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# Black Atlantis

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AYESHA HAMEED

*This is an extract from a script that accompanies sounds and images that I have been collecting for an ongoing live audio-visual essay called Black Atlantis<sup>1</sup> Black Atlantis looks at the Black Atlantic and its afterlives in contemporary illegalized migration at sea, in oceanic environments, through Afrofuturistic dancefloors, and soundsystems and in outer space. Using Walter Benjamin's concept of the dialectical image I examine how to think through sound, image, water, violence, and history as elements of an active archive; and the late twentieth century electronic music duo from Detroit, Drexciya's framework of time travel as an historical method. (A majority of these elements are presented in unlikely pairs, juxtaposed with one another).*

*Black Atlantis combines two discourses: Afrofuturism and the Anthropocene. This follows Phil Sternberg's critique of the original formulation of the Black Atlantic, which he points out focuses on surfaces rather than depths of the ocean (Sternberg 2015: n.p.). As a result, the wetness of the ocean is lost and thus its haptic, tactile quality is lost.*

*This script takes Drexciya and their creation of a sonic, fictional world as a point of departure. Through liner notes and track titles, they take the Black Atlantic below the water with their imaginary of an Atlantis comprised of former slaves who have adapted to living underwater. The leap to Drexciya would be at once into the past and towards a sci-fi future. The pendulum swings, time bifurcates, and the image flickers.*

*What wetness brings back to the table is a sense of the haptic, the sensory, the bodily, and the epidermal. What below-the-water, and Atlantis brings back is the bottom of the sea, the volume of the water, the materiality of the space of the ocean, and other protagonists that inhabit the sea.*

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<sup>1</sup> *Black Atlantis* has been performed at the ICA London (2015), at The Chimurenga Library at the Showroom, London (2015), Oxford Programme for the Future of Cities, Oxford (2015), and the Edinburgh College of Art (2015) amongst other places. Section 1 of this essay ("Storm") draws in part from an eponymous essay published in *FORENSIS: The Architecture of Public Truth*, ed. Forensic Architecture. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014.

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## Storm

### (SLIDE: TURNER'S SLAVERS)

In 1840, J. M. W. Turner painted *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On*. The sky is red and purple and gold and blue which shifts to frothy white. In the white a ship's masts faintly recede. The water is brown. In the right hand corner is a leg with a manacle round the ankle. There is perhaps a shadow of an arm but it is hard to tell as in the water around it are the ghostly maws of fish with puckered mouths and dark eyes, and seagulls diving into the water.

In 1781, the crew of the English slave ship *Zong* threw their slaves overboard in a calculus that determined that the insurance money for their death was worth more than the profit gained from selling their lives. As ships crossed the Atlantic, it was a common practice for the captain and crew to jettison cargo in storms, but in a few instances such as on the *Zong*, it was slaves who were thrown overboard – an action that raised the issue of whether slaves were legally defined as people or property, and what constituted an unforeseeable event: what in insurance terms would be defined as an “act of God.” This was an ambivalence that played out in insurance claims in court, in art and literature, in the fuelling of the abolitionist movement, through a cast of characters that included the weather, slaves on boats, and the boats themselves.

In any account of the slave ship *Zong*, Turner's *Slavers* is the image that accompanies it. But as the Atlantic historian James Walvin points out, in fact this is not the *Zong* (2011: 1-11). There is no image of the *Zong*, nor was there a storm at sea that precipitated the massacre.

Be that as it may this painting is the stand-in for the *Zong* massacre which has no image and happened on still waters. In this storm the water, the limbs of slaves, the mouths of hungry fish, and the gawping birds become the ecology of the brown water of the sea. I keep returning to the fact that there was no typhoon, that the storm is an imagined one that has become appended to the lore of the slave ship *Zong*. How was it possible to append a storm to the massacre aboard the *Zong*? Or in other words, what is it about storms and what does it mean to imagine one onto history?

