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Megan E. Fourqurean

This article considers multi-authorship as a mode of literary activism in two recent Afrofuturist texts: *The Deep* (2019) by Rivers Solomon and music group *clipping.*, and *The Memory Librarian and Other Stories of Dirty Computer* (2022) by Janelle Monáe and their collaborators. In this article, I expand my discussion of multi-authorship to include both texts' political and artistic legacies as part of their authorial collectives. In doing so, I posit three central arguments: first, that both texts explore the potential for collaborative literary production as a means of resisting creative authority. Second, that *The Deep* and *The Memory Librarian and Other Stories of Dirty Computer* deploy intertextual references to Afrofuturist artistic genealogies and racial justice movements as a form of collective authorship and communal memory. Third, that collaborative storytelling has the potential to contest singular readings both within the narrative and between text and audience. The purpose of examining these texts' multiple authorship and intertextuality is to position *The Deep* and *The Memory Librarian* within wider racial justice movements as forms of literary activism that seek to enact social change through invocations of communal memory and collective engagement.

Keywords: Afrofuturism; racial justice; collaborative writing; authorship; literary activism

Introduction

This article examines collaborative writing and intertextuality as viable modes of literary activism in two multi-authored texts: *The Deep* (2019) by Rivers Solomon, Daveed Diggs, William Hutson, and Jonathan Snipes; and *The Memory Librarian and Other Stories of Dirty Computer* (2022) (henceforth *The Memory Librarian*) by Janelle Monáe, Alaya Dawn Johnson, Danny Lore, Eve L. Ewing, Yohanca Delgado, and Sheree Renée Thomas. I argue that both texts destabilise singular notions of the author-genius in order to assert collective Afrofuturist visions of transgenerational healing and racial justice. I begin by considering authorship in relation to modernity, the transatlantic slave trade, and racial oppression. I suggest these historical contexts, in conversation with Roland Barthes's influential essay 'The Death of the Author' and Barbara Christian's critique in 'The Race for Theory,' offer a means for navigating authorship and authority in both *The Deep* and *The Memory Librarian*. In this article, I partly employ Barthes' notion of the text as 'made of multiple writings […] and entering into mutual relations of dialogue' (Barthes 1977: 148). However, rather than positing a passive author, I consider writers and their artistic, cultural and historical legacies as co-authors who collectively produce the text. In other words, the 'authors' are not only the individuals who write the book, but the text's '*context of intelligibility*: that configuration of potentiality in a given moment and place that impels and shapes the work and makes possible its emergence into meaning' (Etherington and Zimbler, quoted in Krishnan 2020: 296; original emphasis). My reading thus

seeks to mediate between Barthes' emphasis on the reader as a text's unifying agency (Barthes 1977: 148) and Barbara Christian's critique of authorial death in light of the obstacles which women and authors of colour face (Christian 1987: 56). I suggest that multiple authorship can help negotiate the tension between authorial erasure and visibility, particularly for Black, female, and queer writers. I extend this consideration of multiple authorship across networks of Afrofuturist music, Black liberation movements, and twentieth-century histories of racial injustice through 'detailed attention to the literary text … [and] the larger material apparatus, broadly defined, from which it arises' (Krishnan 2020: 298). I suggest that reading both the text's 'internal' narrative elements as well as its 'external' functions and interrelations can offer valuable insight into the literary activist dimensions of highly intertextual works such as *The Deep* and *The Memory Librarian* (Krishnan 2020: 295). In producing fictional narratives that draw upon real-world, transgenerational efforts of Black artists and leaders, *The Deep* and *The Memory Librarian* converse with past and present racial justice movements. Further-more, their activist dimensions extend beyond the text by provoking deeper engagements among diverse audiences. This mode of intertextual activism emerges through online responses to each text on the popular reading platform Goodreads. I argue that reader reviews demonstrate inter-audience responses to, and discussions of, past and present racial injustices in the context of potential future liberation.

In his essay, 'The Death of the Author,' Roland Barthes locates meaning in a text's fabric of contexts and anonymized reader rather than the singular author's expression (Barthes 1977: 146, 148). Michel Foucault's response, 'What is an Author?' further reconceptualises the author-figure as a function rather than an individual (Foucault 1984). Though this article employs elements of Barthes' and Foucault's ideas regarding a text's cultural production and the reader's role in producing meaning, I do not intend to rehash this deeply contested territory. Instead, I want to briefly consider how multi-authored texts by Black writers might engage with critical frameworks that seek to remove the author. In her work on Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Anita Durkin problematises authorial death in relation to Black American writing:

> Morrison … suggests a mode of African American authorship that directly challenges both the absence of African Americans in works by white American authors and contemporary literary the-ories (namely, Barthes's 'The Death of the Author') that insist on the neutrality of the space of writing. In so doing, Morrison … posits the possibility of reading African American literature 'on its own terms,' according to its own conventions. (Durkin 2007: 542)

Here, Durkin emphasises reading Morrison and other Black authors 'on their own terms' rather than within frameworks of authorial neutrality. Durkin further notes 'the critical folly of reading texts by African American authors through the same theoretical scopes […] applied to the study of literature by whites' (Durkin 2007: 542). In other words, we cannot read Mor-rison's writing without considering her as a Black American author. Bearing in mind the speci-ficity that Durkin stresses, I consider how we might read multi-authored texts such as *The Deep* and *The Memory Librarian* on their own terms and within longer collective histories of Black artistic and political resistance. By foregrounding multi-authorship, Solomon, Monáe, and their co-authors challenge the notion of authority, which Barthes (and later Foucault) also pro-blematise. However, where Barthes and Foucault identify the author as a product of modernity even as they overlook the fraught relationship between modernity, capitalism, slavery, and racial injustice (Scott 2004), *The Deep* and *The Memory Librarian* emphasise these relation-ships through wider artistic contexts. So, how might one unseat the author, not as a wholesale rejection of the 'Author-God' (Barthes 1977: 146), but to foreground the histories of chattel slavery and racial injustice underpinning the capitalist modernity that has historically rendered

