

# RECLAIMING THE ABYSS, RECKONING WITH TIME. WATER IN THE AFROFUTURIST IMAGINATION

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*Y'all remember when it used to be deep  
So deep, so, so deep, ay  
(clipping).*

Water is a powerful image in black diasporic literature, and a particularly evocative one for Afrofuturism, as testified by various contemporary Afrofuturist artworks, ranging from music to visual arts and literature. My essay focuses on two North American black authors, Nalo Hopkinson and Rivers Solomon, so as to analyze how their writings employ water imagery—and, specifically, imagery related to the Atlantic Ocean—to reclaim a sense of temporality and history that can truly mirror black experience and go beyond oppression and marginalization, in accordance to what Michelle M. Wright has theorized in her work *Physics of Blackness* (2015) and to what several Afrofuturist scholars have pointed out in the past few decades (Dery 1993; Eshun 2003; Nelson 2001; Lavender 2019) regarding science-fiction's subversive potential for black expression.

This reframing and acknowledgement of non-conforming black experiences/subjectivities is made possible also by the two authors' reinterpretation of African water mythologies and deities, merfolk/mermaids in particular. In the novels examined, these creatures become the embodiment of a hybrid identity in which the past, the present, and the future converge in a creative way, dismantling traditional depictions of alterity and processes of othering. I will further argue that in Hopkinson and Solomon's writings, as a source of both life and death, the oceanic waters constitute an environment which allows us to envision the possibility for a different future than that imposed by canonical Western notions, as well as contributing to the characters' identity-building path. By plunging into the physical and symbolic abyss of the Atlantic Ocean, these novels retrieve a painful yet transfigured past, looking at it not as an enemy, but as an instrument of awareness and activism.

Keywords: Afrofuturism, Rivers Solomon, Nalo Hopkinson, Water, Temporality

## Introduction

Water represents an often ambiguous yet powerful symbolic element when exploring black temporality in North America, since it conveys both the weight of a traumatic history – the Atlantic Slave Trade, the Middle Passage – and the

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yearning for the future as a liberating force and a path to freedom, as when the fugitive slaves crossed the Ohio River to reach the northern states.

When it comes to Afrofuturism, the ocean in particular – its abyssal currents but also the shallow waters where it meets the land – becomes a space of reclamation for black identities. My use of the plural here is not fortuitous, but entails the need to acknowledge blackness as a composited identity, in which difference and transformation are more impactful categories than those of uniformity and immutability, borrowing from Stuart Hall's idea of the diasporic experience as the epitome of an understanding of identity defined by hybridity and becoming (2021: 267). Indeed, according to Hall, identities are «produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies. Moreover, they emerge within the play of specific modalities of power» (2003: 4), and they are thus inherently exclusive, as can occur also with the epistemology of the Middle Passage.

Indeed, if the Middle Passage has served as a defining space and time for blackness, this much sought communal narrative may also become problematic. As Michelle M. Wright argues, relying on that narrative alone, especially in the current socio-political situation, jeopardizes a true representation of black identities, which are many and multifaceted, and do not necessarily share the same timeline (43-47). Disregarding such experiences implies that a more nuanced, composited understanding of blackness risks being disregarded, too. But, as Hall observes, «every identity has its 'margin', an excess, something more» (2003: 5), and that surplus of difference is also what Afrofuturism brings about in its representation of black experience as an intersection of identities. This cultural movement has often been praised for acknowledging and voicing the instances of extraordinary black subjectivities (Dery 180-182; Nelson 3), and the ocean provides a compelling dimension in this regard. Much like outer space, the ocean epitomizes the unknown, the utmost alien environment on Earth (Gaskins 2016: 73) – yet a painfully familiar one for many black subjects, a polysemic signifier in which the traumatic past of the slave ships and the actual bodies of the millions who died in the Middle Passage are retained. The quest of Afrofuturists seems precisely that of representing the currents and depths of that past, to make its frequencies, (narrative) waves, and (hi)stories audible and use them to envision and project a different future.

