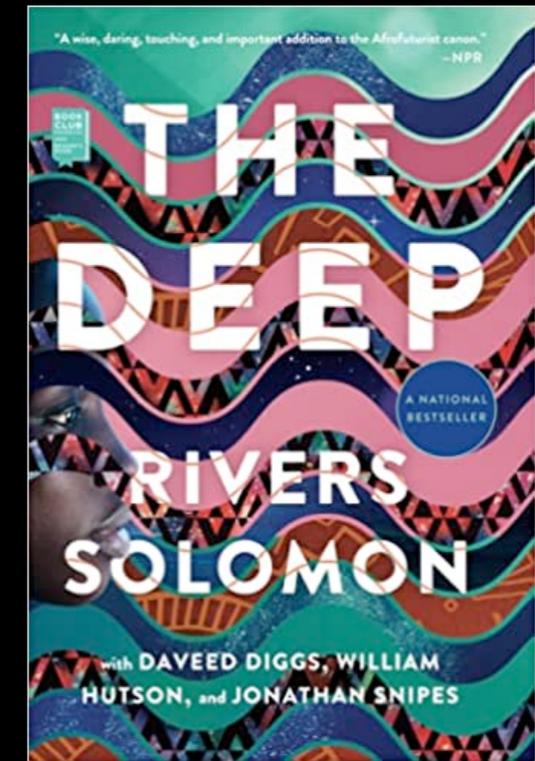


Mermaids



ECL 305: Literature and the Environment
Fall 2025. Professor Pressman

Day 23: Rivers Solomon, *The Deep*

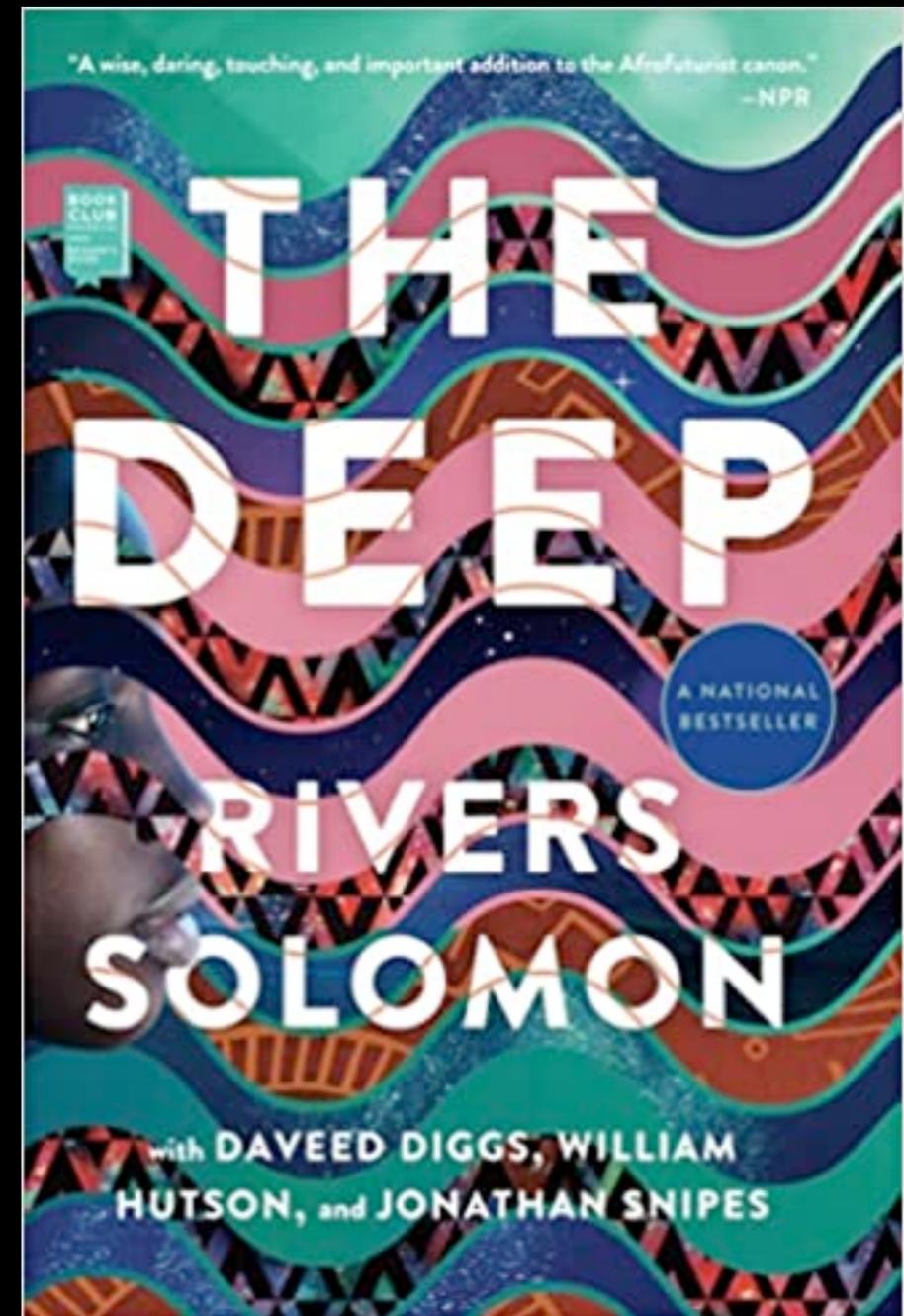
ADMIN

- Grading — by tomorrow!
- Tuesday — asynchronous peer review/sharing of thesis final project.
- Thursday: enjoy your holiday!

The Deep (2019)

Rivers Solomon, with
William Hutson, Jonathan
Snipes, Daveed Diggs

**Lambda Literary Award winner



Listen

- The Deep by clippng.
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yybfqEfuxPc>
-

Drexciya

- Detroit band
- The Drexciyan myth [originated](#) with a Detroit techno band who in the 1997 release of their compilation album, *The Quest*, described in the liner notes the [Afrofuturistic](#) tale. The band continued to create music with three follow-up studio albums between 1999 and 2002 and several more compilation albums until 2013.

Drexiyca

- <https://www.discogs.com/release/12117-Drexciya-The-Quest>

-

“The Deep” song by The Clipping (2017)

LYRICS

Our mothers were pregnant African women thrown overboard while crossing the Atlantic Ocean on slave ships. We were born breathing water as we did in the womb. We built our home on the sea floor, unaware of the two-legged surface dwellers until their world came to destroy ours.

Tonight, we remember.

Y'all remember how deep it go
Started from the bottom

Y'all remember how deep it go
'Fore y'all had to come back, deep
Y'all remember when it used to be deep
So deep, so, so deep, ayy
When y'all swim up out yo' mama while y'all mama was asleep
So deep, so, so deep, ayy
And y'all remember when y'all had the dance floor lit, dark
No two-step, deep, y'all don't even sweat, deep

As deep as it gets

Dreaming dead asleep and keeping time

Y'all heartbeat, deep, y'all heartbeat, deep
And all the fishes had they eyes bugged out
