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## Imagined Oceans

### *Drexciya's Bubble Metropolis and Blue Cultural Studies*

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**ABSTRACT** Over the past twenty years, Black Atlantic Afrofuturism has been the dominant theoretical frame for thinking about the significance of Drexciya's aquatically themed techno music and mythology. Yet there have been few analyses of Drexciya from the perspective of ecology, of the ocean as a marine environment. Through a semiotic analysis of Drexciya's 1993 EP *Bubble Metropolis*, this paper moves the discussion of Drexciya in the direction of ecocriticism and blue cultural studies, or more broadly, the blue humanities, in order to interpret the stories it tells about an imagined ocean. What do these stories mean? Why are these stories important now? Through the production and circulation of oceanic narratives that encourage listeners to imagine, wonder about, and groove to the ocean, Drexciya's music and mythology can be understood as a form of "pre-emptive activism," which designates indirect activist modes that inspire people to care about places, such as an ocean, that they take for granted or ignore. By imagining oceans full of sound, Drexciya fostered a tacit form of marine environmentalism in the 1990s. With oceanic ecosystems on the edge of collapse as a result of the climate emergency, all forms of marine activism, from the direct to the indirect, have gained a new sense of urgency. We need to listen to Drexciya now more than ever.

**KEYWORDS** Afrofuturism, Black Atlantic, cultural studies, Detroit techno, ecocriticism, environmental humanities, race and ethnic studies

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I wanted to do something that involved a total concept and take people somewhere else instead of giving them the same thing they see every single day when they step outside their door.

James Stinson

For all at last return to the sea-to Oceanus, the ocean river, like the ever-flowing stream of time, the beginning and the end.

Rachel Carson

If one of the key obstacles for ocean conservation movements is that terrestrial humans are disconnected from the vast liquid habitats that cover much of the planet, then narratives, theories, paradigms, and practices that reveal interconnections between these spheres may encourage marine environmentalism.

Stacy Alaimo

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*The Ocean After Nature*, a traveling art exhibition organized by the Independent Curators International (ICI) in 2016, brought together twenty artists and collectives whose work represents and critiques the impact of globalization on the Earth's oceanic waters. Summarizing the goal of the exhibition, curator Alaina Claire Feldman writes:

As we consider the future of our planet, today's oceans reveal more about the consequences of human actions than ever before. The ocean and human culture, no longer thought of as separate, exist in a relationship of mutual and potentially destructive influence. Featuring work in a wide variety of media—including photography, video, sculpture, music, and design—the exhibition proposes that seascapes do not only reflect power but can be instruments of power themselves.<sup>1</sup>

*The Ocean After Nature* includes four albums and a playlist of songs by Drexciya, whose aquatically themed techno music helped synthesize the exhibition as a whole. Like the ocean, Drexciya's music is fluid and shifting, incorporating a wide variety of styles within the broader genre of Detroit techno, from ambient to hard techno to noise.

But Drexciya are most often identified with, and considered influential for, their unique blend of electro and techno and strange sea sounds. According to Mike Rubin, "To the standard electro palette of analog synths and 808s, Drexciya added a bubbly variety of wet-sounding keyboard lines, plus echoey sonar pings, depth charges and diving sounds."<sup>2</sup> Or as Marcus Barnes describes it, "This preoccupation with water underpins everything Drexciya did. The music itself often sounds saturated, it percolates with energy, pads wash over you, synth lines squelch and appear soggy in places, there's ambience and serenity, violent stabs, crashing percussion."<sup>3</sup> Drexciya imagined oceans full of sound which were accompanied by alien oceanic narratives that at first had to be pieced together by listeners from song titles and label art but grew into an increasingly complex transatlantic mythology which imagined Drexciyans to be the mutant, water-breathing offspring of enslaved African women who were thrown overboard during the Middle Passage. These seaborne mutants migrated up the waterways that connect the Gulf of Mexico, the Mississippi River, and the Great Lakes of Michigan, finally reaching Detroit, where they produced techno music that spread around the world and eventually back home to Africa.<sup>4</sup> Interconnected waterways—oceans, rivers, lakes, swamps—are, as Anissa Janine Wardi argues, "central tropes in the African American literary and historical tradition."<sup>5</sup> Drexciya took that tradition into the abyss and made it groove.

The artists behind Drexciya, James Stinson and Gerald Donald, were mysterious as they mostly stayed out of the public eye, preferring to let the music, along with the verbal

1. Alaina Claire Feldman, "The Ocean After Nature," *Independent Curators International Exhibitions*, [curatorsintl.org/exhibitions/the-ocean-after-nature](http://curatorsintl.org/exhibitions/the-ocean-after-nature).

2. Mike Rubin, "Infinite Journey to Inner Space: The Legacy of Drexciya," *Red Bull Music Academy*, June 29, 2017, <https://daily.redbullmusicacademy.com/2017/06/drexciya-infinite-journey-to-inner-space>.

3. Marcus Barnes, "Mysteries of the Deep: How Drexciya Reimagined Slavery to Create an Afrofuturist Utopia," *Mixmag*, October 19, 2020, <https://mixmag.net/feature/drexciya-history-interview-feature>.

4. Drexciya, liner notes to *The Quest*, Submerge, 1997.

5. Anissa Janine Wardi, *Water and African American Memory: An Ecocritical Perspective* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011), 3.

and visual textual elements that accompanied their music, speak for itself. Drexciya stopped making music in 2002 when Stinson passed away, and yet the production and circulation of Drexciya's alien oceanic narratives continue to expand in the form of new compilations, reissues, previously unreleased tracks, artwork, videos, animation, documentaries, fan blogs, and most recently, a new graphic novel featuring artwork by longtime collaborator Abu Qadim Haqq, *The Book of Drexciya, Volume One*.<sup>6</sup> While Drexciya's music remained underground for most of the 1990s, circulating primarily amongst DJs, producers, and hardcore fans of Detroit techno, both in the U.S. and in techno-cities such as Berlin, a 1998 essay by Kodwo Eshun published in *The Wire*, "Fear of a Wet Planet," introduced Stinson and Donald to an international audience of musicians, critics, and academics. In the essay, Eshun situated Drexciya in the context of Black Atlantic Afrofuturism, which became the dominant theoretical frame for thinking about and listening to Drexciya. Although scholars paid considerable attention to Drexciya's transatlantic Afrofuturist mythology, very little critical discussion emerged from the perspective of ecology, of the ocean as a marine environment. How did Drexciya feel about and represent the ocean as a material, ecological space? Given the multiple threats to marine ecosystems in our present moment—warming temperatures, overfishing, species extinction, coral bleaching, nuclear contamination, deepwater drilling, plastic pollution, dead zones—*The Ocean After Nature* highlights the urgency of this question. This exhibition, along with recent Drexciya-inspired cultural productions, such as the hip-hop song "The Deep" by Clipping, and a novella of the same title by Rivers Solomon, foregrounds the significance of the ocean as a material, ecological space, and is thus a timely intervention into Drexciya studies.<sup>7</sup> I hope to contribute to these interventions by moving the discussion of Drexciya's imagined oceans toward ecocriticism and the growing field of blue cultural studies.

Ecocriticism emerged in the 1990s amongst literature scholars, which is my academic discipline, and grew out of the histories of nineteenth-century Anglo-American romantic poetry and nature writing and the environmental movements of the 1960s and 70s.<sup>8</sup>

6. The best resource for information about Drexciya is the *Drexciya Research Lab* (DRL), a blog run from the Irish countryside by Stephen Rennicks, which provides an exhaustive catalogue and review of all cultural production related to Drexciya, past, present, and future. [drexciyaresearchlab.blogspot.com](http://drexciyaresearchlab.blogspot.com).

