

**“I’m not America’s nightmare / I’m the American dream”:  
The Spiritual and Emotional Journey from Anger to Love  
in Janelle Monáe’s *Dirty Computer***

Bianka Szendrei

**INTRODUCTION: POLITICS OF ANGER AND LOVE**

Generally, anger is associated with hatred, negativity, pain but most importantly, it is a regularly misinterpreted emotion. Angry individuals are often viewed as violent and vengeful ones who are desperate to release their frustration instead of dealing with their personal confrontations; therefore, they negatively affect their environment with their vibe. Though it is undeniable that anger also encourages people to find a solution, to change a situation or to give voice to their fears. Due to the bad reputation of this emotion, most people feel discouraged from admitting the overwhelming anger they feel in the fear of being stigmatized. Nevertheless, what is anger exactly? Many believe that anger and hatred are interconnected, nonetheless, they carry distinctive meanings. Audre Lorde argues that while hatred’s only aim is to hurt, to destroy, to draw back people from loving each other, in contrast anger is a tool of self-expression and a sign of concern for the self, a community or the future of a society. She notes, “Anger — a passion of displeasure that may be excessive or misplaced but not necessarily harmful. Hatred — an emotional habit or attitude of mind in which aversion is coupled with ill will. Anger, used, does not destroy. Hatred does” (151). Is not anger also a way of coping with a helpless situation, letting others know that our boundaries are being violated and threatened? Is not it a tool of powerful expression of our opinion? Indeed, suppressed anger only results in an excessive one, which slowly destroys the individual inside. To avoid this, it should be normalized to let the anger flow through our veins, embrace the pain because hiding from the problem will eventually only add fuel to the fire. Anger is sometimes necessary to move forward in a situation. Anger is sometimes part of a healing process. Anger is sometimes part of one’s heritage.

Anger and love are sometimes inseparable since anger originates from pure love. The latter emotion is based on mutual respect, compassion and concern for the less fortunate individuals. For decades it has also been a driving force for the grassroots civil movements. The politics of love has various purposes: it is an act of resistance

against social injustices<sup>1</sup>, empathy for the oppressed individuals, a tool for the healing process and a cohesive power for a community. Sometimes individuals are in rage because most of them hate seeing others whom they love getting hurt or mistreated. Sometimes someone replies with anger when their morality of love is being violated. Sometimes anger is a response to the overgrowing hatred and the lack of love.

## **CHAPTER ONE: AFRICAN AMERICAN ANGER**

### **1.1 GENERAL INTRODUCTION**

As James Baldwin says, “To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a rage almost all the time” (thepostarchive, 0:54-1:05). He reflects on how being angry became part of Black people’s life due to the pain and frustration inflicted by the history and the current unequal conditions. White<sup>2</sup> mainstream media portrays African American rage as a violent response, nonetheless, in this case, violence is not necessarily harmful. Frantz Fanon offers a disparate perspective in his essay, “Concerning Violence” in which he draws a parallel between the relationship of the colonizer and the colonized, showing how violence can be treated both negatively and positively. He argues that the violence of the colonized – in this case Black people’s, whose colonization started with slavery – and its consequences are driven by lived experience.

When the dominant culture conquers an area, it maintains its power through repression, fear and violence. Dehumanization of the colonized to a savage level is also a tool of asserting power for the colonizer. On the one hand, violence brings sorrow and terror. Fanon writes, “When the native is tortured, when his wife is killed or raped, he complains to no one” (54). The colonized remaining silent about their experience of torture applies to contemporary African American experience. Fanon implies that through centuries, violence against enslaved people was normalized. Thus, many Black people suppressed their pain and could not vocalize issues affecting the Black community. Fanon’s quote also indicates that even though they wanted to be vocal about their struggles, it only fell on deaf ears.

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1 My research will be based on this type of love.

2 In the research, only the lowercase “white” is going to be used instead of the capitalized one – except when starting a sentence. When discussing African Americans, “Black” is to be used – just like in other ethnicities’ cases, including Asian, Arab, Hispanic, etc. The aim of this distinction is to alienate the dominant from the oppressed. The contrast demonstrates that they are not on the same level. By writing “White” and “Black”, the research would denote the real message and suggest that the two sides are viewed equally.

On the other hand, violence is part of the healing process and is essential for the reconstruction of their identity. When the colonized become fully conscious and wishes to be independent from the colonizers, they allow themselves to regain their self-worth and dignity. The resistance of the colonized is observable nowadays too, but in this context, it is rather a “symbolical” violence.

To be clearer about this idea, let us take the non-violent Black Lives Matter movement, which was organized by Opal Tometi, Patrisse Cullors and Alicia Garza in 2013 to respond to the unfair prosecution of George Zimmermann, the murderer of Trayvon Martin. The Black Lives Matter, the colonized, shows their resistance against the systematic oppression of the colonizer, white American society, by “vocalizing” social issues on an intersectional scale, challenging the legal system and calling for the cut of police funding. Therefore, the Black Lives Matter movement goes against institutionalized racism which was constructed by white Americans while also calling for the vitality of accountability of criminals, legal system and police. *Anger* for African Americans is a significant tool to start a movement and fight for racial justice. Without anger, the abolition of slavery would have never happened, the Civil Rights’ Movement would not be a part of American history books and Jordan Edwards’ senseless death would have never led into a protest against police brutality. In “As Much Truth as One Can Bear,” Baldwin sums up the idea of Black people calling for changes as “Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced” (57). Baldwin suggests that people should learn how to overcome their fears, be honest with themselves and face the truth. Yet, African American anger is commonly used by the dominant culture, especially in popular culture, to vilify Black individuals e.g., the angry and aggressive stereotype of Black gangster in white Hollywood cinema.

