

“Pynk” and Queer:

Photographing Desert Body/Landscapes as Relational Eco-Visual Rhetorics

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#queerology #ecointimacies #bodylandscapes #landscapebody #queernature
 #ecorhetoric #visualrhetoric #ecoview #constructedlandscape
 #succulentsucculents #beautifuldecay #backyardnature
 #inspiredbyjanellemonae #pynklife

I watched Janelle Monáe’s [Pynk](#) music video as soon as it was released. I was enchanted by the pinkly saturated desert landscape, the vaginal and floral fashion pieces, and the depicted queer love story. I was a few weeks into a breakup with my first woman-identified partner when I saw this video and it was a wonderful distraction. But *Pynk* turned out to be much more than that: it has become an aesthetic influence, a model of embodied queer ecological relational practice, and a way of differently seeing landscape.

After I saw the video, I went for a walk with my dog. During that time, long walks in the neighborhood with my dog helped me mourn the loss of my relationship. A particular Palo Verde tree gave me pause as I remembered when she first pointed out a [praying mantis](#) egg casing on one of its lower branches. We had kissed next to that tree and she detailed the insect’s reproductive processes. In between our handholds and observations, while the dog waited

patiently, I had taken out my phone and macro lens attachments for a closer look and, of course, to snap photographs. This tree, like many other desert features, helped construct my queerness as and through ecological relations. My queer identity had grown in the swarm of ladybugs that enveloped us when we reached the top of Mt. Wrightson, in the staccato movements of the [lesbian lizards](#) we talked about and watched frequently, in the delicate veins inside of the prickly pear and the ring she gave me that resembled its features, and in the way I differently experienced the landscape on these walks when we broke up. Our love, and my queerness, had come into being in and of the desert and with her. But to the public, it seemed my femme-presenting queerness had been most legible in relation to her: her queerness easily identifiable through a masculine of center presentation.

But the morning I saw *Pynk*, I began to visually write a new queer ecological story

in response to the video. The imagery and song lyrics remained present with me and I made meaning as I am trained to do as scholar and practitioner of visual rhetoric—through simultaneous analysis and artistic creation. I saw my favorite neighborhood cacti in bloom and, as usual, I took out my phone and macro lens attachment to look closer. Long spines were a geometric maze, a puzzle of pokes and prods. My fingers and phone grazed the plant as I gazed through the lens. The pink flesh of the flower looked remarkably similar to the ruffles of Monáe’s [“labial chaps”](#) (Bryant, 2018); both resonant in their yonic resemblance. The blossom also protruded fine black curled threads, like the [pubic hairs Monáe makes visible](#). I snapped photograph after photograph, composing images of the cactus bloom through the lens of *Pynk*. This series of desert plant body/landscapes emerged from there, and it continues in an ongoing project about queer eco-visual rhetorics and settler colonial landscapes.

Monáe’s video and associated lyrics inspire my aesthetic choices and help me re-view and re-establish a co-constituted eco-relational queerness built through multimodal meaning-making in photographic praxis. I share these images on [Instagram](#), using hashtags as a necessary framing device to not only forward my own identity but also to call attention to the constructed and constructing nature of nature photographs. As eco-visual rhetoric scholars contend, images of nature not only represent nature, but also, they function to construct it (DeLuca and Demo, 2000, 2001; Dobrin and Morey,

2009). This series brings together eco-visual rhetorics and queer ecologies scholarship, particularly through the links between discourses of sexuality and the environment (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson, 2010) that are produced visually. These discourses impact one another and contribute to understandings of who or what is considered natural—a strategy often utilized to position queerness and queer sexuality as unnatural or “against nature” (Hogan, 2010; Seymour, 2013). In photographs that magnify moments of queer eco-relational intimacies, new looking practices and other queer engagements may continue to emerge. But how can such multimodal meaning making practices reflect new ways of seeing landscape and attending to “submerged perspectives” (Gómez-Barris, 2017) without producing queer ecologies as only natural when white and/or biologically inclined? How can such images work to rupture settler colonial systems rather than only reproduce them?

My story is one of many, written and rewritten in the landscape. It is a story told, covered over, and erased like so many others. In its telling, I also participate in processes of erasure. Indeed, place is a palimpsest of constellated and relational becomings (building from Massey, 1991 and Powell et al., 2014), and photographs and photographic technologies are contributors to the valuations of particular lives and lifeworlds. It is my hope that these macro-level depictions of desert landscapes that resemble human bodies may queer understandings of nature and

considerations of the natural. Magnifying the margins of a gaze might—as Monáe’s video exemplified for me—yield new ways of seeing, constructing, and being with landscapes and each other.

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Figure 1: "PYNK: like the inside of your"... cactus blossom?



