

Black Feminist Wondaland: Reckoning, Celebrating, and Reclaiming Joy in Higher Education

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Abstract. Janelle Monae's, *Dirty Computer*, tackles issues like feminism, racism, sexuality, Black womanhood, self-assurance, and growth. Each song on the album is presented from a first-person point of view, offering a unique insight into a story that shares an intimate portrait of what it means to embrace authentic Black womanhood. Monae's lyrical storytelling brings to life stories of love, loss, fear, and celebration, offering an experience that cannot be ignored. Still, the numerous ways Black women experience joy and celebration are often overlooked in higher education. Thus, in this article, we center Monae's album and offer the framework, Black Feminist Wondaland (BFW), to account for how Black women reckon with the misogynoir enacted against us, celebrate ourselves as an act of radical resistance, and reclaim our joy in a society bent on keeping us in a state of sorrow.

Keywords: Afrofuturism, Black Feminist Wondaland, Black feminist/womanist storytelling, *Dirty Computer*, Black women

In her album, *Dirty Computer* (Robinson et al., 2018), Janelle Monae presents intimate commentary centering what it means to embrace authentic Black womanhood in a society that often ignores and erases Black women. The album is loosely grouped into three parts: (1) Reckoning, which examines Monae's acknowledgement of how society views her as a Black queer woman, (2) Celebration, which explores her acceptance of self despite the world's oppressive views; and (3) Reclamation, which situates love—love of country, love of others, and love of self—as the catalyst for social change. In thematically situating the album this way, Monae argues that *Dirty Computers*, "people who are made to feel like integral parts of their beings are bugs and viruses—can band together, find love, and fight back" (Setaro, 2018).

In keeping with the metaphor of the album—as we will continue to do throughout this article—we believe Black women in higher education are often positioned as dirty computers, viruses infiltrating the university system and causing it to malfunction. However, Monae suggests this anti-black reality is one we are not obligated to accept. She commands attention with a simultaneous grace and vigor and uses her power and platform to let Black women know she sees who we are, as we are. Thus, in this article, we center Monae's album as a love letter to Black women and use it to offer the framework, Black Feminist Wondaland (BFW), to account for how Black women reckon with the racialized and gendered violence enacted against us, celebrate ourselves as an act of radical resistance, and reclaim our joy in a society bent on keeping us in a state of sorrow. We situate ourselves "in the along" by dreaming of an otherwise educational space that grapples with the elusive project of Black female mattering in higher education.

Misogynoir in Higher Education

From a young age, Black women are consistently reminded of the perceived “bugs” in our system. We are reminded of how we are less likely than our female peers to graduate on time or to obtain a post-secondary degree (Baxley & Boston, 2010; Smith-Evans & George, 2014). We are reminded that we are 5.5 times more likely to be suspended than our white female peers and that we receive more suspensions than any other racial group (George, 2015; Onyeka-Crawford et al., 2017). We are forced to modify our culturally sanctioned ways of being and adopt standards of “racelessness” (Evans-Winters, 2010; Fordham, 1988), or assimilation into White culture while distancing ourselves from Blackness, in order to avoid ostracization. When we do achieve academic success, our accomplishments are belittled as some educators focus more on our social decorum rather than our academic triumphs (Carter, 2006; Fordham, 1993; Morris, 2007). Ultimately, we are positioned as corporeal sites of struggle who infiltrate and “dirty” academic spaces.

These difficult reminders continue when we dare to enter higher education. Although Black women persist through stereotypes and earn degrees at high rates, our stories are often excluded from the success discourse (Patton & Croom, 2017). Historically White Institutions often see our strength as liabilities rather than signs of empowerment (Williams et al., 2020). Various groups find themselves intimidated by our existence because our behaviors are often at odds with the controlling images (e.g., loud, angry, hyper-sexual, ratchet, sassy, uneducated) encircling perceptions of Black womanhood (Collins, 2009; Lewis & Miller, 2018; Neal-Jackson, 2020). Because of this, we are “forced to invalidate stereotypes and legitimize [our] competence, intelligence, and overall worth” (Bertrand Jones et al., 2013, p. 326). This positioning of Black women as inferior, subservient, hyper-sexual, hostile, or overly masculine is a form of misogynoir or “anti-Black racism and misogyny worked against Black women” (Bailey & Trudy, 2018, p. 764). It forces us to defend our existence and punishes us for refusing to accept the stereotypical roles forced upon us. Ultimately, our essence as Black and woman entwined with our other identities is categorized as detrimental aspects of our American code.