Storms become a point of entry to think about how nature in flux is invoked in a sociohistorical inquiry that takes into account the ways in which seascapes are inveigled into the unstable designation of slaves as persons or property in the triangular trade.

(SLIDE: DREXCIYA'S *THE QUEST* – LINER NOTES AND MAP)

Which strangely enough leads to an electronic band from Detroit called Drexciya whose mythos, built through liner notes, describe a story where the children born of pregnant slaves thrown overboard were able to adapt to living underwater as they went straight from living in amniotic fluid to ocean water, and so built a Black Atlantis called Drexciya.

**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 (Drexciya, 1997: n.p.).**

A key aspect of the Drexciya myth is its temporal proposition: to see time and history as equally in flux as the lapping ocean, to see the afterlife of the middle passage in a futuristic scenario.

Accompanying the text are four maps arranged vertically. They represent four phases of black migration, as imagined by Drexciya.

The first one on the top is of the Atlantic and the shores surrounding it. It is called "The Slave Trade (1655-1867)" and represents the simple isosceles of the triangular trade.

The second map is of the United States, with all the states drawn in. It is called "Migration of Rural Blacks to Northern Cities (1930s-1940s)". There is a dark oval drawn in the South on the borders of Georgia, Tennessee, Alabama and Mississippi. From this oval radiates several arrows pointing north, and one to the west.

The third map is again of the United States and is called "Techno Leaves Detroit and Spreads Worldwide (1988)". Here the state of Michigan is coloured, red and arrows radiate, pointing in all directions to beyond the borders, into the oceans.

The final map is once again of the Atlantic and there are multiple lines crossing the ocean connecting the West coast of Africa to the interior of

North and South America. Or is it the other way around? It is difficult to say as the arrows have no direction.

This is a history told in maps, temporal leaps and movement of bodies. It is sped up. This is the time of surfaces and speed in Fernand Braudel's (1979) history of accumulations.

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## **Angel of history/ Mirror Face/ Reverse View**

**(SLIDE: PAUL KLEE "ANGELUS NOVUS" (L);  
VIDEO CLIP SUN RA *SPACE IS THE PLACE* (R))**

This is thesis nine from Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History".

A Klee painting named "Angelus Novus" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress (Benjamin 1969: 257-8).

This thesis describes a drawing by Paul Klee, which he likens to the angel of history, who is being blown backwards by a storm, which he names as progress. Some questions worth asking: What vectors of movement in space and time does this drawing draw? How is it composed? In other words, what exactly is going on *logistically* in this drawing? Who is facing what?

The angel has its back to the future and is facing the past. The past is a pile of ruin that it is witness to but is helpless to change. The wind is then blowing forward in time that is, from past into the future, but the wind is also blowing it backwards from where it is facing. Spatially the wind is blowing in reverse. Temporally the wind is blowing forward. Suddenly time is not a single vector: intertwined with the disturbance of the wind it proliferates into multiple directions, and when space becomes wind, it proliferates into disturbance.

### (PLAY CLIP)

Consider a counter image to the angel of history. This is a figure in Sun Ra's *Space is the Place* (1974). It is a hooded, cloaked figure. It is tall and gaunt, like the Grim Reaper. It is called the Mirror Face. Under its hood it has a mirror for a face. The Mirror Face reflects what it is facing, or what it is looking at. If you were to look at the Mirror Face, you would see a reflection of yourself. In this counter image, the face that is a mirror is wearing a cloak of death. The reflection is what lies ahead of it, what one sees when looking at the mirror face is anticipation reflected back. This is a loop.

The camera scrolls across the terrain of a technicolored jungle. It then cuts to the figure of Ra who is walking through this forest/jungle. He looks over his shoulder at the Mirror Face, and then they continue to walk. Ra is followed by an entourage, with the Mirror Face walking shortly behind. There is the sound of horns.

You also see from the point of view of the Mirror Face, the path through Sun Ra's outer space forest. The camera cuts to the Mirror Face repeatedly as Sun Ra talks about the importance of sound and vibrations on this new planet. And when he says time has officially ended it cuts to this figure again.

