#BlackLivesMatter: An Afrofuturist and Afropessimist Reading of "The Deep" and *The Deep*

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Abstract

This article undertakes an afrofuturist and afropessimistic reading of an American experimental hip-hop band clipping.'s (stylized as clipping.) song "The Deep" (2017) and Rivers Solomon's novella *The Deep* (2019) to examine how the narratives of trauma and collective memory work to create a futuristic nexus of emancipation, liberation, and technology. Through a variety of narrative discourses and forms, afrofuturism has frequently dissected concrete and figurative traverses that intersect and engage in interaction with one another across the Black Atlantic and beyond. On the same note, afropessimism focuses on the infinite consequences that the black body confronts as a nonexistent slave, a space and often as a defenseless being prone to ceaseless violence. Theoretically grounding on Mark Dery's perception of afrofuturism and Frank Wilderson's perspective of afropessimism, this article also critically examines the primary texts from the outlook of collective trauma and loss of memory. Based on the mythology of Detroit electronic band Drexciya, clipping.'s song "The Deep," a multilayered and evocative sci-fi tale, and Solomon's *The Deep* will be examined to further inspect the power relationship. The aim of the article is two-fold. Firstly, underpinning afrofuturism and afropessimism lenses, it seeks to explore the texts to portray embedded collective trauma and memory to redefine, re-explain, and reimagine the archived history/ies. Secondly, the article will connect the texts to the Black Lives Matter movement.

Keywords: media, technoculture, ethnicity, African historical folklore, speculative literature

"Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children." (King 6.08-6.15)

#BlackLivesMatter

Black Lives Matter (BLM) is a movement in quest of racial impartiality, the abolition of systemic racism, police brutality against African-Americans, marginalization, persecution, and the destruction of global oppression of Black people that stemmed from a 2013 social media hashtag campaign,

116

Nusrat Jahan. "*#BlackLivesMatter*: An Afrofuturist and Afropessimist Reading of "The Deep" and *The Deep*."
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#BlackLivesMatter. This decentralized movement was co-founded in the United States in 2013 by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi (Ray), employing a range of discussion and involvement, counting action that frequently takes place online, offline parades, community organizing, and stirring political contribution to achieve ethnic uprightness. Online support for the #BlackLivesMatter movement enhanced and gained extensive media attention after the 2014 Ferguson rebellion against Black juvenile Michael Brown's death at the hands of police officer Darren Wilson, as opposed to Trayvon Martin's death in 2012, which first rushed the hashtag's popularity. The event sparked intense resentment across the nation for months, representing that Black people were engaged in absolutely "nothing"; hence, the need for observing and examining the past, present, and future of Black slaves through the application of science and technology to scrutinize their trauma is inevitable.

Afrofuturism and Afropessimism: Digging into the Past, Present, and Future
Afrofuturism often has been defined as a black prism through which to view, operate, and envision the circumstances of living in the future. The term "afrofuturism" was first used by cultural critic Mark Dery in his essay "Black to the Future" (1994) to define the medium of fiction that challenges African-American leitmotifs and glitches through technoculture and African-American cultural production that contain an appropriation of high-tech imagery and cyborg futurity. Dery explains it as "speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of 20th century technoculture – and more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future" (180). Science fiction and afrofuturism are intimately associated but afrofuturism offers more, as Lisa Yaszek explains Dery's definition of afrofuturism:

> it [afrofuruism] is a larger aesthetic mode that encompasses a diverse range of artists working in different genres and media who are united by their shared interest in projecting black futures derived from Afrodiasporic experiences. (42)

From the intricate mythology presented by experimental jazz performer Sun Ra, Lee "Scratch" Perry's creepiest "Reggae" to the extravagant stage performances of 1970s bands like George Clinton's band "Parliament, Funkadelic," and Jimi Hendrix's avant-garde work such as "Electric Ladyland," afrofuturist culture has absorbed and built upon many well-known speculative fictional tropes. Afrofuturism draws on science fiction, magic realism, speculative fiction, cyborg fiction, African historical folklore, pulp fiction, technocultural fiction, and African mythological traditions, and it works against the erasure of African American history and the dominant, white-centered imaginations of the future.

Dery considers that a shared black past has been "deliberately rubbed out" (180), that prompts an investigation into the real history and facts in order to treat the trauma and memory loss.

