

## CHAPTER ONE

# “AQUATIC KNOWLEDGE FOR THOSE WHO KNOW”: DREXCIYA AS BLACK CULTURAL PRAXIS<sup>1</sup>

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In 1992, a mysterious techno EP was released on Detroit-based Shockwave Records: *Deep Sea Dweller*. Coming in at a tight 17 minutes, the EP featured four oceanic-influenced tracks—“Sea Quake,” “Nautilus,” “Depressurization,” and “Sea Snake”—and the words “Written Mixed and Produced by Drexciya” on the record’s sticker. With booming 808 kickdrums and rippling arpeggiated synths that sought to capture the feeling of the deep sea, listeners were introduced to the cryptic quest of Drexciya. From 1992-2002, the electronic duo Drexciya anonymously released nine EPs, three studio albums, and one compilation album—completing one of the most eclectic discographies in electronic music. During this prolific run, the identities of the musicians behind Drexciya remained unknown. Their mostly wordless subterranean techno music was recorded live on analog machines. The group did not tour. They rarely gave interviews. Drexciya was an enigma. Their mythology was bolstered by the nautical afro-futuristic myth the band detailed in their liner notes, song titles, and brief vocal interludes. The clearest description of this myth is written in the liner notes of their 1997 compilation album *The Quest*:

Could it be possible for humans to breath 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 labour for being sick and disruptive cargo. Is it possible that they could have given birth at sea to babies that never needed air? Recent experiments have shown mice able to breathe liquid oxygen. Even more shocking and conclusive was a recent instance of a premature infant saved

from certain death by breathing liquid oxygen through its undeveloped lungs. These facts combined with reported sightings of Gillmen and swamp monsters in the coastal swamps of the South-Eastern United States make the slave trade theory startlingly feasible. Are Drexciyans water breathing, aquatically mutated descendants of those unfortunate victims of human greed? Have they been spared by God to teach us or terrorise us? Did they migrate from the Gulf of Mexico to the Mississippi river basin and on to the great lakes of Michigan? Do they walk among us? Are they more advanced than us and why do they make their strange music? What is their Quest? These are many of the questions that you don't know and never will. The end of one thing...and the beginning of another. Out – The Unknown Writer. (*The Quest*)

Drawing upon the planned historical “disaster of Black subjection” (Sharpe 5) during the transatlantic slave trade and its many “afterlives” (Hartman 6), James Stinson and Gerald Donald—the two African American producers behind Drexciya—crafted a mythology that imagined a Black Atlantis called Drexciya that is populated by the unborn children of pregnant African women thrown off the slave ships during the Middle Passage. Drexciya is an underwater utopia<sup>2</sup> inhabited by a hybrid African-aquatic species, and Greg Tate calls the fable a “revisionist look at the Middle Passage as a realm of possibility and not annihilation” (qtd. in Rubin). While the ocean has understandably been situated as a site of trauma for peoples of the African diaspora, the Drexciya myth submerges self-emancipated Africans deep into the hadalpelagic zone and imaginatively builds a Black Atlantis that offers Black people an oceanic space of possibility, belonging, and freedom.

The Black Atlantis has inspired a wave of artists from Sun Ra to Ellen Gallagher to Lupe Fiasco to imagine the potentiality of the aquatic space for Black people. Simultaneously, there has been significant academic interest in situating the Black Atlantic and the many oceanic crossing—both willing and captive—that peoples of the African diaspora have made across the Atlantic Ocean as a generative site of theorization for African diasporic being and Black cultural expression. Most notable is Paul Gilroy's 1993 text *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* where he argues for a diasporic understanding of Blackness. Gilroy writes, “A concern with the Atlantic as a cultural and political system has been forced on black historiography and intellectual history by the economic and historical matrix in which plantation slavery—'capitalism with its clothes off'—was one special moment” (15). While Gilroy's seminal text remains an important point of theorization and undoubtedly influences more contemporary texts like Christina Sharpe's 2016 work, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*,

there is growing interest in theorizations of Black cultural practices that engage with water in ways that move beyond the familiar paradigms of the Middle Passage and the transatlantic slave trade. While the Drexciya myth is indeed inspired by the Middle Passage, I would like to suggest Drexciya as a creative praxis of Black hydro-poetics that turns to the undersea as a liberatory space for people of the African diaspora. Through the act of aquatic submergence, Drexciya and the Black Atlantis provide a praxis for interpreting Black cultural production that engages with the underwater space as a site of potentiality and belonging as opposed to one of enslavement and death.

