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On the Shores of (Counter)memory: Reconfiguring Utopia in Janelle Monáe's *Dirty Computer* (an "Emotion Picture")

Abstract

Popular discourses on the late-1990s "digital boom" claim that new technologies will erase social inequities by "erasing" difference itself. Instead, this supposedly utopian "placeless, raceless, bodiless" future only further displaces people who cannot "erase" how historically and socially mediated differences have unevenly marked their bodies as "out of place" and far from utopia's shore. Therefore, new ways of imagining utopia must be informed by the memories and history of those who have been erased from previous utopian thinking. This article argues that Janelle Monáe's *Dirty Computer* (2018), a self-described "emotion picture," usurps this "placeless, raceless, bodiless" utopia by writing Black bodies back into the narrative through the Afrofuturistic production of countermemories, the use of race as technology, and Black fugitivity. By framing Black refusal to comply with one's own erasure as the refusal of white historicity and restricted utopian imagination, as well as the disruption of artificially-constructed notions of where and how memory exists, *Dirty Computer* imagines a future that celebrates the very differences that past visions of utopia have attempted to erase.

Introduction: Far From Shore

For the quincentenary edition of Thomas More's *Utopia*, Verso included an introduction by China Miéville and four essays by acclaimed science fiction writer, Ursula K. Le Guin. Here, Le Guin grapples with utopia's spatial impossibility; after all, More's coining of "utopia" derives from the Greek words for "not" and "place." In "A Non-Euclidean View of California as a Cold Place to Be," Le Guin argues that utopia is "pure structure without content; pure model; goal. That is its virtue. Utopia is uninhabitable. As soon as we reach it, it ceases to be utopia."¹ Incapable of existing in any set location or time, utopia as nowhere, as "no-place," slips from our grasp like an ever-receding shoreline. Our seemingly futile pursuit of it, "to reconstruct the world, to rebuild or rationalize it, is to run the risk of losing or destroying what in fact is," yet we push forward because of the *promise* utopia holds.² As China Miéville writes in "Close to the Shore," the march toward utopia "isn't hope;

still less optimism: it is need, and it is desire" for the good life.³ Still, "not only is [utopia] insufficient: [it] can, in some iterations, be part of the ideology of the system, the bad totality that organizes us."⁴ Utopia has its limits, becoming dystopian to those who do not fit its image of perfection.

Utopia and dystopia are inextricably and cyclically linked. They are "great and equal powers; neither can exist alone, and each is always in the process of becoming the other."⁵ More's utopia, an island nation of 54 cities, appeared to uphold tenants of equality and goodwill—a welfare state, no unemployment, and communistic living—but it was carved out of colonialism and the displacement of Indigenous peoples. Located in the New World, the island was once a peninsula that was separated from the mainland by King Utopus, who, despite insisting that "the natives might not think he treated them like slaves, he not only forced the inhabitants, but also his own soldiers, to labor in carrying it on."⁶ This seemingly perfect place, this utopia, relied on corporal

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punishment and slavery, with each house holding two slaves. Such utopias are only graspable for those who crown themselves founder—or king—first and write its laws, including who is allowed to arrive at its shore or remain within its borders.

As Milan Kundera writes in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, “once the dream of paradise starts to turn into reality, however, here and there people begin to crop up who stand in its way, and so the rulers of paradise must build a little gulag on the side of Eden.”⁷ Utopia cannot—and will not—make room for everyone. Part of the “ideology of the system,”⁸ exclusion is dreamt up in spaces that cannot imagine a world without displacement or hegemonic rule. Miéville argues that “those who rule... calmly configure and effect utopias of their own,” while “those they rule have no choice but to live or die,”⁹ but what if utopia is reconfigured *away* from the effacement and subjugation of those who do not fit its mold and instead toward a future that is built on imagining new modes of living and freedom?

