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Ethico-onto-epistem-ology and traumatic memories in Rivers Solomon's *The Deep* and *Sorrowland*

ABSTRACT

*Karen Barad's theory of agential realism and her notion of ethico-onto-epistemology, based on the inseparability of ethics, being and knowledge, disclaim any immanent distinction between the human and the nonhuman, the mind and the body, and discourse and matter. The approach to reality as discursively-materially constituted brings together critical posthumanism, agential realism and new materialism, which comprise Rosi Braidotti's affirmative ethics and Barad's ethics of knowing – in line with their respective ethics of becoming and ethics of entanglement. Bearing these premises in mind, this article presents an analysis of trans-species, trans-corporeal ethico-onto-epistem-ology in Rivers Solomon's latest Afrofuturist works, *The Deep* (2019) and *Sorrowland* (2021) as the posthumanist means that enable characters to cope with their ancestors' traumatic memories. *The Deep* portrays the wajinru as a new species emerging from the entangled intra-action of relata (the unborn children of pregnant Black women thrown overboard slave ships) and their medium (the ocean). Simultaneously, the history of the oppressed is presented as discursive-material and embodied in the figure of 'the historian', who hosts the memories of all their ancestors liberating the other wajinru from their traumatic history. In *Sorrowland*, with a marked posthumanist neo-materialist stance, memories adopt a quasi-gothic haunting quality but*

KEYWORDS

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1. Solomon's use of personal pronouns for self-definition as a non-binary, intersex person has shifted from they/their to fae/faer, as can be noticed in faer website. I will thus stick to faer choice throughout this article.
2. Solomon's use of gothic features fits in Michael Sean Bolton's definition of posthuman gothic –as opposed to postmodern gothic– in so far as it calls into question the integrity of subjectivity and human agency not by an external threat or other but by the internal threat that results from the integration of the other – technological experimentation and the natural/animal – within oneself (2014: 2).

are indeed the trans-corporeal result of scientific experimentation on an African American sect for the US government's military interests. The protagonist's symbiosis with wild nature appears as the novel's brand of ethical entanglement in the face of racial exploitation.

INTRODUCTION

Rivers Solomon introduces faerself¹ as 'half woman, half boy, part beast, and a refugee of the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade. Fae writes about feral creatures on the cusp. Born in the so-called United States, fae currently lives on an isle off the Eurasian continent' (n.d.: n.pag.). Fae science fiction debut novel, *An Unkindness of Ghosts* (2017), was awarded the Community of Literary Magazines and Presses' Firecracker Award for best independently published novel, and faer second, *The Deep* (2019), the Lambda Literary Award. Faeer third novel, *Sorrowland* (2021a) won the Otherwise Award. These works present narrative features and motifs that allow for their classification within the related generic frames of speculative fiction and Afrofuturism; nevertheless, there is a gradation in the way Solomon's writing evolves towards increasing levels of genre hybridity. While *An Unkindness of Ghosts* can be defined as science fiction involving post-apocalyptic space travel, *The Deep* is a trans-species posthuman narrative of the Anthropocene that develops its concern with historical trauma through elements of Afrofuturism and magic realism. Generic indefinability is even more apparent in *Sorrowland*, where features of realism, the grotesque and captivity narratives fuse with an outstanding deployment of posthuman gothic whereby a typical gothic ingredient like the presence of hauntings turns out to be the product of scientific experimentation on persons that become human-nature hybrids, thereby questioning the limits of the notion of humanity.² Throughout these books, a series of political concerns (racism, cis-heterosexism, ableism, humanist, capitalist, colonial and environmental exploitation) run like rivers that converge in a fertile ocean of new posthuman possibilities that are, borrowing from Solomon's self-description, 'dark and brooding and powerful and a nest for new life' (2023: n.pag.).

This article focuses on *The Deep* and *Sorrowland* for the vibrant posthumanist approach to exploitation, marginalization and traumatic memories they share, as I will demonstrate. With this purpose in mind, the article opens with a brief introduction to notions like speculative fiction, Afrofuturism and the trauma of the Middle Passage to contextualize my discussion of Solomon's works. Before delving into the analysis itself, a second section will elaborate on the critical posthumanist and new materialist theoretical frameworks that I will employ to unearth the trans-corporeal ethico-onto-epistem-ological response to traumatic memories that Solomon's two fictional works display by means of a posthuman, anthrodecentring humanimal ethics that lays bare the White supremacist liberal humanism that lies at the core of slave trade and the disposability of Black life.

SPECULATIVE FICTION, AFROFUTURISM AND THE TRAUMA OF THE MIDDLE PASSAGE

Robert A. Heinlein coined the term speculative fiction in 1941 to describe fictional works in which 'accepted science and established fields are extrapolated to produce a new situation' with the purpose of tackling 'new human

problems' and 'how human beings cope with those new problems' (1991: 4). Margaret Atwood focuses on the feasibility of events in her later definition of the subgenre as 'things that really could happen but just hadn't completely happened when the authors wrote the books' (2011: 6), while Judith Merril centres on its aims, describing speculative fictions as 'stories whose objective is to explore, to discover, to learn, by means of projection, extrapolation, analogue, hypothesis-and-paper-experimentation, something about the nature of the universe, of man, or reality' (1966: 35). Tomás Vergara aptly argues that speculative tropes 'offer the possibility to play with historical causality in order to exhibit concealed affinities between distant events and reveal their underlying ramifications into future ones', drawing attention to 'subterranean reverberations and affinities' (2023: 76) whereby clear demarcations between past, present and future are troubled and ultimately blurred.