## **1.2 THE USE OF ANGER: BLACK WOMEN’S RAGE**

Malcolm X’s 1962 speech perfectly sums up the fate of the African American woman in the American society: “The most disrespected person in America is the black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the black woman. The most neglected person in America is the Black woman” (“Who Taught You to Hate Yourself - Malcolm X.”, 2:26-2:30). The “angry Black woman” is among the most common racial stereotypes, which derives from white American mainstream media’s misrepresentation. Black women are often portrayed as illogical, aggressive and ignorant. Alas, not many people are capable of interpreting Black women’s anger in a positive way. Audre Lorde argues, “every black woman in America lives her life somewhere along a wide curve of ancient and unexpressed anger” (145). If

one takes into consideration the anger of Black women: what might be at the root of their pain? Police brutalizing Black women which is going to be discussed in the “Django Jane” chapter. Another reason can be rape culture, which dates back to slavery, and oversexualization of Black women’s body which mainly originates from the stereotypical image of Jezebel, the sexually loose Black woman. When rape occurred, Black women were less likely to report the incident due to the sense of guilt which appeared due to the internalization of the idea that Jezebel desired sex and could be easily exploited (West 294). Black women’s body was not only treated as an object but also as a monstrosity which greatly affected their self-image. According to Mogul et al., in earlier times heteropatriarchy usually compared Black women’s vagina to the idealized image of white women’s vagina. Their conclusion was that Black women’s clitoris is larger than the ideal one which was a sign of Black women’s sexual deviance that was a result of sexual intercourses with Black lesbians (16). It means that Black women’s body in general was not only an object for the white male-gaze fantasy but their sexual integrity was also crushed by white heteropatriarchy. Mogul et. al also suggests that the vilification of Black queer women was closely connected to the shaming of Black women’s vagina and body in general.

Intersectionality is an essential element of feminism, especially when it comes to the issues of women of color whose experience of sexism and racism is simultaneous. The term was first introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw and was used to criticize the antidiscrimination doctrine and describe the location of Black woman in the “imperialist whitesupremacist heteropatriarchal” system<sup>3</sup>. She argues in “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,” that intersectionality “provides a basis for reconceptualizing race as a coalition between men” (1299). Intersectionalism takes into consideration racial,

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3 I use the term “imperialist whitesupremacist heteropatriarchy” to describe the “interlocking political systems that are the foundation of our nation’s [America’s] politics” (hooks 17). According to Black feminist and activist bell hooks [her name is purposely not capitalized] who coined the term, these mutually constitutive political systems are based on domination: imperialism claims the right of territorial domination; whitesupremacy asserts its power over marginalized communities, while heteropatriarchy strives to dominate genders other than cisgendered heterosexual men. hooks suggests that amongst the three systems “we all learn the most about growing up is the system of patriarchy, even if we never know the word, because patriarchal gender roles are assigned to us as children and we are given continual guidance about the ways we can best fulfill these roles” (hooks 17-18). Since people are born into heteropatriarchy and it becomes a part of their everyday life, many times it is difficult to spot heteropatriarchy.

gender, class, queer<sup>4</sup> injustices. It is the key of seeing others' struggles from disparate perspectives. White women must feel obliged to empower women of color and cannot neglect their struggles. They cannot claim to stand for every woman if they are only concerned with problems that are only beneficial for them. Black women's anger cannot be left ignored either, and white women should not remain silent when it is time to act for women of color. The pain of women of color roots in their involuntarily removal from their home to a land where they were forced into slavery. They watched their children torn away from them and sold into slavery; sexual abuse became part of their everyday life. Even after the abolition of slavery, Black women were humiliated and exploited<sup>5</sup>. In consequence of the never-ending atrocities, their anger and rage are responses to racism and gender inequalities.

Audre Lorde argues in "The Uses of Anger," that learning to express anger is a tool of personal growth and is part of survival (Blacpast.org). Nevertheless, it is also essential for Black women to learn how to replace their anger with something powerful. In my interpretation, Lorde suggests that Black women should never let anger bottle up in them and eventually make their spirit bitter. Since their rage is never left unnoticed, it is better to articulate the frustration even though society makes them believe that it is unnecessary. There is a difference between expression and expression. While, for example, Serena Williams can be extremely vocal about racism she encounters on the court (and alas, it is often labeled as a meltdown by the dominant narrative)<sup>6</sup>; or Lucy McBath transformed her pain into power

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4 I intend to use "queer" throughout my analysis as it encompasses various aspects of social identity and behaves as an umbrella term, Burgett and Glenn Hendler defines queer as "an attempt to challenge identity categories that are presented as stable, transhistorical, or authentic" (190). Queerness is more than a social identity, it is closely related to politics and "is a description inherently fluid, a zone of endless possibilities that challenges oppressive norms and social institutions" (Perry 68).

5 Sojourner Truth discusses the pain of seeing her children sold into slavery in one of her speeches, "Ain't I a Woman?" (1851) while Harriet Jacobs' autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) details the sexual abuse she was a victim of.

6 In *Citizen: An American Lyric*, Claudia Rankine quotes Zora Neale Hurston, "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background" (70) to illustrate Williams' situation on the overwhelmingly white platform. Williams is not welcomed by the whitesupremacist heteropatriarchy on the tennis court because of her skin color. Hence, she becomes an open target of racism, the "Other", the alienated. Judges (mostly white men) constantly accuse her of cheating and give bad calls, people on social media label Williams as a "gorilla," others call attention to her "manly" appearance while Williams was also a target of distasteful jokes which targeted her breast size as well. By this the dominant culture wishes to assert its power over a Black woman's body. She becomes hypervisible for being "different" and "angry". Rankine perfectly shows how Williams reclaims her pride through using white culture's weapon, violence, against itself. Even though Williams is a wealthy athlete, she cannot escape the atrocities of racism and sexism as a Black woman.

