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Chiara Patrizi
Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna / Università degli Studi di Trieste / Università Ca' Foscari Venezia

Breathing and Mourning Underwater: A Black Journey Towards Identity in *The Deep*

Abstract

Afrofuturism has provided new means of reappropriation and subversion of white dominant discourses regarding society, history, and temporality. My essay examines how Rivers Solomon's 2019 *The Deep* deals with what Michelle M. Wright defines as "Epiphenomenal time" – which moves outward and forward, contrary to the bi-dimensionality of white narratives, which "erases" the experiences of the Other. Inspired by an experimental hip-hop song by clipping. (inspired, too, in turn, by electronic duo Drexciya), Solomon's novella narrates of an underwater civilization started by the descendants of the pregnant enslaved women who were thrown overboard from slave ships. By creating an imaginary world and an imaginary journey through the Black Atlantic and through different media and forms of storytelling, Drexciya, clipping., and Solomon work with and within Epiphenomenal time as a way to engage representations of blackness in the diaspora that do not depend on white-imposed linear narratives to define themselves.

1. *Introduction: Afrofuturist present(s)*

If black subjects, those who suffered the consequences of the Slave Trade, are to be considered, in Toni Morrison's words, the first moderns, because they "had to deal with 'post-modern' problems in the nineteenth century and earlier. These things had to be addressed by black people a long time ago" (Gilroy 1993b, 178), then the Black Atlantic might indeed be the cradle of (post) modernity – albeit disturbingly. Morrison's statement opens to unsettling yet necessary re-readings of modernity as a journey of the marginalized, a perspective that has been also shared by Kalí Tal, who contends that, "the struggle of

African-Americans is precisely the struggle to integrate identity and multiplicity, and the culture(s) of African-Americans can surely be understood as perfect models of the 'postmodern' condition, except that they predate postmodernism by hundreds of years, and thus contradict the notion that the absence of the (illusion of) unitary self is something new" (Tal 1996). At least since Du Bois's "double consciousness," (Du Bois 2015 [1903]; Womack 2013, 117-29) but perhaps even before, Black art and literature have been depicting such struggle with inventiveness, through experimental stylistic choices and groundbreaking philosophical and cultural aesthetics. In the last decades, this peculiar way of experimenting has found a fertile environment within sci-fi and the Afrofuturist movement. Although Afrofuturism still proves difficult to define – given the fact that it encompasses modes of aesthetic production, genres, political and social stances – it can be better understood if interpreted "as a moment and as a movement" (Lavender 2019, 1). Indeed, since Mark Dery coined the term in the 1990s (Dery 1994, 180-182), Afrofuturism has often explored the real and metaphorical journeys that merge and enter in conversation with each other in the Black Atlantic – and beyond – through different forms of storytelling and art production, from music to visual arts to literature.

Within the realm of literature, Rivers Solomon's 2019 novella, *The Deep*, takes these intellectual and artistic exchanges one step further, since the story of the *wajinru,* the water-breathing merfolk descendent of the pregnant enslaved women who died after being thrown in the ocean from the slave ships, is born out of a collective effort. That is, *The Deep* constitutes the latest artistic step of an Afrofuturist journey – or a "game of artistic Telephone" (clipping. 2019, 157) – through the Black Atlantic initiated by Detroit-based electronic duo Drexciya and continued, among others, by LA experimental hip hop group clipping. and now by Solomon.

In the liner notes of their 1997 compilation album *The Quest*, Drexciya retraced the experience of the Middle Passage through the creation of a science-fictional historiography, inspired both by Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* (1993) and by African folklore, the Mami Wata in particular (Womack 2013, 70; 86-7):

> Could it be possible for humans to breathe underwater? A fetus in its mother's womb is certainly alive in an aquatic environment.
> During the greatest Holocaust the world has ever known, pregnant America-bound African slaves were thrown overboard by the thousands during labor for being sick and disruptive cargo. Is it possible that they could have given birth at sea to babies that never needed air?

