of gender binaries. In an interview with cultural critic Roxane Gay, Monáe explains she does not ascribe to a particular gender: "I feel my feminine energy, my masculine energy, and energy I can't even explain" (*Janelle Monáe's Afrofuture*). When considering Monáe's history of pushing back against "the boundaries of gender," she/her pronouns used in reference to Monáe seem inappropriate and contradictory (*Janelle Monáe's Afrofuture*). Monáe has both identified as a woman and rejected gender binaries, opting instead to use android as a chosen identifier. A serious question for consideration is which pronouns should be used in reference to Monáe, who professes to use the identity markers she/her or they/them? Judith Butler's theorization of gender performance noted the challenges that come with identifying appropriate language to properly define individuals who don't fall neatly into socialized gendered categories. Butler surmises, "there is … a good deal about the diverse experiences of women that is being expressed and still needs to be expressed, but caution is needed with respect to that theoretical language, for it does not simply report a pre-linguistic experience, but constructs that experience as well as the limits of its analysis" (531). In respect to this article, keeping with the existing body of scholarship on Monáe, she/her pronouns are used with the understanding that these labels are elusive with respect to how Monáe self-defines.

Gladys Bentley and Meshell Ndegeocello: Suit-wearing Trailblazers of Gender Nonconformity

Long before Monáe was undermining gender conventions, queer black musicians Gladys Bentley and Meshell Ndegeocello paved the way and created space for an atypical representation of the black female

entertainer. In the 1920s–1950s, Gladys Bentley, a bawdy, openly gay musician, curated a wardrobe that defied expected social mores and gender norms. On stage, she wore tuxedos, and off stage, she wore her brother's suits. Bentley entertained in some of the most famous nightclubs around the world. In New York City, she performed frequently at Harry Hansberry's, a popular gay and lesbian nightclub, where she danced with a troupe of men in drag. Bentley's open lesbianism and cross-dressing challenged gender norms. Her clothing made a strong statement about how she chose to define her personhood. In Bentley's era, it was radical for a woman to wear male attire, and the perceived impropriety of her transgender appearance put her at risk for violent attacks and imprisonment. In an essay for *Ebony* magazine, she wrote about the constraints of living in a society that condemned individuals who rejected heteronormativity and gender conformity:

> Some of us wear the symbols and badges of our non-conformity. Others seeking to avoid the censure of society, hide behind respectable fronts, haunted always by the fear of exposure and ostracism. Society shuns us. The unscrupulous exploit us. Very few people can understand us....I have violated the accepted code of morals that our world observes but yet the world has tramped to the doors of the places where I have performed to applaud my piano playing and song styling. (Bentley)

Bentley acknowledged the hypocrisy of those who accused her of immorality but had no qualms about indulging in her music or frequenting the LGBTQ-friendly venues where she performed. Later in life, the pressures of homophobia, along with her own inner turmoil about her chosen lifestyle, were too much to bear, and Bentley traded her suits for dresses.

Although it was temporary, adopting different forms of gender expression with clothing and accessories liberated Bentley from gender norms and created opportunities for the next generation of black androgynous performers, such as neo-soul/funk artist Meshell Ndegeocello. Ndegeocello appeared 30 years after Bentley. Ndegeocello's "masculine" persona set her apart from other black women performers of her time, such as Aaliyah and Mary J. Blige. Similar to Bentley, Ndegeocello was a renegade, a performer who broke the rules, defied categorization, and used her body and clothing to push the boundaries of gender categorization. Ndegeocello's baggy jeans, big sweatshirts, and trademark shaved head earned her the label of "tomboy" or "homeboy," and with her music, the media constantly speculated about her sexuality. In her second album *Peace Beyond passion* (1996), Ndegeocello referenced the LGBTQI+ community with songs such as "Leviticus: Faggot," a song about homophobia, religion, and the ostracization of the LGBTQI+ community. In other songs and music videos, Ndegeocello addresses same-sex desires and takes on a masculine persona. On the album cover for *Bitter* (1999), Ndegeocello is presented as an androgynous figure. A blurry image captures her silhouette on the floor, dressed in a black tank top and jeans. Shana Goldin-Perschbacher argues, "Ndegocello has learned to perform aspects of masculinity, not to avoid femininity, but rather to broaden what being a woman is" (491). In an industry so accustomed to the hypersexualization of black women's bodies presented in heteronormative scenarios (which will be discussed later), Ndegocello's imagery was unique. In the "Pocketbook" video, Ndegeocello sports a shaved head and tracksuit in one shot, and in another image, she wears a fedora and pants. Throughout the video, she is surrounded by women.