My essay examines Afrofuturist oceanic temporalities through the writing of Nalo Hopkinson and Rivers Solomon, two North American authors whose fictional works manage to both acknowledge the legacy of the Black Atlantic and challenge the epistemology of the Middle Passage through the representation of non-standard black identities. By intersecting timelines and temporal communities, their works expand the notion of blackness and ultimately celebrate

non-conforming and queer black subjectivities. Their fictions break free from traditional linear progress narratives (Wright 15-20) *and* from canonical depictions of blackness by redefining the symbolic relationship between “the deep” and the surface; moreover, they subvert common portrayals of the Other(ed) by including mythical sea-creatures (merfolk) as the embodiment of hybridity and of a creative potential which comes both as an echo of ancient histories and as the chant of an ongoing renewal, thus attuning such histories to the possibility to imagine the future.

### **Songs of Diasporic Merfolk**

When thinking about the Atlantic Ocean, «a natural fact» (Armitage 11), as both a historical and geographical category, David Armitage notes that such geography «should be considered flexible, for “oceans” are no less mythical than continents». He further explains that:

The precise limits of the ocean were, of course, fluid: exactly where it ended was less clear than what it touched and what it connected as long as ‘the Ocean’ was thought of as a single body of circulating water rather than as seven distinct seas. The chronology of Atlantic history should also be considered fluid (12).

And yet, the very geography of the ocean reflects a temporality that moves both horizontally and vertically (Wright 25-26), as exemplified by the overlapping and intersecting of its waves and currents between the surface and the deep waters, which makes its fluidity quite problematic. Within the oceanic environment, the abyss corresponds to a peculiar kind of wilderness – a place that «encapsulates», as Leal states, «the attitude of a society to the unknown» (36); it is thus likely to be inaccessible to humans and inhabited instead by alien Others, according also to a vast body of different mythologies. Among these creatures, notably fascinating are merfolk, the half human, half marine beings whose liminal bodily features allows for the encounter between the human and the nonhuman in various ways, since they are often associated with fertility and fortune, but also with the most obscure and dangerous deep waters. Not surprisingly, in the case of the victims of the Atlantic Slave Trade such mythology provided a glimpse of hope in a desperate situation, achieved by commending oneself to water deities such as Mami Wata or Yemoja. As Gaskins notes:

Beginning in the 16th Century with the arrival of enslaved Africans via the Atlantic slave trade, the traditions, beliefs and practices honouring their ancestral water deities were transplanted into the US. According to Ras Michael Brown (2012), African-descended enslaved people brought with them myriad ideas about nature spirits who champion the oppressed and avenge the enslaved (2018: 198).

The water spirits' subversive character is most likely the main reason why many contemporary black artists «remix» (Gaskins 2018: 199) these deities in their works with a militant intent. Among the first and most interesting examples in music is Drexciya, the Detroit-based techno duo who imagined an underwater community inhabited by the descendants of pregnant enslaved women thrown overboard from slave ships during the Middle Passage<sup>1</sup>. In using an essentially instrumental genre to narrate their myth, Drexciya crafted their own sonic retelling of the Black Atlantic as science fiction (Eperjesi 122-124; Eshun 300). Their music inspired in turn a series of artworks through different media, like Ellen Gallagher's series of drawings titled *Watery Ecstatic*; the collaboration between hip hop group clipping and Rivers Solomon for *The Deep*; the comics series *The Book of Drexciya* by Abdul Qadim Haqq and Dai Satō; Ayana V. Jackson's exhibition *From the Deep: In the Wake of Drexciya*, currently on display at the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, as well as various scholarly essays (Gaskins 2016: 77; Mayer 561-565; Williams 168). This dialogue across time, space, and media testifies to the hybrid character of Afrofuturism as a vibrant artistic movement that celebrates difference and transformation; this is also apparent in the way in which aquatic imagery is articulated and developed by Nalo Hopkinson and Rivers Solomon to reclaim a sense of history and identity not imposed by white, Western-centric notions.