7. Clipping's "The Deep" was commissioned for a special episode of *This American Life* on Chicago Public Radio in 2017. The title of the episode, "We Are the Future," was on Afrofuturism. The Drexciya-inspired song then gave birth to a novella, also titled *The Deep* (Saga/Gallery Press, 2019), written by Rivers Solomon along with Clipping members Daveed Diggs, William Hutson, and Jonathan Snipes. Both the song and novella confront the ecological devastation caused by deep-sea oil drilling.

8. Ecological literary criticism, or ecocriticism, began to circulate as a literary and cultural theory after the founding of the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE) at the Western Literary Association in 1992, which was followed a year later by the launch of the journal *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment*. See Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, eds., *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996); Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996); Greg Garrard, *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Timothy Clark, *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). On the redefinition of ecocriticism in relation to African American literary and cultural history, see Wardi, *Water and African American Memory*, 3–29.

Ecocriticism initially focused on the relationship between literature and natural or wilderness environments but now engages wide variety of texts, including music, and spatial and temporal contexts, including the hyper-mediated, imaginary worlds of science fiction and fantasy. Lawrence Buell, one of the founders of the field, provides a flexible rubric for thinking about what ecocriticism can mean. For Buell, ecocriticism works to understand and theorize “acts of the environmental imagination” that entangle us with the world; these acts can be broken down into four kinds of ethical environmental engagement:

They may connect readers vicariously with others’ experience, suffering, pain; that of nonhumans as well as humans. They may reconnect readers with places they have been and send them where they would otherwise never physically go. They may direct thought toward alternative futures. And they may affect ones’ caring for the physical world; make it feel more or less precious or endangered or disposable.<sup>9</sup>

The environmental imagination expressed through the liner notes to *The Quest*, for example, inspires travel to an alien ocean where listeners are encouraged to identify with and care about a mutant, water-breathing human species that was conceived amidst the horrors of the Middle Passage. The means of transportation to this imagined ocean are the stories that emerge from the combination of music, cover art, song titles, and liner notes. This may be the most popular Drexciyan mythology, but it is not the only one. Over the course of their career, Drexciya arranged a thrilling package of offshore adventures through speculative pasts and futures which fostered a sense of connection to, and wonder about, the ocean.<sup>10</sup>

Unlike Drexciya, ecocriticism has not cared too much about oceans, as the field has been overwhelmingly green and not blue, dry and not wet, that is, centered on the land and not the water. Considering that a global ocean covers seventy percent of the planet and that maritime trade was the foundation of western colonial modernity, the absence of oceans in ecocriticism is both surprising and symptomatic. As an extension and critique of ecocriticism, blue cultural studies, also known more broadly as the blue or maritime humanities, confronts a situation in which, as Steven Mentz puts it:

Except as a space for recreation, the sea seems less present to early 21st-century English and American readers than it did to our ancestors. Airline travel, containerization, the automation of ports, and even the romance of outer space have all contributed to the decreasing centrality of the maritime world in the Western imagination.<sup>11</sup>

Blue cultural studies aligns with Buell’s rubric in working to interrogate the various ways in which human and non-human species relate to, and through, oceanic environments,

9. Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World*, 2.

10. On imagining and the imagined as a concrete social practice, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991); Arjun Appadurai, “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy,” in *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory*, eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 325–39; Subramani, “The Oceanic Imaginary,” *The Contemporary Pacific* 13, no. 1 (2001): 149–162.

11. Steven Mentz, “Toward a Blue Cultural Studies: The Sea, Maritime Culture, and Early Modern English Literature,” *Literature Compass* 6, no. 5 (2009): 998.

both real and imagined. Given my academic training as a literature scholar working at the intersection of ecocriticism and blue cultural studies, in this paper I offer a musical semiosis of Drexciya's 1993 EP *Bubble Metropolis* in order to interpret the stories it tells about an imagined ocean.<sup>12</sup> What do these stories mean? Why are these stories important now?

Stacy Alaimo proposes that as "terrestrial humans are disconnected from the vast liquid habitats that cover much of the planet, then narratives, theories, paradigms, and practices that reveal interconnections between these spheres may encourage marine environmentalism."<sup>13</sup> While mainstream marine environmentalism works to raise awareness about and organize resistance to specific threats to marine ecosystems, Drexciya created an alternative, non-didactic, non-pedagogical style of marine environmentalism through the production and circulation of oceanic narratives in which binary oppositions of culture and nature, mythology and ecology, familiar and strange, near and far were mixed up and filtered through Black Atlantic Afrofuturism. Drexciya encouraged listeners to imagine, wonder about, and groove to the ocean, an act of environmental imagination that is a form of "pre-emptive activism."<sup>14</sup> As anthropogenic climate change drives up ocean temperatures and acidification, while ecocidal flows of plastic and agricultural waste create garbage patches and dead zones, marine ecosystems are beginning to collapse. Given the multiple threats to the Earth's oceanic waters, all forms of marine activism, from the direct to the indirect, have gained a new sense of urgency. We need to listen to Drexciya now more than ever.

#### DREXCIYA IN THE BLACK ATLANTIC

Between 1992 and 2002, Drexciya released nine EPs, three studio albums, and three singles, taking listeners on a journey from past to future, and from the ocean to outer space. The label art on their first EP, *Deep Sea Dweller*, displays an indistinct, strangely elongated outline of a body, arms outstretched, which appears to be floating in water. It is unclear whether this is a human or some kind of alien, and the sea is generic; it could be any sea. The image resembles the film poster for James Cameron's 1989 underwater science fiction film *The Abyss*. The word "abyss" appears in two later song titles, "Beyond the Abyss" on *Bubble Metropolis* and "Sighting the Abyss" on the 1995 release *Aquatic Invasion*. Mike Banks, who released much of Drexciya's music through the Underground Resistance record label, believes *The Abyss* was a significant influence on Stinson and Donald's oceanic fantasies, which I discuss in the following section.<sup>15</sup> Song titles on *Deep*

12. On musical semiosis, see Philip Tagg, "Meaning and communication" in *Music's Meanings: a modern musicology for non-musos* (New York: The Mass Media Music Scholars' Press, 2015), 155–71.

13. Stacy Alaimo, "Oceanic Origins, Plastic Activism, and New Materialism at Sea," in *Material Ecocriticism*, eds. Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 188.

14. Saskia Beudel, "Science, Wonder, and New Nature Writing," in *Routledge Handbook of Ecocriticism and Environmental Communication*, eds. Scott Slovic, Swarnalatha Rangarajan, and Vidya Sarveswaran (New York: Routledge, 2019), 265.

15. *Red Bull Music Academy*, "Mike Banks, Carola Stoiber & Dimitri Hegemann on Detroit and Techno," Nov. 27, 2018, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=sNvjBP5KQuc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sNvjBP5KQuc).

*Sea Dweller*—“Sea Quake,” “Nautilus 12,” “Depressurization,” “Sea Snake”—further the aquatic theme but are suggestive rather than specific, and somewhat mundane compared to the marvelous titles, stories, and images that would come later, the most iconic being the ninja-esque Wavejumper commandos designed by Detroit artist Frankie Fultz on *Aquatic Invasion*, bootleg images of which now circulate on everything from coffee mugs to coronavirus face masks.

