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**Diving into *The Deep*: Exploring the Liberatory and Healing Potential in Afrofuturistic
Fantasy**

The genre of fantasy has long been described as a space of escape, as a nostalgic haven that trades the mundane trials of the world in favor of battles for power, honor, and valor. This much is apparent in centuries of fantasy produced by authors who have long held great influence in the genre. Whether it's J.R.R. Tolkien's writings on the brave journeys of Bilbo Baggins or Robert E. Howard's heroic tales of Conan the Barbarian, most authors seek to escape the mundanity of their highly industrial and rigid societies by returning to nostalgic, magical times. However, as anyone outside of the dominant paradigms of power can attest to, the nostalgic and escapist themes of fantasy are only accessible to a select few audiences who hold identities on the side of history that has benefited from colonial extraction and racial exploitation. Neither *The Hobbit* nor Conan the Barbarian's pulp fiction include narratives of Blackness, Indigeneity, female characters, or queerness. Like many works of their time, they both contain elements of violent racialization, which deeply attests to the fact that escapism in works of fantasy is not always accessible through the nostalgia of the past. To engage in elements of escapism and liberation, one must often instead look to the future.

Though the idea of nostalgia in novels is only accessible to a few, fantasy's function is not solely centered around providing an escape to violent pasts and colonial periods. In fantasy, Afrofuturism does the critical work of contending with the past in ways that acknowledge cultural trauma while holding space for future joy and humanity. Beyond this, Afrofuturistic fantasy engages in the work of "speculative fiction" and seeks to imagine futures centering liberation and community. This essay will examine the ways in which Afrofuturism accomplishes this interrogation of fantasy through a study of *The Deep*, a novella by Rivers Solomon. By engaging with the "Black Fantastic" literary pattern, the historical and literary impact of the Middle Passage, and the concept of "speculative fictions", *The Deep* demonstrates how one might find hope and light in their future when the past is wrought with pain and cultural trauma.

The Deep follows the journey of Yetu, the historian of the *wajinru* people who live in the depths of the Atlantic Ocean. The *wajinru* are humanoid merpeople descended from those who were pregnant and thrown overboard slave ships during the Middle Passage. Thus, their descents must contend with holding a deep trauma and pain in their subconscious and their communities. Yetu is tasked with holding much of the physical and emotional trauma of her people, as well as centuries of painful memories that no one else holds in quite the same way. By imagining the ways in which one might contend with the deep trauma of the Middle Passage, Solomon explores how communities and individuals might hold and process historical trauma, especially when the process of finding solace, comfort, and escape is obscured by the murky depths of the past.

Understanding the tools that Afrofuturism works with to reimagine liberatory futures requires looking back to the central location that many works of Afrofuturistic begin at. Several authors and

scholars note that the Middle Passage is a central point in Black Expressive Culture, and that one must begin there in order to understand the work that Afrofuturism engages in. This is explored by scholar Dorottya Mózes, who examines the work of Frank Wilker in his book *Cultural Memories of Origin: Trauma, Memory, and Imagery in African American Narratives of the Middle Passage*. In this work, both Mózes and Wilker note that “the prime originator of racial slavery and terror for African captives in the Atlantic is the Middle Passage”, or “the second leg of the triangular slave trade” (Mózes 1).

Wilker further discusses the way that some Afrofuturistic works can function as “the foundational African diasporic narrative”, as they reckon with a central “founding trauma for Black identity” (Wilker 128). In the world that Solomon imagines in *The Deep*, the *wajinru* people themselves are a sort of members of the African diaspora who explore their own means of contending with the generational trauma rooted in the horror of the Middle Passage. Contextualizing Yetu’s narrative with the histories of those who were enslaved makes it clear that past is not always a place in which the African Diaspora can find relief, nostalgia, or escape in. Thus, Afrofuturistic fantasy must instead do the work of creating and imagining futures that provide an essential form of hope and healing.