On the same note, afrofuturism may raise concerns about afropessimism, a theoretical lens that explains why civil society relies on anti-black violence – a system of violence that views black people as its own enemies. It acts as an outlook of grasping how the trans-Atlantic slave trade, prejudice, and other historical events involving enslavement in the United States have affected structural conditions as well as African-Americans' subjective, lived experiences, and embodied realities. Writing about a black person's agony from an afropessimist perception emphasizes how the black flesh of the slave, set outside of history, family, and modern variations, cannot be comprehended within the confines of Western discourses such as postcolonialism, psychoanalysis, feminism, or other discourse. Frank Wilderson, in his book *Afropessimism* (2020), explains that being a slave is a permanent condition for Black people and afropessimism conveys that "Blacks are not Human subjects, but are instead structurally inert props, implements for the execution of White and non-Black fantasies and sadomasochistic pleasures" (15). It serves as a diagnostic tool for reasoning regarding how Black people are confined, positioned, and condemned within dominant discourses and structures, making the black people "a perpetual corpse, buried beneath the world and stinking it up" (Cunningham 1). Being victims of "social death" (Wilderson 227) is the current situation of black people, who are sadly always and everywhere excluded from a society. This is an adaptation of the afropessimist axiom: the black person is not considered generally as a "body," but rather as "flesh," definitely not a "human subject," but rather a "sentient being" (Wilderson 3). The afropessimist conception of blackness and its incommensurability with other socially oppressive stances is determined by slavery. In the minds of afropessimists, "the black is positioned, a priori, as slave" (Douglass et al. 1). Emphasizing the harsh realities of Black life in the world, it provides a vital point of view that identifies the constant challenges and anguish that Black people endure and acknowledges the historical pain, collective trauma, memory, and suffering that comes eventually with being a "Black." Afrofuturism and afropessimism share the goal of emancipating Black people from restrictive narratives and bringing self-awareness to the conversation about Black life. When afropessimism seeks that Black people are subjugated, afrofuturism conveys the idea that black people may create their own futures free from the constraints imposed by their history. Afropessimism works as a prism through which to see the racism that exists in the world and afrofuturism is one way to create a world free from such oppression. This study, which identifies an intrinsically speculative aspect in the two distinct bodies of thought, interprets

communal trauma and memory in the texts discussed and illustrates how Black people must thoroughly create a redemption plan.

Before endeavoring a comprehensive study of the selected texts through the lens of afrofuturism and afropessimism, however, a look back into the theory of collective trauma and memory is vital.

Collective Trauma and Memory

The psychological distress that a group, generally a whole culture, society, or other significant number of people, endures in response to a shared trauma is known as collective trauma. Each of these factors – religion, culture, ethnic background, sexual orientation, and class – can serve as a tool to impose social suffering. Such traumas tend to be disastrous in their magnitude and effect to influence the entire group, and are "symbolic renderings that reconstruct and imagine" (Alexander 4) the real event or distinct suffering. However, the emergence of a common cultural trauma is not always assured. Shared trauma depends on collective cultural interpretation processes, as collective traumas are not "found," but rather "made" (Alexander 98). In the study of cultural traumas like the Holocaust or chattel slavery, the term "collective memory" is commonly employed to signify something that goes beyond an individual's memory. It can be summarized as a shared body of information in a social group's collective memory. It is crucial to remember that the term "African American" is a historically produced collective identity that required first and foremost the articulation and approval of people it was intended to include where the memory of slavery would play a key role in this identity formation. Whether or not a victim of slavery, it established one's identity as an African-American and was the reason why direct experience led to the emergence of the labels "former slave" or "daughter of slaves" within this identity which can act as a medium, a communal, and common memory to bind all Americans of African descent (Eyerman 16-17).

Since the trauma of slavery required complete surrender of not just physical productivity but also of African customs, cultural, and psychological standards, their submission is both in terms of their status as slaves and also in terms of their identity. Eyerman asserts that due to such widespread "collective memory," which is manifested as collective trauma, traumatic events are by definition painful and subject to many types of appraisals. It may take a lifetime for a collective memory that is based on a horrific and deadly traumatic event to become public memory; occasionally it might take even longer, and other times sometimes "it may never happen at all" (Eyerman 15), which can be considered as Foucauldian "counter-memory" (Foucault 160). In this regard, Igartua and Paez contribute to this generational cycle's explanation of the presence of the

essential psychological distance needed for recalling a terrible incident, whether it be communal or personal. The anguish that comes with recalling a terrible incident may subside and reduce with time (83-84).