I am building upon the work of poet and scholar Joshua Bennett who developed his theory of Black hydro-poetics by asking, “How does the ever-present specter of the transatlantic slave trade...propel us to theorize Black eco-poetics not as a matter of *ground* but as an occasion to think at the intersection of terra firma and open sea, surface and benthos, the observable ocean and the uncharted Blackness of its very bottom?” (171). Bennett advocates for “the social and political possibilities of a wetter archive, a black hydro-poetics that does not require solid ground in order to make its claims or sustain its movement but rather relishes the freedom of the open water, dodges death at every turn, makes hazy the division between person and nonperson so that a more robust, ethical lexicon for black life might rise to the air” (173-74). Likewise, Isabel Hofmeyr argues that Black hydro-poetics “constitute the undersea as a potent source of ancestral memory and imagination” (23). I suggest Drexciya may be positioned as a way of reading Black hydro-poetics for Black liberation and creative possibility. Drexciya posits that Black people have a uniquely kindred relationship with the undersea that fostered the creation of a Black utopia entirely outside of hegemonic white supremacy and capitalist modernity. The Drexciyans mutated into the more-than-human and subsequently surpassed land-confined humanity in technological innovation, nautical abilities, and ethics. Drexciya is part of a larger Black radical tradition—which Isabel Hofmeyr and Charne Lavery note, “has always been engaged with the undersea” (35)—that is submarine.

There have been many previous efforts to center the Drexciyan myth as a generative example of African diasporic cultural practice. Indeed, the electronic duo was first brought to wider cultural awareness because of Kodwo Eshun’s work on Afrofuturism.<sup>3</sup> In “Further Considerations on Afrofuturism,” Eshun argues the group exemplifies the “aesthetic of estrangement” (300). Eshun is building upon Greg Tate’s claim that “Black people live the estrangement that science-fictions writers envision” (qtd. in Dery 212). For Eshun, the Drexciya myth is a quintessential Afrofuturist

project, and he argues, “Afrofuturism may be characterized as a program recovering the histories of counter-futures created in a century hostile to Afro-diasporic projection and as a space within which the critical work of manufacturing tools capable of intervention within the current political dispensation may be undertaken” (301). Similarly, Suzanna Chan examines Ellen Gallagher’s artistic interpretation of the Drexciyan myth and argues, “[It] feature[s] the black Atlantic in counter-memories that reinscribe the historical murder of African women through a myth of their survival and transformation into aquatic beings” (246). In the recently released *Dear Science and Other Stories*, Katherine McKittrick reads Drexciya “as collaborative sound-labor that draws attention to creative acts that disrupt disciplined ways of knowing,” and she describes the Drexciya myth as “a legible neo-slave narrative that promises a future [...] not arrived yet” (56). These critical endeavors explore the generative potential of Drexciya’s Afrofuturistic myth. Where I slightly depart from these previous attempts is that I believe the Drexciyan future has not yet arrived for us land-dwellers but *is* imaginatively available in the undersea space. The Drexciyan myth provides a framework to interrogate water-centric Black cultural production, and this praxis of submergence is a commitment to “The end of one thing . . . and the beginning of another” (*The Quest*). I am looking at African diasporic texts that, like Drexciya, submerge themselves undersea and explore the territory beneath the surface as a worthwhile place of creative exploration for Black people. The undersea is situated as a space of belonging and one that opens up a variety of African diasporic utopic potentialities. This is the potential of Drexciya as praxis.

There are three specific dimensions of Drexciya as praxis that I wish to elaborate upon: Black aquatic belonging, nonmodernity, and cross-species intimacy. Drexciya insists on Black aquatic belonging by suggesting that Black people have a uniquely privileged relationship with water and the undersea space. In 1995, Drexciya released a 12” EP entitled *Aquatic Invasion*, which features arguably the group’s most popular track “Wavejumper.” The EP’s sticker and liner notes introduce the “Drexciyan Tactical Seaforces” or “Wavejumpers” into the Drexciyan lore. These are a militant force who protect the Black utopia from potential enemies. The song “Wavejumper” includes a rare spoken-word moment where an elderly man says, “You must face the power of the black wave of Lardossa before you become a Drexciyan Wavejumpers.” The liner notes further elaborate on the Drexciyan Wavejumpers and ends with the sentence, “Aquatic knowledge for those who know.” Here, Drexciya articulates a key aspect of their mythology, which I am calling Black aquatic belonging. The Drexciyan Wavejumpers have the ability to face and subsequently harness