Cause y'all dancing underwater and y'all don't get wet

And the dark smelled sweet and y'all tails touch reef
Y'all feed off the bottom, but now y'all remember

[Chorus: Daveed Diggs]

Y'all remember
Y'all remember

Drexciya, *The Quest* (1997)

- “During the greatest holocaust the world has ever known, pregnant America-bound African slaves were thrown overboard by the thousands during labour for being sick and disruptive cargo. Is it possible that they could have given birth at sea to babies that never needed air?”
- Recent experiments have shown mice able to breathe liquid oxygen. Even more shocking and conclusive was a recent instance of a premature infant saved from certain death by breathing liquid oxygen through its undeveloped lungs. These facts combined with reported sightings of Gillmen and swamp monsters in the coastal swamps of the South-Eastern United States make the slave trade theory startlingly feasible.
- Are Drexciyans water breathing, aquatically mutated descendants of those unfortunate victims of human greed? have they been spared by God to teach us or terrorise us? Did they migrate from the Gulf of Mexico to the Mississippi river basin and on to the great lakes of Michigan?
- Do they walk among us? Are they more advanced than us and why do they make their strange music?
- What is their Quest?
- These are many of the questions that you don't know and never will.
- The end of one thing...and the beginning of another.”
- —<https://www.discogs.com/release/12117-Drexciya-The-Quest>

AT THE SMITHSONIAN | JUNE 8, 2023

Meet the Inhabitants of the Mythic World of Drexciya

Artist Ayana V. Jackson creates an undersea realm honoring those who jumped or were thrown overboard during the trans-Atlantic slave trade

“From the Deep: In the Wake of Drexciya with Ayana V. Jackson” is on view at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African Art through April 2024.

