Purifying Dirty Computers
Cyborgs, Sex, Christ, and Otherness

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Virtual reality, especially neural network technology, provides a theologically imaginative experience of otherness that disrupts racialized, sexual, and cultural logics that undergird dominant Christian white cisheterosexual theologies. These technologies not only enable users to "walk a mile in another's shoes" or the other they wish they were, users feel, embody, and are other in ways only hinted at by Jesus' hybrid existence proposed in Matthew 25,35-46. I use a digital sexual storytelling method to explore an indecent incarnational theology of the cyborg which uncovers the persistence of anti-blackness and anti-queerness in digital Christain theology as well as evidences strategies of indecency to combat them.

> Sexual stories of fetishism give us food for thought for a Jesus Messiah in whom we may find the particulars of our life concretised and not transcendentalised, divinely sexualised, socially sexualised, and always for our time and the precise present moment.[1]

> They started calling us computers. People began vanishing and the cleaning began. You were dirty if you looked different. You were dirty if you refused to live the way they dictated. You were dirty if you showed any form of opposition at all. And if you were dirty it was only a matter of time.[2]

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[1] Althaus-Reid 2000: 163.

[2] Monáe 2018.

> How might the modern John or Johanna, stake her claim to be—as a black woman, mother, and former slave—the Son of Man, the fulfillment of the promise to unite the whole people under a common sign?[3]

The advance of digital technologies provides a novel way to experience ourselves as other, when dominant racialized, sexual, cultural, and religious systems seek to foreclose on liberative possibilities of self and communal identity. With virtual reality and the possibilities of neural network reality devices, we are not only able to "walk a mile in another's shoes" or the other we wish we were; we can feel, embody, and be other in ways hinted at by Jesus' hybrid existence proposed in Matthew 25: 35-46. Here, I want to explore the digital possibilities of an incarnational indecent theology of the cyborg. I am not intending to layout a fully developed theological argument as much as lean on scholars who have already done so in an effort to signal theologically imaginative possibilities and practices for decolonial, anti-racist sexual and gender justice in a digital world.[4] For this, I bring into conversation Marcella Althaus-Reid's method of sexual storytelling for doing indecent theology, Donna Haraway's foundational concept of the cyborg and its messianic possibilities, as well as the synthesized cyber theology approach to Christology presented by Jeanine Thweatt-Bates. I wonder with the reader about how digital technology is constitutive of who we are and what theological questions that raises for decolonial, anti-racist sexual and gender justice.[5]

Marcella Althaus-Reid declared that all theology is sexual theology. [6] And in this declaration, she provided a methodology of approaching theology as sexual storytelling. Indecent theology is a third way, different from western normative colonizing theologies as well as distinct from liberation theologies even in their postcolonial and preferential commitments. Indecent theology takes seriously the foundations of liberationist theologies as hearing and seeing the 'othered' other, whether that be the poor or sub-

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[3] Haraway 1992: 91.

[4] For a robust discussion with far more detail and eloquence than I can provide of theological anthropology and the intersections of gender, embodiment, and cyborg existence related to post/transhuman debates see the recent dissertation by Max Thornton, "Cyborg Trans/Criptions: Gender, Disability and the Image of God" (Thornton 2021). He weaves together a robust analysis of transgender theory and theology, crip theology and disability studies, as well as feminist and queer theologies.

[5] In this article, I attempt to build on and expand the arguments in my 2019 article for Vol 3: The Digital in this series. I again center story and relationality as a way to argue "As digitally embodied spirits we more deeply inhabit our relationality, interdependence, and multiplicity creating more entangled modes of oppression as well as generating liberative salvific moments." This paper seeks to further analysis of cyborg reality without dismissing race or gender discrimination in particular, or the sacred, in this case related to Christology more generally. See Ott 2019b.

[6] Althaus-Reid 2000: 146.

altern.[7] Althaus-Reid challenges the historical, theological silencing of sexual stories in ways that complicate a center-margin or colonizer-colonized binary.

How do we do indecent theology in relation to digital technology? That is to say, I am not seeking to write a new theology. Rather, I'm arguing for another multiplicitous location of doing theology indecently – of *doing* God and thus undoing white cishetero-patriarchal Christianity. Digital space or locations have material qualities and a dependent relationship to hardware; they also reside beyond or outside of linear time and geographic boundaries. Digital sexual stories are human and more. Digital sexuality is an experience of flesh and microchip, feeling and network, experience and haptic response, attraction and electromagnetism, memory and megabyte, interface and connection. A digital indecent theology can be understood in what Althaus-Reid describes as fetishism. Fetishism is "a kind of robotic epistemology concerning the difference between animate and inanimate objects, or between animated sexual organs and inanimate ones."[8] For Althaus-Reid, fetishism and Christianity share parallel mythologies of the living dead, the animated inanimate. An indecent theology via the lens of fetish uncovers inherent practices of socio-political and heterosexist domination and subordination in Christian salvation. At the same time, this inquiry seeks to dislodge the anthropocentric thrust of most Christian sexual theologies.

