

CROSSING MERFOLK NARRATIVES OF THE SACRED:

Nalo Hopkinson's *The New Moon's Arms* and Gabrielle Tesfaye's *The Water Will Carry Us Home*

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ABSTRACT: This article defines what I call the 'crossing merfolk' narrative, the idea that African people who jumped or were cast overboard during the Middle Passage became water-dwelling beings. While critical attention has been increasing for 1990s' electronic music duo Drexciya, whose sonic fiction contains the most well-known example of this narrative, this is actually a recurring tradition in Black oral and artistic culture that can be traced to West and Central African religions. I focus particularly on what I call 'crossing merfolk narratives of the sacred', M. Jacqui Alexander's term for African diasporic religious traditions anchored in West and Central African cosmologies. Analysing the role of the sacred in two crossing merfolk narratives, Nalo Hopkinson's 2007 novel *The New Moon's Arms* and Gabrielle Tesfaye's short film *The Water Will Carry Us Home* (2018), I argue that these texts expand the Black Atlantic imaginary and transform mermaid lore. I develop the term 'diasporic collage' to describe the ways in which Hopkinson and Tesfaye reference and combine water spirits and ritual practices from multiple African diasporic traditions into narratives that intersect mermaids and the Middle Passage.

KEYWORDS: mermaids, water spirits, Mami Wata, Yemaya, Black Atlantic, Middle Passage, Nalo Hopkinson, Gabrielle Tesfaye, African diasporic religions, spirituality, collage

Introduction

Mermaids, water spirits, and aquatic people are abundant in African diasporic culture and have received greater critical attention in recent years. One recurring trope in a Black aquatic imaginary is the idea that African people who died while being transported to the Americas to be enslaved live on in the ocean. I use the term 'crossing merfolk' to describe this imaginary. The term is inspired by M. Jacqui Alexander's use of 'the Crossing' to describe both the Middle Passage and 'the crossroads,' a spiritual location of potential, of transformation, of passing between worlds. Alexander insists that the transatlantic slave trade moved not only people, but also their knowledges, spirits, and rituals. I use the term 'merfolk' broadly, to encompass different kinds of beings – human, part-human, and human-like – who dwell primarily in the water, whether or not they ascribe to the human-and-fishtail compound figure associated with the Western mermaid (Hayward, 2017: 7). 1990s' electronic music duo Drexciya continues to offer the most famous example of what I call the crossing merfolk narrative. The sleeve notes of their 1997 compilation album *The*

Quest tells the story of mutated humans descended from pregnant African women cast overboard during the Middle Passage. This and other crossing merfolk narratives have represented the water-dwelling descendants of those imprisoned on slave ships as the outcomes of rapid evolution or a mysterious, unexplained transformation. Increasingly, however, crossing merfolk narratives – particularly, and perhaps not coincidentally, authored by Black women – ground these narratives explicitly within the sacred: M. Jacqui Alexander’s term for cosmologies and oral cultures derived from African traditional and diasporic religions. In Nalo Hopkinson’s *The New Moon’s Arms* (2007) the African goddess Mami Wata destroys a slave ship and transforms the Africans onboard into shapeshifting seal-people. In Gabrielle Tesfaye’s short film *The Water Will Carry Us Home* (2018), another African goddess, Yemaya, transforms Africans thrown overboard from a slave ship into mermaids. Both texts allude to multiple African-derived deities and depict scenes of women conducting African-derived rituals. These crossing merfolk narratives demonstrate a movement in the Black Atlantic aquatic imaginary towards feminine-centred and more explicitly African-derived narratives.

The sacred provides spiritual precedence for the concept that those presumed lost during the Middle Passage live on in the sea. In *Pedagogies of the Crossing* (2005), M. Jacqui Alexander uses the sacred to describe the myriad African cosmological systems that also travelled and transformed through the transatlantic slave trade. The cosmological systems of West and Central African peoples such as the Kongo, Yoruba, Dahomey, Ewe, and Fon, fused and borrowed from one another both within Africa, through the slave trade, and through subsequent migrations (Alexander, 2005: 290-291, 299; Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, 2011: 116; Thompson, 1983: xiv). Two of the major continuities found across these spiritual systems include (1) the centrality of intermediary deities or spirits who personify natural elements and hold direct relationships with their devotees; and (2) the importance of ritual as a method of regulating humanity’s relationships with these forces (Hale, 2009; Mapara, 2016; Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, 2011). Alexander describes the similar functions of the former in her comparison of the core elements of Santería and Vodou:

Both attend to the idea of multiply manifested or multidimensional god, avatars, that make the Sacred tangible, the most central of which are manifestations of Lwa and orisha that inhabit physical elements as well as human beings. (Alexander, 2005: 299)

Most important to this analysis are the lwa, orisha, and related spirits of the water. Indigenous to African cultures, water spirits fuse, transform, and take on even more importance during the Crossing. Mermaid language and imagery is often used to describe and represent African diasporic water spirits such as Yemaya, Yoruba orisha of the ocean and mother of all orishas; Oshun, Yoruba orisha of freshwaters and love; La Siren, Vodou lwa of the sea; and Mami Wata, a multiply-manifesting water goddess produced through the fusion of West and Central African water deities with elements of colonial cultures (Chuks and Makwudo, 2020: 1). Stories of Yemaya, La Siren, and Mami Wata often speak of their penchant for taking devotees to live with them in the water, where humans can survive in the spirit’s presence and are sometimes returned to the world above. Another aspect of the sacred that provides precedence for the crossing merfolk idea is a belief in the spiritual realm or afterlife as being housed in the water, most particularly the Atlantic Ocean. One concept that reflects this belief is that of the Kalunga, which according to Nettrice Gaskins (2016), is “a watery boundary between the world of the living and the dead in religious traditions of the African Congo” that is “often associated with bodies of water,

with the Atlantic Ocean being the most prominent” (76). Bakôngo practitioner Kia Bunseki Fukiau describes Kalunga almost as a womb for the universal force of creation:

The world floated in Kalunga, endless water within subcosmic space, half emerging for terrestrial life, half submerging for marine life and the spiritual world. Kalunga is the ocean door between two worlds. (Alexander, 2005: 301)