[...]
Are Drexciyans water-breathing, aquatically mutated descendants of those unfortunate victims of human greed? Have they been spared by God to teach us or terrorize us? Did they migrate from the Gulf of Mexico to the Mississippi river basin and on to the Great Lakes of Michigan?
Do they walk among us? Are they more advanced than us and why do they make their strange music?
What is their quest?
These are many of the questions that you don't know and never will.
The end of one thing... and the beginning of another.
Out - The Unknown Writer. (Drexciya 1997)

Drexciya's universe has crossed media and narrative forms to become, like any proper mythology (Eshun 2003, 300-1), a collective endeavor involving various songwriters and storytellers, as well as visual artists and painters, such as Abdul Qadim Haqq and Ellen Gallagher.[1] The result is a multifaceted work of art that belongs to a community rather than to a single artist. One of its most interesting metamorphoses was with clipping., who wrote the song "The Deep" for the #623 episode of *This American Life*, "We Are in the Future" (2017), dedicated to Afrofuturism, and who passed it on to writer Rivers Solomon, who turned into a novella that is explicitly "honoring a legacy of art that already exists" (Philpott 2019). With *The Deep*, Solomon acknowledges faer work as necessarily connected to and shaped by the others – in the past, in the present, and perhaps in the future. Nonetheless, the author manages to craft a story that enters the 21st century bringing black experience out of the depths of the ocean, giving it a voice to narrate its own (hi)story not from a marginalized position. In fear novella, embodied black history is not portrayed as the surfacing of something "undead" and hopelessly haunted by the past, but ultimately as the emergence of new life. In this process, remembering and forgetting find their balance and contribute to the representation of blackness today in a powerful way, reclaiming the past as an ally and not as a ghost to be feared or chased away. Particularly effective in this respect is

1 Abdul Qadim Haqq is the visual artist and illustrator who created the album covers of Drexciya's records; with Dai Satō, Haqq has recently authored a graphic novel titled *The Book of Drexciya, Vol.* 1 & 2 (2020-2021). Artist Ellen Gallagher has explicitly declared that her work, in particular the panting series *Watery Ecstatic*, has been inspired by Drexciya's mythology (Gallagher 2011 [2005]).

Solomon's choice of focusing the narration not only on the exploration of the bottom of the ocean but, especially, of the shallow waters, as the meeting point of land and sea, both geographically and metaphorically. Furthermore, even if faer writing speaks from/to/of the same communal experience envisioned by both Drexciya and clipping., the novella departs from their lyrics and music in articulating the narration around one character in particular, Yetu, the historian. As clipping. recall, the group's usual lyric-composition process resembles a "Passover Seder" (clipping. 2019, 161)[2] and now, thanks to Solomon, "[they]'ve learned who is burdened with this ritual of remembering and retelling. Rivers has given [them] Yetu, and in so doing, shown [them] something that [their] song elided: the immediate and visceral pain inherent in passing down past trauma" (Ibid.: 161).

My essay argues that, contrary to what might initially be surmised by looking at its title and content, what *The Deep* is actually re-presenting is a journey through liminal encounters between spaces and temporalities. Such journey starts from a real *and* symbolic fall into the darkest depths of the Atlantic Ocean but eventually develops along the surface, where the encounter with "the Other" takes on perhaps unexpected significance. In doing so, *The Deep* places its story within what Michelle M. Wright has termed "Epiphenomenal time" (2015), a conception of temporality that subverts the standardized and Western-imposed chronological approach to time to reclaim the centrality of the experience of the marginalized communities within the Black Atlantic epistemology.

