

Teachin' Books Episode 1.13 – Janelle Monáe's "Pynk" and Vivek Shraya's "Part-time Woman"

[Music: "Homer Said" by [Dyalla Swain](#)]

Jessica McDonald 0:10

Hey! This is Teachin' Books, a podcast all about the ways people teach, learn, and work with literature. I'm Jessica McDonald and today I am talking about teachin' music and music videos -- two music videos in particular that I teach in combination with one another, beside one another. The first is Janelle Monáe's "Pynk," and Vivek Shraya's "Part-time Woman." So before we go any further, let me tell you that I will drop the links for both of those songs, including the music videos, in the show notes so that if you haven't heard the songs or if you haven't watched the videos, you can go ahead and take a look and take a listen. They're really short so you can pause this episode and just come right back in a few minutes, if you like. Okay, and if you've done that, or are forging ahead anyways, let me get right into it and I'll tell you about how I teach these two songs, these two texts in the broadest sense of that word, together.

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

Jess 1:18

So if you don't know about these musicians I'll just tell you a little bit about them first. Janelle Monáe is a Kansas City-born and raised musician and actor. She often writes and performs music in the style of Afrofuturism, which combines technology and/or science fiction, speculative fiction, with aspects of African or African diasporic experiences. So for example, her earlier music, her earlier albums, were written and performed around this sort of character that she built up, this alter ego character, named Cindi Mayweather, who is an android. And if you've watched the video for "Pynk," you can see how those Afrofuturist elements are pulled through into this newer album, this newer collection of songs, which is her third studio album, Dirty Computer. So yeah this song, "Pynk," is from Dirty Computer, which was released in 2018. Okay, so this song "Pynk" comes from the second sort of loose loosely grouped section of her album, which Monáe has said is a celebration of quote "sexuality and of womanness." I'm mentioning that here because it will play into what I talk about a little bit later and how I teach this text.

Jess 2:38

Vivek Shreya is an Edmonton-born, Alberta-based musician, writer of all sorts of things. She's a playwright, poet, novelist, etc etc., artist, Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Calgary, and she writes about like such a breadth of social and personal and political topics that it's really hard for me to summarize them, but I'm just going to give it a try here. Some of the recurring topics of her work are:

gender, gender queerness, masculinity, experiences of quote unquote "womanhood," including as a trans woman, race, racism, colonialism and whiteness the experiences of immigrant families and the experiences of women of color in Canada. This song, "Part-time Woman," comes from an EP of the same title, which was released in 2017. And I'm going to read part of the description of the EP from Shraya's website. So it says, "Part-time Woman, the new EP by Vivek Shreya and Queer Songbook Orchestra, is a question and a critique. What defines woman? A critique of the labor expected in order to be seen and valued as feminine. For anyone who has been misgendered, made to feel not feminine enough, or struggled to find home in a language that resists complexity." So Queer Songbook Orchestra, by the way, are from their website, "They are a Toronto based 13 piece chamber pop ensemble dedicated to exploring and uplifting queer narrative and pop music." So the song, "Part-time Woman," and the album, is a collaboration between Vivek Shreya and Queer Songbook Orchestra.

Jess 4:26

So the classes that I've taught these two texts, these two music videos, these two songs, together in are first-year English classes, called Reading Culture, and I've actually talked about this at least once, maybe a few times on the podcast before. So in this first-year, Reading Culture English class, we study all sorts of cultural works, like, you know, I start with poems and a play and a comic, and these music videos, then we later get into a novel and a film and that sort of thing. And this is the class that I have themed sometimes around Nature versus Culture, and I know I've mentioned that before on the podcast. And the whole class, the whole course, is sort of designed around questioning that very binary of nature versus culture. How do these categories get established, and why, to what effects or consequences or implications, are they established? What are the power dynamics that work behind nature versus culture as a model of understanding the world? Those are the larger, larger questions that sort of guide our study in this course.