Some authors do suggest possible links between African cosmologies and the Drexciyan mythos. Ytasha Womack (2013) claims that Mami Wata inspires the Drexciyan origin story. Nettrice Gaskins (2016: 75-76) parallels Drexciya member Donald Stinson’s idea of liquid wormholes in Drexciya’s undersea world to the Kalunga and compares the Darthouven fishmen (characters in the Drexciyan universe) to nommos, hybrid fish creatures in West African Dogon cosmology. These are compelling as possible examples of how African cultural specificities make their way, sometimes unintentionally or subconsciously, into African American culture. However, rather than explicit African origins, Drexciyan worldbuilding points more directly to Western myths and comic book references: the Roman sea god Pluto, the mythical island of Atlantis, and the island of Doctor Positron, a location in the Marvel universe (Gaskins, 2016: 73-74). Gaskins and Joshua Bennett place Drexciya in a lineage of Black cultural texts that reimagine Atlantis, the legendary lost island civilisation that once served as a foil to the city of Athens, as a hidden Black utopia. Gaskins argues that Drexciya’s sonic fiction is inspired by music collective Parliament Funkadelic’s *Motor Booty Affair* (1978), which portrays an Atlantis of African diasporan people united by music and dance. The Drexciyan and Black Atlantis imaginaries overlap, intersect, and continue to inspire new works in Black visual, musical, and literary arts (Gaskins, 2016: 70-77; Bennett, 2020: 178). In other work, I describe the Black Atlantis concept as aqua-Afrotopia: the aquatic version of the recurring African American imagining of an African civilisation that was never conquered, able to develop free of the disruptive influences of racial chattel slavery and colonisation (Davis, 2019; Davis, 2022: 9).

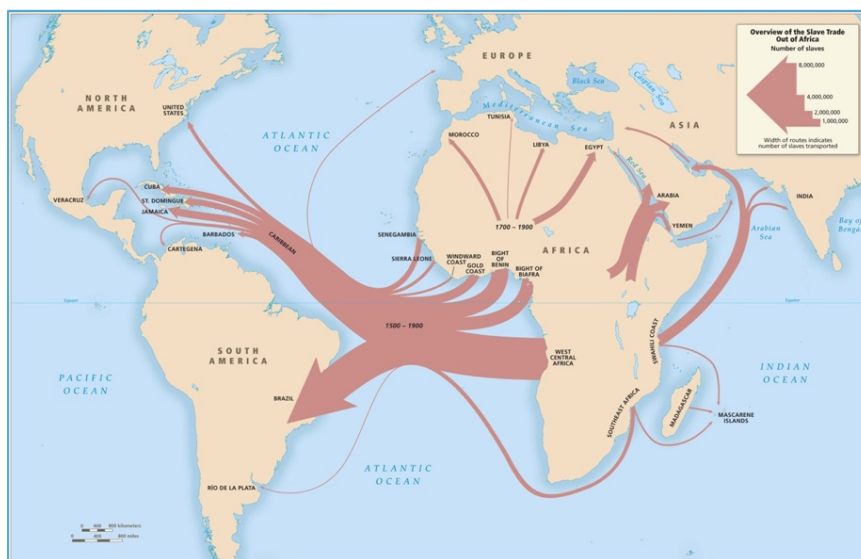


Figure 1 – Overview of the slave trade out of Africa, 1500-1900. (Eltis and Richardson, 2010 – reproduced by kind permission of Yale University Press.)

This analysis expands the study of the crossing merfolk narrative beyond the aqua-Afrotopia to look at more recent fictional and multidisciplinary artistic crossing merfolk narratives by Black diasporic women. Rather than engaging in detailed worldbuilding of aqua-Afrotopias, these crossing merfolk narratives allow the undersea world to be opaque, summoning crossing merfolk as figures of memory, survival, and healing for African diasporan descendants. Turning more towards the sacred than to utopianism and science fiction themes, Nalo Hopkinson's and Gabrielle Tesfaye's crossing merfolk stories reflect both artists' diasporic, hybrid backgrounds and sensibilities. When asked about how her movement through different geographical and cultural locations (Jamaica, Trinidad, Guyana, Canada, Southern California) affect her work, Hopkinson says:

I don't know any other way to live. My family had been moving since I was eight months old... I think that one thing it brings to my writing is a sense of hybridity, of collage. (Batty and Hopkinson, 2002: 177).

Gabrielle Tesfaye is a first-generation American artist of Jamaican and Ethiopian descent from Milwaukee who has lived in Thailand and India. Describing how these identities shape her work, she says,

It involves pieces of many cultures, because of my multicultural background as a daughter of the Afro and Asiatic diaspora. However, I do not take on any as my one religion or consider myself a devotee to one belief system. Yoruba orishas, Vodou loa, Egyptian and Hindu gods and goddesses, and many other spirits without names all make up my limitless world. (Yampert, 2018: online)

My juxtaposition of Hopkinson and Tesfaye aligns with the black diasporic framework that Chelsea Frazier (2016) uses to analyse the eco-critical cultural production of African American science fiction writer Octavia Butler and Kenyan visual artist Wangechi Mutu. While acknowledging the important distinctions between Butler's and Mutu's locations and histories, Frazier focuses on the "through-lines," the "shared preoccupations and creative commitments" that are certainly in some ways produced and shaped through the artists' distinct but intersecting experiences as Black diasporic women (2016: 41-42). I recognise in Hopkinson and Tesfaye through-lines of a Black feminine-centred orientation towards cultural, genre, spiritual, and narrative hybridity and experimentation. While Hopkinson is a fiction writer and Tesfaye is a visual artist who includes collage among her many techniques, Hopkinson's claim that her writing is also "collage" opens the door to consider both of their work within this method. According to Nettrice Gaskins, in "visual art, textile design and music, artists take portions from one source and reuse it to create something new. One way to do this is through collage, assemblage, or upcycling" (Gaskins, 2018: 200). With collage, artists merge scraps of things from different sources, choosing these fragments for resemblances and distinctions in colour or texture that work towards the purpose that they serve within the new whole. The displacement of African-descended people demands acts of what I call 'diasporic collage', as those seeking meaning beyond their colonisers' vocabulary search memories, experiences, oral stories, and formal studies of diverse African-derived cultures, assembling the pieces into synthesised forms of knowledge, practice, and art. *The New Moon's Arms* and *The Water Will Carry Us Home* both create and summon the crossing merfolk in their novels through ritual acts grounded in either the Vodou lwa or Yoruba orisha traditions. However, these ritual acts, like the texts themselves, blend and adapt different elements and materials from African and African-derived spirituality. They engage in diasporic collage of sacred practices within expansions of both mermaid lore and the Black aquatic imaginary.