“the power of the black wave of Lardossa.” The praxis of Drexciya suggests that African-descended people have a special bond with the sea and hold “Aquatic knowledge.” Co-producer James Stinson believed that Drexciya’s music reflected water. In a rare interview, Stinson claimed that “water is the most powerful element on this planet” and “has many different properties.”<sup>4</sup> He went on to say, “And that’s the way we see our music—we can come in any different size or shape that we want depending on the rhythm of the song, how aggressive the song is, how transparent or how big it is, how clear, how diluted, how fast, how slow, it all depends—the same properties as water.” Drexciya as praxis suggests aquatic-centered African diasporic texts advocate that Black people hold a uniquely privileged relationship with the undersea.

A second key aspect of my argument is that the Drexciya myth embraces nonmodernity. In a 1991 interview with Paul Gilroy, Toni Morrison contended that enslaved Africans were the first moderns. Morrison’s argument has been significantly elaborated upon in African diasporic thought, and Eshun writes, “Her argument that the African slaves that experienced capture, theft, abduction, and mutilation were the first moderns is important for positioning slavery at the heart of modernity” (297). Modernity led to the cultural unmaking of enslaved Africans, which Hortense Spillers describes as follows: “Those African persons in ‘Middle Passage’ were literally suspended in the ‘oceanic,’ [...] in movement across the Atlantic, but they were also nowhere at all” (72). This line of thinking is indicative of one of the organizing principles of much African diasporic oceanic thought—the Middle Passage was a planned violent event where enslaved Africans were culturally unmade as modernity began. For those of us who believe modernity and capitalism are inherently tied up with the transatlantic slave trade, Drexciya provides an exemplary Black creative praxis because the Drexciyans defy modernity. According to the Drexciya myth, captive Africans were thrown overboard during the Middle Passage and adapted into “water breathing, aquatically mutated descendants of those unfortunate victims of human greed” (*The Quest*). Though created by the Middle Passage, the undersea space never experienced capitalist modernity and instead fosters a “black hydro-poetics that [...] relishes the freedom of the open water” (Bennett 173). The undersea world of Drexciya is a utopia precisely because it never experienced the modernity that infected the land.

Drexciya also opens up a cross-species intimacy between Drexciyans and the nonhuman beings that inhabit the ocean. Many of Drexciya’s song titles reference aquatic life including “Bottom Feeders” and “Organic Hydro-poly Spores” on *Neptune’s Lair*; “Song of the Green Whale” on *Harnessed The Storm*; “Sea Snake” on *Deep Sea Dweller*;

“Darthouven Fish Men” on *The Journey Home*; and “The Plankton Organization” on *Digital Tsunami*. Each of these titles reflects a familiarity with nonhuman aquatic life. Additionally, the group’s discography shows an awareness of other unknown forms of life found at “the uncharted blackness of [the ocean’s] very bottom” (Bennett 171). For example, Drexciya is inhabited by “Polymono Plexusgel” (from *Neptune’s Lair*), which Stinson described as a “gel that is alive but not alive.” He goes on to say, “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.” Drexciya as praxis allows Black artists to explore cross-species intimacy in the aquatic space. These three dimensions of Drexciya as praxis—Black aquatic belonging, nonmodernity, and cross-species intimacy—open up a variety of Afro-centric potentialities. The undersea provides a generative creative space that allows writers and artists of the African diaspora to imaginatively explore the ocean for possibility, belonging, and freedom.

The remainder of this chapter is concerned with applying Drexciya as an interpretive tool for oceanic moments in African diasporic cultural production. I examine three very different texts: Nikky Finney’s 2003 poem “The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau,” Michelle Cliff’s 1984 novel *Abeng*, and Lupe Fiasco’s “Wave” from his 2018 album *Drogas Wave*. I have chosen these works because they are examples of African diasporic texts that engage with the exciting potentials of the underwater space for Black community and belonging. Like Drexciya, these three works posit that people of the African diaspora hold a uniquely privileged relationship with the ocean, explore the generative potential of nonmodernity, and present cross-species intimacy. Through my close readings, I focus on Black aquatic belonging in “The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau,” nonmodernity in *Abeng*, and cross-species intimacy in “Wave.” In a final brief postscript on the praxis of Drexciya, I argue that land-based poetics and ethics are not enough to combat systematic racial discrimination and the traumatic history perpetuated by our climate of anti-Blackness. For this reason, creatively descending into the undersea space provides an opportunity to find racial justice.