Jess 5:38

And these particular texts I slot in to the same unit that I talked about for the Landwhale episode, Jes Baker's Landwhale, if you happen to listen to that. And that's a unit on Bodies and Identities. So that's a unit where in class we talk a lot about gender and gender expression and, importantly, how gender gets sort of caught up in discussions about the ways that bodies look or are, in troubling ways but also in empowering ways sometimes. We talk about health and wellness, that was a big thing for the Landwhale episode, fatness, disability, just the different sort of intersections of bodies with identity, even when those intersections are troubled. So this, these texts are placed within a unit that's really, it's a unit that talks about how bodies and identities shape but also are shaped by the ideological force of the Nature versus Culture divide, like what is socially deemed natural for human bodies, for example, what is deemed unnatural for human bodies, for example.

Jess 6:50

The other sort of contextual thing to know about this day in class, this sort of single lesson where I talk about these two texts together, these two songs together, is that it's one single day or one lesson in a larger, longer, maybe -- not sure what the best word is but -- in a trajectory of teaching how to read the visual dimensions of texts. So what I mean by that is because it's a Reading Culture class and we're asked by the Department and the university to take up a lot of different cultural works, that means that students are called not just to critically read the language of written texts, but also inevitably, depending on how you organize your course, to read visuals, especially if you're doing or including texts like films, or comics, or other graphics, like maybe memes or other graphic sort of media.

Jess 7:55

So for for my course, this is a pretty early text. Before these two music videos and these songs, the class will have seen one other text that has clearly visual dimensions, which is a comic that I teach called Ducks by Kate Beaton. But then this is sort of their second try, students' second try or their second chance at reading visuals and the visual dimensions of culture in a critical way. And then later on the class moves into other sort of visual study like we we look at Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom, and we talk a lot about the visuals of that movie, later on in the course. One of the things I try to do then with this text, with these texts together, is to bring them together in order to teach method -- like teach methods of reading the visuals of texts, like paying attention to color, which is really important for these music videos, style, performance, movement, any aesthetic choices. Those visuals are what I'm trying to teach students methods for reading, when I pair these texts together.

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

Jess 9:15

So let me tell you a little bit about the songs, hoping that you have listened to them or watched the videos, but also knowing you might not have. Janelle Monáe's "Pynk" is... I mean it's sort of hard to describe, but you could think of it as a celebration of the color pink in a very literal way. And then a celebration of the cultural but also biological significance of pink. The song is, through the color pink, a sort of reflection on and celebration of bodies and body parts, especially in their sexual and sensual capacities. So like, the first lyrics of the song are "pink, like the inside of your, baby / pink behind all of the doors, crazy / pink, like the tongue that goes down, maybe." Yeah, I mean they don't have the same sort of oomph when I read them out as they do when Janelle Monáe like beautifully sings them, but in these lyrics you can get a sense of the celebration of bodies and body parts that that's happening here. So, yeah: "pink when you're blushing inside / pink like the lips around your / pink like the skin that's under / pink where it's deepest inside / pink beyond forest and thighs / pink like the lid of your eye." Eventually the lyrics get to this line that's kind of whispered: "deep inside, we're all just pink." And so that returns to this idea of pink as a unifying color, pink as like sort of the color inside all humans.

Jess 10:59

According to Pitchfork, the description of the song and the music video reads this: "Pynk is a brash celebration of creation, self love, sexuality, and pussy power. Pink is the color that unites us all for pink is the color found in the deepest and darkest nooks and crannies of humans everywhere." So that gives you a sense of I guess the song's aboutness, what it's supposed to sort of be about or is going for.

Jess 11:29

Before we get into the details of that, I want to tell you a little bit about "Part-time Woman." Yeah, what is this song about? So this song really asks the question, what defines "womanhood" quote unquote? What acts or actions or practices or behaviors or aesthetics or biological dimensions -- what of those make someone into a woman? So for example, some of the lyrics, I mean the song starts off with, "I don't shave. I don't wear makeup / no skirts. I don't dress up / What does that make me. Does that make me a part-time woman?" So really, this song is all about those... It's about questioning those practices that are associated with womanhood. And in turn, questioning what defines a woman.