Oral Culture, Mami Wata and Ritual in *The New Moon's Arms*

Nalo Hopkinson's *The New Moon's Arms* takes place on a fictional island in the Caribbean called Cayaba. The protagonist, a middle-aged woman named Calamity, discovers Agway, an injured child, on a beach and takes her in, eventually realising that he is a marine human descended from survivors of a shipwrecked slave ship. Throughout the novel, Hopkinson hints at Agway's origins through the overlapping of folk stories about African ghosts and aquatic beings. These oral traditions draw direct connections between merfolk and the notion of the sea as afterlife in African and African diasporic cosmologies. These stories prepare the reader to accept the explanation for Agway's origins while referencing an alternative genealogy for the crossing merfolk concept grounded in the Sacred. One oral legend that I argue provides precedence for the belief that those who went into the water during the Crossing live on in human or another form is the story of the mass suicide at Ibo Landing in the Georgia Lowcountry. Accounts of the events of Ibo Landing differ widely, but what remains consistent is that a group of enslaved West Africans being transported in a small craft across the tidal waters of Dunbar Creek in St. Simons Island, Georgia, rebelled against the white crew and 'took to' the waters of the creek. In some versions of the story the Ibos then flew back to Africa (sometimes first transforming into buzzards), providing an early example of the widespread 'flying Africans' tale. In some versions they walk back to Africa either on top of the water or on the ocean floor. In others they exist as ghosts that continue to haunt the waters, their singing or crying voices heard constantly on shore (Hallock, 2019; Schneider, 2020; Powell, 2010). According to Timothy Powell, "The distinction between suicide and flight may very well depend on whether the analysis takes into consideration the spiritual dimension of the story, the realm of the ancestors" (2010: 259). Bess Montgomery (2008) argues that in African American oral culture and literature, ghost stories are a way to talk about the reverence for ancestors and their ongoing presence in the lives of their descendants that is a core element of African religions (104). There are multiple mentions of ghosts of enslaved people that haunt Cayaba's shores and waters. Early in *The New Moon's Arms*, Calamity reflects upon the islanders' explanation for the source of sea or advection fog, which occurs:

when a body of warm moist air moves over a cooler surface and is cooled to a dew point, which is the temperature at which condensation takes place. Cayaba had another name for it, though: jumbie breath. Was under cover of a night like this that Potoo nelson and eighty-two other slaves climbed up the mountain and threw themselves off the cliffs into the sea at Rocky Bottom and drowned. In jumbie breath weather, people said dead slaves came up out of the water and walked, looking for the man who had led them to their doom. (Hopkinson, 2007: 39)

Ghosts of drowned enslaved people come up again when two dead sea people, whom Calamity believes to be Agway's parents, are found washed up on tiny islands, called Dutchie and St. Cyprian's, off the coast of Cayaba. Calamity is chilled by her conversation with a Cayaba local named Mr. Lee about the stretch of water between the islands and Cayaba's mainland:

*"Shallow water out there, rocks joking up. Those rocks tear up a slave ship once."
"Yeah, yeah, and the ghosts of drowned slaves haunt the islands to this day, blah, blah, blah. I read the brochure."*

He hugged himself more tightly. “All right then,” he said. “I won’t tell you what me and Tommy Naya saw out Dutchie way that day. But I don’t like to be near the dead. They don’t stay peaceful.”

My skin pimpled. I was never going to hang out with Mr. Lee again.
(Hopkinson, 2007: 89)

There are reasons to believe that whatever Mr. Lee and Tommy Naya saw on the day he speaks of were not ghosts or the non-peaceful dead, but the crossing merfolk of the novel. Dutchie and St. Cyprian are mating grounds for the monk seals which are legendary to Cayaba, protected by the state only because of their attraction to tourists – “the seals were Cayaba’s cash cows” (Hopkinson, 2007: 89). These seals are not native to the region, and their population fluctuates constantly and inexplicably throughout the book. By the end of the novel it is revealed that the monk seals are one form taken by the sea people. Here, Hopkinson intersects the folklore of selkies, shapeshifters who are seals in water and beautiful women on land, with the history of the Middle Passage (Anatol, 2014: 205). That Mr. Lee and Tommy Naya experience their sighting of the sea people as a ghost sighting reinforces the link between ghosts, flying Africans, and crossing merfolk, as all of these stories are informed by African cosmologies of the afterlife. While not perfectly depicting the events of Ibo Landing, these ghost stories evoke its resonance. According to Rebecca Schneider,

But perhaps either way and simultaneously – rising into the air to fly away and/or walking into the water to drown – the Igbo at Dunbar Creek refused the plot that the island plantations held in store. So in terms of the variant endings to the tale, perhaps both can be true – drowning and flying. Who is to say what happened? Who is to say that folk in the littoral zones among life and death do not fly? (2020: 203)