What Eurocentric definitions of speculative fiction seem to share is a humanist universalist – colour-blind – approach to the subgenre, which is currently being revised by writers of colour especially through the incorporation of magical realistic ingredients and racial concerns. Such is the case of Larissa Lai, who proposes that speculative fiction 'might offer not a linear pathway, but a rupture into another time and space where we can be if not free then at least different. [...] [S]peculative fiction holds profound possibilities for building community while making art' (2020: 25–32). Lai's concern with community building by imagining futures of liberation goes hand in hand with the aims of Afrofuturism. Since Mark Dery (1993: 180–82) coined the term in an interview with Black critics Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate and Tricia Rose on the genealogies of this genre they had theorized upon, Afrofuturism 'has often explored the real and metaphorical journeys that merge and enter in conversation with each other in the Black Atlantic – and beyond' (Patrizi 2023: 100). Following Frank Wilker's contention that many Afrofuturistic works focus on the Middle Passage as a 'founding trauma for Black identity' (2017: 128), Somwya Kannan highlights the role of Afrofuturism in acknowledging cultural trauma while creating futures that open up a space for hope and healing (2022: 2–3). As she points out, the African Diaspora cannot always find relief, nostalgia or escape in the past because its victims were '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' (2022: 4). As the traumatic past and racial violence of the Black Diaspora cannot be accessed through memory and western teleological narrative forms, Jayna Brown traces in her analysis of Afrofuturist cultural manifestations a futurity that generates 'all kinds of temporal distortions that refuse a Western chronology of civilization' (2021: 15), estranging the reader from the present while troubling linearity, as will be noticed in Solomon's *The Deep*.

The foundational origin of the Middle Passage in the formation of Black Diasporic identities acquires further implications for the present of Black lives and the extent to which they matter if taking into account that 'the devaluation of Black life is intimately related to the development and expansion of capitalism' (Vergara 2023: 79), of the trafficking of African captives on the exclusive bases of profit – their deaths thus becoming 'a by-product of commerce' (Hartman 2008: 31). In this line of thought, Christina Sharpe exposes the Black condition of non/being, i.e. their systemic exclusion from the notion of humanity (2016). This significantly resonates with Rosi Braidotti's critical posthumanist understanding of the lives of 'the sexualized, racialized, and

naturalized others' as being reduced to the 'less than human status of disposable bodies' in the humanist mind frame around which global capitalism and western categorical thinking are built (2013: 15). A similar connection is deftly disclosed in Zakiyyah Iman Jackson's theorization on the western enlightenment colonial co-development of the notions of Blackness and animalization as the background for the construction of (White) humanity through the anti-Black abjection of Black gender and sexuality (2020: 3), which will be particularly relevant to the analysis of *Sorrowland*.

CRITICAL POSTHUMANISM AND NEW MATERIALISMS

Critical posthumanism and new materialism can be understood as forms of inclusive or inclusionary ethics as they shift 'the classic focus on moral agents, moral subjects, and (moral) objects (in a structural model one would say "relata"), toward relations' (Loh 2022: 2). In her post-anthropocentric post-humanist view, Braidotti calls for a posthuman subjectivity that is 'rather materialist and vitalist, embodied and embedded, firmly located somewhere' (2013: 51) and for a nature-culture continuum that extends beyond the quality of the subject to a wider understanding of the world as such. Taking Baruch Spinoza's monism and Giorgio Agamben's conceptualization of bare life as points of departure, Braidotti develops her notion of *zoe* (natural life, as opposed to *bios*, or human life) as the non-hierarchical conjunction and co-development of human and nonhuman 'earth' others. Focusing on the 'kind of relational subjects "we" are in the process of becoming' (2019: 131), she elaborates on an affirmative ethics based on transversal alliances with 'non-human agents, technologically mediated elements, Earth-others (land, waters, plants, animals) and non-human inorganic agents (plastic buckets, wires, software, algorithms, etc.)' (2019: 164).

Sharing Braidotti's overall concern with environmental exploitation and the trans-species commodification of Life, and dwelling on the ethics of human-nonhuman relations, Stacy Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality and its focus on movement across bodies is significant in the context of a post-anthropocentric posthuman ethics since, according to Alaimo, awareness of the interconnection of one's self and the environment 'marks a profound shift in subjectivity' (2010: 20), preventing the feeling of separateness between the human and 'the interconnected, mutually constitutive actions of material reality' (2010: 24). Her material, trans-corporeal ethics thus shifts attention from the disembodied values of individuals to situated, embodied practices and a reconsideration of the notion of agency: nature must no longer be understood as 'a passive resource for the exploitation of Man' and the human body as 'a blank slate awaiting the inscription of culture' (2010: 244–45). This framework requires a reconceptualization that acknowledges the actions of bodies and natures and which Mel Y. Chen reinterprets through their concept of animacy as it applies to 'animals, humans, and dead things' (2012: 5). To them, animacy – 'a quality of agency, awareness, mobility, and liveliness' (2012: 2) – is inevitably 'shaped by race and sexuality' (2012: 5) and pertains also to elements traditionally considered inert matter that are agentic for their effects on human beings, like toxins, chemicals and metals.

In a related attempt to avoid anthropocentrism and biocentrism, Jane Bennett describes human culture as 'inextricably enmeshed with vibrant, nonhuman agencies' and human intentionality as 'agentic only if accompanied by a vast entourage of nonhumans' (2010: 108). Since humans are not

exclusively human any more, 'vital materialists are selves who live as earth' (2010: 111), aware of the capacities and limitations of the materials they are made of. When matter is no longer perceived as passive and inert but as capable of self-transformation and self-organization, the sense of agency as the exclusive possession of humans is jeopardized, and the human species is 'relocated within a natural environment whose material forces themselves manifest certain agentic capacities and in which the domain of unintended or unanticipated effects is considerably broadened' (Coole and Frost 2010: 10), as chaos theories and complexity theories have amply proved (see Davies 1989; Davies and Gribbin [1991] 1992; Hayles 1991).