Black subjectivities unknown and ostensibly unknowable? One possible answer is to consider alternative modes of literary production, such as multi-authorship, as a challenge to the binary between a singular author and the deconstructed author-figure. In doing so, we might mediate between Barthes' and Foucault's scepticism of the author as sole source of authority and Christian's and Durkin's necessity for conspicuous authorship among female (and queer) writers of colour. Despite participating in commercial publishing, which partly relies on marketable authorial figures to increase profits (Ohlsson et al. 2014: 32–33), the texts in this article nonetheless challenge the author-figure by devolving creative authority amongst individual co-authors and collective histories of Black resistance. At the same time, Solomon, Monáe, and their collaborators resist complete authorial erasure by asserting their own roles in the writing process. To demonstrate this careful balance between authority and authorship, I want to turn now to the artistic and political legacies of the two multi-authored texts in this article: *The Deep* and *The Memory Librarian*.

'Artistic Telephone': Collaborative Authorship as Resistant Co-creation

The Deep is a novella co-authored by Rivers Solomon, Daveed Diggs, William Hutson, and Jonathan Snipes, while *The Memory Librarian* is a collection of short stories by Janelle Monáe, Alaya Dawn Johnson, Danny Lore, Eve L. Ewing, Yohanca Delgado, and Sheree Renée Thomas. Both texts present Afrofuturist visions of Black collective futurity, which echo their collaborative production. In the afterword to *The Deep*, the music group *clipping.* (which includes Diggs, Hutson, and Snipes) describes the creative process as 'a game of artistic Telephone' (Solomon et al. 2019: 157). The group explains that Telephone, a game in which a phrase is whispered from one player to the next, is 'usually deployed to illustrate how signal accumulates noise, how transduction degrades information, how truth becomes fiction when it's passed along as gossip' (Solomon et al. 2019: 157). However, *clipping.* notes that distortion 'is a *feature* of Telephone, not its failure' (Solomon et al. 2019: 157; original emphasis). This description encapsulates how collaborative authorship might challenge authority and the figure of the singular author-genius. *clipping.*, whose background lies in rap and hip hop, explain that their collective approach was a response to the 'fiercely independent authorship presumed in rap lyrics' (Solomon et al. 2019: 160). As part of this response, *clipping.* worked with writer Rivers Solomon to develop the novella from *clipping.*'s own song 'The Deep,' itself inspired by 1990s Detroit techno group Drexciya. In explaining this process, *clipping.* undermines assumptions of linear creation by describing a mode of adaptation that alters both past and future artistic works: 'It's a retelling that reaches back to the materials it adapts, and complicates them; makes them better. In this sense, Rivers has coauthored our song in as profound a way as we have inspired this book' (Solomon et al. 2019: 162). This model treats the text as unstable, with each iteration acting upon the others despite the years, even decades, separating them.

Similarly, Janelle Monáe in her[1] acknowledgements to *The Memory Librarian* thanks their co-authors for 'taking ownership of this world in a way that I have always wanted … and [making] the stakes of these stories bigger than I would have just on my own' (Monáe et al. 2022: 316). Like *clipping.*, who produced the song that inspired *The Deep*, Monáe created the world of Dirty Computer through her 2018 concept album *Dirty Computer* and its accompanying 2019 'emotion picture' of the same name. In both cases, the musical authors *clipping.* and Monáe openly acknowledge their literary collaborators' role in creating new textual worlds while also altering the musical topographies that produced them. This multi-directional creative mode defies the 'univocal subjective tradition' of the author as 'an authoritative entity dispensing truth' (Siegle 1983: 132, 136). Instead, cross-media

adaptation and literary remixing produce a novella (*The Deep*) based on a song ('The Deep') based on a concept (Drexciya), each of which influences and is influenced by its successors and predecessors. Likewise, Monáe's collection of short stories (*The Memory Librarian*) is based on an emotion picture (*Dirty Computer*) based on an album (*Dirty Computer*). Every emergent iteration is thus the product of multiple authorship, in which no single creator has sole authority over the project.

Both books' material configurations further foreground collaborative rather than individual authorship. *The Deep*'s front cover lists both Rivers Solomon and the members of *clipping.* as authors of the published text. While Solomon's name appears first and larger than those of *clipping.*'s members, the cover nonetheless presents an authorial collective. In contrast, *The Memory Librarian* features Monáe's name, image and album name on the front cover, thus positioning her as the 'hook' through which the text is 'given distinctiveness and marketed' (Gunkel 2012: 76). However, the book's back cover undermines exclusive single authorship by explicitly listing each co-author 'in collaboration with' Monáe (Monáe et al. 2022: back cover). Furthermore, every even-numbered page within Monáe's book lists the co-authors for that particular story, thus reasserting its collaborative authorship. Nonetheless, we might argue that reliance on well-known figures undermines such resistance: Rivers Solomon is an award-winning writer, and Janelle Monáe is a highly acclaimed musician. A truly authorless text would perhaps be published anonymously or under a pseudonym, and it certainly would not rely on the name and image of a popular celebrity. However, this assumption overlooks the very real material conditions which might necessitate authorial presence even as the writing collective challenges authority.

