

Examining the Sea as a Medium for History in Rivers

Solomon's The Deep

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Abstract: The early works on the Black Atlantic often took the sea as a space of change and cultural emergence, manifesting the history of slavery and the long-term effects of this history through connecting the living with the dead, the past with the real, and the sea with the land. Rivers Solomon's *The Deep* contributes to this perspective. Solomon draws on the worldview of Drexciyan's music. She retells the history of the Atlantic trade by constructing a fantasy race, the wajinru. Wajinru is the descendant of pregnant women abandoned in the Atlantic trade. Their first generations are raised by whales, and established their own society in the depths of the sea. Because only have short memories, wajinru relies on historians in Remembrance for the long-term memory of the community. Yetu, the main character, is the wajinru's new generation of historians, believing that the heavy burden of history is preventing her from acquiring an individual identity. She abandons the other wajinru in a Remembrance and goes to the coast, where she meets Oori, a human woman. Yetu knows the importance of history through their communication. Therefore, she ultimately chooses to return to her people to save them from the painful memories. Solomon focuses more on the fluidity and historicization of the sea. Using a blue humanities approach, she revisits the history of the Atlantic trade through intersecting narratives and character stories. Solomon portrays a fantastical aquatic race wajinru, showing the past, present and future of slavery from the horizontal plane and the deep sea. Taking wajinru, the inhabitant of the deep sea, as the recorder of Atlantic trade, this essay analyse how they represent slavery history by establishing new connections with the world through the sea. By focusing on the attitudes and approaches of the wajinru to the history of slavery, revealing the traumatic effects on black people brought about by slavery in real history.

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As a component of the natural environment, the relationship between the sea and humans can be analogized, to some extent, with the relationship between nature and humans. Jason W. Moore's *Web of life* expresses that "humans make environments and environments make humans - and human organization"^[1]. This argument appears in his discussion of the relationship between accumulation of capital and ecology. Moore places nature within the framework of capitalist society, emphasizing that nature does not exist on its own, but is closely related to culture. He takes nature as an important factor in the development of capitalism. This dualism can somehow explain the interrelationship between humans and the sea in the capitalist process. "Global capitalism is a seaborne phenomenon"^[2]. Taking the Atlantic trade as an example, humans used the sea for slave transport, "integrated the merchandise of captive Africans into the emerging seaborne world market,"^[3]. During this process, sellers gained profit by selling enslaved people, and buyers gained profit by purchasing enslaved people as labor to create commodities, which led to the accumulation of capital and contributed to the development of capitalism. However, the relationship between the sea and humans is more complex. Because this relationship is influenced not only by themselves, but also by history, geography, and the natural sciences. Therefore, to move beyond the dualism that separates humanity from the sea, this study adopts an interdisciplinary approach. By integrating literature, history and cultural studies, we can reconceptualize the sea not as a passive backdrop but as an active, interconnected agent, thereby revealing its fuller range of possibilities.

Blue Humanities is the product of the intersection of the sea with other disciplines. According to Campbell and Paye, "The Blue Humanities is a field that, by definition, seeks the dissolution of terrestrial bias in critical outlooks and methodologies."^[4] The sea contains 97% of the Earth's water. It is a body of salty water that covers 70.8% of the planet. The waters in the sea are fluid and interconnected. They intertwine with each other and serve as a space that connects the world. In this space, humans and humans, humans and the sea are connected while the resources, history, and culture are