Who is utopia for? What can it offer for those who cannot find a place in its “no-place”? Where can bodies that trouble whiteness, heterosexuality, ableness, and other markers of “normativity” and “goodness” go? How can racialized, queer, disabled, and non-binary bodies fit into a future that erases non-normative existences for an unattainable utopia that only welcomes those who can disentangle themselves from the weight of identity? Grappling with Miéville’s claim that “we *live* in utopia; it just isn’t ours,” who, exactly, is displaced from this “we”?¹⁰ I consider these questions through an analysis of Janelle Monáe’s *Dirty Computer* (2018), a self-described “emotion picture,”¹¹ within a larger discussion of countermemories and Black refusal against a “placeless, raceless, bodiless” utopia built on the hegemonic erasure of difference. A visual album that weaves a “dystopia-in-utopia” narrative through songs from the concept album of the same name, *Dirty Computer* imagines a world where those who are different are “dirty computers” who are “cleaned” by extracting and erasing their memories.¹² In *Dirty Computer*, memory makes a person who they are; it defines their subjectivity, maps the history of their body, and connects them to others across time and space. Without memory, a dirty computer becomes a “blank slate,” incapable of remembering who

they are or where they came from. Any new knowledge is granted solely by The House of the New Dawn, a facility that “cleans” dirty computers in pursuit of its version of utopia, where such cleanings are the only way the facility can control its subjects since it cannot accept differences that challenge its hegemonic view of utopia.

In *Social Text*, Alondra Nelson argues that popular discourses of the late-1990s “digital boom” relied on “rags-to-riches stories of dot-com millionaires and the promise of a placeless, raceless, bodiless near future enabled by technological progress” that obfuscated the growing racial and social inequities known as the “digital divide.”¹³ This supposedly utopian “placeless, raceless, bodiless” future, where differences of race, gender, sexuality, and body type are effaced under the belief that, through such erasure, no one will be displaced from utopia, is itself a tool of displacement. New technologies that potentially offer “a future of wholly new human beings—unfettered not only from the physical body but from past human experience as well” will only free some people, as “bodies carry different social weights that unevenly mediate access to [this] freely constructed identity.”¹⁴ A utopia built on effacing difference is only accessible to those who do not need to be effaced to begin with, while those left to the wayside, such as racialized bodies, cannot escape the ramifications of being treated as different and “out of place.” The ones who benefit the most from a “placeless, raceless, bodiless” future are those whose existences are not marked by the history of their birthplace, race, or body (such as abled-bodied white people). A utopia that erases the past betrays the possibility of new futures, for the future cannot exist without the past guiding it. “In these frameworks, the technologically enabled future is by its very nature unmoored from the past and from people of color,” choosing instead to move against both history *and* memory.¹⁵

New ways of imagining utopia must build upon the memories and history that have been erased from previous frameworks of utopian thinking. Therefore, this article argues that *Dirty Computer* troubles the promise of a “placeless, raceless, bodiless” future, reconfiguring this version of utopia by reframing the erasure of Black bodies through the Afrofuturistic production of countermemories and the rendering of race as technology. Through

visualizing how “Black existence and science fiction are one and the same,”¹⁶ Afrofuturism imagines what the future may look like outside of white ideas of science fiction and utopia and their denial of Black histories. By framing refusal to comply with one’s own erasure as the turn toward Black fugitivity and away from white historicity and previous utopian imagination, as well as the disruption of constructed notions of where and how memory exists, *Dirty Computer* opens up avenues of future possibilities and modes of living that are built not on the promise of utopia through effacement, but freedom through difference. It asks us to consider not only who utopia is “really” for, but how to pave our own paths toward freedom while celebrating the very differences that disrupts the homogeneity of past visions of utopia.

Mapping Memory in *Dirty Computer*

In *Dirty Computer*, Janelle Monáe takes on the role of Jane 57821, a dirty computer who falls in love with Zen (Tessa Thompson), a “clean” computer who no longer remembers her. The visual album begins with people of various races, genders, and body types standing before a screen before being stripped of their clothes and “disappearing” in a static flurry as Jane tells us via voiceover:

They started calling us computers. People began vanishing, then the cleaning began. You were dirty if you looked different. You were dirty if you refused to live the way they dictate. You were dirty if you showed any form of opposition at all. And if you were dirty, it was only a matter of time.¹⁷

Jane is in The House of the New Dawn, where “they drained us of our dirt and all the things that made us special.”¹⁸ The hallway she is pulled through on a gurney is filled with a soft, glowing light that reflects off of its whitewashed walls. The visuals are clear: The House of the New Dawn is where dirty computers are pulled into the light so that they may live a “better” life in utopia—a utopia that strips them of their memories while forcing them into the facility’s restricted vision of the future, which sees difference as a threat to paradise and refusal to be complicit

in one’s own erasure as a refusal of utopia itself.