Lisa Ede and Andrea A. Lunsford suggest that, while the death of the author might be productive for writers who have been prioritised within commercial publishing and literary scholarship, such is not the case for women and writers of colour. Postcolonial and feminist critics such as Barbara Christian have asked whether it is 'merely a coincidence […] that the death of the author was proclaimed just as women and scholars of color were beginning to publish' (Ede and Lunsford 2001: 355). This question, which underpins much of Christian's scepticism in her 1987 article 'The Race for Theory,' identifies the tension between epistemic moves away from the author (as evidenced by Barthes and Foucault) and 'the urgent need to recover the voices of those whose otherness denied them *author*ity' (Ede and Lunsford 2001: 355, original emphasis). Among these voices are Black writers who have struggled against American literature's 'predominant project of exclusion' (Durkin 2007: 551). Thus, I suggest that *The Deep* and *The Memory Librarian* evidence a particular mode of multi-authorship which strives to mediate between two poles. Devolved authority across multiple figures enables each authorial assemblage to enact a collective literary process; however, retaining their names within the collective allows Solomon, Monáe, and their respective collaborators to resist 'the anonymity of a murmur,' which the author-figure's withdrawal necessitates (Foucault 1984: 120). Authors, largely white and male, whom literary studies have largely prioritised as the emblem of the author-genius may be less disadvantaged by this anonymity. However, Christian argues that both the prior valorisation of authorship and the more recent abandonment of the author-figure operate as means of controlling literary and critical fields (Christian 1987: 55). Women and writers of colour, two primary groups whom dominant literary practice has often excluded, must therefore strive against authorial erasure by asserting their presence in the literary landscape as part of a wider 'need to become empowered' (Christian 1987: 57, 61). I want to consider possibilities of empowerment as we move from issues of literary production to intertextuality and collective histories as modes of multi-authorship.

Afrofuturist Legacies: Intertextuality as Collective Memory

Barbara Christian argues that empowerment in literature 'is partially derived from a knowledge of history' (Christian 1987: 61). In contrast to Barthes's writer – '[a] mere vessel through which their narratives ooze' – Christian argues for the deliberate 'reclamation of Afro-American history and culture' (Christian 1987: 56, 61). I want to follow Christian's lead by considering the activist possibilities available in texts that foreground their sociopolitical contexts. Barthes suggests that in writing, 'everything is to be *disentangled*, nothing *deciphered* [...] "run" (like the thread of a stocking) at every point and at every level' (Barthes 1977: 147). While I do not posit that 'there is nothing beneath' the text (Barthes 1977: 147), I would like to explore the possibilities which emerge when we prioritise disentangling its multiple contextual threads. Indeed, I want to suggest that a disentangling reading might reveal the activist dimensions of texts such as *The Deep* and *The Memory Librarian*, which interweave their narratives with references to longer histories of racial injustice and resistance. These extratextual aspects produce a broader vision of the long-standing struggles for liberation. Moreover, I argue that these dense intertextual networks serve as another form of multiple authorship, in which the text's predecessors become its ancestral co-authors.

Let us begin our work of disentanglement with *The Deep*. Extensive work has examined the artistic lineage that gave rise to this novella, so I will only provide a brief outline. In 1990s Detroit, techno duo Drexciya developed an underwater civilisation and mythology of the same name. James Stinson and Gerald Donald, who comprise Drexciya, conceived of Drexciyan society as 'an underwater country populated by the unborn children of pregnant African women thrown off of slave ships during the middle passage who had learned to breathe underwater in their mother's wombs' (Gaskins 2016: 68–9). This mythology inspired rap group *clipping.*, who created their song 'The Deep' as an extension of Drexciya's mythology (Wang 2023: 351). Though *clipping.*'s 'The Deep' never uses the term 'Drexciyan,' the track retells Drexciya's origin myth, including their traumatic emergence and impending conflict with humans. *clipping.* further expands on these origins when the unnamed (presumably Drexciyan) narrator explains that '[w]ith cannons, [humans] searched for oil beneath our cities. Their greed and recklessness forced our uprising' (*clipping.* 2017). Just as *clipping.* develops Drexciya's earlier mythology by instantiating the conflict at which Drexciya only hints, Rivers Solomon builds on the track 'The Deep' by problematising *clipping.*'s utopic vision of collectivity. Though this lineage appears straightforward, Longyan Wang productively complicates it by considering a longer history of Middle Passage representations. According to Wang, 'the layers of Drexciyan mythology' lie in 'numerous newspapers and legal documents from the 18th and 19th centuries, as well as monographs from the 20th and 21st centuries,' including scholarly texts, literary fiction, and legal proceedings (Wang 2023: 335).

However, this broad genealogy culminates in a surprisingly simple formulation of *The Deep*'s origins. Wang concludes that the 'music by Drexciya and Clipping [*sic*] constitutes the hypotext, the primary or source or adapted text, while Solomon's novella, coming chronologically after both groups' music, is the hypertext, the derived, transformed, and secondary text' (Wang 2023: 356). Though this assessment is objectively accurate – Drexciya and *clipping.* do precede *The Deep* – it also strangely collapses temporal distance. There are only two years between *clipping.*'s song 'The Deep' (2017) and the multi-authored novella *The Deep* (2019), whereas Drexciya's first album *The Quest* came out in 1997, a full twenty years before *clipping.*'s track. What, then, should we do with this decades-long gap? I suggest that rather than trying to collapse time on the basis of artistic likeness as Wang does, we might productively extend the timeframe even further and afford as much consideration to the lineages that produced Drexciya as we do to those that produced *The Deep*. If we expand our scope beyond Drexciya, we can trace

the sedimented histories of racial injustice and liberatory imagination, which Wang's valuable yet selective timeline overlooks. I want to mark these layers through two divergent threads: the first is Drexciya's Afrofuturist influences. The second is The Great Migration, which Drexciya references in their first album's liner notes. Both threads converge on the institutionalised racial injustices of the Jim Crow system in the American South, itself a legacy of the transatlantic slave trade. I argue that by bringing together these two currents – artistic and historical – Solomon and *clipping*. invoke both collective memories of injustice and broader histories of empowerment.