Ndegeocello's masculine persona is most clearly discernible in the video for "If that's your boyfriend (He Wasn't Last Night)" (1994), a song about stealing women's boyfriends. Goldin-Perschbacher observes,

> Director Jean Baptiste Mondino sonically and visually helps Ndegeocello create a masculine female character that has confidently slept with several women's boyfriends. The video presents the narrator using predominantly butch gender cues that are understood to empower her heterosexual conquests at the expense of a series of more stereotypically feminine girlfriend characters. Ndegeocello wears dark shiny lipstick (also seen on two of the 'girlfriends') and sports a menswear suit jacket and trousers, a white tank top, suspenders, and a closely-shaven head. (482)

In comparison to videos released the same year, such as Janet Jackson's "That's the Way Love Goes" or Mariah Carey's "Dream Lover," both videos showcasing feminine women flirting with male suitors, for its time, Ndegeocello's video was groundbreaking and provocative.

With the exception of Grace Jones, Joan Armatrading, and Tracy Chapman, there were few black women entertainers in the mainstream who broke the mold and presented an alternative representation of black women in the music industry. Rather than relying on Ndegeocello's sexuality as a way to promote her music, which is a standard practice in the media, record sales would be generated from the quality of her music. For her time, Ndegeocello was a renegade who dared to change the rules and refused to be labeled by sex, gender, or ideology. When the media tried to call her a feminist lesbian, according to Goldin-Perschbacher, "she coyly identified as 'homo sapien'." Ndegeocello's stance was important because "[b]y identifying herself in terms of humanity and functionality, she teasingly but proudly reversed traditional devaluation of 'Others' via theories of pathology, deviance and immortality" (479). Essentially, Ndegeocello gave visibility to a community of individuals who had little representation in the media and showed young artists that it was possible to perform as their authentic selves. Ndegeocello's authenticity and ability to set her own standards influenced Monáe. Monáe admits, "there were, of course, a lot of artists who have come before me that walked in their truth like (openly queer singer-songwriter and activist) Meshell Ndegeocello. Even if they didn't say, "Hey, I'm gay," there was just a certain freeness that I got when I looked at David Bowie, a freeness I got that blurred the line of gender" (Azzopardi np). From the onset, Monáe blurred gender lines, and similar to Ndegeocello Monáe carves out a definition of womanhood akin to other artists (not discussed here) such as rappers Queen Latifah, MC Lyte, or Da Brat, and she challenged audiences to be receptive to a presentation of the black body that was unique for black women. Monáe's body, mostly clad in her uniform of a black and white tuxedo, armed herself for the assault and adulation for her choice to be authentically herself.

Monáe's Revision of the Little Black Dress

In 2010, Monáe wore a tuxedo in the video for her first major hit, "Tightrope" on the *ArchAndroid Album*. A black tuxedo, a white shirt with black buttons, and black and white spectators are worn by Monáe and her dancers who slide across the floor in James Brown-inspired dance moves. In an interview, Monáe expounded on her passion for the tuxedo: "A tux is a standard uniform, it's so classy and it's a lifestyle I enjoy. The tux keeps me balanced. I look at myself as a canvas. I don't want to cloud myself with too many colors or I will go crazy" (*The Beat*).

Monáe is one among a number of women performers who have worn the tuxedo in some of the most iconic moments in pop culture. In 1933, actress Marlena Dietrich wore a tuxedo in the film *Morocco* (1930), and off-screen, much to the dismay of many, she wore a man's suit and coat. Eighty-four years later, Beyoncé crashed the internet after she performed at the Video Music Awards in her sequined purple tuxedo jacket and announced her pregnancy. A few years later, Madonna's ensemble of a traditional black tuxedo and top hat worn for her 2014 performance at the Video Music Awards also became a newsworthy moment for the entertainment industry. These women who wore the tuxedos in their performances wanted to make a bold, memorable statement, and each succeeded in creating iconic looks capturing specific moments in their careers, but with the exception of Dietrich, there is no evidence of their reasons for donning the tuxedo were the same as Monáe's. It is important to note that while the tuxedo has become a favorite performance ensemble for women, initially, tuxedos were designed for men.

