



**Tidal Relations: Pelagic theories  
of the Black Atlantic**

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by

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*Undrowned (2022). Acrylic ink, oil pastel and paillettes on Mylar. © Natalie Wood*

## *Tidal Relations: Pelagic theories of the Black Atlantic*

### ABSTRACT

In this paper I gather a group of theories I consider to be Pelagic theories of the Black Atlantic. These theories demonstrate how Black scholars and artists engage in “thinking through the ocean” (Jue 2020, p.16) and sites of the Middle Passage in order to understand and respond to the forces of anti-Black racism, cis-heteropatriarchy, ecocide, capitalist and colonial logics. They reveal thoughts on the Anthropocene, humanism, Black liberation struggles, and abolition practices as a way to invoke a theory of change practice to valorize all life. This paper is guided by the question, what pelagic theories can be applied to explain, comprehend, and inspire Black contemporary life and struggle in the aftermath of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery?

Natalie Wood

## **Tidal Relations: Pelagic Theories of the Black Atlantic**

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*The sea is history* (Walcott, 2007).

I first heard the term *pelagic* from Paul Gilroy's 2015 Antipode lecture called "*Where every breeze speaks of courage and liberty; Offshore humanism and marine xenology or Racism and the problem of critique at sea level*" he gave at the International Conference of the Association of American Geographers (AAG) and Royal Geographical Society in England. In his lecture he asks the audience to consider the ways racism and racial capitalism are disregarded factors in the failing relations of humans to nature and in the discussions of the Anthropocene. He draws upon texts such as Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* to Frederick Douglass's *The Heroic Slave* to bolster his argument and point out the ways in which in the middle of the ocean "slavery's pelagic theatre of power" (Gilroy, 2015 p.4) cannot prevent those deemed infrahuman from hearing and responding to the calls for courage and liberty. Here he draws out a relationship of the ocean to Black liberation struggles. I choose to call this relationship the Black Pelagic.

In this paper I enclose a group of theories I consider to be Pelagic theories of the Black Atlantic. These theories demonstrate how Black scholars and artists engage in "thinking through the ocean" (Jue 2020, p.16) and sites of the Middle Passage in order to understand and respond to the forces of anti-Black racism, cis-heteropatriarchy, ecocide, capitalist and colonial logics. They reveal thoughts on the Anthropocene, humanism, Black liberation struggles, and abolition practices as a way to invoke a theory of change practice to valorize all life. This paper is guided

by the question, *what pelagic theories can be applied to explain, comprehend, and inspire Black contemporary life and struggle in the aftermath of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery?*

## **The Black Pelagic**

The Black Pelagic gathers a group of theories detailing the historic and contemporary relationship the African diaspora has with the sea, the ocean, large bodies of water, and particularly the Atlantic Ocean. According to Webb's (2021) *Introduction to Oceanography* pelagic is a scientific category naming a specific zone of the ocean. The pelagic zone "refers to the water column, where swimming and floating organisms live" (Webb, 2021, p.10). It spans beyond the shoreline to the depths of the open seas, except for the shoreline (littoral) and the benthic or midnight oceanic zones.

Pelagic also forms part of the word *archipelagic* a concept associated with Island and Caribbean Studies and thought. Academic, island and ocean theorist Elizabeth DeLoughrey says this concept, archipelagic, "seeks to undermine colonial discourses of island isolation and to fashion broader, anti-colonial alliances across both [islands and their respective continents]" (DeLoughery, 2001, p 47). It reveals Caribbean and African diasporic struggles with the legacies and relations of colonialism, and our actions to "reimagining insular, oceanic, and archipelagic spaces as *mainlands* and *mainwaters*, crucial spaces, participants, nodes, and networks within planetary history" (Roberts & Stephens, 2003, p.95).

Black Pelagic theory gives name to an ongoing analysis driven by artists and scholars of the Black Atlantic struggling to grasp the afterlife of the Middle Passage and slavery by “thinking through the ocean” (Jue, 2020, p. 16). In *Wild Blue Media*, Jue (2020) elaborates that the ocean is a factor in inspiring theoretical approaches dealing with the Middle Passage. She says for example, Gilroy’s conceptualization of the Black Atlantic has spurred on many analyses that centre the Atlantic Ocean in understanding and deciphering the various strands that have led to the imposed subjugated status of those of us in the African diaspora.

Black Pelagic engages with these legacies and relations, it centres oceanic spaces and specifically references the forced crossings of the Middle Passage, slavery, its trauma, and its ongoing impact on the African diaspora. When Black scholars and artists like me ‘think through the ocean’ we are thus highlighting the important role the ocean has had on our identities, our lives, cultures, struggles for liberation, and our creative expression.

For this paper, I ask what pelagic theories can be applied to explain, comprehend, and inspire Black contemporary life and struggle in the aftermath of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery? Black Pelagic theories centre specifically on our relationships with the Atlantic Ocean, site of the Middle Passage, a symbol of the terror and trauma of African slavery in order to interpret and provide perspectives on the struggles, the resiliency, the imaginations, and creative capacity of the African and Black diaspora.