-



Seascape: the state of our oceans

The Book Of Drexciya, graphic novel by Abdul Qadim Haqq and Dai Sato

Drexciya: how Afrofuturism is inspiring calls for an ocean memorial to slavery

- Helen Scales for *The Guardian* (January 25, 2021)
- <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/jan/25/drexciya-how-afrofuturism-inspired-calls-for-an-ocean-memorial-to-slavery>

The alternative Black history of a deep-sea civilisation has planted the seed for proposals to memorialise the 1.8 million Africans who died in the Atlantic

by [Helen Scales](#)

Somewhere in the dark, vast abyss of the Atlantic Ocean, deep beneath the waves, lies a civilisation. For centuries the Drexciyans have lived in peaceful isolation on the seabed, occupying their bubble metropolis, unaware of the land-based realm their ancestors were forced to leave behind.

The Drexciyans trace their lineage back to the pregnant African women - considered by their captors to be sick or disruptive - who were thrown off slave ships to drown. Baby Drexciyans swam from their mothers' wombs, never needing to breathe air, and gave rise to a subaqueous empire.

Drexciya, of course, does not technically exist. It was created by the Detroit electro duo of the same name in their [1992 album *Deep Sea Dweller*](#), and over the course of a decade was expanded through an acoustic techno-soundscape of bubbly arpeggios and watery synths, with track names and

Discussion

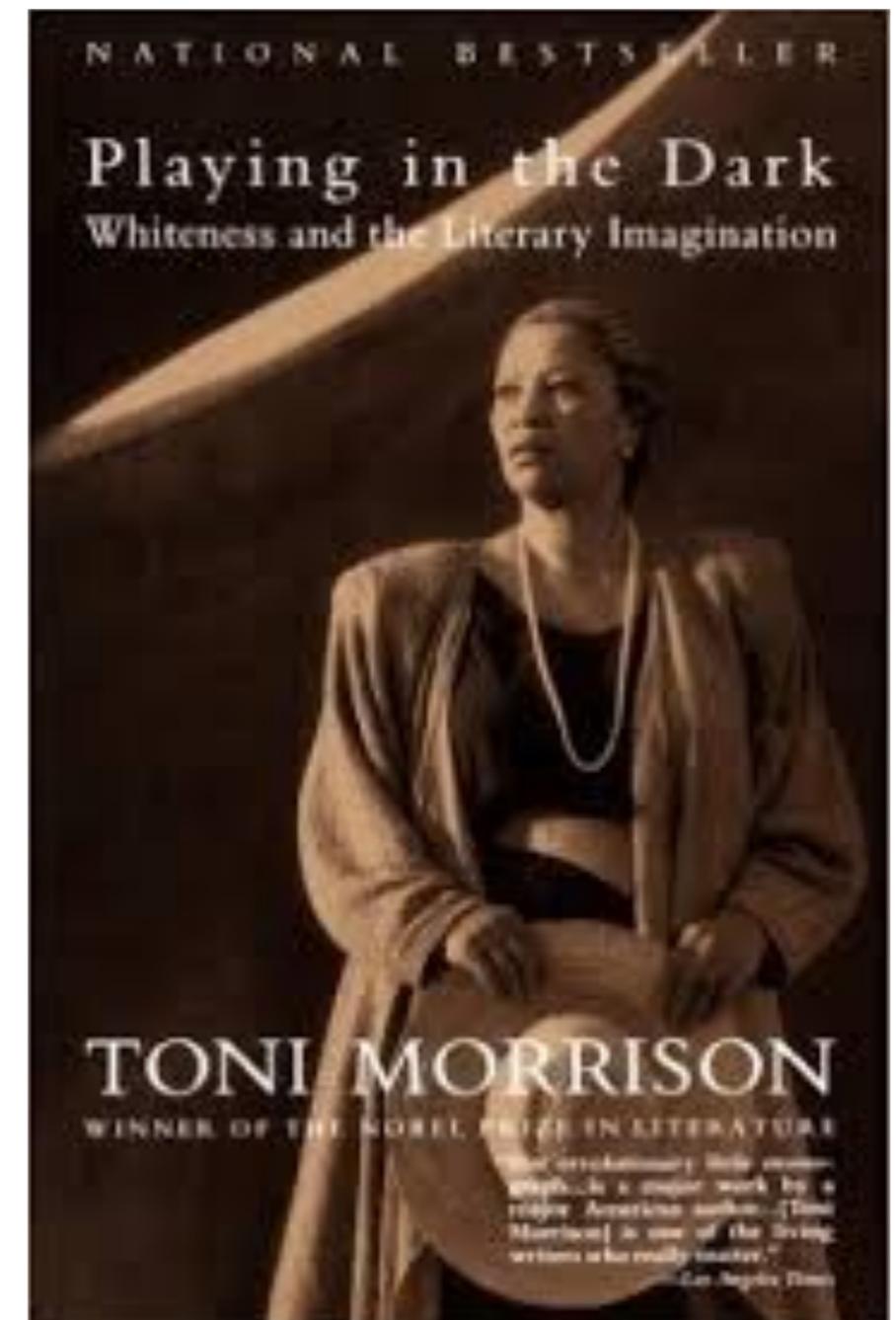
- First impressions?
- Passages to discuss?