We have all become technology (machine) and human, what some call the post or transhuman or what Donna Haraway named the cyborg.[9] For some, this is a recent event because of the proximity of integration of technology into our bodies (like constant connection with smartphones, earbuds, pacemakers, or mRNA which bridge tenuous and fabricated divides of nature/machine/human). Others believe we have been transhuman for centuries since learning to use tools, wearing glasses, or understanding the synaptic chemistry of the brain.[10] As the fabrication of the 'man made' distinctions between human, nature, and machine become more recognizable in their erasure through exposure, questions arise about qualities once considered unique to humans (like cognition, ethical decision-making, emotions, and so on). In this arti-

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[7] See Chakravorty Spivak 1988. Subalternity is ultimately a social, cultural, political status defined first in postcolonial discourse as a way to address issues of power and representation. The subaltern are not monolithic, rather subalternity is a status or condition of subordination often attributed to colonialization but in a variety of academic studies it can also relate to racial, linguistic, sexual, economic, or class status. I am intentionally naming Spivak within the legacies of liberation theologies as the academic discipline transitions to include or engage postcolonial theory and eventually decolonial and anti-racist approaches.

[8] Althaus-Reid 2000: 149.

[9] Haraway 2011.

[10] Two examples of this argument are Butler 2019 and Dyer 2011.

cle, I explore virtual reality as a specific entanglement of digital spiritual embodiment and the ever increasing possibility or awareness of cyborg/android existence to elucidate theological questions about ethical responses to otherness specifically created by racial, gender, and sexuality differences.

Rather than succumb to the debates of when humans became or become transhuman, I return to the storytelling ways of indecent theology and the roots of feminist cyborg theory. In her "Cyborg Manifesto," Haraway describes the impact of storytelling this way: "The tools are often stories, retold stories, versions that reverse and displace the hierarchical dualisms of naturalized identities. In retelling origin stories, cyborg authors subvert the central myths of origin of Western culture. We have all been colonized by those origin myths, with their longing for fulfillment in apocalypse."[11] The central myths intertwine with Christianity to suggest an original innocence, fall, and necessary return, whereas cyborg storytelling's power resides in "seizing the tools to mark the world that marked them as other."[12] Some have criticized the use of Haraway's cyborg as valorizing technological innovation or bodily enhancement, rather Haraway uses the technological to uncover the engineering that creates naturalized and ahistorical myths about humans related specifically to gender and race as well as the role of militarized capitalism in neocolonial form.[13] For this reason, Lara Cox argues, Haraway's work as well as other decolonial feminist projects were left out of queer studies with the exception of media studies. Because as she notes, "it told an inconvenient truth about the mutually constitutive nature of race, gender, sexuality and class."[14] In response, I invite the reader to resist the impulse, with me, to project the cyborg as either a utopic postracial, postgender/sex being, an enlightenment or neoliberal ideal posthuman, or a vicarious vehicle for atonement.[15]

In *Cyborg Selves: A Theological Anthropology of the Posthuman*, Jeanine Thweatt-Bates provides a thorough proposal of a renewed and relational theological anthropology that adeptly integrates postcolonial critiques of power, hybridity, and otherness across nature, machine, and human historical divides. In doing so, she engages Haraway's

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[11] Haraway 2011: 441.

[12] Haraway 2011: 441.

[13] These themes come up in Haraway's later works that go on to complicate and articulate more about her original writings on the cyborg. See Haraway 2008 and Haraway 2016. Grebowicz and Merrick also note that Haraway develops additional figures such as the coyote, the trickster, companion species, and the chthonic forces of the Earth. See Grebowicz / Merrick 2013.

[14] Cox 2018: 33.

[15] I have added the "vicarious vehicle for atonement" based on the paper discussion and colleagues' comments. See comment section.

account of the trickster figures of Jesus and Sojourner Truth that disrupt uninterrogated posthuman propositions,[16] along with Anne Kull's insights[17] on how cyborg embodiment radically expands what counts as human for the sake of incarnational theology, and explores Christ's hybridity, thus resisting binary human/divine distinctions through Kwok, Pui Lan's work on postcolonial theological imagination.[18] Thweatt-Bates offers a posthuman Christology that "is an opportunity to collectively construct a posthuman future and a liveable world for every body, human and post- and non-, of all sorts."[19]

In order to explore an indecent incarnational theology of the cyborg that provides ethical insights to decolonial, anti-racist sexual and gender justice, I focus on the digital sexual storytelling of Janelle Monáe in her emotion film album, *Dirty Computer* with a focus on the pattern of the coming out story.[20] Monáe in the video portion of her song *Make Me Feel* recreates the San Junipero episode of *Black Mirror*.[21] San Junipero is an example of how digitally mediated relationship through virtual reality (VR) shifts the conception of sexual intimacy and relationship toward sexually liberative possibilities. *Dirty Computer*, while projecting a world of cyborg[22] not merely VR simulation, provides a view into the persistence of anti-blackness and anti-queerness[23] in digital spaces and strategies of indecency to combat them. While we may not yet experience the neural simulated realities or the digital existence fictionalized in these narratives, we experience the possibilities in current virtual reality technologies.[24] Thus, sexuality is embodied and social, political, and technological, though most Christian theologies and ethics have continuously tried to confine it to a physical, cisgender, heterosexual coupled behavior.[25]

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[16] Haraway 1992: 88–93.

