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Kinship in the abyss: submerging with *The Deep*

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ABSTRACT

While a body of earlier work on the Black Atlantic generally imagined the ocean as a backdrop for primarily heteronormative, masculine human agents to move from one continent to another, this westward telos has been complicated by a deeper engagement with Black queer intimacies and non-human kinship relations in the depths of the ocean. A recent novella written by Rivers Solomon with their collaborative interlocuters from the band “clipping.” – Daveed Diggs, William Hutson, and Jonathan Snipes – portrays the fluidity of an aqueous merfolk named the wajinru who are born of the dead and nursed and nourished as kin by non-human figures of what Edouard Glissant terms the “womb abyss.” Here I explore *The Deep* as speculative fiction that speaks directly to questions of oceanic origins and ontologies, transforming the necropolitics of transatlantic slave trading into the possibilities of the “womb abyss” for the lives of its “aquatically mutated,” non-binary descendants.

KEYWORDS

Black Atlantic; queer Atlantic; multispecies studies; critical ocean studies; oceanic humanities; Rivers Solomon

“What does it mean to be born of the dead? What does it mean to begin?”¹

– Rivers Solomon, Daveed Diggs, William Hutson, and Jonathan Snipes

“How do we attend to physical, social, and figurative death and also to the largeness that is Black life, Black life insisted from death?”

– Christina Sharpe²

The epigraphs that frame this essay raise critical questions about the embodiment of history and memory as well as the filial and other obligations derived from ancestry, narrative, and ontology. This volume on kinship as a critical idiom in oceanic studies helps suture this topic to the vital questions raised by Christina Sharpe’s “wake work” alongside the generative relations imagined in Edouard Glissant’s theory of the middle passage as a “womb abyss;” a descent into the abjection and terror of colonial antiblack violence as well as a generative space of alterity and becoming.³ To Glissant, Sharpe, and many other hydro-theorists,⁴ the Atlantic Ocean provides the ontological and material space for the history of modernity as well as a figure for the possibilities of regeneration. While a body of earlier work on the Black Atlantic generally imagined the ocean as a backdrop for primarily heteronormative, masculine human agents to move from one continent to another, this westward telos has been complicated by a deeper engagement with Black queer intimacies and non-human kinship relations in the depths of the ocean.⁵ A recent novella written by Rivers Solomon with their collaborative interlocuters from the band

“clipping.” – Daveed Diggs, William Hutson, and Jonathan Snipes – portrays the fluidity of an aqueous merfolk named the wajinru who are born “of the dead” and nursed and nourished as kin by non-human figures of the “womb abyss.” *The Deep* – as novel and as a figure – renders a fluid space that informs and transforms “the largeness that is Black life” at an oceanic scale. This is evident in the radical transformation of the human subject into a new being, a “strange fish” (110), with important implications for understanding the complex, queer relations of maritime kindred, all the way down to the bacterial level.

As the Afterword to the novella explains, *The Deep* is one narrative part of a complex and ongoing “game of artistic Telephone” (157), whose origins are attributed to the Detroit-based electronic duo, Drexciya. In the liner notes to their album *The Quest* (1997), they wondered if it was “possible for humans to breathe underwater [...] (since) a foetus in its mother’s womb is certainly alive in an aquatic environment.”⁶ Drexciyans become, in the words of their creators, “the water-breathing, aquatically mutated descendants of those unfortunate victims” thrown overboard in the Atlantic Ocean (158), in what Katherine McKittrick refers to as a “middle passage cosmogony.”⁷ In turn, the band clipping. was commissioned by the radio program *This American Life* to create a song for the “We are the Future” episode, which drew from Drexciya’s vision and then expanded it out, verbally and sonically, to encompass the threats of deep-sea mining as well as climate change.⁸ In their vision of a voluminous and vertical ocean, the violence of underwater extraction of “black gold” awakens a new consciousness of the dreamers of the deep (“dreams got woke”) to rise up against the “two-legged surface dwellers,” whom they recognize as kin.