transmitted through the sea. Blue humanities emphasizes “the ocean’s lively materiality”, and this lively materiality is the key to linking the sea with other realms. DeLoughrey argues that the sea embodies materiality through its ability to bear the weight of the dead. The sea becomes a space for the existence of the dead. At the same time, it also records the memories which the dead carry. The record of the memory is from another property of the sea: “water, the substance of life, is also the substance of death for ambivalent reverie”. The sea provides space for the dead to exist as well as gives life to them. In the sea, the dead achieve immortality in another way. As Christina Sharpe’s quote in *In the Wake* suggests, “Nobody dies of old age in the ocean.” Bodies are recycled by the sea and reborn in the form of elements. In *The Deep*, the dead pregnant women give birth to wajinru through direct contact with the sea, and wajinru become visualization elements who are born from imagination. They are the offspring of humanity. Meanwhile, they are the agents of the sea because it is the sea that gives them the ability to live in the deep. As DeLoughrey discusses in “Kinship in the Abyss”, wajinru have kinship both with humans and the sea. This kinship allows wajinru to remember the memory of its human ancestors and to illustrate this history from the perspective of a marine creature. Because they are directly related to enslaved people of the Atlantic trade, the history that wajinru presented is the history of the enslaved people of the Atlantic trade.

Wajinru’s history is the history of the poetics of Atlantic trade, manifesting the brutality of the history of slavery through literature. Steve Mentz proposes “poetics of planetary water” to change and enrich the relationship between the sea and humanity. This perspective conceptualizes the existing viewpoints of blue humanities, exploring the current relationship between history and literary water studies, and representing the humanities embodied in the sea via the poetics in literature. His viewpoint stands on Gillis’s “historicization of the ocean”, which regards the sea as central to the cultural imagination, shaping human cultural history through the sea. Within this framework, he introduces Aristotle’s poetic idea, which takes art as a response to natural reality. Wajinru, being a carrier of history, is the poetic expression of real history. “One day we are swimming but a few feet down from the surface in pleasantly cool waters, [...] We wonder how close it was to death already before whatever devil who captained that ship abandoned it to the seas.” Wajinru had witnessed enslaved people on a slave ship being thrown overboard and dying in the sea. It is the reflection of the real history. Patrick Manning points out that more than 1.5 million people lost their lives in the slave trade. One of the reasons for their death is because of the disease caused by the harsh conditions in the cabin. Enslaved people faced abandonment as they neared death and lost perceived economic value. In some cases, some chose to jump into the sea voluntarily. Another reason is because of the lack of resources on the ship, leading to the abandonment of enslaved people to minimize resource waste. Regardless of the reason, there is no doubt that the destiny of these enslaved people is decided by the sea. A limited number managed to escape via the sea, just like the Waj in *The Deep*. But most of them are die. They sank to the bottom of the sea or were buried in the belly of a shark. As Sharpe mentions in *In the Wake*,

that thrown overboard person would [...] because many of those enslaved people were sick and were likely emaciated or close to it, [...] they would have sunk relatively quickly and drowned relatively quickly as well. And then there were the sharks that always traveled in the wake of slave ships.

This historical atrocity is not just recorded but viscerally experienced in the narrative of the wajinru. Solomon displays the conditions of shipwrecked enslaved people through the memories of wajinru’s ancestors. This is established at the very beginning of the novella when Yetu, overwhelmed by these memories, is rescued from sharks by Amaba. At that time, Yutu not only recalls but also physically experiences the sensation of her ancestors’ bodies being torn apart. This directly echoed the fate suffered by enslaved people in real history, highlighting their absolute fragility in the face of the sea’s violence. Through this narrative mechanism, the sea is described as a witness to these atrocities, and the history of wajinru become the true record of the suffering of those who died within it. The memories that define them are thus both the origins of the wajinru race and a narrative of the brutality of slavery.

These memories force the reader to confront the human experience of those lost: They are suffering and scared. They have been robbed from their homes, stolen from their families. Their lives are no longer their own. They belong to the two-legs on the decks of the ships. This trauma is further exacerbated by the existence of slavery. The existence of slavery deprives the enslaved people of their agency, meaning that not only does they suffer physical abuse, but they are also classified as calculable assets. As a result, the enslaved people were discarded as objects. Just as Solomon states in the book:

We are descendants of the people not on the top of the ship, but on the bottom, thrown overboard, deemed too much a drain of resources to stay on the journey to their destination.