Jess 12:24

So like I said, I pair these texts together on one day and I do that because they both visually, through the music videos, and lyrically, through the lyrics, theorize womanhood in very different ways, but using similar aesthetics and similar visual vocabularies, for the music videos of course. So in terms of their content, as I sort of said, they're both looking at like what does it mean to be a woman. How is womanhood tied or not tied to the body? That's kind of a big aspect of "Pynk." How is that connection to the body inhibiting, or dangerous, or trouble troubling like we see in "Part-time Woman," but also how might it be for some people, empowering? And we see that a little bit through "Pynk" and this notion of sort of pussy power, which I should say comes up in the music video a few times.

Jess 13:21

The music videos are similar though, in their aesthetics and in their visual vocabulary. There's lots of pink you'll notice. There is classic or traditional sort of markers of femininity. I'll talk a little bit about those in a second. Both videos recycle scenes and signs of sort of exaggerated femininity or girlhood, sort of classic but amped-up scenes of girlhood and femininity from like 80s and 90s pop culture, like the sleepover scene, sort of the Jane Fonda-style workout videos. These are music videos that are really calling back to that cultural history of femininity and womanhood in what seems like deliberate ways.

Jess 14:13

This is the activity that I do with students when I'm teaching these two texts. Like I said, I do it in one class which is a little bit squishy. It's a little bit squishy in terms of content-to-time, one 80-minute class, but we really focus in on this specific kind of question or activity. I get students to think and discuss in

small groups about these questions: I ask What similarities can you identify between the two songs and music videos? Similarities in a) images or visual details b) lyrics or the quote "message" of the songs, c) the songs or videos' approach to the course theme, Nature versus Culture.

Jess 15:00

So students discuss this three-pronged question about the similarities between the songs and their videos in groups, and then for the last 20, maybe 30 minutes depending on how group discussion goes, we will debrief as a group and have a whole class discussion where we sort of list all the similarities that they have seen and identified. But then, very importantly, we move past that list. What I mean by that is that I framed this, the teaching of these texts, as an exercise in sort of teaching methods of reading. And so, one aspect of teaching methods of reading, reading the visuals, is making sure that we get away from just simply spotting simple similarities, like, "Oh, I noticed that they both include a lot of pink." And then we push past that into what is the meaning of those similarities? And then what is the "so what?" or the larger significance? Why does that meaning matter? So for example, if a student brings up the fact that there's like this gray fluffy soft looking kitty in the Janelle Monáe video, then we need to go the next step and say, sort of, what is the meaning of that kitty? Like is it a sexual innuendo because of the whole pussy power thing that runs throughout the video? Is it the softness of the kitty? Is it the aesthetics of the kitty? Is it something about the ways in which cats are gendered or made feminine or seen as feminine? And then the next step is to say well so what, what is that doing in light of the rest of the music video?

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

Jess 16:50

So let me give you a little sense of how that looks. When we come back as a whole group, and students have sort of discussed these questions in their small groups, and we debrief, we usually come up with huge, huge lists of sort of similarities and things that the students have noticed. So for example, in "Pynk," we have a sign that says "Girls eat free and never leave." So this idea of the music video creating or highlighting a paradise for women. That's carried through in the women who populate the video, you know, tons of women of color who are populating the video, being really affectionate with one another and sensual with one another, sexual with one another, even in their movement, that sort of thing. In general, there's a lot of visuals that express or that celebrates sex, especially sex in relation to women or between women. We have close-ups of underwear inscriptions like "sex cells," "great cosmic mother," "I grab back," which is a political reference to Donald Trump's famous "grab them by the pussy" comment and sort of suggests an empowering of the pussy back at those who might grab it. We have this sort of sensual retro exercising in the style of, like I was saying, Jane Fonda's workout videos, we have the sign "Pussy Power" in neon lighting, a finger going through a pink donut, ice cube on a grapefruit, pink lipstick to being twirled up, kind of sensually, asses being slapped, tongues touching, flipping the bird,

belly button, blowing bubbles in a milkshake, untied bikini strap -- just a lot of images that and visuals that really amplify the celebration of sex and bodies going on in this song and going on here in this music video.