This alien oceanic world became significantly more complex, and more accessible to the non-vinyl buying public, with the 1997 release of *The Quest*, a two-CD set that includes a narrative in the liner notes attributed to “The Unknown Writer.” This narrative provides specific geographical and historical coordinates through which a community of Drexciyans could be imagined, while at the same time deepening the mystery and exoticism of this oceanic other:

Could it be possible for humans to breath[e] underwater? A foetus in its mother’s womb is certainly alive in an aquatic environment. During the greatest Holocaust the world has ever known, pregnant America-bound African slaves were thrown overboard by the thousands during labor for being sick and disruptive cargo. Is it possible that they could have given birth at sea to babies that never needed air? Are Drexciyans water-breathing, aquatically mutated descendents [sic] of those unfortunate victims of human greed? Have they been spared by God to teach us or terrorize us?<sup>16</sup>

“The Unknown Writer” uses an interrogative voice to create a speculative archival record of the slave trade. One feature of this record, “Pregnant America-bound African slaves were thrown overboard by the thousands during labor,” is a curious alteration of the historical record, considering the economic value of slaves doubled as they crossed the Atlantic. In order for a slave ship to be profitable, the number of slaves in the hold was maximized, and the captain and crew were responsible for making sure the human cargo arrived at their New World destination alive. Historian Stephanie E. Smallwood explains the hideous mathematical calculations that sustained the slave trade:

Maximizing the size of slave cargoes maintained the rate of return that investors demanded. Moreover, it answered the captain’s self-interest, as the greater share of his compensation depended on the number of persons delivered alive to the American market, not the price at which they sold on the market.<sup>17</sup>

Throwing slaves into the water to drown would be akin to throwing profits directly into the water. A pregnant slave would have been especially valuable, as the foetus represented future profits. Slave ships were constructed with special nets to prevent slaves from

16. Drexciya, liner notes to *The Quest*. Greg Tate argues that Drexciya’s mythology has roots in legends about the Igbo, “the Africans least preferred for the slave trade because they were known to jump off ships and drown themselves. There’s even myths about them not drowning but walking or flying back to Africa.” Tate quoted in Rubin, “Infinite Journey to Inner Space,” *Red Bull Music Academy*. According Ytasha L. Womack, Drexciya’s mythology was inspired by African mermaid myths, specifically the Mami Wata, who are half human and half sea creature, and “are closely associated with the Africans brought to the New World in the transatlantic slave trade.” *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2013), 86–87.

17. Stephanie E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2007): 70.

jumping overboard to drown, one of the many forms of resistance practiced by enslaved human beings as they moved through the Middle Passage.<sup>18</sup> “The Unknown Writer” highlights the violence and trauma of the transatlantic slave trade, and in the process actively rewrites this story to create an opening through which a new mutant species of human, the Drexciyan, can enter the world.<sup>19</sup> This revision may be historically anachronistic, but it is true to the extent that the slave trade was a brutal economic system in which human beings were tortured and terrorized as they were converted into objects of exchange, and true to the extent that the movement of slave ships across the ocean gave birth to new subjects of history.<sup>20</sup>

Around the same time that Drexciya began to imagine and tell stories about alien oceanic worlds, cultural studies, under the impact of postcolonial theory, was also undergoing an oceanic turn. Postcolonial theory critiqued the tendency in cultural studies, and the “terra-centric” humanities in general, to locate culture within the boundaries of the nation state. Attention to transnational flows of people, ideas, commodities, technologies, and capital directed cultural studies both above and below the nation state, toward processes of globalization and localization, toward discrepant forms of cosmopolitanism, and toward historically deep sites of cultural production: regions, archipelagos, islands, and oceans.<sup>21</sup> The trans-oceanic reorientation of humanities scholarship, now referred to as blue cultural studies or the blue humanities, has been long overdue.<sup>22</sup> One text that guided cultural studies toward the ocean was Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, which came out in 1993, a year after Drexciya’s first release. Building on the spatial turn in Marxist geography and history in the 1970s, *The Black*

18. According to Marcus Rediker, many slaves “chose drowning over starvation as a means to terminate the life of a body meant to slave away on New World plantations. This kind of resistance was widely practiced and just as widely feared by the organizers of the trade.” *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 288. At the same time, in 1781, the captain of the slave ship *Zong* murdered 132 sick slaves by throwing them overboard. See Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, 240.

19. On the reassembling and reinterpreting of the transatlantic slave trade by Afrofuturology, see Tobias C. van Veen, “The Armageddon Effect: Afrofuturism and the Chronopolitics of Alien Nation,” in *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astroblackness*, eds. Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones (New York: Lexington Books, 2015), 65.

20. It is estimated that up to 1.8 million African people died on slave ships during the Middle Passage and were thrown overboard. See Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, 5. On the importance of Drexciya to current efforts to memorialize those deaths, see Helen Scales, “Drexciya: How Afrofuturism is inspiring calls for an ocean memorial to slavery,” *The Guardian*, January 25, 2021, [www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/jan/25/drexciya-how-afrofuturism-inspired-calls-for-an-ocean-memorial-to-slavery](http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/jan/25/drexciya-how-afrofuturism-inspired-calls-for-an-ocean-memorial-to-slavery). On the importance of water in African American literary history to traumatic memory and rites of healing, see Wardi, *Water and African American Memory*.

21. Important work in postcolonial theory from the early 1990s that influenced the rise of transnational cultural studies includes: Arjun Appadurai, “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy,” in *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory*, eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 325–39; James Clifford, “Traveling Cultures,” in *Cultural Studies*, eds. L. Grossberg, C. Nelson, P. Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 96–107; Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1990); Masao Miyoshi, “A Borderless World?” *Critical Inquiry* 19, no. 4 (Summer 1993): 726–51; Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 2012).

22. On the oceanic turn in the humanities, see Mentz, “Toward a Blue Cultural Studies.” On the oceanic turn in postcolonial American Studies, see John R. Eperjesi, *The Imperialist Imaginary: Visions of Asia and the Pacific in American Culture* (Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 2005).

*Atlantic* “inaugurated a new generation of thinking about race in trans-oceanic ways.”<sup>23</sup> Gilroy assembled a diasporic mode of cultural analysis in which Black Britain was recentered on the Black Atlantic, “one single, complex unit of analysis,” which traces those “fractal patterns of cultural and political exchange and transformation . . . that are significant not simply for the peoples of Caribbean but for Europe, for Africa, especially Liberia and Sierra Leone, and of course, for black America.”<sup>24</sup> For Gilroy, the movement of bodies, ideas, cultural practices, and artifacts across the Atlantic over the past three hundred years has distilled a distinct transnational and intercultural racial formation where in-between-ness inspires cultural production, and where trans-oceanic routes support new modes of becoming and constellations of identity and community.

Kodwo Eshun was the first critic to situate Drexciya’s alien oceanic worlds in the context of Gilroy’s Black Atlantic while expanding this spatial-analytic frame to include the rapidly evolving temporal discourse of Afrofuturism. In his 1998 piece for *The Wire*, “Fear of a Wet Planet,” Eshun enthuses:

Taken together, the EPs and the CD form a Black Atlantic cycle which is electronic music’s most ambitious sonic fiction since Parliament’s 1975-79 Mothership Connection cycle. The Drexciyan cycle plumbs the remotest depths of the Black Atlantic, pursuing its “processes of cultural mutation and restless discontinuity” to extreme ends. As theorised by British cultural critic Paul Gilroy, the Black Atlantic is the “webbed network” between the US and Africa, Latin America and Europe, the UK and the Caribbean along which information, people, records, and enforced dematerialisation systems have been routing, rerouting and criss-crossing since slavery.<sup>25</sup>

Eshun helped spread the sights and sounds of Drexciya to artists across the world ocean who have localized and added to the mythology, thus ensuring that it continues to evolve along multiple aesthetic and cultural trajectories. In both this essay and the 1999 monograph *More Brilliant Than The Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*, Eshun brought together two discourses, the Black Atlantic and Afrofuturism, which emerged around the same time in the early 1990s,<sup>26</sup> the moment when Drexciya’s mythological universe was being formed.