Afrofuturism

A hallmark of Monae’s work is the use of Afrofuturism to paint a picture of a world vivid in its imagery and spirit. Afrofuturism uses various combinations of science fiction, fantasy, magical realism, horror, history, and imagination to critique oppressions and imagine unbound Black subjectivities in future or alternate worlds (Barr, 2008; Womack, 2013). Black people have harnessed the aesthetic to combat socially constructed realities converging Black identities with calamity and to contest stories where imaginative spaces align the persistence of Black lives with a disastrous future (Yaszek, 2006). Afrofuturism has also been used as a foundation to disrupt modern ideologies restricting Black imaginations and to provide a space for Black people to envision the tools necessary to subvert oppressive paradigms

and create equitable futures (Eshun, 2003). Afrofuturism is a vehicle Black people use to critique social injustice and position ourselves as agents of social change.

Black female Afrofuturists often centralize Black women and girls, redefining how our marginalized identities are depicted (Barr, 2008; Womack, 2013). Through Afrofuturism, Black women create physical and symbolic spaces where we can explore our identities, digging behind societal ideas about what it means to inhabit a Black female body, and creating room for other Black women and girls to define their own existence in numerous and nuanced ways (Morris, 2016). Monae has consistently presented visions of possibility for Black people, amplifying the voices of those who are positioned as viruses destined to destroy America. She previously used her android alter ego, Cindi Mayweather, to focus on the Black female body, presenting herself in a "safe" package that was less a role-play than a glimpse into her truths (English & Kim, 2013). Monae offered this package because the public did not "know Janelle Monae, and [she] felt like [she] didn't really have to be her because they were fine with Cindi" (Wortham, 2018). Cindi was safer than Janelle. This use of artistry calls upon bell hooks' (2015) musings, where she asked appropriately if there is any surprise "people whose bodies have been perpetually used, exploited, and objectified should not seek to turn flesh into armor?" (p. 90). Monae, like so many Black women, is both hyper-visible and invisible (Collins, 2009), so she created social armor, "safe" packaging that allowed her to hide her truths. Through Cindi, Monae amplified visions of Black possibility while also confining herself, but in *Dirty Computer*, she shed the armor and freed herself from captivity.

In moving from body/flesh to Android/armor and back again, we see Monae's work as the embodiment of Black freedom dreaming. As Kelley (2002) argued:

progressive social movements do not simply produce statistics and narratives of oppression; rather, the best ones do what great poetry always does: transport us to another place, compel us to relive horrors, and, more importantly, enable us to imagine a new society (p. 9).

Through Afrofuturist narratives, Monae uses her body of work to ask listeners to understand and reckon with the horrors of Black female existence in the U.S., but she also imagines and musically creates another place, a new society where we can reclaim our histories, our futures, our joys. She acknowledges the need for social armor but sings of worlds where we are not forced to constantly ready ourselves for battle.

Black Feminist Wondaland

According to Collins (2009), Black women academics explore "the 'inside' ideas that allow Black women to cope with and, in many cases, transcend the confines of intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality" (p. 98). This exploration is the foundation for Black Feminism. Specifically, Black feminist thought (Collins, 2009; Collins, 2016) centers Black women's lived experiences as credible sources of knowledge; focalizes the use of dialogue between community members as

a way to create new knowledge; and suggests emotion and care are essential to the research and knowledge validation process. As oppositional knowledge, Black Feminism believes “Black women are inherently valuable, that our liberation is a necessity” and “the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation are us” (Combahee River Collective, 1977, para. 9). Ultimately, Black Feminism provides us a location to reckon with, celebrate, and reclaim ourselves in ways traditional feminism does not.