## **The Sea is history**

Caribbean poet Derek Walcott in his (1992) Nobel acceptance lecture expounds on the centrality of the sea and its memory of colonialism's long-lasting terrors, he writes "the sea sighs with the drowned from the Middle Passage, the butchery of its aborigines, Carib and Aruac and Taino, bleeds in the scarlet of the immortelle, and even the actions of surf on sand cannot erase the African memory...". [verse 41]. The sea in effect becomes an archive and a witness to these histories of violence and centuries later it is a reminder that these memories refuse to be erased.

Another writer, Dionne Brand, award-winning Canadian author, poet, and essayist in a *Map to the Door of No Return*, also elucidates the all-encompassing and intimate relationship we the diaspora have with the Caribbean Sea and Atlantic Ocean saying, "Water is the first thing in my imagination.... All-beginning in water, all ending in water. [It] is the first thing in my memory. The sea sounded like a thousand secrets, all whispered at the same time... (Brand 2001, p.7). Like Brand, many of us, have reference points beginning with the seas and for us the whisperings of the seas call like haunted memories. We know the Atlantic Ocean is an all-encompassing ontological force bearing memories of the drowned thrown overboard slave ships, and the survivors and their descendants who were forced to settle in the Americas. It continues to have a strong resonance for those of us descendants of the enslaved living in what has been called the Black Atlantic.

As a first-generation immigrant settler, Canadian artist from the Caribbean I create artwork inspired by the diasporic wonder and trauma of the sea. I see deep connections between my struggles now and the trauma of the Middle Passage, slavery, and racial capitalism. The pelagic debates and theories connect the Caribbean, America, Canada, England, and Africa tracing the ghostly tracks of the triangular trade, and the crossings of the African diaspora – making its own watery palimpsest. These theories include those of Farris-Thompson’s and Gilroy’s concept of the *Black Atlantic*, Gilroy’s *Spirit of Sea Level Theory*, Rinaldo Walcott’s *Aquatic Theory*, Christina Sharpe’s *Wake theory*, Kamau Brathwaite’s *Tidalectics*, Pauline Gumb’s *Undrowned theory*, and *spiritual theories of Yemayá*, that enfold Octavia Butler’s Afrofuturistic otherworldly narratives of water mammal transfiguration and relations. These theories also dive into the genealogy of Abolitionist movements from W. E. B. DuBois’s and Angela Davis’s *Abolition Democracy*, and Ruth Gilmore’s *Abolition Geographies* as they relate to the Anthropocene era. They flow and flood into contemporary ecological concerns commingling with the Caribbean community and the African diasporic calls for reparations and to memorialize the Middle Passage.

There are many pelagic metaphors used to draw out an incompletely addressed and ongoing rolling trauma connected to the Middle Passage, enslavement, and its afterlife. I draw heavily upon Caribbean writers and theorists either as they are located in the metropolises of Euro-American countries or grounded in the archipelago of the Caribbean islands. In my discussion I begin with the concept of the *Black Atlantic*, defining the term and its impact. I cross in Western anxieties of living in the Anthropocene era and how blinkered they are to their own historical and

contemporary world-ending practices meted out to Indigenous communities including the African diaspora (Maynard and Simpson, 2022). Central to this is an understanding that anti-Blackness and the brutalizing of all Black lives is a historic and contemporary global project requiring an official recognition in the declaration of the United Nations International Decade (2014-2024) for People of African Descent (UN Assembly, 2015). I bring in theories that explore what this means to our contemporary relationships to the sea and our emotionally complex reactions towards large bodies of water. How the fluidity of these bodies of water also manifests space for a presence of queerness and gives rise to the deep imaginings of a queer Atlantic that is erased and invisibilized. And what does it mean to embrace a cyclical world view and recognize wave like entanglements with land, sea, memory, and time antithetical to Western linear, progressive, oppositional, and dialectical concepts. Finally, I pour into the mix ideas of the Middle Passage as a spiritual crossroad where Yemayá, the spiritual African mother of all the oceans waits to repair, heal, and address the collective trauma. In examining these theories, I fashion a pedagogical pelagic framing for relating to my art as it grapples with the conditions of Black life in the present.

### **The Black Atlantic**

The concept of the *Black Atlantic* was first introduced by Robert Farris-Thompson an American art historian well known for his study of African retentions in the *Black Atlantic*, who documented the “Flash of the Spirit” (1983) he observed in African civilizations and traditions as they crossed the Atlantic. This ‘flash’ he attributes to Black “art and philosophy fused with new elements overseas, [Indigenous, Asian and European influences] shaping and defining the Black

Atlantic visual tradition” (p. xiv). The concept was then taken up and expanded upon a decade later by British Cultural studies scholar Paul Gilroy (1993) in his seminal book *The Black Atlantic, Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Like Farris-Thompson before him, Gilroy shared his understanding of the Black Atlantic as “intercultural and transnational,” bringing an effective challenge to narrow “nationalist [Eurocentric and White supremacist] paradigms for thinking about cultural history,” the Enlightenment, Modernity (Ibid,1993 p. ix) and identity.