In fact, we might deepen this artistic and intellectual genealogy, considering that the creators of Drexciya, James Stinson and Gerald Donald, were inspired by Paul Gilroy’s foundational text *The Black Atlantic* (1993) and its examination of “countercultures of modernity.”⁹ While Gilroy’s work has been vital in repositioning the cosmopolitanism of the Black Atlantic’s “webbed network”¹⁰ and to inspiring a generation of diaspora and cultural studies scholarship, writers in critical ocean studies have noted that one “never gets wet” in this particular imaginary of the Atlantic and have called for a deeper engagement with oceanic matter.¹¹ In other words, in that current of scholarship the ocean has been represented as a passive and often feminized backdrop to an active (hetero)masculinity, and has not been engaged as material in and of itself. As critical ocean studies became more interdisciplinary, feminist materialists argued for material submersion into the oceanic and to engage more-than-human ontologies, turning to fluidity as a trope of liquid subjectivity and of queer relation.¹² My recent work has been fathoming literary and artistic representations of “sea ontologies,” or multispecies, more-than-human ontologies of the submarine that render the ocean as origins, ancestor, mat(t)er, as well as kin. Here I want to go deeper with *The Deep*, a speculative fiction text that speaks directly to these questions of oceanic origins and ontologies, transforming the necropolitics of the transatlantic slave trade into the possibilities of the “womb abyss” for the lives of its “aquatically mutated,” non-binary descendants.

While it is narrated by other (non-human) characters, *The Deep* is primarily a bildungsroman of the female-identified, hermaphroditic character Yetu; the novella is an allegory for the reconciliation of the burden of a traumatic cultural history with one’s personal obligations, desires, and responsibilities to self and kindred. It begins in a dreamlike

consciousness, where Yetu hovers between the present and the memories of the communal past which, as Historian, she is obligated to retain and re-member for the deep-sea dwelling wajinru community. This temporal and spatial blurring between past and present and between bodies we might liken to what Gaston Bachelard refers to as “hydrous dreams;”¹³ an oceanic consciousness that employs the fluidity of the element of water to narratively dissolve the boundaries between subjects, sexualities, and temporalities.¹⁴

Due to the constant circulation of ocean water and its unbounded horizons, it challenges the localizing tendencies of narrative form. As I’ve argued elsewhere, an engagement with the materiality of the ocean – its perpetual movement – demands a different kind of narrative form that diffracts linear temporality and challenges its realist tropes.¹⁵ This attentiveness to oceanic form challenges the structures of anglophone literary narrative such as the maritime novel, which is an inheritance of transatlantic colonialism.¹⁶ Those narrative inheritances are tied closely to the realist novel and its anthropocentric focus, a point Amitav Ghosh considers in relation to the imaginative failures of so-called serious fiction in representing the nonhuman scale of the “unthinkable.”¹⁷ In *The Deep* we see that speculative fiction provides a more temporally flexible mode of representing climate crisis as well as transoceanic experience as (multispecies) being. As with other texts in this speculative fiction genre such as Ursula K. Le Guin’s “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas” (1973), Lois Lowry’s *The Giver* (1993), and even Solomon’s earlier novel *An Unkindness of Ghosts* (2017), the story is told from the perspective of a young protagonist who bears the heavy burden for the community’s memory and deep history. In this novel, “history was everything [...] to be without one was death” (96, 100). Nevertheless, Yetu and the historians who precede her carry the tremendous weight of “six-hundred years of pain” (94).