[17] Kull 2001.

[18] Kwok 2005: Chapter 7.

[19] Thweatt-Bates 2012: 192.

[20] Monáe 2018.

[21] *Black Mirror*, season 3, episode 4, "San Junipero," directed by Owen Harris, written by Charlie Brooker, aired October 21, 2016, Netflix.

[22] Haraway defines the cyborg this way: "a cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" which resonates with Monae's character of Jane. Haraway 2011: 429.

[23] Here I use queerness to signal both a political and social subjectivity, and gender and sexual diversities.

[24] Loths 2017: Chapter 10.

[25] Lunceford 2009. Sacredness comes only from humanities recognition or interaction with the self and other human which reduces it to a fleshly exchange Lunceford argues that to transcend or leave the body behind is anti-social saying, "If sacred experience lie in the removal of mediation, an increase in mediation can only lead one further from the sacred." (94) He believes all humans want to be one flesh or known in an in-person sexual encounter even though he

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1. Sexual Storytelling

The storyteller Janelle Monáe has been called a digital griot[26] for her Afrofuturist music albums and emotions pictures (a narrative film that accompanies her albums). As an Afrofuturist, Monáe uses digital storytelling created through various art forms of narration, imagery, and music to combat anti-technological Blackness—the idea that technology and Blackness are incompatible. This is often perpetuated by other digital writers and critics who either depict racialized bodies as primitive and technology free (left behind) or on the other hand, erasure racial categories in the future effectively whitewashing all futures. While Monáe's work "voices narratives of liberation via technology, she equally confronts the racist, heterosexist patriarchal, capitalist origins of technology and how these have been used against black women's bodies."[27] She also readily plays with Christian symbols which inserts a religious critique often missed in popular culture analysis of her work.

Similar to the boundary defying existence of the cyborg, Monáe uses different forms of storytelling to enhance the intersections of identity and time by remixing sound and images in her emotion pictures. "In this way technology connects us to other people and to other times, allowing the past, present, and future to merge so that we might access historical moments directly and yet in a way that is both transformed and transforming."[28] Like most Afrofuturism, Monáe's work, through its focus on Blackness, uncovers and highlights the dominance of whiteness. In the particular story of *Dirty Computer*, Monáe deploys purity—literal cleanings and visual imagery—to highlight that "purity is, like the western whiteness which represents it, a single-frequency thought" as Althaus-Reid notes.[29] Monáe uses music and imagery as a form of encryption, preventing interpretation by the dominant class.[30]

The centering of the cyborg in indecent theological approaches resists both Christian purity myths and current digital design that drives toward oneness. Singularity is of-

admits that even those are mediated. This line of argument negates embodied affective and cognitive dimensions of sexuality, while preferencing the physical acts of sexuality which has been a long held Christian bias.

[26] Jones 2018.

[27] Jones 2018: 43.

[28] Jones 2018: 50.

[29] Althaus-Reid 2000: 102.

[30] Jones 2018: 66. Janelle Monáe in the character of Archandroid, Cindi, model #57821 and Jane #57821 (Sincerely, Jane) in Dirty Computer – has a tattoo of the female christ on her right wrist. 57821 shows up as a song in The Archandriod album, suite III and Metropolis cover of Cindi Mayweather is 57821 – Sincerely Jane is most closely related to Kansas City (are we really alive or walking dead) Mayweather in previous albums is a revolutionary leader of androids/robots against the human class that oppresses them – fight back with time travel and music/art time-traveling android messiah – dirty computer seems new tale, but has callbacks to other storylines

ten the tool of the dominant culture to subsume difference. The cyborg, while seen as other, less than human, "can range from hybrid subjectivities grafted to the human body, or inhuman bodies fused with human subjectivities, to bodies that have found an equilibrium in both their human/machine avatars, and finally, to figures that have become cyborgs of both the body and the mind."[31] This definitional and ontological diversity resists singularity from a technological as well as sexuality and gender expression.[32] The imperial, colonizing desire for "oneness" or a singular code also attempts to eradicate multiple narratives and languages.[33] Thus we need multiple representational stories that work for and with othered subjects.[34]