If we recall, Drexciya emerged from Detroit's burgeoning techno scene and released their first album in the 1990s, twenty years before *clipping*.'s track 'The Deep.' Interestingly, Drexciya's own artistic inspiration predates their 1997 album *The Quest* by almost exactly twenty years as well. In 1978, George Clinton's collective Parliament-Funkadelic (P-Funk) released *Motor Booty Affair*. This album, which builds on P-Funk's pre-existing work, 'continues a story in which the ocean is a realm where the life of Middle Passage survivors continues, and where the African Diaspora is united in rhythm and music' (Gaskins 2016: 70). Clinton's underwater Black utopia would later heavily impact Drexciya's own development, as evidenced by the Drexciyans' similar mythological origins. Both Drexciya and P-Funk use Afrofuturist imaginaries to 'eschew the idea of universal humanity at the centre of Western Enlightenment thought' by positing themselves as beings beyond the human itself (Rollefson 2008: 89). As J. Griffith Rollefson notes, '[f]or the Afrofuturists, [the] universal humanity that was so long denied to black Americans has proven itself a conception so thoroughly encoded as white that it is best left disregarded' (Rollefson 2008: 89). In constructing underwater worlds that operate entirely apart from land-based civilisations, Drexciya and P-Funk discard the universal humanity from which they have already been racially excluded.

If we rewind a further twenty years from P-Funk's 1970s aquatic imaginary, we arrive at yet another formative moment: the advent of Afrofuturism itself. Sun Ra, credited with inventing Afrofuturist music in the 1950s, also sought to sidestep the 'irrational system of racialized hierarchies that inform post-Enlightenment thinking' by insisting that he was, in fact, from Saturn (Rollefson 2008: 89). This removed him not only from hierarchies of Black and white but also exempted him from the limitations of the human race altogether (Rollefson 2008: 93–4). Like Clinton, Sun Ra refused humanity based on the material realities that circumscribed Black life in America. Ra was intimately familiar with the 'spatial restrictions on Black Americans during Jim Crow segregation and […] the psychic and material toll anti-Black racism takes on the imagination and consciousness of Black people' (Keeling 2017: 200). By asserting his extraterrestrial origins, Sun Ra imagined a spatial configuration that opened up possibilities for Black life beyond the confines of institutionalised racism. Thus, Sun Ra in the 1950s contributed to the advent of Afrofuturism, leading P-Funk in the 1970s to imagine an underwater utopia, which Drexciya builds upon in the 1990s, *clipping*. In 2017, Drexciya expands on this concept, while Solomon problematises it in 2019. This artistic lineage not only links the 2019 novella *The Deep* with Afrofuturist musical experimentation in the 1950s, but also provides an avenue for thinking art in relation to history and activism. Elizabeth Hamilton defines Afrofuturism as 'a mechanism for understanding the real world situations of oppression in the contemporary world in the context of the ever-present past' (Hamilton 2017: 19). This relationship between past and present is not simply a static timeline upon which we might chart modernity's 'progress' (or lack thereof). Instead, Afrofuturism challenges the division between past and present to complicate an idealised post-racial future by retaining the visceral memory of previous and ongoing racial injustices.

Afrofuturism, including that of Sun Ra and P-Funk, imagines Black futurity in the face of 'colonialism and apartheid, slavery and Jim Crow, and legacies of displacement' (Hamilton

2017: 18). Jim Crow in particular plays a role in both Drexciya's and *The Deep*'s narrative formations. In the liner notes for *The Quest*, Drexciya outline their mythological origins through four pathways of movement, one of which is 'Migration Route of Rural Blacks to Northern Cities.' This pathway references the Great Migration, which took place from 1900 to 1970, when 'approximately 6 million blacks migrated from the South to the North' due to 'Jim Crow laws and […] reduced labor market opportunities' (Eriksson 2018: 526). This migration was a direct result of socioeconomic and racial injustices levelled against Black Southerners following the American Civil War. Jim Crow laws targeted every facet of Black lives, cultivating an atmosphere of violent oppression that precipitated the mass movement of Black families from the American South to Midwestern cities, including Detroit (Tolnay et al. 2018: 15–16). By referencing this migration in their introduction to Drexciya, Stinson and Donald forge a direct link between both centuries-old traumas of the transatlantic slave trade and more recent state-sanctioned racial violence. Solomon et al. echo these histories in their novella *The Deep* when the protagonist's love interest, Oori, reveals that she too has been permanently displaced from her homeland (Solomon et al. 2019: 92). This displacement recalls both the abductions of the transatlantic slave trade as well as the ostensibly voluntary but ultimately coerced Great Migration. This mass migration was partly responsible for the city of Detroit's distinctive 'Motown sound,' which attracted musicians such as George Clinton and gave rise to Drexciya (Gaskins 2016: 72). In expanding our vision beyond straightforward lineages, we thus begin to perceive the complex network of relations that gave rise to and, in many ways, co-authored *The Deep*.