By exploring the “inside” ideas of *Dirty Computer*, we theorize Black Feminist Wondaland (BFW), a critical theory blending the ideas of Black Feminism with the Afrofuturistic ideals embedded within Monae’s work. We explore the social and academic work of the album and discuss how it can be used to center how Black women reckon with oppression, celebrate themselves, and reclaim joy. Brittney Cooper (2018) says “Black feminism is about the world Black women and girls can build, if all the haters would raise up and let us get to work” (p. 35). Moving past the “haters” imposing their will against Black women and girls, we acknowledge and speak truth to systems working together to maintain an oppressive state. We present this article as our contribution to the work, moving past the “haters” to tell our stories.

Reckoning

“I don’t wanna live on my knees, I just gotta tell the truth.”

Monae is aware of her place in the world, not only as a commercialized “other,” but also as a Black woman (English & Kim, 2013). For instance, she presents to Black women a very personal acknowledgment of the difficulties we face, reminding us we “are not America’s nightmare, [we are] the American dream.” Lines like “but no matter where I was, I always stood out, Black Waldo dancing with the thick brows” and “but all I really ever felt was stressed out, kinda like my afro when it’s pressed out” speak frankly to the stereotypical images of Black women forced upon us as well as how we are asked to erase ourselves and our histories to fit into white ideals (Collins, 2009). Additionally, she honors her pansexual identity and challenges the notion of mandatory heterosexuality in the music industry and Black community (Durham et al., 2013). She follows in the footsteps of fellow queer Black artist Meshell Ndegeocello by defying what has been accepted in the realms of “sexuality, Christianity, and the church...by bringing it into a queer context” (Clay, 2008). This is shown when she raps, “I just wanna find a God, and I hope she loves me, too.” She acknowledges the oppressive heteronormative confinement of Black women and uses her music to show solidarity. Through reckoning, she contends with dominant narratives surrounding Black female existence—we are the nightmares, the oddities, the bugs in the system—and uses these acknowledgements to prepare for a better future.

Celebration

"Black Girl Magic! Y'all can't stand it, y'all can't ban it—made out like a bandit! They been tryin' hard just to make us all vanish—I suggest they put our flag on a whole 'nother planet!"

Taking time to celebrate the self is an act of resistance, and celebrating others can be an act of revolution. Monae not only takes the time to celebrate herself, but she honors all Black women by reminding us not only of the power we hold within ourselves, but of the responsibility we have to face the larger society with power from within. For instance, "Django Jane" is an homage to the power of Black women, a praisesong where we feel seen and heard, an anthem we could use whenever we got down or weary. When she proclaims, "Jane Bond, never Jane Doe, and I Django, never Sambo," she introduces a feminized James Bond, refuses gender norms, rejects Black women's erasure, and refuses racist stereotypes all within the space of ten words. In "I Like That," Monae describes how she has come to a place of complete understanding and personal validation, at one point saying "I don't care what I look like, but I feel good. Better than amazing, and better than I could." Through these songs, Monae celebrates all parts of Black womanhood and commemorates Black life and self-definition. She moves from reckoning with the world to the celebration of the self within that world.

Reclamation

*"Hold on, don't fight your war alone.
Hate all around you, don't have to face it on your own.
We will win this fight, let all souls be brave—
We'll find a way to heaven, we'll find a way."*

Being Black in America is a life of constant struggle. It is showing pride in your race and culture in a society that cares nothing for your survival. It is wanting to show pride in a country where your freedom was and is conditional. Monae, however, provides space to consider what it would mean to reclaim our place in the fabric of America as citizens of a country that raised us, albeit with dysfunction. In one line, she says, "hands go up, men go down. Try my luck? Stand my Ground. Die in church, live in jail. Say her name, twice in hell." She speaks these lines, leaving no room for any misunderstanding of her words or intentions, as she pays tribute to Trayvon Martin, the victims of the 2015 Charleston Church Shooting, and Sandra Bland. She says their names, remembers their stories and claims their histories as part of American history. The album ends with a proclamation: "This is not my America. But I tell you today that the devil is a liar, because it's gon' be my America before it's all over." Here, Monae says we are not resigned to the fate offered to us because we have the right to stand and fight for what is ours. We will collectively find a way to reclaim our freedom, even if we have to create a path that does not yet exist.