Jamaican-born Canadian writer Nalo Hopkinson's fiction has been praised for the way in which it addresses issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality through a deep knowledge of Afro-Caribbean folklore and history (Lavender 2019: 75; 2023: xi-xii), as in her 2003 novel *The Salt Roads*, a cross-generational narrative revolving around the (re)birth of Lasirén/Ezili in eighteenth-century St. Domingue, nineteenth-century Paris, and fourth-century Egypt and Jerusalem as her consciousness intertwines with those of three different women. When summoned by Mer, Tipingee, and Georgine, three enslaved women in St. Domingue, during the burial of Georgine's stillborn child, the water goddess akin to Mami Wata introduces herself as

born from song and prayer. A small life, never begun, lends me its unused vitality. I'm born from mourning and sorrow and three women's tearful voices. I'm born from countless journeys chained tight in the bellies of ships. Born from hope vibrant and hope destroyed. Born of bitter experience. Born of wishing for better. I'm born (40).

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, Drexciyan mythology is reminiscent of the etymology of the name Yemoja, one of the most important of such water deities, which is «a contraction of the Yoruba words: *Yeye*, meaning 'mother'; *omo*, meaning 'child'; and *eja*, meaning 'fish'. Roughly translated, the term means "mother whose children are like fish"» (Gaskins 2018: 196).

The context and atmosphere here might remind us of the “sorrow songs” celebrated by Du Bois, that «gift of story and song» (198) that enslaved Africans brought with them across the ocean, thus qualifying merfolk as much different deities than European mermaids. In addition, the nonlinear structure of the novel acknowledges music as an instrumental mode of narration for black experience. As Sorensen has pointed out, *The Salt Roads*’ narrative proceeds «dubwise into the future», that is, by provoking «reflection through the use of reverberation» (268), a vernacular technique that is particularly fitting for Afrofuturism, since, through it, listeners / readers hear «each sound as a reverberation or echoing of what has come before, or, even more disjunctively, hear[s] a sound for the first time as an echo of an absent original» (Sorensen 268). The novel has a fragmented, dub-like structure which, starting from its section titles (“BEAT...”; “BREAK/”; “BEAT!”; “ONE-”; “... ↓ DROP”), «samples and fractures historical narrative and produces a literary version of dub’s sonic dissonance, deformation, and estrangement» (Sorensen 271). Ezili’s consciousness is what connects each narrative scrap through space and time, making them reverberate through ancient waters towards the future.

Hopkinson’s next novel, *The New Moon’s Arms*, relies on the same water imagery, this time to craft a story in which the scope might appear smaller – it is definitely a less global and more local narrative – and yet, in transplanting merfolk mythology in a contemporary setting, it contributes to complete Hopkinson’s exploration of its potential as a way to both embody and (re)tell black experience. Unlike other of her works, the protagonist here bears no god-like features, but she is “just a woman”, named Calamity Lambkin who lives in the fictional Caribbean Island of Cayaba. While trying to make sense of the losses of her life, she experiences something which will be determinant in her path towards the construction of a new self: she happens to rescue and foster an injured child stranded on the shore, whom she names Agway, and who will turn out to be a merchild from a mysterious local community of “sea people”, as the Cayabans call them. The merfolk are said to be the descendants of the Africans forcefully boarded on a slave ship which was wrecked off the coast of Cayaba, even though it is not clear how/why they became sea creatures. When Calamity starts considering that these might be Agway’s origins, she shares her thoughts with her old school-friend Evelyn, who is skeptical, to say the least, if not in denial. She eventually accepts the idea only when Calamity points out the countless oral narratives revolving around the ocean and water creatures, which are thus dignified as a historiography capable of envisioning a different future – and therefore, albeit paradoxically, a different present – for black people (Davis 352-353). Similarly, the encounter with Agway and, through him, with oceanic temporality, ignites the possibility of inhabiting a new identity for

Calamity, one which can fill the emptiness of her past with a new sense of kinship that leads her to question and redefine not only her personal life-story but the very assumptions regarding normalcy, affection, and care in terms that are not Western-imposed.