### **Nikky Finney and Black Aquatic Belonging**

Water is a common theme in Nikky Finney’s poetry, and the word “water” is mentioned well over 100 times across her six poetry collections. The South Carolinian National Book Award-winning African American

poet has written about aquatic violence inflicted on African Americans (“Left”), the many storms that elderly Black southerners have survived (“My Time Up With You”), and has used nautical metaphors to represent the climate of antiblackness (“Auction Block of Negro Weather”). “The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau” from her 2003 collection *The World is Round* is a prime example of the poet’s career-long exploration of water and the submarine. Applying Drexciya as a reading praxis to Finney’s poem reveals a poet exploring the political and creative potentials of the undersea space for members of the African diaspora. The poem touches upon all three elements of Drexciya as praxis, but “The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau” is a particularly exemplary example of Black aquatic belonging.

Finney sketches a story from her childhood in “The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau.” It is the “summer of ’63,” and Finney is “only one Black girl / who belongs to the South” (31). The young protagonist of the poem is “never afraid to jump / in the deep end of the city pool” (31). The girl has been left home alone and knows she has “twenty-eight minutes / before Mama pulls into the yard, / sees me idle, leaps into her arias” (32). She turns on the television and sees the conservationist and filmmaker Jacques Cousteau sitting on the edge of a boat / named *Calypso*” (33). Though she does not trust white men, “there is something / watery about him that makes [her] / not turn away” (34). She begins to repeat the French words Cousteau says. On the screen, Cousteau shows off his Aqua-Lung invention which enables him to go underwater. The girl continues to speak Cousteau’s French, and Finney writes, “We are speaking the same language now, / a dialect of water and salt” (36). Finney then imagines every white man dropping “themselves over / the sides of their boats,” and she believes this might enable her to “get to know them too” (36). The girl’s mother pulls into the driveway, and the speaker of the poem hastily turns off the television. She relays to the reader her fear that “once out of the sea” Cousteau “will be / just another white man rising from the depths” (36). Remembering the “old water” that Cousteau showed her, Finney writes, “I felt / safe, safer than on any bloody land / ever walked, beneath the Confederate flag / of South Carolina in 1963” (37).

The summer of 1963 was a pivotal moment for the Civil Rights Movement as an unprecedented number of protests demanding racial justice swept across the United States. This was the summer Medgar Evers was assassinated, the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church was bombed in Birmingham, and Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his “I Have a Dream” speech. However, the young speaker of “The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau” is unaware of this tumultuous political reality. Finney references the racial violence occurring in 1963 when she describes herself as “A privileged one

/ who gets to walk to church / [...] without the pin of a bomb,” unlike the victims of the Birmingham Church Bombing (31). However, the young girl in the poem is “not allowed to watch TV news” but instead “encouraged to swim” (31). From the outset of the poem, Finney describes water as an alternative to social reality. The protagonist’s family insulates her from the TV news reporting on the violent responses to the Civil Rights Movement and instead encourages her to swim. The poem makes an ancestral claim to the undersea, and Finney makes a clear reference to enslaved Africans drowned during the Middle Passage when she writes, “My grandmother tells me that in every / body of water deep enough to drown / there are people we know” (31). As opposed to shying away from the history of aquatic violence wrought against Black people, Finney’s grandmother tells her, “I should learn to swim, eyes open” (31). The poem implies that the underwater space is a site of belonging for Black people, and Finney describes how the young girl in the poem is “never afraid to jump / in the deep end of the city pool” (31). The reference to the city pool is particularly striking given the ongoing history of racism<sup>5</sup> at public pools, but nevertheless, the underwater space is still presented as a counter to the racist and violent events occurring on the land. Over the first several lines of the poem, Finney repeatedly returns to the theme of Black aquatic belonging.

