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Ghosts [Crowds]

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# Ghosts from the Abyss

## The imagination of new worlds in the sea-narratives of Afrofuturism

**Gabriella Palermo**

*Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?  
Where is your tribal memory? Sirs, in that grey vault.  
The sea has locked them up. The Sea is History.  
Derek Walcott, The Sea is History*

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This contribution aims to investigate a different ghostscape, shaped by the turbulent materiality of the sea: the abyss. A space of trauma and simultaneously of becoming, it is populated by spectral objects, traces, fragments, and, above all, ghosts. Édouard Glissant,<sup>1</sup> a major thinker of the abyss, identified it with the space of loss opened by the Middle Passage in the Atlantic Ocean during the slave trade. Paul Gilroy<sup>2</sup> will name this space *The Black Atlantic*: a space of violence of the rising capitalistic system and its colonial routes, a space of memory of Black subjectivities. Attending the wake<sup>3</sup> that reproduces this trauma along the sea lines, another such abysmal space is, today, *The Black Mediterranean*: a space of violence along the migrants' routes, a space of (re)generation of sea-related Black counter-practices, counter-narratives, and counter-subjectivities.<sup>4</sup> With this as a background, we can see how abysses are not signified by an absence, but on the contrary by a counter-presence: since "drowning is not ashes, water is not earth, and bodies disappear differently";<sup>5</sup> the ghosts inhabiting the abysses are not mere abstract or metaphorical figures, but presences-absences made of a different materiality: they are an "intermediate presence between the visible and the invisible, the real and the unreal, the past and the present, the conscious and the unconscious": such "absences can have a subjectivity of their own, an agency, a regime of perception that makes them *de facto* presences".<sup>6</sup>

What do the specific ghosts emerging from the abyss evoke and tell us? How do they shape the future by *re-memorizing* the past and questioning the present? How do they haunt the present and the presence in the sea-wake that connects the Black Atlantic to the Black Mediterranean, and vice versa? If we position ourselves at the sea level, taking the perspective *from the sea*, the *point de vue/vie*<sup>7</sup> changes completely. This is due to the main characteristics of the sea, particularly its turbulent materiality. If the turbulence recalls Haraway's *trouble*<sup>8</sup> as a method to stay in contact with a damaged planet that needs the articulation of models of response-ability and becoming-with, imagining new possible alternative worlds, materiality is connected to the livingness of the world: it is no longer conceived of as representation, but as a basis for living and liveable heterogenous worlds, in which "matter comes to matter".<sup>9</sup> Looking into the abyss through the turbulent materiality of the sea, we understand how it is not a blank space of metaphors and abstraction; on the contrary, it is a world inhabited by ghosts of/that matter. In this haunting and troubling, they whisper possible alternative

worlds, fluid, in motion, in a continuous regeneration and becoming-with.

“Can a community whose past has been deliberately erased, and whose energies have been exhausted in the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures?” This was the famous question posed by Mark Dery in 1994 when he first coined the term Afrofuturism. Breaking with humanistic categories, the cultural expression of Afrodiasporic cultures is constituted — mainly through science fiction, music experimentations, visual productions — around the centrality of the removed and denied memory of slavery, turning it into a tool of re-signification, imagination, and construction

*What do the specific ghosts from the abyss evoke and tell us? How do they shape the future by re-memorizing the past and questioning the present? How do they haunt the present and the presence in the sea-wake connecting and reproducing the Black Atlantic with the Black Mediterranean and vice versa?*

of possible alternative futures. A *Leitmotiv* of Afrofuturism productions, even in their heterogenous and multiple approaches, is water. Related to trauma and the ghosts inhabiting the abysses, in Afrofuturism water symbolizes both death and life, erasure and memory, past

and future. Since the 1970s, the techno-electro duo *Drexciya* — formed by James Stinson and Gerald Donald — envisioned a whole mythology of a marine world: the drexciyans<sup>10</sup>, born from pregnant Black women thrown overboard from the slave ships crossing that space of death of the Middle Passage in the Atlantic Ocean, inhabit the abyss.<sup>11</sup>

