



Emilio Amideo, *Queer Tidalectics: Linguistic and Sexual Fluidity in Contemporary Black Diasporic Literature*, Northwestern University Press, 2021, 280 pp.

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Queer Tidalectics: Linguistic and Sexual Fluidity in Contemporary Black Diasporic Literature is Emilio Amideo's recent contribution in the areas of cultural and postcolonial studies, gender and corporeality studies. Published in 2021 by Northwestern University Press in the series *Critical Insurgencies*, the volume privileges an area of interest rarely explored in Italian academia, that is, the interrelation between the new recent strand of Blue Humanities, Critical Ocean Studies that gives centrality to water, fluidity and hybridization, and Queer Studies.

Indeed, in *Queer Tidalectics: Linguistic and Sexual Fluidity in Contemporary Black Diasporic Literature*, Amideo focuses on "tidalectis", the interpretative paradigm offered by Kamau Brathwaite, who specifically defined the concept in his *ConVERSations with Nathaniel Mackey*. Here, in opposition to the control that Western philosophy tries to exert on the lives of human beings through dialectics, binaries, and fixed schemas of time, space and subjectivity, the Barbadian poet and critic conceives of the possibility of a new way of being in contrast with the anthropocentric terrestrial world, in what he defines as "tidalectics" (Brathwaite 1999).

In his intention of creating an archive of Black queer contemporary literature under the spell of "tidalectics", Amideo chooses all postcolonial and queer authors who delineate a Black aquatic aesthetics, relying on the fluid performativity and opacity of water. Dealing with the inability of language to express queerness in its coarticulation with Blackness, and, at the same time, experiencing the impossibility to claim their sexuality in the contemporary heteronormative social and cultural milieu, James Baldwin, Jackie Kay, Thomas Glave and Shani Mootoo adopt important poetic strategies that all deal with water, consequently performing a new creative form of writing. *Queer Tidalectics* looks at these liquid and fluid movements: emphasizing the natural element of water as the space of diasporic "remembering" (to use Toni Morrison's expression) and the body of the Black queer subject as the means of a performative fleshly language. The book reads the non-linearity of the narratives analyzed, their extraordinary succession of flashbacks and flashforwards, the alternation of different characters' points of view in a rhythm of writing that disrupts the imposition of any conception of linear time. It is the orchestrated construction of "queer asynchronia", which reproduces the movement of waves and the music of jazz, aiming to deconstruct the fixed sequential steps imposed by society on the lives of human beings, that disrupts what Elizabeth Freeman majestically defines as "chrononormativity" (Freeman 2010).

In this sense, Amideo's choice to dedicate his first chapter to James Baldwin is strategic. Baldwin was the first poet who experimented with an encoded aquatic language to express sexual fluidity and blur gender and race categorizations. In "The Sub(merged)text in James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*" (35-74), Amideo analyzes the water tropes and the biblical archetypes strictly connected to the action of (re)naming in the slave trade. Nodal in this chapter is the analysis of the love story in the novel *Giovanni's Room* (1956). In Amideo's analysis, Baldwin intends here to challenge the rigid imposition of the white, male, hetero-universal Western subject, expressing, at the same time, his desire to escape the macho imperative imposed in the 1950s as the re-construction of the "race man" in the Black community. All the characters of the novel are white and male, and the opposition between the stability of the land and the mutability of water represents here the contrasting feelings experienced by homosexual people in heteronormative societies. The aquatic imagery is associated with the character Giovanni, and with the hidden and contrasting connotations of his

room. A room that represents the space for liberated self-expression and the free manifestation of feelings, the metaphor of the gay constriction, the fearful threat that affects David's masculinity, the epistemic interruption of linear time, the creation of an alternative fluid tempor(e)ality, the womb that might create an alternative way of being and, finally, the acceptance of the complexity of human experience. Indeed, as Amideo states:

Baldwin's writing demonstrates the danger inherent in stiff and stagnant uses of language reflecting strictly prescribed norms of behavior according to heteronormative conceptions of gender and sexuality, and fosters the use of literature, of alternative narratives and imagery, as an antidote capable of altering society's perceptions. (74)

The second chapter, "Waves of Sound, Gender Fluidity, and Shifting Kinships in Jackie Kay's *Trumpet*" (75-111) is devoted to Jackie Kay's *Trumpet* (1998). According to Amideo, in her first novel, Kay rejects the notion of a single story/point of view by drawing on the relationality that characterizes human existence, kinship and memory, thus representing the fluidity of human identity. "Tidalectic" is here produced in the polyphonic and non-linear post-mortem reconstruction of the life of Joss Moody, a Black trans* jazz player. By rejecting the dominant discourse which reproduces what Julia Serano terms "trans-mystification" (Serano 2007), the creative move of appropriating *l'écriture féminine* by French female theorists allows Kay to show that, in their different traits, Moody's existence and body can be deconstructed and reconstructed through a performative counter-language specifically dealing with gender and race, a new language where identity formations are intended in constant metamorphosis – just as in the rhythm of jazz music and the movements of sea waves.