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2 The Passover, or Pesach, Seder is a Jewish ritual. Seder literally means "order," a term which usually describes the ceremonial meal and retelling of the Exodus through songs, readings, and rituals – a ceremony that involve every member of the family, old and young. The three fundamental patterns of the seder are the family, the individual, and the nation. The national pattern of the seder symbolizes the first step toward the final redemption from slavery and the formation of the Jewish nation, while on the individual level, every participant contributes by feels as though they were among those who left Egypt. Interestingly but not surprisingly, the Exodus represents a key moment of identification also for the African American community, as many old and new artworks testify like, for instance, spirituals such as "Go Down Moses," scholarly works like W.E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), as well as literary masterpieces such as Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1951) or, more recently, theater/movie productions like Antoinette Nwandu's play *Pass Over* (2018). For a more detailed examination of the influence of the Book of Exodus on African American experience see Kling 2004.

2. *"What does it mean to be born from the dead?"*

The Deep starts with a near-death experience at the bottom of the ocean, throwing readers in a dark realm, a dimension they are unprepared to meet – disoriented, lost, somehow much like the protagonist, Yetu, but ultimately differently. Yetu is seen bleeding, both physically and psychologically, equally hurt in her flesh and mind. She has just survived an encounter with the sharks in extremely unsafe waters, a danger she consciously put herself in, desperately trying to survive yet another type of destructive encounter, that with the rememberings of the history of her entire people, the merfolk wajinru: "'It was like dreaming,' said Yetu, throat raw. She'd been weeping for days, lost in a remembering of one of the first wajinru" (Solomon 2019a, 1). These very first lines provide the initial clues on the type of journey the novella is about to explore: as the use of gerunds and of words related to suffering and remembrance aptly introduces, Yetu's will be a peregrination through embodied memory, history, and pain, to find a stronger sense of community and hope nonetheless. Traumatic past will then be understood not only as a burden to be endured or as a memorial but as an experience to be internalized and shared, as a knowledge that can affect change, in order to go beyond mere survival.

Not surprisingly, therefore, even if the novella does not start 'at the beginning' of either Yetu's or the wajinru's story, as de Bruin-Molé has noted, "[i]n *The Deep*, there are multiple beginnings, from the memories of different historians of the *wajinru* people, and each is similarly grim" (2021, 4). Clearly, there is no mythical, idyllic past to retrieve or to long for nostalgically, as the first wajinru knew all too well. Instead, the past is understood as something unbearably painful but still necessary to the community's consciousness, so that the task of carrying the burden of the single stories that form the collective history of the merfolk is assigned to one of them, the historian, who temporarily gives it back to all the others during the yearly ceremony of the "the Remembrance," in which they all learn about where they come from and are guided through a sorrowful yet precious journey through time by the historian, in order to reinforce their bond as a people. Since "During the Remembrance mind left body [...] the wajinru people would be entranced by the History" (Solomon 2019a, 19-20) and not in control of their actions, they would first build a mud sphere to protect themselves as well as the ocean,

which they call "the womb," a clear reference to the actual wombs they all come from and which symbolize a state of suspension between life and death.

Both Solomon and fear characters appear to be working with what writer Ishmael Reed has described as "necromancy," that is, an approach to history in which the past is used to read and interpret the present and "to prophesize about the future" (1995, 51). Reed explains that necromancers are those who "go back into the past and get some metaphor from the past to explain the present or the future. [...] Necromancers used to lie *in the guts of the dead* or in tombs to receive visions of the future. That is prophecy. The black writers lie in the guts of old America, making readings about the future" (1995, 16; emphasis mine). This is precisely what Yetu, and the other wajinru with her, are going to learn: that the past should be used both to interpret the present *and* to imagine the future, so that the present is not solely a locus of remembrance but of agency, an act that is especially compelling "in a country where Americans assimilate corpses in their daily comings and goings" (Rankine 2015). In *The Deep*, the wajinru are literally born out of the dead bodies of the enslaved women thrown off from the ships which were crossing the Atlantic to reach the plantations of North America, an uncanny awareness that makes the historian wonder: "What does it mean to be born of the dead? What does it mean to begin? First, gray, murky darkness. First Solitude. Each of us is the only one of our kind, for we are spread apart and know not of one another's existence" (Solomon 2019a, 42). At first, not all wajinru survived the apparently impossible birth underwater, but those who did, helped by the whales, their "second mothers" (Ibid.) were born free. The merfolk has built a peaceful community, and they live safe in the deep waters being at the top their ecosystem's food chain. They have never reached America – the US South, the plantations – they have never experienced enslavement directly. However, they are also aware that they are supposed to stay away from and fear shallow waters, where encounters with the (white) "two-legs" might occur and turn into bloody wars, given the humans disregard for and ruthlessness toward the ocean and those who live inside it. Such blurred awareness becomes clearer during the Remembrance, when the historian shares with them the scattered and painful pieces of a past of enslavement, torture, and unmerciful death turned into a loving and caring present, step by step, over many generations of wajinru. The only bright encounter with a surface dweller is with Waj, a human they save and befriend and who, in turn, gifts them with a language to name themselves, and the world. The Remembrance brings about an