"The Deep"

The experimental hip-hop group clipping.'s intriguing song "The Deep," included in their 2014 album "CLPPNG," highlights crucial issues related to ethnicity, history, and identity. The classic Detroit electro-techno band Drexciya gets recognition in the song "The Deep" where the undersea nation of "Drexciya" was home to the unborn offspring of African women who had been cast off slave ships when they became pregnant. These fetuses then developed the ability to breathe underwater. Just as afrofuturism envisions alternative universes that address racial politics and belonging by fusing science fiction components, "The Deep" also envisions an underwater world where the descendants rise up, calling on the resources of their collective memory for guidance with the urgent cry "y'all remember how deep it go" (Diggs et al. 0.27-0.28) after surface-dwellers destroy the civilization in their quest for oil. The children's offspring launch a rebellion as oil exploration companies attack their cities. The song intensifies as it discusses the attack, the rise of society, and the aftermath. Solomon acknowledges that "The Deep" had multiple layers and textures and it contains "diaspora and slavery, ecological devastation, memory and remembrance" (Liptak 4). Considering water as the main component of this song, it can also be categorized based on different ocean zones according to their transition temperament, generating a non-anthropocentric link between the ocean residents and the human beings, which also points to our seafaring ancestry, fluid state of existence, and evolutionary history. As Dery explains, "afrofuturism reboots our historical memory" (qtd. in Yehouessi 6) and enduring the suffering of the consequences of an abusive past to remember is beneficial because it enables one to learn about one's identity, heritage, and individuality. The developing human fetus is found in the amniotic fluid and humans are thought to be primates that have migrated across the land-sea interface to adapt to a particular environment. In the same way afrofuturism compares the realities of forced migration and captive slavery to speculative literature's depictions of extraterrestrial invasion and physical metamorphosis, "The Deep" reflects the connection between water and the womb, indicating the dormant and untamable mysteries and strengths of water to transcend boundaries. As Dery describes, "it's important that progressive voices reclaim the future" (qtd. in Yehouessi 2). The song uses Black cultural lenses to revise historical accounts and forecast future events, as well as to reclaim and liberate Black people, paying homage to the distinct African vicious history. In order to renegotiate perceptions of the past, present, and future, and to navigate these temporalities simultaneously, the

oppressed, the excluded, and the marginalized are retaliating and confronting their potential oppressors. Rising to the surface, the residents experience both the wind and sunlight for the first time. The inhabitants of the underwater world have no way to defend themselves when the explosion occurs; their coral castles collapse and they perish in large numbers.

The oceanic zones represented in the song are reversed in the sense that the whole world is upside-down to repress the African people, their history, culture, and tradition. The song concludes with the water-dwellers eradicating the human beings by summoning a tremendous tidal wave as vengeance for "the blast, the drill, and the gas" (Diggs et al. 4.50). The narrative of the song destabilizes the western gaze by telling the story of Black victims. "The Deep" implies that there was no social life for slaves and that slavery and the condition of African women are synonymous with social death. The African women who were thrown off the ships were not even considered as human beings. They lost their agency and "personhood" (Cunningham 1) to become exploited, portraying afropessimism as it acknowledges that the violence considers them nothing but "a mass of flesh" (Wilderson 164). Wounded, traumatized Black flesh acts as the ultimate symbol of otherness, alienation, and difference. It presents African Americans as less than human and Wilderson notes, "It is hard to be a slave and feel that you are worthy, truly worthy, of your suffering as a slave" (101). "The Deep" echoes the principles of afropessimism concerning Blackness, enslavement, and Black non-existence, and argues that there was never a moment of balance for slaves, and that Blackness is a unique condition that is associated with slavery and identical with social death. As inert props, violence envelops Black flesh, and remembering these historical and social settings might help human beings recognize and acknowledge the subliminal trauma. Rather than the Black culture being erased and drowned in the oceanic world, the oppressed are eliminating their oppressor. Afrofuturism tends to acknowledge both communal and individual "black historical trauma" (Karam and Kirby-Hirst 4), and reflecting utopian African alternate history, "The Deep" has a close relationship with trauma. The song grants African people the ability to both retell their futures and look back to their pasts, where they are extraterrestrial creatures, energized by both historical and collective trauma, the latter of which is known as "intergenerational trauma" (Karam and Kirby-Hirst 4). Manifesting the cosmopolitan authenticity and the inherent dynamics of afropessimism, "The Deep" estimates Wilderson's query ceaselessly as to why African people are not considered as human beings, and are "instead structurally inert props" (Williams). The inhabitants, "already dead to the world" and cannot be "wounded or killed" (Patterson 155), only have to tick the boxes of an uprising as there will be "no more deep," only "sunshine" (Diggs et al. 3.57). Thus, destabilizing the status quo afrofuturism and afropessimism,

"The Deep" proceeds towards an alternate world where the minority takes over the majority, remembering and overcoming their collective trauma.