The myth of the *Black Atlantis* has created a whole world of sea-related narratives, visual productions, and sonic experimentations in Afrofuturism's field. The novel *The Deep* by Rivers Solomon<sup>12</sup> reclaims the imaginary of a submerged world inhabited by the *wajinru* (literally, “chorus of the deep”), a water-breathing people descendants of Black women thrown overboard. In the abyss, the *wajinru* built their cities made of “mud, carnage, ship wreckage, and plants harvested from more shallow seawater.”<sup>13</sup> First-generation *wajinru* rescued the women from the waves and raised the water-born babies. They established the new society and were also its first historians: “a historian's role was to carry the memories so other *wajinru* wouldn't have to. Then, when the time came, she'd share them freely until they got their fill of knowing.”<sup>14</sup> *She* is here our main character, the historian Yetu. Unlike previous historians, Yetu cannot carry the weight of history any longer: memories are killing her. During the *remembrance* ceremony, when the historian must hand out memories to the *wajinru* and then take them back — as “it wasn't a story that could be told, only recalled”<sup>15</sup> — she decides to leave them with all the memories, and flee. On the surface, she finds herself in a tiny pool from which she cannot get out. There, she meets the two-legs people, the surface dwellers, who take care of her: among them there is Oori, somehow a historian herself. Meanwhile, in the abyss, the *wajinru* face a new threat: the two-legs are back with weapons, this time to steal the gifts of the deep: “Below us, deep beneath the sand, there is a substance they crave. It is their life force. Their food. They feast on it like blood.”<sup>16</sup> During the fight, the ocean protects the sea-people above land. Yetu feels her kin through the ocean; she returns and saves her world from the storm caused by the battle. Then, not only does she change her society, giving her people new memories and a new history, but she herself changes into a new creature, capable of breathing in both water and air. Oori will do the same when they meet again in the sea: “This time, the two-legs venturing into the depths had not been abandoned to the sea, but invited into it.”<sup>17</sup>

In the novel, all the main themes of the sea-narratives of Afrofuturism are developed: memory of the trauma of the Middle Passage, rejection of humanity, re-signification of the abyss as a space of alternative worlds. Here, in the deep, memory and history are kept by a community guardian who carries the weight of the trauma: memories are in motion from historian to historian as a tool of preservation from pain and survival. The *wajinru* abyss is an alternative world whose ghosts as presences-absences

are not only the mutant creatures breathing-in-the-water and inhabiting its cities, but also objects, sharks, organic and inorganic matter, memories: spectral fragments from a past that is never past, in a continuous regeneration haunting the present and shaping the future. How does this becoming-with unfold at the bottom of the sea? How composting and regenerative processes take place in the abyss?

In her book *In the Wake*, Christina Sharpe follows the wake of bodies thrown overboard from the slave ship *The Zong*, and asks herself: "What happened to the bodies? What happened to the components of their bodies in salt water?" As Anne Gardulski told her, the atoms of those people who were thrown overboard are out there in the ocean even today, because of the process of co-digestion of the ocean's organisms: the sea-matter. "The amount of time it takes for a substance to enter the ocean and then to leave it is called residence time. Human blood is salty, and sodium, Gardulski tells me, has a residence time of 260 million years. And what happens to the energy that is produced in the waters? It continues cycling like atoms in residence time. We, Black people, exist in the residence time of the wake, a time in which 'everything is now. It is all now'".<sup>18</sup>

Eating, partially co-digesting, partly assimilating:<sup>19</sup> such are the processes of becoming-with that take place in the ghostscape of the abyss, whose turbulent materiality can regenerate new alternative worlds, cities, spaces, times, narratives, history, presences-absences. Yet, the question raised by *Drexciya* in the cover *The Quest* still haunts us: "Have they been spared by God to teach or terrorize us?"