extreme manifestation of a duboisian double-consciousness (Eshun 2003, 298; Nelson 2002, 3-4), when the wajinru discover again that they are actually related to the two-legs: "It was too strange to carry both truths at once: the aliveness of their own bodies, and the deadness of the two-legs corpses. The conflict split their minds in half, threatened their own bodies" (Ibid.: 37), but they survive because the historian is there with them. When ceremony is over, only Yetu is left to remember, to be haunted by those past horrors as if they were present, as a belated witness of a never-ending trauma (Caruth 1995, 17-8, 157-8; 1996, 8) that no one has prepared her to process, as she recalls, "She'd discovered the History on her own, through out-of-order scraps and pieces. Silver slicing through her" (Solomon 2019a, 28).

Just like the dying bodies of the enslaved women painfully carried the future by carrying the bodies of the first wajinru, half-human half-fish creatures, so the burden of the past is so overwhelming for Yetu that she often feels like less than a living being, like "a cracked vessel" (Solomon 2019, 39) for the history of her people: "her own self had been scooped out when she was a child of fourteen years to make room for ancestors, leaving her empty and wandering and ravenous" (8). Her condition reflects Habiba Ibrahim's speculation on how "black female age has taken on an archival function through abusive and liberating presumptions about who is likely to survive. [...] [T]he black female body – old, young, neither, both – is a site of speculative historiography, of epistemic renewal and preservation. She manifests an unfulfillable desire to make direct contact with the past. Thus, she turns our attention to the Ocean" (Ibrahim 2021, 87). In the novella, this archival function is represented by the metaphor of the vessel, which is both in connection and in contrast with that of the womb, as enclosed spaces of care and relics at the same time, preserving memories and bodies to carry them through the present. Yetu's age is indicative of a fundamental dichotomy in this respect, since her young body, deprived of its personal memories to leave space for the ancient collective History, can be perceived as "the embodied remains of what no longer exists, and yet what brings us in closer proximity to what is now absent" (Ibid.: 107).

In what might seem a paradoxical choice, to the first wajinru forgetting a traumatic past – of enslavement, of drowning, of death – was a vital effort to be pursued, necessary to the survival of their community; and yet that same past was regarded as equally necessary to ensure that the wajinru perceived themselves as a community with a shared history, rather than separated individuals.

That would have destroyed them as much as being haunted by the History every moment. And that was the reason why the role of the historian was so important. Yetu, however, is not like the historians who preceded her. At the very least, she is a reluctant leader, one who perceives her role as a curse rather than a gift, as her cold words at the beginning of the Remembrance unequivocally show: "'You are a blessing,' said Nnenyo. 'I am what is required,' [Yetu] said, no warmth left in her even for Nnenyo. Everything tense, she just wanted this whole thing to be over. Fine. Let the Remembrance begin right here right now, for all she cared, womb or not womb" (26).