Indecent theology is rooted in telling sexual stories, but it also resists the notion of a "perfect story." Althaus-Reid, when discussing the pattern of sexual stories, notes that coming-out stories "give a testimonial with an affirmation of what normativity has denied." The collection of coming-out stories creates a "network of rebellious people, the sort of rebellion which nurtures theology with a deeper questioning of life."[35] When Janelle Monáe remixes an episode from *Black Mirror*, "San Junipero," within her emotion picture, she moves the pattern of the coming-out story from testimony to theology. Referring back to Black feminist Cheryl Clark, Cassandra Jones unpacks Monáe's use of the death of her main characters, writing "this is not a moment that can be dismissed as another example of the 'bury your gays' trope in which LGBT characters are denied the promise of a loving future routinely granted to starring characters. . . death functions as a means of wresting control of the narrative . . ."[36] Yorkie and Kelly die to rise again in San Junipero. There is a resurrection of sorts from animate to inanimate that plays into technological infallibility as a way to remedy human messiness and failure. Yet, this is somehow different than Monáe's use of death related to Cindi Mayweather, the Archandroid in her earlier album who dies and rises to lead a revolution, and Jane #57821, who is scrubbed and rebooted only to destroy her captors. Monáe's re-mixing of the San Junipero narrative in *Dirty Computer* is a coming-out narrative continues the disruption of the perfect story. In this sexual fetish narrative she draws our attention to the living dead and challenges predetermined notions of liberation in the face of technological fallibility rather than infallibility.

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[31] Berman Ghan 2020.

[32] Henderson-Espinoza 2018b: 90.

[33] Haraway 2011: 442.

[34] Peckruhn 2017: 11-12.

[35] Althaus-Reid 2000: 145.

[36] Jones 2018: 53.

Dirty Computer opens with a scene of Jane #57821 being carried on a stretcher into the New Dawn facility. We see Jane's female Christ tattoo and all the personnel dressed in gleaming white. The narrator repeats the line used as one of the epigraphs to this article, "They started calling us computers. People began vanishing and the cleaning began. You were dirty if you looked different. You were dirty if you refused to live the way they dictated. You were dirty if you showed any form of opposition at all. And if you were dirty it was only a matter of time." She goes on to talk about being drained of the dirt which was what made them special. This signals the cyborg as a creation of the dominant class (they started calling us computers). Harkening perhaps to Haraway's claim that, "The main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins."[37] Jane is set on an operating table in what looks like a surgical room. Jane #57821 is asked by the operator of the facility to repeat "I'm a dirty computer, I am ready to be cleaned." Jane cannot affirm a desire to be cleaned (exceedingly unfaithful) and the facility director gives the command to initiate the nevermind—a gas, used to extract memories and display them as files to be deleted by the two white male cleaning room operators.

Each memory is a song with accompanying video reminding the viewer/listener of racial, sexual, and gender politics. Dirty Computer has multiple sexual stories that contribute to a digital indecent theological inquiry. I have chosen to focus on Monáe's *Make Me Feel* song and video which reference the San Junipero episode sandwiched between *Pynk*, an empowerment anthem to the vulva and a counseling session with an ex-lover, now cleaned computer known as a torch, Mary Apple #53. The location of the *Make Me Feel* song and reference to the San Junipero episode provides the context for both what can be understood as the broadcast of Jane's and Monáe's coming-out. The homage to the *Black Mirror* episode of "San Junipero" allows Monáe to layer imagery, fluidity of time, music, and historical references all toward a social and digital centering of blackness and sexual and gender diversity as dirty and at risk of erasure by New Dawn, the cleansing facility.

What happens in the San Junipero episode? San Junipero is a simulated reality created for the elderly to visit and where humans can choose to live their after life, uploaded to the cloud.[38] In this futuristic world, the elderly have access to this alternate reality for five hours a week because of fears of addiction and as a trial run if they would like to purchase this as their afterlife location. In one's twenty-something, simulated body,

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[37] Haraway 2011: 430.
[38] *Black Mirror*, "San Junipero."

residents can visit distinct decades in San Junipero, returning to the time of their youth or trying out a new decade. The landscape is generally the same with a few stores, a bar/dance club, houses if users have paid for them, beaches, cliffs, and a seedy club, the Quagmire, out in the desert where all forms of debauchery take place. Of course, depending on the decade one chooses to join at each visit, advertisements, drinks, and dress shift to match the time period. We are introduced to Yorkie and Kelly in the first scene before we know the environment is a simulated reality. Though Wes, who continually chases Kelly, gives the viewer clues when he keeps reminding her that time is running out. Yorkie, a white gangly twenty-something, is visibly uncomfortable and stands out. She is used by Kelly, a self-confident, stylish African-American young adult to escape Wes, an overbearing white dude who begs Kelly to have sex with him again.

Yorkie plays the role of an old friend at Kelly's request and helps get rid of Wes. Kelly discovers this is Yorkie's first time to San Junipero and wants to introduce her to the benefits of unencumbered fun. Yorkie doesn't drink or dance which Kelly tries to push on her. Finally, Yorkie in her discomfort leaves the bar. In the exchange that follows, we find out that Yorkie identifies as gay but has never had a relationship or explored her sexual orientation. Kelly volunteers to help her. This leads to a tumultuous back and forth relationship where Yorkie falls in love with Kelly, has sexual intercourse for the first time with her, and searches in subsequent weekly visits to find her. Over the course of these events, we learn about the details of how San Junipero functions as a simulated reality for the elderly. Once reunited, Yorkie confronts Kelly's belief that San Junipero is all about fun with no commitment. Kelly and Yorkie develop a relationship and one night in bed, Kelly suggests they should see each other in real life. Yorkie dismisses this idea, but eventually gives Kelly her location.