In Zoti Aleyu's memory, enslaved people were abandoned because they were regarded as a waste of resources. Once enslaved, individual's autonomy is limited, resulting in the deprivation of liberty and the loss of the opportunity to determine their own destiny. The violation of the human rights of enslaved people is further illustrated by the Zong massacre in history. Zong threw purchased enslaved people overboard during the voyage due to a lack of drinking water. It is recognized by the courts as "a simple one of maritime insurance" after that. Enslaved people are identified as transported property but not as individuals. The death of enslaved people was seen as the loss of property. This dehumanization originated from the capitalist system that drove the Atlantic trade. The Atlantic trade was motivated by the demand for enslaved people to serve as cheap labor in the Americas. This slavery was related to factories during the period of the primitive accumulation of capitalism. As Karl Marx argues, the exploitation of labor workers in manufacturing during the primitive period of capitalist accumulation in Europe was "veiled slavery"^[5]. Moreover, he contends that this covert form of enslavement "needed the unqualified slavery of the unqualified slavery of the New World as its pedestal." This means that the brutality of New World slavery was the foundation of European capitalist expansion. The term "New World" in this context is Americas. The capitalist expansion of the Americas required a substantial labor force. Because of the cost-effectiveness and robustness of enslaved people, American plantation owners turn to buying enslaved people. This shift resulted in the transatlantic slave trade. The Atlantic trade was "an important factor in the growth of the shipping industry, and at the same time a source of surplus wealth for American industrialism.", which played a crucial role in propelling the advancement of both European and American capitalism. This slavery resulted in a large number of Africans being forced to leave their homelands for continuous labor in the Americas, unable to exercise the rights they possessed.

Moreover, slavery leads to racism. Slavery brings economic advantages to European and American capitalist systems, while at the same time causing enduring trauma to enslaved people and their descendants. When enslaved people are disenfranchised, they are not regarded as equals. Furthermore, when the composition of enslaved people is associated with a specific racial identity, then they would be discriminated and as well as being against to the exclusion of others. Racism is "the relegation of people of color to inferior status and treatment based on unfounded beliefs about innate inferiority, as well as unjust treatment and oppression of people of color, whether intended or not." Wajinru is a legacy of racism. The slave traders' belief of racial superiority empowers them to arbitrarily control the lives of enslaved people. In consequence, the enslaved people are thrown into the sea. The descendants of these enslaved people are wajinru, and they are living evidence of this false superiority. Wajinru has to long resided in the deep sea, distanced from their ancestor's homelands, and unable to see the sunlight. In modern times, the false belief of superiority still exists. Even after the Emancipation Proclamation came into effect, blacks in the United States suffered discrimination, including but not limited to the segregation around 1970s, and in recent years malicious reports and murders of blacks. Therefore, the intergenerational trauma caused by slavery has persisted now. It perpetuates the cycle of discrimination and inequality, and still profoundly influences the social lives of black descendants to this day.

In addition to racism, the recognition identity problems of blacks is also a consequence of slavery. Having witnessed numerous ancestors die in the sea and having endured profound suffering, the first historian Zoti Aleyu made the decision to let others forget these pains and entrusted the history and memory to historians of each generation. "We never wanted our people, our kindred, to suffer the loneliness we have known. Over the years, when others came to us desperate to talk about it, we encouraged them to forget." For the other wajinru, they "forgot" the history. This approach to history is a metaphor for the reality that the history of slavery is being erased. As Saidiya Hartman writes in *Lose Your Mother*, "In every slave society, slave owners attempted to eradicate the slave's memory, that is, to erase all the evidence of an existence before slavery. [...] A slave without a past had no life to avenge." This "rupture" in history continues today. In Hartman's description, she was exploring the history of slavery, but most people were indifferent to it. She has found slave testimony of her great-great-grandmother's. However, when her great-great-grandmother was asked what she remembers about slavery, she replied "Not a thing." The reluctance of enslaved people to recount their past experiences stems from the pain of the memories. It is also from the deliberate erasure of the slave owners. As a result, their descendants seldom learn about their ancestors' memories during the era of slavery as well as the life in their original home.