For both authors, the Black Atlantic holds the rich and dynamic culture of African-descended and the Black diaspora surrounding the Atlantic Ocean, from the continent of Africa to the Caribbean, the Americas and Europe. This diaspora draws upon common histories of colonialism, slavery, the slave trade, the Middle Passage, and their afterlives (Sharpe, 2016). It practices rhizome-like transmissions of common cultural hybridized practices, perspectives, fights, and innovations, that foreground the twinned yet unachieved goals of Black emancipation and liberation (Gilroy, 1993; Walcott, 2021). Gilroy asks us to see this community spanning the Atlantic uncontained within national boundaries and cast globally with comparable cultural practices, acts of solidarity, survival, and expression. He points out that this mass enforced movement of millions of enslaved Africans generated wealth for Euro-American countries and propped up capitalism, global desires for progress and industry, and ushered in Modernity. It also cemented white supremacist views and racial capitalism (Robinson, 2017). Robinson who coined the term, sees racial capitalism as a modern world mutually reinforcing system dependent on inequality, slavery, violence, imperialism, racial exploitation, and genocide (Kelley, 2017) for

its continuation and its profit making. In fact, “capitalism requires inequality and racism enshrines it” (Gilmore, 2017, p. 240).

Gilroy uses a symbology of the chronotope (a space-time container) to recognize that at the heart of Black Atlantic culture is the slave ship, a crucible from which Black identities have been forged. Despite the diversity of languages, customs, and behaviors, the Black Atlantic / circum-Atlantic African diaspora shares common identity markers extending from these histories of enslavement, forced exile to present-day systemic struggles against anti-Black racism. Common as well are invented cultural practices that are a fusion of European, Asian, and African cultures, such as carnival, soca, steel pan, reggae, rap, and hip hop. These identities and practices are constantly evolving, never complete and constantly being remade. (p.1x). Gilroy recommended that we recognize these similar struggles, desires, and cultural practices as a global Black consciousness movement which he called the Black Atlantic. Cedric J. Robinson (2000) agrees conceptualizing these culturally embodied struggles and practices of resistance as an ontological experience. He says living while Black calls for “the continuing development of the collective consciousness informed by the historical struggles for liberation and motivated by the shared sense of obligation to preserve the collective being, the ontological totality (p.171). For Robinson like Gilroy the collective being expands beyond the African diaspora to humanity and the planet.

## Sea Level Theory, the Anthropocene and offshore humanism

Almost two decades later, in Gilroy's 2015 Antipode article, *Where every breeze speaks of courage and liberty: Offshore humanism and marine xenology or racism and the problem of critique at sea level*, he proposes a Spirit of Sea Level theory to critique the established geographer's perception of the Anthropocene era. Like a Black Atlantic and Black Radical Tradition <sup>1</sup> critique, he highlights his concerns with the inadequate discussions and understandings of the Anthropocene that derive from a limited Eurocentric world viewpoint. The Anthropocene is a term first used by scientists Crutzen and Stoermer (2000) to acknowledge and register the deleterious human impact on Earth's natural ecological and geological systems. In particular, the impact of industry and unbridled capitalism has had on spurring climate change, rising seas, loss of species and the threatening all life on this planet. The Anthropocene is world-ending. This epoch began in the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century which coincidentally was the beginning of industrialization and the height of the slave trade. Like Verges's (2017) *Racial Capitocene*, Yusoff's (2019) *Black Anthropocene*, and Maynard and Simpson's (2022) *Interminable Catastrophe* (p.20), Gilroy argues Indigenous, Black, People of Color (IBPOC) and other de-natured, de-humanized and infra-human communities have already experienced world endings begun in imperialist colonial contact and their virulent capitalist systems of exploitation and extraction. An ecocide decreed by an Imperialist agenda. In *A Billion and one Black Anthropocene's*, Yusoff writes, "The Anthropocene might seem to offer a dystopic future that

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<sup>1</sup> "The Black Radical Tradition, [as conceived by Cedric Johnson] is a tradition of resistance honed by the history of racialized, permanent, hereditary, and chattel slavery that formed the contours of civic and social life in the Americas, Europe, and Africa. Grounded in Black resistance more than five centuries in the making, this practice produced an enduring vision of a shared future whose principal promise is the abolition of all forms of oppression" (Robinson. and Robinson, p.17). "Black radicalism refers to demands and articulations of freedom by Black activists, artists, and intellectuals on behalf of everyone's freedom. Black freedom is freedom for all. (Robinson and Robinson, p.12).

laments the end of the world, but imperialism and ongoing (settler) colonialisms have been ending worlds for as long as they have been in existence” (2018, p. ii).

He proffers that these discussions on the Anthropocene need to center, IBPOC historical and contemporary struggles with colonial, genocidal, extractive, exploitative and damaging forces upon land, sea, air, and people. By doing so he hopes the British and European contemporary discourse that erases the humanity of African refugees drowning in the Mediterranean (evoking memories of the transatlantic drownings) will become less vindictive, more inclusive and may therefore elicit a shift to a reparative and “planetary humanism” (Gilroy, 2018, p. 19). By drawing upon Jamaican novelist, essayist, and leading cultural thinker Sylvia Wynter’s argument of the need for a “re-enchantment of humanism” (Scott, 2000, p. 190)– he advises applying her discourse and coming to terms with a new humanism where humanity and species life beyond raciology is folded in. “The refiguration of the human outside of raciology has enormous consequences—not least for the critique of epistemology and the politics of truth” (Gilroy, 2018, p.7).