Offline, Kelly, an elderly Black woman with cancer, whose husband and child have preceded her in death, goes to visit Yorkie and meet Greg, the man Yorkie says she is going to marry. Kelly learns that Yorkie has been a quadriplegic since she was 21, when crashed her car after coming out to her parents who rejected her. Yorkie wants to be euthanized so she can permanently live in San Junipero, but the law requires a family member, lawyer, and medical professional to consent. Her family continues to punish her by refusing to sign. Greg is her nurse and has agreed to marry Yorkie so he can sign as her family member. Kelly is allowed five minutes to see Yorkie in San Junipero and ask her if she can marry her instead. With this complete, Yorkie is euthanized and uploaded to live in San Junipero for her afterlife.

When Kelly reunites with Yorkie in San Junipero, they argue over Kelly's commitment to be buried with her family when she dies, not uploaded to the cloud in San Junipero. Yorkie and Kelly have a fight where Kelly details the many sacrifices that connect her with the love of her husband and the loss of her daughter. But she also states that she believes there is nothing beyond their deaths. Regardless of Yorkies pleas that "This is real" (motioning to her surroundings) and "This is real" (affectionately touching Kelly), we are led to believe Kelly will not return. When Kelly finally decides to be euthanized, the scene cuts to her body being buried with her family in the graveyard and, then, her data or consciousness placed next to Yorkie's in what looks like a mini-robotic mausoleum. In the final scene, Yorkie picks up Kelly at their San Junipero beach house and they (presumably) live happily ever after.

San Junipero shares the theme of manipulation of time through memory and simulated reality based on a neural technology. It also plays with fixed notions of sexual identity, boundaries of age, and racial purity in sexual relationships. The liberative narrative of sexual affirmation and companionship does, however, perpetuate an ableist ideology of technology as the solution to physical and even political limitations. As a sexual story reveals, it may also conceal. In San Junipero, the living dead have another option, they can break out of the confines of U.S. Christianity's heterosexual dominance supporting a white, capitalist economic structure of family.[39] In the argument between Kelly and Yorkie at the end of the episode, Kelly also upsets the utopian vision of San Junipero by reminding Yorkie of the many users who go to the Quagmire, a club where sexual fetishes are explored, "just to try to feel something" she notes. This reinforces the fairy-tale nature of their own relationship that eventually conforms to a coupled, heterosexual happily-ever-after made possible in simulated reality. San Junipero affords a space for the realization of sexual orientations other than heterosexuality, yet it simultaneously reinforces capitalist, young, able, cis, liberal ideals.

Monáe, however, does not serve up the heartfelt gay-affirming utopian future conjured by San Junipero, made possible by an uninterrogated portrayal of technology cast as salvific. Instead, the digital existence of Jane #57821 threatens the whiteness and sexual purity of digitized humanity. In *Make me Feel*, Jane enters the bar with Zen just like Yorkie and Kelly, her female-identified lover from the *Pynk* song and cleaned torch MaryApple #53. And, yet, the discomfort of Yorkie is nowhere to be found in this remix. Instead, Jane's character is both the singer and participant in the video. The two main characters are both black, unlike San Junipero, and there is a

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[39] For analysis of the intersections of U.S. Christianity with racial, class, gender, and economic constructions of the family, see Ruether 2001.

third black male lover in the scene that is not cast aside like the white Wes character in San Junipero. *Make me Feel* complicates a binary presentation of orientation and gender identity via the main characters sexual threesome and the montage of historical, non-binary gender spectrum musical and visual references.

Following the song *Make Me Feel,* the San Juniper homage, we see MaryApple #53, a cleaned computer or torch, counseling Jane to accept the process of cleaning and stop thinking. In New Dawn, *torches* bring captured dirty computers from the darkness into the light, and the facility's gleaming white dresses for torches are reminiscent of baptismal garb. She notes that freedom in the New Dawn comes from forgetting. This attempt at erasing the memories of the dirty computers both shows the power of remembering and claiming one's own history and the concern by the dominant class of the cognitive functions of those deemed machines.[40] The time bending quality of *Dirty Computer* and movement between homage and remix suggest a type of post-colonial imagination making visible a "reality" of living otherwise. Jane notes earlier in the emotion picture, that "just when you think you know the past, they hit you with nevermind." Jane tells MaryApple she does not want to forget. MaryApple reminds Jane that she has no choice. At the same time, we see MaryApple's increasingly visible doubt of the cleaning process and her own desires to remember.