The chapters "To Breathe in Water: Alternative Voicing of Queer Belonging in Thomas Glave's Work" (113-53) and "Time (Un)flowing and Sideways Movement in Shani Mootoo's *Moving Forward Sideways Like a Crab*" (155-89) are interrelated: Thomas Glave and Shani Mootoo both use the element of water and the natural world to articulate imaginary forms of hybrid existences and alternative kinships.

In the case of Thomas Glave's poetics, Amideo takes in consideration the short story "He Who Would Have Become 'Joshua', 1791" (2008) and the two reflections "Whose Caribbean? An Allegory, In Part" (2005) and "Jamaican, Octopus" (2013). He shows how the author advances a Caribbean/Afro Queer "ecophenomenology" by expressing the Black Atlantic and the Caribbean Archipelago as queer heterotopias where human beings could be reborn in alternative forms of kinship with the environment. Once again, the narration happens in the ancestral waters of the Caribbean Sea, what the author defines as the "Sea of We" (Glave 2005), an archival space for the emotional and corporeal experiences of the Middle Passage. These experiences are so painful and violent that they need what Saidiya Hartman defines as "critical fabulation" in order to be told (Hartman 2008). Amideo translates this impossibility to pass down the dramatic memory of the slave trade with the word "unspeakability" (137), metaphorically connected to the physical act of keeping the mouth closed underwater. In his analysis, Amideo reveals to readers the expedients that Glave uses to narrate the trauma of male rapes aboard slave ships and the refused possibility of queer relations, thus breaking the silence and, metaphorically, opening the mouth to pass the memory.

Drawing on “He Who Would Have Become ‘Joshua’, 1791”, Amideo intends the physical act of keeping one’s mouth shut during the crossing as a condition of both death and salvation. Indeed, for enslaved people it represented the impossibility to orally communicate, the refusal to be sexually abused and, ultimately, the last resistance acted out to free themselves by starvation or asphyxiation, thus finding freedom underwater once thrown overboard. It is exactly underwater, the space of liberation and possibilities, where Glave conceives characters reborn in queer hybrid bodies that resist colonialism, racism and homophobia. In the second part of “To Breathe in Water”, Amideo makes clear Glave’s intention to blur all the fixed categories of belonging, in particular the human/nature divide, thus deconstructing phallogocentric and patriarchal Western ideas of culture. By drawing on the similarities that make the octopus a symbol of queerness, in “Jamaican, Octopus” Glave portrays a submarine society made of “more or less men” and characters whose sexuality is fluid. Continuing his submerged critical fabulation in “Whose Caribbean? An Allegory, in Part” he imagines a child whose body is both male and female and connected to the landscape of the archipelago, taking this image from hermaphrodite Afro Caribbean natural god(dess).

The last chapter of Amideo’s original contribution, carries on the exploration of fluid forms of identity focusing on the artist and writer Shani Mootoo. The novel *Moving Forward Sideways Like a Crab* allows Amideo to explore the male/female binarism through the symbolism of the crab as a sea creature. Following Mootoo’s life and novel, this chapter moves geographically from the Caribbean to Canada, providing a historical overview of the Black presence/absence in the state, to finally land in Trinidad, where the local culture is characterized by the creolization of African and Indo-Caribbean traditions. In the chapter, the way that the crab moves “sideways” is connected to the way queer people are forced to live in a heteronormative society and, in particular, to the way Mootoo tries to live her own life, in the attempt to overcome the trauma of the abuses she suffered as a child. As Amideo rightly underlines, the writer elaborates her unique way of expressing the complexity of the human experience and trauma through the “sideways” narrations consisting of deferrals, shifts in gender pronouns and temporal discontinuity.

Reaching the conclusion of the volume: through Mootoo’s poem “Mantra for Migrants”, the final celebration of the condition of fluidity and movement in which human beings might happily find themselves, if and when freed from the yoke of fixed categorizations, arrives. Citing Amideo:

The fluid Black queer archive that emerges from the narratives collected in this book aims precisely, as I have highlighted, at undoing the focus on individuality and appropriation typical of the common notion of the archive through a polyphonic and necessarily fragmented narration that remains inconstant, fluid, but that, in doing so, resists to the violence of monolithic and reducing discourses. (193)

Amideo succeeds in his ambitious intention to reconfigure “a more fluid and open conception of the archive” (193): taking cue from Black Diasporic memory, *Queer Tidalectics* constitutes a precious means to accessing the complexities of the human existence. Moreover, Amideo does not only present an invaluable archive to conserve and circulate contemporary black diasporic literature, with attentive critical analysis and many theoretical and critical references, but also, most importantly, advances a

unique contribution to further explore the interrelation between black studies, queer studies and blue humanities. It is through the immersion in this fluid interrelation of research fields that the reader can find a way of living otherwise, in communion with the “tidalectical” movements of the sea.

Works Cited

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