The Tux: Ungendering Fashion

According to Anne Hollander, over 100 years ago, the tuxedo was developed in America as dinner wear to pair with black trousers. Tuxedos were actually informal wear, but over time became synonymous with formal attire: "The black tailcoat worn with white tie, white waistcoat, stiff shirt, and silk hat, once prescribed for all gentlemen in the evening in all private or public places, including theaters and restaurants, is

still worn on certain formal and festive occasions; but it is now mostly seen on performers, many of them female" (Hollander 81). For female performers, the tuxedo is modified for a woman's shape and designed with feminine details with deep necklines or form-fitting pants, but there are some women who desire the classic cut of a man's suit/tuxedo. Unfortunately, depending on body type, they often encounter problems with sizing around the hips or bust area, and the garments usually require expensive tailoring. As a multimillion dollar performing artist with access to designers and tailors, it is unlikely that Monáe has difficulty finding suits, but in her earlier years, she might have faced challenges. The Butch Clothing Company and Her Tuxedo are two brands catering to consumers who want suits properly tailored for a woman's form. Some of the businesses selling suits to women are exclusively for LGBTQI consumers. Melissa Mann, for example, started Androgyny, a company that makes men's suits. Mann explains, "For me, it's having more androgynous clothing that fits me (sic), that I feel comfortable and confident in" (Lecompte). While some queer women prefer an androgynous appearance, Monáe gravitates to what scholar Mignon-Moore calls a "gender-blender" style "that is related to but distinct from an androgynous presentation of self." Moore defines gender-blenders as those who do not ""de-emphasize" femininity or masculinity" (125). Monáe fits Moore's description. Her tuxedos are often paired with "feminine" blouses, makeup, jewelry, and elaborate hairstyles.

Monáe's habit of creating ensembles that merge feminine and masculine elements creates an appearance of gender nonconformity and a "visual resistance" that challenges accepted and expected dress (Genter 604). Monáe's defiance of "acceptable" or "expected" dress speaks to the disrespectability politics of dress she chooses for herself. Monáe is of course not the first in fashion and music to queer clothing: Tracy Chapman, David Bowie, Prince, Boy George, and Annie Lenox worry about the lines between masculine and feminine. Monáe exhibits what Jack Halberstam defines as "feminine masculinity." Halberstam, heavily influenced by Butler's performance theory, argues for a definition of masculinity untethered to "maleness and power." Instead, Halberstam recognizes women can embody the masculine and thereby present female masculinity since "masculinity has been produced by and across by both male and female bodies" (2). Halberstam's definition gets us closer to finding language to define Monáe, but as she warns in her song "Q-u-e-en," like her peer Ndegeocello, "Categorize me, I defy every label."

As a black queer woman, Monáe's statement engages in the black feminist discourse of identity politics and black female subjectivity. Melissa Harris-Perry argues that black women in American society are both invisible and hypervisible. Since the legacy of slavery, they have been reduced to stereotypes (mammy, jezebel, and matriarch), which strip them of humanity. Monáe not only scoffs at those who attempt to project labels onto her body but maintains her body does not fit the prescribed mold. Furthermore, as English and Kim observe, Monáe is not completely invested in a Homosapien identity. Rather, her "technologized identity," embodied through her Cindi Mayweather android persona, defies conventional definitions of race, class, gender, and sexuality. When Monáe states "she defies every label, she's celebrating the Afrofuturist identity she's created" (223), which gives her a sense of freedom. Ultimately, Monáe destabilizes gender cues; neither male nor female, she subverts gender binaries, not only for herself but also for others. Monáe acknowledges that the fashion industry plays a role in limiting how women express alternative versions of womanhood. In fact, in Monáe's opinion, clothing should not be gendered: "I don't believe in menswear. I just like what I like and I want to be respected as an individual. I think it's time for someone. to redefine what a woman can wear, how she can dress and wear her hair" (English and Kim 221–222). Essentially, Monáe has unapologetically upended what it means to dress as a woman – and not just by wearing tuxedos.