We can trace several of the same lineages in Janelle Monáe et al.'s *The Memory Librarian*. While *The Deep* finds its primary orientation in Drexciya's discography, *The Memory Librarian* inhabits Janelle Monáe's dystopian Afrofuturist world as formulated in their 2018 album *Dirty Computer* and its accompanying 2019 'emotion picture' of the same name. We can draw a clear line from *The Memory Librarian* (2022), the literary text, to *Dirty Computer* (2019), the cinematic text, to *Dirty Computer* (2018), the musical text. However, from here the lineage becomes both more complicated and more interesting. Much of the work on Monáe's musical and political influences thus far follows two distinct avenues: first (and again), George Clinton's Afrofuturist influences; and second, the aesthetic traces of Prince's mentorship in Monáe's albums *Metropolis* and *Dirty Computer* (Vernallis et al. 2019: 258). This approach positions Clinton as Monáe's political influence, and Prince as her artistic one. However, doing so overlooks Prince's own politics and its echoes in Monáe's musical and literary work. For example, Daylanne K. English and Alvin Kim argue that Monáe 'honors, yet also expands upon, earlier forms of Afrofuturistic funk, most obviously that of George Clinton and Parliament-Funkadelic' (English and Kim 2013: 217). While Clinton maintained an exclusively male focus, Monáe's oeuvre emphasises the artist's queer, working class, feminist priorities (Hassler-Forest 2022). Nonetheless, there is no disputing the fact that both Monáe's artistic work, particularly her artist's collective, the WondaLand Arts Society, 'owes a great deal to Clinton and P-Funk, itself an artist's collective of its time' (English and Kim 2013: 228). Meanwhile, Prince's aesthetic influence on Monáe is widely noted, even as his political impact remains mostly overlooked (Hassler-Forest 2022: 49–50). This gap arises from the popular assumption that Prince himself was apolitical (Vogel 2018: 7). However, a closer look at Prince's public persona and musical repertoire reveals that his work resisted not only racial injustice, but gender essentialism and capitalist exploitation. Christine Capetola notes that Prince and other 'black pop music in the 1980s helps forward Monáe's Afrocyberpunk project of using music technology to embrace a gender-inclusive black queerness' (Capetola 2019: 248). While Capetola provides insight into Monáe's place 'within a (both recent and distant) history of the black struggles that form the political-aesthetic backgrounds of [1980s Black] sonics,' I feel that a deeper examination of Prince's

own politics might help contextualise Monaé's work within specific racial and gendered justice movements (Capetola 2019: 247).

Despite assumptions that he was apolitical, Prince situated his gender and sexuality within a specifically Black activist framework. When he became embroiled in the battle with Warner Brothers over the rights to his master tape, Prince framed his resistance to capitalist exploitation within a broader history of Black liberation movements. One of his key moves in this legal battle was to renounce the name 'Prince,' which he called his 'slave name,' instead taking on 'an unpronounceable glyph of his own creation' (Royster 2013: 12). This glyph (S) combined the symbols for male and female along with a trumpet-like shape, 'suggest[ing], along with its 'unpronounceability', the insufficiency of language to capture the full spectrum of a fully emancipated, fully human self' (Royster 2013: 13). Along with his name change, the Artist Formerly Known as Prince would appear on stage with the word 'slave' written across his cheek, 'signifying his role as part of the Warner Brothers' 'plantation,' … plac[ing] himself in the history of African diasporic freedom struggles' (Royster 2013: 12–13). Prince further clarified this connection in a 2004 *Jet* magazine interview, where he stated, 'If you don't own your master tape, your master owns you … And you might as well write slave on your face too' (Prince, quoted in Royster 2013: 13). In linking his gender expression through the glyph S to his resistance against racial and capitalist exploitation, Prince declared himself unequivocally political and foreshadowed Janelle Monaé's openly political public persona decades later.

Like Prince, Monaé asserts their gender as unapologetically her own, coming out herself as a nonbinary pansexual 'free-ass motherfucker' (Mier 2022). However, Monaé too struggles to reconcile their liberatory politics with her participation in the profit-driven music industry and celebrity culture. As both herself and her alter egos Cindi Mayweather and Jane 57821, Monaé must strike 'a delicate balance between endorsing and condemning capitalism' and acknowledging 'her status as the commodified other, one who is conscious of that status and of the impossibility of decommodification, because it would in turn necessitate deactivation' (English and Kim 2013: 225, 227). Here, English and Kim identify a key tension that Monaé must navigate. Even as she envisions an inclusive future that resists the capitalist exploitation of poor, Black and working-class people, Monaé must perform within the exploitative entertainment industry to procure the material means required to actualise their radical vision. Even in this astute analysis, English and Kim place Monaé in conversation with Clinton's P-Funk collective while overlooking Prince's similarly dual professional balancing act. In order to retain a wide audience base, particularly among white listeners, Prince had to perform 'a racial high-wire act trying to balance mass commercial appeal to an interracial audience with and against his own blackness' (Nama 2020: 152). Prince, in order to maintain this balance, had to continually employ 'surreptitious reaffirmations of his blackness' as a means of furthering his career without sacrificing his racial identity (Nama 2020: 151).

Perhaps surprisingly, Prince also navigated the boundary between mainstream pop and Afrofuturism. Zack Stiegler argues that Prince's 1998 song 'The War' 'presents a dystopic strain of Afrofuturism masquerading as utopic' (Stiegler 2020: 177). According to Stiegler, 'the song offers a clear path to a seemingly better future via the resource-rich underground metropolis, but this paradise is merely a cover-up for the further exploitation and subjugation of Black identity via the "microchip in your neck"' (Stiegler 2020: 181). This description of 'The War' resonates with Monaé's discography, which includes an album entitled *Metropolis* that details the story of Monaé's android alter ego Cindi Mayweather. In *Metropolis*, Mayweather is clearly an android because she and her duplicates have 'a luminous barcode on their wrists and a small shiny spot on their left temporal lobes,' details which recall the microchip in Prince's 'The War' (Aghoro 2018: 337). Similarly, Monaé invokes Prince's faux-utopia in *The Memory Librarian* through New Dawn, a racist, queerphobic, oppressive governmental