This is an embodied history, which Yetu experiences as “real as flesh,” where those who came before “lived inside” her, just as she “walked inside them” (94). In some scenes of the novel, Yetu is described in terms of *a priori* ontology, as “Not-Yetu” when she is “possessed by an ancestor” (18).¹⁸ In this sense kinship is embodied communal history. And while most of the wajinru community lives in a fluid sense of the present, their history is latent in their bodies. It is not in their bones or in the synecdoche of coral, as Derek Walcott’s poetry imagines the “sea (a)s history,” – but rather 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” (27).¹⁹ Yetu’s role then is to “remind them” in an annual ceremony called The Remembrance; the novel imagines and reenacts an embodied history in which, to draw from M. NourbeSe Philip, “the smallest cell remembers.”²⁰ The pain of being rendered a vessel for traumatic communal memory is excruciating for Yetu – she explains that “when you’re everyone in the past, and when you’re for everyone in the present, you’re no one. Nobody” (95). This tension over being a vessel (or in other scenes, a “cavity”) for history functions as an allegory at the level of character, community, and author. In other words, this multiscale allegory examines how an individual and embodied sense of communal memory might serve as archive for broader kinship networks that are in the process of becoming for character, reader, and author. Yetu’s developmental arc in the novel is to attain her own queer, multispecies kinship relations as well as to recognize her responsibilities to the wajinru, and to accept that “without (her), they perish” (97). The protagonist (and at another scale, the author) struggles directly with

what Donna Haraway would call “response-ability,” where one “inherit(s) obligations we did not and cannot choose.”²¹

This entangled relationship between the body of the human (or wajinru) and the oceanic body as communal memory and knowledge is beautifully articulated in Glissant’s trifold theory of the transoceanic abyss. In the opening to *Poetics of Relation* he frames the slave ship as a “womb abyss ... a matrix, and yet it expels you.” The second figuration of the abyss is the oceanic depths, a “violent belly” marking “one vast beginning ... whose time is marked by these balls and chains gone green.”²² The third experience of the abyss is the way its memory “served as alluvium” for the shared knowledge “of the Whole,” of Relation, which arises from the experience of the “the womb abyss and the infinite abyss.”²³ Arising from Glissant’s earlier work, the abyss is an imagination of eternity, of violence, and of the sense of the possibility of a poetics arising from a disjunctured history of space that is simultaneously discontinuous and continuous. His oceanic imaginary employs the figures of alterity, unfathomable depth, as well as an oceanic womb as violent origin story for the African diaspora.

Generally speaking, the ocean is a figure of evolutionary and ancestral origins often configured in kinship terms as mother/mater. For example, poet/historian Kamau Brathwaite’s theory of tidalectics has called for the resuscitation of “submerged mothers” of the African diaspora.²⁴ In this particular novel, the turn to origins includes multiple maternal figures as well as kinship relations with the deep and its many creatures, human and otherwise. While Philip’s epic poem *Zong!* sought to exhume middle passage ancestors through a process she refers to as “exaqua,”²⁵ the authors of *The Deep* explore a multi-sensory, nonvisual consciousness that is haptic and multispecies, establishing kinship relations that fathom the deep rather than bringing them up to the surface.²⁶ In fact, the novel concludes with a submergence that brings the human back into the abyss willingly, reflecting a new (erotic) multispecies kinship in the ever-changing abyss. Certainly, kinship relations with the two-legged “surface dwellers” are critical to the narrative; the fact that Yetu swims from the depths to the surface and reestablishes queer kinship ties with those from whom she is descended is a vital commentary on history, desire, and being.

Yet there are other submerged mothers in this nonhuman queering of the womb abyss. Whales are inscribed as originary figures that are critical to wajinru life; called “second mothers,” they are given one of the few wajinru names represented in the novel (“*skalu*”) (42). In the wajinru origin story, “giant water beasts” nursed the “pups” once they were birthed by their drowning human mothers. The infants are transformed into “wild, screaming fish creatures, scaled and boneless” (42) and are taken by the whales “down to the deepest depths where (they) are safer” (43) and where they eventually build a civilization. The whales are vital to collecting the newborn wajinru across the expanse of the ocean during the slave trade, and they continue to provide milk to the pups in the novel’s present.²⁷ Solomon and their co-authors make an interesting choice to represent the wajinru not as mammals but boneless, abyssal-dwelling fish whose bodily memories are entirely submarine. In this abyssal context, “kin making is making persons, not necessarily as individuals or as humans.”²⁸