## Concluding thoughts

"The sea is history", wrote the poet Derek Walcott in one of his most famous poems. And it is history because it never forgives. As an archive of memories, stories, bodies, narratives, traces, fragments, it keeps everything, and returns everything. A restitution reproduced today in the wake of violence tracked down once again by contemporary capitalism and its coloniality in the Black Mediterranean. Here, the rationality of accumulation, the hierarchization of society by class, race and gender for the sake of the capital, is constituting a ghostscape determined by ruthless necropolitics.<sup>20</sup>

But the sea is history and geography, too: due to its turbulent materiality, everything is re-composed, re-worked, re-generated, through a continuous process of becoming-with, among wake and waves. A multiplication of horizons in which, as Hito Steyerl argues, the helpless tumble into the abyss can turn into new representational freedom: "if the new views from above recreate societies as free-falling urban abysses and splintered terrains of occupation, surveilled aerially and policed biopolitically, they may also — as linear perspective did — carry the seeds of their own demise within them".<sup>21</sup> Coming from the Abyss, these ghosts re-emerge to question us about the past, the present and possible alternative sea-related futures, as a presence-absence on the threshold between the visible and the invisible, the no-longer and the not-yet: a space of possibilities.

#### Endnotes

- 1 See for example: Édouard Glissant ([1990] 1997) *Poetics of Relation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- 2 Paul Gilroy (1993) *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- 3 Christina Sharpe (2016) *In the Wake: on Blackness and Being*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- 4 Giulia de Spuches and Gabriella Palermo (2020) Between Wakes and Waves. An anti-geopolitical View of a Postcolonial Mediterranean Space, in: Valentina Favarò and Serena Marcenò (Eds.) *Rethinking Borders. Decolonizing Knowledge and Categories*, pp. 33–60. Palermo: Palermo University Press.
- 5 John E. Drabinski (2019) *Glissant and the Middle Passage. Philosophy, Beginnings, Abyss*. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, p. 3.
- 6 Alberto Vanolo (2018) Fantasmi, *Rivista Geografica Italiana*, 125, pp. 369–381: 374.
- 7 Frédérique Ait-Touati et al. (2020) *Terraforma. Manuel de Cartographies Potentielles*. Paris: Éditions B42.
- 8 Donna Haraway (2016) *Staying with the trouble: making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- 9 Karen Barad (2003) Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter, *Gender and Science: New Issues*, 28 (3), pp. 801–831.
- 10 The Drexciya world was visually conceived by Abdul Qadim Haqq, who drew the covers of the records; he recently published the graphic novel *The Book of Drexciya Vol. 1*.
- 11 See some records titled *Deep Sea Dweller*, *Bubble Metropolis*, *The Unknown Aquazone*, *The Journey Home*, *Hydro Doorways*, *Black Sea*, *Aqua Wormhole*.
- 12 Rivers Solomon based their novel on the same name song by the experimental hip-hop group Clipping, formed by Daveed Diggs, William Hutson and Jonathan Snipes, who figure also as co-authors of the book. At the very first page, they thank Gerald Donald and James Stinson, aka Drexciya, as a remark of the connection/filiation of both the abyss stories.
- 13 Rivers Solomon (2019) *The Deep*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, p. 55.
- 14 *Ivi* p. 8.
- 15 This sentence is a clear reference to Toni Morrison's book *Beloved* (1998) – “it was not a story to pass on” – in which pass on has the double meaning of ‘hand out’ and ‘neglect’. In *The Deep*, it is the same story Yetu has to ‘hand out’, which cannot be told, only recalled.
- 16 *Ivi* p. 135.
- 17 *Ivi* p. 155.
- 18 Christina Sharpe *op. cit.*, p. 41.
- 19 See Donna Haraway, *op. cit.*
- 20 See Achille Mbembe (2003) Necropolitics, *Public Culture*, 15 (1), pp. 11–40.
- 21 Hito Steyerl (2011) In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective, *e-flux Journal* (24) 04/11, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/24/67860/in-free-fall-a-thought-experiment-on-vertical-perspective/>.