As the recurrent image of the cracked vessel, or "a vessel of [...] ugliness" (100) shows, being chosen to become the historian is something that has deprived her of her youth, dreams, and agency when she was still eager to find her own place in the ocean and within her community. And yet she could not refuse: the survival of all her people depended on her becoming the carrier of the past. When looking at US history, that same role has often weighted on black artists too, since it was often regarded as necessary that their work fulfilled a specific kind political and historical function with regard to the African American past. In a continuous negotiation between individual self and community, personal and public, center and margin, they fulfilled this role by providing an alternative historiography whose main feature is its non-linearity. According to such paradigm, black experience configures itself as an unconventional voyage, in which diverse moments and experiences intersect and at times overlap – not necessarily chronologically or vertically organized – and tend to revolve around the Black Atlantic and the Middle Passage. When it comes to defining blackness in the present, this can be both a powerful means of connection and a problematic framework, liable to exclude certain experiences and subjects; however, as Afrofuturism also shows, black artists and scholars have once again taken on the challenge of finding means of expressions that can include the different subjectivities that participate in depicting black identity now.

The Middle Passage in particular, as Michelle M. Wright contends, provides an epistemology and a historiography that is both suitable to a linear, progress narrative but, at the same time forces scholar to acknowledge the limitations of such narrative, calling for the need to combine vertical and horizontal narrative/historical frames in order to truly acknowledge the complexity of black identities through time (Wright 2015, 25-6). Wright's "Epiphenomenal time" defines precisely this dimension, "the 'now' through which the past, present,

and future are always interpreted [... and which] denotes the current moment, a moment that is *not* directly borne out of another (i.e. causally created)" (4), thus representing an invaluable tool for a more inclusive understanding of blackness, which goes beyond the simple localization in time of blackness offered by a linear progress narrative to call the attention on how the now mediates and is mediated by the past. Ultimately, the notion of Epiphenomenal time both summons and defies the Middle Passage epistemology, to put forth a narration of blackness that is not subject to white-imposed modes of interpretation.

Similarly, Solomon's work both dialogues with and challenges that same epistemology thanks to the stylistic and thematic elements fae introduces into the previously mentioned "game of artistic Telephone." Not only faer story includes a female, first-person narrator, in fact, but *The Deep* also presents the wajinru as hermaphrodites, thus picturing black, non-male subjects as endowed with fundamental agency within the bigger narrative of the Black Atlantic, rather than being just passive recipients and/or victims of the events (Wright 2015, 52-4; 82-9; 164-6). Moreover, the fact that they are the descendants of those enslaved people who have never reached America places them on a timeline that is both tied to and divergent from the one usually identified with the Middle Passage. Being hermaphrodite, half-human and half-fish creatures whose blackness has been affected by slavery but whose present departs from the traditional timeline of the Black Atlantic, the wajinru embody, with their very presence, a symbolic and cultural threshold. They exist *in limine* between 'human' and 'other,' they carry both in their genes, and thus help redefine the boundaries between the two, to the point that they might also be defined as post-human – and not only because of their bodily appearance. Indeed, their very existence confronts readers with the need to rethink their assumptions and preconceptions regarding identification and othering, as processes and as instruments of power, with regard to the forced de-humanization that black bodies have endured and that black artists have confronted and fiercely rejected (Weheliye 2002, 26).

Moreover, Yetu's role as historian, combined with her young age, allows her to deal with Epiphenomenal time, to embody it in some way: her struggle to come into being in the present, to exist "now," at last, and not as an unnatural relic of the past, can be understood as a reclaim of the "current moment" (Wright 2015, 4). This might appear as a paradox, given that the term "historian" qualifies her as one who masters chronological time, and she does, but she also departs from it by "understand[ing] one spacetime: the moment of