Solomon and their colleagues’ game of a (sub)aquatic “artistic telephone” comes at a timely moment. Given the development in recent years of visual and other technologies that can withstand extreme water pressure, it seems there has never been such a broad

representation of – and desire for – the creatures and minerals of the deep. From the multispecies eroticism of the popular film *My Octopus Teacher* (one is tempted to call it *My Octopus Lover*) to suboceanic webcams and submersibles, the abyssal zones and their inhabitants are receiving more exposure, study, and scrutiny. Although the oceanic depths are still largely unmapped, the extractive industries are scrambling for mining rights for deep-sea minerals, referring to Clarion Clipperon Zone – an area in the Pacific as large as the continental United States – a “modern Eldorado.”²⁹ Biotech firms are experimenting with chemical and other compounds derived from sponges, algae, sharks, and snails to treat a variety of human illnesses, including COVID-19. In a less extractive sense, humanities scholars have been plumbing the depths of kinship relations that we might derive from creatures of the deep. To writer Alexis Pauline Gumbs, “core Black feminist practices like breathing, remembering, collaborating” can be “transformed” in an apprenticeship to marine mammals.³⁰ (Even a few sharks appear in her imagining of mammalian relations of oceanic being). While whales and dolphins are certainly charismatic in their likeness to humans and because we share a long history of interspecies communication and partnership, Stacy Alaimo reminds us that these celebrations of a watery kinship with the ocean should not overlook the violent history of the slaughter of its creatures, which is ongoing through practices like sea-bed trawling, ghost netting, shark finning, industrial fishing, and petrochemical pollution.³¹ In *The Deep*, wajinru are killed by the underwater explosions of oil companies and by submersible scouts in “metal fish” looking to “see what gifts of the deep they could steal” (135). In bringing extractive violence full circle, the novel (and the song) connects multispecies violence against the wajinru as a genocidal and ecocidal legacy of the colonial systems of transatlantic capitalism that created their existence to begin with.

Solomon has commented in interviews about their extensive research into submarine lifeforms in preparation for writing the novel and thus incorporates a wide range of non-human creatures and imagines the wajinru as nonbinary, hermaphroditic beings, like many fish. *The Deep* is peppered with references to blue and fin whales, white and frilled sharks, vampire squid, dragon fish, and even an ancient leviathan (107). One key figure is Anyeteket, an ailing ancient frilled shark, a species known as a “living fossil” due to its prehistoric physiology. She is named and cared for by the wajinru and, at her death, her belly produces a skull and comb derived from the first mothers (16), a discovery that ultimately brings Yetu into (queer) kinship relations with shore-dwelling humans. The shark’s body thus becomes a material archive for middle passage history; its preservation of this particular skull and artifact for over 600 years provides the wajinru with one of their only tangible connections to their first mother/mater. It is this entanglement between violence and death that Yetu struggles with, noting that Anyeteket’s “age and infamy” gave her the honor of a wajinru name (16). During the ritual of The Remembrance, which takes place in a “mud womb,” the wajinru come to remember and become witness to the hundreds of white sharks who “gobbled alive” (35) human beings in the middle passage. It’s by inhabiting the “strange floating bodies” (36) of human dismemberment that the wajinru re-member their kinship with the two-leggeds. The novel’s representation of the torment of a simultaneous, embodied “aliveness” and “deadness” (37) speaks to scholarship about an antiblack “climate” in the tradition of theorizing transatlantic “slavery and social death.”³² This same tension between death and life drives Yetu’s desire for dissolution – this is where we find her drifting at the start of the novel to make herself “easy

prey" for the sharks (37). While *The Deep* can be interpreted as a text perfectly suited for current theories of ontology in "the wake" of Black life and death, I want to dive a bit deeper to engage how the text inscribes the non-human here – whales, sharks, and even bacteria – in a complex rendering of the kinship networks of sea ontologies.