Both Wajinru and Oori experience a "rupture" in their history. Wajinru have no lasting memories and their history is carried by the historians, "they lived out their days in blissful ignorance." The wajinru, during their "forget" of history, are unaware of their kinship with the two-legs. Their understanding is confined to identifying solely as they are wajinru, a

half-mermaid who live in the sea, with an absence of awareness about their mother on land. Just as in *Lose Your Mother*, when African Americans wanted to identify themselves in Africa, “In 1999, a measure to grant African Americans Ghanaian citizenship was defeated. No one seemed to be waiting any longer for the hour of Africa's redemption.” They realized that they seemed to be excluded by African society and “lose their mother”. Wajinru serves as a surrogate for African Americans. Possessing both human and marine characteristics, they exist as a distinct race, not entirely belonging to either the sea or the land. Regarding Oori, she is the last of the Oshuben. There is a “rupture” in Oshuben’s history due to the people who know their history are dead. “I barely know any stories from my parents’ generation. I can’t remember our language.” Mentz indicates that Oori and Yetu have the same ancestor. Because the tattoo on Oori’s body is in accord with the carvings on the comb that Yetu acquired in the deep sea. Therefore, it is possible that Oori’s ancestors are enslaved people, or that their families were captured into slavery. The traumatic experience has caused them to share only limited details about their past with Oori, which led to a “rupture” of the family history and made Oori exclude herself from establishing social relations where she lives actively. “Oori had no interest in Yetu, nor in anyone, it seemed.” She is unique, showing a greater fondness for animals in comparison to humans. This might arise from a feeling of loneliness caused by the uncertainty about her self-identity. She felt that she did not belong to the community. Consequently, she did not engage with it much. As one of the expatriates in *Lose Your Mother* admitted, “‘When you really really realise you are not African,’[...] ‘it’s the loneliest moment of your life, [...] it goes on being lonely, and it’s how you adjust yourself to that loneliness that matters,’” Oori’s experience and actions manifest that she is suffering such loneliness. However, she has found a way to manage this loneliness by spending time with the sea, connecting with it, and ultimately finding her self-identity by embracing it.

Simultaneously, the “rupture” of history also leads to another crisis. In *The Deep*, the lack of memory of the past allows wajinru for “spontaneity and lack of regret”. They live in ignorance and comfort, lacking the ability to be alert to potential crises. In Basha’s memory, the wajinru suffered a disaster. An explosion in the deep sea killed the children of wajinru. Historian Basha suggested that this was because of the plundering of the two-legs in the deep and that they could have avoided a greater tragedy by fighting. But Omju, the leader at the time, disagreed with this solution. “They want an easy answer. A quick trick to fix the problem of the recent attacks upon us. They want me to tell them it’s some barely known underwater creature, and if we just do this, we can beat it.” With no historical memory, wajinru is immersed in the perception of themselves as “the apex predators of the entire sea”^[6]. They maintain the belief that their current prowess can resolve all problems, demonstrating reluctance to acknowledge that the explosion originated from two-legged, which is a threat beyond the deep sea. The rejection of Omju led to more severe consequences. Numerous wajinru died, and huge cities disappeared. The “forgetfulness” of history has prevented wajinru from learning from the past, impeding a proper response to the crisis. They exhibit unwarranted confidence and a persistent adherence to established patterns. For the descendants of enslaved people, the persistence of racist discrimination serves as a reminder of the lasting trauma from slavery. The potential erasure of history by white Westerners poses a risk of the descendants losing awareness of slavery, and therefore failing to draw lessons from history. Such a “forget” in historical understanding may result in a repetition of the past, as descendants, like their ancestors, might forego resistance due to a forgotten history.

However, the history of wajinru is not abandoned; rather, it exists within the wajinru.