The Deep

The mythological Drexciya's universe is a joint effort amongst a range of lyricists, storytellers, visual artists, and painters. It spans media and narrative genres and the ultimate result is a multifaceted piece of art that, rather than having a single author, reflects a collection of individuals. In one of its more fascinating modifications, author Rivers Solomon has adapted the song "The Deep" by clipping. into a novella that is upholding an already-existing artistic heritage and Solomon is listed as the author, with Daveed Diggs, William Hutson, and Jonathan Snipes.

Solomon creates a context for discussion on greater topics of afropessimism and afrofuturism, as well as the significance and construction of collective traumatic memories in forming who outcast African people are, by fully exploring gender fluidity and interactions across species. Being a nonbinary who uses the pronouns they/them and fae/faer, Solomon describes themself as "a refugee of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade" (1), indicating faer embarking on a journey into the heart of the ocean and beyond the margins. The novella opens with Yetu describing how her throat aches from crying while attempting to recall the past that is gone. Wajinru people, which means "chorus of the deep" (Solomon et al. 10), choose their gender in a fictitious "Secondary World" (Wolf 24), and elect a single community member in the role of historian who is to remember the past, history, and their beginnings. Yetu has been given this challenging responsibility. The numerous beginnings to *The Deep* come from various historians of the Wajinru people, where the first historian ponders the horrifying beginning of their civilization: "What does it mean to be born of the dead? What does it mean to begin? First, gray, murky darkness. First, solitude" (Solomon et al. 42).

The protagonist Yetu, meaning "ours" or "us" in Kiswahili, is the Wajinru's current keeper of the ancestral memory, which she shares with the community during a regular Remembrance ritual. While the pregnant ladies perished in the water, their progeny survived and prospered in a submerged utopia. They forget about their past, leaving only the historian to preserve their recollections, believing it to be too horrific for anybody to recall. She runs to the outside to avoid the memories, the expectations, and the duties and finds a world her people long ago abandoned. She is going to discover more about her own history and her people's destiny than she ever could have imagined. They must embrace the memories, take back their identities, and accept who they truly are if they are all to live.

Indistinguishably, as afropessimist discourse portrays how Black people are placed, confined, and penalized, *The Deep* offers an afropessimist reading where the Wajinru people suffer a social death. Here, Yetu represents the essential sign of being Black and a slave, rendering her body an ever-vulnerable object exposed to relentless abuse. After turning into Wajinru "flesh," the Wajinru people have "neither gender nor history" (Weier 423) and the flesh becomes a simple commodity, susceptible to the whims and desires of society. They lament the ongoing threat of black death though they fail to remember it. In a similar way, non-African people or white people are termed as surface-dwelling creatures, land creatures, two-legs in *The Deep*, signifying African people as "other." The Wajinru community negotiated an aquatic environment in a Black body in this novel by refusing to adhere to western conceptions and the Black existence functions in a space of possibilities. The book is a protest against the ways that Black subjects have been rendered susceptible by white supremacist violence and manipulation against Black bodies. The book's afropessimistic concepts also call for protecting the Black lives while they are subjected to racist oppression to prevent the possibility of their lives being erased,

> "Tell us!" someone shouted, their voice high-pitched, loud, and demanding, a screech that sliced through the water. "Tell us! Tell us now!"
> "Remember," Yetu told them. "Remember." (Solomon et al. 31)

Engulfed in that "deepest deep" (Solomon et al. 31) region of history, the Wajinru people are a collective, "they were all in this together" (Solomon et al. 32). And this collective thought reflects and honors the African culture which concurrently explores these temporalities and modifies views on the past, present, and future, promising afrofuturism. In other words, because everything negative is attributed to Black people, Black bodies end up serving as substitutes and representatives for the catastrophes that strike white Americans. Afrofuturism seeks to counter this discourse by transforming the negative image of blackness into an optimistic one. As the process of afrofuturism entails a complete re-imagining of the past and a hopeful vision of the future, both the outer world and the in-text world contain elements of this past, the African history, and culture to serve as an escape, *The Deep* offers a futuristic world that aims to eradicate the systemic racism and oppression that Black people face. Even though Yetu departs from the Wajinru community, she meets Oori who enables her to appreciate the significance of their painful past and establishes the necessity of history, "But your whole history. Your ancestry. That's who you are." (Solomon et al. 95).