The image of the Mirror Face draws from Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), where in a sequence of images a woman slips in and out of a gruesome afternoon dream. The Mirror Face in that film is menacing. Sun Ra's Mirror Face looks like more of a happy witness.

The angel of history is Klee's drawing brought into animation in the gust of the storm of history. The angel is worried. It is flying. It is blown by a fierce wind that is history and is a storm. The Mirror Face is on the other side of time, and yet it is an antecedent to Deren's dreamscape thirty years before. It walks sedately behind Ra under a curtain of trumpet calls and leaves.



## **Angel of History 2/ Digital Tsunami**

This storm is what we call progress. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. A Klee painting named "Angelus Novus" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating.

This is from Benjamin's ninth thesis, again. But it looks a bit different.

When you reverse the order of the sentences something happens. Suddenly the very worried angel of history recedes and is replaced by another protagonist, the Storm. It pushes an unnamed character into the future while blowing higher and higher the pile of debris into the past. This is the catastrophe. With the storm as the hurtling agent what all of a sudden becomes tangible is the materiality of the wind. What is accumulated becomes a part of the landscape of the storm and a sedimentation that the angel cannot do anything about. Benjamin does not say here what is being accumulated or where (that comes earlier in his work on the baroque). But consider this. What if history was a storm at sea and its detritus was inextricable from the crashing waves and the pelting water and the bluster?

The storm that fuels the mythos of the Zong massacre is a surface symptom of seismic changes below. It is the storm that Benjamin calls progress, the piling of ruin upon ruin on the surface of the sea that knows no traces but leaves sediments below.

My counter image to this is Drexciya's *Digital Tsunami* (2002). If you consider the tsunami as an agent like this storm in reverse, it too constitutes a kind of ecstatic blending of forces indistinguishable from one another. But this tsunami is digital – its power lies in the blending and syncopation of beats. There is a blurring of figure and ground of this song: beats and rhythms blend into one another.

**PLAY AUDIO**



*Digital Tsunami* starts with sets of beats – one whip-like,

one dissolving  
and a rainy sound.

A fourth much faster one comes in later.

A bright sound, like a creature between a siren,

a person,  
an animal

swimming underwater or flying through the storm,

cuts through the beaded curtains of beats.

It is echoey.

But this sound too is part of the same indeterminate digital palette.

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## **Atlantis agitation/ Cities under the sea**

**(SLIDE: “THE CAPITAL CITY OF ATLANTIS” AFTER C. J. GILL)**

I’m using Atlantis and Drexciya to consider bodies under the sea. This is a way to think about the accumulation of violence that when inadequately documented falls under the register of detectability. I’m thinking of this in connection with the crisis in Lesbos in 2015<sup>2</sup> and other shores of the Mediterranean where the narrative of crisis is enunciated in a bodily narrative – feet freezing in Lesvos, a child’s body on the shore.

I’m also thinking about the land under the sea as an extension of the sea and of the continents.

What does Drexciya achieve by fleshing this underwater mythos out? How is it different from Sun Ra’s planet? Both responses to transatlantic slavery are spatially and (popular-) scientifically articulated.

This is what we know about Atlantis. There is a storm or agitation that causes a city to sink. From this a city underwater is formed. This city is made up of that old city that sank in the storm/earthquake/agitation. The residues of the built city above become a basis for the city below. It bears traces of the agitation that

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, BBC News Online (2016) and Foster (2015).

caused this formation, it is witness to this seismic change. Underwater, the city changes.

Now underwater, the city has a different set of ecologies and infrastructural rules, because water is now the primary medium, not air. The adaptation of this city to its existence underwater opens the possibility of an episteme that centralises other forms of adaptation to living underwater. This adaptation has a tinge of menace.

This is an image of Atlantis. It is a diagram of the city as it is described by Plato at the end of his *Critias* (Plato 1984). Atlantis is the parcel of land meted out to the sea god Poseidon. But this city is at the surface of the water; it is the city as it existed before it sank below the water. We know it will sink and become the paradigmatic underwater city. In other words, the future of this city is at the bottom of the sea. It is a temporal diagram of city that only exists in anticipation of its annihilation and reformulation below the water.