The importance of a diasporic, trans-oceanic perspective on Black cultural production as expressed through artists such as Drexciya cannot be overstated. At the same time, this geopolitical framing of Drexciya reproduces a potentially problematic dimension of Black Atlantic criticism in which the ocean appears meaningful only in relation to human activities. For Gilroy, “the image of ships in motion . . . focus[es] attention on the [M]iddle [P]assage.”<sup>27</sup> While the diasporic perspective afforded by ships in motion brings cultural

23. Elizabeth DeLoughrey, “Submarine Futures of the Anthropocene,” *Comparative Literature* 69, no. 1 (March 2017): 32.

24. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 15.

25. Kodwo Eshun, “Fear of a Wet Planet,” *The Wire* 167 (January 1998): 20.

26. See Mark Dery, “Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose,” in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture* (Durham: Duke UP, 1994), 122-179.

27. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 4.

histories occluded by the terra-centric humanities into focus, this point of view makes it hard to see, imagine, think about, or act on the ocean as an ecological system, as a space of multispecies entanglements and deep, more-than-human temporalities. Critiquing anthropocentric oceanic narratives, Elizabeth DeLoughrey writes:

With some exceptions, these narratives largely represent a transoceanic imaginary, positioning the sea as a stage for human history; a narrative of flat surfaces rather than immersions. Until recently, the oceanic has not been truly fathomed as a cultural or multispecies ecology.<sup>28</sup>

Ecocritically informed blue cultural studies foregrounds the vast, interconnected networks of marine ecosystems, hydrological processes, geological formations, and climate patterns, which have been evolving for billions of years and which are being catastrophically affected by the agents of capitalist modernity: fossil fuels, overconsumption, pollution, militarization. While scholars and critics have paid considerable attention to Drexciya's trans-oceanic mythology,<sup>29</sup> there has been very little critical discussion from the perspective of the ocean as a material, ecological space.

James Stinson and Gerald Donald did not give many interviews during the 1990s; in *The Wire*, Eshun describes rare interviews as “briefings from an unannounced war.”<sup>30</sup> But in the two years before he passed away, James Stinson spent some time talking with interviewers about the ocean and the importance of water, both as a symbol and as the most important material resource on the planet, and his words were far from warlike.<sup>31</sup> Stinson's comments about water and the ocean are wide-ranging and touch on everything from melting polar icecaps to contaminated drinking water. In contrast to the speculative, alternate historical specificity of *The Quest's* myth of origins and other visual and verbal depictions of Drexciyans from the mid-1990s, which provide detailed visions of aquatic combat, assault, and invasion, the inspiration Stinson drew from the ocean was at times more aligned with romantic conceptions of nature as timeless and beautiful and separate from humanity. For Stinson, the ocean symbolized a deep, more-than-human temporality: “The reason I adopted the whole background and whole theme of water was for its longevity. Water was here at the beginning before we existed and water will be here when we go away. It's beautiful.”<sup>32</sup> In a 2002 interview with John Osselaer for *Techno Tourist* magazine, Stinson offered:

Water is life. Life started on this planet and other planets due to water. It is the cutting edge of creativity and innovation. You have billions of different species in the seas, oceans, lakes, ponds and streams across the world. Millions of species still have not

28. DeLoughrey, “Submarine Futures of the Anthropocene,” 33.

29. For a close analysis of Drexciya's oceanic mythology, see Nettrice R. Gaskins, “Deep Sea Dwellers: Drexciya and Sonic Third Space,” *Shima* 10, no. 2 (2016): 68–80.

30. Eshun, “Fear of a Wet Planet,” 19.

31. See Drexciya Research Lab, “Drexciya Speaks,” which includes links to and highlights from ten interviews with James Stinson, May 16, 2005, <http://drexciyaresearchlab.blogspot.com/2005/05/drexciya-speaks.html>.

32. In 2002, Derek Beere conducted a phone interview with James Stinson for *Future BPM* magazine. The interview was never published. In 2018, Beere and Stephen Rennicks of DRL decided fans should hear it. See Beere, “Drexciya,” [web.archive.org/web/20020609044525/http://www.futurebpm.com/drexciya.htm](http://web.archive.org/web/20020609044525/http://www.futurebpm.com/drexciya.htm).

been discovered by man so is that the cutting edge of creativity or what? We approach our music the same way.<sup>33</sup>

Stinson's meditations on the ocean, which exhibit reverence, humility, and a passionate sense of wonder, resonate with those of Rachel Carson, the marine biologist and conservationist whose 1962 book *Silent Spring* about the deadly effects of the pesticide DDT inspired the environmental movements of the 1960s and 70s. Before *Silent Spring* Carson wrote *The Sea Around Us*, which won the National Book Award for Nonfiction and remained on the *New York Times* Bestseller list for eighty-six weeks.

*The Sea Around Us* combines rigorous science writing with a pervasive and passionate sense of wonder, and according to Carson's biographer, "wonder and awe were, for her, the highest emotions."<sup>34</sup> For Carson, as for Stinson, the sea is a poetic place composed of both repetition and difference, deep time and surface shimmer:

For the sea as a whole, the alternation of day and night, the passage of the seasons, the procession of the years, are lost in its vastness, obliterated in its own changeless eternity. But the surface waters are different. The face of the sea is always changing. Crossed by colors, lights, and moving shadows, sparkling in the sun, mysterious in the twilight, its aspects and its moods vary hour by hour. The surface waters move with the tides, stir to the breath of the winds, and rise and fall to the endless, hurrying forms of the waves.<sup>35</sup>

*The Sea Around Us* is much less conspicuously activist than *Silent Spring*, yet Saskia Beudel argues that the circulation of wonder in Carson's descriptions of the sea can be read as a form of "pre-emptive activism:"

If an object or "thing" of the world about us has the power to arouse passionate curiosity, sustained attention and attainment of not just facts (data) but knowledge and wisdom surrounding that object, by default, Carson implies, one is unlikely to want to destroy that same object.<sup>36</sup>

There are many points of contact between Carson and Stinson, as both expressed passionate curiosity, awe, and respect for the ocean, and were attuned to the fluctuating, disparate moods elicited by the water. Carson and Stinson were each powerfully affected by the ocean, which they worked to convey to their respective readers and listeners, the former through a densely textured blend of scientific and poetic discourse, the latter through a densely textured blend of electro- and techno-music. The oceanic moods or affects tracked by Carson and Stinson encompass a wide spectrum, from the dreamy and sedative to the stormy and terrifying. The production of these affects was the locus of Drexciya's pre-emptive activism, of the sustained auditory attention through which they

33. John Osselaer, "Drexciya: twenty thousand leagues under the sea," *Techno Tourist*, February 2002, web.archive.org/web/20020510020232/http://techtourist.org/modules.php?op=modload&name=Sections&file=index&req=viewarticle&artid=15.