Playing in the Dark: Whiteness in the Literary Imagination (1992)

“The contemplation of this black presence is central to any understanding of our national literature and should not be permitted to hover at the margins of the literary imagination” (5)

“It has occurred to me that the very manner by which American literature distinguishes itself as a coherent entity exists because of this unsettled and unsettling population” (5-6)

“Africans and their descendants were not, in any sense that matters, *there*” (16); “It requires hard work *not* to see this” (17)



Toni Morrison, “Romancing the Shadow”

“Explicit or implicit, the Africanist presence informs in compelling and inescapable ways the texture of American literature.” (46)

“Africanism is the vehicle by which the American self knows itself *as not enslaved*, but free; not repulsive, but desirable” (52)

Toni Morrison, “rememory”

“Some things go on. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was just my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do” (Toni Morrison, *Beloved* [1987]: 43).

“Something familiar and warm circles though us, a memory written in our blood” (Rivers Solomon, *The Deep*, 44)

M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (2008)

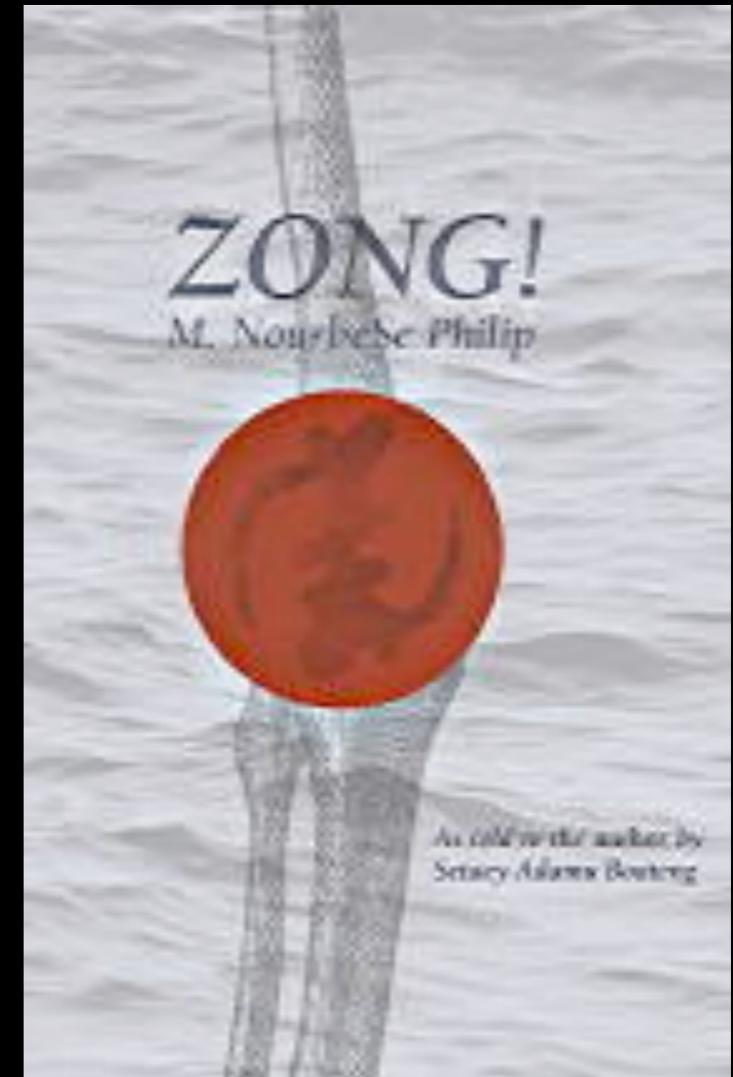
w w w w a wa
w a w a t
er wa s
our wa
te r gg g g go
o oo goo d
waa wa wa

