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Research Article

Margaret Wrinkle's *Wash*: Water, Memory, and Terraqueous Ecocriticism

Zahra Taheri

[1] Associate Professor of English Literature, Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, University of Kashan, Kashan, Iran.

Email: ztaheri@kashanu.ac.ir

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***Corresponding author:**
Associate Professor of English Literature, Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, University of Kashan, Iran.
E-mail: ztaheri@kashanu.ac.ir

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Abstract

Slave narratives from the American South are primarily situated in "land" since the status of freedom or slavery is determined by land boundaries. Terms such as the frontier or the plantation, which appear so frequently in these narratives, also foreground the centrality of land. Consequently, most current ecocritical readings of slave narratives are landlocked and limited in scope, portraying nature as a politically charged, racialized concept associated with the physical violence enacted against slaves in woods and plantations. In these readings, the natural world, as Evelyn White (1995) observes, functions as a "repository for racial terror"—a framing that reduces nature to a complicit ally of the oppressive white system. Through this narrow definition of slave narratives, not only do the roles of aquatic realms—as the Middle Passage and ancestral memory—are eliminated but also nature as an agent of resistance, challenging white supremacy, is dismissed. This study offers a close reading of Margaret Wrinkle's Wash (2013), employing a blue humanities framework that brings Dan Brayton's and Anissa Wardi's theoretical frameworks into dialogue. Reading Brayton's emphasis on the materiality of water against Wardi's conception of water as a site of memory, trauma, and resistance, it discusses how water enables cultural continuity through "limbo time" and anti-conformist" identity. In this way, this study challenges the anthropocentric treatment of water as backdrop and recasts it as the present site of historical memory forging intergenerational links.

Keywords: aquatic realm, memory repository, the Middle Passage, the planation, Wash

Introduction

Margaret Wrinkle's debut novel, *Wash* (2013) recounts the lives of Mena, the matriarch, and her son, Wash. Before Wash's birth, Mena walks into the ocean on a daily basis, a deliberate ritual of connecting to the water to confront the trauma of the Middle Passage and to enact the rites of healing. The centrality of narrative on Mena's healing rituals and on Wash's memory of Mena's immersion mark the novel's distinct departure from conventional slave narratives of the American South, which remain largely landlocked— bound to plantation fields, cotton rows, swamps, and the frontier. Such narratives, more fundamentally, mirror an anthropocentric outlook, in which nature is meaningful only in relation to human affairs, and trees, animals, and soil are rarely granted interiority or agency; in this treatment, nature becomes largely approached as a passive backdrop, denied any materiality of its own.

This denial sharpens highlighted around water

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specifically: water and aquatic realms have no place in these narratives since it cannot be owned, fenced, or permanently demarcated as a plantation or frontier line can be. Yet, water permeates the archive of American slavery—from the Middle Passage's oceanic graves to riverine escape routes—functioning as an active agent shaping collective identity and as a repository of cultural memory: a site of ancestral communication and a source of freedom and resistance that counterbalances the boundary logic underpinning white supremacy. Critics have largely read Wrinkle's narrative a land-bound narrative of the plantation, engaging with cotton fields, slavery, and master-slave conflicts and have rarely highlighted the presence of water inland, despite Mena's memories of the Middle Passage and its afterlives through rituals and the historical unconscious. Foregrounding this presence not only gives materiality to water but also offers an image of water as an absent presence.

This study offers a close reading of Margaret Wrinkle's Wash (2013), employing a blue humanities framework that places Dan Brayton's and Anissa Wardi's theoretical approaches in dialogue. By reading Brayton's emphasis on the materiality of water against Wardi's conception of water as a site of memory, trauma, and resistance, it argues that water in Wrinkle's novel functions as a material archive and the conduit of memory that shape Black historical consciousness. In this way, the study challenges anthropocentric treatments of water as mere backdrop and recasts it as a present site of historical memory that forges intergenerational links. This study proceeds in three sections; in the first part, Brayton's terraqueous ecocriticism and Wardi's conception of water as memory repository are elaborated, establishing the theoretical framework for the study. The second section analyzes how Wrinkle's narrative engages with the aquatic realm and how it foregrounds water's as a site of collective memory and ancestral, limbo time. The conclusion considers the implications of this aquatic reading for environmental criticism and African American studies.