This description of Atlantis is haunted by its sinking. So, fittingly, Atlantis above the water is rooted in the nautical. It is part of Poseidon's portion of the Earth. In this description and diagram Atlantis is formed of a concentric set of circles of land, interspersed with circles of water. It was initially impenetrable to the sea as there were no thoroughfares for ships yet. But with time and the development of industry the many kings of Atlantis dug a canal from the citadel in the middle, cutting through these circles of land just wide enough for a ship to pass through. And then they were connected by a complex web of bridges. The land of Poseidon that we see through the temporal optics of an underwater gaze, is a play of surfaces.

Atlantis from this point of view is a temporal image that anticipates its submerged state. This is what Peter Linebaugh had in mind when mapping revolutionary energy as arising from underwater when thinking of the eighteenth century Wars of Revolution encircling the Atlantic region.

**I have called this essay "All the Atlantic Mountains Shook" because I wish to suggest profound and hemispheric events that originate beneath the surface of things and which are not confined to any particular nation but arise from all four corners of the Atlantic – North and South America, Europe, and Africa (Linebaugh 1982: 87).**

Linebaugh sees the earthquakes on the Atlantic shores as reflective of the revolutionary energies that were erupting in France, America, and Haiti. The seismic quality of these changes draws from William Blake's 'interdisciplinary' gaze, which Linebaugh says combines "geography, history, morality, sexual generation, and mythology" in a mixture "that simultaneously challenged imperialism *and* empiricism" (ibid: 88). Linebaugh sees Atlantis as forming a kind of methodology to con-

sider anti-imperialism, through a rearrangement of sea and land:

**The belief that the earth once had a different arrangement of continents and oceans became the basis for imagining, not a legendary or future conquest, but of an anti-imperialist peaceable kingdom (ibid: 88).**

This image of utopia tied the revolutions all round the Atlantic to the myth of Atlantis. The mountains form the unity of the Atlantic utopia and the quaking of the mountains signals their destruction.

A Drexciyan expansion of this epistemology would amplify this interdisciplinary approach of combining “geography, history, morality, sexual generation, and mythology” with the “belief that the earth once had a different arrangement of continents and oceans” (ibid: 88). But not as a *metaphor* for changes produced by radical politics and revolutionary energy. Rather it would be a means of a new epistemology that *literally* intertwined history and politics with the geological as part of an expanded notion of ecology made possible by Atlantis.

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## **Neptune’s Lair/ Cities under the Sea II**

(SLIDE: L -DAVID ATTENBOROUGH ON HYDROTHERMAL VENTS  
VIDEO CLIP; R – DREXCIYA “NEPTUNE’S LAIR” ALBUM COVER 1999)

The originary myth of Drexciya follows the proposition that adaptation (from foetus to aquatic to amphibian) provides the possibility of life after the massacre of the jettisoning of slaves. Survival is made possible through a rearrangement of the physis that collapsed the distinction between the human and the non-human in Drexciyan bodies that could breathe underwater. This adaptation was enabled by a collapse of the semantics of what the environment constituted. Amniotic fluid was the transitional fluid or an estuary to seawater. The ability to breathe underwater was not the pivot that enabled this adaptation, rather the transition of one aquatic atmosphere into another (amniotic into seawater) formed the change. The foetus continued to develop and grow as before, but took its first breath in a watery environment, rather than in air.