when did we decide you Dave ask/s that i dear Lisa
the hag secr (C) the crone these words come from his lips
my hand shapes them she sh/h
apes all of dead
sing sing they sang of died not so loud
didn't the bell ring a song oh oh
I come from the north the date again el song my ass
land of mist the date again am am my goat bag
of hoar-frost the time and date of sin palm willie
sow the seven seas groan to &&
with ash din of dying why did we writ in
decide when did we die decide sand
i come from the north the died the dead live rent sing i say
i come from the north very own the my lives
the north dales the land hey hey ho
dales of mist land of hoar froes
there of rise in the time and date of hoar frost
of sit inside the time and date
he had an ace of sin
i a sequence of
queens king one chu
Sam the rum dear Ruth can a tale be
mortality by the tail if told ever
om the rum cold a secret race
mai calms lives of writ/s & *underwriters rent/s
calms calms the truth to be sure
calms to the right this is but
writ in sand an oration a tale
writ in sand old is new
live life as sin
rent life when did we decide

Zong & Zong!

On November, 1781, the captain of the slave ship Zong ordered that some 150 Africans be murdered by drowning so that the ship's owners could collect insurance monies

“The case report *Gregson vs. Gilbert*, recounts the massacre by drowning of some 130 enslaved Africans over the course of ten days beginning on November 29th, 1781. The captain of the eponymous slave ship, *Zong*, having made many navigational errors resulting in extending the length of the voyage from West Africa to Jamaica ordered the Africans be thrown overboard so as to allow the owners of the ship, the Gregsons, to claim indemnity from their insurers, the Gilberts. When the insurers refused to honour the contract of insurance, the ship’s owners initiated legal action against them, which proved to be successful. Upon appeal, however, the insurers, the Gilberts were granted a new trial. The report of that hearing, *Gregson vs Gilbert* constitutes the only extant, public document related to the massacre. Through fugal and counterpointed strategies, *Zong!* explodes the coded, documented silence of the historical text to become an anti-narrative lament that tells the story of this haunting and tragic massacre: it cannot be told yet must be told; it can only be told by not telling.”



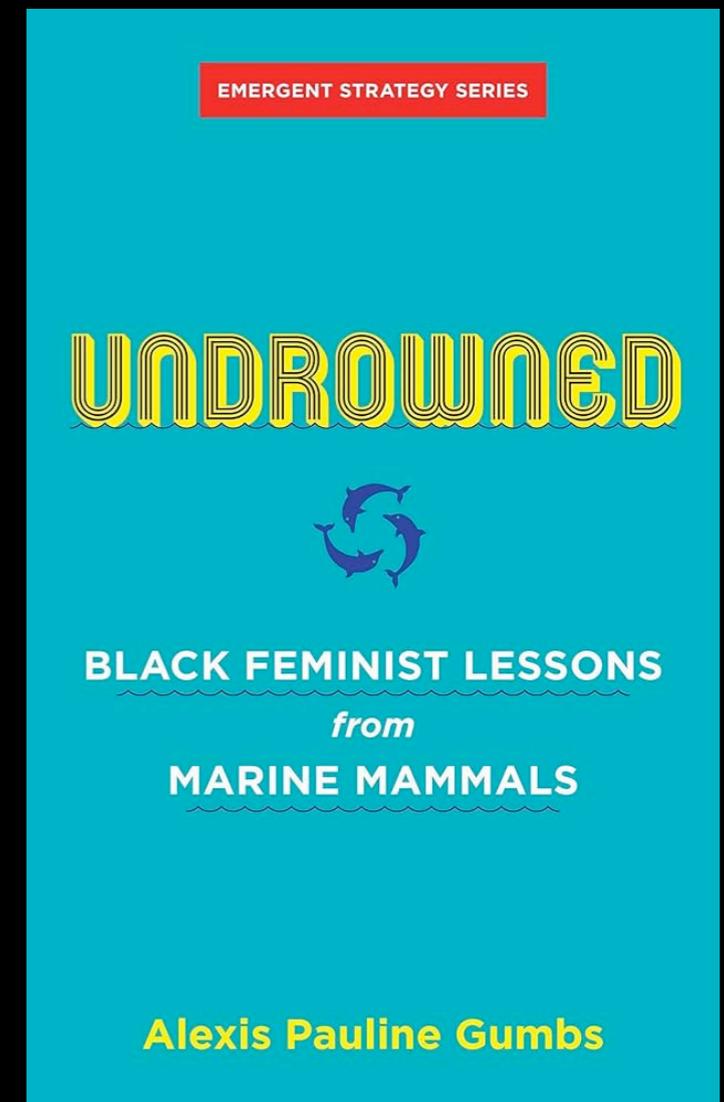
M. NourbeSe Philip, Setaey Adamu Boateng
2008