the now, through which we imagine the past and also move into future possibilities (walking, thinking, talking)" (Ibid.: 145), a moment that is therefore able to welcome the intersections of all the other spacetimes that fall under the denomination of blackness, without forcing them into a linear timeline. Such constriction risked to be fatal for her as the historian and as an individual, since "Rather than capturing the full multidimensionality of Blackness, linear spacetime generates paradoxes that manifest through failed interpellation, or qualitative collapse, which can create an either/or Blackness according to which one must choose one interpretation over the other to reposition Blackness in that linear spacetime" (Ibid. 146). What first sparks her journey is precisely a qualitative collapse with regard to her identity which could not be contained within the restricted boundaries of the linear timeline she – the historian – was supposed to conduct like a perfectly harmonized orchestra of rememberings. As her thoughts suggest, "History was everything. Yetu knew that. But it wasn't kind" (Solomon 2019a, 96), Yetu appears to be aware that "[t]o historicize an identity within a linear progress narrative provides 'order,' [...], origin, direction, and stability – but linear spacetime also complicates or even limits the historical fluidity of such an identity" (Wright 2015, 146), and this initially unconscious awareness may be the driving force that first draws her to swim upward, towards the shallow waters.

If, according to Wright, Epiphenomenal time needs chronological time first in order to be used profitably (2015, 14; 145), it is true that Yetu does certainly share a linear timeline with her fellow wajinru; but she also rejects it and, albeit still unconsciously, seeks to expand it when swimming away to look for shelter on the surface. Here, she meets stories and temporalities that intersects with hers, creatures who "in the contemporary moment, perceive and perform themselves as Black but do not share that linear timeline" (Ibid.: 14). When a starving Yetu finally reaches the surface, there she finds a "new world" to explore, a dimension she had traveled and experienced only as the historian and that now surrounds her: burning bright, "just water and sky" (Solomon 2019a, 70), unknown yet familiar like an eerie remembering, a déjà-vu difficult to understand, as she ponders when observing the landscape: "The vastness of the ocean looked so different from above, so much less comprehensible. Its murky blue waters were a dark veil separating her from her people. Cut off from them, she had trouble making sense of who she was. Without them, she seemed nothing more than a strange fish, alone. Absent the rememberings, who was she but

a woman cast away?" (Ibid.: 77). Removed from her homeland and, more importantly, for her people's linear timeline, she is not yet aware that her journey will take her to truly become the "single individual [that is interpellated] as the point at which many collective identities intersect" (Wright 2015, 30).

She soon meets a group of surface dwellers, the notorious two-legs who, surprisingly, do not mean any harm and seem more interested and surprised by the fact that Yetu breathes and speaks, meaning that she looks less like a monster and more like a human (Solomon 2019a, 79-80). But it is a woman, Oori, who takes care of her, bringing fish so that Yetu does not starve. Apparently, Oori does so out of some sort of ethical duty and nothing more: when Yetu thanks her for the food, the woman hastily responds, "What should I have done instead? Not provide what is necessary? Don't take it to heart. I fed my mother till the day she died, and I despised her. Good-bye" (Ibid.: 82). Like Yetu, Oori too presents herself as "what is required," and perhaps this is what connects them at first, before they eventually fall in love with each other. Their bond develops before they discover that they might share a common ancestry. Apparently, Oori is the last of her people: when she finally agrees to tell her story, she explains that "I am from a dead place. [...] The land is dead. The people are dead. [...] All dead. I am the last of the Oshuben" (Ibid.: 92). Few words, but enough to convey the sense of "an unspeakable loss," a pain that Yetu feels and experiences through her skin, as she has always done also with the History, and to which she can only respond "I cannot imagine a hole as wide as that" (Ibid.: 92). As her tragic story reveals, Oori, too, is a cracked vessel, but one who believes that "your whole history. Your ancestry. That's who you are" (Ibid.: 95); what to Yetu is a dominating, oppressing presence that prevents her from developing a subjectivity that is truly hers, to Oori is a thin and distant voice that is bound to fade not matter how much she cherishes it. Given their seemingly opposite approaches, then, it is not surprising that, when their two solitudes meet, they clash at first but they eventually come together and provide each other with a way to carry and embrace their history in the present, without having their individual identities silenced. Their encounter contributes, in other words, "to [produce] many and varied kinds of Blackness through the intersection of linear and Epiphenomenal time" (Wright 2015a, 152). Their stories, and their responses to them, encapsulate the various and often contrasting ways in which blackness has been – and still is – experienced, performed, represented, lived and in which black bodies constantly negotiate