On a similar note, Karen Barad proposes an ethics of entanglement whereby individuals – which she calls *relata* – emerge through their entangled intra-relating with their surroundings rather than have an independent, self-contained existence. She consequently defines phenomena as 'the ontological inseparability of agentially intra-acting components' and intra-action as '*the mutual constitution of entangled agencies*' (2007: 33, original emphasis). The notion of agency as an exclusive attribute of the human subject is therefore dismantled and replaced by an understanding of the universe as a process of becoming in its dynamic self-organization. According to Barad's agential realism, the (re)configuration of the world is a result of cognitive processes being 'material practices of intra-acting within and as part of the world' (2007: 90). In other words, '*the material and the discursive are mutually implicated in the dynamics of intra-activity*' (2007: 152, original emphasis). Consequently, she proposes an '*ethico-onto-epistem-ology* – an appreciation of the intertwining of ethics, knowing, and being' (2007: 185, original emphasis) as she disclaims any immanent distinction between 'human and nonhuman, subject and object, mind and body, matter and discourse' (2007: 185). Similarly, Jackson puts forth the inseparability of ontology and epistemology as the latter is 'constituent with our being' (2020: 8). In line with her argument that the universalist notion of humanity 'is produced by the constitutive abjection of black humanity', she describes anti-Black animalization as 'a relatively distinctive modality of semio-material violence' (2020: 23) that is intra-actively conceptual and inscribed (or inflicted) upon the flesh. Jackson hence carries out an interrogation of 'the epistemology of "the human"' that can guide ethico-political practices (2020: 15). It is in the intra-action with these theoretical frameworks that my reading of Rivers Solomon's novella of quasi-oneiric quality *The Deep* and faer genre hybrid novel *Sorrowland* erupts given their trans-corporeal ethico-onto-epistem-ological challenges to humanist dualistic frameworks and the discursive-material embodied nature of the traumatic memories of Black abjection these narratives unearth.

OCEANIC EMBODIED MEMORIES IN THE DEEP

The Deep is a brief but intense narrative whose surface gradually reveals a diversity of thematic undercurrents marked by the ebbs and flows between the present narrating time and the analepses that shed some light on the uncanny story time; between the perspective of the current 'historian' and two previous ones; between the present and the un-lived traumatic memories of ancestors that intrude in the life of and overwhelm the main character. *The Deep* is a vindication of history as part of one's identity, a celebration of shared history in its capacity to build community through the strength of togetherness without losing one's individual self, as well as a celebration of reconciliation.

One of the first issues that call the reader's attention about *The Deep* is Solomon's acknowledgement of shared authorship with rapper Daveed Diggs and producers William Hutson and Jonathan Snipes, all three members of the music band clipping, on whose song 'The Deep' the book is based. They, in turn, acknowledge in the dedication of the book that '[t]his book and the song for which it's named would not exist without the work of Geral Donald and James Stinton' – the members of a Detroit techno-electro music duo called Drexciya that created an original mythology of 'water-breathing, aquatically mutated descendants' of 'pregnant America-bound African slaves [...] thrown over-board by the thousands during labor for being sick and disruptive cargo' (Solomon et al. 2019: 158). The creative process is thus described as a productive 'game of artistic Telephone' (2019: 157) that is explicitly open to further adaptations and interpretations in an invitation that highlights not only the collective authorship of the mythology and narrative but also the import of passing on the story – to take up Toni Morrison's famous phrase from the closing section of her masterpiece *Beloved* ([1987] 1988: 275) – for the survival of the memories it entails.

Formally speaking, Solomon's novella *The Deep* is composed of nine chapters and an Afterword in which the narrative reverberates as if chanted by a 'chorus of the deep' (Solomon et al. 2019: 10) or wajinru, the trans-species that populate the ocean deep. Chapters 1–3, 5–7 and 9 are told by an external omniscient narrator that frequently delegates focalization on Yetu, the last historian of the wajinru. Chapters 4 and 8 are narrated internally by Zoti and Basha, the first and penultimate historians, respectively, taking the reader back in time to two transcendental moments of wajinru history: the creation of the wajinru community and the self-defence Tidal War they declared on humans. Following the long tradition of mermaids and other water-dwelling beings that Jalondra A. Davis identifies in African diasporic culture (2021: 349), the wajinru are a black-skinned-scaled hybrid species of human and fish resulting from the intra-action of the ocean deep, the care of breast-feeding whales and the unborn babies of pregnant African women who were thrown overboard the slave ships that were carrying them in the Middle Passage to the American markets because they were 'deemed too much a drain of resources to stay on the journey to their destination' (Solomon et al. 2019: 58). These trans-species humanimal babies were born with fins and sticky webbings at their ends (2019: 7), a hybrid species of hermaphroditic deep-water animal (they learned to breathe in the water from the womb) and human with the intellectual capabilities considered exclusive to the human species. Even though they can learn to speak, they usually communicate 'in electricity, in charges' and transfer their memories as they live them (2019: 84). The wajinru population increases over time as they begin to disturb the ocean waters with the purpose of sinking slave ships, thereby adding new members to their community. This stands as both an act of vengeance led by Zoti against the traffic of African people in the Middle Passage and as a kind act of liberation – distantly echoing Sethe's killing of her daughter *Beloved* to save her from the horrors of slavery (Morrison [1987] 1988) – since they know that the Africans' lives as slaves would be miserable if they ever reached their American destination (2019: 62).