Policing Self-expression: Embracing Disrespectability Politics

While the black and white suit or tuxedo defines Monáe's signature look, equestrian-style outfits (cropped jackets, riding pants, and riding boots) or matador-inspired outfits (slim-fitting pants with bolero jacket and capes attached with intricate stitching) are also in rotation. Clothing takes center stage in Monáe's

wardrobe, but the accessories are equally important. Monáe often dons bow ties, suspenders, trouser chains, and epaulets. Furthermore, different hats accompany the outfits: conductor's hats, captain's hats, kufis, and smoking caps. Many of these garments, especially those that riff on the military, connote authority and leadership. Thus, with these items of clothing, Monáe dares to co-opt the image of male authority and establish herself as a leader among women (and men). In the video and stage performance for "Django Jane," for example, she is featured on a throne dressed in a red pantsuit and kufi, surrounded by women. Melina Yates Richards suggests, "'Django Jane' cinematically (re)mixes an array of tropes that historically shaped hip hop, while consistently foregrounding black ungendered womanhood. Combining late 1980s/early 1990s visual referents, Jane sits upon a throne while donning a tailored suit and kufi hat reminiscent of the Nation of Islam's masculine visual aesthetics, as well as the sartorial stylings of pioneering female rapper Dana 'Queen Latifah' Owens" (Yates-Richards np). Although Richards equates Monáe's wardrobe with Queen Latifah's, the video also hearkens back to Ndegeocello's "If That's Your Boyfriend (He Wasn't Last Night)." Further commenting on the "Django Jane" video, Yates-Richards also draws attention to the specific colors of the suits, which have symbolic meanings within the black community. "While Jane raps, her suit's colour changes from green, to red, to a black-and-white small-check plaid, and her kufis are embroidered with gold. The shifting spectrum of suit colours may symbolize alignment with a 1990s rap Pan-Africanist aesthetic" (Yates-Richards np). To Yates-Richards' point, it is not only the suit that nods to a Pan-African aesthetic, but also the kufi (typically worn by African men) does as well. While scholars (English and King, Yates-Richards, Redmond, et al.) and astute observers of Monáe might recognize what is at play with the singer's carefully curated wardrobe (she is more than her clothing, race, gender, and sex), others have missed the point and inform Monáe of exactly how they feel about her attire.

Over the years, Monáe has been both praised and criticized for her clothing, specifically her black and white uniform and her androgynous style. Monáe addresses her critics in her music. "Monáe is consistently self-aware of her own performative, as well as sartorial, expansion of womanhood. On her collaborative remix of Tightrope with B.O.B and Lupe Fiasco, she claims, "I can bomb with the fellas/And rock a state Acapella/....Talkin' bout why she don't change her clothes?"/Well they ain't seen to mind last three times I posed in *Vogue*" (English and Kim 222). In 2015, Monáe had a public exchange with a fan on social media who expressed his impatience with her "soulfulness"/mannishness, which in his view compromised her sexuality: In a Twitter post he wrote, "girl, stop being so soulful and be sexy. tired of those dumbass suits, you fine but you too damn soulful man[...]." Not only does this comment evidence the fan's effort to police black womanhood and to hold her in accordance with respectability, but it also speaks to the uneasiness brought on by her androgyny, thus subjecting her to his male gaze and punishment. As Butler notes, "Performing one's gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect" (528). The fan attempts to force Monáe to abandon the suits and dress in a fashion more aligned with a subjective definition of femininity rejected by Monáe. Her retort was simple: "Sit down. I'm not for male consumption." Monáe's choice of language in defense of the fan's criticism taps into a broader conversation about the historical commodification of the black body and the scopophilic fantasies male audiences wish to put upon her body. She is clear that she will not be objectified. Monáe responded to the fan on social media, but in "Django Jane," she addresses the backlash she has experienced from wearing suits: "Remember when they used to say I looked too mannish." Here, the word "mannishness" points to respectability politics, and as Christina Bush observes, it is meant to be insulting:

> To be 'mannish' is to both transgress and instantiate dominantly outlined dictates around gender – to at once be recognized and misrecognized as masculine. When 'mannish' female-bodied people, particularly Black people, are ridiculed or castigated for being so it is because they ostensibly mark a failure and/or refusal with regards to gender – and in so doing potentially reveal the many (il)logics of gender, sexuality, and race that fail to neatly and naturally cohere for all (Black) masculine people. (112)

Mannishness stands outside of the codes of respectability politics. Moreover, mannish or not, it is a feat for Monáe to have achieved her objective to exercise her agency and dress how she pleases, especially in an industry that prefers its women performers scantily clad.

Monáe is one of the few mainstream African-American women artists to achieve success without yielding to the pressure to wear revealing clothing. As Roxane Gay observes, "she is daringly herself in an industry that often demands conformity and punishes originality" (Gay np). Monáe's originality was apparent from her very first album where she appeared as her android alter-ego, Cindi Mayweather, an off-white (with red trim) malfunctioned, battered, dismembered robot with exposed wires, sporting a stylish pompadour. Subsequent albums, *ArchAndroid* and *Electric Lady*, and *Dirty Computer*, continued the Afrofuturist theme. The album cover for *ArchAndroid* features Monáe's face with a burnished gold headpiece constructed to look like a futuristic city. She is also wearing a burnished gold suit of armor with a thick neck cuff. Three tiny lights (or jewels) illuminate a metal-like plate connecting the neck cuff to the suit. Her ears are adorned with large triangular earrings. Her image contrasts with a deep blue background. Interestingly, she's not wearing black and white. She gazes confidently at the viewer. On the *Electric Lady* cover, Monáe looks sleek dressed in a black and white outfit with a shiny bob (in one image her hair is in a bouffant) pearl earrings, and red nail polish. Her image (avatar) is repeated several times in different poses. She gazes at the camera in what could be mistaken for glam shots, but upon closer inspection, in some of the images, the look in her eyes betrays a frightened individual. Finally, the artwork on the *Dirty Computer* album cover is reminiscent of *ArchAndroid*, except she forgoes the headpiece for a heavy mesh-like face covering. In this image, Monáe's eyes are lowered and her neck and clavicle are showing, her bare skin illuminated by a reddish-orange glow. Monáe's head is surrounded by an orange embryo-like matter with a few pink fibers and a whitish-blue cloud behind it that blends into purple. Perhaps the audience is invited to see a version of Monáe that she can only imagine. No black and white suit is required for this part of her journey. Again, maintaining autonomy over her image and music was precisely why she opted to broker a deal with Bad Boy to release music on her own independent label, an accomplishment few black women have achieved so early in their careers. Most importantly, none of these album covers expose a great deal of her skin or present her body in highly sexual poses.

In her oft-cited essay "selling hot pussy" bell hooks argues black women are particularly susceptible to hypersexualization because "their sexuality has been represented in racist sexist iconography as more free and liberated, many black woman singers, irrespective of the quality of their voices have cultivated an image which suggests they are sexually available and licentious" (hooks 125). hooks argues that black women such as Josephine Baker, Tina Turner, Aretha Franklin, and Diana Ross were sexually exploited by the men who managed their careers (later, she reserves the same criticism for Beyoncé Knowles) and made them dress provocatively. hooks argues that by using their bodies and sexuality to sell music, Baker, Turner, Franklin, and others allowed themselves to be fetishized and subject to men's scopophilic fantasies. hooks' argument is rejected by a new generation of feminists such as Gay, who view her critique of Franklin, Turner, and Ross as a denial of women's agency. A younger generation, Lizzo, Megan Thee Stallion, and Cardi B, unabashedly exhibit their bodies and feel secure in their decisions to bare it all or dress modestly. These women fully embrace what Cooper calls "ratchetness," which can be described as "over-the-top, excessive, doing the most" and defined as ghetto fabulous (221). In her song "Savage," for example, Megan Thee Stallion proclaims, "I'm a savage/classy, bougie, ratchet" (Savage).