In Drexciya’s album *Neptune’s Lair* (1999) the primary focus of their investigation is into a substance called Polymono Plexusgel. Neptune’s Lair is the name of their lab located on the sea floor where they perform experiments on this material. In an interview with Andrew Duke, Drexciya say:

Well, basically, the main thing that we want to work on is the new lab, Neptune's Lair. Right now we're in the process of doing a lot of experiments and whatnot, so in the forthcoming years you'll be hearing a lot more experiments. That's one thing we want to start doing because it's time now to go back and do some more research on some different kinds of elements and whatnot. One of the things is Polymono Plexusgel; that's the gel that is alive but not alive. The energy that makes it live is from the energy that lives in Drexciya—the magic—and it comes from the Earth. The Polymono Plexusgel and the strands tap themselves right down into the planet. The planet actually gives itself life, can you catch me? If you look at the album [*Neptune's Lair*], there's a lot of different titles – the different elements that's on there—that go along with these concepts. We're developing a little mystery and the people kind of go along with that and follow it (Duke 2016: n.p.).

Polymono Plexusgel is a Gaian substance both alive and not alive. It seeps into the core of the earth and is part of the planet, and through it makes life on earth self-generating. Neptune's Lair is a city that is a laboratory that enables Drexciya to 'perform experiments' in sonic form and in the titles of their tracks. These experiments into the composition of the planets and the substances that they are made up of are on-going. Through sonic and fictional tools, Drexciya explore the possibilities of this ecology. These experiments are logged in their tracklist.

*Intro: Temple Of Dos De Agua*  
*Species Of The Pod*  
*Andreaen Sand Dunes*  
*Habitat 'O' Negative*  
*Drifting Into A Time Of No Future*  
*Polymono Plexusgel*  
*Surface Terrestrial Colonization*  
*Organic Hydropoly Spores*  
*Draining Of The Tanks*  
*Devil Ray Cove Fusion Flats*  
*Oxyplasmic Gyration Beam*  
*Quantum Hydrodynamics*  
*Lost Vessel*  
*Bottom Feeders*

The experiments yield new liquid habitats (O negative); other forms of life (Hydro-poly Spores); new developments in physics (Oxyplasmic Gyration Beam); and new terrains and architectural elements (Temple Of Dos De Agua, Andreaen Sand Dunes). Not only are new atmospheres being generated in the ecology of Drexciya, new ways of building and moving through cities are being developed. The land under the sea has an infrastructure as well: in the “Bubble Metropolis” (1993). The Drexciyan Cruise Control Bubble 1 calls to a passing ship to slow down, to proceed with caution on the aquabahn at the bottom of the sea. Drexciya also document an underground highway first in *Aquabahn* (in *Drexciya 4* 1994) and then remixed in the slightly renamed *Aquabon* (in *The Quest* 1997). In this universe there are other cities as well:

**Lardossa is just another city that's on the other side of Drexciya. There's many different cities around there, and as time goes on we'll bring them forth or whatnot. It's a place on the other side of the Red Hills, it's a very calm tranquil place where things are very easy-going, there's not really that hustle and bustle and it's more or less carefree and mellow, like you're in a trance (ibid).**

The cover of *Neptune's Lair* shows an underwater landscape. In the middle of the image are two black spheres with something splashing out below and a spire tentacling out above. There are red hills in the background. This might be the frontier to Lardossia. There is a swirling funnel on the top. In the foreground there is a variety of vegetation scattered along what looks like a rocky slope. One of these bits of vegetation is a collection of long and tubular shapes that seem to be growing out of the rocky slopes. They look like tubeworms that grow on hydrothermal vents.

Tubeworms are the first clue to the question of *how* and *where* this form of adaptation is ecologically situated. Tubeworms grow on hydrothermal vents – eruptions of volcanic activity through fissures on the ocean floor, where hot magma meets seawater and where geothermal water erupts. These vents are found in ocean basins and in subduction zones where tectonic plates are in the process of moving away or towards one another.

Picture this. This is at the ocean floor. It is miles under the sea surface and it is pitch dark. The vents, almost sixty metres high, are emitting smoke up to 400C. The residues of the tectonic movement in the earth below, sulphide minerals broken into a fine grain – iron sulphide in the dark emissions pumping out of black smokers; and barium, calcium and silicon in the white emissions cascading out of white smokers. These particles are carried in this bellowing water from subduction zones to the ocean floor. As this jet encounters the cold ocean water, it cools, and

the minerals become solid once again, and form tall chimney like structures up to 10 metres high (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration n.d.).