Literature Review

Despite accolades Wrinkle's *Wash* (2013) has amassed, her narrative has received little attention from scholars to date. Gordon Hunter, for example, considers *Wash* as the "realist treatment of slavery's degradations and its opportunities of black ennoblement" (2017, 4). In his view, Wrinkle's portrayal of "redemptive human dignity at time of uncertainties" has made her narrative thematically unique to twentieth-century audience (2017, 4). To Major Jackson, *Wash* is Wrinkle's self-conscious attempt at "speaking back to the past". In his review of the novel, Jackson categorizes *Wash* along all the other works dealing with the American grand narratives of slavery and resistance. Zahra Taheri describes Wrinkle's work as a meta-historical romance that provides a mosaic image or a polyphonic narration of the grand narrative of history. In her view, Wrinkle's work exemplifies a historiography that seeks not only to challenge the white supremacy in the narrative of black slavery but also to reveal the ties between the flourishing economy of the South and the sexual abuse of its slaves.

While existing scholarship on slave narratives has investigated the intersection of race, land, and violence, it has largely centered terrestrial space, comparatively unexplored the role water can play as the site of ancestral memory and cultural continuity, challenging historical amnesia, particularly through the figure of the saltwater slave. Such readings often remain anthropocentric, relying on hierarchies between humans and nature, between land and sea. However, what makes Wrinkle's narrative distinct is the fact that *Wash*, unlike other plantation novels, highlights water in the form of aquatic realms and afterlives—through the intersection of inland Tennessee plantation and saltwater slave's ancestral memory. In this way, the study broadens the scope of nature in plantation narratives to encompass aquatic realms as absent presence and depicts the ways through which water shapes Black historical consciousness while challenging anthropocentric readings.

Aquatic Realms and Ancestral Memory

In his book *Shakespeare's Ocean*, Dan Brayton introduces the concept of "the terrestrial bias" to critique the tendencies that "locate the subject of ecocritical inquiry in a green and landlocked space" (2012, 35). This inclination, as Brayton notes, depicts the limited scope of ecocritical studies and produces a land fetishism that looks difficult to replace. In its worst case, this terrestrial bias banishes the sea and makes it secondary to land: that is, it relegates water to a kind of "conceptual netherworld" (2012, 38)—a state of critical limbo that is recognized neither as nature nor as history. In this way, people generally think of history as something tied to land. In turn, the historicity of the ocean, "from the book of Genesis to the English Romantic poets, has been consistently denied, repressed, or erased" (2012, 41). Brayton traces this denial to the deep-seated feature of European culture, in which Western civilization has long defined "the ocean as an unnatural ... void lying eternally outside—or on the margins—of human social constructs. This mythology runs through Western culture" and makes "the idea that the marine

environment is linked to human history" look radical (Brayton 2012, 41).

Marcus Rediker describes this perception as "terracentrism," an outlook he ascribes to the rise of the modern nation-state in the late eighteenth century. This perspective implies "that the seas of the world are unreal spaces, voids between the real places, which are landed and national"; in other words, it refuses to recognize the sea as "the material place of human work and habitation, a place where identities have been formed, where history has been made" (2015, 11-12). This perception, by deepening the division between human and nature, "evacuates" the sea from real people and ships and replaces it with a wild and sublime sea "populated with imaginary figures, fit for aesthetic contemplation" (Rediker 2015, 11). Consequently, it pictures the sea as an asocial, ahistorical *space* representing a void rather than an environment, with the result that the natural environment is equated with terrestrial life. Such privileging of land over sea has had substantial implications for how slave narratives have been read: water's constitutive role in shaping Black culture memory has largely been overlooked, obscured by what W. H. Auden calls "the romantic iconography of the sea":

> The sea, in fact, is that state of barbaric vagueness and disorder out of which civilization has emerged and into which, unless saved by the effort of gods and men, it is always liable to relapse. It is so little of a friendly symbol that the first thing which the author of the Book of Revelation notices in his vision of the new heaven and earth at the end of time is that '*there was no more sea*.' (1985, 8)

Describing sea as a "barbaric vagueness" that civilization must hold at bay explains why in slave narratives land signifies order and civilization while the sea represents chaos. As an "unnatural void forever evincing hostile alterity," the sea is rendered outside the human social realm (Brayton 2012, 41). Steinberg extends this logic in instrumental terms: the sea is an incomprehensible 'non-place' that represents "a 'lawless,' antithetical 'other' lying outside the rational organization of the world, an external space to be feared, used, crossed, or conquered, but not a space *of* society" (2001, 35). This cultural construction is rooted partly in the vastness of the sea and its resistance to possession— "neither seized nor inclosed" (Jowitt 2010, 5)—a quality that sets the sea in contrast with the dominant ethos of early capitalism, private property, and recasts it instead as a "waste place to be traversed, not a place of human habitation" (Brayton 2012, 47). In this account, the sea becomes a realm from which all signs of humanity have vanished, where "shore" stands in rigid separation from "watery plain" (Brayton 2012, 47).