Black Feminist-Womanist Storytelling

Baker-Bell (2017) described Black feminist-womanist storytelling as a methodology located at the intersections of autoethnography, Black women's language and literacy practices, Black feminist and womanist theories, and storytelling. She argued that the theoretical and methodological combination provides Black women with a means to collect, write, analyze, and theorize our stories while we simultaneously heal from them. In centering autoethnography, Black feminist/womanist storytelling allows us to center our personal experiences, note our relationships with others, engage in self-reflection, and balance our academic lives alongside our emotional and creative existences. By grounding itself in Black feminist and womanist theories, the methodology makes space for us to consider the wholeness of our identities and center ourselves as people worthy of deep study. Through the upliftment of Black literacy traditions, Black feminist/womanist storytelling gives us permission to rely upon our ancestor's ways of knowing and being. It allows us to consider story as a vehicle to transmit our knowledges, our experiences, our struggles, and our triumphs to the world in hopes that these narratives promote self and communal healing as well as societal change.

We call upon Black feminist-womanist storytelling because we wish to highlight our stories as "sources of legitimate knowledge" (Haddix, 2016, p. 22). We wish to write ourselves free (Carey, 2016). Rather than relying upon a conceptual focus or centering an analysis of external data, we center ourselves as Black women currently located within higher education. We use storytelling to highlight how we have reckoned with misogynoir in higher education and center how we have learned to celebrate ourselves and reclaim our joy in spite of it. We use our stories as Monae used her album: to provide clear access to our lives without pretense, costume, or citation. We follow Monae's poetic and narrative style as embodiment and example of the methodological work we foreground in this article. Through story and song, we ask readers to contend with us, as we are, to relive our horrors, but more importantly, imagine a new higher education alongside us. In putting our stories in conversation, we bear witness to each other's experiences, but we also provide a space for readers to see us, to reckon with the violence we have experienced, and to listen as we celebrate and reclaim our Wondaland in higher education.

Our Stories, Our Songs

Elizabeth's Song

I **reckon** with my place in academia. I recognize at this point, it is part of my preparation for my time out in the world.

I never wanted much to do with higher education. Black women learn from a young age that education is the one true currency that will take us to the highest heights of our hopes and dreams.

I resented that view. I wanted to do things I enjoyed, and I wanted to do them my way. I wanted to show Black children the lives they wanted to live were at their

fingertips, and even if they couldn't reach them, they had someone, at least one person, that believed in them.

Through twists and turns, I found myself in graduate school. After my time at an HBCU, moving to a PWI was a challenge. Luckily, my master's degree program was full of Black teachers who brought invaluable field experience to our lessons. They allowed and encouraged a frankness I had been longing for.

And of course, White teachers that mean well, but are truly without empathy for your passion, your purpose, your mission.

The professor that worked in policy assured me the school-to-prison pipeline was more of a "trickle," a series of unfortunate events no one could really attribute to schools.

The professor that dismissed my work on Black women and girls as just "fun" work that wouldn't have "real value" in a policy world.

They thought they were helping. *"But all I ever really felt was stressed out, kind of like my afro when it's pressed out."*

I **celebrate** my place in academia. I recognize that to get to this point, I acknowledge the parts of me that I yield to it, and those I hold dear.

I cried alone on a Toronto subway, after participants at my first academic conference were content to overlook me during a research presentation. I had spent so long bending my work to those that told me they meant me well. I went to them for support during this lonely time and found dismissal.

Those tears were cleansing. They reminded me how I had gotten to where I was, and why I needed to stay there. Why I needed to stay true to who I am, and not to the person they wanted me to be.

Black children still needed to know someone believes in them, and still believes in them. My charge wasn't to those that would simply evaluate my work, but to the community whose lives could be changed by my contributions for years to come.

I began to study and celebrate the work of Black authors even more. Ask more questions for more uncomfortable answers. I sought mentors that saw the value not just in my work, but in my existence as a person. I remembered my reason to celebrate.

"I'm always left of center, and that's right where I belong."

I **reclaim** my place in academia. They can prepare me, but they *cannot* undo me.