regime that enforces conformity through forced chemical amnesia (Monáe et al. 2022). Nonetheless, despite the many parallels between Prince's 'The War' and Monáe's *The Memory Librarian*, Monáe ultimately posits liberatory futures that realise the revolution that Prince predicts but never fully delivers. Unlike Prince, who prioritises 'the perils of godless blind faith in government, mass media and technology' (Stiegler 2020: 181), Monáe imagines a future in which technology, despite its potential for violence, also enables 'a gender-inclusive black queerness' (Capetola 2019: 248). In 'Timebox Altar(ed),' *The Memory Librarian*'s final story, each protagonist briefly travels to a utopic future built by and for the men, women, and queer people of colour whom New Dawn ultimately fails to control (Monáe et al. 2022: 282–91). Their visions invoke a form of collective memory that recalls an ever-present future. As the time-travelling child Artis explains, he 'hadn't even been there then [in that future], and yet he remembered it clearly' (Monáe et al. 2022: 302). Like Artis, who remembers events for which he was never and/or not yet physically present, Monáe and their collaborators draw on long histories of Black creative resistance as collective memories that are 'never fixed but are forever constructed and reconstructed through the context of present-day concerns and events' (Bertens 2017: 97). In this way, Monáe, Solomon et al. use their texts as a mode of collaborative storytelling that invokes both their own present-day voices and the politics of Prince, George Clinton, Sun Ra, and Drexciya. By reading *The Deep* and *The Memory Librarian* for the flows that produced them, we gain a more complex understanding of each text as 'an active process […] which links the artist and the viewer […] together in a collective act of transmission' (Krishnan 2020: 299). I would now like to consider this act of transmission between text and reader.

Collaborative Storytelling: Narrative and Audience

Throughout this article, I have attended to the collective – collaborative authorship, collective resistance, and communal memory. However, both *The Deep* and *The Memory Librarian* resist romanticising ideas of collective identity. Rather than positioning the communal as a panacea for past and present trauma, both texts identify the tension between collective and individual needs. In *The Deep*, the protagonist Yetu is her community's historian, collecting, safeguarding, and continually reliving their traumatic memories in order to spare the rest of the mermaid-like *wajinru*. Yetu struggles to process the horrors of the Middle Passage and subsequent conflicts between land-dwelling humans and their oceanic *wajinru* counterparts. More importantly, becoming the historian at fourteen means that Yetu fails to develop an individual personality due to the overwhelming emotional, physical, and psychological pressure of centuries-long collective pain. By the time she reaches thirty-four, Yetu's 'own self had been scooped out […] to make room for ancestors, leaving her empty and wandering and ravenous' (Solomon et al. 2019: 8). This emptiness means Yetu cannot identify with the people for whom she has sacrificed her identity. Instead, she describes the *wajinru* as 'a mass that fed off her rememberings for their own benefit' (Solomon et al. 2019: 145). In contrast to the sense of grounding and nourishment that the other *wajinru* receive from their parasitic relationship with her, the burden of generational trauma leaves Yetu 'wandering and ravenous,' denied any possibility of rootedness or fulfilment to mitigate her suffering. Yetu eventually abandons her people in an effort to discover the self, which had thus far been subsumed by the collective need. In doing so, she jeopardises the *wajinru*, as they languish in the grip of history, which she refuses to take back. Moreover, Yetu puts the lives of the remaining land-dwellers at risk, as the wajinru unintentionally trigger a global storm in the midst of history. The consequences of generational trauma, forcibly distilled into a single individual, thus take on catastrophic dimensions that threaten the very lives that the historian was intended to preserve. Far from an idealised vision of communal solidarity,

The Deep portrays the *wajinru* as a doomed predatory society that sacrifices the needs of the individual at the altar of collective comfort.

This problematic form of community also arises in *The Memory Librarian*. In the story 'Timebox,' by Monáe and Eve L. Ewing, Raven and her girlfriend Akilah discover a temporal disruption in the pantry of their new apartment. This pantry, also known as a 'Timebox,' freezes time outside for anyone who enters. Raven, an exhausted working-class nursing student, envisions using the Timebox to catch up on sleep or spend otherwise scarce time with her family. However, Akilah, whose time is her own thanks to generational wealth, plans to use the Timebox as a space for community organising. These two diverging approaches to the Timebox clash in a confrontation between Raven and Akilah. When Raven explains that she wants to use the Timebox to rest, Akilah calls her selfish:

> Akilah continued. 'This is about collective responsibility. We have something really radical on our hands. We need to use it for more than … taking a nap.'
> Raven recoiled like she had been spit on. In a rush, she felt it all at once, all the weight of all the tired she had ever been. (Monáe et al. 2022: 184)

In this moment, Raven realises her partner is willing to sacrifice her individual wellbeing for the sake of the idealised community. When faced with Akilah's disdain, Raven realises that she 'had been sprinting. Had been out of breath for years. The days of her past and future and present running sat like a weight on her chest' (Monáe et al. 2022: 185). Raven responds to Akilah's accusation on a somatic level as the burden of collective responsibility expresses itself within her body. The weight on Raven's chest is not simply a reaction to Akilah's disapproval, but a physical manifestation of lifelong precarity. As a working class, full-time student and queer Black woman struggling to survive under New Dawn's authoritarian regime, Raven envisions existence as an endless yet futile state of flight, ultimately embodied as breathlessness. Ironically, Raven surrenders her own mental and physical wellbeing for the sake of her education, which she feels would enable her to fulfil her community responsibilities through her medical expertise, a fact that Akilah disregards. Moreover, Raven's exhaustion, like Yetu's erasure, operates across multiple temporalities as visions of the past, present, and future become burdens for individuals subsumed within an idealised collective responsibility. Both texts thus problematise the communal, asking their readers to consider the impact of the greater good when it relies upon the destruction of the individual.