It is an arrangement of bios that looks like cities. After an exploration of hydrothermal vents in the Cayman Trough in the Caribbean in 2003, a BBC article notes that “One of the people ‘piloting’ the ROV said seabed smokestacks remind him of ‘the industrial Midlands’” (Shukman 2013: n.p.). Another bleak industrial landscape in decline, an underwater Detroit.

### (PLAY VIDEO CLIP: David Attenborough/hydrothermal vents)

As Attenborough proclaims in the voice over, it is an efflorescence of life that lasts as long as the vent is active. These spaces look like industrial landscapes but they are singular for another more magical reason. Though in complete darkness, there is an abundance of life growing on hydrothermal vents. This is the site of the genesis of another food chain that arises from heat. Unlike other bacteria that synthesise energy from light, on the surface of a hydrothermal vent, chemosynthetic bacteria and archaea use heat from the vents. They are the base of another food chain that includes tubeworms, blind shrimp and clams.

There is a story that Stephen Helmreich recounts by Steven Hallam, a scientist that he encounters in his research for his book *Alien Ocean* (2009: 64). Hallam’s story is a fanciful combination of two conceptions of an indifferent nature – the gothic horror of HP Lovecraft’s tales of subterranean horrors arising as a return of the repressed of human civilisation, and James Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis. The latter imagines the Earth as a self-supporting system that delicately balances different forms of life, however Helmreich points out that this balance is not centred on humans. That in fact the hubris of humanity might provide the ‘feedback’ that enables its own destruction. The decentring of humans, or even the irrelevance of humans is what Helmreich points out is what a Lovelockian ecology shares with a Lovecraftian one. Hallam’s whimsical story of ecological evolution unfolds thusly, without human actors:

**Once upon a time, when the Earth was young, there was very little oxygen in the atmosphere. Instead, the atmosphere was mostly composed of methane and carbon dioxide and the oceans were warm and shallow. Life evolved to thrive under these greenhouse conditions. Methanogenic microbes feeding on carbon dioxide and other simple carbon compounds produced vast quantities of methane and this methane was in turn consumed by methane-oxidizing microbes found primarily beneath the ocean’s surface. In cooperation with sulfate-reducing organisms, the methane-oxidizing microbes built towering reef**

cities formed from mineralized carbonate and filled them over countless generations with their collective brood.

And affairs continued in this tranquil equilibrium for one and a half billion years, until the genesis of oxygenic-phototrophic metabolisms and the oxidation of the atmosphere. Life forms able to adapt to elevated oxygen levels thrived and radiated. Meanwhile, those content with living in anoxic places were pushed to marginal zones, to extreme environments – subterranean worlds and still waters, mud flats, and seafloor spreading centers. The great reef cities fell into ruin and were subsumed into submarine strata, a cryptic but lingering record of the lives of these ancient organisms. Despite this catastrophic reversal of fortune, these ancient ones held onto the edges of their once great empire and there they waited (ibid: 64-65).

Helmreich points out that Hallam's fable highlights the alien-ness of the ocean from human purpose and use, and Hallam considers how this might be a way to think about an ocean ethics separate from human intention (ibid: 65). In the context of this discussion, it makes the notion of an atmosphere made of something other than air into a picture. This fable makes visible an ecology based on an axiom that is not air. Here, of course, it is methane and carbon dioxide, not water as the Drexicyans imagined. The oceans are not oceans as we know them, they are shallow and warm and filled with methane-oxidising microbes underwater.

Here there are no human or faunal agents. Rather the master architects are the underwater microbes that build tall cities of carbonate to live in. These cities are the bizzaro-world, pre-historical equivalents of hydrothermal vents, here growing in full light and warmth of shallow waters, not clandestine, nor ephemeral. This is not a corollary of Atlantis before it sank underwater, it is an Atlantis that is both above and below the water, both pre- and post-disaster.