The wajinru hold the memories of their African ancestors, which are so painful and traumatic that the common members of the wajinru community are prevented from remembering them: 'Their memories faded after weeks or months – if not through wajinru biological disposition for forgetfulness, then through sheer force of will. Those cursed with more intact long-term

recollection learned how to forget' (2019: 5). Their forgetful nature is made possible by the existence of a special member of the species, known as the historian, who hosts all those memories inside of her and shares them with the rest of the wajinru only once a year, in a ceremony called the Remembrance. This relation to their own history was devised by Zoti, who decided to absorb and store inside of him all those memories in order to protect the wajinru from knowledge about their origins. Nevertheless, the wajinru long for knowledge of the past, which onto-epistemologically 'made and defined them. [...] Without answers, there is only a hole, a hole where a history should be that takes the shape of an endless longing' (2019: 8). In *The Deep*, memories are indeed depicted as both embodied and material: the wajinru 'knew things in their bodies, bits of the past absorbed into them and transformed into instincts' (2019: 11); the traumatic history of their African ancestors and their own hybrid trans-species origins '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' (2019: 27). Furthermore, as the external narrator states regarding the weight and import of Yetu's job: 'Years of living with the memories of the dead had taken their toll, occupying as much of her mind and body as her own self did. [...] Her body was full of other bodies' (2019: 19–28). Other historians in the past had gone unaffected by those memories, but Yetu, after twenty years holding in her mind and body the plight of the dead in the Middle Passage, has an acute sensitivity that brings her to the verge of suicide by tempting a group of sharks with her own blood because of the pressure she feels from the weight of her responsibility, the burden of 'six hundred years of wajinru culture and custom' (2019: 9). The fact that Yetu is first introduced when posing such a threat to her own safety is not coincidental. As Elizabeth DeLoughrey aptly points out, sharks 'followed slave ships across the Atlantic due to the daily disposal of waste and bodies', becoming 'a figure of terror associated with the slave ship' (2022: 6). However, Joshua Bennett's double-edged reading of the figure of the shark in African American poetry helps shed new light on Yetu's action. Bennett exposes how the shark represents not just 'the ever-present threat of imminent death for the enslaved during their time at sea' (2020: 172) but also, more poignantly, a gateway to escape from the imposed destiny of commodification and violence. Suicide by jumping overboard slave ships and being devoured by sharks was a means to rebel against captivity that was feared by the slave traders as its frequency increased, death being a way to return to one's native land according to West African cosmologies (Bennett 2020: 177). Thus, Yetu's pull towards the sharks can be read as an unconscious 'self-sacrificial offering' (DeLoughrey 2022: 7) elicited by the ancestors' memories but also as a reference to those who decided on their own futures and refused to become objects of exchange.

Yetu's risking her life among starving sharks endangers the history of the wajinru, foregrounding again the material, embodied quality of memories:

If Yetu died doing something reckless and the wajinru were not able to recover her body, the next historian would not be able to harvest the ancestors' rememberings from Yetu's mind. Bits of history could be salvaged from the shark's body, assuming they found it, but it was an incredible risk, and no doubt whole sections would be lost. [...] Without Yetu's body, they couldn't transfer the History, and without the History, the wajinru would perish.

(Solomon et al. 2019: 5–19)

3. As Hannah Arendt explains in her 'Introduction' to Benjamin's *Illuminations*:

Like a pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths, and to carry them to the surface, this thinking delves into the depths of the past – but not in order to resuscitate it the way it was and to contribute to the renewal of extinct ages. What guides this thinking is the conviction that although the living is subject to the ruin of the time, the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization, that in the depth of the sea, into which sinks and is dissolved what once was alive, some things 'suffer a sea-change' and survive in new crystallized forms and shapes that remain immune to the elements, as though they waited only for the pearl diver who one day will come down to them and bring them up into the world of the living – as 'thought fragments', as something 'rich and strange'.

([1968] 2007: 50–51)

Significantly enough, the survival of wajinru memories is not guaranteed by an act of transmission (oral, vibrational or otherwise) but by their existence as physical matter in Yetu's brain, whether dead or alive.

