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The Bloop

S. Ayesha Hameed

In 1997 Drexciya, an electronic band from Detroit came out with *The Quest*. In its liner notes is the following story.

During the greatest Holocaust the world has ever known, pregnant America-bound African slaves were thrown overboard by the thousands during labour for being sick and disruptive cargo. Is it possible that they could have given birth at sea to babies that never needed air? Are Drexciyans water-breathing aquatically mutated descendants of those unfortunate victims of human greed? Recent experiments have shown a premature human infant saved from certain death by breathing liquid oxygen through its underdeveloped lungs.¹

This story draws on a particular practice in the history of transatlantic slavery, the jettison of slaves for insurance purposes. Here Drexciya posit an alternate ending: that the foetuses of the pregnant women thrown overboard adapted from living in amniotic fluid to living underwater. These newly adapted underwater people and their descendants set up a Black Atlantis called Drexciya at the bottom of the ocean. Subsequent album covers trace the evolution of Drexciyan creatures – from gill-breathing aquatic creatures, to flippered-feet wave jumpers, to outer space explorers. Their later albums study the pragmatic infrastructures under which Drexciya and other underwater cities functioned, their ecologies etc.²

Also in 1997 the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration discovered a very powerful ultra low frequency sound coming from the ocean surrounding the southern tip of South America that they called ‘the bloop’.³ Picked up by autonomous hydrophone arrays, the sound was detectable from over 5000 kms away. Its audio profile resembled that of a living creature but was exponentially louder than sounds produced by the loudest animal, the blue whale. At the time, the NOAA’s Dr Christopher Fox noted that the signature of the sound produced rapidly varied in frequency, a trait characteristic of marine animals. This begged the tantalising question– was there a creature even bigger than a blue whale lurking at the bottom of the sea?

The NOAA eventually decided that the sound came from a large ice quake at the bottom of the ocean. The confusion surrounding the bloop makes for another reading of life under the sea though. At a sonic level, the difference between sentient life and the environment became blurred and unreadable. Ice could make the sound of an underwater animal. In this confusion perhaps it is possible to make sense of Drexciya’s experiment – to blend the human with the non-human as a form of adaptation and survival. This is a blurring of the parameters of the ecological to make for another possibility for life and the blurring of the sonic threshold performed by the bloop is one such instance.

In 2008 M NourbeSe Philip published *Zong!* a cycle of poems written to mark the massacre of slaves thrown from the slave ship *Zong* in 1781.⁴ All the poems draw solely from the text of the two-page document surviving the *Gilbert v. Gregson* court case, the insurance claim made in court after the jettison.⁵ In the first poem the word ‘water’ (and a few others) is splintered and fractured across the length of the page;

and under a line in the gutter of the page at the bottom is a list of imagined names of the slaves thrown overboard. The scattered words read as the depth of the sea from surface to ocean floor, the line drawn across the bottom of the page. In her performance of these poems Philip pulls the words to their breaking point, the completion of each utterance of the syllables in the word water catching at her throat. It sounds like she is drowning. In pronouncing the word 'water', water becomes both the subject and the object of drowning. It is painful and violent.⁶

The sound of suffocated drowning that infuses Philip's performance of *Zong!* and particularly the word 'water' turns the voice into something not human, almost watery, environmental. It crosses the threshold between the human and the environment underwater. The sound of the word water and its meaning become as liminal an entity as the bloop, but this time they cross the threshold from the opposite direction – where the human voice becomes something inhuman, watery, monstrous.

Both the bloop and the sound of the word 'water' blur their human and inhuman qualities and this indeterminacy is what fuels the speculation of an underwater Drexciya. But there is something monstrous in the uncanniness of both. The bloop evokes the murky horror of imagining a screeching creature in uncharted depths that is more gargantuan than a blue whale. With the performance of the word water there is the horror of hearing a voice stretching beyond human detection towards its own annihilation. This is a measure of the horror embedded in Drexciya's imagining of the possibility of life growing in the bodies of drowned enslaved women thrown overboard.

It raises the question: to what extent is horror a fuel for resistance?
And: to what extent is adaptation a form of agency?

It casts the sonic as a vibrating vehicle transmitting this knife-edged form of survival, and opens the discourse of adaptation/survival to non-human forms of life. Part of its power lies in looking directly at the moment of simultaneous horror and annihilation, into its sub-aquatic Cthulu-esque face. And to make reverberations of that horror into progenitors of a form of response and survival whose indeterminacy finds echoes in the bloop.

...but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age.⁷

References

- ¹ This is from the liner notes of Drexciya's first LP, *The Quest* CD (Detroit: Submerge Records, 1997).
- ² see for example Drexciya's *Neptune's Lair* CD (Germany: Tresor Records, 1999).
- ³ David Wolman "Calls from the deep" 15 June 2002 From *New Scientist Print Edition*. Retrieved July 4, 2016
http://web.archive.org/web/20130106141048/http://www.science.org.au/nova/newscientist/102ns_001.htm
- ⁴ M NourbeSe Philip *Zong!* Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008.
- ⁵ Omar Berrada "Defend the Dead: Omar Berrada on M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*" Chumurenga/ Pan African Space Station (Radio Broadcast) 2015 (Retrieved July 4 2016) <https://www.mixcloud.com/chimurenga/defend-the-dead-omar-berrada-zong/>
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ H.P. Lovecraft. *The Best of H.P. Lovecraft: Bloodcurdling Tales of Horror and the Macabre*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1982, p.76.