and became an advocate<sup>7</sup>; others, like Janelle Monáe, write lyrics to express their frustration. Nonetheless, there is an essential common point in Williams's, McBath and Monáe's way of addressing social problems: they openly criticize without censorship. They disregard the dominant culture's response, endeavor to challenge everyone and withdraw from filtering their messages. Monáe, as a contemporary Afrofuturist artist, uses one of the most predominant spaces in popular culture, music, to address racial injustices, spread feminist ideas and openly criticize white supremacy because she feels responsible for the marginalized and embodies a representative of the community. Throughout their<sup>8</sup> career, one of their main aims is to liberate their audience from the marginalized's mental prison the "imperialist whitesupremacist heteropatriarchy" forced them into. Grace Gipson perfectly sums up the uniqueness of Monáe and their technique of giving visibility to the oppressed:

Through each album, song, lyric, and musical note, Monáe gives freedom to that 'other' (marginalized victims within the world) or segregated minority that is often discussed in Afrofuturism. Instead of them being minimized, she maximizes their existence and breathes this sort of life. It is as though she elevates this state of consciousness that surpasses the misfortunes that one may visually perceive in today's society. (93)

Monáe being an openly queer influencer ensures proper representation for the queer community. Monáe's queer identity suggests "an identity, understood as a sexuality that does not conform to Western notions of heterosexual expression" (Anderson 3). It means that Monáe's identity and style are rather fluid but at the

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7 Lucy McBath is a member-elect of the US House of Representatives from Georgia's 6th congressional district whose son, Jordan Davis, was a victim of gun violence in 2012. McBath decided to run as a mother and as a representative of the Black youth and her rage led her to victory.

8 On 11 Jan 2020 Monáe shared a tweet where they let their audience know that they identify as non-binary. Holleb defines non-binary as a gender identity which "can be used to describe anyone whose gender isn't exclusively 'man' or 'woman,' and anyone whose gender isn't either 'man' or 'woman.' Anyone who is gender fluid, agender, demi-gender, genderqueer, neutrois, a mix of man and woman, or any gender which isn't unambiguously 'man' or 'woman' could call themselves non-binary. There isn't one single way to be non-binary" (185). Individuals identifying as non-binary mostly use "they/them" pronoun, nevertheless, there are cases when beside "they/them," either "he/him" or "she/her" are also accepted pronouns by the person. Since I would like to respect Monáe's pronouns, I intend to use "they/them" as Monáe's pronoun – although please note that Monáe has never confirmed their preferred pronoun.

same time challenges the heteronormative norms<sup>9</sup>. By their honesty and bravery, they become one of the most important voices of our generation. Through an analysis of some of the lyrics of their newest album, *Dirty Computer* (2018), this study examines Monáe's spiritual journey from anger to love. The essay also demonstrates how they have stepped over many boundaries to confer their views on racial, gender and queer injustices.

## CHAPTER TWO: INTRODUCTION TO *DIRTY COMPUTER* (2018)

Monáe's *Dirty Computer* is probably the most honest work they have ever released. It is more than just a simple album: as Monáe puts it, it is "rooted around love" (Mastrogiannis), serving as a therapy session for Monáe and a metaphorical refuge for marginalized individuals. It depicts an ideal world for the audience where sexuality, gender, and race are no longer viewed as negative aspects. Originally, Monáe planned to record an angry album, albeit instead of taking violent actions and using overly explicit terms, they decided to write social criticism. The album is divided into three main parts; each of them demonstrating Monáe's process of defeating their anger and finding peace. They open the section by defining their and many marginalized people's role in America, as Monáe explains, "the sting of being called a n\*\*\*er for the first time by your oppressor. The sting of being called b\*tch for the first time by a man. You're like, 'OK, this is how I'm viewed in this society'" (Mastrogiannis). Later on, Monáe celebrates their "dirtiness", which is equivalent to extraordinariness. "Dirtiness" shows their absolute freedom and the transformation elevated into reclamation (Mastrogiannis). Reclamation carries distinct meanings here: it can refer to the identity and pride of queer African American women, and the denial of the socially constructed "ideal" liberation of the body and sexuality.

*Dirty Computer* has a significant meaning for Monáe since they have always had an extraordinary, yet, futuristic view on humans. Futurism is also an essential theme because their progressive interpretation of racial, gender and sexual liberation goes against the traditional, heteronormative norms. To Monáe, each individual is a

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9 The definition of heteronormative must be fixed since it is going to be one of the driving forces in the research. Berlant and Warner define the term as "the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent – that is, organized as a sexuality – but also privileged" (548). While heteronormativity and heterosexuality are not inseparable terms, it is crucial to emphasize that their meaning are not the same. Heterosexuality is indeed the foundation of heteronormativity although heteronormativity is rather a power structure that influences the queer community and straight people based on socially constructed norms.

fragmented one, most of them are being judged for their “filth” and “dirtiness” – it includes sexual orientation, gender, race, class, mental health, etc. In an interview with *iHeartRadio*, Monáe draws a parallel between humans and computers: “We’re downloading, uploading things in our brains, in our hearts, and some of the things that make us unique can be seen as these bugs, and these viruses. And for me, I see all my bugs and viruses as features, as attributes. [...] This album is about reckoning what it means to have your rights trampled on and to face opposition, perseverance” (Mastrogiannis). Monáe refers to being the Other in a mainstream society as “the bugs are in me” (Monáe 2018). Monáe’s fascination with computers elevates human existence to a new, scientific level where humanhood is understood in technological terminology. Sylvia Wynter argues in one of her studies that human existence should be understood as a praxis (23). Therefore, both Monáe’s and Wynter’s understanding of the human existence reduces humanness to a theoretical level and rather opens towards an inclusive definition of being – which also includes computers.