Certainly if one considers the inhuman in the middle passage it would likely include the shark as a figure of terror associated with the slave ship. As historian Marcus Rediker observes, the rise of the word for shark (perhaps an Indigenous Caribbean borrowing) in the sixteenth century is coterminous with the British slave trade itself.³³ He demonstrates that many different sharks (and fish) followed slave ships across the Atlantic due to the daily disposal of waste and bodies. When in port, sharks were often fed by ship captains to ensure that both crew and captive peoples were terrorized enough to diminish desertions and suicidal drownings. Attempts to join the ancestors by jumping overboard were merged in ship records to a singularly horrible death – in one 1799 account, "by Sharks drowned."³⁴ The British abolitionists capitalized on the terrors of transatlantic slavery through the figure of the shark, even writing satirical petitions against abolition from sharks. Lesser known is that sharks, amongst other fish, were eaten on slave ships, which would have been familiar food for many coastal Africans.³⁵

Although Rediker's research suggests it was bull and tiger sharks that became part of the terror ecology of the slave ship across the Atlantic, Solomon et. al. chose to focus on the more ancient frilled shark as a keystone species, which generally inhabits the deeper mesopelagic and bathypelagic zones of the ocean. In this sense the figure of the shark in the novel becomes an allegory for the bloody alterity and temporality of the deep, which includes ancestral kinship and ritual.

In her recent work anthropologist Kim TallBear shifts the scholarly discourse of multi-species to consider this in Indigenous terms as a more embodied and relational mode of "multirelative" ontologies.³⁶ I believe this concept helps address some of the puzzling elements in *The Deep*, which include an extended, blood-filled narration of Yetu eviscerating a frilled shark for reasons she dimly remembers as tied to ritual and as an offering to the ancestors (103).³⁷ The violence of the dance to death with this shark makes her feel sick enough to vomit and it disturbs and confuses the other wajinru. So while the concept of the "amaba" or mother functions as one that is easily consumable (the first and second mothers are mammals, representing critical ecologies of care), the sense of kinship to nonhuman predators due to histories of violence are less easily "digested." And while kinship relations are often cemented over the sharing of food, this is not a shark for eating. It is killed for sacrifice, "to offer blood to the ocean" (101) and for Yetu to be "submerged in the red lifewater of this ancient creature" (103). When Yetu configures herself as an apex predator she performs the type of kinship Potawatomi scholar Kyle Powys Whyte refers to as "renewing relatives" with nonhuman others through the performance of the hunt.³⁸

Nevertheless, Yetu's attempt at violent ceremonial sacrifice ends in failure, reminding her of the "failed suicide attempt" (101) at the start of the novel where she uses her own blood to entice her consumption by sharks. While she attributes wajinru life origins to the first and second mothers, an ecology of mammals and care, the novel extends far more textual examination to the relationship with sharks which are rendered as more complex, including the violence of consumption, bloodletting, predation, caretaking, and as an embodied storehouse of the archive. The authors' decision to depict the

wajinru as cartilaginous fish – like sharks (chondrichthyes) – expands the concept of kinship as a more-than-mammalian “mutuality of being,” as anthropologist Marshall Sahlins might suggest.³⁹ In keeping with the configuration of the oceanic depths as a space of shifting kinship relations, the violence of multispecies/multirelative others becomes a critical component of life in the deep. Sahlins demonstrates that kinfolk are “members of one another,” a relation in which one lives and dies one another, “emotionally and symbolically.”⁴⁰ Or as Marilyn Strathern argues, “the singular person (is) a composite site of multiple others.”⁴¹ Moreover this does not only suggest the mutuality and relationality between persons, human and otherwise, but also the ontological mutuality between person and place. Where Sahlins and other anthropologists find “kinship is geography, or landscape”⁴² we might argue in Solomon et. al.’s novel, kinship is sea ontology, or seascape. Or as Yetu refers to it – as “home-sea” (122).