In her narration of the Igbo Landing story, Schneider resists the urge to certainty, ceding authority to the Black vernacular tradition. Like the crossing merfolk idea, the Igbo Landing narrative is a story of ongoing life that resists the material archive’s focus on death, capital, and calculation (Hallock, 2019: 26). I propose that the belief that those on Igbo Landing live on in the water or back in Africa is connected to African cosmologies that associate bodies of water with the spiritual realm and the spiritual realm with the homeland. Though allegedly the people themselves were Igbo or at least from the Niger region, Powell observes that those African diasporan people who have passed on the tale represent a milieu of creolised African cultures, including those of the Kongo. Powell interprets the Ibo Landing narrative not only through a belief in ancestors’ ongoing roles in African communities that is shared across many continental and diasporic cultures, but the specific concept of the Kalunga. In Powell’s re-reading, the moment that the Ibo enter the waters of Dunbar Creek, they submerge themselves below the Kalunga line, into another dimension, a site of transformation (2010: 266). Whether that transformation is into ancestors, or buzzards who fly back to Africa, or ghosts, (or mermaids?) is less important than the spiritual frameworks that inform the continuing telling of the tale. Though stories of flying Africans, water-walking Africans, and beach-haunting African ghosts abound through the Americas, it is not without precedent to believe that these resonances with Ibo Landing are an intentional act of diasporic collage on Hopkinson’s part. Hopkinson has said that her first novel, *Brown girl in the ring* (1988), which depicts a pan-Caribbean community in inner-city Toronto, was inspired by popular representations of Detroit, a majority Black, systematically disinvested city in the midwestern United States

(Hopkinson, 2014). It is therefore quite possible that she might infuse the narrative of a fictional island in the Caribbean with callouts to African American folklore.



Figure 2 – Map of St. Simons Island (Stevens, 1847 – source: http://www.oatland.org/Maps/SSI_Cate_1929.htm).

Where the Ibo Landing constellation of stories points to cosmologies in which the water is a site of ongoing life, the second set of stories references water spirits that take people below the sea. These stories appear in *The New Moon's Arms* after Calamity finds Agway on the beach. Agway is hospitalized and treated for his injuries by Calamity's old childhood friend, a doctor named Evelyn. Evelyn identifies Agway's physical aberrations – bluish skin, webbed hands and feet, a transparent eyelid, sticky skin on his inner legs, and broad chest – as deformities. Calamity tries to introduce the possibility that Agway is actually a merboy by reminding Evelyn of the island's oral culture around water creatures. I focus here on just one of these stories, of an old lady who finds a blue baby in a hole. When the baby tries to force her to obey it, the old lady throws the baby into the ocean, where it “grows huge, turns into the devil woman of the sea who drags ships down” (Hopkinson, 2007: 133). This devil woman of the sea most likely references Mama D'Leau, also known as Mama Dlo, Mama Glo, or Mama Jo. In Trinidad and Tobago, Mama D'Leau is an anaconda woman who drags down ships. But she also shows up in South Carolina Lowcountry folklore and fictional adaptations as a benevolent mermaid who befriends a neglected child, caring for her under the sea and blessing her with wealth (Hamilton, 1995; Souci, 1992).

Ras Brown's *African-Atlantic Cultures and the South Carolina Lowcountry* (2012) aligns the Iwa, orisha, and Mami Wata with the simbi, a Kongo word that he uses to describe a plethora of nature spirits in West and Central African cultures. During the ravages of West and Central African populations by the slave trade, water simbi sometimes took on malevolent connotations. Some who saw relatives and community members taken across the water believed that these kidnapped people had been taken by simbi to live under the sea, where they (the kidnapped) laboured to create the unusual cloths and goods coming into African economies through trade with Europe (Brown, 2012: 92, 252). Brown's study also explains the complex syncretic process – similar, intersecting and overlapping the way that African water goddesses become mermaids – by which the name Mami Wata comes to describe a complex milieu of powerful, sometimes nurturing, sometimes vengeful female simbi of the water. Mami Wata is usually depicted holding or being encircled by serpents.

She is dangerous; able to assist, but also able to destroy those whom she encounters (Drewal, 2008). The anaconda-bodied Mama D'Leau (French for 'mother of the river') appears to be one manifestation of the water deity Mami Wata, (Garcia Vega, 2016). That Calamity and Evelyn only know this figure as the 'devil woman of the sea' reflects both the multidimensionality of Mami Wata and the transmutation of water spirits during the transatlantic slave trade. In the context of the Crossing and disappearances of loved ones, water spirits could function as culprits or as saviours. Calamity rationalises the blue baby and the devil lady story:

That story had quite a different cast to it since my experiences of the past few days. Now I would be willing to bet that it was a fictionalised story of somebody else bucking up with a sea person. (Hopkinson, 2007: 133).

This rationalisation demonstrates what María Alonso calls the “marvellous-realist aspect of the novel, where speculation (the aforementioned biological possibility) replaces magic” (2015: 106). In the main story, narrated from Calamity's point of view, these folk stories are just that, stories, and Agway's existence can be explained through science. She interprets Agway's bodily differences as evolutionary adaptations to the marine environment and assumes that his people are responsible for the stories of devils in the water. However, Calamity's perspective is not the only one from which the novel is narrated, and her voice is not its only or lasting authority. In a second, interspersed narrative, Mami Wata shows up again, to provide an alternative origin for the sea people that is completely anchored in the Sacred.

Throughout the novel, Calamity's straightforward first-person narration is disrupted by another story, rendered in italics, of an Igbo woman's experiences during the Crossing. This character is referred to only as “the dada-haired lady”. “Dada-haired” describes the character's naturally occurring dreadlocks, which connects her immediately to Agway and the other merfolk, who also have dreadlocked hair. It also signifies that she has unusual magical power, which might have singled her out as a person of suspicion in her community and played a role in her being sold into the transatlantic slave trade (Hopkinson, 2007). Yet “dada” also hints at meanings in different continental African languages that lend authoritative power to this second story. According to Maria Alonso,

The attributive “dada” here conflates Ewe dada “mother” and Fante dadaa “old” to confer on the narrator the authoritative status of an African grandmother recounting a tale – a slave narrative, as it were – to her younger kin. (Alonso, 2015: 108)