34. Linda Lear, *Rachel Carson: Witness for Nature* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009), 284.

35. Rachel Carson, *The Sea Around Us* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), 29.

36. Beudel, "Science, Wonder, and New Nature Writing," 271.

encouraged listeners to imagine and connect to the ocean as a space full of sound.<sup>37</sup> The following section provides a semiotic framework for thinking about the production of oceanic affects by Drexciya in relation to one of their early EPs, *Bubble Metropolis*. Unlike most scholarly work on Drexciya, which is fixated on the embodied, militaristic oceanic imaginary that began to appear in the mid 1990s and was canonized by Eshun in 1998, my analysis of *Bubble Metropolis* is guided and inspired by Stinson's wonder-filled oceanic meditations, which have not received the attention and respect from critics or academics that they deserve.

### THE IMAGINED OCEAN OF BUBBLE METROPOLIS

Listeners first enter the alien oceanic environment of *Bubble Metropolis* through the artwork and written text on the label at the center of the record. The iconic symbol of the Underground Resistance collective and record label, a bold "UR" in white lettering against a black background, immediately grabs the eye. The label announces that, "UR Presents Drexciya: Bubble Metropolis." At the bottom of the label we learn that the tracks were "Made in Drexciya for UR in Detroit." Underground Resistance (UR) was formed when Jeff Mills and Mike Banks met at Detroit's United Sound recording studio in 1989 and, along with Robert Hood, began collaborating on music that led to the formation of UR as the Public Enemy of techno, a "kind of covert musical operation set on toppling the industry establishment," as Dan Sisko puts it.<sup>38</sup> UR, along with the distribution company started by Banks, Submerge, wanted artists to have complete artistic independence and to be protected from exploitation by record companies.<sup>39</sup> The militant style of Underground Resistance has been linked to the Black Panthers, a link confirmed by Jeff Mills in a 2006 interview published in the Japanese newspaper *Yomiuri Daily*, "All the black men you see in America today are the direct result of those actions: all the freedoms we have, as well as the restrictions, refer back to the government and the Black Panthers in the '70s . . . So we make music. We make music about who we are and where we're from."<sup>40</sup>

The influence of the Underground Resistance collective over the visual and verbal promotion of Drexciya might partially explain why their oceanic narratives became increasingly paramilitaristic after the 1994 release of *Aquatic Invasion*, but which is absent on *Bubble Metropolis*. The label art on the A-side, subtitled "Fresh Water," displays

37. The expression "ocean full of sound" is an extension of, and tribute to, David Toop's *Ocean of Sound: Ambient sound and radical listening in the age of communication* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1995). If Rachel Carson and James Stinson were stuck in an elevator with Sigmund Freud, they might sound like Toop, "On our watery planet, we return to the sea for a diagnosis of our current condition. Submersion into deep and mysterious pools represents an intensely romantic desire for the dispersion into nature, the unconscious, the womb, the chaotic stuff of which life is made." *Ocean of Sound*, 268.

38. Dan Sisko, *Techno Rebels: the renegades of electronic funk* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010), 99.

39. On the history and cultural importance of Submerge, see C. Vecchiola, "Submerge in Detroit: Techno's Creative Response to Urban Crisis," *Journal of American Studies* 45, no. 1 (February 2011): 95-101.

40. This quote is from an interview with Japanese newspaper *Daily Yomiuri*. See "Underground Resistance," *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Underground\\_Resistance](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Underground_Resistance).

a picturesque drawing of a healthy coral reef, an abundance of sea life, and a pair of dolphins floating playfully in the water. Sunlight is shimmering through the water and illuminating the sea life, creating a sacred glow reminiscent of romantic representations of natural wildness, such as those by Hudson River School painters Thomas Cole and Albert Beirstadt. The visual representation of the sea on the labels is one of harmony and order and natural abundance. The shades of bluish-grey monotone convey a soft, calm, dreamy tone.

The title of the EP, *Bubble Metropolis*, alludes to Fritz Lang's dystopian science fiction film *Metropolis*, which is set in the year 2030 and depicts a world of extreme economic disparity, as the wealthy are vertically segregated and insulated in massive skyscrapers, while the working masses live underground, performing the dirty and dangerous labor that keeps things running. Lang's film also inspired Cybotron's "Techno City." According to Richard "Rik" Davis, who, along with Juan Atkins, founded Cybotron, "Techno City" refers to Detroit's Woodward Avenue ghetto, home to oppressed people who dream of working their way up to the cybodrome, where the artists and intellectuals live. Simon Reynolds interprets this perspective as an "allegory of the unofficial apartheid taking shape in urban America, with the emergence of privately policed fortress communities and township-like ethnic ghettos."<sup>41</sup> Drexciya's metropolis can be read as a futuristic, aquatopian fantasy of escape—keeping in mind the dual meanings of utopia as both "better place" and "no place"—the result of listening to Jimi Hendrix's "1983 . . . (A Merman I Should Turn to Be)," while watching Lang's film. Just as the speaker of Hendrix's song builds a machine to escape to the sea and leave the violence of war and patriotism ravaging the land behind, *Bubble Metropolis* opens with the means of escape, an "Aqua Worm Hole," to leave the post-industrial city behind. A common trope in science fiction, a wormhole, also known as an Einstein-Rosen bridge, forms part of the general theory of relativity, which postulates the ability to move from one place to another without crossing the space in between. The sequence of song titles on the A-side—"Aqua Worm Hole," "Positron Island," and "Beyond the Abyss"—are episodes in an adventurous narrative of time and space travel through the ocean. In the following, I offer an analysis of the "Fresh Water" side of the EP in which I make connections among form, affect, and indexicality, that is, the way in which the latter two songs point to some specific feature or dimension of a material ocean.<sup>42</sup> My comments on the "Salt Water" side are more general and focus on the vocal persona that appears on the track "Bubble Metropolis."

"Aqua Worm Hole," the point of departure, is a lyrical techno-track. It opens with swirling, arpeggiated chords, over which appears a high-pitched melody played on what almost sounds like a toy xylophone. The melody is magical and dreamy, like the pacific marine setting on the label, and opens listeners to the wonder of the ocean. The wistful

41. Simon Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy: into the world of techno and rave culture* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1998), 19.

42. Email exchanges with musician friends helped me fine-tune my understanding of the "Fresh Water" side. I would like to thank David Choi, KyuCheol Choi, Robin Lee, Udo Lee, and Adam Ratana.

motif alludes to childhood, which has been idealized by romantic artists as a time when our sense of awe is most pure, our sense of curiosity is most active, and when our imaginations are most flexible. The song begins to groove with the introduction of a funky, sensuous, analog bass riff. Another synth line is introduced, which adds a mildly frenetic and disorienting rhythm to the composition. Like Alice going down the rabbit hole, the listener is gently grooving through a wormhole. The fast breaks of the analog drum pattern, an allusion to bebop jazz of the 1950s and soul music of the 1960s, create a sense of forward momentum.