The evolution of oxygenic-phototrophic metabolisms and the increased oxygen in the atmosphere favoured another Gaian balance – where methane-consuming microbes became outcasts in a rapidly dwindling environment, relegated to the bottom of the sea.

But there is something latently and disinterestedly sinister in this tale that plays out temporally. In this long view of history what is evident is that though the time scale is huge, there is a sense of quiet alternation and waiting that underlies this tale. The ascendancy of one kind of ecological balance of air and life does not ensure its perpetual survival. Rather another way of life is latently, patiently at its

margins waiting for its moment. This is gothic, Lovecraftian horror, played out in slow temporal swings.

From the point of view of this story Drexciya's laboratory experiments with this Gaian material Polymono Plexusgel begins to make sense. This material that binds and makes life and connects becomes another catalyst to consider the kind of adaptations that would enable the survival of Drexciyans underwater. "It's a mental thing," they confirmed. "But when the polar cap melts, everybody's gonna live in Drexciya..." (Barr 2007: n.p.).

The reincarnation of the hydrothermal vent in Hallam's tale of shallow oceans and carbonate towers opens up other possibilities that Drexciya present like the adaptation of underwater Drexciyans to be able to live and inhabit planets in outer space. Scientists think that hydrothermal vents possibly exist on Europa, Jupiter's satellite and on Saturn's Enceladus (NASA 2015: n.p.). An extinct one may have also existed on Mars (NASA 2010: n.p.). It raises the question – how is this underwater atmosphere different from that of outer space?

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## **Two Ships/ Time Travel/ Bodies under the Sea**

**(SLIDE: L - BROOKES IMAGE; R – BOAT WITH MIGRANTS, LAMPEDUSA)**

To the left is a diagram of the Brookes slaveship hold storage first published in 1788. Thomas Clarkson used this image in his campaign against transatlantic slavery. In the nineteenth century the Brookes Image and others like it were used to create mass awareness of conditions for slaves on board ships, which in turn spearheaded the abolitionist movement.

To the right is an image of migrants on a boat that arrived on the North coast of the Mediterranean. Other boats sailing on this route are not as lucky, where more often than not they capsize and run out of fuel, or are turned back.

The state often wilfully turns away from rescuing boats like these. Migrants on these small boats have not been jettisoned from the boats they are sailing on, but their journeys are no less violent and perilous. The boats fall under the threshold of state responsibility, where, as Lorenzo Pezzani states, there is a systematic looking away or ignoring of these ships by states surrounding the Mediterranean (2013: 152). Looking away from overcrowded ships on the Mediterranean is as much of a death sentence as a jettison.



The middle passage finds its afterlife in the crossing of the Mediterranean by ‘adventurers’: migrants crossing from sub Saharan Africa into the European Union. To cross the Mediterranean is called ‘to burn’, as migrants burn their papers to make the crossing on fragile ships (Barrada 2005: n.p.). This highlights the centrality of documents in contemporary migration and the legal implications of living and travelling without papers. The ‘adventurer’ as a figure highlights the aleatory nature of making this journey where the inextricable combination of natural and human forces adds to the peril of their journey. Its plantations are detention centres, camps, and biometric regimes. Its Atlantis lies in the infinitely receding horizon of their destinations – what right wing rags decrying the desire to arrive at the UK as a quest for Eldorado – another mystical and lost land.

These two images placed together suggest a relationship between two histories. Though placed at the end, the juxtaposition of these two images are what catalyse this project. This juxtaposition of histories is hardly novel, with voices on the left and right connecting these two journeys in mainstream news:

\*

*IT IS APRIL 13, 2015.  
AND. IT IS APRIL 19, 2015.*

This link was dramatically apparent in the aftermath of the capsizing of two migrant ships, which resulted in the deaths of over twelve hundred people. These two incidents were linked to the middle passage in news articles by both pro- and anti-migration advocates. On the right, anti-immigrant groups made a link by comparing traffickers to eighteenth century slave traders. Figures like Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi dubbed this new slave trade, driven by exploitative traffickers (BBC 2015: n.p.).

