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Staying knotted in the anthropocene: pain, memory, and survival in the deep and the word for world is forest

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Abstract. This paper explores how survival is imagined in speculative fiction through the concept of relational knotting—a structure of suspended tension rather than resolution. Reading Rivers Solomon's *The Deep* and Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Word for World is Forest*, the essay argues that survival under the pressures of historical trauma, ecological collapse, and colonial violence requires the redistribution of pain across collective, more-than-human networks. Centralized suffering leads to fragmentation; only when memory and grief are shared—through community, ecology, and interspecies entanglement—can a durable form of survival emerge. Drawing on theoretical insights from Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour, and Dipesh Chakrabarty, this paper proposes a Knot Theory of Relational Survival, where knots signify the ethical practice of staying knotted—with others, with place, and with histories that resist resolution. These texts imagine survivance as ecological co-dwelling in a world that insists on unfinishedness.

Keywords: posthuman ethics, relational survival, ecological speculative fiction, collective memory, knot theory

1. Introduction

Survival, in the long wake of historical trauma, ecological devastation, and colonial violence, is rarely a matter of coherence. It is a condition of friction—of existing in tension with histories that wound, relations that bind, and futures that refuse linear resolution. In speculative fiction, this condition often takes form as a pattern of entanglement: memories recur, grief loops, violence reverberates. What holds, then, is a structure of suspension—a knot. Unlike a line that resolves or a circle that closes, the knot binds through tension, through the distributed weight of what cannot be borne alone. This paper argues that across the oceanic memory circuits of *The Deep* and the forested dream-networks of *The Word for World is Forest*, survival emerges through shared strain, ecological embeddedness, and co-witnessing. These texts aim to inhabit it together, "messily", and enduringly.

This notion grows from a set of questions raised by scholars working across posthumanism, ecological, and planetary thought. In *Staying with the Trouble*, Donna Haraway urges us to "make kin, not babies," to think with compost, symbiosis, and entangled becoming. Against both fatalism and salvation, she proposes a mode of storytelling grounded in partiality, co-creation, and what she calls "string figures": collaborative practices of worlding that depend on giving and receiving, failure and repair, across species and temporalities [1]. She writes: "It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories. It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts…" [1]. Haraway's looping syntax performs the very entanglement she describes: thought folds into thought, description into description, matter into meaning. The knot here is a generative link—a transfer point for becoming-with. This paper takes up that provocation but shifts the frame from string figures as patterns of exchange to knots as structures of tension. Where string figures trace cooperation, knots register strain. They are what happens when threads catch, refuse to let go, and must live with their entwinement.

Bruno Latour, in his theorization of planetary ecology, similarly challenges the notion that political or historical action proceeds through sovereign agency. In the *Anthropocene*, he argues, "We are no longer dealing with a system of causes but with a concatenation of performances" [2]. The knot offers a formal and conceptual response to this shift: it is an assemblage of performances, a structure in which no single strand determines the whole, and no actor—human or nonhuman—acts alone. The speculative texts I analyze do not isolate memory or violence within individuals, but allow them to circulate, bind, and rebind across species, bodies, and ecosystems.

2. Centralized pain: the unraveling knot

Patricia Yaeger's provocative question— "should the oceans have standing?"—pushes the limits of narrative to include the nonhuman not only as background but as agent, witness, and bearer of trauma [3]. The ocean, she suggests, is archive and ethically implicated. In *The Deep*, the ocean literally carries the weight of ancestral memory. But more than this, it becomes a knotting medium, where history is not preserved but recirculated—made thick, resistant, and wet with shared pain. Reading through knots allows us to see not just what speculative fiction remembers, but how it holds what cannot be integrated into narrative.

Taken together, these theoretical provocations call for a critical vocabulary that accounts for memory, community, and survivance in forms that resist linearity and coherence. This paper explores how survival takes shape when pain exceeds the limits of individual endurance, when it must be carried across bodies, voices, and temporalities. It begins with the recognition that suffering concentrated in a single figure—whether Yetu as Historian or Selver as dreamer-turned-god—leads to collapse, distortion, and fragmentation. From there, the inquiry turns to models of distributed holding: communities that do not erase pain but share it, redistribute it, and speak it aloud. Finally, it extends that vision of collectivity to include nonhuman actors—oceans that remember, forests that dream, ecologies that sustain shared becoming. Through close readings of *The Deep* and *The Word for World is Forest*, this paper traces how speculative fiction imagines survival not through mastery or healing, but through entangled dwelling—with others, with memory, and with more-than-human worlds that shape what living can still mean.