Despite this bleak perspective, both *The Deep* and *The Memory Librarian* offer avenues for rethinking collective memory in relation to generational healing and individual identity. In *The Deep*, Yetu ultimately returns to her people not because she is 'emotionally stronger and more at peace with herself' (Wang 2023: 359), but because she feels guilty for escaping her all-consuming responsibility as the *wajinru*'s historian. As she arrives back among the *wajinru*, ready to take on their collective memories again, Yetu recalls that 'the rememberings erased her, that [she] didn't exist because the ancestors took up too much space inside her. *That was all still true*, but what did it matter whether she existed if she was alone?' (Solomon et al. 2019: 147; emphasis added). Yetu succumbs to collective need by deciding to die for the community's sake. However, Amaba, Yetu's mother, refuses to allow this self-sacrifice, insisting instead on sharing her daughter's burden. Yetu realises that she does not need to carry the memories alone, nor should she simply transfer that burden to her unwitting people. Instead, she decides to 'join them as they experienced [the history] … she could guide them through the remembering so it didn't overtake them with such violence. They could bear it all together' (Solomon et al. 2019: 148). In this moment, Yetu strikes a balance between the needs of the community and those of the individual by forging a network of shared responsibility and community care. In the novella's final chapter,

Yetu and the rest of the *wajinru* work together through six hundred years of traumatic memories, grieving their losses together (Solomon et al. 2019: 149). No longer subsumed within a collective need, Yetu can develop her individual identity without losing herself to the wider currents of *wajinru* memory while simultaneously offering her people the sense of continuity that history bestows.

Similar resolutions emerge in *The Memory Librarian*, where individuals participate in communal recollection as a means of psychological healing. In the story 'Nevermind,' by Monáe and Danny Lore, Jane 57821 recovers from chemically-induced amnesia by retelling her own individual history. However, the drug's effects linger even after her escape from New Dawn's detention facility, leaving Jane with shifting, partial memories. To counteract this erasure, Jane relates her history to her friend Neer, who holds the fragmented memories for Jane to piece together. When Jane falters, Neer 'recognize[s] where Jane need[s] support' and fills in the absences (Monáe et al. 2022: 86). However, rather than commandeering Jane's memories, Neer asks her, 'Do you want me to remind you? Or do you want to let it grow yourself?' (Monáe et al. 2022: 86). These questions, like Amaba's insistence on sharing the *wajinru*'s history with Yetu, demonstrates a mode of collaborative healing that nonetheless affords agency to the individual. The memories Neer holds are those which Jane has chosen to bestow, relying on Neer to safeguard the memories without necessarily owning them. Jane recovers more memories by drawing them from the earth itself, channelling her life story through the floor of the Cave where she and Neer slowly reconstruct her past (Monáe et al. 2022: 85). Though Neer only retells Jane's story as a mode of resistance against the state's violent efforts to erase 'dirty' identities, in doing so, they risk undermining Jane's ability to wholly own her life story. However, ongoing institutional violence necessitates this concession. Shared identity, while potentially compromising Jane's individuality, resists New Dawn's isolating modes of oppression, which seek to eradicate Jane's subjectivity altogether. In this context, individual recollection is just as impossible for Jane as individual amnesia is for Yetu, but collective memory enables the gradual reconstitution of her personal history.

A more optimistic vision of restorative community emerges in 'Timebox Altar(ed).' In this story, the nonbinary child Bug remains isolated after their mother's disappearance and father's illness, and their gender identity positions them outside the parameters for acceptable citizenship under New Dawn's rule. When Bug's brother Artis travels forward into an inclusive utopian future, he feels relief at witnessing Bug in 'a world where [they] could be their full, true self and be celebrated for it … Bug wasn't alone anymore. Bug had community, chosen family … Bug would be ensconced in a broader circle of safety and love' (Monáe et al. 2022: 302–03). In representing a possible future that centres inclusion and collective joy, 'Timebox Altar(ed)' reconceptualises the oppressive communal solidarities that Akilah attempts to force on Raven in 'Timebox.' Instead, the collective is a space where the individual might thrive. More importantly, the future becomes a memory of what is to come – a space that anyone might inhabit if they can recall its possibilities. As Mx. Tangee, the mysterious time-travelling provocateur, asks in 'Timebox Altar(ed),' 'How can they forget a future?' (Monáe et al. 2022: 272).

This relationship between memory and time, in which recollection becomes a mode of '*astro travelin'*' (Monáe et al. 2022: 272), also enables identification beyond the text. The complexities of their authorial production, artistic lineages, and Afrofuturist narratives position *The Deep* and *The Memory Librarian* within a vast array of intratextual and extratextual relations. When we consider audience responses to each text's intertextual fabric, this network emerges. On the popular website Goodreads, readers can post book reviews and hold conversations in the comments of each review. One purpose of Goodreads reviews is to allow readers to discuss a difficult text's 'concatenation of […] interpretive barriers,' including 'obscure references to other texts [and] recondite information' (Stinson and Driscoll 2022: 99, 98). We see such conversations

in the reviews for *The Deep* and *The Memory Librarian*, where readers try to navigate each text's complex world through 'more intimate and less hierarchical' interactions (Stinson and Driscoll 2022: 111). A brief survey of responses to *The Deep*, for example, shows that many of the four-star and five-star reviews come from readers who were already aware of the novella's origins or who had read *clipping*.'s afterword and contextualised the narrative within that activist framework. One five-star review draws explicit links between Drexciya, *clipping*., and the novella through 'the constant generational trauma that is inflicted on Black people' (review of *The Deep*).[2] This reader deliberately ties *The Deep* to both its artistic ancestors and its real-world contexts as the basis for their five-star review. More importantly, this review, which like all Goodreads reviews is '*implicitly* addressed to other readers,' presents *The Deep*'s social context as a tool by which future readers might more easily access the novella (Driscoll and Rehberg Sedo 2019: 254). Two-star reviews, however, demonstrate a general dissatisfaction over what some readers consider to be poor world-building or lack of narrative closure.[3] One two-star review of *The Deep* explains that '[t]here were so many incredible concepts introduced, interesting side-stories and more […] and they were only told in snippets […] leaving me feeling like the story was unfinished and I was left in the dark' (review of *The Deep*). Multiple reviews echo this sentiment, with an emphasis on incomplete world-building, underdeveloped concepts, and a general impression that the story simply 'didn't make sense' (review of *The Deep*). Aside from an unfamiliarity with *The Deep*'s intertextual references, these reviews demonstrate the ways in which 'a reading experience links the book not to objective or external criteria but to the lived experience of the reader' (Driscoll and Rehberg Sedo 2019: 252). For readers whose lived experiences are far distant from *The Deep*'s artistic genealogies, the novella's 'poor world-building' reflects reader expectations for what they assume to be a straightforward work of genre fiction, namely science fiction and/or fantasy. This rift between the text's socio-cultural position versus the reader's expectation jeopardises the possibilities for literary activism predicated on intertextuality. However, the community-based nature of Goodreads offers an avenue by which this rift might be bridged. In the comments section of the lengthy two-star review above, another reader responded by explicitly situating the novella within its wider political context and emphasising the reader's responsibility to read the text 'on its own terms' as Durkin suggests: 'We – especially those of us who don't have Black/African heritage – are really called to "go deep" […] in this novella' (response to a review of *The Deep*). This brief exchange demonstrates what I would term the novella's literary activist dimensions. By provoking readers to delve into the histories that produced it, *The Deep* opens an avenue for audience-centred discussions that foreground uniquely Black experiences.