This separation, in turn, further reinforces the incomprehensibility of the sea, figuring it, in Brayton's terms, "as a tabula rasa" onto which writers can map whatever dangers and threats they can imagine (2012, 49). Furthermore, the assumption of the sea as a non-place removes it from human control and depicts it as timeless and, thus, inexhaustible entity. Simultaneously, it obscures "salt waters as a dimension of the environment" and produces *chlorophilia*— "an inability to look beyond the imagery of the land and its leafy green cloak" (Brayton 2012, 57). By chlorophilia, Brayton means that green is nature's "vital color, but it is not nature's only shade, and it is not the color that hits the eye when one beholds the global ocean that covers the majority of the Earth's surface" (2012, 57). In this way, the sea offers a radical alterity, reinforcing the Romantic epistemology of 'nature as green.' This assumption "continues to construct the category of the natural in terms of terrestrial life, consigning the sea to the realm of chaos, the primordial, and the nonhuman" (Brayton 2012, 41). To Brayton, this "terrestrial human ontology" once provided the foundation for conventional ecocriticism, shaped "by partitioning the planet so as to ignore the significance of nearly three quarters of it" (Brayton 2012, 177). Consequently, it impoverished people's understanding of what constitutes nature, reinforcing "the longstanding notion that the sea is somehow not of this world" (Brayton 2012, 177). However, Brayton declares that literary scholarship can no longer "relegate nature, place, and the nonhuman to the setting or background against which the 'real' drama of plot and character unfold, but it has yet to pay any attention to either marine ecology or the literature of the sea" (2012, 23). What Brayton seeks is to foreground the maritime dimension of literary works and to correct what he calls the "terrestrial human ontology" dominating the canon, not by inverting the hierarchy, but by demanding a balanced type of attention to land and sea, recognizing their inextricable relationship.

Where Brayton's framework aims to highlight the materiality of bodies of water in literary scholarship, Anissa Wardi extends this framework to the African American literary tradition, providing a new theoretical map for conceptualizing the African diaspora. For Wardi, water retains the same materiality Brayton insists upon, but it also serves as a symbolic function underexplored in the conventional can-

on. In Wardi's view, conventional African American ecocriticism has largely focused on the plantation system, inland geographies, and terrestrial spaces, leaving the aquatic dimensions of African American history unexplored. Inspired by Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* or sites of memory, Wardi suggests that in African American cultural history, bodies of water function as *lieux de mémoire*—embodied sites where memory and history converge" (2011, 6). Wardi, thus, argues that scholars seeking insight into African American cultural history must attend to its watercourses.

Central to this contention is the claim that water, for Wardi, functions as a site of memory, trauma, and resistance. She describes The Middle Passage "as archetypal water crossing" (2011, 6) that is "always already present in bodies of water" (2011, 19)—one that "highlights the elision of geographic and human water bodies, as the transatlantic slave trade, beginning in West African interiors, took human bodies across smaller bodies of water—rivers and lakes—before crossing the Atlantic" (2011, 6). The sheer number of those Africans "who made the journey and those who died en route," she argues, "highlights water crossing as integral to black life" (2011, 6)—carrying memories and operating as a constitutive site of African American historical consciousness. In other words, water crossing shapes African American cultural history, since "in African American literature, recovery of the past is frequently coterminous with a literal or symbolic return to the originary waters of the Atlantic Ocean" (2011, 6). In this way, the sea is no longer "a non-place, extra-social nowhere" (Wardi 2011, 23) that lies outside history, but rather a site of history where "the bones of the Middle Passage are an 'always already' of waterways, highlighting water as a location of death and a principal site of ancestral memory" (Wardi 2011, 23). It is through such remembering that African American slaves can forge a freed identity.

Ignoring water in these narratives not only erases the traumatic parts of African American history but also removes an active archive—a "'liquid lifeline' that extends from shore to shore," remembering "the bodies through which it flowed" (2011, 29). It also obliterates water's role as a family shrine, as a site of religious significance across African traditions, symbolizing the "meeting-point between the visible and invisible world" (Mbiti 1991, 146). This spiritual understanding of the sea finds historical support: many enslaved people believed that death at sea would leave them "wafted back to their native plains ... [thus] when someone died, the other Africans said that '*he has gone to his happy country*'" (Rediker 2010, 302). The convergence of historical consciousness and spiritual belief reinforces Wardi's argument that the sea maintains "ancestral bonds that connect America to Africa, the living to the dead" (Wardi 2011, 39). This convergence also foregrounds the sea's bearing of racial trauma: such traumas, Wardi insists, "are not merely held in a collective memory but are physically placed;" since the sea preserves "the history of those it carried away," its "material geography … was forever imprinted" by the slave trade (Wardi 2011, 78). Water, thus, functions as a material archive of ancestral trauma—one that renders the Middle Passage, the traumas of Black diaspora, and the continuity of ancestral bonds continuously present. A focus on water in these narratives can, consequently, illuminate "the confluence of water, loss, and migration in African American culture"—one that begins with "the transatlantic trade voyage, in which Africans were taken from their homelands and placed in the holds of slaving vessels" (Wardi 2011, 3).