The generational trauma of the Middle Passage is explored in relation to fantasy literature by author and scholar Ebony Elizabeth Thomas in the ideas of “The Dark Fantastic”, which is a framework that examines race in young adult fantasy and speculative fiction through the stages of “spectacle, hesitation, violence, and haunting” (Thomas 283). Thomas extends this idea towards the concept of the “Black Fantastic” and explains how literary patterns and storylines in Black fantasy must inherently differ from their Eurocentric counterparts. This is particularly observed in the idea of the “Door of No Return”, which refers to the way in which the Black Diaspora’s past contains deep

trauma and racial violence that is largely impossible to access through memory or narrative forms.

Members of the Black Diaspora have been violently severed from narratives and histories predating the Middle Passage, and thus experience temporality and their pasts differently from Eurocentric fantasies that aim to find solace and escape in the past. In other words, it is largely impossible to access or return to events and memories before the Middle Passage. This is demonstrated in various journeys made throughout *The Deep* as characters work to navigate their futures beyond the Door of No Return.

The Deep begins by imagining the fate of members of the African Diaspora who were thrown off slave ships during the Middle passage, and then proceeds to investigate how characters contend with this deep pain and severance from their history. When the audience meets Yetu, she is attempting to contend with holding the memories, narratives, emotions, and sensations of all the *wajinru* who have come before her. Her path stands in deep contrast to characters like Bilbo Baggins and Conan the Barbarian, who are both fashioned by white authors to provide an escape from deeply industrial worlds. While their narratives of whiteness attempt to access nostalgic escapism through quests of valor, characters like Yetu instead face horrors like images of “a rain of bodies of two-legs” being thrown into the sea (Solomon 13) and the sensations of the pain that their ancestors have experienced. It is evident that Afrofuturistic fantasy is fundamentally different in its acknowledgement of these racial traumas and in its quest to imagine better futures of healing, connection, and liberation.

Both the characters of Yetu and Oori contend with moving from the Door of No Return into better futures that they must work to imagine and create. Thus, in this novella, Solomon uses the powerful form of fantasy to create new futures under the category of “speculative fiction”. Scholar Jane Bryce from the University of the West Indies describes speculative fiction as a form of magical

realism that specifically works to embody elements of “resistance and subversion” (4). The genre specifically centers non-Eurocentric literary plans, blueprints, or foundations (Bryce 12), much like the pattern of Thomas’s “Black Fantastic”. Bryce quotes Uppinder Mehan, a coeditor of the first anthology of “postcolonial science fiction and fantasy” in noting that if those impacted by colonialism and racial violence do not work to imagine their futures, “postcolonial peoples risk being condemned to be spoken about and for again” (Bryce 1).

The *wajinru* people and members of the African Diaspora in *The Deep* center their journey around speculative fiction in which they both work to imagine new futures in different ways. For Yetu, the Door of No Return begins with trauma enacted upon pregnant women on slave ships in the Middle Passage. From there, a pod of *zoti aleyu*, or strange fish, are birthed and nurtured emotionally by another two-legged land dweller who most likely has also lived through similar traumatic experiences in the Middle Passage. They are further nurtured by whales and grow their pod carefully, ultimately personally witnessing the trauma that the two-legs enact through enslavement and environmental extraction. This history is undoubtedly full of pain that nearly crushes Yetu emotionally and physically, and thus she attempts to sever herself from history, traveling up, up, up to the ocean’s surface. Here, she spends time stranded in a small rock-studded pool, pondering the meaning of kinship. Yetu believes that kinship directly means “isolation from her people” and she attempts to “cope with the rememberings” (Solomon 59) by distancing herself from her community and their history. Enduring six hundred years of pain leaves Yetu feeling like she existed as “a shell” or historical vessel for her people. Here, Solomon comments upon the way that holding deeply traumatic histories in isolation can erase one’s personhood. From here, Yetu is unable to return to this traumatic

past, and Afrofuturism must use speculative fiction to look into the future to determine how one might hold this weight.