The poem suggests that submerging oneself into water opens up the possibility of racial equity underseas. The young Black girl in the poem intuitively understands she is “five parts water, three parts magnet / and positively electrical” (33). She also understands that she does not trust white men because she has seen them behave dangerously and violently. When the speaker of the poem first sees Jacques Cousteau, she describes him in decidedly aquatic terms as a “kind of hybrid fish / or tired seabird” (33). Cousteau mirrors the hybrid human-aquatic species of Drexciya, and Cousteau’s proximity and intimacy with the water allows the young southern Black girl of the poem to look upon him with a semblance of trust. Finney writes, “There is something / watery about him that makes me / not turn away” (34). The poem again reiterates that Black people have a uniquely kindred relationship with the sea with Finney writing, “I am more Atlantic than anything, / having been born there [...] / still having people, four-hundred- / year-old cousins, never met, still there” (36). Yet, Cousteau also demonstrates a deep familiarity with the water, and Cousteau’s close relationship with the aquatic opens up a moment where the young girl and Cousteau speak a shared “dialect of water and salt” (36). This is a radical moment of reconciliation because the young girl “disobey[s] the haunting of southern / Black girl routines and practice[s] / his every word” (35). Again, the poem is set in the American South during the summer of 1963;



the young Black girl protagonist is trusting Cousteau in spite of his white skin. Importantly, this moment where the girl and Cousteau are “speaking the same language” (36) only occurs after Cousteau “takes one backward splash” and submerges himself underwater (35). Finney writes, “We have nothing in common except this / wet salty place where suddenly I realize / we both are from” (36). The poem explores the potential for Black people to find safety and belonging in the aquatic space, and it even gestures toward the possibility of racial equity underwater.

Strikingly, the poem implies that water has transformational and, perhaps even, baptismal qualities for racist white men. Finney describes the dangerous tricks racist white men employ:

One thing is for certain I do not trust white men  
I know them as creatures  
who throw smoking things,  
hide their many hands, disappear  
out of sight. (34)

After the speaker of the poem develops an imaginative undersea bond with Cousteau, the girl wonders what would happen if “all the white men / in the world drop themselves over the sides of their boats” (36). She posits that she “might get to know them too” if they were underwater. Submerging the white body into the water seemingly disables the sleight of hand that makes these white men dangerous because their hands can no longer “disappear / out of sight” when slowed by the all-encompassing water (34). Finney also describes these men throwing “smoking things” (34), but this becomes an impossibility underwater as the fires of white rage are engulfed and extinguished. After considering the transformative qualities of water, the young protagonist returns to Cousteau and reveals her fear that once out of the water Cousteau will be “a land creature once again able to hurl / sizzling rocks and words, fire his gun, / then hide his hand so well” (36). The poem implies that Black aquatic belonging renders acts of racist violence impossible underwater. Instead, the young girl and Cousteau are equal once submerged—“He as fragile as it. We as vulnerable / as anything new” (37).

Of course, this is all an impossibility on the land. When Finney imagines “all the white men / in the world” dropping “themselves over / the sides of their boats,” there is a tacit understanding that this will not happen (36). Finney imagines the type of racial equity that an aquatic life would provide, but she, and by extension we, do not live in the water. The poem makes it clear that leaving the safety of the water is a dangerous act for Black people: “My fear: once out of the sea, he will be / just another white man rising from the depths” (36). However, the impossibility of inhabiting

the physical Black Atlantis does not foreclose the imaginative possibility of the undersea space as a site of Black aquatic belonging. Here, the temporality of the poem is key. At the close of the poem, the narrator describes as her mother “pulled the Buick all the way in” and the young girl hastily turns off the television before Cousteau “pulls himself / all the way out of the water” (36). Finney insists that Cousteau remain partially submerged. In the logic of the poem, the underwater remains a space of Black aquatic belonging and racial equity, and Finney refuses to allow Cousteau to return to the land. Finney closes the poem by writing:

There, in the old water, where always I felt  
Safe, safer than on any bloody land  
Ever walked, beneath the Confederate flag  
Of South Carolina in 1963. (37)

As opposed to the hegemonic white supremacy that has spread across the land, the underwater space remains an imaginative refuge and site of Black aquatic belonging for the young Black girl protagonist of “The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau.”

### **Michelle Cliff and Nonmodernity**

In the final pages of Michelle Cliff’s queer Caribbean bildungsroman *Abeng*, the twelve-year-old biracial protagonist Clare Savage dreams that she and her best friend Zoe “were fist-fighting by the river in St. Elizabeth” (165). In a decidedly aquatic dream sequence, Cliff describes how the white-passing Clare injures the dark-skinned Zoe before “making a compress of moss drenched in water to soothe the cut” (165). Clare awakens to discover her first period, and “propelled by her dream,” she walks to a stream to wash herself and describes how the water “made her feel better” (165). This final moment of aquatic wounding and healing is the culmination of an extremely water-centric novel. Over 166 pages, Clare slowly becomes aware of Jamaica’s colonial history, racism in her country, and her burgeoning queer sexual desires for her “dearest friend who was dark,” Zoe (126). Cliff once described her 1984 novel as an “autobiography,” and she claimed, “I was a girl similar to Clare and have spent most of my life and most of my work exploring my identity as a light-skinned Jamaican, the privilege and damage that comes from the identity” (qtd. in Dagbovie 96). Born in Kingston, Jamaica<sup>6</sup>, Michelle Cliff is part of a generation of Caribbean writers who defined “themselves in terms of their Caribbean origins [and] began to create new ways to represent Caribbeanness ... to reflect its multifaceted, creolized, nature” (Ilmonen 2). Unsurprisingly,