Gilroy’s Sea Level theory (2015) argues that we the descendants of the enslaved have always exerted our humanity in the face of “slavery’s pelagic theatre of power” (p. 5) and colonialism’s world-endings. At sea level “water flows down and not up” (Gilroy, 2018, p.10), which challenges the dominant perspective of progress, domination, dominance, and competitiveness. Offshore on the open seas, and at the coastal areas of ports and harbors we confront “the nodal points in intersecting planetary webs of trade, information and

accumulation... the unruly force of rivers and oceans as well as the distinctive habits, peregrinations and insubordinate mentalities of those (proletariat and the enslaved) who worked upon the waters.” (Gilroy, 2018, p. 7) These, he says, were expressions of conflicting hydrarchies<sup>2</sup> that can be used to inspire a more radical imagining of civil society, generate new humanisms, and deliver ecological and ethical relationships such as the welcoming environments of sanctuary cities of which Toronto has chosen to be one.

### **Black Aquatic**

Whereas Gilroy takes on the naming, the historical terrors and the resistance through cultural expression and movements to the enforced inhuman status of the Black Atlantic, Rinaldo Walcott’s Black Aquatic theory (2021) seizes on the contemporary emotion-laden ambivalence of the Black diaspora towards the ocean and all natural and manmade bodies of water. He writes, “Indeed, as far as the sea and ocean were concerned, reverence and fear, and sometimes both simultaneously, characterized our relationship to bodies of water, especially the sea.” (pp.64-65). He says the Black Aquatic,

pursues the relationship Black people have to bodies of water as foundationally formative of blackness, ... Therefore, if the sea has been death, it has also been birth...[that] blackness itself is birthed in salt water—the Atlantic Ocean as a first

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<sup>2</sup> Hydrarchies. Hydrarchy refers to how life and work is ordered at sea. There is Hydrarchy from above and below. “Hydrarchy from below (relevant perspective) refers to how seafaring people organize themselves and their lives. This includes a maritime tradition of resistance that is radical, democratic, and egalitarian...It is based on the work seafarers do, how they cooperate in a dangerous environment, and how they learn that solidarity [across race] is necessary for survival.” (Palermo, 2011).

instance—and then later becomes a kind of saline embodiment of early modern and late modern new life forms of Black selves” (Walcott, 2021, p.65).

Taken from Africa our original homeland and launched across the Atlantic Ocean Black people would always have a complex and ambivalent relationship with the ocean. I have lived this ambivalence as someone who grew up with parents who lived on an island and yet who did not swim and would not consider the possibility. I learned the swim strokes in high school in Trinidad but was not a competent swimmer and I still held a fear for the immenseness of the ocean and swimming in a pools’ deep end. I grew up with the warning to ‘never turn your back to the sea’. I imagined this statement was a reminder that the sea was always waiting to grab you and take you away, an embodied memory of its implication in the first abduction and a terrifying thought. It was like a haunting as we were surrounded by the sea. We as a Trini(dad) family would go to the sea for a dip and to sit and ‘lime’ on the beach not to enjoy the pleasure of the silence that comes with being immersed and moving smoothly through the water. Concerns for salt in our hair, the race and class-based expectations and policies that surrounded who could use the pools led to an avoidance from fear of drowning and of conflict.

It is my daughter’s love for water that has brought me and my queer Canadian family to the edges beyond the beach and finally into the depths of our local swimming pool and the many lakes in Ontario. My daughter taught us how to swim and eventually (after several years) to feel comfortable and confident in the deep. To create my artwork for these exhibits, I had to develop a comfort with deep water (learn to swim) so I could immerse myself in it to record underwater,

but also to be able to relay the experience on paper and on film. Fortunately, I had a good teacher.

Walcott's (2021) discussion of the "narratology and hauntology" (p.65) of the aquatic layers of Black life also intones a form of liquidity to Black subjectivity. Blackness he says begins in the liquid state of the Middle Passage. Birthed in the terrors of the slave ship bound for the Americas and its plantation economies, its plantation futures, and inescapable Black geographies. These Black geographies which McKittrick (2011) defines as "terrains of struggle" (p.7) – are environmental, social, political, and economic sites where Black subjects engage in never-ending struggles against forms of extraction, exploitation, erasure, and premature death. Walcott's liquid birth was also the birth of a never-ending fluid state of resisting against Black subjectivity. He argues that our resistance is necessary as there is an ongoing perception and re-positioning of Blackness in "recognizable tropes or Atlantic rhetorics" (Walcott 2021, p. 68), that show us in crisis, helpless and needing rescue. An example of this form of narratology can be seen in Canadian artist, Kent Monkman's paintings, *Welcoming the Newcomers*, and *Resurgence of the People* commissioned for the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 2019. In these paintings which are meant to display the Indigenous world view, the Black subjects are portrayed as either seeking rescue from raging waters or dragging and caring for an unconscious white man half submerged in water and thus perceived as forever tied to whiteness – an unresolved master slave discourse. This Walcott proves is a 'terrain of struggle' as it repeats an old stereotypical and manufactured trope of Black helplessness and incapacity solely attuned to whiteness. It is also indicative of the hauntology of these rhetorics.