In the latter interview, Monáe elaborates on that people possess viruses and bugs and to Monáe, these features are more like positive attributes. In general interpretation, the bug is not equivalent to an insect, but to the fault in the system. Bugs or even viruses are threats to a carefully constructed operational system, they have the capacity of destroying or disrupting a system. This explains why Monáe views some people as computers as oppressed individuals are capable of disrupting the whitesupremacist heteropatriarchy by simply resisting social norms. Nevertheless, dominant culture uses “bug” as a slur to make the marginalized feel like outsiders. “Imperialist whitesupremacist heteropatriarchy” states that having a “bug” is a fatal flaw, a disease; and it results in expatriation from society. Monáe, instead of letting be defined by the slur, the creation of the dominant culture’s fantasy, decides to identify with the “dirty computer”, the supposedly flawed android to express their support towards fellow dirty computers. Thus, Monáe weaponizes the oppressor’s tool, the slur in order to liberate from the mental prison – similarly when the Black community reclaims the n-word. Throughout the *Dirty Computer* “journey”, Monáe asks their listeners to be proud of their “bugs” by which the oppressed can reclaim their pride.

The album is a response to Donald Trump’s 2016 election victory, which left many minority groups in fear and uncertainty. Trump’s figure imposes a threat and those were familiar with his background (sexual assault allegations, controversial campaign speeches, racist agenda) did not expect a positive outcome from his administration. Thus, one might ask: is it possible to maintain a “safe space” for gender, racial and sexual minorities, moreover, can the Trump administration ensure the proper representation of their rights? At the time of such ambivalence,



Monáe, being an African American non-binary pansexual woman coming from a working-class family had concerns about their and community's future. In an interview with *Allure*, they recall the pain and the frustration after the results: "I felt it was a direct attack on us, on black women, on women, on women's rights, on the LGBTQIA<sup>10</sup> community, on poor folks. I felt like it was a direct attack saying, 'You're not important. You're not valuable and we're going to make laws and regulations that make it official and make it legal for us to devalue you and treat you like second-class citizens or worse'" (Ford). After Trump's victory, many voters felt let down, that their struggles in an oppressive system will never be recognized. Sorrow and helplessness create frustration, which eventually turns into anger. Monáe had two choices: let anger slowly destroy them or find a way to let the pain and fear flow away. As an artist, they felt responsible for giving voice to the problems of minorities and restoring their faith in the future. Monáe decided to directly respond to the Trump administration and channel their emotions because they got tired of being the inferior one in the society. Monáe refuses to be devalued and treated as a burden by the "imperialist whitesupremacist heteropatriarchy". They reclaim their dignity and define their societal significance in one of her songs, "Crazy, Classic, Life," which I incorporated in the title of my study, that "I'm not America's nightmare / I'm the American dream" (Monáe 2018). They had been angry for too long and wanted to take action. They wanted to record an angry album, which paradoxically resulted in a loving one.

### CHAPTER THREE: DEPICTION OF ANGER AND LOVE

Through "Americans" and "Stevie' Dream," Monáe offers a great contrast between anger and love. On the one hand, in "Americans," they take into account the injustices that marginalized individuals have been struggling with for decades and lists various reasons for Black people to be angry about. On the other hand, "Stevie's Dream" strikes a distinct tone and offers love in the darkest times.

Monáe's journey of finding inner peace and learning the trick of communicating their feelings started with one of her good friends', Stevie Wonder's, advice. Monáe brings the verbatim of Wonder's lesson in the form of a song, titled "Stevie's Dream". The lyrics goes,

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10 The acronym, "LGBTQIA" is an umbrella term to describe a community (sexual minorities) as a whole. It is the abbreviation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex an Asexual." However, the form of the acronym may vary in different studies. In earlier academic works, some scholars only mention "LGBT" which was later extended to "LGBTQ". Nowadays, "LGBTQIA," "LGBTQ+" and "LGBTQIA+" are the most commonly used forms where the "+" signifies the other sexual identities such as polysexual or demisexual.

Even when you're upset, use words of love  
'Cause God is love  
Allah is love  
Jehovah is love  
So don't let your expressions, even of anger  
Be confused or misconstrued  
Turn them into words of expression  
That can be understood by using words of love. (Monáe 2018)

Wonder suggests that addressing issues and dealing with anger will ultimately result in love. Forgiveness and kindness weaken evil and do not let hate tear people apart. As Monáe says, "It's easy for me to just stay angry, but it's harder for me to choose love" (Norwood) because hate takes no effort, but expressing gentleness requires maturity and bravery. Moreover, Monáe presents religion from a different perspective here. The Bible and religion are used by Western Christianity to justify that the existence of queer people is wrong and sinful. Rejection by Christian community can lead to many queers abandoning God since they feel alienated from his mercy. As a non-binary pansexual Black woman, Monáe volunteers to use their faith, to embrace and represent the queer community members. They stand before God and pray in the name of the queer community in order to let them know: they are worthy of God's love and their feelings are valid.

"Americans", wanders to darker places and creates a great contrast between hatred, represented through bigotry and violence; and love, embodied by acceptance. Monáe arrives at her final destination: peace. They can finally let her anger go away, having expressed their opinion and transformed their emotions into art. It is now the listeners', the "dirty computers'," task to face their fears, go through a spiritual journey and find home. However, in the current American society, it is challenging to do so. Monáe knows well that her marginalized audience will always face rejection and anger; however, they refuse to let these individuals down. They do not want to declare one solution for dealing with anger because they are aware of the individual differences in coping mechanisms and experiences; they only show their way to find the way from rage to love. They immediately state, "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 (Monáe 2018). They comfort their listeners and offer their support to the listeners. Monáe, furthermore, gives a sense of belonging to the listeners as they use the "we" pronoun, expressing solidarity and togetherness. While it is difficult to remain kind and keep loving under such harsh circumstances, the singer encourages their audience to keep rejecting anger and fighting for the good

purpose. Monáe brings many examples of injustice in their lyrics, thus giving a powerful social criticism about the current conditions in American society from various aspects in order to encourage the listeners to critically interrogate social norms that people internalize and the dominant culture in general.