Monáe locates in a shared frame liberation and domination, queer pleasure and police surveillance, embodied Black desire and white surgical erasure. Each of Jane's memories, Monáe's songs, provide opportunities for sexual stories, political and social critique. There is not enough space for all of those stories here. However, the end of Dirty Computer is as important as its pragmatically surreal remix of San Junipero. After cleaning, all dirty computers become torches, become a MaryApple. Jane is renamed MaryApple #54 and deployed to counsel and cleanse a friend and male sexual partner (Che #06756). After a small credit run, we return to the room with Jane and Che, MaryApple #53 enters with stolen gas masks and they set the whole facility to Nevermind cleanse. In this act, we see even the leader of the facility succumb to nevermind suggesting they are all cyborgs, not human or computer. They leave the facility, once again on the run as dirty computers.

Monáe's *Dirty Computer* stands apart from LGBT liberation movements that seek acceptance from or integration with a white cisheterosexual, Christian majority.[41] Jane

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[40] Kwok describes postcolonial imagination in this way: "to imagine means to discern that something is not fitting, to search for new images and to arrive at new patterns of meaning and interpretation." See Kwok 2005: 9.

[41] For more on the queer agenda as a desire for radical transformation, not only social inclusion see, Ellison 2012: 76.

literally revolts against the attempt to baptize her (or her companions) as a Christian enlightenment subject, purified of her sexual dirt. Monáe provides not so subtle theological clues to uncover the disordered Christian desire for purity. New dawn (a carceral Edenic second coming) transforms those who are black sexual deviants into torches (light, whiteness) and renames them MaryApple, signaling the Christian requirement to suppress femaleness into the virginal, subservient mother tasked with converting temptation. Jane, marked with a female crucified Christ tattoo, liberates her lovers from New Dawn. MaryApple #53's liberation by Jane simultaneously shows how no amount of control can create coherence or singularity from Eve to Mary.

In the process of cleansing, which Jane resists, nothing ever changes about the color of her skin. One might imagine that cinematography could have literally drained the blackness from Jane. In one scene, she is drained of her rainbow blood, a biotechnological (nature/machine) representation of gayness. Blackness or dirt is associated with memory, thoughts, history, and resistance.[42] This highlights for the viewer that while whiteness is represented as a skin tone and a symbolic clothing color in the emotion picture, more importantly it is a totalizing system of oppression entangled with Christian belief about sexual purity. Monáe's characters want and create revolution. Jane, as the female Christ/savior following her cleanse/death, resists the structures of technological domination wielded in service of totalizing norms of whiteness and cisheterosexuality.

2. Fetish of Cyborg Sexual Storytelling

Althaus-Reid's description of Latin American fetishist theology resembles Monáe's *Dirty Computer*, "as an erotic unveiling of God's love amongst the dirty, sweating bodies of the marginalized and excluded."[43] Of course, one is in the streets of Argentina and the other in the fictive Afrofuturist halls of the New Dawn cleansing facility. Althaus-Reid suggests a fetishist way of loving and knowing can find other bodies, other loves, and an *Other* God.[44] That other God may be a Black messianic bisexual cyborg, which expands the other to multiple experiences made possible by simulated realities. Similarly, Anne Kull suggests that "those who take pleasure in incarnation, on the contrary, want to have as many bodies as possible (including the

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[42] Per the comments during this paper discussion, the association of blackness and dirt relates to claims made by ecowomanists/feminists that have yet to gain significant traction in Christian digital theology conversations. See Ott 2019a.

[43] Maria Althaus-Reid 2007: 152.

[44] Althaus-Reid 2007: 152.

resurrected one), so as to become affected by many other agencies (including other organisms, machines, and God)."[45] The multiplicity of otherness, however, does not negate a focus on power, rather it heightens the question of 'what is human' in an effort to decolonialize Christian enforcement of anthropocentric racial and sexual distinctions.

When considering Althaus-Reid's methodology and use of fetishism, Mayra Rivera suggests, "The invocation of fetishism is part of a broader performative questioning of the divisions between religious, economic and sexual discourses; of the strict boundary between subject and objects; and the split between matter and spirit, all of which unveil the failures of dominant metaphysical systems and the need for reimagining corporeality otherwise – indeed a new poetics of matter."[46] One that resonates with a combination of imagery, music, and text (song lyrics) in *Dirty Computer*. Rivera provides a thick description of the history of fetish, one that started in Christian colonizing encounters of the Portuguese and Dutch with traders along the West African coast. "The fetish was an object that resisted the European logic of trade, and thus the value it was given would easily be deemed as a symptom of irrationality."[47] Similarly, the white male workers in the New Dawn facility oscillate between fascination at watching Jane's memories and a lack of understanding about what they represent, thus a form of encryption which the viewer realizes later is never fully erased. Fetish came to symbolize, for Europeans, a perceived lack of boundary between spirit and matter in African religions, an otherness. In the process of colonial standardization and moral normalizing, "Fetishism was a term of differentiation, or better, a concept through which European Christianity could be constructed as transcending materiality – epistemologically and ontologically – and as carried on by autonomous subjects."[48] Later, Marx and Freud connect fetish to economic and sexual practices. Though Rivera notes, Althaus-Reid is most interested in fetishisms earlier use, "as a border created by colonial Othering. Her tactic is partly a satirical performance that mocks the anxieties of Christian discourse and claims the rejected fetish to show the failures of an always incomplete occlusion of the economic, political and sexual dimensions of the properly spiritual."[49]

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[45] Kull 2001: 283.