She is taken into a room with a one-way mirror where, behind it, two white men (“cleaners”) pull her memories up on a computer. Onscreen, her memories appear as separate, digitized files playing simultaneously. When selected, each file pulls up a “preview” of the memory, which is numbered and time stamped. For example, the memory that aligns with the music video for “Crazy, Classic, Life” was “created” 75 days ago and is numbered Memory 203206, while the memory to its right was “created” 68 days ago and is numbered Memory 203205. The cleaners organize Jane’s memories linearly; memories “to the right” are more recent, while those “to the left” are older. Filed chronologically, the cleaners can easily select, play, rewind, fast-forward, and delete every memory on her “drive” (Figure 1).¹⁹



Figure 1. Memory as technology. The cleaners can easily select, play, and delete Jane’s memories. Screen capture, *Dirty Computer* (Wondaland, 2018).

The head of the facility, a white woman known as Mother Victoria, tells Jane over intercom to repeat “I am a dirty computer. I am ready to be cleaned.”²⁰ When Jane refuses to affirm that she is a “dirty computer,” the cleaners release a gas called Nevermind, causing her to spasm violently before falling unconscious. Jane’s talking back verbally evokes bell hooks’ Black looks, where, in Simone Browne’s reading, “the violent ways in which Blacks were denied the right to look back ‘had produced in us an overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze.’ ‘Black looks’ were politicized and transformative when... ‘by courageously looking, we defiantly declared: ‘Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality.’”²¹ Jane’s refusal to say she is a dirty computer and verbalize her own subjugation angers Mother Victoria because this refusal allows Jane to reclaim her own agency, even momentarily.

Jane’s punishment via Nevermind shows that dirty computers are not allowed to fight against

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their own cleaning or reject the facility's vision of utopia. Here, memories become tools of painful extraction and erasure; if people are seen as either clean or dirty computers, then the rest of the body is open to further technologization. For The House of the New Dawn, cleaning dirty computers is an act of mercy, as if they are hardware overrun with viruses. However, rendering memory as technology, as files capable of playback, rewind, and deletion, cannot be delineated into strict, temporal categories, no matter how hard the cleaners try. Here, memory is not just software, lines of code that can be deleted and forgotten; it lives in the body, etches its presence onto the skin, the *hardware*, of dirty computers. For example, when the cleaners press "play" on the "Crazy, Classic, Life" memory/music video, we see that they have attempted to categorize Jane's memories according to date as well as bookmark them with artificial "start" and "end" times. Memories slip across time and place, refusing easy archival or retrieval. Immediately, we see Jane's memories push back against these attempts to sort and delete them as if they are nothing more than bad files. "Crazy, Classic, Life" "begins" with static grain, shuttering, and poor rendering, as if we are watching an old VHS tape (Figure 2 and Figure 3). Eventually, the memory "clears up," taking on a smoother, more digitized "look," but



Figure 2. The "start" of the "Crazy, Classic, Life" memory/music video. Beginning with the "collapse" of the image, the memory is filled with static grain and poor rendering. Screen capture, *Dirty Computer* (Wondaland, 2018).



Figure 3. Taking on the quality of an old VHS tape, the memory pushes back against the cleaners' attempts to easily sort and play it by refusing to "properly" start... Screen capture, *Dirty Computer* (Wondaland, 2018).

this initial "collapse" of the image foretells the disintegration of the artificial boundaries the cleaners have placed on her memories (Figure 4).



Figure 4. ...before, eventually, "clearing up" into a smoother, more digitized "look." Screen capture, *Dirty Computer* (Wondaland, 2018).

Despite the facility's attempts to create linearity through the technologization of memory as if it is merely software that can be extracted and expelled, memories shift and change, informed by new ways of understanding the past in order to live in the present and brace for potential futures. Unlike computer memory, which can be retrieved and deleted with relative ease, non-computer memory—*human* memory—sits outside of delineation: in our bodies, in others, in history. It may slip from our grasp and we may not remember every memory within us, but it is encoded in our very bodies—without it, we become ahistorical, unable to imagine a better world since we cannot recall the one we are living in.