When pain is centralized in one body, the knot unravels before it can even form. What should have been dispersed across a community becomes a point of unbearable pressure. The knot, which requires shared tension and distributed force, cannot form when pain is monopolized. Instead, the system tears. To imagine this is to picture a sheet of plastic wrap stretched evenly across space—meant to hold weight only when tension is spread. Place a single weight, a single orange, at the center, and the plastic bows, strains, and eventually splits. Both *The Deep* and *The Word for World is Forest* shows this state of distortion: the protagonists are not woven into a structure but isolated within it, forced to bear what cannot be held alone.

This kind of pain results in a radical distortion of perception. As the *Historian*, Yetu is forced into the role of the most important person in her community—yet, paradoxically, she also becomes "no one." This duality fractures her sense of self, caught between being the collective's center and being erased by its weight. The tension between fragmentation and absorption ignites a torrent of pain that is both personal and communal. When Yetu begins to drown in the memories of her people, she feels "Her body was full of other bodies. Every wajinru who had ever lived possessed her in this moment. They gnashed, they clawed, desperate to speak" [4]. The syntax itself breaks here—abrupt, piling clauses, physical verbs. The choice of words here shows the kind of swarm of trauma trying to erupt from the nervous system. There is no buffer, no dispersal, only a single body forced to hold the weight of a multitude. There is also no border between her body and theirs, no stable "self" to mediate the weight of history. Her skin becomes "an open sore," and even the sound of a loved one's voice "salted it" [4]. Pain becomes the surface on which all sensation is inscribed. This overconcentration of pain reaches a breaking point during an argument with her Amaba, where Yetu describes being "turned into splinters and fragments" [4]. Memory explodes in her. Earlier, she recounts being "three boys in the moments before their deaths," then "them during their deaths", a sequence that unravels the boundary of self until only shards remain [4]. The structure stretches too tightly over a single body, and instead of holding, it shatters. What might have been a network of tension becomes a site of failure.

Selver's experience mirrors Yetu's in the recursive structure of his dreams. These are involuntary returns and loops through which trauma replays itself with minute variations and no closure. He dreams again of striking Davidson, "teeth broke, and blood ran between the white splinters", but this is no longer catharsis. "There was nothing to that dream but relief," we are told—a dream he has dreamed "many times," so familiar it becomes useless. What he seeks is not relief, but the "bitter"—a return to the source of violence, to the "long dreadful street in the alien city called Central" [5]. His dreams are stuck in replay, unable to resolve the psychic damage they rehearse. They offer neither vision nor escape, but instead produce a form of saturated stasis, where the repetition of colonial pain functions as a broken system of meaning. In this way, dreaming becomes a failed archive—incapable of metabolizing violence, merely recycling it.

Language, too, falters under the weight of overconcentration. Selver's voice, once embedded in a forest-world where dream and speech were mutually sustaining, now bears a foreign resonance he cannot locate: "Was he speaking his own language, or was he speaking Captain Davidson's?" [5]. His utterances no longer link dream to waking life—as the sha'ab once did by translating the "root" of vision into action—but instead echo the invader's lexicon. The voice that made him "a god" among his people [5]—has become entangled in a syntax not of his own making. The dream-root, once the generative source of Athshean life, now risks becoming "an infection, a foreign plague," threatening to unravel the very social fabric it once upheld [5]. In this moment, language ceases to be a shared ecological medium—it becomes saturated, privatized, weaponized. What was meant to be collective utterance collapses into alien transmission, rupturing Selver's relation to both his own history and his people.

When memory is sequestered, it ceases to bind—it crushes. In both *The Deep* and *The Word for World is Forest*, the failure of communal distribution—of affect, of memory, of voice—becomes the very mechanism through which knotting collapses into rupture. This is a structural vulnerability: when collectivity is replaced by concentration, trauma becomes unspeakable, for it

lacks a relational architecture in which to reside. This state of disintegration also makes the need for knotting visible. If pain monopolized undoes the subject, perhaps pain dispersed becomes a way to reassemble one. The question that follows is not only how to survive with pain, but how to share it without re-centering it.