Jess 18:53

And actually something I haven't even mentioned and didn't for some reason write in my notes here but that has become a huge part in students' discussion of this text is that Janelle Monáe for a lot of it or for part of it is wearing essentially I call them vagina pants in class, but I actually don't think I would call it them that if I were to teach this again for another time. They're pussy pants, essentially, right? They are, I mean I'll throw up maybe an image of them in the shownotes or direct you to where you can see them, but you could also just watch the music video, those pants are even just in their in the space that they take up in the music video, in the frames, on Janell Monáe body, they are making space for celebrating the pussy right? Pussy power is, is the running motto of this music video.

Jess 19:52

Like "Pynk," the video for "Part-time Woman" includes a lot of pink, a lot of image like literally the color pink, a lot of images that are sort of stereotypically or pop culturally feminine or feminized. There's for example a sleepover scene in "Part-time Woman," just like there is in "Pynk," where you have two characters I guess Vivek Shreya, and Alok who is featured in the video, lying on beds, wearing pink PJs, socks, kind of classic sleepover posture, if you know what I mean? That sounded weird but I just mean like kind of like laying on your belly with, like, a hand rest your, your head resting... I'm like doing it as if you can see me, but kind of your legs up and... I dunno, I'll screenshot the part that I mean, just so that you know what a sleepover posture looks like. Pillow fights, fixing hair in the mirror, writing in a journal or diary, all of those sort of classic sleepover scenes pulled from 80s and 90s TV shows and movies.

Jess 20:58

So when I talk about this part of the music video with students, we, we talk about how by adopting this visual vocabulary of a very typically feminine stereotypical pop culture scene, which is a girl's sleepover, to comment upon how these actions, like the movies and TV shows that they imitate, are practiced or learned or performed, or constructed. Like, none of the these sleepover sort of actions are inherently biologically female right. Instead, these become practiced actions that we attach meanings to through their circulation in real life, and in pop culture. So in adopting that kind of sleepover scene. this video is really highlighting gendered practices as things that aren't inherent or sort of natural, but instead are learned, and therefore can be troubled, and critiqued, and unlearned, and deliberately played with, and also unthinkingly accepted.

Jess 22:08

We talk about like the blowing bubbles at the end of the video, why they're there, why do they fall on this carpet, why is it that kind of carpet? I mean students have had all sorts of great things to say about the bubbles popping and how those bubbles represent like the bubble of restricted, restrictive gender norms popping and how Vivek Shraya is trying to essentially, through critique, pop the bubble of what womanhood must look like. And yet when you put that in contrast to the fact that the video is so deliberately playing with traditional visual signs of femininity, it becomes a really interesting contrast.

Jess 22:50

Okay, so that was a lot of detail about the kinds of visuals and visual images that are not just in the music videos but that have come up in my class discussions around these two music videos. But I wanted to zoom out again here at the end of this discussion to talk about overall what I think these two videos are doing together, or so what?, or why I teach them together.