In *Dirty Computer*, deleting memory deletes the self. Fearful of losing the rest of her memories, Jane tells Zen "They're taking everything away from me. I don't even remember how we met anymore. I'm not sure if any of this actually happened," to which Zen says, "Thinking will only make it harder. It's best if you just enjoy the process, accept it. People used to work so hard to be free, but we're lucky here. All we have to do is forget."²² The utopia The House of the New Dawn strives toward hinges on erasure and forgetting, "cleaning" bodies marked with differences, memories, and histories that complicate their tumble toward the facility's narrow vision of the future. But utopia cannot exist without the foundation of the past, without an understanding of history—including the dystopia it both emerges from and is destined to repeat. "People are always shouting they want to create a better future," writes Kundera. "It's not true...The past is full of life,

eager to irritate us, provoke and insult us, tempt us to destroy or repaint it. The only reason people want to be masters of the future is to change the past”²³ and, in their pursuit of utopia, expel those who cannot reach its unattainable shore through a “method of organized forgetting” and “cleaning.”²⁴

Memory sits both within and outside of the body, in the very history we move through, so it cannot be easily erased or forgotten. The last memory we (and the cleaners) see occurs on a secluded beach. Jane and Zen are happy; they walk across the sand, laughing and swaying in each other’s arms. They lie together on the beach, watching the sunset, as Zen gives Jane a tattoo of a crucified, TV-headed figure on the inside of her right forearm. One of the cleaners exclaim, “I thought we deleted the beach stuff already,” to which the other replies: “delete it again.”²⁵ But it is too late; even after its re-deletion and the seemingly successful and “complete” cleaning of both Jane and Zen’s memories, the tattoo is the physical embodiment of their shared memory of the beach and their relationship. The tattoo is visible, tactile, etched onto Jane’s very skin. The beach memory may have been deleted from her software, but it cannot be extracted from the hardware of her body. The facility’s attempts to technologize memories to make them easier to delete fail to consider the possibility of haptic technology, of tactility merging with the digital to flood the mind with memories marked upon the body. For Jane and Zen, touch is a tool of liberation, of freedom grasped with both hands. Speaking of hapticity as love (for others, of others toward you) in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, Stefano Harvey and Fred Moten write “to sense and be sensed in that space of no space, though refused sentiment, history, and home, we feel (for) each other. A feel, a sentiment with its own interiority, there on skin, soul no longer inside but there for all to hear, for all to move.”²⁶ To touch is to know the history denied to us.

Zen was kidnapped by the police at the end of the “Screwed” memory/music video and wiped clean of her memories, and it is only when she sees Jane’s tattoo—the very tattoo she gave to her—that she remembers her. This dual remembering of the same memory cannot be deleted because it is physically *embedded* within Jane’s skin, while touching the tattoo allows Zen’s memory to re-enter her “clean”

body. Located outside of Jane’s “memory drive” and software, the beach memory cannot be deleted, no matter how often the cleaners try (Figure 5).



Figure 5. The tattoo as embedded, haptic memory allows Zen to re-member Jane and their relationship. Screen capture, *Dirty Computer* (Wondaland, 2018).

Jane and Zen’s shared memory open up sites of new potentialities; existing within the mind and body, across place, time, and history, such memories cannot be successfully contained and destroyed since they refuse easy categorization. Although cleaned of her other memories, the visual album’s chronological organization of Jane’s memories cannot account for the slippage of the beach memory—we cannot place it anywhere in its constructed narrative.²⁷ Yet, this memory allows them to remember *enough* to refuse the erasure that upholds a utopia they will never be welcomed into. *Dirty Computer* ends with Jane and Zen breaking out of The House of the New Dawn, taking their freedom into their own hands rather than relying on an insidious power that subjugates them to conditional “freedom.” Le Guin grapples with utopia’s impossibility when she asks, “Will you choose freedom without happiness, or happiness without freedom? The only answer one can make, I think, is: No.”²⁸ Jane and Zen make their choice. By refusing to remain clean, when such cleaning is contingent on the erasure of their subjectivity and history, they open themselves up to unknown futures. They walk out of the facility into a blinding light, towards a place that may not exist, but the possibility of creating a *new* vision of utopia drives them forward.

Against White Historicity: Afrofuturistic Counter-memories

This refusal of erasure and subsequent flight toward a utopia that will be built by the unfettered possibilities of *their* imagination evokes Black

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fugitivity, which rejects complicity with a history that will not write Black subjectivity into its fold. In *Stolen Life*, Moten writes that fugitivity “is a desire for and a spirit of escape and transgression of the proper and the proposed. It’s a desire for the outside, for a playing or being outside, an outlaw edge proper to the now always already improper voice or instrument.”²⁹ Black fugitivity lies outside of white historicity, refusing to take part in its hegemonic framing. Jane and Zen’s refusal to be anything *but* dirty computers rewrites history with them at the forefront.