Figure 2: "PYNK: Where it's deepest inside"



Figure 3: "PYNK: Getting lost in the dark is my favorite part"



Figure 4: "PYNK: Like the halls of your heart"



Figure 5: "PYNK: Leaving traces of us"

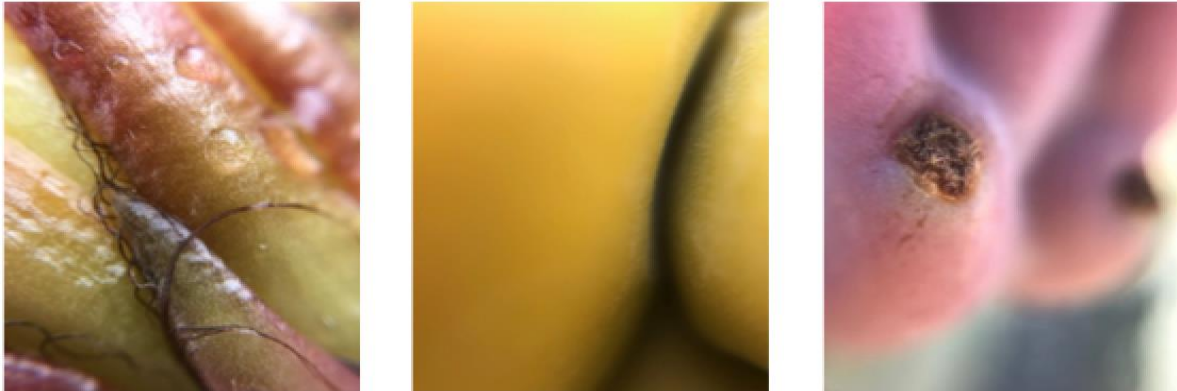


Figure 6: "PYNK: Let's count the ways we could..."



Figure 7: "PYNK: Like the [birds of] paradise found"

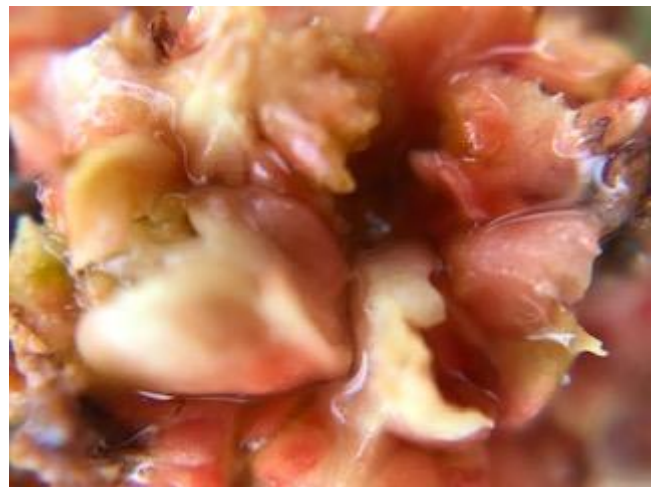


Figure 8: "PYNK: When you're blushing inside"

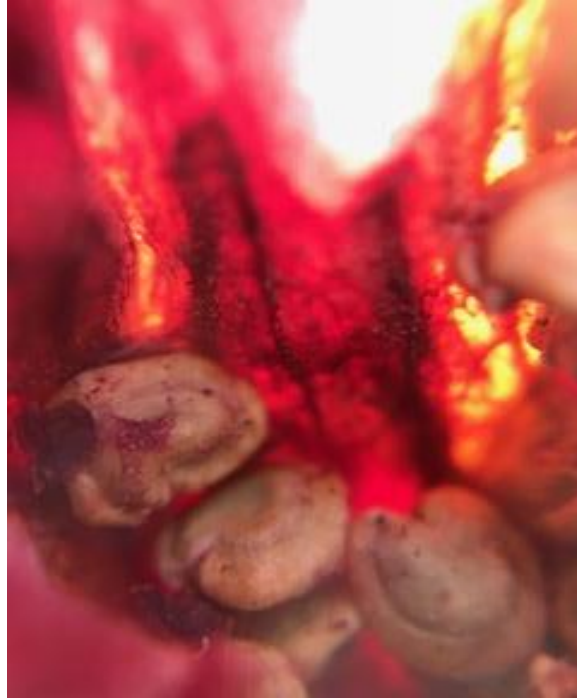


Figure 9: "PYNK: Like the skin that's under"

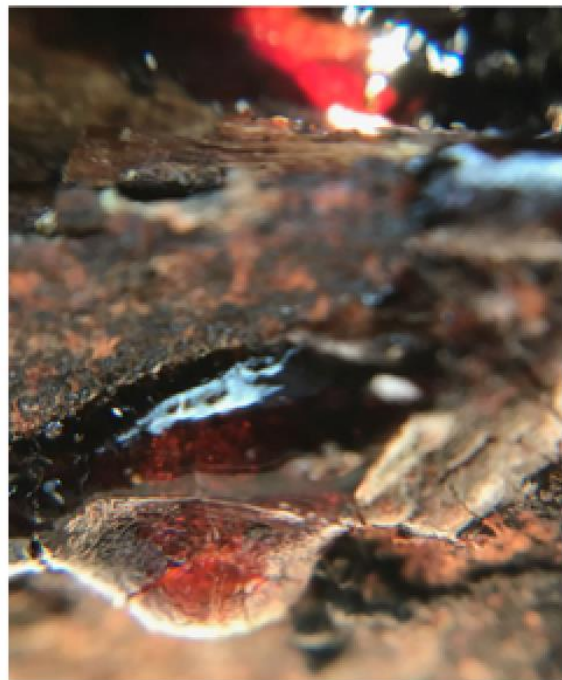


Figure 10: "PYNK: Yeah, some like that!"



Figure 11: "PYNK: Behind all of the doors"