It is against this theoretical framework that Wrinkle's *Wash* is explored. By showing how water helps Mena and Wash maintain cultural bonds with their ancestors and forge freed identities, Wrinkle not only foregrounds the materiality of water alongside other elements of nature but also redefines it as an active agent of history: one that archives the pain and suffering of the enslaved and gestures toward the submerged presence of enslaved life at sea. This active presence of water—embodied in Mena's memory of the Middle Passage and her near-death survival at sea—distinguishes Wrinkle's narrative from other land-based plantation novels. Rather than treating water as a chaotic non-place, Wrinkle's narrative stages it a site of racial formation and Black resistance. In this way, Wrinkle reorients African American literary tradition away from its landlocked perspective—thereby, remapping a relation between land and water that conventional nature writing has taken for granted.

Discussion

Wash as an Aquatic Narrative

Wrinkle sets her slave narrative, *Wash*, across Tennessee and Nags Head Island, coastal North Carolina in the American South. It narrates the intersecting lives of Wash, the eponymous character forced into the role of "Sire." In flashback, the narrative also recounts the story of Mena, Wash's mother, and the way she, as a young African girl, is abducted from her homeland in the West Africa by white enslavers and forcibly transported to the islands of the South

to be sold on the slave market. Next, it narrates how Richardson, then a young plantation owner, buys Mena, despite the warnings he has received about buying saltwater slaves. Yet, to avoid trouble, he sends Mena temporarily to Old Man Thompson's island at Nags Head. Later, Old Man Thompson discovers that Mena is pregnant. He helps her deliver her son, Wash, and allows them to remain on the island for an extended period. After nineteen years, they are sent to Tennessee to serve Richardson who has run up debts and decides to invest in his black slaves.

On the surface, a plantation owner, a purchased woman, a birth in captivity situates *Wash* within a plantation-narrative plot. However, the novel departs significantly from conventional slave narrative tradition, both structurally and thematically: unlike canonical slave narratives, the novel's meaning does not rely on a single character, narrator, or setting. A set of first- and third-person narrators—including Pallas, Richardson, Mena, Rufus, and Wash himself—recount a story that unfolds nonlinearly across several decades and generations of characters, adopting a structure that circulates like water itself. This dispersal is structurally embodied in the novel's settings, Old Man Thompson's island and Tennessee, through which Wrinkle divides narrative attention between water and land rather than anchoring the story in a single, landlocked inland plantation.

At the outset, the narrative offers a terrestrial life set in Tennessee, establishing the conventional system of plantation narrative. This land-based opening is soon challenged by an aquatic narrative centered on Mena as a saltwater slave, particularly through flashbacks to the Middle Passage crossing. This relationship to water later persists through her bathing rituals and daily floating—a practice she also teaches Wash. These acts disconnect her from land, and with it the material bondage of plantation slavery. At the same time, they place her in contact with the homeland across the Atlantic, a source of historical consciousness. For Mena, water is the site where individual and cultural histories converge and where intergenerational bonds—passed from mother to son—are created.

The Absent Presence: Water as a Memory Site

Margaret Wrinkle's *Wash* like most of the plantation narratives opens with a description of a plantation field and its logic of accumulation and commodification. It reveals that Richardson, the plantation owner, has fallen into debts after a drought and sends Wash to neighboring farms a "Sire"— a traveling enslaved man force to father children with enslaved women—to help offset the losses. Alongside debts, breeding, accumulation, and the commodification of Black bodies—elements that align Wrinkle's *Wash* with traditional terrestrial narratives—water pervades the novel's imaginative landscape, surfacing most powerfully through Mena and her profound engagement with water: "I [Thompson] sometimes came across Mena hovering at the water's edge with her eyes locked on the horizon" (Wrinkle 2013, 28). Mena's bathing ritual echoes the ancient African water rituals that John Mbiti describes as a practice "symbolizing purification and cleansing, not only of bodily but also of mystical impurities contracted through broken taboos, the committing of crime, and contamination by evil magic or curse" (1991, 148). It offers a place where the visible, real world and the invisible, spiritual, ancestral world converge and where traumas of the Middle Passage are confronted. This return to water is enacted through physical reenactment, which initiates Mena "into the collective past through incantatory speech, song, and ritual. The preparation for this journey begins with ablution" (Wardi 2011, 25). These acts do not merely symbolize the past; they pull her into it—connecting her to a shared history preserved in the collective unconscious across generations. Old Man Thompson describes this pull in this way: "I sometimes came across Mena hovering at the water's edge with her eyes locked on the horizon and … kept stepping into the surf … pulled towards whatever it was she saw out there" (Wrinkle 2013, 28).