This fugitivity, this *taking back* of history and subjectivity, produces counter-memories, which resists “official” versions of history by redrawing its boundaries to include those who have been cast out of white-centric historical frameworks. In “Future considerations on Afrofuturism,” Kodwo Eshun argues that the practice of counter-memory “defined itself as an ethical commitment to history, the dead, and the forgotten,” a means of bringing to light the histories (and peoples) that have been cast aside.³⁰ By writing Black subjectivity back into the narrative, to “establish the historical character of Black culture, to bring Africa and its subjects into history denied by Hegel et al., it has been necessary to assemble counter-memories that contest the colonial archive, thereby situating the collective trauma of slavery as the founding moment of modernity.”³¹ The Black slave as the figure of modernity is built on the technologization of their body; the slave is forced to bear the weight of human labor and the bodily imposition of race, where race is used, as described by Beth Coleman in “Race as Technology,” “as a contraption by one people to subject another” to violent subjugation.³² Yet, the slave is displaced from reaping the spoils of modernity, cast out of both the historical moment they created and a utopia built on the erasure of bodies such as theirs, which do not belong in a “placeless, raceless, bodiless” future—a utopia that cannot be sustained because its vision of “paradise” is built on effacing the very foundation of its past.

Jane’s tattoo and her and Zen’s dual remembrance of the beach memory is a counter-memory since it sits outside of white-centric notions of where history lives and how memories form. Counter-memories recognize the existence of marked bodies and centers them, usurping how we read history and our own place within its archive.

Therefore, erasing difference in an attempt to create utopian-minded “sameness” or “cleanliness” ignores how difference is imposed by the powerful onto the otherized. To dismiss the way race, gender, and sexuality organize the body is to deny responsibility for the displacement of non-white, non-male, and non-straight bodies from systems of power, belonging, and subjectivity. To see utopia as where the “placeless, raceless, and bodiless” may thrive is to admit that only those who are invisible are worthy of entry, when such invisibility is contingent on how well they fit into modes of whiteness, heterosexuality, and ableness. It is to admit that whiteness organizes ways of belonging; where, as Browne writes in *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*, “the production of norms pertaining to race [is an] exercise [in the] power to define what is in and out of place.”³³ How ironic that this version of “utopia,” when utopia itself is already always “out of place,” continues to displace others. Those who are “dirty” are marked as “out of place”—thrown from the gates of a possible Eden.

Yet, Browne argues that “this making of Blackness as out of place must be read as also productive of a rejection of lived objectivity,” of history pushing Blackness out of the annals.³⁴ “It is the making of the Black body as out of place, an attempt to deny its capacity for humanness, which makes for the productive power of epidermalization” and the refusal of white-centric history in favor of reimagined histories that write Blackness in.³⁵ Counter-memories insert marked bodies back into history and possible futures, restructuring the pursuit of utopia away from effacement toward centering difference. Realizing the Afrofuturistic production of counter-memories extends its tradition “by reorienting the intercultural vectors of Black Atlantic temporality towards the proleptic as much as the retrospective.”³⁶ Since Afrofuturism is concerned “with the possibilities for intervention within the dimension of the predictive, the projected, the proleptic, the envisioned, the virtual, the anticipatory, and the future conditional,” it visualizes possible, graspable futures “in moments where any future was made difficult for [Black people] to imagine.”³⁷ Counter-memories exist in the proleptic, the present, and the projected, complicating where and how memories form. In *Dirty Computer*, counter-memories sit haptically on the bodies of dirty computers who

refuse to be cleaned, destabilizing the facility's attempt to chronologically organize memories by imagining new sites of remembering.

Race as Technology (Toward Freedom)

Seeing race *as* technology, as a tool that can be utilized for self-liberation from subjugation, recognizes how race marks bodies and modes of living while challenging the dichotomy of power and identity stitched within its structure. Beth Coleman argues that seeing race as technology “changes the terms of engagement with an all-too-familiar system of representation and power.”³⁸

[N]either its visual markings nor its political effects distinguish race; rather, its distinction lies in its speed of change, its sliding value, its apparent and invisible differences. In this sense, race may be the “hammer,” but the question remains: in whose hand does it rest?³⁹