These ‘Atlantic rhetorics’ manufactured during the Middle Passage and in enslavement is where he states liquidity becomes liquidation a state of being which he considers a “synonym of death” (Walcott, 2021, p. 66). Black people are often seen without – without land, without agency, without belief in our humanity (McKittrick, 2011), incapable and in crisis often by our own hands. Our struggles for liberation, our assertions of our humanity against histories of commodification are easily erased. Anti-Blackness imposes this liquidation which is enforced by the anxieties, desires, and whims of white supremacist viewpoints sutured to racial capitalism. For Walcott, the Black aquatic theory refuses these impositions, parsing, identifying, and clarifying these terrains of struggle, their genealogies, their relations with water and liquidity and propelling their flow towards change.

### **Wake theory**

The liquid nature of Blackness in the face of anti-Blackness is what Black studies scholar Christina Sharpe (2016) calls “living in the wake” (p. 15). Hers is another pelagic theory seeking to understand Black experience, and the normalizing of Black premature death. She describes the wake as, “the track left on the water’s surface by a ship...; the disturbance caused by a body swimming, or one that is moved in water; the air currents behind a body in flight; a region of disturbed flow; rituals [to] enact grief and memory...being awake and also consciousness” (Sharpe, 2016, p. 21). In this description you can almost see the gliding movement of a slave

ship, a body thrown or leaping overboard as though in flight, the disturbance caused by its fall into the ocean and the grief tied to the memory of the Middle Passage.

For Sharpe, the metaphor of the wake means enacting and re-enacting rituals of grief. In other words, Blackness can be seen to be in a perpetual grief state, aware that the disturbance made by 36,000 slave ships, the movement of 12 million people across the Atlantic Ocean, the wave displacement made by 2 million thrown overboard has us experiencing repercussions and unstable currents that still wash us into precarious living and premature violent deaths. These dynamic patterns of pelagic movement manifest anti-Blackness as climate, as the weather. This Sharpe shows are the links to the present -day and ongoing struggles of the Black Atlantic and useful to understanding the ontological being of Blackness.

In her book, *In the wake: On Blackness and being*, she writes, her purpose is to create an archive tracing Black death and the ways we resist. Among her arguments she discusses “quotidian catastrophic events” (Sharpe, 2016, p.20) that lead to the violent deaths of Black people at the hands of police. She writes that in America, police encounters result in “the too-young Black dead: in Chicago, in Boston, in Philadelphia, in Sanford, Florida, in Atlanta, in Los Angeles, in Ferguson, Missouri, in every town and city across the United States” (Sharpe, 2016, p.97). Living in the wake in the afterlife of slavery calls for us to “re-imagine and transform spaces for and practices of an ethics of care (as in repair, maintenance, attention), an ethics of seeing, and of being...” (Sharpe, 2016, p.131). These practices she calls “wake work” (Sharpe, 2016, p.17). She sees this work embedded in a “Black aesthetic” approach employed by a variety

of contemporary Black poets, writers, thinkers, and artists like Dionne Brand, NourbeSe Philip, Hew Locke and Charles Gaines. I see myself like these artists, who struggle to understand what it means to live in the afterlife of slavery and who are implicated in a desire to re-imagine and provide a collective ethics of care (Sharpe, 2016, p.20).

### **Tidalectics**

The wake of the slave ship and slavery continues to create waves and ripples of ongoing struggle and movement across the Atlantic. Award winning Barbadian poet, academic and cultural theorist, Edward Kamau Brathwaite speaking about the diaspora observes, “We in the Caribbean have basically conceived of our cosmos as coming out of a plantation; a migration out of a plantation...a perpetual tide of migration – ...nigration” (Brathwaite, 1999, p.37-38). Black life in the Black Atlantic is in constant motion driven by the original disturbance caused by the historic forces of dehumanization and commodification. Brathwaite (1999) asks,

Why are we so ... fragmented, so perpetually caught up with the notion of hope and still at the same time Sisyphean? Why is our psychology not dialectical... but *Tidalectic* like our grandmother’s – our nana’s - action, like the movement of the Ocean she’s walking on [*with grace and terror*], coming from one continent/ continuum, touching another, and then receding (‘reading’) from the island(s) into the perhaps creative chaos of the (ir) future (p.34).

His invention of the term *Tidalectic* has inspired many academics and artists who are searching for ways to understand the terror (the haunting) and grace, the ‘Sisyphean’ motions of solving or resolving the conquest of colonialism, of living in the wake. He sees *Tidalectics* as a term to capture the liquid movement of one moment being treated as a citizen, of belonging to the archive of humanity, nation, and history and in another breaking moment being pushed outside of these rights. *Tidalectics* is a method of thinking through the ebb and flow of tides, the ceaseless movements of water distilling, taking, washing away but also depositing and returning, to understand the experience of the Black Atlantic, and our relations to the ocean, to history, to time and memory.