In knowing Black children deserve so much more than they are often given, I remind myself that I am a Black child. I have an opportunity to make a mark with

my work. Conforming to those that would seek to have me silenced, is not only a detriment to myself, but a disservice to the world that needs to hear more of what Black women have to say.

We don't deserve to be told our work does not have real value. We don't deserve to have our lived experiences questioned. We don't deserve to have our words and ideas taken and credited to those that would see us under their feet before they would have us at the heads of their tables.

We deserve to be the loudest ones in the room. For that volume to be from the sounds of our joy rather than our pain.

We deserve to share our stories. To a world that may not deserve them, but that needs them.

We deserve to empower not just each other, but generations of Black thought leaders that will grow and develop with and after us, and for that empowerment to create a world of Black joy that is incomparable.

We are here to reclaim our peace, and our time.

"Love me, baby. Love me for who I am."

Stephanie's Story

"I'm not that special, I'm broke inside, Crashing Slowly, the bugs are in me."

She froze. She's done this before, every time that word spewed from a mouth it didn't belong to. Her face is still, poised so as not to alarm the person who embodies dominance through age, gender, position, race. On the inside, there's an earthquake, a sudden violent shaking at the core of her being destroying her soul. Although she's breaking down internally, she knows her place. If she shouts in protest or rolls her eyes, the stereotypes will activate. No one will care about the why behind her reaction. They will only see Black and woman and outrage. They won't see how she crashes slowly toward despair, for they don't wish to see. They dream her as nightmare.

As he repeatedly says, "n****r," not at her, but to her in the midst of conversation, she sits silently. Every N a bullet. Every hard -er a lingering wound. Still, she sits, hoping she'll be able to cauterize the wound with thoughts of Black love and Black dreams. This time, it doesn't work, but she continues to try. She must. She knows how he sees her. This was clear when he said, "I don't know what you do, but you're publishing so it must be good work." He had the opportunity to know her, but he chose not to. She has **reckoned** with this, with the knowledge that he has erased her personal history and replaced it with his constructed image. So, he continues to speak, and she continues to wilt. She is crashing slowly as he plants the "bugs" he believes already exist within her.

"Now go on girl and use that sauce...If you don't then that's your loss."

She sits in an auditorium, waiting for the speakers to begin. In time, two Black women and one Black man take the stage. Their voices sing a collective song of Black celebration, as they highlight the knowledges of Black and Brown youth across the Diaspora. As they sing, the room changes colors, vibrant hues of amber, coral, rose, and sapphire. Joy resounds from their voices as they uplift and **celebrate** Black life. They sing, "our stories matter," "save our children," and "center Black life." They lead the auditorium in appreciation and adoration of Black existence.

She hears their call and wonders how she can **celebrate** herself. Her wounds haven't healed. She presumes the presenters are still nursing wounds inflicted upon them by the academy. And yet, they sing. They **celebrate** Black people and Black culture in harmonizing melody, and although the song is meant for all to hear, it falls gracefully on her ears. She rises, joins the chorus and sings. Her song, although it contains different words, adds to the cacophony of sound, the melodic discord of Black praisesong. She sings, "my research is enough," "Black girls are enough," "I am enough." In this instance, she rejects society's positioning of her and refuses racist, stereotypical images. She **celebrates** herself, her work, her existence. She defines herself on her terms, and smiles.

"Let's introduce ourselves from a free point of view."

Over time, she's heard the joyous songs of Black students, faculty, and staff who face oppression together. They refuse inferiority and **reclaim** the academic space their forebears fought for. They're not alone. She's not alone. She never was. This awareness of a communal and ancestral spirit allows her to persevere. But what does it mean to persevere in a place that refuses her? What does it mean to **reclaim** herself in the fabric of academic life?

She thinks about these questions, but she can't respond. The answers elude her. They will continue to evade her awareness until she realizes **reclamation** is formed through community. It's upon this realization that she decides to hold tight to the Black people who raised her, the Black women who nurtured her, the Black ancestors who paved a way for her. They aren't welcomed in academia, for they are too country, too poor, too Black. And yet, she must find a way to block the noise of dominance and salvage the resounding call of Black joy and Black life. She doesn't accept her fate or submit to the call of dominance. She introduces herself freely and says her name, Stephanie. She is no longer frozen.