The tale recounts how a goddess called Uhamiri saves the ship's captives from enslavement. Taiwo Osinubi refers to Uhamiri and Mami Wata as the same deity in an analysis of Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* where the “Uhamiri goddess (is) rendered as Mami Wata in Pidgin English and widely recognised as an icon for multiple forms of desire” (2014: 4). According to Osinubi, Uhamiri (Mami Wata) is “associated with women, sexuality, commerce, and, especially, with the contact between Europe, the Americas, and Africa” (2014: 4). Mami Wata is produced through and shaped by trans-continental contact. While the emphasis on Mami Wata as an icon of wealth and commerce in *Efuru* is absent in *The New Moon's Arms*, both novels remark upon her denial of fertility to devotees. The failure of *Efuru*, as a devotee of Uhamiri, to have children directly relates to the dada-haired lady, who knows that once she calls for Uhamiri's help, she will never bear a child (Osinubi, 2014: 14; Hopkinson, 2007: 257). Yet it is through her womb, her menstrual blood, that the

dada-haired lady channels the power of Uhamiri, brings a storm to destroy the ship, and transforms the African people onboard into seals (Hopkinson, 2007: 316). The role of the sacred in the scene is embodied and sensual. The dada-haired lady speaks of her menstrual blood, her gift of transformation, and Uhamiri's power in the same terms: "[t]he ocean of power would not be held back" and "[s]he tried to guide it as it flowed" (ibid: 315-316). The shedding of the dada-haired lady's menstrual blood at the beginning of the scene opens the door to the transformation of the crossing merfolk, and her shedding of blood after being shot by sailors at the end of the scene seems to close it:

She had used all her blood power to bring the people home. They were bahari now. The sea was where they would live. (ibid: 318).

That this surge of power occurs at the end of the dada-haired lady's reproductive capacity marks her as a spiritual ancestor to Calamity, who is going through menopause throughout the novel. Many critics have commented upon Calamity's menopause in relationship to her magical powers; whenever Calamity experiences hot flashes she also magically 'finds' things – jewellery, toy trucks, cashew groves – that have been long lost. Yet I align Calamity with the dada-haired lady in another way; she also uses her power to invoke the gods of the sea.

Another significant moment of the Sacred in *The New Moon's Arms* is the performance of ritual preceding Calamity's rescue of Agway. While Calamity gives the child this name because she hears him babble "Ag-way," it clearly alludes to Agwe, the name of a primary Rada lwa in Vodou. While other authors (Anatol, 2014; Wisker, 2020) have remarked upon Agway's connection to the ocean lwa Agwe, they have not extended this detail beyond it being just another example of the novel's many references to ocean-based mythologies. I demonstrate in the following analysis that Hopkinson does not merely accidentally discover Agway on the beach – she summons him through ritual. Through ritual, actions in the physical world – music, song, dance, manipulation of objects, sacrifice, burning of candles or incense, offerings and feeding – are undertaken to invoke the presence, advice, or intervention of the spirit (Dayan, 1995; Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, 2011; Hale, 2009). In Vodou Agwe is the lwa and protector of the sea, ships, and all aquatic life. He rules the ocean with his mermaid wife, Lasiren, (also commonly understood to be a manifestation of Mami Wata). Agwe is associated with the colours blue and green and emblems that include miniature rowboats, shells, and metal fish (Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, 2011: 125). Maya Deren's auto-ethnographic piece, 'Agwe – Sovereign of the Seas', describes an elaborate ritual performed to invoke Agwe. Under the direction of a mambo or houngan (the spiritual leaders in Vodou), devotees prepare an elaborate feast for Agwe and his guests. Taking their feast by boat out onto the sea, they pour libations and perform songs and dances until some reach trance state, when Agwe appears by possessing two of his female devotees (Deren, 2013: 155). Early in *The New Moon's Arms*, the protagonist Calamity, following her father's funeral, decides to have an impromptu midnight picnic. Not merely Calamity getting drunk following her father's funeral, this midnight meal on the beach can be seen as a condensed and improvised version of the Agwe ceremony described above. Calamity takes a bottle of cashew liquor and a yam to the beach, makes a fire, and buries the yam. As she cooks her yam in the sand, she drinks and sings, seemingly lulling herself into an intoxicated state:

With no dinner in my belly yet, I began to feel the booze one time. So I had more. The sea made its warm whooshing noise. I crooned to it, "The moonlight, the music, and you...," and took another gulp...I was pleasantly woozy. The tingling spread out from the centre of me to my legs, torso, head

and arms. My toes and the soles of my feet were arm. My fingertips prickled. I rubbed my hands together, so that friction increased the lovely heat. (Hopkinson, 2007: 47)

The burial of the yam– and later forgetting her bottle of liquor – on the beach is Calamity's feast and offering to Agwe. Like the devotees that Deren describes, Calamity performs songs and movement as she sinks into an altered form of consciousness. As she goes into trance state, she begins to verbally call on her ancestors and spirits:

I drank a toast to Dadda, and one to Mumma...The wind was stronger, the waves tossing more. The night air was freshening, so Grandmother Sea was restless. I faced her and bowed to her. "Old woman," I greeted her. (ibid: 47-48)

She also later calls out to a "Grandpa Sea and Grandpa Sky" (ibid: 49). These personified elements correlate to the lwas, which are linked to and sometimes considered embodiments of natural forces (Alexander, 2005: 303; Benson, 2011: 67). The spirits seem to respond to Calamity, the weather intensifying as she shouts at the sea, and the action of the weather takes on distinct personalities that can be found in multiple African diasporic cosmologies:

The dance of lightning from the sky was magnificent. Bloated waves reached high, high, high, trying to push away the stabbing lightning. "That's right!" I shouted to Mumma Sea. "Protect yourself!" (ibid: 50)

While Calamity's exhortations more literally reference her suspicion that her father may have murdered her mother, they also clearly reference the ongoing dramas between African diasporic cosmological figures. In Haitian Vodou, the lwa of love, Erzulie (who in her sea manifestation is Lasiren, the wife of Agwe) carries on a tumultuous affair with the aggressive lwa of fire, Ogoun. In Santería there is constant upheaval between orisha of love and freshwaters Ochún and her unfaithful warrior husband Chango, orisha of lightning and thunder (Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, 2011: 50-51; Deren, 2013: 151). These cosmological romantic dramas are also alluded to through another subplot in the novel. For most of the book Calamity simultaneously dates a marine biologist named Gene, who first appears emerging from the ocean where he had been diving, and a police officer named Hector. The love triangle between Gene, Hector, and Calamity seems to be another callout to the rivalry between the sea captain Agwe and the warrior Ogoun for the love of the flirtatious Erzulie.