If we think back to the dreamlike opening of the novel where Yetu hovers between life and death in her self-sacrificial offering to the sharks, we note that the “rememberings” draw her “backward into the ancestors’ memories” to such an extent that she unconsciously “brings herself to the sharks to be feasted upon” (3). The way in which memory is activated in relation to (multispecies) being is given more significance when we consider Sahlins’ charge that memory is critical to establishing and performing kinship.⁴³ These representations of creatures of the deep suggest that kinship is also a performed and dynamic practice. Ultimately Yetu’s very being as a subject/species is challenged by the possibility of becoming ingested by sharks even as it reaffirms their kinship relations, just as her being as a subject of history is challenged by the dissolving propensities of salt water. We know from Bachelard that sea water is “heavy water” because it carries the weight of the dead, and in this sense these hydrous dreams of more-than-human consciousness foreground the fluidity and density of oceanic temporality as well as oceanic matter.⁴⁴

The Deep provides another dimension to this hydro-theory by its multispecies imaginary in which the wajinru – scaled, large-eyed, sentient, hermaphroditic, deep-sea-dwelling human-descended fish who communicate through vibration, song, touch, dance, words, and electrical current – are configured as the “apex predators of the entire sea” (130), even as they are subject to becoming part of the larger food chain of the ocean. This is an elemental vision of transspecies and transhistorical bodily fluidity, consumption, and queer relation. It broadens the human-focused narrative of transoceanic histories, suggesting the sharks are also ongoing participants and agents (of life and death) in an oceanic “archive of meaning and matter.”⁴⁵

Earlier I had mentioned the shift towards “sea ontologies,” an expansion of anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli’s theory of the way in which the neoliberal capital structures of settler colonialism create a geontological hierarchy between figures of life and nonlife.⁴⁶ It’s exceedingly difficult to speak about the ontologies of the sea – which is to say circulating ocean water itself – without rooting this in the localizing figures of oceanic representation such as the ship, the shore, and the body (human and otherwise).⁴⁷ Solomon and company’s novel is remarkable for its imagining of the deep itself, which is to say a dark space of oceanic movement and fluidity, unsecured by land-based imaginaries. While there are references to wajinru architecture, the underwater castles are never actually depicted because the water itself becomes a kind of medium for wajinru communication, a life source, and their mother (149).

In my conclusion I'd like to put this in conversation with the concept of the deep itself which is part of wajinru kinship relations. According to the historian who narrates their initial descent: "the deep will be our sibling, our parent, our relief from endless solitude" (50). In the novel, the ocean deep becomes a figure of life (60), burial (62), sacrifice (101), and the violence of deep-sea mining (137) which destroys many of the wajinru community and causes a tidal "uprising" against the surface dwellers. The womb abyss becomes a transformative threshold, spatially, temporally, as well as in terms of species being. It is a profoundly metaphysical space in which Yetu ponders the basic ontological questions of being in relation to others. In Glissant's work we find the abyss as "pregnant" with death, a "womb abyss" and Solomon and their co-creators root this womb in "sacred waters" (17) at the bottom of the sea. So while the Greek origins for the term "abyss" suggest bottomlessness, the novel provides a generative space of community dance and remembrance described as a "giant mud sphere" (32), a dark "mud womb" that Solomon has described in an interview as a "space for contemplation [...] where life must reconsider how it's formed in order to survive."⁴⁸

In addressing the ongoing wake of the middle passage, Sharpe asks "What happens to the energy that is produced in the waters? It continues cycling like atoms on residence time."⁴⁹ The Deep channels this energy as a mode of aquatic communication – in the mud womb "the water was ripe with electrical energy" (144) and the wajinru speak "the rudimentary language of electrical charges" (147). The novel bristles with electricity and the hyper-sensation felt by Yetu whether she is close or distant from other living beings, so much so that she longs for "pockets of the deep still untouched by sentient life" (97) that might offer a respite from electrical contact. Theoretical physicist Karen Barad would likely remind us here that all touch is already an "electromagnetic interaction," a "radically queer" component of the indeterminacy of quantum theory.⁵⁰ As a storm created by the "unbridled" energy of wajinru anguish rises (86), one is reminded of Sharpe's claim about antiblackness as climate, where "the weather necessitates changeability and improvisation [...] it produces new ecologies" (106). Certainly, the retaliation against the two-leggeds for the violence of their deep-sea mining expands the question of nonhuman agency in relation to the climate of the racial capitalocene, plantationocene, and chthulucene.⁵¹ Yet *The Deep* stages this tension over climate in broad kinship terms, raising some complex questions about the boundaries between life and nonlife in terms of kinship and its queer radical relationality.