[46] Rivera 2010: 92.

[47] Rivera 2010: 88.

[48] Rivera 2010: 90.

[49] Rivera 2010: 91.

Althaus-Reid uses fetishism to reject historically constructed dichotomies between matter and transcendence, and I am pushing that to include technology and Christ. In a sense, this is not anathema to Althaus-Reid's own work. As I already described in the introduction, Althaus-Reid describes fetishism as "a kind of robotic epistemology concerning the difference between animate and inanimate objects, or between animated sexual organs and inanimate ones."[50] Similarly in *Dirty Computer,* salvation does not save one from sexual sin, which dominant Christianity suggests is an artificial state as opposed to the natural, original state of Edenic sinlessness or freedom from sexual desire. Rather salvation is a concrete freedom from the New Dawn, from the oppressive construction of purity. Jane as the messianic figure, like Jesus, "learnt the expectation of his[her] community, and therefore [s]he learnt to be Messiah."[51] This dialogical approach to salvation is bottom up, disrupting the dominance of top down authoritarianism.[52] In reading fetishism and Christianity simultaneously, Althaus-Reid uncovers the artificiality of Christianity. Additionally, she concludes that "humanity is not natural and static, but in a continuous process of production of material and symbolic realms."[53] Thus, humanity and Christianity can be disrupted and reorganized.

Monáe's/Jane's messianic character literally accomplishes a liberation for those marked as dirty computers in the emotion picture and for Monáe's self and fans offline. In this sense, Monáe/Jane is a trickster figure, like Jesus and Sojourner Truth posited by Haraway as "not a coherent substance with two or more attributes, but an oxymoronic singularity who stood for an entire excluded and dangerously promising humanity."[54] The specificity of these humans is what challenges the legal and symbolic standards of what counts as human. This reverberates with Kwok's argument for the hybridity of Jesus, a postcolonial Christology, that throws off the clothes of cultural purity, monologic discourse, and binary divine/human natures to reveal the naked incarnational fluidity that comes with embodied flesh.[55] In conversation with Kwok, Thweatt-Bates suggests, that the necessary transformation of the symbol of Christ from a colonizing tool to a hybridized Christ is likewise seen in the cyborg. She

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[50] Althaus-Reid 2000: 149.

[51] Althaus-Reid 2000: 155. See, also comments on this section regarding "disruptive excess" of a messianic figure. Jane/Jesus are more than the Messiah they become for their communities. They are constantly in the process of becoming that and still other, which yields the excess that will continuously disrupt and reorganize as dominant structures attempt to create coherence. This includes my own attempts in this paper.

[52] For more on decolonial erotic possibilities of this theological approach see, Henderson-Espinoza 2018a.

[53] Althaus-Reid 2000: 150.

[54] Haraway 1992: 92.

[55] Kwok 2005: Chapter 7, in particular see 169–172.

writes, "the cyborg's hybrid ontology points us toward the fact of our kinship with the nonhuman (in all its forms: animal, machine, and divinity) and the necessity of constructing a world in which the life, dignity and freedom of all God's hybrid creations may be affirmed."[56] The final goal is not a liberation that allows the colonized to be colonizer or matriarchy instead of patriarchy or any inversion of binary power relations. Rather, as Althaus-Reid suggests, "To liberate the oppressed means also to liberate the oppressors from the sin of oppression which engulfs their lives. Therefore we do not have 'either/or' category here."[57]

3. Cyborg Experiment for Indecent Revelation/Revolution

I have argued that incarnational indecent cyborgs "destabliliz[e] dominant forms of theological imagination whose doctrine reproduces contours of violence against those who enflesh a difference relative to gender and sexuality" and simultaneously generate "a constructive creativity that embodies a force of becoming."[58] Robyn Henderson-Espinoza notes that "Allowing religion to be framed by an ontology of becoming similar to that of gender . . . necessitates a new ontological and epistemological orientation that impacts our social practices" (ethics).[59] In seeking out "possibilities for new contours of gender and sexuality to materialize"[60] as social practices or ethics, how might we employ virtual or simulated realities (or augmented and mixed realities that provide a different entanglement of digital embodiment), in ways that capture the sorts of otherness explored in San Junipero and *Dirty Computer* as a means to disrupt domination rather than further a pornography of marginalization? Indecent theology methodologically suggests this happens through the experiencing of stories, stories of the marginalized and subaltern that disrupt grand narratives. The power in the stories that Althaus-Reid narrates and Janelle Monáe creates resides in their visceral ability to sensually arouse. As Rivera suggests, "The goal is a transformation of our perception of ourselves and the world around us."[61] Yet, the inherent challenge of making a text grab and transform a reader is difficult and probably only the purview of the best writers. Of course, the infusion of music and moving imagery in Monáe's case

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[56] Thweatt-Bates 2012: 190.