Calamity's heightened physical and emotional state, and the approaching storm that seems to respond to her calls to the spirits, intensify until she passes out on the beach:

A spectacular jag of lightning split the sky open. The boom of thunder made my ears buzz. I whimpered and shivered for a time. And then there was nothing. (Hopkinson, 2007: 50-51).

When she awakens, she finds an injured child stranded on a rock. The child has a bluish tinge to his skin and shells tied into his hair. His first words to her are "Ag-way!" which she gives him as a name (Hopkinson, 2007: 84). She later becomes convinced that he is a merchild, identifying him as one of the sea people who live in the waters around Cayaba. The colour blue, the shells, the emergence from the sea (the location of Guinea), and the

connection to mermaids all serve to solidify Agway's associations with Agwe. Rather than being spiritually possessed by Agwe, as would happen in a typical Agwe ceremony, Calamity takes Agway in and cares for him. Calamity's mothering of Agway reverses the parental relationship usually ascribed to African diasporic deities and their devotees (who are said to be the "children" of their orisha or lwa). Yet, Agway's role in her life still signifies the workings of the Sacred. Agway's presence ignites a series of transformations and reconciliations in Calamity's relationships with her family, her traumatic history, and her home, Cayaba. When this work is done, Agway returns to his home in the sea. Of course, the beach scene is not perfectly loyal to the particulars of a Vodou ritual. It is spontaneous, intuitive, and creative, drawing on the fragments available: a cheap bottle of liquor, a leftover yam, driftwood found on the beach, and a worldview already oriented towards a personal relationship with the forces of nature. The words Calamity uses to call to the spirits are not the words that her ancestors would have used. This improvised ceremony signifies the methods of retrieval, creativity, and diasporic collage that displaced African-descended people use to enact the Sacred and make sense of themselves in the so-called New World.

Nostalgia, Collage, and Ritual in *The Water Will Carry Us Home*

Gabrielle Tesfaye is a multidisciplinary artist who also infuses scenes of African diasporic histories with magic and spirituality. Her art combines several mediums: painting, collage, puppetry, music, storytelling, performance, and stop-motion animation. Tesfaye is unabashed about the political, emotional, and spiritual imperatives of her work, on how it reflects and responds to "a growing interest within people, going back to 'the past,' studying ancestral power, healing rites, cultural rituals, and relearning our history" (Travis and Ali, 2018: online). She says of her works, which largely feature women:

When painting a woman, I am not necessarily trying to paint her to be beautiful. She is already beautiful, we are already beautiful, I am painting what is organic. A feeling, a way, not a mask or an ideal. Art gives us feeling, whereas images in media may make us think "I want to look like that", a painting makes us say, "I want to feel like that, embody that essence, know that wisdom, rediscover that birthright in my heart". (ibid)

For Tesfaye, the experience of visual art, as opposed to a media image, reorients someone towards the interior, towards not seeing, but feeling. Tesfaye's emphasis on *feeling* can be read through Badia Ahad-Legardy's theory of Afro-nostalgia. In *Afro-Nostalgia: Feeling Good in Contemporary Black Culture*, Ahad-Legardy (2021) confronts the prevailing idea that nostalgia is unavailable to Black people because of the traumas associated with the racial past. Citing studies that determine nostalgia to be a pleasurable feeling that promotes hope and well-being, Ahad-Legardy questions why it should be denied to Black people. Arguing that Black people should have access to the full range of human emotion and experience, including nostalgia, she examines cultural productions that produce good feelings for Black people within representations of the past (2021: 4) Ahad-Legardy reads such cultural production through what she defines as Afro-nostalgia:

a lens through which we can conceptualize the desires of the African-descended to discern and devise romantic recollections of the past in the

service of complicating the traumatic as a singular black historical through line. (Ahad-Legardy, 2021: 3)

Though not undertaken in Ahad-Legardy's study, I argue that the crossing merfolk narrative, like the flying Africans story, enacts Afro-nostalgia by intersecting the traumatic histories of the transatlantic slave trade with the pleasure of escape, rebirth, and transformation. According to Ahad-Legardy, artists who deploy Afro-nostalgia "lace the gaps of historical memory with pleasure-inducing affect – not by rewriting the past but by embracing nostalgia's imaginative capacity to rehabilitate the black historical past and refashion the present" (2021: 8). The crossing merfolk and flying African stories do not write away the horror of enslavement, but they do stage a refusal of that horror as the overdetermination of Black histories and contemporary Black life. Crossing merfolk narratives of the sacred are particularly invested in 'refashioning the present' through the healing of contemporary African diasporic people. In *The New Moon's Arms* Calamity's use of the sacred through finding items from her past and summoning Agwe allows her to work towards healing her traumas and family relationships. Tesfaye's *The Water Will Carry Us Home*, which moves through time to depict a young woman (Tefsaye) summoning the orisha to save her ancestors, is itself a ritual of healing for descendants of the transatlantic slave trade. Like Julie Dash's film *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), Tesfaye

produces a film that can itself be read as a kind of diasporic ceremony, a spatio-temporal nexus that collocates the past, the present and the future; the living, the dead and the unborn; Africa, the Americas, and the Middle Passage. (Kaplan, 2007: 516)