many critics have been attuned to Clare's growing racial and sexual consciousness in Cliff's seminal work.<sup>7</sup> However, studies of *Abeng* have neglected to examine the importance of water in the novel. Water is a central element of the text. The seminal moments in Clare's life like the aforementioned dream sequence (165), her first moment of sexual awakening (120), and her introduction to her racial privilege (122) occur when Clare is immersed in water. While the entirety of the novel demands a hydro-poetics reading, I am focusing specifically on the first chapter of the novel because it offers a particularly excellent example of the nonmodernity element of Drexciya as praxis.

The novel is set in 1958 when "Jamaica had two rulers: a white queen and a white governor" despite the fact that "The population of the island was primarily Black" (5). Cliff introduces her reader to the Savage family as they "get ready for church" (3). The protagonist, Clare Savage, has a mixed-race Black mother named Kitty and a white father named Boy. Over the first chapter, Cliff alternates between vignettes about the social and political climate of 1950s Jamaica and a story about the Savage family's Sunday spent at a middle-class Presbyterian church service and then at the beach. While at the beach, Boy Savage tells his daughter an Atlantis-inspired origin myth for Jamaica. Cliff writes, "He explained to her how the entire chain of the West Indies had once been underwater" (9). Boy then presents two Atlantis-inspired myths to Clare as possible explanations for the Caribbean:

Perhaps, he said to his daughter, the islands of the West Indies—particularly the Greater Antilles, which were said once to have been joined—were the remains of Atlantis, the floating continent Plato had written about in the *Timaeus*, that sank under the sea. It had been an ideal place, too good for this world. [...] "Or maybe the islands were an undersea mountain range, and emerged when Atlantis went under the Mediterranean. When the Volcano erupted in Crete." He paused again. "Some say that Crete and Atlantis were one," still trying to forge some connections between the pieces of knowledge he possessed, and how he wanted things to be. (9)

Boy is desperately searching for a myth that can explain the existence of the Caribbean, and he grasps at Atlantis for an answer. For Cliff, Boy's mythmaking is inherently tied up with the myth of whiteness. Rajeswari Mohan writes, "[Boy] seeks to establish Jamaica and his own family as direct and continuous extensions of the highest promise of European history and tradition" (1). Similar logic was used to justify British colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade. Later, Cliff describes the Savage family as

“fixed by color, class, and religion” and she notes, “over the years a carefully contrived mythology was constructed, which they used to protect their identities. When they were poor, and not all of them white, the mythology persisted” (29). When Boy describes his Atlantis-inspired myth to Clare, he is trying to pass on the racial capital of whiteness by grasping for an ancient myth to rationalize why this island of stolen land belongs to white people. For this very reason, we can understand Boy’s origin story of the Caribbean as a decidedly white supremacist myth that supports modernity.

*Abeng* is constantly contending with and challenging colonialism of the mind, and Mohan argues, “Cliff seems to view historiography as a profoundly revolutionary project, requiring social upheaval and massive political change, more so than decolonization or the mere cultural rejuvenation of the nation” (13). I would add that Cliff uses the underwater space to support her historiographic mission and challenge modernity. At the close of the first chapter, Cliff destabilizes Boy’s Atlantis-inspired myths by having the water reject him. After the family arrives at the beach, Cliff describes Boy Savage stepping into the water and encountering a shark: “He claimed a shark had swum up right beside his thigh and touched him” (10). Boy leaps out of the water in a panic. Cliff writes, “Mrs. Savage went into the water to prove it was safe now, and the girls, Clare and Jennie, who was seven, followed her. But it was no use. ‘As God is my judge,’ Mr. Savage vowed, ‘I am never going into the sea again—never’” (10). Boy is the only ‘white’ person in this midst, and he is traumatized by his interaction with the water. The other characters are of African-descent and can enter the water unimpeded, and they exemplify Bennet’s argument that “black hydro-poetics [...] relishes the freedom of the open water” (173). Indeed, throughout the rest of *Abeng*, Clare and her friend Zoe repeatedly play in the water, and this aquatic play allows Clare to explore and understand her racial and sexual identities. By contrast, Boy is purged by the sea after his first contact with the underwater. Boy exemplifies modernity and European colonialism with his commitment to white supremacy and mythmaking, and the water’s rejection of Boy is a simultaneous rejection of his ideology. *Abeng* embraces aquatic nonmodernity by denying Boy access to the water.

