



# Fluid Identities and Memories in Rivers Solomon's *The Deep*

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**Abstract**— *In recent years, there has been a noticeable shift in the realm of speculative fantasy fiction towards incorporating contemporary issues, particularly those concerning marginalized communities. Popular speculative fiction has become increasingly interested in exploring the experiences of marginalized people and how they make their way through a world that is frequently hostile to them. Rivers Solomon, in her 2019 novella, The Deep, skilfully explores the ongoing struggle of marginalized communities to reconcile their past with their present and future. Through this exploration, this study aims to gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which postcolonialism interacts in creative narratives, particularly in speculative fantasy fiction. Set in a deep underwater society inhabited by the descendants of pregnant African women who were thrown overboard during the transatlantic slave trade, this work grapples with the lasting impact of this traumatic history on the fictional "Wajinru" community while highlighting the novel's historical context. The characters and their experiences highlight the marginalization and resistance of individuals who occupy liminal spaces, while its narrative structure disrupts dominant traditional narratives. The aim of this paper is to delve into the intricate process of identity formation within the context of generational trauma portrayed in the novella.*



**Keywords**— *Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, Transgenerational Trauma, Collective Memory*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Zetta Elliott's insight in her essay, *Decolonising the Imagination*, where she notes that she "learned early on those only white children had wonderful adventures in distant lands," underscores a pervasive issue within the science fiction and fantasy (SFF) genre. However, Rivers Solomon challenges the Eurocentric narrative that often permeates the popular fantasy genre by offering a powerful counter-narrative and incorporating non-western cultural influences into her works. *The Deep* engages in the challenge to prevailing historical narratives, which Kodwo Eshun refers to as the "war of counter memory." It explores this narrative through the portrayal of the wajinru, an underwater society of mer-folks with their own culture, history, and language. The story draws inspiration from African folklore and mythology, as well as the real-world history of the slave trade and the displacement of Black people from their homeland. Through this world building,

*The Deep* offers a platform on which to stage social scenes specific to the concerns such as the loss of homeland and the effects of generational trauma. The novella's exploration of intergenerational trauma and displacement serves as a powerful commentary on these themes.

In a 2014 op-ed for the New York Times, US children's novelist Christopher Myers lamented what he termed as the "Apartheid" of American speculative fiction, noting the glaring absence of characters of color and other marginalized groups in books that "traverse the lands of adventure, curiosity, imagination, or personal growth." Similarly, Peter Kalu has criticized the genre, stating, "Even in science fiction and fantasy, we are used to hearing the stories of the rich and the white. This represents an enormous failure of imagination." However, in recent years, there has been a growing movement towards diversifying the genre and providing a platform for underrepresented voices. Jess Kelly in her essay, *A Multitude of Identities*:

*Intersectionality in YA Fantasy*, is of the opinion that contemporary fantasy literature provides a platform for the representation of marginalized voices. The genre frequently addresses concerns of identity, power, and social justice. Thus, challenging the binary between canonical literature and speculative literature which is often dismissed as entertainment or a form of escapism and questioning the idea that only particular genres of literature are deserving of critical attention and recognition.

*The Deep* provides an opportunity to explore the oppressed identities in a liminal space where power dynamics are complex and oppressive structures endure. The setting enables the novel to explore themes of postcolonialism through a lens that is familiar to readers, while simultaneously creating a sense of distance that allows the novel to address these themes in a nuanced way. The science fiction and fantasy (SFF) genre has also come a long way in recent years when it comes to portraying complex identities that go beyond simplistic categorizations. This work of fiction highlights the importance of acknowledging and understanding the ways in which our experiences shape our identities, and how we can create new identities in response to trauma. The struggle of reconciling personal and communal identities may also be seen as a part of a larger discourse around larger historical and cultural narratives.