Such immersions in water, "which often include matrilineal elements (birthplaces, handkerchiefs, and colors), are steeped in a Pan-African sensibility, and thus replay the transoceanic crossing and facilitate a diasporic connection to Africa" (Wardi 2011, 41). At the same time, these rituals offer a way of reclaiming the connection between water and land, highlighting a geographical interconnectedness that challenges the terracentric logic of the plantation. As Wardi argues, "Geography is imprinted with memory" (Wardi 2011, 5). Water, in particular, she suggests is "at once sensuous and abstract, geographically bounded and boundless, is an evocation of memory and history" (Wardi 2011, 6).

Furthermore, by moving between land and sea, Mena embodies rather than merely asserts the interconnectedness of the two realms. At the same time, she juxtaposes green and blue, and thereby challenges what Brayton calls *chlorophilia*—the dominance of green nature. In other words, Mena's returning to water, within a genre that would conventionally confine her, works against this *chlorophilic bias*, restor-

ing blue as a color and a space of equal weight. Her "drifting along the shoreline with the current" (Wrinkle 2013, 30) also invokes the Middle Passage and the forced and voluntary migrations that followed it. Called "the second leg of the triangular trade route," the Middle Passage, in this noel's logic, remains always present in water; the sea itself summons up the memory of "the millions who endured the enforced physical crossing over the moving waters of the Atlantic" (Wardi 2011, 6). Mena undergoes this Passage as a young woman— "barely out of her teens and slight enough to seem younger"—when she is captured and taken to the sea (Wrinkle 2013, 22). On board, she drops into a trance that lasts for several days; the captain, believing her to be sick, decides to throw her "overboard before she infected the rest with whatever disease he decided she had" (Wrinkle 2013, 21). Even though Mena narrowly survives, the Middle Passage is generally associated with death and mourning, as enslaved people died of disease or by suicide aboard the ships. Those thrown overboard drowned, their bodies settling at the bottom of the sea. These underwater bones, marking the journey from Africa to America, function as "a material carrier of memory, one in which both the body and the ocean waters are transformed," transmuting the Atlantic "into a floating graveyard" that "forces a confrontation with consecrated, ancestral bodies that, bereft of ceremonial entombment, found their resting place in the depths of the Atlantic" (Wardi 2011, 7-8). Brayton, by contrast, associates it with "occult knowledge" (2012, 99)—an association that marks saltwater slaves uncontrollable by their white masters and an object of wariness within the Black community itself: they "want none of that old hoodoo. Made em uneasy" (Wrinkle 2013, 23). Kathleen Brogan describes this refusal thus:

> What happens when dramatic historical breaks in social continuity—such as the experiences of enslavement, exile, immigration, and colonization—fracture the familiar ways of mapping memory? Stories of cultural haunting attempt to remap an often fragmented and inevitably changed memory to its new coordinates by conjuring ghosts who pass from the past into the present, from the old territory into the new. (1998, 13)

In this way, saltwater slaves, marked by trauma of the Middle Passage, remain bound to their African heritage in ways that set them apart from the countryborn—a distinction Wrinkle dramatizes through Wash's recollection of his mother:

> But my mamma [Mena] just stood there, wearing the distance she came across in her eyes and in her ways both. And she didn't let it die down ... Like she was disrespecting em by hanging on to her African when this new place kept saying drop it and turn and walk away... Dragging your memories along with you can wear you out, like a mule dragging a heavy load over rough ground. But then here she comes, with her hands wrapped tight round all of it and not letting go. Keeping her knowing for herself. (Wrinkle 2013, 23)