“Yetu gave them a script, but they knew the words. It lived in their cartilage and their organs, as coded into them as the shape of the webbed appendages on their front fins or the bulbousness of their eyes. She only need remind them. That was all remembering was. Prodding them lest they try to move on from things that should not be moved on from.”

These buried memories are awakened when needed, and wajinru will recollect their identity. Their memories are shared with the help of the sea. The sea gave them the ability to control electricity, and this ability allowed them to connect with each other during Remembrance, rekindling memories in their bodies. In Basha’s memory, history is awakened in moments of crisis. “We pass on rememberings to them. They must have the depravity of the two-legs fresh in their minds.” Basha shares the memories with wajinru. Similar events happened in history to make wajinru understand the current situation. Therefore, they unite as one and follow Basha to the surface to attack the two-legs. Additionally, Solomon’s use of personal pronouns suggests that the wajinru’s history has not been abandoned. The employment of the first-person pronoun “We” when narrating the memory of the historian conveys a nuanced perspective. On the one hand, it suggests that historians are not just individuals, but also a bearer of history and a symbol of the history of the wajinru. On the other hand, it argues that not only the historian himself but also the whole wajinru has the history. The “we” serves as a representative proxy of all the

wajinru. Otherwise, repetition in the novella also shows wajinru's remember of history. For example, Yetu repeats the word "remember" many times in Remembrance. And "we remember" is repeated in every historical memory. It emphasizes that the wajinru body and blood remember these histories, reinforcing their connection to the past.

The Deep provides approaches to how to treat history, that is accepting and sharing it. For Yetu, she thought she was just a carrier of her ancestors' memories and thus lost herself. But in fact, she is the one in the wajinru who has not lost her identity when others have no memories. Because "your whole history. Your ancestry. That's who you are." The identity of an individual is realized in the history of the community. In the end, Yetu shares the history with the entire wajinru community. Every wajinru possesses history in mind, eradicating the divide between wajinru and historians. They can exchange perspectives on history. When Zoti Aleyu made the decision for the wajinru to forget their history, her intention was to make them into "a people". "That is what we think about now, the peace we imparted, the togetherness we brought." However, it is only when the wajinru embrace and acknowledge their history that they evolve into a cohesive community. The shared history becomes a unifying force, enabling them to know their identity in the context of this history and form a whole. This community embrace all beings who share a common identity due to a shared history, such as Oori. Yetu and Oori's ancestors shared a similar history, allowing Oori to embrace the history and be accepted by the sea when Yetu shared the wajinru's history with her. Consequently, Oori reclarify her identity through the sea. Contrary to transforming into a wajinru or losing her human characteristics, she emerged as "a completely new thing."^[7] Solomon ends the novella by depicting the connection between humans and the ocean through Oori's transformation. "This time, the two-legs venturing into the depths had not been abandoned to the sea, but invited into it." By accepting and expressing love for the sea, Oori gained access to the sea, signaling that humans' attitude towards the sea should be acceptance rather than exploitation. Simultaneously, this serves as an allegory for how history should be approached. The sea, as a silent witness to history, becomes symbol of embracing our history. Accepting the sea becomes synonymous with embracing history itself.

Campbell and Paye indicate that fluid water "can oppose strategies of imperialist containment and hegemonic enclosure." Correspondently, Solomon critiques slavery by portraying imaginative sea creatures. Through the description of Yetu and the history of wajinru, Solomon illuminates the authentic history of the Atlantic trade, reflecting the enduring trauma of slavery and the predicament of black racism at the same time. She combines this reflection with the relationship between humans and the sea. The existence of wajinru derives from the power of the sea. The sea serves as a medium for wajinru to record history, and ultimately helps them to establish their identity. Solomon emphasizes the significance of remembering history, arguing that it facilitates understanding of one's identity and helps humans cope with potential crises. She suggests an active pursuit of history, taking the sea as a highly valuable space for exploring the history of slavery.

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