*Tidalectics* promotes an archipelagic epistemology. In this theory the sea does not divide but it links and connects islands, nations, people, and histories through time and across its waters – a Black Atlantic concept. In Braithwaite’s vision, it is not the water alone that moves but the land also draws closer or further away (DeLoughrey, 2007). The impact/tidal wave of the Middle Passage and its afterlife has a cyclical movement where healing from the trauma is ongoing (ebbing and flowing) and healing and repairing cannot truly take place until as writer, academic and activist Jacqui Alexander states, all the stories of “those who forcibly undertook the Middle Passage are still yearning to tell, five centuries later” are told. (2005, p.6). She adds, all the stories must be read with a pedagogical framing. Poet/essayist NourbeSe Philip’s magnum opus, *Zong!*, comes to mind where she works (“wake work”) at parsing the official record for the truth, relying on archives, creativity and rememory, to tell the untold stories of the slave ship Zong’s cargo buried in the silent watery archives of the Middle Passage.

*Tidalectics* imagines and gives added context to the Crossings – the Middle Passage and all the other forms of ‘nigrations’. Alexander (2005, p. 8) says, “The Crossing is also meant to evoke/ invoke the crossroads, the space of convergence and endless possibility; the place where we put down and discard the unnecessary in order to pick up that which is necessary. It is that imaginary from which we dream the craft of a new compass” – a *Tidalectics* of being launched in creative chaos. As well she adds that, “crossing is never undertaken once and for all” (p.14-15). It is in fact never ending and often an escape from and a perilous journey to as we cross the Atlantic, the Caribbean sea, the Mediterranean Sea, Lake Michigan, Huron or the Niagara River. It is a Tidalectic proposition. She encourages us to see the various crossings, and stories connected to the Middle Passage as a pedagogical opportunity. To ascertain what we need to know and learn of ourselves and what we need in order to transform our condition.

### **Queer Atlantic**

These many crossings, the flow of the tides, the liquid nature of Blackness also must take on and imagine, as Omise’eke Tinsley does, the queer Atlantic. In her article, *Black Atlantic, queer Atlantic: Queer imaginings of the Middle Passage* (2017) she takes the reader on an imaginative journey of rememory, borrowing from the factual documentations, narratives, and imaginings of others - to interrupt, interject, the Black queer and feminist experience missing from Gilroy’s take on the Black Atlantic. The mere fact that we Black queers exist today as descendants from this *Maaafa*, a Swahili term used to describe the African holocaust brought on by the Middle Passage and enslavement (Philips, 2008), means we existed before and during. She writes, “This

wateriness is metaphor, and history too. The brown-skinned, fluid-bodied experiences now called blackness and queerness surfaced in intercontinental, maritime contacts hundreds of years ago: in the seventeenth century, in the Atlantic Ocean. You see, the black Atlantic has always been the queer Atlantic” (Tinsley, 2017, p.191). At the heart of queerness is the struggle against erasure, very much like the experience of Blackness’ social and lived death (Haritaworn, Moussa & Ware, 2018). Chambers-Letson (2018), says “black and brown queer and trans death, like the deaths of women of color, produced by different yet overlapping histories of colonialism, capital accumulation, white supremacy, and cis-heteropatriarchy, share something with each other not in spite, but because, of their difference” (p. xvii).

Using the discoveries from researchers such as Dutch anthropologist Gloria Wekker, Tinsley grounds her argument by quoting the terms in use by maroons and the enslaved across the Caribbean that attach the presence of same sex bonds to those arriving on the same ships. These terms include *mati*, *sippi*, *malongue*, *batiment*, and *malungo* (Tinsley, 2017, as cited in Wekker, 1994, p.194). Proving that enslaved African women “created erotic bonds with other women ...and captive African men created bonds with other men” (Tinsley, 2017, p.192) during the brutality of the Middle Passage. There, in the belly of the slave ship, its cargo, the enslaved practiced care, holding, and attending to each other. In these brutalizing spaces feeling and feeling for each other disrupted the violence of being treated as cargo, blurred boundaries, and overflowed the imposed assigned roles and expectations. This Amideo (2016) terms a *Queer Tidalectics* where “aquatic images associated with queer desire, has the potential for re-

imagining life outside of contemporary racialized heteropatriarchy” (p.102), outside of Black queer erasure.

### **Undrowned theory**

In *Undrowned: Black feminist lessons from marine mammals*, Alexis Pauline Gumbs (2020) centers the experience of the Middle Passage in a context of Drowned vs Undrowned. Those who survived like my ancestors are the Undrowned. In this manner she recontextualizes and situates those who survived in a tangible relationship an entanglement with those who drowned. Memorializing those who drowned. She says,

The massive drowning yet unfinished ... I am talking about the middle passage and everyone who drowned and everyone who continued breathing. But I am troubling the distinction between the two. I am saying that those who survived in the underbellies of boats, ...under unbreathable circumstances are the undrowned...” (Gumbs, 2020, p.1-2).