### **Lupe Fiasco and Cross Species Intimacy**

In 2018, Lupe Fiasco released a twenty-one-track double album entitled *DROGAS Wave*, which tells a familiar nautical afro-futurist tale. Describing his concept album, Fiasco said, “*DROGAS Wave* is based on a story about a group of slaves that jumped off of a slave ship transporting

them from Africa. The slaves did not drown, and instead somehow managed to live under the sea. They spent the rest of their underwater existence sinking slave ships” (qtd. in Espinoza). While Fiasco does not cite Drexciya as an inspiration, his Black Atlantis myth shares many elements with the Detroit group’s mythology. Fiasco names his imagined African-Aquatic species LongChains, and they have clear resonances with the Drexciyan Wavejumpers as both forces protect their respective underwater Black utopias. Of the three texts examined in this chapter, *DROGAS Wave* is the best fit for a Drexciya as praxis reading due to the obvious overlaps between the two imagined utopias. The album undoubtedly exemplifies every dimension of Drexciya as praxis with “WAV Files” and “Halie Selassie” advocating for Black aquatic belonging while “Manilla” and “Gold vs. The Right Things to Do” epitomize nonmodernity. For the purpose of this chapter, I am particularly interested in the song “Down,” featuring Nikki Jean, because the song is a clear example of cross-species intimacy between nonhuman aquatic beings and African-descended peoples. Similar to Drexciya, “Down” imagines kinship between nonhuman oceanic life and the LongChains, and this cross-species partnership bolsters the underwater Black utopia that *DROGAS Wave* imagines. A brief reading of the song’s lyrics brings us to the final element of Drexciya as praxis.

“Down” begins with the chorus sung by Lupe Fiasco and Nikki Jean from the perspective of the LongChains:

Fish is my friends and the whales is my homies.  
 Octopuses my people, the shrimp, they all know me.  
 The sharks is my n—s, the dolphins is with us.  
 The crabs is my comrades, the seahorse be holdin' us down.  
 Jellyfish, they just be rollin' around.  
 Lobsters is cool, they are not food,  
 They part of the crew,  
 And that mean they down (that mean they down).

From the outset, Fiasco suggests that the LongChains have a cross-species relationship with various submarine life. This kinship goes beyond simple coexistence as Fiasco uses phrases connotated with intimacy such as “my people,” “with us,” and “part of the crew.” Further, the repeated “holdin’ us down” and “they down” suggests that the nonhuman animals are ‘down’ for the cause of Black liberation. In Fiasco’s imagination, the underwater space is one where all of the beings work toward Black liberation and equity.

The verses of “Down” delve further into the mythology of the LongChains. Fiasco begins the first verse by rapping: “Life Aquatic, product of the passage, ooh. Stay there with me, lookin' like Atlantis.” The

LongChains, like Drexciya, were brought into being through the Middle Passage, but they have developed an underwater utopia, which Fiasco makes clear when he raps, “We're off to build another planet.” The undersea area is a peaceful utopia where the LongChains can “just be floatin’.” This utopia is bolstered by the partnerships between the LongChains and various underwater creatures, which is emphasized in the subsequent verses and the choruses. The second verse speaks about how Africans were thrown “in the water, execution” but the LongChains survived and created a community with “the sharks and the dolphins.” Similar to Drexciya, the LongChains develop an alternative relationship with nonhuman life. In our non-submerged world, animals are routinely tortured and killed, and Philip J. Sampson notes, “The most common way of talking about animals has always been pragmatic, emphasizing the human ability to make use of their bodies and labour” (17). “Wave” is a disavowal of the mistreatment of animals—“Lobsters is cool, they are not food.” As opposed to land-based humanity’s exploitation and defilement of nonhuman life, the undersea space allows the LongChains to develop an ethical cross-species bond with nonhuman life and surpass the immorality of land-confined humanity’s mistreatment of the nonhuman. “Down” reveals a cross-species intimacy where every being is working towards Black liberation and ethical treatment of nonhuman animals.