In “Race and/as Technology, or How to Do Things to Race,” Wendy Hui Kyong Chun asserts race as technology “shifts the focus from the *what* of race to the *how* of race, from *knowing* race to *doing* race.”⁴⁰ She continues: “Could ‘race’ be not simply an object of representation and portrayal, of knowledge or truth, but also a technique that one uses, even as one is used by it?”⁴¹ Racialized bodies are *always* “doing” race since race is an “invaluable mapping tool, a means by which origins and boundaries are simultaneously traced and constructed and through which the visible traces of the body are tied to allegedly innate invisible characteristics.”⁴² Race is an invaluable mapping tool for whiteness to yield against non-white bodies, but navigating spaces built by and for whiteness as a racialized person means using race as a multi-purpose tool, of being invisible in certain spaces and hyper-visible in others. Grappling with the possibility of fragmentation, of being read as a racialized object before a human subject, it means knowing more about your oppressor than they know about you in order to use their tools of subjugation, their way of *seeing* race, against them. It is to force the hammer of race from the grip of whiteness. Race as technology “grasps a prosthetic logic in

which local agency—yours and mine—depends on what we make of the tools at hand.”⁴³ It does not attempt to erase difference but challenge how we use race to make possible our own path toward freedom—a path that recognizes and honors how our identities and histories inform the ways we move from the present into possible futures.

If Jane's memories can be technologized as files on a projected screen, then her race—her Blackness—can be technologized as well, reconfigured into a tool of reclamation and freedom. Throughout *Dirty Computer*, she fights against being cleaned, talking back against Mother Victoria's insistence that she repeat “I am a dirty computer. I am ready to be cleaned.”⁴⁴ In the memory/music video for “Django Jane,” she raps:

Remember when they used to say I
looked too mannish? Black girl magic /
y'all can't stand it / ya'll can't ban it, made
out like a bandit / they been tryin' hard
just to make us all vanish / I suggest they
put a flag on a whole 'nother planet.⁴⁵

Later, she asserts, “We fem the future, don't make it worse / you want the world? Well, what's it worth?”⁴⁶ Then, in “I Like That,” perhaps the most abstract memory/music video in the entire visual album (a cleaner exclaims “What is that? That's not a memory”), Jane affirms her capacity to be “good” to herself and the people she loves, even if she is read as “bad” by The House of the New Dawn and its white-centric and restricted understanding of “purity.” She sings “Told the whole world I'm the venom and the antidote / Take a different type of girl to keep the whole world afloat,” forcing the ubiquitous “them” to see that her existence both affirms *their* existence and her own.⁴⁷ Janelle Monáe's claim in the album's titular song that “I will always be your dirty computer”⁴⁸ explicitly states that clean computers cannot exist without the presence of dirty ones, reclaiming this insult to secure her own freedom and solidify her reason for remaining “dirty.” Clean computers need dirty computers to confirm that they are “clean,” much like how utopia cannot embrace everyone that arrives at shore lest their differences challenge who utopia is *really* for. Yet, it is the cast aside, the “dirty computers,”

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who are capable of imagining expansive and possible futures not by merely going forward, but by looking back toward newly opened histories.

Conclusion: Beyond the Shore

Memory is how we understand ourselves in relation to one another. It lives within the body, across history, in the ways we touch and know and love. Countermemories, such as the beach memory evoked by Jane's tattoo, challenge hegemonic and white-centric versions of history by centering and celebrating marked bodies—the very bodies cast aside by a utopia built on the impossibility of a “placeless, raceless, bodiless” future. The utopia *The House of the New Dawn* strives for can never be reached, for it is a dystopia-in-utopia imagining of the future that lays its foundation on the erasure of memory and the denial of history's effect on the present. “Clean” computers are barren computers, ahistorical and unmoving. It is the “dirty computers,” the ones who refuse to be erased, whose fugitivity broadens the scope of history to include them in its moments, who understand that utopia cannot be built on the displacement of marked bodies and effacement. It must be reimagined as a place worthy of our differences—it must become more than what it was before.