Alexis Pauline Gumbs,
Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals (Emergent Strategy Series, AK Press, 2020)

“What is the scale of breathing?” (1); “the scale of breathing is collective” (1)

-the middle passage; the drowned, on the slave ship
“their breathing is not separate from the drowning of their kin and fellow captives, their breathing is not separate from the breathing of the ocean.... Their breathing did not make them individual survivors. It made a context” (2)

“Breathing in unbreathable circumstances is what we do every day in the chokehold of racial gendered ableist capitalism’ (2)



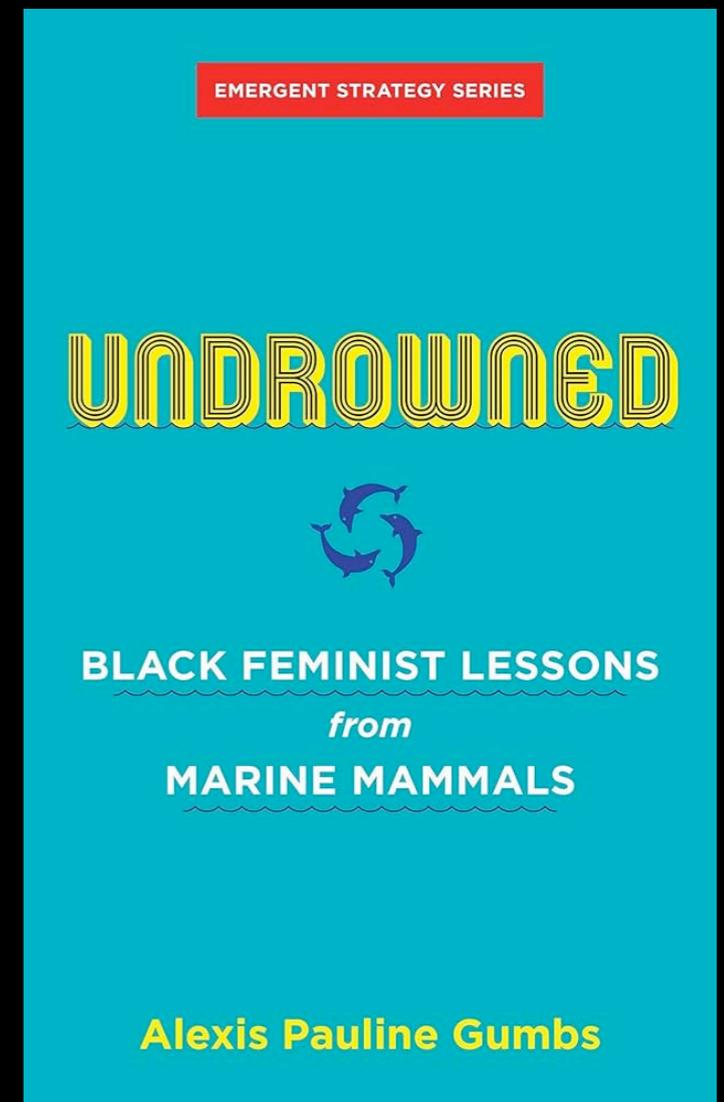
Alexis Pauline Gumbs,
Undrowned: Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals (Emergent Strategy Series, AK Press, 2020)

“How does echolocation, the practice many marine mammals use to navigate the world through bouncing sounds, change our understandings of ‘vision’ and visionary action?” (15)

“The function of dorsal fins for aquatic animals is stability. In water that is always moving, having a dorsal fin provides balance... Yes, I need a dorsal fin to navigate all of this transformation” (44)

“From mothering as an emergent strategy in massive dolphin super-pods to pantropical synchronized swimming as a model of being prepared for large-scale direct action, the dolphins are educating us on how to squad, or pod up” (51)

“these dolphin schools are organizational structures for learning nurturance, and survival, both intergenerationally and within generations” (55)



Take-aways?