In “Americans,” gun control is mentioned as in “Die in church” (Monáe 2018). Monáe pays tribute to the victims of the 2015 Charleston mass shooting perpetrated by Dylan Roof who targeted ten Black congregants and killed nine of them in the hope of declaring a race war. Roof consciously targeted the holy place as the Charleston church has a long history of being the symbol of the peaceful protest against white oppression of African Americans (Jorgensen 340). Whitesupremacy has the tendency to “victimize” shooters, claiming that the perpetrator suffered from mental illness. Thus, white America fails to acknowledge the actual problem (the unregulated gun distribution and systemic racism); they simply sweep it under the rug. It is not a surprise then that after the tragedy, Black people could not rely on protection from the supposed “justice” system. Additionally, the Charleston shooting made it very clear that even after the atrocities of slavery, Jim Crow laws, segregation and the Ku Klux Klan, history will always repeat itself and racism returns in disparate forms to Black people’s life. In that sense, Black people’s main quests become survival and resistance. Instead of withdrawing, the victims and Monáe remind Black people to maintain the communal power and love because through union comes solidarity and strength. Through a united protest against guns comes the chance of change.

Monáe also brings up the mistreatment of African Americans, concerning criminal law, as they sing, “Live in jail” (Monáe 2018). It is a general truth that Black people get executed unfairly<sup>11</sup>, especially since the declaration of War on Drugs (1971), and the dominant culture views their imprisonment as a benefit to private businesses. Black individuals have higher a chance to get imprisoned than white people<sup>12</sup> because, as Grier & Cobbs argue, “hatred of blacks has been so deeply bound up with being an American that it has been one of the first things

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11 Many statistics and studies prove that the legal system treats colors differently. Carlos Berdejó notes that according to a statistic of the Wisconsin Circuit Courts, white defendants are 25% more likely to be found “not guilty” and leave the court without serious charges while the court often imposes the highest charges on Black individuals. The study also points out that Black people are 75% more likely to be punished for minor crimes such as possession of cannabis, vandalism, or petty theft (3). Gross et al.’s study suggests that innocent Black people are seven times more likely to wrongfully get charged with murder than a white person, moreover about 3,5 times more likely to be found falsely guilty in sexual assault (4, 11).

12 This can also be traced back to private businesses profiting from free prison labor which can only be maintained if prisons are filled with inmates. Therefore, mass incarceration became a common practice which Ava DuVernay perfectly explains in her film, *13<sup>th</sup>* (2016).

new Americans learn and one of the last things old Americans forget” (204). Grier & Cobbs suggest that the institutional racism and the hatred of people of color had become part of the white American identity. The dominant culture has managed to find loopholes and violate the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment without the threat of any legal consequences. This violation of law has been going on since the early 1900s and even nowadays its morality and legality are vital questions in the American society. Ava DuVernay’s documentary, *13<sup>th</sup>* (2016), sheds light on how privatized prisons systematically target poor African Americans who cannot afford a good lawyer or the bail-out money (Alexander 104) to exploit them for businesses’ profit interests. She points out that mass incarceration and the criminal justice system have become a societal problem and require major reforms. Many poor Black individuals do not have a stable financial background to afford a good lawyer and bail out after an arrest and thus it is easier for the oppressive system to keep them in jail.

Criminalization also has a psychological impact on African Americans’ individual and communal identity. As African American lawyer Bryan Stevenson argues in *13<sup>th</sup>*, “We make them their crime. That’s how we introduced them. ‘That’s a rapist. That’s a murderer. That’s a robber. That’s a sex offender. That’s a burglar. That’s a gang leader.’ And through that lens, it becomes so much easier to accept that they’re guilty and that they should go to prison” (00:29:55-00:30:10). If the oppressive society enforces a false image for an individual and depicts them as a savage and violent criminal, the victim eventually starts identifying with the image<sup>13</sup>. The victims of such a system can share their anger and traumas with publicity, and through talking about the difficulties comes healing.

Monáe then continues, “say her name, twice in hell” (Monáe 2018). This line is a remark on the #SayHerName movement, which raises awareness for Black women (including transgender individuals) victims subjected to racial profiling, police brutality and sexual misconduct committed by an officer. Due to the interlocking racism and sexism, proper media representation for marginalized communities is lacking, hence, they become silenced victims of the system. #SayHerName resists silence and the loss of identity of the victims. In an interview with *Black Perspectives*, Andrea Ritchie notes, “Black women’s mere presence, speech, and protest of mistreatment in public spaces is [...] a threat that officers meet with physical or even deadly force” (Jackson). Ritchie sheds light on how institutions, in this case police departments, abuse their power against not only racial but gender

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13 This process of transformation can be observed in Richard Wright’s *Native Son* as well. Through the main character, Bigger Thomas, Wright criticizes racial oppression which affects the Black conscious in the American society while also arguing that society greatly contributes to one’s identity development. Due to his skin color, Bigger Thomas cannot have a meaningful role in white society, and he is reduced to be only an outcast, a threat.

and sexual minorities. The loss of loved daughters wreck mothers, but brings them together at the same time. Through sisterhood and shared pain, these women learn how to create love out of their sorrow and rage. By these contrasts, again, Monáe forces their white audience to think and invites them to call attention to these vital questions and become allies. However, without giving up certain privileges, one cannot expect change in the society. White people should use their inherited privilege to empower minorities, question the justice system, challenge the supposedly “ideal” images that determine everyone’s status in the society.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY**