As the track progresses at a tempo of around 140 beats per minute, tension between the otherworldly synth lines, earthy snare and bass patterns, and sedative melody is uncanny, both strangely familiar and comfortingly unfamiliar. “Aqua Worm Hole” is an emotional track, and like many classic Detroit techno-tracks, it does not elicit emotions that are easy to describe.<sup>43</sup> Relevant here is Simon Reynolds’s comment that tracks such as Rhythm Is Rhythm’s “Nude Photo” and “Beyond the Dance” express a “weird mix of euphoria and anxiety,” emotions that are “oddly indefinable.”<sup>44</sup> “Aqua Worm Hole” produces a sense of what Sianne Ngai refers to as “affective indeterminacy” or “affective disorientation,”<sup>45</sup> but unlike the ugly feelings described by Ngai, here indeterminacy or disorientation is experienced as pleasurable, as joyful. This affective indeterminacy was produced with sound technologies such as the Roland TR 808 drum machine and Korg Mono/Poly analog synthesizer,<sup>46</sup> and as Kodwo Eshun emphasizes, “machines don’t distance you from your emotions, in fact quite the opposite. Sound machines make you feel more intensely, along a broader band of emotional spectra than ever before in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>47</sup>

The experience of progressive movement in the opening track is pleurably, lyrically disorienting. In contrast to the sparse phrasing and dreamy melodic lines of “Aqua Worm Hole,” “Positron Island” is loud and dense, a pounding, aggressive, hard techno-track that feels claustrophobic and tense. The track opens with the kind of bubbly or percolating synth lines that fascinate critics such as Rubin and Barnes, not to mention scores of Drexciya fans. The locked-in drum loops are starkly, abrasively repetitive, offering no sense of relief or catharsis. Here, the wide pitch contour between the metallic percussion and the agitated, stabbing synthesizer is haunting and nightmarish. In the transition to “Positron Island,” which moves at roughly the same tempo as “Aqua Worm Hole,” the oceanic journey has gone from light to dark, from soft to hard, from cerebral to corporeal, and from fluid to fixed.

43. In a private email exchange, Udo Lee commented that, ““Aqua Worm Hole” is based on a Db minor 13 chord, which I think is also the cause of the emotional ambiguity, since these extended chords carry a lot of unresolved tension. Very jazz.”

44. Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*, 21. On affect in Detroit techno, see Richard Pope, “Hooked on Affect: Detroit Techno and Dystopian Digital Culture,” *Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture* 2, no. 1 (2011): 24-44.

45. Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 14.

46. Mike Banks mentions the Korg Mono/Poly and 808 in Rubin, “Infinite Journey to Inner Space.”

47. Eshun, *More Brilliant than the Sun*, -002.

The word “positron” in the title can be read synecdochally as a reference to antimatter. In 1929, physicist Paul Dirac argued that the components of atoms, electrons and protons, have antimatter counterparts.<sup>48</sup> An electron is negatively charged, thus its antimatter counterpart is a positive electron or positron. Antimatter is a common science fiction trope that could take the form of antimatter-powered spaceships, such as the warp drives on the television series *Star Trek*, or antimatter weapons, as when Megatron from *The Transformers* steals an “antimatter formula” to turn himself into “the most powerful weapon in the universe.”<sup>49</sup> Antimatter is not a fantasy. As science writer Keay Davidson points out:

But antimatter itself isn’t fiction; it actually exists and has been intensively studied by physicists since the 1930s. In a sense, matter and antimatter are the yin and yang of reality: Every type of subatomic particle has its antimatter counterpart. But when matter and antimatter collide, they annihilate each other in an immense burst of energy.<sup>50</sup>

That immense burst of energy is of great interest to the US military, which hopes to weaponize it in the form of antimatter bombs or antimatter-triggered nuclear weapons. By attaching “positron” to “island,” the title can be related to the unending ecological and humanitarian crisis of nuclear testing on the islands, waters, and peoples of the Pacific Ocean. Between 1946 and 1958, at the dawn of the Cold War, sixty-seven nuclear tests were conducted in the Republic of the Marshall Islands, which is part of the larger island group of Micronesia. Radioactive contamination continues to haunt these waters, while Marshall Islanders, who have been displaced from their homelands, continue to suffer from radioactivity-related cancers and birth defects.<sup>51</sup> Today, these islands and atolls are more radioactive than Chernobyl and Fukushima.<sup>52</sup> The angry, dystopic, nightmarishly repetitive mood of “Positron Island” becomes meaningful when heard in the context of a militarized nuclear Pacific.

The collision of the lyrical “Aqua Worm Hole” (matter) and the nightmarish “Positron Island” (antimatter) produces a short burst of energy that concludes the *Aside*, “Beyond the Abyss.” This is deep-sea techno, a style of music that is Drexciya’s sound signature. The track opens with several seconds of what sounds like the drone of an engine and is followed by the gradual introduction of a tambourine roll, drumbeats, and strange sound effects. Despite its weirdness, the track still possesses a groovy, linear dance music structure in which sections of sound are repeated at a tempo of 144 beats per

48. Keay Davidson, “Air Force pursuing antimatter weapons,” October 2004, [sfgate.com/science/article/Air-Force-pursuing-antimatter-weapons-Program-2689674.php](http://sfgate.com/science/article/Air-Force-pursuing-antimatter-weapons-Program-2689674.php).

49. On antimatter in science fiction, see *TV Tropes*, “Antimatter,” [tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/Antimatter#:~:text=A%20classic%20staple%20of%20science,have%20a%20negative%20electric%20charge%2C](http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/Antimatter#:~:text=A%20classic%20staple%20of%20science,have%20a%20negative%20electric%20charge%2C).

50. Davidson, “Air Force pursuing antimatter.”

51. Teresia Teaiwa, “Bikinis and Other S/pacific N/oceans,” in *Militarized Currents: Toward a Decolonized Future in Asia and the Pacific*, eds. Setsu Shigematsu and Keith L. Camacho (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 18.

52. See Laura Geggel, “The Marshall Islands Are 10 Times More Radioactive than Chernobyl,” *Live Science*, July 2019, <https://www.livescience.com/65949-marshall-islands-more-radioactivity-chernobyl.html>.

minute. The repetition of the drone effect provides a motif for the muffled, underwater groove, while the absence of harmony contributes to a feeling of disembodiment, of floating in a submersible while peculiar sea creatures pass by. The title, as noted earlier, alludes to James Cameron's science fiction film *The Abyss*, in which the crew of an underwater drilling platform encounters an alien civilization and peculiar sea creatures deep in the Cayman Trough in the Caribbean.

Drexciya imagined a deep sea that is full of sound, a noisy underwater acoustic environment that was not confirmed scientifically until 2015, when the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) deployed a hydrophone to the deepest part of the global ocean, the Challenger Deep trough of the Mariana Trench near Micronesia. The hydrophone reached a depth of more than 10,971 meters (6.71 miles), where it recorded ambient sound levels for more than twenty-three days. In a summary of the NOAA's findings:

Instead of being one of the quietest places on Earth, scientists found that at the deepest part of the ocean, there is almost constant noise. The ambient sound field is dominated by the sound of earthquakes, both near and far, as well as distinct moans of baleen whales and the clamor of a category 4 typhoon passing overhead. The hydrophone also picked up sound from ship propellers, as Challenger Deep is close to Guam, a regional hub for container shipping with China and the Philippines.<sup>53</sup>

Drexciya's hydro-acoustic oceanic imaginary opened listeners to a subjective interpretation or appropriation of the sounds of the deep. On a track like "Beyond the Abyss," with the exception of the engine drone, these sounds are unfamiliar, unrecognizable, and of indeterminate origin. By imagining the ocean as an "ambient sound field" that is full of strange noises, Stinson and Donald worked to create a sense of wonder and curiosity in listeners. For Rachel Carson, wonder was defined by open-ended questioning, mystery, and intrigue.<sup>54</sup> For Drexciya, wonder was defined by open-ended listening: Where are we? What are we hearing? Where are these sounds coming from? Are these sounds the product of nature or technology? As listeners are immersed in an ocean full of sound, boundaries between subject and object, nature and culture, near and far become blurred. "Beyond the Abyss" facilitates an encounter with the mystery, intrigue, and sensuous enchantment of a deep-sea acoustic environment, an environment that instills reverence and humility in the listener.