3. Reknitting survival: collective tension as practice

When pain overwhelms the individual, survival must be rewoven—across bodies, across time. What breaks in isolation begins to hold in mesh. The knot, as developed here, is a material practice of relational suspension. Unlike a chain, it has no fixed hierarchy; unlike a center, it does not consolidate force. A knot is a point in a web—pliable, porous, and tensile—where pressure redistributes. Donna Haraway calls this mode of connection a game of "string figures," a process of "giving and receiving patterns, dropping threads and failing but sometimes finding something that works… a way of crafting conditions for finite flourishing on Earth" [1]. Knots, in this sense, are transmissions; they absorb pain through distributed tension. They do not untie damage, but they prevent it from tearing any single thread apart. In this way, to knot is not to master trauma but to share its weight. The structure holds. And crucially, it holds together. To remain knotted is to remain in tension with others—across difference, across histories, across wounds.

In *The Deep*, this redistribution of memory begins in a moment of intersubjective co-decision. Yetu's refusal to remain the sole bearer of history emerges in dialogue—with pain, with ancestry, and with Amaba, the elder who once embodied the logic of sacrificial memory. When Yetu begins absorbing the full tide of ancestral memory, Amaba does not scold or demand a return to tradition. Instead, she offers something more radical: accompaniment. "Please! There must be another way," she begs. "You don't have to live with this pain alone. Join us" [4]. Her words and gesture—pressing her fins to Yetu's cheeks—enact a form of care that refuses individualization. She insists: "I would sooner die than let you suffer this alone… I will not see you bear it without your amaba, without your kindred" [4]. This insistence creates an opening through which Yetu no longer imagines memory as her burden alone. Rather than reclaim the History, she imagines a shift: "Maybe, instead of taking the History from them, she could join them as they experienced it… They could bear it all together" [4]. The result is a new configuration: "They each held pieces of the History now, divvied up between them. They shared it and discussed it. They grieved" [4]. This gesture transforms the knot from a private enclosure to a communal mesh, a shared structure of suspension. Even the language reflects this affective deferral: "Sometimes, they wanted to die. But then they would remember, it was done" [4]. The finality of "done" is deceptive. What is over is the monopoly on remembering—not the grief, not the burden, not the sea of names. Yetu's role becomes that of a guide within the knot, not its anchor. As she says to the others, "We must save one another" [4]. The act is a gesture that keeps each individual from disappearing entirely into the dark.

The final gesture in *The Deep*—Yetu's transmission of the remembering to Oori—is an act of expanding the knot. This moment literalizes what Haraway calls the "string figure": a tactile, intersubjective configuration in which knowledge is passed as embodied relation [1]. When Yetu invites Oori to "touch" and "remember," she is weaving another body into the shared tension of survival. The water becomes their connective medium: "She didn't grow gills or fins, but like Yetu, she could breathe both on land and in the sea" [4]. This dual capacity—this new, amphibious form—signals the emergence of a different kind of being: one by the act of relational transformation.

Haraway emphasizes that string figures do not work if held alone; they must be passed, caught, altered. "Nobody lives everywhere; everybody lives somewhere. Nothing is connected to everything; everything is connected to something" [1]. In this embrace, Yetu offers Oori an entry point into pain, memory, and co-belonging. The ocean, here, acts as both womb and web—an ecological knot that ties past and future into a breathable present. The knot, now including Oori, holds—not by resisting dissolution, but by making room for the newly made. Survival, in this closing image, is not recovery but invitation.

