

Emiri Ninomiya

Water, Trauma, and Collaborative Memory in Rivers Solomon's *The Deep*

Since the birth of the earliest myths and legends, water has often graced literature with its ethereal emotional symbolism and enigmatic maternal nature. It flows with purpose, sometimes a tool for gods, sometimes a new realm for mortals. Bringing life as much as it brings death, water in literature is as integral to human nature as it is to the human body, and in a new Afrofuturist interpretation, novelist Rivers Solomon with Daveed Diggs, William Hutson, and Jonathan Snipes sets a story of traumatic memory against the backdrop of the endless ocean. This story emerged first from the mythos of Drexiciya, who sprinkled throughout their music references to an aquatic people descended from the unborn children of drowned enslaved-to-be, then through the song *The Deep* by rap group clipping. (Heller). In itself a collaborative effort, the novel *The Deep* builds on the canon of African cultural literature, invoking the symbolism of water to tell a story of an underwater people called the Wajinru. These water-dwellers, neither wholly human nor entirely fish, learn to share their memories rather than leave their weight to one among them.

The transatlantic slave trade is central to this story. Solomon and indeed many other artists before them have thoroughly examined the inherited trauma of Black descendants of the enslaved. Martinican writer and poet Edouard Glissant, whose ideas shall be elucidated upon later in this essay, examined this phenomenon in Caribbean, Black-dominated countries. The sea is a "space of origins," and for the shackled Africans who were brought across the Atlantic, it is the origin of their collective trauma (Bonnet, Schon). Without discussing the bloody history of pain inherent to the Black American experience, by which I mean Black people living throughout the Americas, works like *The Deep* which examine their collective trauma suffer a lack of framing.

The Deep juxtaposes the dueling perspectives of characters Yetu and Oori on water and memory to reflect emerging interpretations of the transatlantic slave crossing as symbolic as a place of trauma and legacy. Oori grieves that her people's memory may die with her and sees the ocean as something brave and lively. Yetu, historian member of the aquatic Wajinru people, suffers the burden of traumatic memory and rises to the surface to escape it. These relationships with the water evolve as they connect with each other. Yetu and her people come to share their memories with each other, strengthening their bond. Oori eventually leaves the surface behind, as it has nothing left for her, and joins Yetu and her people. Memories evolve to be more than a burden, but an ever-collaborative project. Yetu and Oori's joined compromise demonstrates the power of memory as an honor to experience.

During an annual ceremony called the Remembrance in which the historian disperses the Rememberings to the rest of the Wajinru, Yetu leaves her people partway through to escape the memories altogether. Her freedom is liberating, her mind feeling empty of pain for the first time since she became the historian. Yet, she does not revel, for the feeling that she has abandoned her people will not leave her: "By leaving, Yetu was forcing them to endure the full weight of their History... After everything, she still might die" (69). Unfortunately, this leaves the Wajinru in a frenzied state of pain as they are stuck in a fit of traumatic Rememberings, leading to a storm that threatens the whole world (114). Such is their power, which Yetu had underestimated and has now let free.

For each form in which water appears in the novel, there is an associated meaning. The ocean itself represents the shared history remembered in the hearts of a people, the Wajinru in the story. When Yetu is at the bottom of the ocean, the water pressure is immense, matching the depth of trauma memory can bring: "Wajinru ruled the deep... But the deepness that Yetu shared

with them now was something different altogether” (30). Secondly, ripples caused by movement in the water connect the Wajinru as the light does not penetrate the deepest waters they make their home. They communicate with movement and feel each other in the water, which overwhelms sensitive Yetu (2). She must dull her senses to cope with these sensations, mirroring the defenses she needs to build in her mind against the pain of the Rememberings. Finally, the mother archetype also appears frequently in the novel. The Foremothers are the enslaved pregnant African women who were cast overboard from the slave ships, and from whom all Wajinru are descended (28). The first Wajinru were raised by whales in pods governed by a matriarch whale and the Remembrance ceremony occurs in a round cave of mud called the Womb. Water as femininity is a hallmark of mythos throughout cultures, remarkable in its chaotic beauty and power to create life. These three senses of water link community with the inheritance of trauma.

The literary canon is far from lacking in connections between water, trauma, and the past. Glissant meditated on the “art” of memory by examining the traumatic past of the descendants of Caribbean slaves, brought to the islands via slave ships. In his 1964 novel *Le quatrième siècle* set in the French Caribbean in the late 1700s, a young man by the name of Maroon flees enslavement in favor of preserving his dignity and his heritage. This contrasts with the character of Béluse who resigns himself to become a mindless tool (Thomas). He and the other enslaved are robbed of their humanity, culture, language, and family from before in the brutal environment to which they are subjected, a horrific mainstay in slavery. Glissant provides the idea of “nonhistory,” or an unvoiced history which “results from a traumatic dislocation of body and consciousness” (Lapina).