### **4.1 “DJANGO JANE”: BLACK GIRL MAGIC, BLACK VISIBILITY, LISTENING AS UNDERSTANDING**

When Monáe dropped “Django Jane,” it quickly became the anthem of Black women. The title itself is already very telling. *Django* (1966) was originally a Western movie with a white male protagonist. Howbeit Quentin Tarantino’s *Django Unchained* (2012) meant a great shift in Wild West stories by making the main character a Black man, who escapes slavery, and exacts revenge on his oppressors. While in Tarantino’s movie Django gains physical and spiritual freedom, Monáe escapes their mental enslavement that the whitesupremacist heteropatriarchy forced them into. In Monáe’s song, Django’s character appears as “Jane Bond, never Jane Doe / I Django, never Sambo” (00:20:12-00:20:16). Monáe plays a language game in which they oppose a name with a similarly sounding term. They are Jane (the nickname of Janelle) Bond, the intellectual heroine, who saves the day, but they refuse to be invisible in the society, and named Jane Doe, a term used to refer to “a woman whose real name is not known or cannot be revealed” (“Jane Doe”). The latter term also criticizes the ignorant social attitude towards violence against women of color and the lack of representation of victims in law or media. By denying “Jane Doe,” Monáe breaks out of the role of the victim and becomes an individual with an identity. They identify with the escaped hero, Django, instead of remaining Sambo, a racial stereotype used to degrade Black people. “Sambo” and other stereotypical Black characters (see “Jezebel or Sapphire”) function as colonizing tools for the dominant to enslave the marginalized. Consequently, Monáe defies the dominant culture’s creature, “Sambo” and moves towards resistance along with liberation.

To Monáe, “Django Jane” is more than just a simple song. It is an individual and a communal story at the same time, as they describe, “a response to me feeling the sting of the threats being made to my rights as a woman, as a black woman,

as a sexually liberated woman, even just as a daughter with parents who have been oppressed for many decades” (Bengal). The song is centered around Black women’s magic and liberation, but Monáe does not stop there, they go even further and talks about Black queer women’s magic<sup>14</sup>. The concept of Black woman’s magic creates a contrast between society’s and Monáe’s view on women. White supremacist heteropatriarchy tends to measure (Black) women’s strength by how much pain they can endure, and not by their achievements, actions or self-expression. Monáe offers a distinct perspective and does not let women be defined by their pain, but by their most precious power: womanhood. Monáe pays tribute to CaShawn Thompson<sup>15</sup> in “Black girl magic, y’all can’t stand it” (Monáe 2018). They turn their anger into magic, transforms their rage into a power by which they can openly call out the oppressive patriarchal system, and reclaim their and their sisters’ pride. Black girl magic is also a reference to Michelle Obama’s speech at the 2015 Black Girls Rock Awards, which challenges the social expectations towards women. Obama’s speech shed light on how women are constantly blaming and judging themselves for wanting to deny heteropatriarchy, escape toxic masculinity, and be different from the socially constructed image. Through her personal experience as a woman, she teaches other women to defy labels, overcome hardships and elevate themselves to a free and independent being. Furthermore, she invites her audience to question the heteronormative patriarchy and deny toxic masculinity<sup>16</sup> which aims to view women as objects in order to fulfill the male-gaze desire. Monáe asserts women’s formidable role in the song, emphasizing their incredible power when saying, “We gave you life, we gave you birth / We gave you God, we gave you Earth” (Monáe 2018). These words reinforce Monáe’s idea about women, discussed

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14 Although she never openly identified with the term but based on Monáe’s love and respect for women she can be called, what Alice Walker defines in her novel *In Search of Our Mothers’ Garden: Womanist Prose*, a womanist. Walker argues, a womanist is a “woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female” (xi). Hence, love for women should not necessarily be based on sexual desires but shared experience of sisterhood.

15 #BlackGirlMagic movement promotes self-love amongst African American women. According to Thompson, she never wanted to claim this culture for herself, her main goal has always been to deliver a significant message to women: they are magical, strong, beautiful and successful (Ebony F.).

16 Toxic masculinity is a concept or a code of behavior that describes all those unhealthy characteristics that men are supposed to possess in order to fulfill their manhood. For instance, violence as a part of masculinity (“boys will be boys”) is often normalized by the mainstream society or men cannot struggle with mental health issues such as depression or anxiety because these are considered as weaknesses.

in her 2017 Women's March speech: "I want to remind you that it was woman that gave you Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., it was woman that gave you Malcolm X, and according to the Bible, it was a woman that gave you Jesus." (Democracy Now!, 0:41-1:05). They state the ultimate truth: women are the source of life and possess a power that no one can ever imagine. Therefore, Monáe refuses to let this power left unacknowledged and only allow patriarchy to view women through an objectifying lens that only serves the male gaze.

In the song, Monáe also states the thesis of *Dirty Computer* when rapping, "hit the mute button, let the vagina have a monologue," (Monáe 2018) Monáe does not simply warn the audience to listen, but addresses their message to the imperialist whitesupremacist heteropatriarchal system. Cisgendered, white heterosexual men have always ruled the platform and now it is women's time to take over. Listening means that people allow each other to tell stories. Telling a story is not only crucial for a communal reflection on the self, history and culture but also for the individual one. Vocalizing personal fears and sharing traumas are vital parts of one's identity development especially when the individual feels trapped in their own mind. There are different forms of listening: on the one hand, one pays attention in order to form a response, to avoid awkward silences, it is like a "must". Albeit this way does not guarantee that the listener successfully decodes the message and understands the meaning of the words. On the other hand, people also listen to start conversations and exchange ideas. It forces them to think and evaluate the words and to seek to understand the messages. Monáe strives to achieve the latter form of listening, because as they explain in a discussion, "through understanding comes empathy, through empathy comes love" (Double J). Thus, they ask their audience to put aside judgments and anger. Through listening, open their hearts and ears to understand each other. Hear the words, taste and analyze them.

Besides women's role, Monáe also points out how the dominant culture fails to recognize Black people's power when singing, "Kept us in the back of the store / We ain't hidden no more (Monáe 2018). This part can be interpreted as a reference to Ralph Ellison's "What America Would Be Like Without Blacks". Ellison discusses the role of African Americans in the American society as "whatever else the true American is, he is also somehow black. Materially, psychologically and culturally, part of the nation's heritage is Negro American, and whatever it becomes will be shaped in part by the Negro's presence" (587). His essay argues that without the presence of Black people the United States would have never reached economically, culturally and socially its current level. It is undeniable that the US was also built on the pain, suffering and blood of African Americans during slavery and post-Emancipation through their exploitation as cheap labor. Black people also blessed the nation with their music, arts, and literature that defined the American literary

canon as well. Monáe creates a bridge between past and present, when they pay tribute to their parents' hard work and to historical African American figures, whose impact shaped the views and identity of the Black community. These people influenced Monáe's career, moreover, in "Django Jane," each person represents their own ways of dealing with anger.