Dirty Computer writes the racialized, queer, marked body back into history and new, future potentialities. It visualizes the possibility of the impossible, of a utopia built on self-liberation and new ways of understanding memory, refusal, and race. Countermemories, fugitivity, and using race as technology changes not only how we see history, but how we imagine better futures. Mother Victoria tells Jane that “a dirty computer will do

anything to survive,” yet Jane refuses to change because by asserting that she *is* dirty, she keeps herself and her memories alive.⁴⁹ When Jane and Zen escape at the end of *Dirty Computer*, they release Nevermind, throwing the tools of their subjugation onto the people who tried to erase the very differences that lead to their liberation.⁵⁰ In the end, the tattoo Zen gave to Jane saves her from being erased of everything that makes her who she is—her memories, her history, her relationships, but it also brings Zen back from her “cleaned” state. The Afrofuturistic production of countermemories ask where memory and history sit, who they belong to, and how they are written about, allowing the marked bodies who have been cast out of the past to write themselves back into the archives and more expansive futures. *Dirty Computer* sees the “dystopia-in-utopia” of utopian thinking that erases differences in the pursuit of an impossible, homogenous future, reaching beyond it toward a world that can become so much more.

For Le Guin, utopia cannot be reached by “going forward, but only roundabout or sideways,”⁵¹ turning and returning, history re-opening with the songs of once silenced voices. It must be reimagined, for “the exercise of imagination is dangerous to those who profit from the way things are because it has the power to show that the way things are is not permanent, not universal, not necessary.”⁵² Those cast aside from such restricted visions of utopia deserve better—a new way of how to see utopia, and how we can imagine more.

The last shot of *Dirty Computer* focuses on Jane as she turns to look over her shoulder, looking backward as she moves forward into the light. We do not know where she is going, or what her future holds, but we know it is being written with her at the helm.⁵³

Kanika Lawton holds an MA in Cinema Studies from the University of Toronto, where her thesis “Bodies as Mirrors: Figuring Annihilation in the Female Double” examines the relationship between self-image and self-harm in gendered depictions of doppelgängers in psychological horror films. Her research lies at the intersection of new media and corporeality, particularly how technology shapes our shifting understanding of subjectivity, gender, and race. Her areas of interest include: surveillance studies, queer theory, critical race theory, intermediality, and futurity. A Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net-nominated writer, she has received fellowships from Pink Door and BOAAT Writer's Retreat.

Notes

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- 1 Ursula K. Le Guin, "A Non-Euclidean View of California as a Cold Place to Be," *Utopia* (London: Verso, 2016), 166.
- 2 Le Guin, "A Non-Euclidean View of California as a Cold Place to Be," 167.
- 3 China Miéville, "Close to the Shore," *Utopia* (London: Verso, 2016), 6.
- 4 Miéville, "The Limits of Utopia," *Utopia* (London: Verso, 2016), 16-17.
- 5 Le Guin, "Utopiyin, Utopiyang," *Utopia* (London: Verso, 2016), 196
- 6 Thomas More, "Discourses of Raphael Hythloday, of the Best State of a Commonwealth, in *Utopia* (London: Verso, 2016) 73.
- 7 Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, (New York: HarperPerennial Modern Classics, 1999), 233.
- 8 Miéville, "The Limits of Utopia," 16-17.
- 9 Miéville, "Close to the Shore," 6.
- 10 Miéville, "The Limits of Utopia," *Utopia*, 24, italics in text.
- 11 Monáe defines an "emotion picture" as "a narrative film and accompanying musical album." See the description for *Dirty Computer* on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jdH2Sy-BINE&ct=1s>.
- 12 Throughout this article, "dystopia-in-utopia" refers not only to the symbiotic relationship between utopia and dystopia, but the dark underbelly of utopian thinking. Utopia cannot be framed as utopian without an understanding of what constitutes dystopia. At the same time, utopia's spatial (and even existential) impossibility means that it is also impossible for it to be utopian for everyone. Someone, somewhere, will always be shut out, living in a dystopia within this utopia. Despite The House of the New Dawn's insistence that "cleaning" dirty computers is for their own good (so that they may live in utopia), the facility fails to understand that the loss of identity and memory is a dystopian nightmare for the dirty computers they are "helping."
- 13 Alondra Nelson, "Introduction: Future Texts" *Social Text* 7, Vol. 20, No. 2 (Summer 2002): 1.
- 14 Nelson, 2-3.
- 15 Nelson, 6.
- 16 Kodwo Eshun, "Future considerations of Afrofuturism," *Science Fiction Criticism: An Anthology of Essential Writings*, ed. Rob Latham (London: Bloomsbury, 2017) 466.
- 17 *Dirty Computer*, directed by Andrew Donoho, Chuck Lightning, Emma Westenberg, Alan Ferguson, and Lacey Duke (2018; Atlanta, GA: Wondaland, 2018), YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jdH2Sy-BINE&ct=1s>.
- 18 *Dirty Computer*, 2018.
- 19 All screen captures are taken from *Dirty Computer* on YouTube, which fall under Fair Use. Although the music videos that make up Jane's memories within this visual album are available to view on their own (notably the videos for "Crazy, Classic, Life," "Screwed," "Django Jane," "PYNK," "Make Me Feel," and "I Like That"), this article is solely concerned with the narrative that string these videos together, especially with regards to the consequences of being a dirty computer in a world that prioritizes "cleanliness" through erasure.
- 20 *Dirty Computer*, 2018.
- 21 Simone Browne, "Notes on Surveillance Studies: Through the Door of No Return," *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 58.
- 22 *Dirty Computer*, 2018.
- 23 Kundera, 22
- 24 Kundera, 235.
- 25 *Dirty Computer*, 2018.
- 26 Stefano Harvey and Fred Moten, "Fantasy on Hold," *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (London: Minor Compositions, 2013), 98.
- 27 The music videos in *Dirty Computer* offer a glimpse into Jane's memories; for example, Jane and Zen meet in "Crazy, Classic, Life," they run away from the police in "Screwed," they begin to fall in love in "PYNK," and so on. However, the beach memory is not accompanied by a song from the album; it stands apart not only from the overall narrative of *Dirty Computer*, but from its album. Instead of existing linearly and solely in the mind, this slippery memory etches itself onto Jane's body, her and Zen's shared experiences, and their history together.
- 28 Le Guin, "A Non-Euclidean View of California as a Cold Place to Be," *Utopia*, 193.
- 29 Fred Moten, *Stolen Life*, consent not to be a single being (Durham: Duke University, 2018), 131.