We see a similar dynamic emerge in reviews for *The Memory Librarian*. Lower-starred reviews argue that the '[e]xplanation of the world mechanics, hierarchy, character descriptions and backstories […] all were severely lacking' (review of *The Memory Librarian*). However, higher-starred reviews draw clear links between the text and Monáe's artistic work. One review in particular contextualises *The Memory Librarian* by explaining that.

> Monáe has spent her music career building a world where its inhabitants fight memory control, explore identity, navigate technology, and ultimately, organize towards liberation. *The Memory Librarian* is a culmination of that narrative. (Review of *The Memory Librarian*)

This review directly addresses the issues of world-building raised in the lower-starred review above, demonstrating how audience awareness of the text's broader contexts can have a significant impact on responses to its literary attributes. This, then, is a fundamental part of both texts' activist dimensions. More than simply operating as an amalgamation of numerous musical, literary, and political influences, *The Deep* and *The Memory Librarian* serve as entry points into

deeper considerations of Black resistance and liberation. Even when reader expectations might work against the narrative's intertextuality, modes of social reading such as Goodreads reviews can 'reach out to readers, authors, characters, and people in reviewers' lives, assembling complex social networks of reading,' which enable new modes of understanding beyond an individual reader's lived experiences (Driscoll and Rehberg Sedo 2019: 254). In the case of both *The Deep* and *The Memory Librarian*, reviews and their responses function as the space in which readers can navigate the limitations and affordances of their lived realities. It is this dimension of collaborative reading that actualises the literary activist dimensions of multi-authored, highly intertextual works such as *The Deep* and *The Memory Librarian* by bridging the gap between collective artistic visions and their diverse, at times sceptical, audiences.

Conclusion

Both *The Deep* and *The Memory Librarian* demonstrate a form of collaborative authorship that extends beyond the writer to encompass the text's artistic and political 'culture as a complex totality whose true richness and interest lie in the relations and interactions of its parts' (Krishnan 2020: 301). In their authorial collectives, Solomon, *clipping*. and Monáe et al. destabilise the Eurocentric Enlightenment foundations of the singular author-genius by demonstrating deeply intertextual and extratextual commitments in their invocation of collective Afrofuturist and Black liberation movements. These networks of relationships position both texts as fragments of a larger world rather than works of individual literary production. The result is a dynamic in which social contexts co-create *The Deep* and *The Memory Librarian* along with the human writers who materially produce them (Krishnan 2020: 296). Finally, the texts partly echo Barthes's assertion that the reader is responsible for making meaning. Barthes argues that the 'reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost' (Barthes 1977: 148). While both texts do place meaning in the hands of the readers, *The Deep* and *The Memory Librarian* also refuse Barthes's complete authorial erasure and his idealised impersonal reader. After all, they list named authors who take responsibility for the texts' production and who assume readers are informed by the very 'history, biography, psychology,' which Barthes refutes (Barthes 1977: 148). Nonetheless, by situating these texts within pre-existing, highly complex fictional and real contexts, Solomon, *clipping*., Monáe, and their collaborators afford readers significant responsibility in engaging with their work and ultimately making meaning. As evidenced in the range of reviews, not all audiences know what to do with the intertextual patchworks that underpin *The Deep* and *The Memory Librarian*. However, for readers who either possess the 'body of shared cultural memories' that shaped these texts (Bertens 2017: 94) or who are willing to discover it, *The Deep* and *The Memory Librarian and Other Stories of Dirty Computer* demonstrate literature's ability to 'furnish us […] with possibilities of going beyond the limitations of our own narrow, limited spheres of culture and nationality, striking up across space and time, novel and more complex and productive nodes of identification' (Harvey 2020: 139). In contesting essentialist and exclusionary notions of modernity, authorship, authority, and identity, Solomon, Monáe, and their collaborators mobilise the interconnected networks of artistic production and invite their audiences to recall futures of collective Black liberation.

Disclosure Statement

Notes on Contributor

Megan E. Fourqurean is a postgraduate researcher at the University of Leeds. Her doctoral thesis analyses representations of gender nonconformity in contemporary Nigerian literature through the figure of Mami Wata. Her research interests include postcolonial literature, ecocriticism and speculative fiction. Megan's published work has appeared in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* and *The Journal of the African Literature Association*, with an article forthcoming in *Science Fiction Studies*.

Notes

1. Janelle Monáe uses she/they pronouns, both of which I will use in this article.
2. Though reviews on Goodreads are publicly available, I have decided to protect the privacy of individual users by not including their usernames when quoting their reviews. For reference, I have included links to each text's Goodreads review page in the works cited below.
3. I do not include one-star reviews in my discussion, as they very rarely include written feedback to justify the star rating.

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