For instance, the "fled to Paris / In the darkest hours, spoke truth to power?" (Monáe 2018) part may refer to author James Baldwin, who was not only vilified for his skin color, but also for his sexual orientation. Instead of letting anger poison his soul, Baldwin decided to distance himself from the judgment of the American society and fled to Paris, where he put his thoughts about racism and homophobia into words. Contrary to Baldwin, she wants to stay in the US and keep fighting for her rights. Monáe understands those individuals, who choose fleeing as a tool of escaping racism. Additionally, Monáe is aware of the fact that each individual copes with traumas and difficulties differently and thus they do not want to determine one good solution against anger and hatred. They let their audience to experience their boundaries and individual path to healing. Years later, Baldwin returned to the US to preach against the senseless hatred and unite the American society through encouraging his white and Black audience to welcome each other as "brothers" and "sisters" with love because they belong together through the shared history. He notes:

No one in the world—in the entire world—knows more—knows Americans better or, odd as this may sound, loves them more than the American Negro. This is because he has had to watch you, outwit you, deal with you, and bear you, and sometimes even bleed and die with you, ever since we got here, that is, since both of us, black and white, got here—and this is a wedding. Whether I like it or not, or whether you like it or not, we are bound together forever. We are part of each other. ("In Search of a Majority: An Address")

Baldwin argues that the white and Black American have an unconditional love between each other as they have always coexisted since the creation of the American nation. Although I believe that the absence of this type of sense of togetherness is only a part of the issue, the American institution was founded on systematic racism.

Next, Monáe turns to another figure: "Who twist the plot? / Who shot the sheriff" (Monáe 2018). It is a reference to reggae king's, Bob Marley's "I Shot the Sheriff," being one of the most powerful criticisms of the American criminal justice system, law enforcement and corruption, explaining how the dominant culture



has the power to create a false narrative. By asking “Who twist the plot?,” Monáe holds a mirror against the dominant culture that frames the main narrative. In consequence of this, Monáe encourages white listeners to a form of self-criticism. In Marley’s song, the narrator tells his story about how he killed a corrupt sheriff in self-defense and was later framed as the murderer by the white society<sup>17</sup>. Instead of accepting the dominant narrative and living out his life as a monster, Marley’s character chooses to share his story and call attention to racial injustice<sup>18</sup>. The Marley-reference can also be applied to the problem of police brutality against non-white ethnicities, which is gaining more and more attention in the mainstream media and through the Black Lives Matter movement. Police brutality reappears in “Crazy, Classic, Life,” condemning gun violence and police brutality by drawing a parallel between police and Rambo, both famous for their overly militaristic nature and violence.

#### **4.2 “DON’T JUDGE ME”: SEXUAL AND SPIRITUAL LIBERATION THROUGH SELF-LOVE, QUEERNESS AND VULNERABILITY**

Self-love is just as significant on the album as communal love<sup>19</sup> for the healing process of individuals. Monáe demonstrates this concept in “Don’t Judge Me” which strikes a more intimate tone and Monáe opens up about their personal life, identity crisis and sexuality. They used to be a prisoner of their own body and mind, trying hard to fit into the society but after a while they realized that they do not want to spend their life being a disguise. In “Don’t Judge Me,” they establish a connection between spiritual and sexual liberation. Firstly, they abandon all toxic social expectations about sexuality; then they get intimate with their identity, discover the hidden parts of their spirit, befriend with themselves, appreciate their being as it is and lastly, the healing process begins. In the song, Monáe asks the

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17 Richard Wright’s *Native Son* carries a similar idea: the dominant culture’s power lies within the capability of creating and then enforcing a new narrative. In Wright’s case, the “murderer” lets the narrative define him, while Marley’s character resists this idea.

18 While doing a research on Marley’s song, I came across a Medium article based on a 2011 documentary about the singer, titled *Bob Marley: The Making of a Legend*, where one of his ex-girlfriends, Esther Anderson, explains that the song was inspired by the ongoing argument between her and Marley about birth control. Marley allegedly viewed birth control as a sin. This interpretation of the song would go against Monáe’s feminism; therefore, I believe that she was not aware of Marley’s values.

19 *The New Psychology of Love* defines communal love as a term that “encompasses a number of different relationships without necessarily defining their nature. It may be present in friendships as well as in love between relatives or married couples” (Strenberg & Weis 320). Here, the shared experience connects the individuals and keeps love alive.

listener to let them start from a blank page and disparate view, as they says, “Let’s reintroduce ourselves, from a free point of view” (Monáe 2018), to show their real, uncensored side because they have nothing to hide anymore.

Firstly, even though Monáe does not openly state in the song, they have finally found their freedom through her self-love. Monáe becomes an independent, free self and learns self-appreciation. Here, anger and hatred are in connection with the self and not the system. Seeing distorted images and being rejected by the society for being the Other can result in self-hatred. Before Monáe’s guide to self-acceptance, sexual, racial and gender minorities lived in their own mental prison, where they were controlled by dogmas. They hid their identity behind a mask and tried to comply with socially constructed norms in order to feel visible. The unhealthy expectation of heteropatriarchy had defined the identity of many, although now, individuals focus on their feelings and they choose to prioritize their happiness to become visible. They learn how to appreciate their uniqueness and reinterpret their societal role. When one lets go of expectations and chooses free self-expression, they become spiritually and physically free. They learn how to resist, how to allow the self to discover itself and accept the endless possibilities of one’s identity. Monáe’s main message is to let the vulnerable and honest side come to the surface, endeavor to be a human. Dare to resist social norms because expectations are only mental obstacles and force everyone to suppress their real self. It requires an exceptional power to face one’s fears and it is essential in order to find one’s real identity.