4. The selver paradox: when knotting recentralizes

If Yetu's survival signals the potential of memory to be held collectively, not as a solution but as a shared and suspended burden, then Selver's trajectory in *The Word for World is Forest* provides a critical contrast. Selver eventually turns this dream into action. Declaring to the headwoman of Cadast, "Tell any people who dream of a city burning to come after me to Broter," he invokes both vision and mobilization [5]. Over the next pages, he leads a growing number of Athsheans— "sixty in all, as great a troop as most people had ever seen on the move at once"—toward violent revolt, a process that is paradoxically nourished by the collective dreaming network that once held the community in nonviolence [5]. The dream becomes the conduit through which violence is not only imagined but legitimized. This shift marks a dangerous centralization. Coro Mena, who had once taught Selver to dream, now names him "a god that kills and is not himself reborn" [5]. Unlike other Athshean deities—who cycle through death and rebirth, song and silence—Selver becomes fixed, singular, and irreversible. His unique status as "the son of forest-fire, the brother of the murdered" intensifies this exceptionalism [5]. Instead of being a node in a network, he becomes a center around which others gather, a harvester of fear. As the elder tells him, "All that we fear to know, you have seen, you have known… now you gather it" [5].

Selver himself senses this shift. When asked by Coro Mena, "Do you hold the dream in your hands?", he replies, "Sometimes. Sometimes I am afraid to" [5]. His response gestures toward a fraying thread—what was once unconscious and shared becomes conscious and burdensome, estranged from its ecological rhythm. This unease intensifies as others begin acting in obedience to Selver's retelling of it. Fear becomes the affective glue.

This transformation isolates him from the very structure that once made dreaming a collective process. "He was setting off alone," the narrator remarks, "implicated in crowd and act, he would have little time for the slow and deep running of the great dreams" [5]. The temporal structure of knotting—recursive, lingering, entangled—is broken by the forward rush of violent purpose. Instead of threading together many paths, Selver becomes a directional force. Even his sense of self fractures: "You are surer of me than I am," acknowledging the role thrust upon him without full consent [5].

This contrast clarifies the political ontology of the knot. What distinguishes Yetu's structure from Selver's is the refusal of centrality. In *The Deep*, memory becomes a shared architecture, a loose archive that reknots itself without final resolution. In Forest, memory becomes unidirectional anchored to one node, severed from shared improvisation. The knot, then, is not simply a metaphor, but a structural question: who gets to hold pain, how is it spaced, and can it be passed without reimposing violence? In this light, knotting emerges not as a point of tension, but as a process of relational suspension—the difference between rupture and reformation, between holding and constraining.

5. Ecological infrastructure: the materiality of knotting

If memory and pain can be held collectively, as we saw in Yetu's re-knotting with her community, then we must ask: what enables such collective holding in the first place? What grounds it, sustains it, or threatens it? The answer lies not only in social will, but in material conditions—in the ecological textures that allow relation to persist across bodies and time. These environments are generative actors that enable memory to circulate and pressure to redistribute. They provide the ambient structure in which non-sovereign subjectivity can endure. This is why collective survival, as imagined in these texts, is inseparable from ecological embeddedness. The ocean and the forest enable transmission by keeping meaning in motion—through currents, dreams, sounds, and rhythms. Without such sustaining ecologies, the knots unravel.

In *The Deep*, the wajinru are born from the legacy of transatlantic slavery, but they live in the ocean's rhythm, its pressures and pulses forming the contour of their memory. "It was the ocean who was their first amaba," the text affirms, recasting the sea as origin, archive, and caretaker [4]. In Forest, the Athsheans live not alongside the forest but within it; their subjectivity is porous to its soundscapes and dream logic. Selver's psychic collapse begins when this forested dream-network is severed by Terran invasion, turning a space of ecological reciprocity into one of violent individuation. What these non-human species suffer is not just social domination but ecological rupture. When the ocean is too full of memory, or the forest is silenced by machines, collectivity fragments. Language fails. Violence enters. In this light, the Anthropocene is one of entangled epistemological collapse. The forest and the ocean are reminders that survival is never solitary, and that memory and dreaming, needs more than human carriers.