Solomon contrasts Yetu's experiences with those of Oori in order to offer another example of the postcolonial trauma that comes with the "Door of No Return", as well as to explore another way to navigate the importance of community in holding trauma while seeking liberation. Oori faces severance from the Oshuben people and her family, but unlike Yetu, she barely knows any stories from her parents' generation. She eventually leaves Yetu to make a pilgrimage to her homeland to care for fixtures and grave sites for fear that they may all "vanish" and that the place she hails from will become "truly dead" (Solomon 80). Rather than sever herself from a past that she must hold alone, Oori continually revisits the remnants of her history and her people's culture, attempting to find something, anything to cling to. In comparing both Yetu and Oori's relationships with the past, Solomon imparts that the way in which one attempts to access a past of cultural and generational trauma can heavily impact an individual and shape their sense of personhood. This section of the novella can be further explained through the concept of "traumatic contemporaneity", which is expounded upon by Wilker and worked through by author Toni Morrison in her 1987 work *Beloved*. Wilker describes this concept as being situated in the "interstices between remembering and forgetting, collectivity and individuality, choicelessness and choice" (Wilker 160). Yetu and Oori fall upon two sides of this traumatic contemporaneity in both of their quests to make sense of cultural trauma and history that comes after the "Door of No Return". Both find themselves at extremes, with Yetu's movement from communal remembrance to deep isolation and with Oori's largely stagnant journey of holding one

foot in the past. Both are unable to locate a sense of hope for the future, and thus find themselves unable to move into states of liberation.

Ultimately, various components of Afrofuturism in fantasy allow characters to move from the trauma of the Middle Passage and beyond the Door of No Return into the endless possibilities that stem from speculative fiction. When Yetu can reconcile the components of traumatic contemporaneity, she can “let the multiple truths” of her history and present “exist inside her as a way of meditating” (Solomon 92). Though Yetu initially feels like a vessel who holds the deep trauma of her people, she realizes that holding their history and past binds them together rather than leaving them as hollow cavities. Yetu hurls through the depths of her waters and homeland, through the depths of space and time, and eventually realizes that she can acknowledge the harm of the past while being in community with others. She acknowledges the pain for the other *wajinru* and emphasizes that they must “save one another”. Ultimately, she questions what would matter “whether she existed if she was alone, if all that was around her was abyss” (Solomon 95). Here, Solomon imagines a future of liberation, and emphasizes the importance of acknowledging trauma to move forward in community and connection.

This message is cemented in the final connection between Oori and Yetu when Oori decides to join Yetu in the murky depths of her home. As Solomon says, the ocean grants wishes and forms something entirely new. Yetu calls upon the sea to reach back into the past, to find rebirth and life even after the existence of the Door of No Return. She describes it as the place where “the life of the *wajinru* began, and reaching backward, the life of the two-legs too” (99). With Yetu transferring a remembering of the womb to Oori, the power of the ocean allows her to breathe underwater just as

she'd breathed in the womb. Though she is not a *wajinru*, she is a “completely new thing”. In this transformative work of speculative fiction, the “two-legs venturing into the depths had not been abandoned to the sea, but invited into it” (99).

Ultimately, Solomon weaves together elements of Afrofuturism in a fantasy novel that pushes the genre in a new direction. Rather than providing an escape by returning to a past that is meant to conjure nostalgia and a sense of safety, Solomon questions what one does when the past is not a construction of whiteness and instead holds memories of trauma. Here, one has no choice but to move forward. After acknowledging the trauma that stems from the Middle Passage and the variety of experiences that come with the Door of No Return, Solomon pushes audiences to imagine how one might navigate a future of liberation, hope, and ultimately, healing. Through navigating traumatic contemporaneity, Solomon asserts that shared community is essential in the process of contending with cultural trauma. In working to establish one's personhood, the acknowledgement of trauma and the knowledge of the ways that it connects individuals in a community to each other is essential. However, we must also extend beyond that and seek to establish connections between ourselves and these networks of history, for we are able to hold grief and pain while seeking the capacity for great joy, connection, and a way forward for ourselves and our people. Thus, the work of Afrofuturism and fantasy dives into the depths of radically reimagining futures in ways that will hold us, connect us, and heal us.

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