Even though the singer has always had a unique relationship with their audience<sup>20</sup>, up until *Dirty Computer* they were rather silent about their personal life. The fans knew about Monáe’s family background and their struggle to gain recognition in a critical white society, but very little about their sexual orientation, which led to many speculations in the past. For instance, Monáe’s androgynous style and their “trademark”, the black and white, clean cut tuxedo with a bowtie is supposed to be a form of tribute that they pay to their parents’ hard work and resistance towards heteronormativity’s idea about gendered clothes. Thinking with a heteronormative individual’s head, a woman wearing “manly” clothes denotes one’s gayness; and thus, people were debating wherever Monáe was attracted to women too<sup>21</sup>. With

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20 To me, this deep connection is especially visible in her “Cold War” video where she is naked (Monáe expresses her openness towards the listener by becoming vulnerable), looks deep into the camera and opens up about her fears.

21 At first, even Monáe thought that she was bisexual but after doing a research, she identified herself as a pansexual woman. Pansexuality is a “genderless” and biological “sexless” attraction so the person can be attracted to everyone, including transgenders, genderqueers, intersexuals, etc. Pansexuality and bisexuality may appear very similar and there is an overlap between the two terms. Bisexuality is defined as attraction to two or more genders, while pansexuality refers to ALL genders.

this comes the great pressure of trying to define herself and fit into a category<sup>22</sup> to find their place in the society.

Monáe refers to the anger of being in a forced disguise when they sing, “Taste my fear and light your candle to my raging fire / Of broken desire” (Monáe 2018). They express their anger which can be traced back to the toxic expectations of heteronormativity. Since Monáe felt that they cannot fit into the “ideal” image of sexual orientation, they suppressed their desires and started questioning their feelings for a long time. Coming to terms with one’s sexuality is essential in the individual’s identity development and a difficult, but deep emotional, psychological and spiritual journey for most people. Outcomes may vary, though acceptance or denial are amongst the two most common. One cannot judge those, who refuse to admit the truth to themselves. Some individuals are aware of the consequences of a “coming out” process and thus, they are desperately trying to conform to the socially constructed images and fit into the heteronormative society in order to avoid rejection. This creates a type of mental boundary in many people who are trying to come to terms with their sexual identity. Additionally, queerphobia or the internalization of queerphobia complicates individuals’ self-accepting process which may eventually result in self-destructive behavior (McDermott et al. 817). Just like many people before or even nowadays, Monáe also had their own journey with their sexuality, but they decided to celebrate themselves and the queer community. Nonetheless, they mention that being open is not always a fairy tale.

The lyrics goes, “Even though you tell me you love me / I’m afraid that you just love my disguise” (Monáe 2018). Monáe becomes vulnerable and opens up about the fear of being rejected. Their fear of abandonment by their partners, who will not accept their true self, only the constructed image that the other one knows, the disguise that hides Monáe’s real identity. The doubts and fears are closely connected to Monáe’s mental health. They suffer from anxiety disorder so in many cases their mental illness holds them back from experiencing the joy of life. Instead, they are constantly focused on their fear of being vulnerable, falling in love, loving themselves and forgiving those, who hurt them. Having anxiety disorder can mean limited existence, feeling less connected to the world, distancing the mind from the body. While everything seems dynamic, the individual is just incapable of moving forward due to the weight of their fears and doubts. It is like an eternal detention, bereft of finally exhaling. Monáe had dealt with similar issues and they were desperate to gain control over their life. Eventually, Monáe came to

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22 Monáe denies the idea of categorization; therefore, it can also be viewed as a form of resistance towards society’s expectations. In “Q.U.E.E.N.”, for instance, she sings, “Categorize me I defy every label” (Monáe 2013).

the conclusion that vulnerability is more likely a power than a weakness. “Don’t Judge Me” tells the story of how heteronormativity forced Monáe to repress their sexual desires for too long and how they have finally escaped their cage through overcoming their fears.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is wrong to assume that there always has to be a parallel between anger and violence. Excessive anger indeed can result in verbal or physical abuse, although another perspective about anger suggests that it may serve as a tool to give voice to the frustrations of mistreatment and injustice, bringing the “wind of change”; and motivating individuals to come up with solutions. Many find it easier to hide behind labeling anger violent because it threatens their ideologies and confronts them with reality. The essay pointed out that in case of racial and gender minorities, anger is often misinterpreted and confused with aggression, while it is only a way to say “enough”. In this case, anger does not wish to bring more hatred and hurt others; it is just simply “spitting the truth”. Through Fanon, it was demonstrated that violence can also be a liberating power for minorities because it helps them regain their dignity and self-respect. Black women respond with rage to their simultaneous misogynoir of racism and sexism. Therefore, people should put aside their socially determined meaning of rage and anger and approach the definitions from a disparate point of view.

*Dirty Computer* is an extremely complex work and a very intimate experience at the same time through the eyes of a racial, sexual and gender minority. Monáe shows how through art it is possible to channel one’s emotions, fears and anger, while finding love and peace. They never say, however, that it is going to be an easy task for the listeners. Their album is for both sides: for the marginalized community, it is a guide of survival and healing. It is a mirror for the privileged to see themselves and the damage caused by their “exceptionality”. Monáe asks everyone to listen to each other, as it is the only way to understand the situation of the unprivileged. Through paying attention and trying to understand comes empathy with love. Monáe refuses to be devalued or have their pride taken away from them. Even though they are hurt and humiliated, their extraordinariness lies within their magic, strong spirit, identity, and these are possessions that no one can acquire without experiencing pure love. Monáe turns hatred into love, using love to reclaim their pride and weaponizes the tools of the dominant culture which once constructed Monáe’s identity. Thus, at the end of the album the listener is left with a liberated and loving being in Monáe’s character while also having a deeper insight into the marginalized experience.

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