

Bodies of Water in
African American
Literature, Music,
and Film

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Edited by

Sharon A. Lewis and Ama S. Wattley

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For Brian

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INTRODUCTION

SHARON A. LEWIS & AMA S. WATTLEY

Bodies of Water in African American Literature, Film and Music is a collection of original essays exploring the meaning of and/or human connection to still or moving bodies of water—lakes, rivers, oceans, gulfs, bayous, streams, ponds, creeks, canals, for example—in 20th and 21st century narratives by African Americans. Throughout the canon of African American literature, a host of autobiographical, poetic, fictional and visual works are set on or near bodies of water. In fact, the entire tradition of African American artistic production brims with waterways as symbols. Too many to mention, across history and several genres, we need only recollect Langston Hughes’s poem, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” (1921); Zora Neale Hurston’s Janie’s time spent on the “muck,” the Floridian Everglades, and Lake Okeechobee in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937); Robert Hayden’s 1945 poem, “Middle Passage”; Gloria Naylor’s novel, *Mama Day* (1988), which takes place in fictional Willow Springs, a barrier Sea Island; “The Combahee River Statement” (the title alluding to Harriet Tubman’s 1863 raid freeing over 700 enslaved Black people on a Combahee River ferry in South Carolina); Michelle Cliff’s novel, *Free Enterprise* (1993) which not only alludes to the Mississippi River as “The Old Man. The Big Muddy. The Father of Waters” (4) on which a major character dwells but also includes a chapter, “On the High Seas Hurricane Coming On” in which Mary Ellen Pleasant ferries the Atlantic Ocean from Boston to Martha’s Vineyard; Lucille Clifton’s commemorative poem, “Blessing the Boats” (2000); Yusef Komunyakaa’s essay, “Dark Waters” (2002); and August Wilson’s play *Gem of the Ocean* (2003). Several of Toni Morrison’s novels feature bodies of water, as well: the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers (*Beloved*); Sula’s unintentional river drowning of Chicken Little (*Sula*); Shadrack, a fisherman, lives on a riverbank (*Sula*); *Tar Baby*’s shipwrecked Son Green walks out of the sea onto an island’s shores; in *Song of Solomon*, Milkman and Sweet go swimming in a river, an experience which becomes a “watershed” moment for Milkman; Rebekka crosses the Atlantic Ocean from Europe to the United States, and an enigmatic Sorrow survives a

shipwreck and washes ashore in *A Mercy*; finally, a coastal resort hotel, Amber Cove, figures in *Love*.

In addition to explorations in literature, not surprisingly, bodies of water have been a feature of much African American music as well, beginning with the spirituals through the blues to contemporary R&B, hip hop, and rap. For example, in “History of Hymns: ‘Wade in the Water,’” C. Michael Hawn notes that because water was an integral element of slavery, and often freedom, “Water is an important image in the African American spiritual. ‘Deep river, my home is over Jordan’ . . . is a song that finds hope on the other side of the river. ‘Go Down, Moses’ . . . is a spiritual of deliverance in which Pharaoh’s armies were drowned in the sea.” Other spirituals/gospel songs such as “Wade in the Water,” often referred to as “God’s Gonna Trouble the Water,” and “Down by The Riverside;” blues songs such as Bessie Smith’s “Backwater Blues;” contemporary rap, hip hop, and R&B songs such as Jay-Z’s “Oceans,” Mary J. Blige’s “Mighty River,” and Beyoncé’s “Nile” all include lyrics that reference bodies of water. Within these song lyrics, as in literature and film, bodies of water have varied meanings as sites of liberation, spiritual renewal and release, but also of trauma and past memories.

In terms of films, Kasi Lemmons’s *Eve’s Bayou* (1997), is a spellbinding movie which incorporates into its 1960’s Louisiana setting a tranquil, murky, shadowy bayou. Denzel Washington’s debut directing of *Antwone Fisher* (2002) offers memorable moments on bodies of water as the lead character is a naval seaman. Other relevant films include Matty Rich’s *The Inkwell* (1994) set on Martha’s Vineyard, Massachusetts, and the documentaries, *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* by Spike Lee (2006) and Rhasaan Nichols’s “*Walking on Water*”: *A Brief History of Black Surfers* (2019).

Bodies of Water in African Diaspora & African America History

Any study of Black American interaction with waterways must begin with the acknowledgment of the ways in which continental African people engaged geographical water. W. Jeffrey Bolster contends that, “[m]any Africans, for instance, felt the power of the water in profound and immediate ways. Across West Africa, the surface of the water served variously in myth and ritual as the boundary through which spiritual communications occurred” (62). For example, illustrious African goddesses of bodies of water are Abena (river), Oshun (a river deity), Yemaya, (a Yoruba goddess of the sea), and Olokun (Yoruba ruler of all bodies of

water). Moreover, anyone remotely familiar with African American folklore recalls *The People Could Fly*, Virginia Hamilton's retelling of a collection of folktales grounded in African American storytelling tradition, for example, animal and cautionary tales. The story by the same title imagines enslaved African people magically flying up and over the sea, liberating themselves from American bondage and returning to their African homelands.