In a way evocative of the pearl diver image in Walter Benjamin's dialectical view of history as an ongoing process between the past and the present,³ wajinru historians roam the ocean collecting the memories of the living wajinru, 'reaching into the minds of the wajinru to log the events of the era' ([1968] 2007: 50–51). Like traditional historians, they 'had to put order and meaning to the events, so that the others could understand' (2019: 9) and, like artists, previous historians used to sing the Remembrance into a melody with the purpose of turning tragedy into beauty. However, Yetu refuses to deceive them by transforming trauma to performance (2019: 10) because the load that she bears is far too heavy. Yetu's refusal to make art out of trauma may be read as a critique upon romanticized, sweetened versions of historical traumas, raising debates on the ethics of aestheticization. However, her rigid understanding of her task proves devastating and it is only when she lets go and shares history with the others that she can find relief and heal. DeLoughrey describes *The Deep* as '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' (2022: 7). Yetu can no longer distinguish between her present life and the intrusive re-enactment of traumatic past events (Solomon et al. 2019: 4) until she abandons the community in the middle of a Remembrance in order to ensure her own survival. Leaving behind the ocean deep she reaches the surface world, forcing the wajinru 'to endure the full weight of their History' (2019: 69). There, she befriends a Black woman she eventually falls in love with: Oori, 'the last of the Oshuben' (2019: 92), whose ethnicity is signalled by the 'black markings inked permanently into her face and neck' (2019: 86). Some of the symbols tattooed in Oori's skin are identical to the etchings on a comb 'inside the skull of a two-legged surface dweller' (2019: 16), a Black woman's skeleton found within the belly of a 600-year-old dead shark. As Freya Juul Jensen remarks, '[t]he memory is stored in the object itself' because it 'is only by touching the comb that Yetu is able to know' what a comb is and the fact that their ancestors used them in their hair (2022: 26). Once again, memories are presented as mattered, material, 'instantiated in a medium', to borrow N. Katherine Hayles's words regarding information (1999: 13). Oori, who bears no knowledge of her ancestors' stories and cannot even remember their mother tongue, teaches Yetu the importance of history, the fact that 'the pain that follows from a violent past is worth bearing since it allows for one to know about their ancestry and identity' (Jensen 2022: 27). It is for her love for the wajinru, for Oori and for the other friendly two-legs that took care of Yetu during her three-month-long surface dwelling that she decides to return. When enraged by their immersion in their memories, the wajinru disturb the waters with such violence that the ocean turmoil stirs a storm that threatens to destroy both the surface world and the cities in the deep. As Davis remarks, *The Deep* rewrites here the traditional western cultural representations of mermaids causing shipwrecks for mischief. These 'crossing merfolk', to borrow Davis's term, cause havoc through storms out of their 'grief for the vulnerability/disposability of Black life as produced by the transatlantic slave trade', moving 'away from a misogynist suspicion of femininity to a liking of racial chattel slavery with the Anthropocene' (2021: 361–62). The link to the Anthropogenic destruction of the wajinru habitat is clear as this accidental storm replicates a previous one led by Basha, which

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gave rise to the Tidal Wars. They flooded the whole earth as a vengeance for humans slaughtering hundreds of wajinru in the explosions with which they mined the ocean deep in their greedy search for oil – ‘a substance they crave’ (Solomon et al. 2019: 135). Sadly enough, these floods also took the Oshuben island with them.

When Yetu returns to the deep, ‘plucking rememberings, reabsorbing them into herself’ (Solomon et al. 2019: 146), her ‘amaba’ – the wajinru term for parent – teaches her that a more positive view of history is possible if only it can be shared as a collective experience:

Pain filled her, but so did knowledge, beauty. [...] Maybe, instead of taking the History from them, she could join them as they experienced it. [...] Could they live out their days all sharing the memories together? [...] Historian and her subjects. It was time for the two to be merged. [...] Who each of them was mattered as much as who all of them were together.

(2019: 145–48)

While ‘holding deeply traumatic histories in isolation can erase one’s personhood’ (Kannan 2022: 5), this new view of shared history and community is, as Kannan asserts, ‘essential in the process of contending with cultural trauma’ and making grief and pain compatible with ‘the capacity for great joy, connection, and a way forward for ourselves and our people’ (2022: 8). Thus relieved from her pressure, Yetu can eventually start a new life with Oori, who learns to breathe underwater thanks to Yetu’s transference of the remembering of the womb. Instead of undergoing a physical transformation to adapt to her new life in the deep, Oori becomes one with the deep, the wajinru and their shared ancestry, as this is the first time a two-legged Black woman is not ‘abandoned to the sea, but invited into it’ (2019: 155).

Trans-corporeal intra-action with water and the ocean is what made the posthuman wajinru species in the first place, and it is only through connection that they achieve survival and a profound sense of reconciliation with the human. Zoti, the first historian, realized that ‘[t]he deep will be our sibling, our parent, our relief from endless solitude’ (Solomon et al. 2019: 50–51), and the external narrator acknowledges the ocean as the wajinru’s first amaba (2019: 149).⁴ Furthermore, Yetu’s reflection when she decides to return to the deep renders water as an essential component in the wajinru just as it is in the human species:

Water, outside her in the pool, inside her body in the form of life-sustaining blood and wet tissue, both connected. She saw it all move in a circle as real as a remembering. Inside her, outside her, one. [...] She’d never felt so synchronized with the ocean before.

(2019: 142–43)

Yetu’s awareness of her liquid nature vibrantly echoes Astrida Neimanis’s notion of hydrocommons, enhancing the always already more-than-human nature of human beings as mostly made of water, who ‘leak and seethe, our borders always vulnerable to rupture and renegotiation’ (2017: 2) with the other bodies and elements with which we intra-act. The sense of oneness not only with the ocean but also with the human is something that Basha had already admitted before Yetu did, despite their will to take revenge: ‘The two-legs are

4. The ocean as a protective space is aptly described by Davis as an Aqua-Afrotopia, a neologism she develops after her own coinage of Afrotopia as ‘a Black political state free to develop without the disruptions, trauma, and underdevelopment of European conquest’ (2024: 310).

5. As Sami Schalk fittingly remarks, 'black women's speculative fiction highlights the mutual constitution of (dis)ability, race, and gender and its impact on so many of us in often oppressive and violent ways' (2018: 83).
6. Cainites further believed that dirt possessed knowledge because of its old connection to the earth, so 'by eating it, people could share in that knowledge' (Solomon 2021a: 11).

our kin' (2019: 140). So does Yetu in a more positive and productive way, bringing the story full circle by befriending a human in a cycle initiated by Zoti, the first historian, who was taught to speak by Waj, a Black person from Tosha, the African island from which Oori's ancestors came as well. The significant difference is that, while Waj left on their way to Tosha, Oori stays in the deep. Nevertheless, this is not necessarily a closed ending since, as the members of clipping state in their Afterword to the novella regarding the different acts of creation and recreation of the story, and echoing Braidotti's ethics of becoming, 'the pleasure is in the process' (2019: 163).

