

***The Memory Librarian and Other Stories of Dirty Computer***

By Janelle Monáe. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2022. 321 pp. Hardcover [also EPUB]. \$28.99. Hardcover ISBN 978-0063070875.

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In April 2022, my smartphone newsfeed turned up an article about Janelle Monáe, an eight-time Grammy-nominated singer/songwriter, who had just published her debut book of fiction, *The Memory Librarian and Other Stories of Dirty Computer*. I was excited that a celebrity had authored a book with “librarian” in the title! The phrase “Dirty Computer” piqued my imagination as well. I envisioned an archivist seated at her workstation, screening born-digital content for computer viruses. What I found instead was a collection of short stories about a dystopian society, a mysterious librarian named Seshet, and a foreboding “Repository.”

While best known for her music, Monáe is also a film actor, fashion designer, and social justice activist for Black and LGBTQ+ communities. As a long-time science fiction fan, she drew inspiration from the classic film *Metropolis* for her first full-length studio album.<sup>1</sup> In 2018, her *Dirty Computer* album earned critical acclaim for its pop funk sound, drawing comparisons to Beyoncé and Prince.<sup>2</sup> In an accompanying 45-minute musical sci-fi film *Dirty Computer [Emotion Picture]*, Monáe appears as Jane57821, fighting for survival and sexual liberation in a society that hates outsiders.<sup>3</sup> *The Memory Librarian* expands on themes from *Dirty Computer [Emotion Picture]* and presents five stories coauthored with sci-fi/fantasy writers Yohanca Delgado, Eve L. Ewing, Alaya Dawn Johnson, Danny Lore, and Sheree Renee Thomas.

Though the Repository looms in the background of all five stories, Director Librarian Seshet’s story in Chapter One offers the most significant insight into the role of librarianship in the book’s imagined future. In this chapter, the authoritarian regime New Dawn is ascendant across North America. With immense high-tech

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<sup>1</sup> Aja Romano, “Janelle Monáe’s Body of Work Is a Masterpiece of Modern Science Fiction,” *Vox*, May 16, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/platform/amp/2018/5/16/17318242/janelle-monae-science-fiction-influences-afrofuturism>.

<sup>2</sup> Jon Parales and Jon Caramanica, “The 28 Best Albums of 2018,” *New York Times*, December 6, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/06/arts/music/best-albums.html>; Kerra L. Bolton, “Beyoncé and Janelle Monáe Are Creating a New Language of Black Womanhood,” *CNN*, May 2, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/02/opinions/beyonce-and-janelle-monae-transform-us-kerra-bolton-opinion/index.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Janelle Monáe, *Dirty Computer [Emotion Picture]*, May 7, 2018, <https://vimeo.com/268498567>.

capabilities, New Dawn builds power by surveilling human beings—called “dirty computers”—and then transforming them into “clean computers” through repeated memory wipes. The Standards Police frequently raids house parties, blasting a memory-extracting gas called Nevermind to “bust heads” (p. 52). New Dawn uses a variety of systems to acquire memories. Drone-based weapons silently pick up memories from crowds in public places. Individuals with lower social statuses occasionally sell memories for currency at ATM-like machines. Using propaganda strategically, the regime offers employment and other social goods to attract support. It can be inferred that New Dawn does not preserve information from people’s heads for neutral purposes. Because memories clearly have value in the New Dawn economy, authorities mine them, perhaps for commercial gain or security. Upon relinquishing their memories, humans gradually become more “clean,” computerized, and tractable.

Seshet, the Memory Librarian and main character in this chapter, is a Black queer woman (like other characters throughout the book), and one of the few Black women in positions of authority in the city of Little Delta. She oversees the ingest of memories from Little Delta’s clean and less-than-clean “computers” into the Repository, while supervising deputies and negotiating with superiors in a bureaucracy rife with politics and secrets. The Repository has the technology to download human memories as if they were electronic data. According to New Dawn protocol, Director Librarian Seshet must regularly turn over her own memories to the regime. As a high-ranking administrator, though, she receives certain perks like a personal robot assistant, who offers her access to some of her own history. She can also view other people’s memories as she carries out her official duties. Seshet has served in this role for ten years and is “the eye in the obelisk, the Director Librarian, the ‘queen’ of Little Delta” (p. 1). While working on a special assignment to investigate a suspicious increase in the number of “junk memories” flooding the system, Seshet begins to question her loyalty to the Repository and the nature of her relationships with family members, other librarians, and a new lover.