In *The Deep*, the ocean is an ontological infrastructure for remembering—a dynamic, sensorial medium that enables the Wajinru to embody a liquid memory structure. Rather than storing history in fixed vessels, memory in the ocean circulates like a current, rising and receding in waves that resist linear containment. When Yetu attempts to reconnect with the sea after escaping the burden of remembrance, she "luxuriated in the sloshing water" and feels "tiny fish flutter past her again, reminding her that she was alive" [4]. The connection is physiological: "Water, outside her in the pool, inside her body in the form of life-sustaining blood and wet tissue, both connected" [4]. Here, the sea is both archive and agent, its liquidity essential to the tactile transmission of ancestral memory. The affective resonance is sensory and immersive—Yetu reaches out to the water "using the same technique she did when she reached out to the wajinru during the Remembrance," by "slitting[ed] herself open and spilling[ed] herself out" [4]. It is an act of permeability, echoing Donna Haraway's concept of "becoming-with" in relational entanglement that "passing on in twists and skeins," like a string-figure game that reconfigures memory as a relay—shared, refracted, embodied [1]. The repeated use of water-bound vocabulary— "slosh," "tide," "pool," "submerged," "wet tissue," "deep," "currents"—foregrounds how memory itself becomes a hydrological event.

If *The Deep* renders memory as liquid—fluid, saturating, and shared through immersion—then The Word for World is Forest proposes a complementary ecology of memory, grounded in rootedness. The Athshean world is knotted through the forest: dreams, decisions, and mourning all unfold within the leafy canopy. For the Ath`sheans, the word "Athshe" itself means both "forest" and "world". The root and the dream are one word in their language, suggesting that to be of the forest is also to dwell in layered temporalities where memory is as vegetative as it is psychic. The paths they walk do not run straight but "yield to every obstacle, devious as nerves," winding among roots and boles in a forest floor made of "the long, elaborate death of leaves and trees" [5]. Even the colors of the copper willows cannot be fixed— "brownish-red, or reddish-green, or green"—a perpetual mutability that resists all certainty [5]. This ambiguity is not chaos but coherence: a kind of sensuous, non-linear order, shaped by multiplicity and refusal of revelation. To look up through the canopy is to catch "sight of the stars," but never "everything at once" [5]. In this shadowy, unfinalizable habitat, mourning and dreaming occur in tandem with rustling leaves, dusk glades, and

firelit lodges. Even the Athshean houses are semi-subterranean and humid, reeking of woodsmoke and herbs, immersed in the same forest ecosystem: "timber houses are three-quarters sunk, fitted in among tree-roots like badgers' setts," almost "invisible" beneath a thatch of "small branches, pinestraw, reeds, [and] earthmold" [5].

Their sleep patterns, shaped by the twilights of dawn and dusk, follow a rhythm in tune with the canopy's dim fluctuations—the forest's hush and vibration. The Athsheans' physiological rhythm is explicitly described as not following the Terran solar model: "their physiological low was between noon and four p.m.," while their periods of greatest energy occurred "in the two twilights, dawn and evening" [5]. This biorhythm reflects a culture tuned not to light as visibility, but to light as atmosphere: flickering leaflight, filtered shadows, the sound of wind threading through high branches. Even the micro-sleeps common among adults— "five or six hours in 24, in several catnaps"—indicate a sleep ecology structured by intermittent attention rather than diurnal command [5].

This ecological attunement to light, air, and vibration gestures toward what Latour describes as a "metamorphic zone"—a space where agency is inert matter and sovereign subjects, but continuously redistributed among actants that gain "their existence, their subsistence, from the future to the present" [2]. In this frame, Athshe's forest is a participant in world-making—a medium that "comprehends, in a way, the point of view of other bodies," reverberating with the movements of each element within the larger mesh [2]. Latour invokes the idea of "trading zones" between former objects and former subjects, where entities are entangled in reciprocal constraints and responsive relations. "Living with Gaia," Latour writes, demands cohabitation— "a return of object and subject back to the ground" where no entity acts alone, and no consequence can be traced in a straight line [2].

Selver's capacity to imagine resistance itself is also made possible by the cognitive and affective scaffolding provided by the forest. His vision of revolt emerges through his sensory immersion in the forested landscape and coincides with a swelling sense of planetary imbalance and latent action, suggested through natural cues: "The clouds thickened; the wind had died down; leaves were restless" [5]. The forest seems to whisper volatility, not in human language but in a nonverbal grammar of motion and weather. Selver's dreams channel these atmospheric dissonances—he dreams of a "broken birchtree" as a symbol of Thele's death [5], a botanical image that fuses mourning with fracture, stability with violence. The trees signal a threshold—his dreams thereafter turn outward, acquiring an almost meteorological urgency. The invocation of "oak and birch, willow and holly" in later passages reflects this shift: the trees are no longer passive setting but a composite force through which resistance becomes thinkable [5]. It is through this ecological companionship that Selver is able to move from dream to mobilization as one node within a larger arboreal warning system. When Selver's visions spread among other villages, they do so by reverberating in forest images: "the tree at the end of the black path," "roots deeper than the forest," [5]. These vegetal perform the work of planetary cognition.