In the end, Yetu embraces her ancestry, "instead of taking the History from

them, she could join them as they experienced it … they would bear it all together" (Solomon et al. 148). To put it in another way, deciphering the memory and trauma, Solomon aims to counter the monolithic official discourse by documenting the genuine and tangible experiences of African history.

Afrofuturism also acknowledges hierarchical dualisms and binary oppositions, and the binary opposition is at the heart of Solomon's tale – slave traders and Africans, Wajinru and the historian, Yetu and her surface-dwelling companion Oori, land and underwater, the roaring ocean and the tranquil tidepools, recollecting and forgetting – suggest the binary of us/them. Derrida's "Hauntology" (1993), the returning of persistent presence of memory and how "the present is haunted by the metaphorical ghosts of lost futures" (Ashford 4), fits with the notion of afrofuturism that aims to compile counter memories that contradict the historical record and demands to place "the collective trauma of slavery" (Eshun 288). Yetu's memories keep coming back like ghosts, tormenting her, and soon she is psychologically devastated by this role, having post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms, and flees the group to escape from the agony of remembering the historical truth. As traumatized Yetu's sensorimotor level of the brain is actively and constantly processing information, the hyperaroused state of Yetu's results in her having invasive numbness or a lack of emotion and sensation, which is followed by passivity and, most likely, anxiety and paralysis (Ogden et al. 26). Yetu is taking the burden of collective trauma: her body becomes the vessel of other people and she turns into "every Wajinru who had ever lived possessed her in this moment. They gnashed, they clawed, desperate to speak" (Solomon et al. 28). Ultimately, the collective trauma becomes too painful for them, yet history is so appealing to Wajinru people that they thrive for it, "Tell us! Tell us! We must know!" (Solomon et al. 31). Solomon retells the importance of remembrance of the identity, "How could you leave behind something like that? Doesn't it hurt not to know who you are?" (94). Collective memory is used as one form of historical testimony as Yetu begins to remember,

> whales, their gigantic, godlike forms. She remembered shelters made of seaweed and carcasses. Castles, too, made out of the bones of giant sharks. Kings and queens. Endless beauty, endless dark. Then death, so many deaths." (Solomon et al. 34)

She transmits the memories to her people. She also takes the needed psychological distance to recall everything, and later on decides to return to her people, to the History.

Conclusion
This article attempts to provide a critical reading of the functions of

afropessimism and afrofuturism in "The Deep" and *The Deep*, which seek to rescue Black people from historical marginalization and social death as well as to refute the apocalyptic predictions by creating a futuristic world. Exploring the concerns and problems of the Black struggle through cyberculture, mythological reinterpretation, and speculative fiction, both afrofuturism and afropessimism encompass a variety of mediums and can provide an escape from reality due to the institutionalized oppression and racism experienced in everyday life. Emerging from Afro-diasporic experiences, it can also be used to envision and open up new possibilities that may not seem possible given the current circumstances. Because history is where communities derive their sense of culture and belonging, paying tribute to the experiences of ancestors is essential to the collective healing process from trauma. "The Deep" takes its listeners on a journey that delves into the depths of African-American history and the current struggle for equality with their signature amalgamation of influential lyrics and artistic soundscapes. It transcends and blurs the distinction of memory and traumatized history between past and present, navigating towards a hi-tech journey to the center of emancipation. Simultaneously, "held captive by the History, living the lives of the ancestors from beginning to end" (Solomon et al. 39), *The Deep* interacts with the present, for an empowered future through the means of magic realism, African folklore, traditions, and ritual. History becomes so important to the Wajinru that it "included triumph and defeat, togetherness and solitude" (Solomon et al. 34) in *The Deep*. William Hutson says that, "the song and book are two different lenses through which one can access a single fictional world" (Liptak 9). The texts encourage discussion on Black identity, Blackness, afrofuturism, afropessimism, collective, cultural, historical, and traumatizing history documentation; transcending the binary opposition of we/them, creating a futuristic world. This is where #BlackLivesMatter intersects with everything, technology is the unifying factor, and altering the future is the shared objective, overcoming the collective trauma. The persistent iteration of #BlackLivesMatter, whenever the existing circumstances call for it, provides the aspect of the movement that has always been absent from the narrative. Ultimately, reimagining the past and the history, both "The Deep" (2017) and *The Deep* (2019) offer persuasive, reworked counter-histories and counter-hegemonies.

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