Deploying a socio-historical interpretive approach, our volume underscores the question of the relationship of African Americans to bodies of water and harkens back to the culture's foundational story of the Transatlantic Middle Passage: the oral to the written telling of the inhuman conditions within European slave ships' Atlantic Ocean transport of captured and enslaved African people to the Americas for the purpose of centuries-long depraved unpaid capitalist labor. That is to say that the earliest African American creative enterprises typically give voice to the Middle Passage as a metaphor for suffering and death.

African American and African Diaspora Studies scholar Tyler Parry, addressing the question of the historical role of water for African Americans, determines that "water holds a dual role in the history of Black culture and intellectual thought [we would add "fictional," as well]. In one sense, water is an arena for resistance that liberates, nourishes, and sanctifies a people, but it can also be weaponized by hegemonic forces seeking to degrade, poison, or eliminate rebellious populations" (3). Parry goes on to assert that because water was, especially in continental African coastal communities, a "symbol of spiritual renewal and physical pleasure," African Americans, in spite of the horror of the Middle-Passage, must "reclaim water as a cultural space" (5).

In 1995, Elizabeth Schultz penned an exhaustive survey of African American literature's depictions of bodies of water, one which focused primarily on the Atlantic Ocean. Schultz argues that "from the time of eighteenth-century slave narratives, the sea, as image and element, is represented by [B]lack Americans as touching their lives and extending their imaginations (233). Schultz contends that, having survived the Middle Passage, even while enslaved in the Americas, Black people, especially those dwelling on the seacoast, "sought escape from slavery by the sea" and "found that the sea provided various means of employment" (237) in, for instance, whaling and fishing. In fact, Schultz cites Langston Hughes's work, *The Big Sea*, as conveying the notion of the sea as "tranquil," as "a source of imagination," and as a symbol of "possibilities" (245). Having traced the evolution of representations of the ocean in both literature and film from longing, torment and death, to a site of liberation, rebirth and

neutrality, Schultz turns to the tradition of African American women writers to challenge and expand bifurcated ways of thinking about “bodies of water” (253). With writers like Paule Marshall, Ntozake Shange, and Toni Morrison in mind, Schultz discovers that within the African American collective psyche, the Middle Passage is full of “mythic possibilities for creation and transformation. ...a passage into wisdom and life” (259). She goes on to maintain that African American creative expressivists wield a heightened awareness of the binary either/or essence of the sea for African Americans, thus: “The Middle Passage as a ‘voyage through death’ becomes a passage into wisdom and life” (259). Rejecting the conventional devastation of the sea, Schultz offers an analysis which collapses duality and embraces both tragic death and spirited survival.

We would be remiss if we did not integrate the scholarship of Tara T. Green’s re-examination of the Atlantic Ocean in African American literature. Green opens her work with a description of the people of the African diaspora’s “collective historical memories of the Middle Passage” (2). She, like her predecessor, Schultz, goes on to establish that stories of the Middle Passage typically “represent suffering,” but, she also notes a “release from suffering (i.e., freedom through death)” (2). Ultimately, Green goes on to “analyze the role of resistance in the construction of a transformed identity resulting from engagement with the vast presence of water” (3).

Like Green, many contemporary literary theorists no longer read the Middle Passage as exclusively traumatic, as a burial ground, or as symbolic bifurcation of the continents of Africa and Americas. Rather, Green’s impeccable research contends that “African-descended writers and artists recognize the Middle Passage as a historical and figurative place for discovery. ...To be sure, it was there—in the Middle Passage—that forms of Black resistance to social death were born” (4).

What makes our volume unique and vital are the ways in which the contributors undertake “with” Green an effort to re-envision—without refutation or disparagement—those earlier readings of the Middle Passage and to introduce more recent primary and secondary works which embody a reconsideration of the founding examinations of bodies of water. Each offers supplemental, distinctive, and equally stimulating ways of reading African American relationships to bodies of water as vast and deep as the Atlantic Ocean and as narrow and shallow as a creek. Alive and natural, the water moves over terrain and connects national shores. More significantly, bodies of water in these narratives provide passage, comfort, healing, beauty, sustenance (physical, psychological, spiritual), as well as dread, trauma and death. More specifically, though, the critical voices gathered

here insist on dismantling dualistic renderings of African American existence and experience as monolithic and oppositional.