But where does this leave us in relation to sea ontologies, to think in terms of the agency of the sea itself? At the conclusion of the novel, Yetu invites her human lover Oori into the depths where she "transfers the remembering of the womb" through touch; here the deep becomes transformed from a figure of death – as indicated by the dual epigraphs of this essay – into one of queer erotic life. Moreover, this union leads to a nonreproductive futurity that is simultaneously generative of new life forms. As Oori descends into the depths she is able to breathe water and become "a completely new thing" (155). Yet while the human and humanoid fish beings of *The Deep* are rendered with consciousness and sentience, the novel falls short of attributing this characteristic to the ocean itself. Even though the novel inscribes an imaginative, generative, and rich aquasphere of the deep as origins, destiny, and kin, the conclusion forecloses the possibility of the ocean itself being an agent: "Yetu didn't believe that the sea was sentient. But it was here life began" (154).

Recently chemists and evolutionary biologists have postulated that the ocean does in fact constitute a life form (and ancestor), and one need not travel to “Solaris” to explore the speculative possibilities of this thesis.⁵² Interestingly there have been radical, paradigm-changing developments in the field of microbiology that have discovered filamentous bacteria in the mud of the deep ocean floor that would seem to substantiate *The Deep’s* figuring of the “mud womb” as a space of wide-ranging electrical energy. In fact, this neural network of electric bacteria (cable bacteria and nanowire bacteria) on the sea floor and thermal vents have been likened to the alien ocean sentience depicted in the James Cameron film *Avatar*.⁵³ The anaerobic mud of the deep is charged with electric microbes and internal bundles of electrical wires that can transmit across great distances as well as change the chemistry of their surroundings, making oxygen-poor habitats more habitable for living beings. These developments in microbiology – which are not limited to the seafloor – suggest that we live in an “electrical biosphere” in the words of one scientist.⁵⁴

Thinking at multiple scales of nonhuman kinship – from waijinru to sharks to seawater to the bacteria of the womb abyss – we can submerge in a speculative way with the queer ocean ecologies of *The Deep*. In this way the womb abyss becomes a figure of generation and “super life” in ways that fundamentally challenge our own anthropocentric frameworks of kinship, expanding them to the yet-unimagined life of neural networks.⁵⁵ The meaning we can attribute to being “born of the dead,” as the authors query, is to be agents and co-creators of the womb abyss, participants in a queer alterity of a more-than-human ontology of the ever changing sea.

Notes

1. Solomon et. al., *The Deep*, 42. All subsequent references to the novella will be cited parenthetically.
2. Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 17.
3. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 6.
4. I adopt this term from Drexicya’s 1995 song “Hydro Theory.”
5. This was argued in DeLoughrey, “Submarine Futures of the Anthropocene.” See also Tinsley, “Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic.” Recent fictional imaginaries of the submarine include Rita Indiana’s novel *Tentacle* as well as the short story “Broken From the Colony” by Ada M. Patterson which imagines trans girls living under the sea due to climate change.
6. clipping., *Afterword, The Deep*, 158.
7. McKittrick, *Dear Science*, 57.
8. In clipping.’s version of “The Deep” they draw from Drexicya: “we were born breathing water as we did in the womb,” and “prohibit ... (the) first person perspective” (clipping., *Afterword, The Deep*, 160). Rather than starting it from the top, the song asks us, “Y’all remember ... it started it from the bottom,” clipping., *The Deep*. Other notable influences include Parliament’s “Aqua Boogie” (“Cause y’all dancing underwater and y’all don’t get wet”).
9. To eschew a single origin story here, note that the term “black Atlantic” was, in turn, adopted from Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*.
10. Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, 39.
11. Steinberg, “Of Other Seas,” 158.
12. Alaimo, “Violet-Black: Ecologies of the Abyssal Zone,” and Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*.
13. Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*, 130.
14. See Sharpe, *In the Wake*, who argues of “Black being in the wake as a form of *consciousness*,”
14. There is a deeper conversation about the “oceanic feeling” that I engage in the book version of this short essay.
15. DeLoughrey, *Routes and Roots*, 55; Peters and Steinberg “Volume and Vision.”