Described by its editor, Navah Wolfe, as "a game of artistic telephone" in its afterword, the genesis of *The Deep* can be traced back to 1992 with the release of Detroit dance-electronic group Drexciya's debut album, "Deep Sea Dweller." The album drew inspiration from the horrific accounts of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, including the practice of throwing pregnant women deemed expendable overboard during the Middle Passage. The mythos and concept of an underwater society descended from drowned slaves which was originally created by Drexciya in the mid 90s later on inspired the song "The Deep" by the experimental rap group, "Clipping". Rivers Solomon then took up the mantle of authorship, crafting the novel *The Deep* by building upon this existing mythos and infusing it with their own unique perspective and narrative. The idea of an undersea world inhabited by mermaid-like beings known as wajinru or "chorus of the deep" —the evolved water breathing offsprings of drowned, pregnant African slave women— who are free from slavery and unaware of the atrocities their ancestors endured as they went on to establish communities and lead peaceful lives in the abyssal depths of the ocean is a modern day take on the legacy of slavery and its impact on the present, the complexities of identity and belonging, and the relationship between humans and the natural world. In this narrative, the ocean is not merely a "forgotten space", as Allan Sekula described

it, where human bodies gain agency. "It has become less of an inert backdrop to cross over, and more a figure and a material to fathom, to sound, and to descend beneath" (Deloughrey & Flores, 2020). The ocean is not a backdrop but an active participant that shapes the experiences of the wajinru and their understanding of their history.

The novella primarily revolves around the female presenting, hermaphroditic character, Yetu who is burdened with the responsibility of remembering her people's traumatic past. She serves as the historian of her community, the keeper of the memories of her ancestors as she possesses a more robust long-term memory than the other wajinrus. As a result, she was selected at the age of 14 to serve as the historian. She has a responsibility to maintain and share the memories of their people that date back at least 400 years through a rite known as "The Remembrance," in which she temporarily transfers the memories to the other wajinru, enabling them to recollect their origins, identity, and potential future. They employ Yetu as a means of preserving their cultural legacy while simultaneously requiring her to repress her own individual identity as "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" (Solomon et al., 2019, p.11).

## II. THE OCEAN AS A SYMBOL OF ANCESTRAL ORIGINS

The opening scene depicts the 34-year-old Yetu being roused from a dreamlike state, where she finds herself entangled between her present reality and the collective memories of the past, serving as a vessel for "all the memories of those who have come before." (Solomon et al., 2019, p.69). This interplay of space and time, and the dissolution of boundaries between memories, sexualities, and temporalities within the wajinru's experience, echoes Gaston Bachelard's concept of "hydrous dreams." Bachelard's notion suggests a fluidity of consciousness and memory in connection with water, a symbol often associated with the unconscious and the depths of the mind. In this context, the element of water serves as a metaphorical medium for the wajinru through which they navigate their shared memories and identities, allowing them to access a deeper understanding of themselves and their history. The ocean is not only a physical manifestation of this fluidity and but also serves as a symbol for the liminal space that Yetu inhabits, between her individual identity and the collective memories of her people. Bill Ashcroft describes liminality as "an in-between space in which cultural change may occur: the transcultural space in which strategies for personal or communal self-hood may

be elaborated, a region in which there is a continual process of movement and interchange between different states" (Ashcroft et al., 2013). In *The Deep*, this liminal space is embodied by the ocean, which offers the wajinru with the opportunity to discover means of achieving personal and communal self-realization. Thus, the ocean, which is assumed in terms of kinship, is posited as "a figure of evolutionary and ancestral origins" (Deloughrey, 2022) that reflects the complex, multifaceted identities of the characters and their community. The first wajinru were the children born to drowning slave women who had been rejected by the ships. These children evolved and mutated into aqueous beings and embraced their oceanic identity. To add to this further, the ritual of "The Remembrance" takes place in a "mud womb" which can be seen serving as a tangible representation of profound connection to ancestral memories. While they are not being physically (re)-born, the mud womb creates a space for them to access and connect with their ancestral memories in a way that allows for a spiritual rebirth. It allows them to transcend their physical bodies and connect with the oceanic body of communal memory.