However, Mena is not the only character assumed to be haunted by the past and, thus, ostracized and feared as a witch: "Some folks might think she [Mena] was a witch" (Wrinkle 2013, 30). There are other saltwater slaves sharing a similar condition. One is Rufus, Richardson's blacksmith. As a saltwater slave from the West Africa, Rufus is regarded with similar suspicion, despite his hard efforts to keep "his African more hidden than she [Mena] did, saying there's no reason to tell everything you know" (Wrinkle 2013, 23). Fearful of the ancestral world Rufus embodies, the Black community warns children to stay away from him since Africa for those generation were removed from it "was another world and it hurts to try stretching their own minds around it any more, much less the minds of their children" (Wrinkle 2013, 52). Rufus and Mena, unable to forget the traumas of their voyage from Africa to America, thus live in limbo—suspended between the natural and the supernatural—and are shaped by indeterminacy and ontological hybridity. Mena passes this hybridity on to Wash by initiating him into her own daily immersion, a ritual in which "borderless water carries evidence of human history;" through it, Wash comes to experience "not merely a baptism of purification in these water crossings, but an immersion into cultural pasts" (Wardi 2011, 113).

This inheritance begins almost immediately after his birth, when Mena carries her infant son to the water, since "water was the only thing to soothe him" (Wrinkle 2013, 30). Old Man Thompson, witnessing the scene, recalls watching her laying "those memories into that boy," describing how a "pale green light arching around him, a roaring going down into his bones and water pouring" (Wrinkle 2013, 30). Through this early and repeated contact, Mena sit-

uates Wash within his ancestral world, enabling him to construct an alternative world alongside the American South—one into which he later pulls his people, "so they can be here with me [Wash]. Right here in this world" (Wrinkle 2013, 34). As with Mena a Rufus before, the Black community reads Wash's liminality as unsettling, and respond with the same wary avoidance. Paradoxically, this very avoidance becomes protective: distanced from control and enslaved life, Wash is better able to survive its burdens, particularly after serving as a "Sire" to nearby farms:

> It was Mena who taught Wash how to travel like this. How to use his mind's eye to keep his pictures bright and strong and close? Make himself a world to live in. It was Mena at first and then later, Rufus in his forge. (Wrinkle 2013, 21)

If Mena teaches him to "hold all her people in her mind's eye so strong till I [Wash] saw em too" (Wrinkle 2013, 51), Rufus helps him conduct such crossing between worlds as a bird: "This bird is your head. Your mind's eye. Sit on top and see from on high. Both this world and the next. When life gets tight, remember this bird and you know how to go" (Wrinkle 2013, 51). These teachings transform Wash into a meeting place like oceanic water; one that connects the world of spirit with the physical world, the world of ancestors to the real world. This foregrounds the interrelationship between African slaves' bodies and the bodies of water. By naming him Wash, Wrinkle highlights the memory of the Middle Passage and his connections to the ancestors: "To be here in body but gone some place in spirit" (Wrinkle 2013, 23). However, such fluidity of spirit is weakened when Wash and his mother are taken away from Nags Head Island to the inland plantation, as if their ties with both the physical and spiritual worlds had been loosened: "I [Wash] could hear her better so long as we were out there on our own"; however, "After we got took off that island ... [they] carried us over to his big place, there was no telling me nothing" (Wrinkle 2013, 23). Inland, away from the ocean itself, Mena maintains her connection to her ancestors through mud altars and statues, drawing on a substance neither earth nor water: "mud, a mixture of water and soil, silt, or clay, is an in-between substance, (Wardi 2011, 125). As "an aberrant fluid because it does not let one make a mark on it," mud fits saltwater slave's hybrid identity—suspended between the worlds (Wardi 2011, 125). Thus, her recourse to mud is not accidental but an extension of the ontological in-betweenness that shapes her relationship to water:

> She made altars all over that island. The first one I barely remember. It was in a real hidden place where palmetto leaves brushed my face when I stepped through and saw two mud people, all worn down. Ancestors. They were us and we'll be them was what she said as she sprinkled water and some ash then knelt there talking to em for a long time. (Wrinkle 2013, 31)

This in- betweenness surfaces when the statues and alters are broken. Finding them broken, Mena wraps them in a white paper and takes them to the water and holds them under the water until they are melted, as if the waves might carry them home, to a safer place. This ritual of return and dissolution "not only casts [water] as a grave but highlights the myriad acts of communion that maintain ancestral bonds that connect America to Africa, the living to the dead" (Wardi 2011, 39). After Mena's death, Wash maintains this bond with his ancestors. Through stories she told him—of his father and of the land to which their people belonged—Mena had already passed on to her son the knowledge of who he is and who his people are. That knowledge endures as more than memory: for Wash, the dead remain as a living presence, sustained and made accessible through water. This living presence manifests concretely in Wash's actions. Whenever he needs to reconnect with his ancestral past, he returns to her grave, symbolically situated on "the sloping spit of land jutting out into the river"—a threshold between water and land (Wrinkle 2013, 89). He also requests to be buried beside his mother next to the river bank in order "to end up right where he started. Next to his mamma," to his ancestors, and to water (Wrinkle 2013, 153). After Wash's death, the memory of his ancestors is transmitted and sustained through Pallas, his beloved, and the stories she recounts about Wash: "I want to thank all the ancestors who haunted me into unearthing these stories and weaving them together into one" (Wrinkle 2013, 159). Wrinkle, thus, suggests that ancestral memory survives not only through ritual and water but also narrative. Pallas's storytelling exemplifies what Wardi calls "haunting"—a mode through which the dead remain present to the living— reconnecting