If ratchetness/disrespectability is about defying what is deemed acceptable or conventional, it is not only the scantily clad who are defying conventionality but Monáe's suits also challenge respectability politics in regard to how women are "supposed" to dress. Scholar Sharde M. Davis maintains, "It is difficult for black women to uphold attributes that define respectability (such as attractiveness, professionalism, intelligence, and success) because they are saturated with cultures of whiteness, maleness, and heteronormativity" (Davis 272). In an interview with *Marie Claire* magazine, Monáe reflects on the industry's sexual objectification of its women. She notes when she entered the industry, "There were no women who performed fully clothed – still to this day there aren't. To me, that was a problem, to say, If you want to be in the music industry, you need to be able to sell sex … I want to be in control of my body. I don't ever want a man or woman to tell me to dress that way. I think it's up to me" (Yuan). Similar to Ndegeocello, throughout her career, Monáe has been uncompromising. Instead of yielding to the demands of the industry, she has proven there are other ways to represent black womanhood and the black body.

Take for example, the video for the song "Cold War." Unlike music videos of her contemporaries, "Cold War" makes a point to limit how much of the black body is exposed to the viewer. Shana Redmond's analysis of the "Cold War" video emphasizes the significance of Monáe's ability to undermine the commodification of the black female body in entertainment through "disembodiment." In the video, Monáe's face takes up most of the frame. Occasionally, her clavicle is exposed but nothing more. The vulnerability and emotionality of Monae's face indicate she is figuratively and literally baring it all, but not in a fashion that necessitates exhibiting her whole body (403). By showing only her body from the neck upwards, Monáe "disrupts the narrative of gendered black nudity in contemporary music videos" (403). Her version can be sensual and also devoid of nakedness or the kind of fetishization that again leads to what Melissa Harris-Perry refers to as the misrecognition of black womanhood; a set of stereotypes that feeds society's negative view of black women and stunts their psychological growth and self-esteem (Perry 42–43). Thus, throughout her career, Monáe's attire also meant less focus on her body. Her black and white uniform has allowed her to achieve this goal. Perhaps the objective is not necessarily to hide her body, but to exhibit it in a different way, with the suit as an extension of her body – as she says, it is an armor to protect what is underneath. Monáe's determination to protect her individuality was rewarded. In 2012, she became a brand ambassador for Cover Girl cosmetics. In her Black Girls Rock acceptance speech, she emphasized the significance of refusing to yield to the industry or society's expectations of how she should govern her personhood. "I want to be clear young girls, I didn't have to change who I was to become a Covergirl, I didn't have to become perfect. Embrace what makes you unique, even if it makes others uncomfortable" (Monáe Black Girls Rock).

While Monáe is clear about her individual principles with respect to how she governs her body, she is against disparaging women who capitalize from their sexual currency and self-expression: She argues, "There are people who have used my image to slut-shame other women [by saying]: 'Janelle, we really appreciate that you don't show your body.' That's something I'm not cool with. I have worn a tuxedo, but I have never covered up for respectability politics or to shame other women" (Bengal). Monáe's preferred wardrobe is about agency and having the freedom to represent herself as she desires, not according to the dictates of a male-dominated, sexually exploitative industry.

Janelle Monáe's Colorful Second Act

In 2018, Monáe released *Dirty Computer*. For this album, she traded her trademark black and white for a vibrant wardrobe in technicolor. Aja Romano observes, "Over the course of Monáe's career, her music videos have become increasingly colorful and musically effusive. As her assurance as a black, queer artist grows, the black-and-white palettes of 'Tightrope' and 'Queen' give way to the rich fuchsias of 'Yoga' and 'Pink', the vibrance of 'Electric Lady' and 'Django Jane'." Davis maintains, although her clothing was muted, the music was colorful (394). With the release of "Dirty Computer," Monáe was ready to reveal more of her private life. When Monáe released the *Dirty Computer* album, she temporarily hung up the suit and literally came out to the world. Her break from the suit only indicated a costume change; Monáe was not any different; again, she was just sharing herself in a different way. In the videos for *Dirty Computer*, Monáe allows her clothes to tell the story. In "PYNK," the first song off the album, Monáe debuted her pussy pants, chap-like pink pants designed by Dutch designer Duran Lantink. The pants (various shades of pink chiffon) were reminiscent of Georgia O'keefe's "vulva-like" paintings. At the time, the pants connected to the public discourse on the attack on women and became a signifier of a deeper message. Monáe's labia pants appear 1 year after she attended the Women's March where a sea of women with pink pussy hats marched and expressed outrage over former President Trump's infamous "grab 'em by the pussy comments" and condemned legislation that threatens women's reproductive rights, the sexual assault on women, women's inequality, immigration reform, and police brutality. The "PYNK" video tapped into Monáe's own pussy power with a song and video celebrating the power of black women as bringers of life and as sexual beings across genders.