Jess 23:15

Monáe's song and especially video seems to try for an empowering of women via the body. There's you know the vagina pants, as I call them in like my course materials -- I literally have that phrase on a final exam somewhere, from the past, which I was very proud of at the time -- the vagina pants celebrating the vagina, pussy power, making pussies centerstage when they sometimes aren't. Also the video becomes a sort of empowering of queer love between women, sexuality, you know making physical affection between women a central and obvious and clear part of the video. The video is, and the song, is celebrating ...yeah, in short, the video is celebrating the biologically cis female body, as well as it's celebrating queer love between women, and that's actually the sort of sticky point that I want to talk about with this particular video. So I mention this in class and I, it's something I feel complicated and maybe even uncomfortable about, is the way that this video seems to centre cis women's bodies and celebrate womanhood via bodies and quote unquote "female body parts," like heavy quote unquote there, which is for me a little bit troubling. But I will save this. Meg Mathias, in an essay called "Gender Definition and Expressions of Sexuality in Janelle Monáe's 'Pynk,'" she highlights two tweets, one from Janelle Monáe and one from Tessa Thompson, who is an actor who stars in the music video for "Pynk." And these tweets suggest their interpretations, Janelle and Tessa's, interpretations that this is a song that actually celebrates both women who have and do not have vaginas. And I'll link to this piece so you can check out the tweets and the rest of what Meg Mathias has to say about the video. And I take that, I take those tweets. But I'm not sure that their intentions to celebrate bodies that, the bodies of women who don't have vaginas, I'm not sure that those intentions are reflected in the final music video. I'm actually really curious to hear from you. Any of you, if you have thoughts on this, on how or whether "Pynk" centres cis women's bodies or maybe, maybe the video destabilizes the body in ways that I haven't yet accounted for in my classes, because I've been a little bit critical of the celebration of, sort of quote unquote "female biology" in this text, even while I also love the video and love the song, and sort of celebrate it for what it does as well. So please do get in touch if you have thoughts about this whole thing.

Jess 26:09

Okay and to continue this sort of zoom out, Shraya's song and video, like I've said before, at its core seems to be a questioning of what makes a woman, a, what makes a part-time woman, a full-time woman, what do we associate with a quote unquote, "real woman"? Is it wearing makeup, is it shaving, etc. and why? So this is a video and a song that I think questions rather than celebrates the biological. It asks, who gets left out of the definition of womanhood, especially when we focus on the biological aspects of womanhood? So for example in the lyrics, Shraya sings, "how many high notes, do you have to reach? / how many hours do you have to bleed?" really questioning why and to what consequences, socially, many folks might focus on biological dimensions of a phenomenon like gender, which is so much, so much more and more complicated than, biology, right? The link between bodies and gender is not a simple one. So Shraya's song, her song questions the culture that's created around womanhood and its attendant expectations and practices -- like, how much do I need to do to be a woman? Do I need to shave, like? And who do these requirements serve and who benefits from drawing the line between what makes a real woman, full-time woman, and a part-time woman?

Jess 27:42

These are two texts that while complicated, and complicated in their coming together. I find really fruitful to teach. They're so fruitful that it's probably best to teach them in a whole week instead of just one lesson of this course. And maybe that's what I would do in the future. Because the questions that they bring up around gender, bodies, and identities are so productive and create really rich conversations in the classes that I've taught.

Jess 28:14

Okay. Slowly but surely, as always, losing my voice, so I think that's all I'll say about the music videos for now, but let me just say I would love to hear from folks if you have thoughts on either of these songs or music videos. If you've taught them I would love to hear from you, of course. But even if you haven't taught them I would just want to know what your read is on these texts.

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

Jess 28:46

This episode was recorded on Treaty Six territory and the homeland of the Métis. I'm recording this at the end of the pilot program of a new initiative at the University of Saskatchewan called the Indigenous Storyteller in Residence program. And this first position this first pilot program was filled by a musician named Eekwol, Lindsay Knight, who is a songwriter, hip hop MC, and PhD student at the University of Saskatchewan from Muskoday First Nation and now based in Saskatoon. I've been lucky to see and hear

Eekwol perform several times throughout the last decade or so, and she is an extremely compelling and powerful performer, and an amazing songwriter. I'm gonna put some links to where you can find more about her and her work in the show notes, including a link to a talk that she just did recently to finish out her time as the Storyteller in Residence at the U of S. And I watched that talk today and I would recommend that you check it out.

Jess 29:52

Thank you to Dyalla Swain for the podcast music. You can find more of their work at soundcloud.com/dyallas. Thank you to Jade McDougall at muskrat-hands.com for the awesome podcast graphics. You can follow the podcast on Twitter and Instagram @TeachinBooksPod or get in touch via email, tell me what you think about these music videos at teachinbookspod@gmail.com. Okay, my voice is out! So thank you for listening. Join me next week on Teachin' Books, still no "g" in the teachin'.

[Music: "Homer Said"]

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