TRANS-CORPOREAL HAUNTING MEMORIES IN *SORROWLAND*

Solomon's third novel, *Sorrowland*, somehow escapes generic categorization as it combines elements from the gothic, grotesque, speculative fiction, very dark humour, love story, political, racial and anticolonial statement, and vital materialist posthumanist manifesto. Solomon faerself has described it as a 'gothic-horror-thriller frankenbeast about monstrous dykes & how utterly fuckin debased the USA is' (Solomon 2021b: n.pag.). It tells the story of Vern, a visually impaired albino African American lesbian gender resistant young woman⁵ who gives birth to and raises a couple of non-gendered twins – 'Howling and Feral' – in the middle of the forest, surviving only on natural resources and in communion with nature. Apparently haunted by ghosts and visions, the novel gradually reveals the intriguing core of the situation that led Vern to run away from home and hide in the wilderness from the attacks of vicious beasts and hunters. The external narrator that delegates focalization mostly on Vern soon unveils how, at the age of 13, Vern was forced to marry Reverend Sherman, the leader of an all-Black religious sect. The novel begins in medias res when, two years later and nine months pregnant, she has just escaped from the secluded religious compound where she was raised, and where she leaves behind her mother and younger brother. The sect, known as the Blessed Acres of Cain, was based on education, especially on the study of flora and fauna, as a tool for liberation, 'a philosophy that dated back to Claws [Coloreds Against White Supremacy], the precursor group to the Cainites' because '[i]ntimate familiarity with the land reduced dependence on the white economy' (Solomon 2021a: 10).⁶ The origins of the sect are to be found in the 1960s, when the Blessed Acres of Cain was formed as a Black nationalist group that ran schools on the premise that their people 'renounce white civilization' (2021a: 10). In line with their strongly anti-white and anti-American views, Cainites believed that 'those with African ancestry were rejected by the White Devil, their interpretation of the Christian God, and were cast out of the Garden of Eden and banned from his bounty' (2021a: 81). The sect leaders use this story of original rejection as the grounds for their dogmatic abhorrence of what they construct as the ills and perversions of White society – homosexuality, gender dissidence, feminism, disabilities and consumerism.

Held together by religious and anti-White fanaticism, ordinary Cainites ignore the fact that Cainland was actually a stronghold of federal experimentation created at the peak of the Cold War (Solomon 2021a: 315) to make super-strong, powerful soldiers with self-healing qualities and the ability to enter the enemy soldiers' minds and thereby control their wills and actions. The protagonist aptly describes Cainland as a 'psypop' carried out by 'Ku Klux scientists messing all up' (2021a: 191) in their brains, using as test subjects Black people prone to host a fungus that grows as a passenger inside their

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organism, changing their bodily qualities and subjecting them to side-effect hauntings. The exploitation of the lives of African Americans as cheap resources is, yet again, a consequence of the humanist logic that discards them as disposable bodies and of the condition of Black non-being initiated in the Middle Passage. Moreover, this experiment can be read as a twenty-first-century parallel of slavery through Jackson's concept of 'plasticity' as 'a mode of transmutation whereby the fleshy being of blackness is experimented with as if it were infinitely malleable lexical and biological matter, such that blackness is produced as sub/super/human at once' (2020: 3). The main difference resides in the fact that, in this case, the Black sect leaders play an active role in the disposal of their peers' bodies and lives.

As Vergara deftly demonstrates, Vern's escape from the compound to the forest with her newborn twins echoes the 'journey from captivity to liberation [...] experienced by multiple women fleeing from slavery during the Antebellum period', evoking the afterlives of slavery, only in a contemporary setting (2023: 100). All through her escape and attempts at survival, she is chased by Ollie, a threatening figure replicating 'the usual role of the slaveholder and authority chasing fugitive slave across the country' (2023: 100). In this case, she turns out to be the red-haired White woman that had recruited Vern's single mother to enter Cainland in the first place, and whose identity as antagonist is revealed only after Vern has unknowingly trusted her as a friend and been involved with her sexually and emotionally. Far from adopting any Manichaeic standpoint, Vern realizes the continuities between Cainland and the White American society from whose oppression Cainland was allegedly protecting its Black members. Not only are the leaders of Cainland complicit in the federal experiments on Black subjects in exchange for immunity for their sexual abuse of underage Cainites; they also share the same regressive cis-heteropatriarchal and ableist ideology, as encapsulated in the following sermon by Rev. Sherman, where he blames the decadent White society for infecting Blacks with what he considers perversions of human nature: 'It is not until we are damaged by the white man's food that our bodies become twisted with perversion. Disease, fatness, so-called autism, depression, homosexuality. Men who think they're women and women who think they're men' (Solomon 2021a: 48, original emphasis).⁷ As an explicit rejection of the repression exerted by her own husband, Vern gives her children gender neutral names in her refusal to even know what sex(es) they are. As Jesse Cohn suitably points out, in refusing to assign any gender to her children, Vern rejects 'the nature/culture dichotomy that underwrites the sex/gender distinction', challenging 'modes of thought that taxonomize the world into neat categories, gesturing to all that such modes exclude and foreclose' (2023: 317). Furthermore, she fully engages in exploring her lesbian sexuality – first with Ollie and then with Gogo, a Lakota Indigenous American with whom she builds up a queer family. Vern eloquently claims the naturalness of her sexual desires in the following terms:

Hearing the details of what Sherman called *the white man's unnatural lifestyles* had awakened a forbidden part of Vern. If it was so unnatural to feel this way, then why did Vern exist? She was a part of nature, too, wasn't she? Humans and their proclivities were as much a part of the earth as trees, as rivers. Loving and fucking and kissing and nuzzling and bucking were more commonplace than sunrise.