### III. THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN NOSTALGIA AND TRAUMA

In her essay, *The Trauma of Displacement*, Madelaine Hron explores the applicability of trauma studies to the experiences of refugees and displaced individuals. The essay elaborates on how the ones who have been displaced are distinguished by their "success" at "making it" in their new homeland yet how they often exist in a state of liminality, caught between past and present, and between different cultural and social contexts. "In 1678, a young Swiss doctor named Johannes Hofer first documented a new "disease"—a serious, life-threatening form of homesickness – which he termed "nostalgia"" (Hron, 2018). The process of colonization involved the erasure or suppression of their cultural heritage and traditions. This all-pervasive emotion of nostalgia can be a way of reclaiming that lost heritage. The wajinru are nostalgic for a past they do not recall since their genesis is rife with trauma and violence, making the concept of nostalgia difficult for them to understand. The pain of their ancestors' experiences has been handed down to them through their collective consciousness, despite the fact that they cannot recall their history. They are nostalgic for a sense of belonging that has been denied to them rather than for a particular period of time or place in this way. They grow "anxious and restless" without Yetu who is the sole guardian of the collective memories of their ancestors because "without answers, there is only a hole, a hole where a history should be that takes the shape of an endless

longing" (Solomon et al., 2019, p. 11). Their longing for a lost past mirrors a profound void where history should reside and is a manifestation of their desire for a deeper sense of identity and belonging, the realisation of which is facilitated by the recollection of their ancestors' collective memories. However, this nostalgia of theirs for a lost past continues to haunt them, and it is this longing that drives them to explore the mysteries of their origins and the history of their people. Through the wajinru's experience, Solomon explores the idea that memories are not just individual recollections of events, but are shaped and influenced by broader social and historical contexts. The erasure of their history is not just a personal tragedy, but a reflection of the broader violence and trauma inflicted upon enslaved African people during the Middle Passage.

Hron has elaborated on the concept of "double absence" given by Abdulmalek Sayad in his work *La Double Absence*. "Sayad characterizes the immigrant subject as both an immigrant and an emigrant, who remains psychically both in the former home and the new host country, as well as in the past and in the present ... At the heart of this "double absence" is the anguish that many immigrants feel at being suspended "in-between", in a virtual existence between two worlds" (Hron, 2018). Like the immigrant subject in Sayad's formulation, the wanjiru, too, are caught between two worlds, unable to fully inhabit either. They are not fully part of the world of the land-dwelling humans or of the underwater creatures, but rather exist in a state of liminality. Although they are not immigrants in the traditional sense of the word, as a result of their traumatic origins, they are both physically and psychically disconnected from their ancestral past and their present reality. They exist in a state of in-betweenness, suspended between two worlds - the world of their own and the world of the "two-legged surface dwellers" they observe from afar.

The wanjiru exist in a space that is both familiar and foreign, thereby engendering a sense of liminality. This liminality is a site of potential destabilization of dominant narratives and categories, and their existence outside of colonial history challenges the normative cultural forms. They exist in a realm that is both accessible and inaccessible to humans and this struggle creates a sense of existential limbo. Furthermore, their existence in this space also puts them at risk of being erased or forgotten by the human world. They are not recognized or acknowledged by the human world, and their existence outside of colonial history would also mean that they do not fit neatly into existing categories or narratives. This erasure and marginalization is a form of displacement in itself. However, rather than being passive victims of colonial erasure, they assert their agency in their own cultural production and affirm their cultural

autonomy as they actively participate in the construction of their own histories and narratives. Their ability to forge a hybrid cultural identity draws from both their own oceanic background and the wider human community.