Creators are also compelled to engage with the ethereal nature of water via nonliterary, artistic avenues like music and poetry. Scholar Linda Lapina writes of a childhood song of hers, where the river Daugava in Latvia is “full of precious souls.” A river commonly referred to as Daugava mamula (“mother”) or Liktenupe, the river of fate and destiny, it is said to carry the pain, blood, and tears of Latvian of Latvian people to the sea. Drawing upon the writings of Edouard Glissant on intergenerational trauma and histories of violence, Lapina describes a phenomenon where human bodies form an even greater body through their interaction with each other and their environment. The interconnected whole that results from each fully integrated person and memory means far more than the sum of its parts.

Solomon builds upon and develops these perspectives in several ways. First, the character of Yetu is a synthesis of the two characters in *Le quatrième siècle*. She flees her people for liberation, but it is liberation from the burden of memory rather than an embrace of the importance of preserved memory. That memory, that trauma, is oppression. She initially stresses to Oori that “if a people is defined by the terror done to them, it’s good for it to go,” but by the end she learns through her mother Amaba’s kindness and her people’s bravery that memory as a collaborative project (94). This allows Solomon to interrogate the inescapable place of grief in enslaved Black heritage, which is so prevalent in the modern-day United States, the Caribbean, and elsewhere. Secondly, they take Glissant’s interpretation that “history needs to be laid out flat, or sharded afresh... so that memories can be openly heard and joined together” and place it in a nonhuman race’s society (Thomas). This allows for a more explicit examination of the sharing of cultural memory and why it is psychologically and socially important that traumatic memories be a collaborative project. Everyday life allows little discussion of traumatic memory, so a fantastical metaphor such as that in *The Deep* is useful in its accessibility as a short novella.

Finally, Solomon echoes the notion of interactive memory, of which Lapina spoke at length. When integrated and synthesized, differing perspectives and personal histories create a greater cultural legacy.

When Oori descends to join Yetu, she is neither entirely human nor Wajinru, but a new hybrid of both. She represents a new interpretation of memory. It is perhaps flawed, but beautiful in being born of multiple worlds just like the Wajinru. Yetu has learned from connecting with Oori what her Amaba told her a long time ago – that “a people [need] a history. To live without one [is] death,” no matter how painful that history may be or burdensome it may seem (100). The duality has been reconciled, between Yetu’s ache for freedom and the importance of remembering one’s history. Through conscious community remembrance, the Wajinru will maintain the “nonhistory” of which Glissant wrote, keeping it alive for generations to come.

Through walking the audience through Yetu’s evolution and the evolution of all the wajinru, Solomon posits that memory is meant to be collaborative. After all, the name Wajinru is in itself a collaboration. “Waj” mean “chorus” and derives from the name of the first human they contacted, and “inru” means “of the deep” and represents the home to which they belong (64). Yetu, Oori, and the Wajinru resolve to create a collaborative memory from their torrential traumas just as this paper aims to collaborate with the writings of other scholars, just as Rivers Solomon built on the work of music groups clipping. and Drexiciya, and just how Glissant conceived memory to be “reconciliation and unity-with the past and with each other” (Thomas). The memories will be treasured, relationships will be nurtured, and the Foremothers will be honored. Originally, Yetu believes the water to be a crushing abyss of trauma and pain with each ripple a blow, each current snagging the mind and flesh. By the end of the novel, as the deep embraces a joyful Yetu and Oori, that ocean does not clutch, but frees.

Works Cited

- Bonnet, Véronique, and Schon, Natalie. "Maritime Poetics: the Atlantic, the Caribbean and the Mediterranean Seas in the Work of Saint-John Perse, Edouard Glissant, and Derek Walcott." *Journal of Caribbean Literatures*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2002, pp. 13–22. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/40986127 . Accessed 20 Feb. 2021.
- Heller, Jason. *'The Deep' Sings with Many Voices*. 7 Nov. 2019, www.npr.org/2019/11/07/776948306/the-deep-sings-with-many-voices.
- Lapina, Linda. "Re-membering with river Daugava: Poetic engagements with water memory." *Junctures: The Journal for Thematic Dialogue*, no. 21, 2020, p. 31+. *Gale Academic OneFile*, https://go-gale-com.offcampus.lib.washington.edu/ps/i.do?p=AONE&u=wash_main&id=GALE%7CA647535694&v=2.1&it=r. Accessed 19 Feb. 2021.
- Solomon, Rivers, Diggs, Daveed, Hutson, William, and Snipes, Jonathan. *The Deep*. Saga Press, 2019.
- Thomas, Bonnie. "Edouard Glissant and the Art of Memory." *Small Axe*, no. 30, 2009, pp. 25-36,188. *ProQuest*, <https://search.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/edouard-glissant-art-memory/docview/195798327/se-2?accountid=14784>.