(Solomon 2021a: 236, original emphasis)

7. The overall misogynistic attitude of black men is made explicit in many other ways, like the fact that women in the Blessed Acres of Cain had no right to turn down their husbands' requests for sex, refusal being considered the corruption of their minds 'by the notions of whiteness' (Solomon 2021a: 345), or Vern's discovery that her best friend Lucy was murdered by her own father when her mother sought her custody after divorce – '[i]t wasn't even Cainland that had killed her. It was her dad, the same dad she'd've had anywhere else' (Solomon 2021a: 349–50).

Vern is portrayed as a highly sexual person who feels liberated from the oppression undergone in Cainland by embracing and giving satisfaction to her desires. Not only does she engage in sexual intercourse with Ollie and Gogo but also with herself. She masturbates in the open countryside almost fusing in the act with the mud – ‘a viscous matter in a threshold state between solid and liquid’ (Cohn 2023: 315) – on which her naked body is lying. Interestingly enough, Brown considers pleasure, desire and fulfilment as essential to the formation of selfhood and ‘the bedrock of any materialist exploration of utopia’ in Black women’s Afrofuturist cultural productions (2021: 13): sensations reveal the body and the self as open to the other – in her own words, as ‘porous, receptive, impressionable [...]. We are flesh that both gives and receives chemical and electrical signs from other sensate and insensate worlds’ (2021: 14). Not coincidentally, Vern’s porous flesh intra-acts with the mud and fungi that enter the soles of her feet in productive ways as her body transforms into a beast-like posthuman with (lab-induced fungus-based) supernatural abilities.

The portrayal of Cainland as a deeply oppressive cis-heteropatriarchal ableist community directly points to the ills of marginalized groups who enforce different kinds of oppression upon some of their members, imposing different layers of discrimination. Paradoxically enough, intra-racial violence against women and homosexuals at the core of Cainland’s Black supremacist dogmas turn Vern into ‘a refugee from what should have been a refuge’ (Cohn 2023: 308) when she runs away to the woods. Furthermore, the novel opening with Vern’s drive to drown her first newborn in the river because this would be ‘a gentler end’ than the prospect of being returned to the compound (Solomon 2021a: 3) again places the oppression of the Black supremacist sect at the same level as that of slavery in Sethe’s merciful murder of *Beloved* (Morrison [1987] 1988). This straightforward intertextual reference stands as a call to action to acknowledge and respect difference within the Black community just as Audre Lorde called for the acceptance of differences within the feminist movement in the late 1970s ‘as a crucial strength’ ([1979] 2007: 112). As Vergara points out – ‘and Vern herself embodies’ – *Sorrowland* ‘exhibits how Black Liberation movements, in order to be effective, must be attentive to intersectional issues’ (2023: 102). Intersectionality permeates Vern’s hauntings too, as they re-enact traumatic episodes in the lives of dead people oppressed by racial and sexual violence, voicing ‘the silences suppressed in hegemonic US history’ (Vergara 2023: 104). Exploring the connection between trauma and posthuman configurations of the ghost, Tony M. Vinci eloquently argues how ‘the ghost enters the present from the past to rupture our lives with knowledge of what we have overlooked or marginalized’ – enabling us to ‘engage the spectrality of the present and speak to and of and for the muted, invisible, unspeakable pain that has been overlooked or silenced’ (2020: 23). As he further asserts:

The ghost, then, is a doorway to the spectral – ‘the register of past-present-future, the always-ness of an event’ – that haunts the human subject by revealing the ways in which he is not essentially anything. The spectral promotes an understanding that personhood is a momentary, fluid construction of random alien materials, that subjectivity is subject to constant alteration because much of what it is, is not solely part of itself, and that subjectivity is imbricated with unknowable otherness; it is a meeting place for traces of other subjectivities, other times, other species. The spectral’s present non-presence, or not-absent absence,

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invites the subject to participate in a world of deconstructive traces as well as infinite possibilities.

(Vinci 2020: 22)

In *Sorrowland*, the hauntings are described as ‘fragments of the past’ (Solomon 2021a: 166), memories of the dead desperate to tell ‘their unfinished business’ (2021a: 306). Vern’s ghostly visions range from the sighting of a child drowned in a river (2021a: 103) to the bodies of lynched Black men hanging from trees (2021a: 201–30), corpse-pigs awaiting slaughter (2021a: 230), two Latino gay lovers who died of AIDS, whose ghosts end up having sex with Vern (2021a: 294–99) and a plantation mistress trying to sever Vern’s tongue as a punishment for her literacy (2021a: 243) – corroborating how literacy ‘exposed the entire ideological edifice of the Antebellum South’ by irrefutably demonstrating the Black subject’s humanity (Vergara 2023: 104).

However, the spectral intrusions of other people’s traumatic experiences are endowed with a distinctive posthuman quality as they are a side-effect of the scientific drug experimentation carried out in the compound. The purpose was the creation of superhuman beings with the power, among other things, to unfurl an impenetrable protective exoskeleton with antler-looking wings (Solomon 2021a: 303), and the means was their hosting and breeding a body-altering fungus – in itself a natural element that connects Vern to the earth to the extent that they almost become one. As the late Reverend Sherman’s ghost explains to her: ‘The God of Cain lives in the ground there, and when one of us dies, he takes our memories and spreads them across his body’ (2021a: 228). So, when Cainites die, their memories go into the land: ‘The fungus ate the brains of the dead who had hosted it, bringing them back to life in its mycelium’ (2021a: 229). The fungus trans-corporeally enters and intra-acts with Vern’s body through her bare feet and, just like trees talk to each other through their roots (2021a: 208),⁸ she speaks to mycelia, which in turn send messages through her body: ‘[T]he seeds of a thousand hauntings hid dormant in her recesses. Underground, an invisible web of mycelium connected Vern to anyone who had or had ever had the fungus’ (2021a: 192).⁹ The dead’s traumatic memories in *Sorrowland* are thus as discursive-material, nature-cultural and embodied as the wajinru’s in *The Deep*, configuring Vern’s and Yetu’s respective hybrid, humanimal identities.