Jimi Hendrix's "1983 . . . (A Merman I Should Turn to Be)" also radiates a sense of wonder as the lyrics travel from land to sea and from human to merman. The speaker and his lover must move, "Through the noise to the sea / Not to die, but to be re-born / Away from a life so battered and torn." Hendrix's anti-war convictions move the speaker toward an oceanic realm where, "Starfish and giant foams / Greet us with a smile," and ultimately to a place, "To live and breathe underwater / Forever." *Bubble Metropolis* tracks a similar line of flight through an "Aqua Worm Hole," past the noise of "Positron Island," and

53. Robert Dziak, "Ambient Sound at Full Ocean Depth: Eavesdropping on the Challenger Deep," [oceanexplorer.noaa.gov/explorations/16challenger/welcome.html](http://oceanexplorer.noaa.gov/explorations/16challenger/welcome.html).

54. Beudel, "Science, Wonder, and New Nature Writing."

toward the strange sonic sea creatures that float “Beyond the Abyss,” a sonic journey that involves progressively less and less harmonic content.<sup>55</sup> This journey from the human and earthy to the alien and extraterrestrial finally reaches “Bubble Metropolis,” the first track on the B-side, where a voice calmly guides listeners into Drexciya:

This is Drexciyan Cruiser Control, Bubble 1, to Lardossan cruiser 8-203X. Please decrease your speed to 1.788.4 kilobahns. Thank you. Lardossan cruiser 8-203X, please use extra caution as you pass the aqua construction site on the side of the aquabahn. I repeat, proceed, with caution.

Through this spoken announcement, listeners get the sense that Drexciya is an alien oceanic civilization, one that possesses unfamiliar units of measurement and forms of transportation, yet is also very familiar, as the traffic controller urges caution while offering directions past a construction site. The outro to “Bubble Metropolis” includes parting words from the friendly Drexciyan traffic controller: “Lardossan cruiser 8-203X, you are now clear for docking. Have a nice day here in Drexciya. I’m Drexciyan cruise controller X205. If you have any problems, let me know. Bubble Control 1, out.” The vocal persona that appears in “Bubble Metropolis” sounds like an adult woman who is friendly, professional, and speaks North American English.<sup>56</sup> Drexciyans might have some connection to, or affiliation with, Black Americans, but this voice is disembodied, so we can only speculate about the phenotype, not to mention the species or gender, of the entity speaking these words. This North American, human-sounding public announcement could simply be the product of some kind of aquatic artificial intelligence. Again, listeners are confronted with more open-ended questioning, mystery, and intrigue. Having made the difficult journey through the ambient sound field of the deep sea, the vocal persona on “Bubble Metropolis” is warm and comforting. Drexciya sounds like a good place to be.

Through this musical semiotic interpretation of *Bubble Metropolis*, I have modeled one possible way of interpreting the verbal, visual, and sonic form of the EP, how this form generates particular affects or moods, and how this combination of form and affect points to material oceans. This is just one possible interpretation, for the “same sounds can mean different things to different people in different contexts and different times.”<sup>57</sup> I have emphasized the importance of the feelings created by the tracks because James Stinson and Gerald Donald were tuned into the importance of affect in the making of their imagined oceans. In an interview with Tim Pratt of the *Detroit Free Press* in 2002, James Stinson said:

We don’t make songs based on a concept. We make the songs first and deal with the concept around the songs. The whole thing with the aquatic world was created due to how creative and innovative water is. It’s very creative—there’s a lot you can do with it . . . After the music is created, we’re building a concept around it: moods, emotions,

55. I would like to thank Udo Lee for making this observation.

56. On analyzing vocal persona in music, see Tagg, *Music’s Meanings*, 356.

57. Tagg, *Music’s Meanings*, 157.

and feelings from the music helps build the concept. Basically, what we do is listen to the record and then your mind starts to wander and images come to your mind. Hopefully, people that buy the record feel the same thing. When you listen to the music and read the title, you basically have to run with it. The images have to go also with the themes.<sup>58</sup>

Through this quote, it appears that Stinson and Donald listened to the tracks and allowed the affects or moods to inspire imaginative wanderings that were then translated into titles and themes and stories. The textual apparatus on the label functions as instructions that guide listeners as they move toward and through the music. There is a gap between the music and the textual apparatus, and listeners are active participants in the making of meaning and narrative as they fill in the gap. As active participants, active users of this music, listeners can follow the instructions provided by Stinson and Donald, or they can fill in that gap with their own affective, imaginative, and semantic wanderings. But a fundamental question remains: how can Drexciya's imagined oceans be described as Afrofuturist? Apart from the UR symbol discussed above, there are few overt racial signifiers on *Bubble Metropolis*. In my conclusion, before turning to the question of Drexciya's alternative form of marine environmentalism, I suggest a few possibilities for thinking about the meaning of Afrofuturism in relation to *Bubble Metropolis*.

#### FROM AFROFUTURISM TO MARINE ENVIRONMENTALISM

In leaving the land and fresh water behind, and arriving at an aquatopian civilization called Drexciya, is Black identity also being left behind? Kodwo Eshun offers one possible answer to the question of ambiguous or indeterminate racial signification, suggesting that the absence of overt signifiers of blackness is one of the constitutive features of Afrofuturism: "The mayday signal of Black Atlantic Futurism is unrecognizability, as either Black or Music. Sonic Futurism doesn't locate you in tradition; instead it dislocates you from origins."<sup>59</sup> In *Bubble Metropolis*, listeners encounter both dislocation and relocation, separation from tradition and the founding of syncretic origins that assemble and remix spatially and temporally dispersed aesthetic movements ranging from romanticism to science fiction, from post-World War II jazz and soul to Reagan-era electro and techno, from Jules Verne to Jimi Hendrix, from Fritz Lang to James Cameron, from Afrofuturism to marine environmentalism. In the process of imagining an ocean full of sound, Drexciya reimagines the meaning of blackness, and in so doing operates within the broad contours of racial anti-essentialism in Detroit techno. Summarizing the complicated racial politics of this musical culture, Sean Albiez argues that while "techno arguably attempts to escape racial designation, there is simultaneously a clear racial dimension to

58. Tim Pratt, "Q & A with James Stinson," *Detroit Free Press*, March 2002, [web.archive.org/web/20021017052738/http://www.freep.com/entertainment/music/stqna13\\_20020913.htm](http://web.archive.org/web/20021017052738/http://www.freep.com/entertainment/music/stqna13_20020913.htm).

59. Eshun, *More Brilliant than the Sun*, -001.

the transformative agenda of the music. It is informed by a progressive desire to move beyond essentialized ‘blackness’.”<sup>60</sup>

The appropriation and resignification of scientific terms such as wormhole and positron, combined with technologically mediated sonic fantasies of offshore travel, are progressive and futuristic, yet also locate Drexciya in a tradition of Afrofuturist storytelling that began in the middle of the nineteenth century with the speculative fiction of Martin Delany and was carried through the turn of the century by writers such as Charles Chesnutt and Edward Johnson. Lisa Yaszek argues that these early Afrofuturist storytellers “wrote in a diverse range of fantastic and proto-science fictional forms”<sup>61</sup> that both intersects with and deviates from the imaginative work of those white writers, such as Mary Shelley, H.G. Wells and Jules Verne, who are venerated as the founders of science fiction. According to Yaszek:

Whatever narrative forms they worked in, then, 19<sup>th</sup>-century Afrofuturist authors were bound together by a shared interest in representing the changing relations of science and society as they specifically pertained to African American history—including, of course, the history of the future.<sup>62</sup>

From Martin Delany to Drexciya, African Americans have been fantasizing about and making progressive claims on the future for a long time, and have been using those fantasies and claims to critique the economic inequalities and racial injustices that structure the present.