The Water Will Carry Us Home is a six-minute, mostly animated short film featuring painting, collage, and puppetry techniques. The film opens in live action with a scene of Tesfaye kneeling at her altar. The altar includes an image of the ancient Egyptian deity Isis, whom some identify as an antecedent to Mami Wata (Zogbe, 2018: 3; Womack, 2013: 87). Tesfaye's clothing, jewellery, and body art reflect cultures of Africa and its diaspora as well as the Indian and Southeast Asian diasporas that intersect African-descended populations in Africa, the Caribbean, and South America. Her painted fingernails and much of her clothing are red. The red is multivalent, possibly signifying multiple meanings in the cultures that are referenced within the film. In the Hindi religion, red is a sacred colour worn during significant ceremonies. Red is the colour of Mami Wata, whom Tesfaye mentions in her discussion of the film (Travis and Ali, 2018). Red is also one of the colours worn by the Yoruba orisha Eshu, who is a trickster, force of change, and messenger to the gods. This orisha is one of the most significant and has been retained in most African diasporic religions: "within Vodou, Lucumí, and Candomblé is retained the manifest energies of Eshu/Papa Legba/Elegba/Elegbara, guardian of Divine energy and communication, guardian of the crossroads, the force that makes things happen" (Alexander, 2005: 292). In Yoruba-based traditions, Eshu must be invoked first to open the communication between the gods and humanity (Thompson, 1983: 19). Allusions to Eshu continue through the scene. The ethereal chanting music that plays throughout is Ibeni's 'Ellegua', one of this spirit's many names (Tefsaye, 2018). A tattoo of a face woven into an image of crossroads – identified as Papa Legba, Eshu's Iwa form in Vodou – is visible on Tesfaye's chest. When asked about this tattoo in an interview, Tesfaye proclaims, "He (Papa Legba) is my guide!" (Travis and Ali, 2018: online). Using the different mediums of music, clothing, and her own skin, Tesfaye visualises the process of invoking Eshu or Papa Legba, who must be called on first in ceremony.

As the scene continues, Tesfaye burns candles and incense, draws what appears to be an astronomical diagram with a quill pen, stretches her earlobes, and prays. The star diagram reflects the integration of science, art, and spirituality in African thought. It also appears to reference Dogon cosmology, in which part-fish divinities, nommos, come from the stars to the earth, bringing great wisdom (Womack, 2013: 80). Tesfaye confirms this reference when she connects Dogon cosmology to the larger themes of the film:

Ancient African tribes such as the Dogon believed that the world started from water/mer-people,” Tesfaye said. “Water also represents the vastness which the slave ships traveled across from Africa to the Americas and Caribbean. (Yampert, 2018: online)

At the end of the scene Tesfaye displays her hand to the camera lens. Her hand features a henna tattoo of a highly stylised eye. Tesfaye refers to this eye, which appears on most of the figures in her work as the ‘Third Eye.’ The Third Eye is the sixth chakra in Indian spiritual traditions, which, located on the brow, signifies higher spiritual consciousness, intuition, and trust in the power of the unseen (Simpson, 1999: 105). With incense smoke wafting before it, Tesfaye’s hand blurs, then cuts to a black screen featuring the words “The Water Spirit Omambala brought us here. The Water Spirit Omambala will carry us home”. Omambala is a water goddess, the namesake of a river in the Anambra region of contemporary Nigeria, one of many who have taken on elements of and been absorbed by Mami Wata lore and worship (Chuks and Makwudo, 2020: 1-2). In many versions of the Ibo Landing story, the Ibos chanted some version of this saying as they walked into the sea (Davis and Chika Duru, 2014; Yampert, 2018). While the saying names Omambala, it is clearly Yemaya who later appears in the film to answer Tesfaye’s prayer. Tesfaye also mentions Mami Wata in her discussion of the film, relating that there are “many stories within African spirituality of water spirits following the slave ships, Mami Wata, the presence of Yemaya” (Yampert, 2018: online). While not necessarily synonymous, these deities – Omambala, Mami Wata, and Yemaya – are all referenced alongside one another and sometimes blur into one another as they play a similar role in the faith of enslaved African people and the memory and art of their descendants. She (Omambala and/or Mami Wata and/or Yemaya) is the divine feminine force in the water who follows the ships and gives strength to her devotees onboard. This blurring speaks not to inaccuracy or imprecision on the part of Tesfaye but to the porousness and complexity of the Sacred, as water spirits shift, fuse, and become associated with one another through the Crossing and all migrations and exchanges thereafter:

Some energies have been fused; others apparently atrophy in certain places while becoming dominant in others. Yemayá, the goddess of the Ocean seems to have “disappeared” in Haiti, yet homage to Agwe the sea god and Mambo La Siren, the mermaid sister of the two Ezilis, Freda Dahomey and Dantó, attest to the sustained metaphysical significance of water in both systems. Yemayá reigns in Candomblé and Lucumí, assuming the position that had been accorded to her River sister Oshún in Yorubaland, the recognition that it would have been impossible to have survived the Crossing without her. (Alexander, 2005: 292)

As the words, “Omambala brought us here...” fade out, the stop-motion animation begins. A rooster puppet crows. A puppet of a man wearing a white suit trimmed in red and black smokes a key like a cigar. This, again, is Eshu/Ellegua/Papa Legba. Most versions of this orisha are known to wear red and black, and his Haitian lwa form, Papa Legba, is known to

smoke a cigar (Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, 2011). To the sounds of cowbells and drums, Papa Legba uses the key to unlock double doors, carrying out his prescribed role of opening the door to the spirit realm. The doors reveal a ship rocking on the ocean to the sounds of gently wafting waves, creaking wood, and soft, ethereal music (Kenn C.'s 'Spectra'). Black faces in the sky, presumably the orisha of lighting and thunder Ogoun and orisha of wind Oya, blow wind and lightning, tossing the ship back and forth. Though the whole is seamless, these images are rendered differently, including painted or sketched figures, puppets, and archival documents and drawings. What appear to be cut-outs of archival drawings of white sailors stand on the ship's deck. Drawn fragments of a broken ship's hull open onto familiar images from the print legacy of enslavement: an advertisement for the capture of an escapee, a diagram of how African people were stacked into the hold. In one shot, a puppet of a female figure, presumably Yemaya or Omambala, encircles an archival drawing of captive African children huddled together. In another, the faceless masses in the hold give way to more individualised puppets. Pregnant female figures cradle their wombs, and a couple clings tenderly to one another until they are wrenched apart. As both the music and ocean waves crescendo, these people are thrown from the ship into the sea. As they sink, a mermaid with pale blue double tails and elaborately coiffed hair swims into the scene (Figure 3). We can presume that this is Yemaya, orisha of the sea and mother of all orishas. Yemaya's colours are pale blue and white, she especially protects pregnant women and children, and her many titles include 'Mermaid of the Sea' and 'Mermaid Who Stays in the Water' (Hale, 2009; Braham, 2018; Brown, 2012). Under the direction of Yemaya, schools of fish swim around the drowning Africans, who transform into merpeople. Their tails are single as opposed to her double tail, which serves to distinguish Yemaya's deity status. The unborn babies of the pregnant women emerge from conch shells and waft into their parents' waiting arms. At the close of the scene Yemaya captures a white flower (one of her favoured offerings) in her palm (Tsfaye, 2018).