their relation with the past as something that is not fixed but necessarily subject to change, both as a physical, geographical "origin" and as a locus of the mind. By ultimately reading and mediating the past through the "now," and not the contrary, *The Deep* reckons with Epiphenomenal time in a way that allows unexpected, non-conforming experiences of blackness to come to the surface, challenging the dominant narrative, the "canon," to include them.

Even though Yetu and Oori are both haunted by the past(s), what ultimately connects them is the "now" through which their blackness can be understood "as the *intersection* of constructs that locate the Black collective in *history* and in the *specific moment* in which Blackness is being imagined – the "now" through which all imaginings of Blackness will be mediated" (Wright 2015, 14; emphasis in original). For different yet interconnected reasons, Yetu and Oori have been uprooted by their linear spacetime, either by their own will or due to external circumstances, a condition that allows them to inhabit Epiphenomenal time and thus to embody and represent those manifestations of blackness that might be excluded by chronological, vertical-only frames.

3. *Conclusions: troubling the water*

When Yetu leaves them alone in the womb, the wajinru seem to be bound to madness, lost in the Remembrance without any individual agency left, a condition that can only lead them to succumb to rage and hatred, as the historian fears when she thinks about them during her "momentary stay against confusion." Worried about what might happen to them and to the entire ocean, Yetu swims back into the deep, determined to take the rememberings back from their fragile minds and bodies, but when she reaches the sacred waters, something unexpected happens: for the first time, the wajinru refuse to let her take the History back, and not because the prolonged trance has driven them mad, but because they care about her and believe that they need to really be together in order to be stronger. This time, when the wajinru look for Yetu is not for guidance only, but to tell her she does not need to be alone, that they *want* to share the History with her, not only during the Remembrance, but "now," every day, which allows Yetu to think that "Maybe, instead of taking the History from them, she could join them as they experienced it" (Solomon 2019, 148), so that perhaps the History would be indeed less unbearable when

shared. Her archival function, therefore, finds a way out of the slave ship and goes from being "endlessly generative" in the sense that "it constantly reproduces the absence, inadequately filled with new ways of telling an untellable story" (Ibrahim 2021, 107), to being endlessly generative in the sense that it becomes also able to fill that absence with hope, to look at the retellings of the untellable story of the past as instruments that can build an actually tellable future. More importantly, that hope both stems from and nurtures a sense of belonging Yetu was unable to embrace before her journey. This revelation is symbolically represented by the two elements that are also evidence of a shared history between her and Oori: the comb that Yetu, through the previous historians, has inherited from the first mothers and, even more importantly, the fact that the wajinru word for *belonging* is "Tosha," the same name of the island the wajinru's first human friend, Waj, had said to come from. When Waj told the first wajinru she is about to leave them to go back home, because "We must each be where we belong" (Solomon 2019a, 49), the wonder what does *belonging* is. "Where loneliness ends" (Ibid.), she answers, implying a necessary distance between their two worlds. This distance, another mean of exclusion, is eventually overcome through Yetu's and Oori's experience, which constitutes a journey away from loneliness and towards belonging that joins multiple dimensions of blackness together. At the end, Oori literally becomes "a completely new thig" (Ibid.: 155), and Yetu does too, even if her transformation is not physically apparent. Together, they constitute "an intersecting site for a broad variety of other collective epistemologies" (Wright 2015, 30), without collapsing before them, swallowing up, losing, or expelling them, but engaging them in an ever-generative process of understanding and producing blackness.