The diverse representation of women in the "PYNK" video wearing (and not wearing) vagina pants, and the scenes of same-sex desire, make a radical statement about black womanhood that is largely absent in the mainstream music entertainment industry. bell hooks asserts, "When black women relate to our bodies, our sexuality in ways that place erotic recognition, desire, pleasure, and fulfillment at the center of our efforts to create radical black female subjectivity, we can make new and different representations of ourselves as sexual subjects. To do so, we must be willing to transgress traditional boundaries" (hooks 131). Black women haven't always been able to celebrate the black body on their own terms. Indeed, Monáe's "PYNK" video and labia pants break boundaries. In one scene, a woman's head appears between Monáe's loins. The woman looks seductively at the camera while stroking the sides of Monáe's labia pants. During this act, Monáe rubs the woman's face deeper between her legs. The provocative nature of the video compelled fans to read Monáe's clothing as a statement of her same-sex desire. For years, Monáe has dropped hints about her sexuality. In the song "Make me Feel" (co-written by her mentor, Prince), she hints, "It's like I'm powerful with a little bit of tender/an emotional, sexual bender." In an interview with Terry Gross, she explains that the song and the video were about sensuality: ""You Make Me Feel," was exploring being bisexual, being queer. And you can see with the lighting [in the video] we tried to pay homage to the bisexual flag. One of the things that I wanted to do was show love to the bisexual community, pansexual community, and let folks know where I am in my life and just in general" (*Janelle Monáe Wants to Represent the Underdog-in Music and on Screen*). Just like Ndegeocello, Monáe did not shy away from rumors and, in interviews, confirmed her romantic interest in women but clarified her sexual identity as pansexual.

In "PYNK," once again, Monáe redefines the definition of black womanhood and forces audiences to reconsider the categorization of sex by biological definition. Monáe explains, "the pants worn by the dancers in the PYNK video vocalize that she's not a sex essentialist." She continues, "There are some women in the video that do not have on the pants because I don't believe that all women need to possess a vagina to be a woman" (*People Magazine*). By featuring transgender women in "PYNK," Monáe makes a bold statement about representation, recognition, and inclusivity. Monáe's intersecting identities as a black queer woman enable her to know all too well about the invisibility of all black women, especially those in the trans community. Her platform enables her to demand recognition for herself, as well as for other marginalized groups. Several months after releasing *Dirty Computer*, during pride month, Monáe wore a rainbow-colored gown, synonymous with the pride flag, to the BET Awards. The dress was an overt marker of her membership and allegiance to the LGBTQI+ community. The colorful dress was the antithesis of her black and white. Yet again, she effectively wore an outfit that clearly defined the meaning of solidarity to her community, a community marginalized and often under attack. This was a pivotal moment for a mainstream artist to make such a public statement about her sexuality.

Today, Janelle Monáe is one among a number of artists whose clothing expresses particular ideas about politics, sexuality, and gender. She is a role model for others who recognize they can express themselves both by showing their body and by dressing modestly. A new generation of artists such as H.E.R, Alessia Cara, and Billie Eilish seems to be following her lead. Throughout her career, Monáe has been consistent in her endeavor to represent the marginal and to give them visibility, and at the same time, she has used clothing to tell a story about her views on the working class, rigid definitions of black womanhood, and black women's sexuality. Ultimately, her clothing makes a bold statement about her identity as a "black queer woman in America, who is in her words a free-ass motherfucker" (Spanos).

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