Rivers Solomon's 2019 novella *The Deep* also narrates of a community of water beings, the wajinru, who are «born from the dead» (43) as a consequence of the blood-soaked history of the Middle Passage. Even though they are not divine creatures like Ezili, their story too is «born from song and prayer [...] from hope vibrant and hope destroyed» (Hopkinson 2003: 40), both thematically and stylistically. In fact, the novella is the result of a «work of artistic telephone» (clipping, 2019: 157) between Solomon and clipping., who wrote the song “The Deep” riffing on Drexciya's mythology to expand their narration of an alternative black history in which death by water turns into new life and possibilities for black selves to become and transform, free from the constraints of white-dominated society. The wajinru's post-human hybridity – as both human *and* water creatures – makes them the embodiment of the relation between blackness and the Atlantic Ocean which, in this scenario, becomes not only a locus of death and suffering but a liberating environment, where the abyss can be even seen as a shelter. Like Hopkinson's, Solomon's merfolk does not look like attractive women-like creatures as in Western canonical mermaids, but rather like alien beings. This emphasizes even more their capacity to embody a specific notion of alterity and othering, one which connects them with a Duboisian double-consciousness and, through it, with black experience at large.

### Surfacing Temporalities

When considered symbolically, the ocean can indeed accommodate the possibility for the intersection of many and diverse selves and temporalities. Here, time can be represented as moving both horizontally, through currents and waves, and vertically, from the surface to the bottom or – perhaps more appropriately – vice versa; and its merfolk inhabitants, moving through this multi-dimensional metaphor with their hybrid bodies and nonlinear (hi)stories, can be seen as the embodiment of what Paul Gilroy has called «the tension between roots and routes» (133) in the Black Atlantic.

Edouard Glissant's reading of the “submarine” within the Black Atlantic (66-67) reflects on the death at sea of too many enslaved people and concludes that, during the Middle Passage, «*They sowed in the depths the seeds of an invisible presence.* And so transversality, and not the universal transcendence

of the sublime, has come to light» (66), which is precisely what Hopkinson's sea people and Solomon's wajinru are – an invisible yet indispensable presence connecting the deep and the surface, the past and the present. Not surprisingly then, the “submarine” is interpreted by Ian Baucom in strictly temporal terms, as he explains:

Memory here does not haunt, it translates, it fuses the time of remembrance with the time of the remembered, it joins a “now” to a “then” through the mutating wash of a sea-change which is also, always, a “yet-to-be”. Reclaiming the slave from the waters of this Black Atlantic, Glissant's comment demands that we free ourselves from those acts of forgetting upon which the constitution of fixed identities so regularly depend, but asks that in joining ourselves to the no-longer forgotten we refuse to fetishize an alternate past and instead cultivate a vulnerability to the mutating ebb-tides of submarine memory.

While this reading of the submarine again invokes a temporally dispersed subject, it equally implies a model of spatially-disseminated identity, a rhizomatic dislocation of the subject, a self which manifests itself not as an essence but as a meandering (np).

A disseminated identity is exactly what defines Ezili in *The Salt Roads*: like water, the goddess is relentless, moving across time and space with an energy that is ultimately sexual and sensual, feminine, generative (but also, like the sea, potentially destructive). «Time does not flow for me. Not for me the progression in a straight line from earliest to latest» (Hopkinson 2003: 42), she announces early in the novel, «Time *eddies*. I am now then, now there, sometimes simultaneously. Sounds, those are sounds, from another place. I have heard them before, or am I hearing them now, or will hear them later. Three sounds: Song. Prayer. Scream» (42; emphasis added). The image of the eddy, a contrary or circular current, recalls the vertical/horizontal interplay in black temporality and reminds readers of the heterogeneity and difference on which identities are constructed, a process of becoming that is seldom fluid, “smooth”, and rather fragmented, which Ezili manages to navigate on the beat without particular effort. In *The Deep*, learning to play with time comes gradually and quite painfully.