This continuum of drowning/ undrowning, breathing/ breathlessness is a condition of Black life today in the face of anti-Black racism and our experience of many world-endings. To address this moment, she seeks out Black feminist lessons gleaned from marine mammals who she believes have, “much to teach us about the vulnerability, collaboration, and adaptation we need in order to be with change at this time”. (Gumbs, 2020, p.7). She adds that given the era of the Anthropocene, the climate

crisis, the rising of the seas we may need to form new and more healthy relationships with the oceans and with water and their sentient beings. We may need to breathe differently like the baby Weddell seal who in infancy is not aware of its capacity to adapt and breathe expansively, to breathe underwater and to hold its breath for as long as an hour. We may also need to wake up to our destructive practices of living and recognize that we need to become aware of and champion our entanglement with nature, other sentient beings, and the ocean.

In reference to the Middle Passage, she says of those who drowned, she thanks them for sharing what they learnt when facing their own death, “what you learned in your drowning is my breath” (Gumbs, 2020, p. 24). The twenty lessons she imparts include to listen, breathe, remember, be fierce, end capitalism, refuse, rest, and take care of your blessings. In her chapter, End Capitalism, she addresses the disastrous effects of commercial fishing on the Atlantic right whale, the vaquita, the striped dolphin and the New Zealand white front dolphin and points out that this “deadly system [capitalism] doesn’t have to seem like its’s targeting you directly to kill you consistently” (Gumbs, 2020 p.103). Her message of caring is clear – we need to acknowledge the costs of this system, how many extinctions and world endings have occurred and try to imagine ourselves free from the entanglements of capitalism and ready to breathe differently.

One of the inspirations for Gumbs’ book on Black feminist lessons, where she encourages us to listen and learn across species, across extinctions, comes from Octavia

Butler's *Wild Seed* (2005). In *Wild Seed* the main character who is a shape shifter and healer transforms herself into a dolphin during her forced travels across the Middle Passage and has an experience of learning and experiencing freedom by swimming unconstrained, with a dolphin pod who welcomed her. "She was moving through the water alongside the ship, propelling her long sleek body forward with easy beats of her tail... She reveled in the strength and speed of her new body, and in its keen hearing." (Butler, 2005, p.88-89).

Butler's own inspiration for this novel comes from a reference to a Nigerian legend of a woman named Atagbusi who was known as a healer who could shape shift into animal form (Kenan, 1991). Incidentally, this is also a characteristic of the Orisha deity Yemayá, spiritual mother of the oceans worshipped in African traditional religions circum-Atlantic and who is also depicted as a dolphin. Both Butler and Gumbs are practicing what Gilroy imagines to be a new form of humanism, one that recognizes the interspecies nature of our world and chooses not to separate us from all sentient beings. Our role as caretakers and stewards involved in all planetary life is necessary for us to address the present-day world-endings brought on by racial capitalism.

The theories I have just discussed have similar overlapping (crossing) ideas but often there are distinctions which I hope I have illustrated. I have found that each metaphorizing or 'thinking through' the ocean casts a slightly different water track

creating a clearer understanding of the impact of the Middle Passage on the undrowned descendants of the Black Atlantic. These water tracks bring with them lessons of survival, liberation, and levels of comprehending the trauma as a gateway towards healing. An honoring, an acceptance and an integration of ancestral wisdom and ingenuity. It is a reckoning in this time of ongoing skewed pandemic outcomes and police violence that continue to result in the precariousness of living while Black. These Black pelagic theories give us a perspective on and ways of imagining a way out of the impending catastrophe. It acknowledges the importance of queer temporalities and the fluidity and cyclical nature of time. In other words, the wake work I take on now can transform and create healthy more useful perceptions of the past as well as the future. It argues in the absence of repressed official archives, rememory is an empowering cultural tool and methodology. That fluidity of being, champions queerness while acknowledging the shapeshifting that comes with the constant (often forced) movements and crossings of the diaspora. Where at the crossroads of change we can determine what works and what must be created new.

Black feminist lessons are not just political but also spiritual (Alexander, 2005) and bound in a practice of self-knowing and collective care for all sentient beings. Despite and maybe in spite of all the ways industry and profit-making eclipses breathing we can learn and draw upon other life forms and their capacity to adapt and breathe differently. These theories explain and share an understanding of Black contemporary life and struggles in the aftermath of the transatlantic slave trade, colonialism, and racial capitalism.

**In summary but not in Conclusion:**

*“perhaps the deep sea is not our collective haunting, but it is the lands from which we were taken and brought to that haunt us. Maybe the ocean is the only place that can fully hold our humanity.”* (Wallen & Wood, 2022).