On the left, those advocating for migrants, made the connection to the middle passage by drawing attention to the scale of death and conditions on the boat and calling attention to the fact that this journey is voluntary and that the wars migrants fled were the of making of the very same countries that they were approaching for asylum.

\*

*IT IS MARCH 2015.*

Another media blast turned its gaze to the bottom of the sea. The Smithsonian Museum announced the discovery of the San Jose, a capsized slave ship off Cape Horn that *went down with slaves on board* (Catlin 2015: n.p.). Discovering a ship that sank with slaves on board was vital to the Smithsonian. Finding a ship full of slaves would be the first discovery of its kind. The discovery of the San Jose was kept under wraps for two years so that the Smithsonian could make absolutely sure that they were right about its human cargo, and so that scavengers off the South African coast did not steal parts of the ship or its contents. It wasn’t hard to

hide though as the water churned around the remnants like a “swimming in a washing machine”, a storm underwater, making the ship’s parts hard to preserve as well (Cooper 2015: n.p.). The ship, hauled to the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History and Culture, remains nominally the property of Iziko Museum in South Africa (ibid).

What identified this ship as a slaver was the presence of ballast in the form of iron blocks. Iron bars were also the standard to trade for slaves – thirteen bars being the going price for a man, nine for a woman (Malcom 1998: 5). Human cargo is unstable as it is living and moving and so require ballast as counterweight – both then and now. Obviously ballast is missing on boats crossing the Mediterranean. One of the main causes of ships capsizing on the Mediterranean is the absence of ballast. Passengers rush to the side of the boat when a possible rescue ship is sighted, and it is very easy for the boat to tip. The instability of the water and storms that surround the ship is matched by the conditions on board and the unique quality of the passengers who are treated as cargo in both instances.

The story of the recovery of the San Jose is a strange combination of prurience and thrilling detective work, it sits poorly on one’s conscience. What fuels the desire to find a ship that went down with slaves on board? What is the appeal of looking at such a ship? The desire to see is an implicated one.

\*

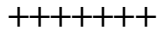
### **IT IS SEPTEMBER 2, 2015.**

Alan Kurdi, a two-year old child attempting, with his family, to flee to Canada, drowned off the Turkish coast and washed up on shore. Images of this child circulated vociferously in the media and on the internet. The image of Kurdi, neatly dressed, face down as if in sleep became a meme, and was turned into a vector-based illustration. It turned (for a moment) the tide of mainstream media and public opinion on the influx of migrants. It was an image that turned into a diagram and once abstracted became a rapidly proliferating catalyst for change. It prompted the Canadian government under Justin Trudeau to pledge to sponsor 25,000 Syrian refugees to Canada (CBC 2015: n.p.). A few months later the artist Ai Wei Wei bewilderingly recreated the pose of Kurdi’s corpse on the beach.

Weeks earlier in his blog *How to See the World*, Nicholas Mirzoeff brought attention to another set of images of drowned migrants (2015: n.p.). Collected by the artist Khaled Bourakeh, they were images of bodies in the swirl of Mediterranean waters. There is something sublime and majestic in these photos, where the violence of the image is inextricable from its pull. This is a gesture that combines the same forces that J.M.W. Turner’s *Slavers* draws from, where the violence of the act depicted spills onto the seascape, and where the boundaries between the dead and the sea are incoherent and blurred. The pull of both Turner and Bourakeh’s images lies in how that sense of horror evoked by the floating dead is transposed onto a turbulent sublime nature – swirling seascapes, saturated with

colour. This sense of witnessing these state sanctioned massacres cannot be separated from the enervating pleasure of looking at nature in revolt. It is a witnessing that is tinged with prurience and voyeurism. These images are of the same stock; one begets the other.

Mirzoeff decried how social media like Facebook took down Bourakeh's images and called this censorship (ibid). These images needed to be seen, he said. But do they? Maybe we need no images here.



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