All in all, *Sorrowland* seems to account for a nature-cultural approach to life as zoe whereby Braidottian disposable bodies – Vern conflating every possible mark of discrimination as a disabled, albino African American gender resistant lesbian turning into a monstrous posthuman creature – merge also in a vibrant, trans-corporeal way as the following extract illustrates:

Vern ate with her skin. Mycelia from the dirt traversed the mycelia of her body and fed her the ground. She absorbed broken-down trees, logs, and animal remains into her cells, and for the first time in months her hunger was sated.

The fungus gave her as much as it took. She and it were symbionts. Siblings.

(2021a: 193)

Furthermore, in the ethico-onto-epistem-ological approach of the novel, embodied discursive-material memories are connected not only to the ancient knowledge of the soil, of the earth, but also to the essence of life.

8. For scientific evidence on the Wood Wide Web and the way trees communicate through their roots, see Simard (2017).
9. Through Vern’s internal focalization, the ancient all-knowing fungus is described as being ‘the stuff of life itself, some ancient essence from an alien world, foisting itself upon her for its own chance at life. It was a gift, and it had chosen her’ (Solomon 2021a: 328).

These memories are the means by which Vern is able to resurrect the African American people killed in the military assault aimed to destroy both Cainland and any proof connecting it to federal experimentation. As if blowing a dandelion, she plants the dead's memories transmuted into spores back into their bodies through their open mouths: 'When every mouth had been tugged into a large O, Vern released her spores. In the same way memories had entered her, she pushed them outward with the spores, pressing them into the bodies they belonged to' (2021a: 352). Just like Yetu gives their identities and memories back to the wajinru by sharing and celebrating their ancestors' history together, Vern thus brings back to life (or animates) her relatives and other former Cainites, now released from the yokes of religious fundamentalism and the government experimentation with which the Black sect leaders were complicit. The open ending then takes Vern, together with her children and Gogo, back to the forest in Tonkawa land, where she feels her true self and alive. Not only is the fungus significantly perceived by Vern as 'Black. Born in Africa. A watchful spirit looking after her people' (2021a: 246) but also nature, the woods, are reclaimed as the space of freedom where labels disintegrate, where 'possibilities seem endless' and 'the wild always wins' (2021a: 354). As the protagonist poetically puts it by the end of the novel, alluding to its title, the woods are the space that 'turns sorrows into flowers' (2021a: 354).

CONCLUSION

The speculative fictional, Afrofuturist works authored by Rivers Solomon under analysis here explore embodied, trans-corporeal ways of processing the traumatic past of the Middle Passage and the ghost of slavery. Their spectral, haunting quality does not only give voice to silenced voices of the past by intruding in the present but also work, when shared, to strengthen the sense of community and survival on the face of the threat of annihilation. Both works equally emphasize the importance of togetherness as a source of strength and the dangers of erasing the differences among individuals for the sake of group cohesiveness or homogeneity. Rather than be disregarded for the sake of racial concerns, the identity axes of gender and sexuality occupy a central position in the books' exposure of traumatogenic oppressions exerted upon vulnerable subjects – or disposable bodies – by those, both White and Black, who hold the power to decide that the notion of humanity applies exclusively to their likes. In this sense, both texts wisely acknowledge continuities in the oppressor/oppressed continuum, between the wajinru and two-legs (who are ultimately the former's ancestors) as well as between Cainland and US white supremacist capitalist society, likened by their ableist, cis-heteropatriarchal prejudices, calling for an intersectional politics against the dangers of intra-marginal oppression.

Significantly enough, from a posthumanist, new materialist viewpoint, it is in the symbiotic intra-action with nature that the wajinru in *The Deep* and Vern in *Sorrowland* find their means to survive and rebel against the forces that threaten to destroy them. Simultaneously, their very existence challenges hegemonic parameters of humanity by their trans-species evolution into Black more-than-human, even monstrous posthuman beings. As Vinci elaborates in his anti-anthropocentric approach to trauma narratives:

If trauma survivors often express feelings of being inhuman, subhuman, other-than-human, then perhaps the simplest and most ethical move

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we can make is to displace (if we cannot remove) the very category that has caused so much pain, shame, and anxiety through its imagined wholeness, its ideologically foreclosed authority and naturalized status as exclusively real: the human – the primary wound, the master narrative from which all modes of social and ecological injustice flourish. (2020: 6)

Nature is ultimately reconceptualized in both texts ‘as a metaphor of a positive integration of humanity into the web of life’, as Vergara (2023: 109) notices in *Sorrowland*. The novel indeed ‘maintains an aporetic structure with regard to Vern’s symbiotic connection with the fungus’ (2023: 109): it represents simultaneously the locus of White oppression through scientific experimentation and of Black liberation, endowing her with the supernatural capacity to defeat her oppressors just as the wajinru’s memories can start a tsunami and shatter the two-legs’ surface world. One could conclude, then, that rebellion and strength may arise from the sources and means of oppression themselves, which the resulting endangered posthuman trans-species can use for their own ends – thus speculatively revisiting Audre Lorde’s famous sentence: ‘The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house’ (2007: 110) until, through intersectional communal resignification, they do.

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