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- 30 Eshun, 459.
31 Eshun, 458.
32 Beth Coleman, "Race as Technology" *Camera Obscura* 70, Vol. 24, 1, 180.
33 Browne, "Introduction, and Other Dark Matters," *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*, 16.
34 Browne, "B^oanding Blackness: Biometric Technology and the Surveillance of Blackness," *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*, 98-99.
35 Browne, 98.
36 Eshun, 459.
37 Eshun, 462-463.
38 Coleman, 178.
39 Coleman, 179.
40 Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, "Race and/as Technology, or How to Do Things to Race," *Race After the Internet*, eds. Lisa Nakamura and Peter A. Chow-White (New York and London: Routledge, 2012), 38, italics in text
41 Chun, 38.
42 Chun, 41.
43 Coleman, 183.
44 *Dirty Computer*, 2018.
45 Janelle Monáe, "Django Jane." Track 6 on *Dirty Computer*. Wondaland Arts Society, Bad Boy Records, and Atlantic Records, 2018.
46 Monáe, "Django Jane." Track 6 on *Dirty Computer*, 2018.
47 Monáe, "I Like That." Track 10 on *Dirty Computer*, 2018.
48 Monáe and Brian Wilson, "Dirty Computer (feat. Brian Wilson)." Track 1 on *Dirty Computer*, 2018.
49 *Dirty Computer*, 2018.
50 Jane and Zen don gas masks to protect themselves from the effects of Nevermind. Curiously, Nevermind knocks *everyone else* unconsciousness, including the cleaners and other clean computers. This phenomenon raises questions over how clean these "clean" computers really are; after all, we can infer from its name (Nevermind) and purpose (knocking out dirty computers to clean them) that it would not be effective on clean computers since there is nothing left to "clean." Though composed of only brief shots of the cleaners slumped over in their chairs and clean computers dressed in all-white lying on the ground, it is clear that The House of the New Dawn's attempt to technologize and "erase" their memories failed because memories exist outside of "memory drives" or the mind. They also sit in the body, so how can you "erase" a body without effectively killing it?
51 Le Guin, "A Non-Euclidean View of California as a Cold Place to Be," *Utopia*, 193.
52 Le Guin, "A War Without End," *Utopia*, 209.
53 Jane and Zen's escape from The House of the New Dawn is accompanied by the song "Americans," which begins with the lines "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." At the same time, the song ends on a spoken outro ("But I tell you today that the Devil is a liar / Because it's gon' be my America before it's all over") with Jane looking back on "Please sign your name on the dotted line," an ambiguous line that suggests the heaven they are striving for may become hell (see the utopia-dystopia cycle) but it is necessary to make the choice *yourself* to "find a way" and brace for what may come.