In addressing the Middle Passage epistemology through speculative fiction, *The Deep* provides a compelling representation of black experience as the combination of liminal encounters which may or may not share common *roots* but in which participants ultimately contribute to the collective identity by learning to build common *routes* instead (Gilroy 1993a, 19-20; 190-1), that move horizontally to connect them together while they still retain their individual subjectivities intact. Thinking with Greg Tate (Dery 1993, 208) and, more recently, with Isaiah Lavender, Afrofuturism reiterates the idea that "Blackness *is* science fictional (Lavender 2019, 9; emphasis in original), for the way in which it embodies a condition and a series of experiences that have been narrated and represented as part of the realm of the imagination, of the non-real, by specu-

lative fiction, as Sanchez-Taylor also noted: "For peoples who are more likely to identify with the alien 'other' in traditional sf more than a white human narrator, sf becomes a space to where authors of color (who are typically fans of the genre themselves) can employ recognizable aspects of sf – tropes like the alien, time travel, and immortality – yet also re-work these tropes to make room for peoples of color" (Sanchez-Taylor 2021, 7). That is, Afrofuturism conjures up the tropes and narrative environment of speculative fiction "to understand the science-fictional existence that blacks have *always* experienced living in the New World – an unreality driven by economic demands, would-be science, and skin color" (Lavender 2019, 9). More importantly, this is not a passive understanding, but one that envisions agency, a way to subvert and dismantle traditional power-relations between dominant and marginalized subjects.

Solomon embraces this approach and takes it even further, so that fear novella includes many "others," who slowly find their voice thanks to fear ability to present often contrasting embodiments of otherness by means of Afrofuturist theme and tropes (the Middle Passage, the symbolic value of water, non-human beings, womanhood, gender) reminiscent of historical and individual traumas.

Blackness has always entailed a complex and painful process of negotiation of identity, both in space and in time, which was deeply affected by slavery and indeed, as Christina Sharpe argues "African and Euro-American post-slavery subjects live in and with the sociohistorical and political positions and contradictions that black bodies embody" (Sharpe 2010, 121-2). This can easily be applied to contemporary black bodies, who keep inhabiting the "afterlife of slavery" (Hartman, 2007) and performing their blackness "in the wake of slavery" (Sharpe 2016) in the "now," through the historical a geographical intersections that allow blackness to be articulated as an inclusive construct, which can go beyond traditional notions of identity and otherness. Looking at blackness from an afrofuturist perspective, as Lavender maintains,

> unlocks the liberatory potential of blacks who see themselves at the fulcrum of contemporary life – as emotional, spiritual, and technological beings in the body politic. As we wrestle with slavery's many legacies – oppression, racism, prejudice, stereotypes, segregation, colorism, and violence – in the twenty-first century of the United States, we dare to hope. By drawing strength and inspiration from this past, we imagine black worlds and identities differently. (Lavender 2019, 8)

In envisioning a liminal time and place in which diverse black subjectivities can converge to create hope for the future, *The Deep* works with that liberatory potential to project an inclusive future in which the boundaries between the so-called center and margins dissolve, to leave room for a textured historiography in which each of the interwoven elements is equally fundamental to the overall narrative.

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Chiara Patrizi (PhD) teaches Anglo-American Literatures at the University of Bologna, at the University of Trieste, and at Ca' Foscari University of Venice. Her research explores the interactions between human existence and time in terms of wilderness experience – the "wilderness of time" of contemporary US literature. In 2017 and 2023, she was Visiting Scholar at Duke University (Durham, NC). She participated in various international conferences and authored essays on contemporary US literature, on Black Studies, on the New African Diaspora, and on the relation between time and trauma in US literature. She is in the editorial team of *Jam It! Journal of American Studies in Italy* and she currently serves as co-chair of the AISNA Graduate Forum.