The wajinru's underwater community revolves around the figure of the historian, the “chosen one”, who carries the “rememberings”, that is, the entire history of the merfolk, starting from their birth from the bellies of the first dying mothers. It is a painful and almost unbearable history, and this is why only one wajinru is chosen to keep the memories within their consciousness, thereby allowing the others to live the present without being destroyed by the past. It is also necessary knowledge for the merfolk, though, and the historian is supposed to share it with the others, once a year, during the ceremony of the Remembrance, so as to guide them through the rememberings and provide them

with a collective identity. Not a water deity like Ezili, Yetu, the latest historian and protagonist of the novella, does not accept her role willingly and will need to go as far as to the surface in order to gain a true sense of belonging and eventually understand «where loneliness ends» (Solomon 49). To Yetu, «[t]he womb abyss becomes a transformative threshold [and] a profoundly metaphysical space» (DeLoughrey 8) but that knowledge needs both to be affected by and to affect the surface in order to become awareness. Like Calamity in *The New Moon's Arms*, who must learn how to use her gift of recovering lost things, Yetu must learn how to make sense of all the fragments lost and all the fragments retrieved – of herself, of her people, and even of the others (the humans). In both cases, the encounter with the Other(ed) – Agway for Calamity and Oori, a human, for Yetu – will be instrumental in the characters' quest.

## Conclusions

The three novels examined are exemplary of how the “aquatic turn” in Afro-futurism not only constitutes an interesting way of intersecting Black Studies with Environmental Humanities (Eperjesi 134-137; Fargione 55-56), but also provides a framework through which to rethink dominant / subaltern relations when it comes to narratives depicting alternative, non-conforming temporalities to address and represent non-conforming identities. In these stories, merfolk are, in fact, the carriers of the possibility for an alternative history arising from the Middle Passage which can, however, be fully understood and actualized only once it reemerges from the abyss to “trouble the waters” on the surface and thereby act as an instrumental means to interpellate individual and collective traumas alike. Here, in the shallow waters at the border between two different senses of time, the encounter between the human and the non- / post-human allows for a reframing of the Middle Passage epistemology. Such reframing goes beyond traditional notions of progress and history to create narratives revolving around the intersection of many and diverse experiences of blackness, that is, the «“now” through which all imaginings of Blackness will be mediated» (Wright 14). This is also made possible thanks to the narrative and stylistic techniques employed by the two authors, who effectively blur the boundaries between literacy and orality by mobilizing different artistic forms and languages to craft their works, continuing and renewing a long-lasting tradition in black literature. Indeed, by reinterpreting West African mythology, and remixing and dubbing it as Afrofuturist fiction, Nalo Hopkinson and Rivers Solomon engage with the black diasporic experience in terms of hybridity and transformation in time and space; in doing so, their novels contribute to



expanding the notion of blackness and envision a sense of community that is not restricted to white, Western-imposed assumptions and mind frames.

By engaging with the realm of «epiphenomenal spacetime» (Wright 41–45), Hopkinson and Solomon offer their readers a language through which to explore how blackness is embodied and read in the current socio-historical moment, which succeeds in being inclusive rather than exclusive when dealing with the Middle Passage epistemology precisely because it nurtures difference and change rather than homogeneity and uniformity. In their fictions, the abyss becomes, in the words of Alexis P. Gumbs, «an opening where all the myriad forms of resource relationship and organization constructed by groups of people in different physical environments still exist as possibilities» (348), not a dark void of perdition and death, not an end but an origin – a source of perhaps unexpected encounters and, metaphorically, a dimension in which the future can be imagined as something tangible and unfolding even in a dying world.

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