On the question of what is at stake in Black science fiction and, by extension, Afrofuturism, Samuel Delany explains:

We need images of tomorrow; and our people need them more than most. Without an image of tomorrow, one is trapped by blind history, economics, and politics beyond our control. One is tied up in a web, in a net, with no way to struggle free. Only by having clear and vital images of the many alternatives, good and bad, of where one can go, will we have any control over the way we may actually get there in a reality tomorrow will bring all too quickly.<sup>63</sup>

Drexciya helped listeners struggle free from the net of their everyday lives, and they did so by creating images of offshore pasts and futures. James Stinson said that he wanted Drexciya to “take people somewhere else instead of giving them the same thing they see every single day when they step outside their door.”<sup>64</sup> What would someone living in Detroit in the 1990s see when they stepped outside their door? They would see a predominantly African American city working through the wreckage of de-industrialization,

60. Sean Albiez, “Post Soul Futurama: African American cultural politics and early Detroit Techno,” *European Journal of American Culture* 24, no. 2 (2005): 11.

61. Lisa Yaszek, “Afrofuturism, Science Fiction, and the History of the Future,” *Socialism and Democracy* 20, no. 3 (November 2006): 44.

62. *Ibid.*

63. Samuel Delany, “The Necessity of Tomorrows,” in *Starboard Wine: more notes on the language of science fiction* (New York: Dragon Press, 1984), 35.

64. Stinson quoted in *Resident Advisor*, “Why Drexciya Took Detroit Electro Underwater.”

which began in the 1950s, compacted by Reagan-era neoliberalism which moved capital offshore while defunding public schools, health, and other social services at home. They would see structural racism in the form of job discrimination, housing segregation, and massive economic inequality between the mostly Black city and mostly white suburbs.<sup>65</sup> By making progressive claims on the future, Detroit techno in general, and Drexciya in particular, gave young people alternative images of where they could go, and thus provided a sense of control, of agency, in relation to an urban landscape that looked pretty battered and torn. Detroit techno also provided a local sense of community, one that quickly became global. Beginning in the 1980s, Detroit techno emerged into a vibrant and supportive music scene that, as C. Vecchiola argues, “used new technologies in music production as well as changing communications technologies to create a transnational arts community.”<sup>66</sup>

As Drexciya’s oceanic Afrofuturism evolved during the 1990s, deep-sea dwelling Drexciyans were fleshed out, visually and verbally embodied as the water-breathing descendants of pregnant African women cast overboard during the Middle Passage. In the first four EPs, *Deep Sea Dweller*, *Bubble Metropolis*, *Molecular Enhancement*, and *The Unknown Aquazone*, the absence of embodiment shifts attention to an alien oceanic environment. By directing a sense of wonder or awe, of open-ended questioning, at an alien ocean, Drexciya can be affiliated with a branch of ecology that similarly marvels at oceanic otherness: marine microbiology. Marine microbiologists are also fascinated by deep-sea dwellers, the vast networks of microbes “which live at astonishing extremes of light, temperature, pressure, and chemistry,”<sup>67</sup> and which are often represented through the figure of the alien. In an anthropological study of this academic field, Stefan Helmreich explains that “I employ the figure of the alien because marine biologists so often invoke it as they describe the unfamiliar universe of marine microbes.”<sup>68</sup> Like marine microbiologists, Drexciya not only take listeners on a journey to an alien oceanic environment, but also introduce a theme that is central to the study of ecology: scale. Over the course of nine EPs and three studio albums, Drexciya created stories that transport listeners from a microcosmic world of positrons and beta particles to the macrocosmic, interplanetary realm of *Grava 4*. Through the production and circulation of narratives in which the mythological and the ecological, culture and nature, are blended, the global ocean is not located on the periphery but at the center of things. While Drexciya do not overtly or didactically address specific environmental crises, the foregrounding and re-centering of the Earth’s oceanic waters, in which the distant appears proximate, the far becomes near, are specific, concrete goals of ocean activists and conservationists. Drexciya’s oceanic imaginary converges with marine microbiologists such as Ed DeLong: “The

65. On the intersection of race and political economy in Detroit, see Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005). Sugrue’s tendency to erase Black agency has elicited important critiques. See Vecchiola, “Submerge in Detroit,” 97, fn. 2.

66. Vecchiola, “Submerge in Detroit,” 97.

67. Stefan Helmreich, *Alien Ocean: Anthropological Voyages in Microbial Seas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), IX.

68. *Ibid.*, 15.

planet should be called Ocean—or maybe it should be called Life or even Ocean Life.”<sup>69</sup> Because so much is unknown about the microbial oceans that support life on this planet and may connect us to life on other planets, these networks, like Drexciya’s music, instigate a wide, fluid range of affect, from joy to anxiety to fear.

Mystery, intrigue, and wonder can be effective ways to get people, especially young people, to care about or preemptively connect to some thing or some place, like an ocean. Helmreich points out that educators often “appeal to the alien to invite kids to consider microbiology as a career.”<sup>70</sup> For James Stinson and Gerald Donald, growing up on the East Side of Detroit might have made the possibility of pursuing a career in marine microbiology a long shot. But like the microbiologists who told Helmreich that their “eyes have been prepared for the deep by ecologically themed media entertainment and science fiction,”<sup>71</sup> Stinson and Donald were also inspired by ecologically themed media such as Cameron’s *The Abyss*, only instead of their eyes, it was their ears that were prepared for the deep, a sensory activation that led them not into the lab but into the music studio. In the studio, Drexciya produced a style of music that in combination with artwork, song and album titles, and liner notes, encouraged listeners to imagine, feel, and hear an unfamiliar oceanic universe of sound.

James Stinson and Gerald Donald don’t fit the white, upper middle class, Birkenstock-wearing stereotype of the environmentalist, and Drexciya’s hyper-mediated, indirect relationship to the ocean is very different from canonical nature writing that privileges immediacy and direct experience. Nicole Seymour argues that mainstream environmentalism has become too rigidly and too narrowly defined, both aesthetically and affectively, which can have the ironic effect of turning people off, rather than turning them on, making them care less rather than more, about the environment. Seymour urges ecocritics to construct an alternative environmentalism that “expands our narrow understandings of what environmentalism looks, sounds and, most importantly, feels like.”<sup>72</sup> Stinson and Donald produced a unique style of techno music that might be unfamiliar to scholars and activists who are concerned about the environment in general, and the ocean in particular, so it could be hard to hear why Drexciya matters. Drexciya take us to the ocean and provide mysterious, open-ended stories that guide us once we get there. Those stories create connections between terrestrial humans and the vast liquid habitats that cover the Earth, and as Alaimo points out, such connections are one of the starting points for marine environmentalism. By connecting us to imagined oceans that are full of wonder, Drexciya created an alternative vision of what a marine environmentalism can look, feel, and most importantly, sound like. ■

69. Ed Long is quoted in Helmreich, *Alien Ocean*, 3.

70. Helmreich, *Alien Ocean*, 15.

71. Helmreich, *Alien Ocean*, 46.

72. Nicole Seymour, “Introduction,” *Bad Environmentalism: Irony and Irreverence in the Ecological Age* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), Kindle.

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