[57] Althaus-Reid 2000: 125.

[58] Henderson-Espinoza 2018b: 91. Here Henderson-Espinoza is reflecting on a transing methodology that for them is rooted in an ontology of becoming, which has its own foundations in work by scholars like Althaus-Reid and Gloria Anzaldua as well as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.

[59] Henderson-Espinoza 2018b: 91.

[60] Henderson-Espinoza 2018b: 91.

[61] Rivera 2010: 81.

helps. Constructive theologians have noted the need to attend "to the sensory perceptual aspects of embodiment" in order to bring materiality into focus in the doing of theology.[62] Being part of the story might be even more powerful; virtual or simulated, augmented or mixed reality may be a way to kinetically, visually, and emotionally disrupt domination and displace the urge to other the Other.

For example, recent scholarship suggests that the use of virtual reality shifts users' ideas and beliefs about the fluidity of gender identity.[63] Based on the notion that "gender identity and the perception of one's own body are tightly connected," researchers created a full-body ownership illusion with synchronous stimulation, meaning the subject experienced themselves in first person computer generated imagery while researchers simulated physical touch outside the visual field of the subject. There were no haptic suits or devices involved. The full-body illusion encoded "episodic memories" of gender incoherence in the participants that were not interrupted by cognitive or emotional responses during the experiment or afterward. That is to say participants' gender identity became more fluid when they experienced themselves or their virtual alterity as different gender expressions. Additionally, "the body-sex-change illusion reduced gender-stereotypical beliefs about own personality... so that a change in one aspect (gender identification), due to the body-sex-change illusion, affects the other aspects (stereotypical self-beliefs)."[64]

Others have argued that digital communication, more broadly, allows for identity formation that is fluid and visible, especially for transgender teens.[65] Leaning into the embodied experience of the cyborg may provide greater potential than previous technological, biomedical interventions used to hide, for example trans experience and identity through transition surgeries that relied on fixed sex categories.[66] These experiences are reminiscent of the cleansing of the dirty computer in the surgical environment to maintain a singularity and normative dominance rather than yield disruptive difference and fluidity. Instead, virtual reality experiences, while perhaps leaving human and machine as separate entities, momentarily alter relationality of self to self and self to other as both an encounter event and as affective intensification.[67]

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[62] Peckruhn 2017: 7.

[63] Tacikowski / Fust / Ehrsson 2020.

[64] Tacikowski / Fust / Ehrsson 2020.

[65] Erlick 2018.

[66] Erlick 2018: 73–92.

[67] Here I'm bringing in the work of Jasbir Puar, who offers a frictional approach to perceived competing approaches of assemblage theory and feminist intersectional theory. She unpacks the location of Haraway's cyborg theory within this conversation. Given my focus on Christian theology, I have not included more from her work. There is room for

What comes from an experience of virtual sub/alternity? Given the stories and research presented, the experience of virtual sub/alternity appears to have an embodied impact while also displacing the dominance of naturalness. That is to say, there is nothing naturally static about racial, sexual or gender categories. They are both material and constructed systems of oppression. Where white, capitalist, cisheterosexual culture reads Blackness, queerness, and poverty as markers of less than human or disposable, Janelle Monáe's work "demonstrates how technological engagement, when paired with knowledge of history and an awareness of the present combine to create a force of social liberation. This marriage of the transformation of both technology and its attendant racialized [sexual, gendered, and economic] narrative is the power of the digital griot."[68] This is not to say that virtual sub/alternity is always liberative or even that digital technologies are free of oppression. In fact, it is exactly because that is the dominant experience—digital as exploitative—that Monáe's work conjures moral imagination that unsettles Christian liberative tropes. She speaks for "humanity outside the narratives of humanism" reminding us that we need not deny materiality, fleshly or technological, while seeking to transform systems of oppression.[69] In fact, we ought to embrace it in all its pleasure, suffering, and sweatiness; that must happen in order to expose the anti-Blackness and anti-queerness of liberal utopic trans/posthuman narratives that seek new ways of binding the human to an Enlightenment, purified Christian ideal. Resistance from the Gospels to *Dirty Computer* takes the form of storytelling in complex, material, and visceral ways embedded in history.

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further exploration of experience of virtual reality and Puar's theoretical approach as well as theological considerations as Puar, herself notes that there must be "cyborgian goddesses" in our midst which may be akin to what I am calling incarnational indecent cyborgs. See, Puar 2012.

[68] Jones 2018: 66.

[69] Thweatt-Bates 2012: 192. Thweatt-Bates takes this language from Haraway who poses Jesus and Sojourner Truth as figures of humanity who can speak outside of humanism. See, Haraway 1992: 88.

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