Figure 3 – Still from *The Water Will Carry Us Home* (Tsfaye, 2018, reproduced with permission of the artist).

In the third chapter of *Afro Nostalgia: Feeling Good in Contemporary Black Culture*, Ahad-Legardy focuses on visual art's negotiation of pleasure within narratives of the past. She

introduces the concept of “*regenerative nostalgia* as a constructive counterpoint to a traumatic narrativising of the black historical past, one that centers healing and revitalisation rather than the repetition of pain” (2021: 89). Discussing the collages of artist Krista Franklin, she analyses how regenerative nostalgia can be enacted

through processes of assemblage in terms of both content (the aggregation of traumatic histories and sublime memories as a point of aesthetic and psychic reconciliation) and form (her chosen medium of collage). (ibid: 90)

Nettrice Gaskins analyses similar “processes of assemblage” in her analysis of artists’ recreations of Mami Wata:

Mami Wata cannot be grasped singularly...Using modes of production, such as remixing or sampling, artists become part of an ongoing process of creating reality while re-creating representations of identity. (2018: 203).

Both Ahad-Legardy and Gaskins examine the new meanings produced by artists’ assemblage of different cultural and historical artefacts into new works. These discussions of collage and remixing inform my notion of diasporic collage. African diasporic artists practice diasporic collage as they quilt together elements: ideas, narratives, languages, images, and cosmologies from different continental and diasporic cultures, recognising shared resonances and uses across geographies and contexts. Tesfaye performs collage through the actual use of collage techniques in the animated portion of her film and collage of different mediums, such as live film and animation into one work. But the film is specifically a diasporic collage because of her assemblage of historical artefacts and spiritual symbols. Tesfaye enacts regenerative nostalgia by placing the historical seamlessly alongside the fantastical in the interest of producing good feelings for African diasporic people. Tesfaye’s crossing merfolk film allows a scene of unimaginable violence to include the pleasures embedded in the mermaid’s magical and sensuous form.

After Yemaya receives the white flowers in her hand, the animation gives way again to live-action film. The music cuts out and the only sound is ocean waves as Tesfaye throws white flowers into the sea, presumably the offerings of flowers that Yemaya has just received. Tesfaye then sits on a beach, putting on headphones crafted from large silver, wire and conch shells. She plugs the wire attached to the headphones into the sand, and the serene music resumes as she puts them over her ears. Her expression is one of utter peace. The doors close, and Papa Legba locks them and puts away the key, indicating that the ritual has concluded (Tefsaye, 2018). *The Water Will Carry Us Home* features a collapse of time. According to Alexander,

the embodiment of the Sacred dislocates clock time, meaning linearity, which is different than living in the past or being bound by tradition...Spirit energy both travels in Time and travels differently through linear time, so that there is no distance between space and time that it is unable to navigate. (2005: 309)

With no need to adhere to linear clock time, Tesfaye is able to invoke the orishas to save her ancestors in the past and heal in the present through their transformation into mermaids. Tesfaye’s ritual practice is grounded in African-based traditions, yet not bound by them. She reworks, blends, and adapts symbols and practices, transposing them onto new mediums and materials. The headphones, crafted from elements of the Earth and

waters, silver and shell, and their ‘plugging’ into the sand signify the ways in which “new technologies have also been integrated into ritualised communications with Mami Wata” (Gaskins, 2018: 200). These headphones indicate that Tesfaye does not desire either an exact return to or a complete forgetting of the past.



Figure 4 – Still from *The Water Will Carry Us Home* (Tefsaye 2018, reproduced with permission of the artist).

Conclusion

Paul Gilroy’s theory of the Black Atlantic claims the Atlantic and the vessels that moved across it as mobile, porous sites of Black cultural production that cannot be contained within or defined by nation states (Gilroy, 1993). Departing from previous popular conceptions of diaspora that emphasised homeland, rootedness, and ‘restoration’ of a flattened concept of African culture and identity, Gilroy, according to Eshun, “proposed a transnationality of diaspora that dissolved the reconstructionist impulse of ancestralism” (2013: 144). Claiming Paul Gilroy’s influence upon Drexciya, Eshun argues that rather than approaching their worldbuilding

from an ancestralist perspective, seeking to reconstruct a forgotten past via the continental locus of the present, Stinson and Donald replaced an aesthetics of Africanity with a poetics of mutation enforced by death. (2013: 144)

Crossing merfolk narratives of the sacred expand the Black Atlantic imaginary not only through more explicit engagements with mermaid lore and more diverse gendered representation than found in either Gilroy’s study or Drexciyan sonic fiction; they return to a politics of ancestralism. However, in contrast to the more rigid, tradition-bound forms of Africanity and ancestralism that Gilroy critiqued, Hopkinson and Tesfaye practice diasporic collage. Rather than flattening African culture, they recognise the inherent hybridity of African diasporic peoples and thus blend and adapt elements from specific African cosmologies as they take form in different parts of the Americas. Channelling and reworking the sacred through crossing merfolk narratives are an act of “reclaiming history, and ancestral healing of our trauma in a different narrative than old scripts have given us” (Travis and Ali, 2018: online). These texts reclaim history and seek to heal trauma through a turn from the utopian, the future-oriented, to the past and the interior. These texts emphasise *feeling* rather than the advanced civilisation-building of Black Atlantis

imaginaries. In *The New Moon's Arms* and *The Water Will Carry Us Home* we get depictions of care: from women making offerings to gods to their prayers being answered, from merchildren rescued after storms to merbabies cradled lovingly in their parents' arms. Such scenes do not overwrite the violence of racial chattel enslavement, but they do imagine a world where its descendants, through the Sacred energies of the water, can experience tenderness and regeneration.



Figure 5 – Still from *The Water Will Carry Us Home* (Tesfaye 2018, reproduced with permission of the artist).

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