Black Feminist Wondaland as Resistance

Monae acknowledged how attending to present social issues, celebrating in spite of oppression, and reclaiming joy can be a space of vulnerability, especially for Black women (Wortham, 2018). Similarly, we acknowledge that sharing our stories was vulnerable, painful work. Still, we called upon BFW to excavate our personal experiences in higher education to help educators think about ways to cultivate

academic spaces where Black women can reckon with how we are positioned in society, while simultaneously celebrating ourselves and reclaiming our own stories. Our stories suggest that even though we both experienced pain in higher education, we found celebration and joy. As Love (2019) argued, joy is resistance, and it comes from releasing pain, generating art, and loving the self and others. BFW allows us to do this work—to fight against tension, surrender our pain, tell our stories, and love ourselves.

As we consider the elusive project of Black female mattering, we look to our stories as learning tools. From our narratives, we see the need for leaders, professors, staff, and all who interact with Black women in higher education to engage in the following: (1) center Black women and Black life unapologetically, without fear; (2) celebrate Black women not because we exceed your expectations, but because we exist; (3) trust the pain, experiences, and words of Black women, not just when social unrest requires a statement, but at all times. Higher education stakeholders must reckon with Black women's social and academic experiences; celebrate Black women, those who are in the classroom and those who are not; and find ways to help Black women reclaim space in academia. As these recommendations are not field-specific, we offer several questions for educators to consider:

1. How are Black women represented across your syllabus? Are we relegated to one month or unit or are we included throughout? Do the stories, articles, and books on the reading list showcase Black women's celebration and reclamation alongside oppression, pain, and/or struggle?
2. How do you celebrate Black women in your classroom and in your everyday life? How do you make space for Black women to be seen and heard?
3. What does your course content and your academic field make possible and impossible for the Black women in your classrooms?
4. How are you ensuring that Black women do not have to fight misogynoir alone?

Asking these questions is paramount. Numerous scholars have identified ways to support Black women in higher education, including adequate mentorship, safe and supportive university environments, peer connections, and proactive coping mechanisms (Bertrand Jones et al., 2013; Bertrand Jones et al., 2015; Dortch, 2016; Hotchkins, 2017). Still, creating higher education spaces where Black women can live empowered and fulfilled existences requires those within higher education to be cognizant of Black women's liminal academic lives, as we struggle to survive in a world that means us harm (Cooper, 2020). Creating spaces where Black women's lives matter requires an understanding of how we celebrate ourselves and reclaim joy in the midst of the pain. It requires higher education stakeholders to recognize the full spectrum of existence we bring with us into academia.

As Black women, we reckon with how we are positioned in society and in higher education. We see how the aesthetics of our joy are cast aside. We know what pain

and violence look like, but that is not the whole of our lives. Our celebration and reclamation find themselves in lifting our voices, sharing our joys, and resting in community. They find themselves in classrooms where we do not have to consistently defend our existence. They find themselves in professors and teachers who allow us the space to be loud, to speak back, to sing praisesongs. This may be difficult and possibly uncomfortable for some because misogynoir runs rampant; however, if we are to mitigate the suffering of Black women in higher education, Black freedom, Black joy, and Black Wondalands must be a top priority.

Conclusion

We use Wondaland in homage to Monae's record label, television and film production company, brand consulting firm, and activist hub (Ringen, 2018). We chose this term rather than a word tied to the album to center the broadness of Monae's ideas. The album provides the basis for our theorizing, but Wondaland is more than one album or one artist. It is a way to showcase how this collective movement starts with Monae's work and ends in the "next time" (Baldwin, 1963, p. 89), in the future realm of possibility within and beyond the academy. In the same way, we hope our stories present examples of the broadness of Black women's higher education experiences even as we acknowledge that there are many more stories to uncover. It is our hope that in the "next time," celebration and reclamation are a given, that our joy matters in these spaces, and that higher education *sees* us, not as America's nightmare, but as America's Dream.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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