In fiction and history, dictatorships manipulate language to disguise abusive behavior. By assigning high-ranking officials the title of librarian, New Dawn appropriates librarianship—a public service profession—for brutal purposes. Librarianship is not the only repurposed occupation in *The Memory Librarian*. “Counselors” hold private memory-extracting sessions, “diagnosing emotional liabilities, selecting the memories for repression or amplification, reveling in the messy, subtle work of realigning a personality” (p. 30). Their job is to gather high-quality products for the librarians. With librarians at the top of the New Dawn hierarchy, the regime prioritizes orderliness and cleanliness, as exemplified by the fastidious librarian image.

In the Repository, most high-ranking librarians are white men, in contrast to the stereotypical white woman librarian. As a Black woman, Seshet often finds herself isolated and overworked. Not knowing whom to trust, she avoids companionship, suppresses her sexuality, and denies herself a satisfying private life—a nod to the

spinster librarian stereotype. During a positive performance review, Seshet's superior, Arch-Librarian Terry, tells her with unintended irony, "You've proven the New Dawn ethos. 'Order, Standards, and Merit above all' . . . You're Merit, of course" (p. 49). Though the Repository claims to be a meritocracy, Seshet's standing is tenuous, and she must tread carefully with a Vice Director Librarian from a powerful opposing faction who would love to see her "flagged for suspected deviance" (p. 29). Institutionalized racism advances New Dawn's goals and extends beyond library walls. As New Dawn's most important institution, the Repository is instrumental to the regime's policies that disproportionately target Black people and other marginalized communities for spying, raids, and arrests.

In film and other media, librarians are often portrayed as ineffectual stooges with little power. In *New Dawn*, librarians are high in the power structure, but they have limited agency, as their own memories and thought processes have been warped due to the regime's memory-wiping protocols. Another familiar stereotype in our popular culture is the misanthropic or evil librarian, recognizable throughout cinematic history (and even satirized in the 2010s television series *Parks and Recreation*). If Seshet—rumored to be "kinder than most of [the librarians]" (p. 42)—were to eventually oppose New Dawn, she would be a hero and a welcome contradiction to the stereotype. However, this book leaves Seshet's future a mystery, and it will take a sequel to discover what happens to her. It remains to be seen if there is redemption for Seshet or anyone else in the Repository.

By collecting human memories, the Repository in *New Dawn* systematically invades people's privacy. While privacy rights in our society have long been compromised, it isn't a library or repository but rather high-tech and other corporate entities that repurpose consumer data, converting our browsing history, clicks, and strokes into revenue dollars. Meanwhile, librarians and archivists have long upheld the right to privacy, including in the digital age. Archivists maintain users' privacy, protecting any personal information collected about users, in accordance with their institutions' policies. In addition, archivists establish procedures to protect the privacy rights of collection donors and persons and entities documented in archival collections.<sup>4</sup> Unlike big tech, archives and libraries are committed to user privacy and have no financial incentive or professional interest in repurposing data. While this book does not capture the role of archivists in guarding the rights to privacy, it does illuminate the vulnerabilities of an information-based society when subjected to nefarious authorities.

Through the regime's project to make people more like computers, the chapter offers a commentary on our contemporary information society. In *New Dawn*, people with intact memories are "dirty," while those who have had their memories manipulated are "clean." New Dawn's dedication to "clean data" obscures its violence toward humanity. In fusing high-tech industry with the powers of an evil

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<sup>4</sup> "SAA Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics," *Society of American Archivists*, last modified August 6, 2020. <https://www2.archivists.org/statements/saa-core-values-statement-and-code-of-ethics>.

state, the regime creates a totalitarian system that obliterates human rights. In our culture, librarians and archivists strive to use technology to build a more equitable and open society. This book serves as a reminder that with the wrong people in charge, these same technologies can and do divide us. While it would have been nice if the Repository had better represented archival ethics and values, Mon e's dystopia presents the ways in which a society can go wrong when these values are not in place.