This liminal space the wajinru inhabit is fraught with tension and ambiguity, and it is this ambiguity that also is at the root of their transgenerational trauma. Anthropologist Victor Turner provides a useful framework for understanding their liminal state and its relationship to their experience of transgenerational trauma. Turner's idea of "Communitas" facilitates the comprehension of the trauma experienced by the wajinru. Communitas refers to a state of community and solidarity that arises in liminal spaces. This concept is particularly relevant to the wajinru's experience during the annual remembrance ceremony. They participate in a collective experience during this ceremony that transcends their individual identities and enables them to connect with one another more deeply. They shed their individual personas and come together as a community to share their pain, grief, and memories. The ceremony involves a complex ritual that requires them to surrender their individual consciousness to the collective consciousness of their ancestors.

The inability to directly access these memories creates a paradoxical experience of trauma, where the trauma is felt through a longing for a past that cannot be fully known. The success that they have had in surviving outside of colonial history is tempered by the ongoing challenges they face in reconciling their past and present, and in finding a place in the world where they belong. Their longing for a concrete past is constantly at loggerheads with the weight of memories Yetu carries. Her personal trauma is intertwined with the trauma of her people as she struggles to reconcile her own experiences with the collective memory of the wajinru. Their survival is "reliant upon her suffering. It was not the intention. It was no one's wish. But it was her lot" (Solomon et al., 2019, p. 15). This practice of communal memory preservation, coupled with the suppression of individual identity, highlights the complex relationship between collective memory and personal trauma.

As the wajinru's historian and the only person who is able to preserve their collective memories, she must accept and bear the burden of their traumatic communal memory. Yetu's struggle to balance her own identity with her communal responsibilities reflects the broader issue of reacting to inherited obligations that shape both individual and social identity. Her consciousness is constantly disrupted by the trauma of her ancestors, and she struggles to make sense of her own identity in the face of this overwhelming history. This constant immersion in

traumatic memories leads to her detachment from the present and the inability to form meaningful relationships with others. For Yetu, the trauma of her ancestors is not a memory that can be easily processed or integrated into her psyche. Instead, it is a haunting presence that disrupts her life and makes it impossible for her to function. Her dilemma illustrates the severity of trauma's effects on an individual. The inability to disentangle oneself from one's trauma is a common theme in trauma studies, and her experiences reflect this phenomenon. Her decision to abandon her role as historian represents an attempt to escape the trauma, but even when she achieves that, she still feels incomplete. What compounds her suffering is the fact that the wajinrus tend to dismiss their ancestral past unless it is time for the annual remembrance. "They each held pieces of the History now, divided up between them. They shared it and discussed it. They grieved. Sometimes, they wanted to die. But then they would remember, it was done." (Solomon et al., 2019, p. 107).

The risks of individualizing trauma are demonstrated by the wajinru's practise of holding to their past through one person. Numerous academics, including Judith Herman and Bessel van der Kolk, have studied the role of community in the processing of shared trauma. According to Herman, acknowledging trauma together can help people feel safer and more trustworthy while also promoting the healing process. Van der Kolk emphasises the significance of communal processing of trauma in his work. Without any past to anchor herself to, she feels as though a crucial part of herself has vanished and gone adrift. Making the wajinru's collective memory really collective once more is the only key to addressing this dilemma. This shift emphasizes on the value of community as a means of recovery as they decide to separately hang on to small portions of their history rather than forcing it all back on Yetu after her return.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

*The Deep* adds to a broader conversation about the transformative power of storytelling, inviting readers to reflect on the ways in which literature can shed light on the complexities of the human experience and offer a reflection on historical trauma. Solomon, through Yetu, tackles the reality of trauma that is embedded in the past and the present, particularly for the wajinru. Recognising trauma and acknowledging its interconnectivity within a society is critical in building individual personhood. Solomon's masterful portrayal of the wajinru's struggles depict that their nostalgia is not merely for a particular time or place but for a deeper sense of belonging and identity that has been denied to them through the erasure of their history.

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