The trauma of the transatlantic slave trade, its afterlife, the warming and rising of the seas, climate change, the Anthropocene, and environmental racism dips into discussions of *Abolition* as a Black Atlantic liberation practice. According to Gilmore (2017), *Abolition* is “a theory of change, it’s a theory of social life. It’s about making things” (p.26). It is a radical act of forming new solidarities, new placemaking where freedom can be defined “as a place” (Gilmore, 2017, p.21) not made precarious by oversurveillance and carceral logics. Heynen (2016) promotes a version of abolition he calls Abolition Ecology which “builds on direct action traditions that began in the abolitionist movement against slavery...Building upon DuBois, toward abolition ecology is an effort to take abolitionist ideas created through hard-fought struggles...” (n.d.) and to tie them into environmental justice movements. In this instance Heynen’s creation of a new term and meshing of Black abolition strategies seems unnecessary to me. It negates abolition democracy’s and abolition geography’s already identified concerns and practices that address environmental racism. These strategies are also environmental justice practices.

Yet, I agree with Lester (2021) contemporary notions of “abolition is a fundamentally contested concept” (p.2) “requiring multiple visions to be theorized” (p. 5) especially in the absence of a proven strategy. Alarming, since the rise of Black Lives Matter there has been a

popular misconception and narrowing of this concept to a call for abolishing police institutions - only. However, abolition as defined by Angela Davis (2005) who draws upon DuBois's abolition democracy is the "negative process of tearing down, but it is also about building up, about creating new institutions... DuBois pointed out that in order to fully abolish the oppressive conditions produced by slavery, new democratic institutions would have to be created" (p.73). This goes beyond the narrow focus of abolishing one institution to include abolition practices in education, health care, penal systems, the economy, etc.

An example of abolition geography, radical acts of placemaking, I would like to discuss, is the call to memorialize the Middle Passage (Menzie, 2020). Scholars across the world have called for a virtual memorial that would take the form of coloured ribbons on world maps of the Atlantic Ocean (Turner et al, 2020). The memorial is meant to recognize that the Atlantic seabed now the site of many European nations' exploratory attempts to extract minerals in international waters, is also an archaeological site of cultural value marking the deaths and unmarked graves of up to 2 million Africans (Scales, 2021). This to me is an example of action that leads to Black Atlantic Futures, it is a socio-spatial fight for recognition, reparation, and memorializing. In fact, it falls into the first step in the Caribbean Community and Common Market's Caribbean Reparation Commission (CRC)'s ten-point reparation plan, which is for former colonial powers to provide an acknowledgement and a formal apology to the descendants of Indigenous, enslaved Africans and "other groups subjected to deceptive systems of indenture". (Euractiv, 2023; 10-point plan, n. d.). This memorial would be an acknowledgment with some reparative value. It

inspires further place-making and world-building, it rewrites maps through a direct and clear pedagogical relationship to the ocean, and to the Middle Passage.

In her series for “The Guardian”, called *Seascope: The state of our oceans*, the article *Drexciya: How Afrofuturism is inspiring calls for an ocean memorial to slavery* (2021) author, marine biologist Helen Scales quotes Rivers Solomon a nonbinary science fiction author of the award-winning novel *The Deep*. Solomon says,

Our human history, our stories, what happened to us, our cultural legacies, are extraordinarily important, informative and shape who we are today. [They] should be at the forefront for how we think about how we’re going to engage with the environment, how we engage with the ocean (2021).

The struggle for our histories is a struggle for our futures. “How we memorialize the dead is also a struggle over how we care for the living.” (Maynard and Simpson, p. 251). This act of placemaking is an abolitionist practice, a Black Radical Tradition and Black Futures strategy. In *Critical Black Futures: Speculative Theories and Explorations* editor Philip Butler writes, “Black Futures ... are new spaces ...of critical thought and imagination” (p. 2). For the Black Futures Jam, an ideating collaborative process designed to create healthy Black Futures at George Brown College Wood (2023) writes,

Black Futures is a process that engages in dismantling and building new worlds that find Black folks thriving, empowered and alive. Critical to this process is the role of imagining worlds that do not exist as yet, ones that defy the forces of colonialism, white supremacy, neo-liberalism, racial capitalism and racism to create worlds that are truly inclusive and welcoming of all Black perspectives (p.19).

Therefore remembering, memorializing, imagining Black Futures that overcome the trauma of slavery to envision caring for the environment and the ocean is synonymous with caring for ourselves.

I seek to engage viewers of my art exhibits in this ongoing discussion of Black Futures, Black radical imaginings, collective care and caring for the environment and the ocean. The Atlantic Ocean, and the Middle Passage continues to be important in Black spiritual, epistemological, traditional, and contemporary mythmaking narratives, cultural and artistic work. This paper asks that we appreciate the visual cultures of the Black Atlantic, we join the international push to virtually recognize the millions lost during the slave trade and we work towards caring for our oceans.

Recognizing that although the Middle Passage can be seen as the birthplace of the subjugation of Black people and the Black Atlantic it is also the birthplace of our quest for

freedom, a bid to end carceral logics, to heal intergenerational trauma, and to call for abolition as a theory of change. Maybe the ocean is the space we can be fully human? Maybe the technology of ‘thinking through the ocean’ can be seen as a necessary practice, a methodology alongside the creation of inclusive worlds. Maybe this is a call to identify, to acknowledge and to practice what Tuck (2022) calls a theory of change to gain from the epistemologies embedded in our tidal relations and Black pelagic theories.



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