### Postscript

While Gerald Donald continues to make music using a variety of aliases, Drexciya ended with James Stinson’s sudden death in 2002 at the age of 32. However, Drexciya’s legacy lives on. Since 2005, the website Drexciya Research Lab has gathered and shared any and all news about Drexciya and created a near-total archive of the group’s work. In 2020, Detroit-based techno visual artist Abdul Qadim Haqq and Japanese screenwriter Dai Satō released the graphic novel *The Book of Drexciya*, detailing the mythology and lore of the underwater Black utopia. In 2022, Tresor Records announced they were re-issuing special editions of the entire Drexciya catalog. Drexciya’s myth continues to grow and inspire. As this chapter has hopefully revealed, the Drexciya myth provides a generative praxis for interpreting Black cultural production that engages with the undersea space and allows artists and their audience to explore underwater for possibility, belonging, and freedom for members of the African diaspora. Further, it is my hope that Drexciya’s discography and mythos offer us a potential praxis to imagine beyond the land. To put it bluntly, we are broken. For 400 years, our land-based attempts at racial justice have

failed. Through the framework of submergence, we can find an alternative way into knowledge and perhaps even racial justice. Perhaps we can read Drexciya's Black hydro-poetics as a referendum on a broken system. Perhaps land-based poetics are not enough to combat systematic racial discrimination and the traumatic history perpetuated by our climate of anti-Blackness. Perhaps it is only "There, in the old water" where racial justice can be found, and perhaps Drexciya can provide us with a praxis of getting imaginatively closer to the underwater space.

### Notes

1. I would like to thank Isabel Hofmeyr for her comments on an earlier version of this chapter. I would also like to thank Sharon A. Lewis and Ama Wattley for their editorial feedback.
2. I follow Jayna Brown's formulation of utopia that she outlines in *Black Utopias*. She argues Black people are "Unburdened by investments in belonging to a system created to exclude us in the first place" and thus "develop marvelous modes of being in and perceiving the universe" (7). She goes on to suggest "that there is real power to be found in such an untethered state—the power to destabilize the very idea of human supremacy and allow for entirely new ways to relate to each other and to the postapocalyptic ecologies, both organic and inorganic, in which we are enmeshed. I argue that those of us who are dislocated on the planet are perfectly positioned to break open the stubborn epistemological logics of human domination" (7).
3. Cultural critic Mary Dery defined Afrofuturism in his article "Black to the Future," which also contained interviews with science fiction writer Samuel Delany and cultural critics Greg Tate and Tricia Rose. Dery writes, "African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future—might, for want of a better term, be called 'Afrofuturism'" The notion of Afrofuturism gives rise to a troubling antinomy: Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures?" (180). For more on Afrofuturism, see Eshun, Kodwo. "Further Considerations of Afrofuturism" and Samatar, Sofia. "Toward a Planetary History of Afrofuturism."
4. All quotes from James Stinson are pulled from his 1999 interview with Andrew Duke.

5. For more on the history of segregation and racism in public swimming pools, see McGhee, Heather. *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together*.
6. Cliff’s family moved to New York in the early 1960s, though the family’s economic status allowed them to travel to and from Jamaica over the intervening years. According to Kaisa Ilmonen, Cliff’s “parents could and wanted to pass as white” (7). Cliff, however, called this racial passing “a schizophrenic experience” and embraced her biracial identity (qtd. in Adisa 275). As an adult, Cliff always defined herself as “a Jamaican woman,” and her debut novel *Abeng* is set in Jamaica (Schwartz, 598).
7. Early critics of the novel often focused on Clare’s social position as a white-passing girl of color and read the novel as Clare’s coming-of-age within a racially stratified society. For example, Suzanne Bost situates Clare as part of the tragic mulatta tradition, and she argues, “Cliff’s work, while retaining roots in Jamaican culture, also moves fluidly from the Caribbean to Europe to the United States” (679). More recently, critics have examined lesbianism and queerness in the text. Timothy Chin applies a queer theory lens to the novel, and he argues, “Cliff inscribes a revisionary account that challenges not only the Eurocentric premises of conventional historiography but also its phallogentric and heterosexist assumptions as well” (90). Likewise, Jennifer Thorington Springer argues, “*Abeng* reveals that in popular Caribbean culture, neither interracial nor homosexual relationships are tolerated” (54).

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