As Chakrabarty reminds us, the current planetary crisis compels us to "scale up our imagination of the human" and to think of ourselves as geological agents acting on planetary time [6]. Selver's dreams, dispersed among trees and villagers, constitute "planetary cognition" that bypasses the sovereign subject and instead takes root in distributed, vegetal memory systems. Such memory, Chakrabarty argues, cannot be historicized through traditional narratives of freedom or progress, but must be placed within the species history of humans, where human and nonhuman actors interlock in complex causality [6]. Thus, the forested sensorium that enables Selver's revolt is not only affective and atmospheric—it is a knot in planetary history, reminding us that survival in the Anthropocene must be imagined as both ecological and collective.

6. Juridical knots: toward ecological personhood

While earlier sections have traced how the Wajinru and Athsheans inhabit entangled, non-sovereign modes of being, what remains underdeveloped is the juridical implication of their forms of life. In her influential *PMLA* editorial, Patricia Yaeger famously asked: "Should the ocean have standing?"—a provocation that questioned the anthropocentric premises of legal recognition [3]. Yet the question, as staged in *The Deep* and *The Word for World is Forest*, is no longer hypothetical. These texts move beyond that nature should have standing; they show what standing looks like when it emerges from within nature. The ocean and the forest do not speak for themselves but speak through species they have shaped—Wajinru and Athshean—who in turn complicate what it means to count as a "person."

Crucially, these demi-human communities' coherence arises from ecological symbiosis: the Wajinru exist as tactile networks of transmitted memory, while Athshean society flows through acoustic kinship with trees and dreams. They neither represent nature nor speak on its behalf. Rather, they are nature's speculative personhoods. The ocean has standing, not because it claims rights, but because its currents form consciousness. The forest has standing as a dream-producing intelligence. This is what a knot-like personhood entails: a structure that unsettles what it means to be a subject in the first place. What both systems offer is a speculative prototype of standing without sovereignty. These are not legal persons because they can speak in court, but because they refract what "the court" might become if it were restructured around survivability, relation, and ecological embeddedness. As Yaeger writes, "to bestow personified rights on the ocean would match our gift to corporations", an indictment that both texts

extend by showing how the sea and the forest already act, remember, and demand response through the demi-human [3]. The forest hums, the sea grieves.

7. Conclusion

To knot is to continue—to hold what cannot be disentangled, to stay with what resists solution. In the narratives of *The Deep* and *The Word for World is Forest*, survival emerge as a fraught and fragile practice of remaining-with: with pain, with memory, with species, with place. The knot becomes the figure through which the human and the nonhuman, the remembered and the unspoken, the living and the dead, are held in shared suspension.

These texts reorient us from liberal sovereignty toward ecological personhood—through the vivid lives of demi-human communities who survive not because they are strong, but because they are porous. If Haraway teaches us to "stay with the trouble," Solomon and Le Guin show us what trouble is made of: water, leafmold, breath, silence. If Latour unravels the fiction of sovereign agency in planetary timescales, these novels retie the threads through shared dreaming and tactile immersion. If Yaeger asks whether the ocean should have standing, these texts answer by staging standing as an ecological formation.

In the Anthropocene, where catastrophe is ongoing and resolution deferred, the knots are the only form survival can take. It makes space for multiplicity, for mutual bearing, for deferred justice. But it also demands something more difficult than endurance: it demands we stay. That we remain knotted as a political and ethical position. This demand is not a call for closure or mastery, but for dwelling—in uncertainty, in vulnerability, in shared tension. To remain knotted is to inhabit the unfinished, to recognize that survival in planetary times is neither linear nor redemptive. It is recursive, entangled, and incomplete.

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