16. DeLoughrey, *Routes and Roots*; Wynter, "Novel and History."
17. Ghosh, *Great Derangement*.
18. One is tempted to read this in terms of Muñoz's concept of the queer possibilities of the "not yet" in *Cruising Utopia*.
19. See Walcott's collected poems, especially "The Schooner *Flight*" and "The Sea is History," *Collected Poems* of Derek Walcott.
20. Philip, *She Tries Her Tongue*, 67.
21. Haraway in conversation with Martha Kenney, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulhocene," 231.
22. Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 6.
23. *Ibid.*, 8.
24. See Brathwaite, "Submerged Mothers," 48–49. This is explored in relation to Caribbean literature of the middle passage in DeLoughrey, *Routes and Roots*.
25. Philip, *Zong!*, 201.
26. TallBear, "Indigenous STS, Governance, and Decolonization" (lecture, University of California, Los Angeles, 13 May 2021).
27. While the adults are referred to as "people," this is a term that according to the *OED* can refer to humans as well as animals.
28. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 103.
29. <https://www.mining-technology.com/analysis/a-modern-eldorado-deep-sea-mining-at-the-clarion-clipperton-zone/>
30. Gumbs, *Undrowned*, 10.
31. Alaimo, "Oceanic Origins," 189.
32. This includes a wide range of work that begins with Orlando Patterson's 1982 book, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*; recent works by scholars influential to my thinking include Hortense Spillers, Sylvia Wynter, and Christina Sharpe.
33. Rediker, "History from below the waterline," 286. The term for a group of sharks is fittingly called a "shiver," *Ibid.*
34. *Ibid.*, 294. See also Kevin Dawson on African proficiency at swimming, *Undercurrents of Power*, 34–36.
35. *Ibid.*, 290.
36. TallBear, "Indigenous STS, Governance, and Decolonization" (lecture, University of California, Los Angeles, 13 May 2021).
37. See Dawson's important research on shark-killing as ritual sport in some coastal African communities, *Undercurrents of Power*, 42–48.
38. Whyte, "Indigenous Climate Change Studies," 157.
39. Sahlins, *What Kinship Is*, ix.
40. *Ibid.*
41. Strathern, qtd. in *Ibid.*, 36.
42. Leach, qtd. in *Ibid.*, 7.
43. *Ibid.*, 8.
44. Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*, 56. This is discussed at length in DeLoughrey, "Heavy Waters."
45. Neimanis observes that "water (is a) planetary archive of meaning and matter," and that "to drink waters is to ingest the ghosts that haunt it," *Bodies of Water*, 87. In a similar vein, Sharpe notes that the "atoms of those people who were thrown overboard are out there in the ocean even today," *In the Wake*, 41.
46. DeLoughrey, "Submarine Futures"; Povinelli, *Geontologies*.
47. DeLoughrey, *Allegories of the Anthropocene*, 135.
48. Coleman, Interview with Rivers Solomon.
49. Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 41.
50. Barad, "On Touching," 209.
51. These terms are unpacked in Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, and DeLoughrey, *Allegories of the Anthropocene*.
52. Discussed in DeLoughrey, *Allegories*, 150; Lem, *Solaris*.

53. I am thankful to Lars Peter Nielsen, Head of Center for Electromicrobiology at Aarhus University, for kindly responding to my questions and providing further materials. See Pennisi, "The Mud is Electric"; and Zimmer, "Wired Bacteria."
54. Filip Meysman quoted in Pennisi, "The Mud is Electric," 903.
55. Barad suggests that "it may well be the inhuman, the insensible, the irrational, the unfathomable, and the incalculable that will help us face the depths of what responsibility entails," "On Touching," 218.

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