Wash's descendant to the ancestral past he carried. This narrative act also enacts what Mentz describes as "a new marine logic"—one that "replaces the land-bound world" (2009, 9), creating connection with the past and transmitting it across generations. Formally, Wrinkle's narrative also embodies this fluidity: the dispersion of memory across generations, flashbacks, and parallel narrations enact the same nonlinearity circulation and associated with sea.

Water, Identity, and Time

Steve Mentz, in his book *Ocean*, argues that oceanic and aquatic thinking disrupt land-based epistemologies by foregrounding fluidity, instability, and movement (2020, 5). Astrida Neimanis account of the body's own aquatic dimension lends further weight to this claim: since the human is roughly 70%water, that water "animates our limbs, expresses our emotions, enables our reproductive proliferation. But moreover, our bodies of water open up to and intertwine with the other bodies of water with whom we share this planet" (2009, 162-63). This intertwining blurs the boundary between self and the world, foregrounding the fluidity, formerly downplayed by a land-locked epistemology, and giving rise to an "aquatic dimension of human identity"—an identity unconfined to any single moment in time, holding all temporal dimensions simultaneously (Brayton 2012, 176). Such an identity takes on what might be called in Deleuze and Guattari's terms a "rhizomatic structure": nonlinear, decentered, opposing the land-based coherence and stability. In this conception of identity, the past is never over; the future is not far, and ancestors, the living, and the future generation all live on together in this identity. Providing an "an interface not only of creatures and habitats, but of time itself," this identity, in Neil Browne's view:

> Contains the past, present, and future; indeed, in the cycle of things, the distinctions between these humanly defined temporal categories become blurred. Time does not seem linear—if anything it is cyclical, experiential, linked with the processes of living, dying, and decomposing of various life forms. (2004, 20)

Formed based on aquatic consciousness, this identity cannot be restricted by the rigid, anthropocentric, exclusionary hierarchies of racism dominating Richardson's plantation. On the other hand, it displays remarkable malleability and emotional pliability that develops through an intimate relationship with the natural and ecological world. Furthermore, it grants Mena and Wash a relational ontology or "rhizomatic thought," to employ Eduard Glissant's terms, to live in harmony with nature. "This rhizomatic thought," as Glissant argues, "is the principle behind what is called "the Poetics of Relation, in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other" (2024, 11). Such extension results in the coexistence of contradictory worlds and time spans alongside with the appeal of horses and plants to Mena and Wash.

It is for this reason that Mena sees woods and water as safe as their shelter on the plantation, or that Wash can connect deeply with animals such as horses and even live among them. This rhizomatic thought frame grants them dynamic subjectivity, helping them survive the pain of racism and the marginalization inflicted by their community. It, likewise, enables both to avoid the conformity and the submission that Richardson, Old Man Thompson, and the plantation's other white inhabitants generally expect of them—displaying what Glissant calls "anti-conformism" (2024, 11). Wrinkle dramatizes this "anti-conformism" in the scenes in which Old Man Thompson and Richardson ask Mena to pay homage to them in front of other enslaved people, and she merely looks, "nodding then went her own way just like always" (Wrinkle 2013, 30). It surfaces again when Richardson expresses his disapproval of Wash's staying in the barn, yet Wash keeps staying there, irrespective of his view. Because of this anti-conformism, neither Mena nor Wash can be confined to one task, one place, or one world. Both remain continuously in motion—a restlessness embodied, quite literally, in the name Mena chooses for her son:

> Some pieces you don't share. She said we needed a name for em to use and this one was fine. Wash. Every time she said it, she heard waves and saw water sheeting off me. Sweeping me clean. (Wrinkle 2013, 41)

Torture and violence fail to suppress such anti-conformism, particularly in Wash's case. In time, both Mena and Wash are left to act on their own terms after a while. Elizabeth Brown-Guillory locates the source of such nonconformity in the defense mechanism their fluidity provides, allowing Mena and Wash "to resist the systems of oppression that are both internal and external to the community" (2006, 3). Whenever situations become difficult, then, Mena or Wash, resort to the same fluidity and move between worlds:

> Whenever things started to heat up, I [Wash] could just go. Like that bird. . . Whenever those Thompson boys honed in on me, I'd

> make my mind into that bird carrying me to the ocean with its roar steady and mounting. Took the edge off whatever mess they had for me that day, reminding me of a bigger world. I got so good at not letting em get to me, I stumbled into a whole different batch of trouble. They needed me beat down and scared looking, not all peaceful and full of ocean inside. (Wrinkle 2013, 51)

Wash's subjectivity is defined by his world crossing capability. It grants him a liminal status that differentiates him from the other country-born slaves, as if he were a saltwater slave like Mena and Rufus. For Paul Gilroy, this liminality is the most significant feature that informs Wash's Black identity; it articulates "a desire to escape the restrictive bonds of ethnicity, national identification, and sometimes even 'race' itself" (1993, 19). By denying an essentialist conception of race and of homogeneous African-ness, Black identity defines Black existence. For Gilroy, Black subjectivity, memory, and identity are shaped once Black subjects embark on the ship in the Middle Passage. After the Middle Passage, slaves such as Mena carry the Atlantic within them. And Wash knows "about having my heart tied to another world. My mamma holding all her people in her mind's eye so strong till I saw em too. She had taught me how to move between that world and this one" (Wrinkle 2013, 51). Thus, they are neither here nor there; they are doubly conscious of both their African lineage and their American existence.

In this way, water, as Neimanis argues, "is not outside of us, but rather cycles through and beyond us, bringing moments of our meaningful materiality along with it" (2009, 178). It depicts Black subjectivity as fluid and blurred, thereby providing "an interface [where] the distinctions between these humanly defined temporal categories become blurred" (Brown 2004, 20). It also "carries time, is time, covers time" (Mittlefehldt 2003, 141). It creates a sense of time Sheila McKoy describes as "limbo time"—a temporality that reflects West African cyclical time. In "limbo time," as McKoy notes, the past, the present, and the future fuse together, and the linear progression of Western thought collapses. As a result, "limbo time" enables cultural continuity for Black diaspora, producing a framework for thinking outside the clock-defined pattern of time and providing "a slow time of simultaneity" through which people can co-exist with their ancestors and their descendants; this time pattern also fights against historical amnesia, making the past a persistently present phenomenon—not a bygone era—which shapes identities. This limbo time thus informs Mena and Wash's capability to cross worlds.

This limbo time is also embodied by Wrinkle's narrative structure. The novel's temporal disruptions—its fusion of the past and the present—highlight Mena and Wash's own experience of cyclical time. In this way, Wrinkle not only foregrounds water as an active materiality in her narrative but also offers a framework of cultural continuity and a structural correspondence between the narrative form and its thematic content; through this correspondence, Wrinkle enacts the fluid ontology of the aquatic identity that Brayton theorizes.

Conclusion

This study offers a close reading of Margaret Wrinkle's Wash (2013), employing a blue humanities framework that places Dan Brayton's and Anissa Wardi's theoretical approaches in dialogue. By reading Brayton's emphasis on the materiality of water against Wardi's conception of water as a site of memory, trauma, and resistance, it argues that water in Wrinkle's novel functions as a material archive and conduit of memory that shape Black historical consciousness. In this way, the reading challenges anthropocentric treatments of water as mere backdrop and recasts it as a present site of historical memory that forges intergenerational links. This analysis has demonstrated that water is an active agent—a liquid life line, a living archive that carries ancestral memory, shapes identity, and enables healing. Mena and Wash's fluid identities enable them to resist the demands of the dehumanizing machine of racial oppression and preserve their connections to their African temporalities that Western linear time has sought to erase. This resistance is enable since they inhabit a state of limbo that mirrors water itself: confined neither to land nor to sea, but always in motion and becoming. Furthermore, in this analysis the sea emerges not as a void across which Black slaves were transported, but as a living archive that shapes and recreates the identity of those who have experienced the Middle Passage. Challenging environmental criticism's land-centric assumptions, this analysis moves beyond landlocked frameworks to recognize water as both a material and an epistemological force. Wrinkle's novel, thus, moves beyond plantation narratives, which center on slavery life and capital accumulation, and becomes a site of political resistance to preserve what the colonial discourse has sought to efface—Black culture and history. Through life narratives of Mena and Wash, Wrinkle ultimately suggests that survival in a world that demands fixity and hierarchical stability lies in fluidity and constant motion.

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