Our volume spotlights analyses which acknowledge the legitimacy of and move beyond the familiar or traditional interpretations of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, namely memory, genocide, trauma, and affliction. Throughout this collection, readers discover a meaningful convergence of customary and innovative ways to contemplate how bodies of water function in the prevailing African American imagination. Contributors propose informed and provocative examinations of images of water in 20th and 21st century African American literature, film, and music in landmark works by such artists as Sterling Brown, Julie Dash, and Blind Lemon Jefferson, as well as more recent works by Jesmyn Ward, Beyoncé, and Rivers Solomon, to name a few.

African American Ecocriticism

Undertaking this project, it was evident that “bodies of water” has been a frequent trope across the entire history of African American innovative endeavours and has cultivated an enormous, diverse, and complex theoretical approach in ecocriticism. Therefore, along with socio-historical interpretive strategies, this collection is underpinned and fueled by African American ecocriticism. Ecocriticism, in and of itself, is a widely accepted (albeit evolving) cross-disciplinarian analytical technique. According to research scholar Nasrumullah Mambrol:

Ecocriticism investigates the relation between humans and the natural world in literature. It deals with how environmental issues, cultural issues concerning the environment and attitudes towards nature are presented and analyzed. One of the main goals in ecocriticism is to study how individuals in society behave and react in relation to nature and ecological aspects. . . . It is . . . a fresh way of analyzing and interpreting literary texts, which brings new dimensions to the field of literary and theoretical studies.

Mambrol cites Joseph Meeker as the first to use the term “literary ecology” in his book *The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology* and William Rueker as the first to coin the term “ecocriticism” in 1978, but notes that the study of ecocriticism came to prominence during the mid-1990s. Quite fundamentally, “[t]he essential assumptions, ideas and methods of ecocritics may be summed up as follows: (1) Ecocritics believe that human culture is related to the physical world. (2) Ecocriticism assumes that all life

forms are interlinked. Ecocriticism expands the notion of ‘the world’ to include the entire ecosphere” (Mambrol).

As has been the case with most other interpretive methodologies, ecocriticism is sourced in a doctrine of “universalism,” that is, an all-encompassing, undifferentiated “human” link to nature, a discourse lacking attention to distinct ways of being and seeing. The omission of the intersectionality of race, gender and class-based conceptions, summons consideration of, for example, Afrocentric perspectives of and relationships with the wilderness, at large, and, in our case, bodies of water, specifically. African American ecocriticism interrogates how African Americans think about and co-exist with ecological and natural aspects of society. Familiar with the cultural chasm of early ecocritical thought, several scholars of African American art forms are vastly interested in closing that gap and, by extension, contributing to the development of Ecocriticism as a body of study. In particular, additional theoretical inspiration for this edition claims Kimberly N. Ruffin’s *Black on Earth: African American Ecoliterary Traditions* (2010), Kimberly K. Smith’s *African American Environmental Thought* (2007), and Anissa Janine Wardi’s *Water and African American Memory: An Ecocritical Perspective* (2011) all pioneering works in African American ecocriticism. While Ruffin’s, Smith’s & Wardi’s studies are not the first or only to explore elements of nature within African American expressivity (see *Ride Out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature* by Melvin Dixon, 1987), each brings together a set of reading tactics lending themselves to further enriching and robust interrogations of Black Americans’ creative affiliations with nature, in the broadest sense.

Ruffin reads a wide assortment of Black American texts from an environmental perspective, exclusively. Not only does she challenge the norm, namely, nature as experienced and defined by Euro-Americans, but she identifies a Black American ecocritical tradition. Ruffin finds a dearth of “investigation(s) of the language and categories of ecological art” (13) and sets out to establish and illuminate African American connection to and representations of nature, from trees and soil to animals and water. While Ruffin acknowledges bodies of water as pertinent to ecoliterary study, her research is more generic and less focused on African American connection to and literary representations of waterbodies.

In her Introduction to *African American Environmental Thought*, Kimberly K. Smith provides a conventional definition of “environmental thought,” as,

a set of ideas and arguments aimed at preserving the wilderness and maintaining a viable ecosystem....Under that definition,

there is little in the black political tradition that qualifies. But that definition is too narrow, I believe; it excludes too many voices and perspectives on humans' relationship to nature (3).

Smith's undertaking affords a singular and comprehensive analysis of African American relationship to land, economic property and agriculture, all rooted in enslaved people's first American locations on free-labor plantations. Smith is ultimately interested in tracing the ways in which Black Americans have engaged in political activism concerning the environment. Reflections about nature as proffered by Smith's work is, unequivocally, a place to begin, but "nature" comprises more than geology, wildlife, atmosphere, the merely living, itself. While we might intellectually employ Smith's thinking about Black America and the environment, at large, we, here, are focused on "water".

And, the motif of water is where Wardi's research is not just ground-breaking but fundamental to our project. Wardi studies African American literature which "illustrate the indelible relationship between bodies of water and human bodies" (19). For example, her reading of August Wilson's play, *Gem of the Ocean*, "offers continual reminders that water is inherently paradoxical in African American cultural history, offering physical and psychic healing while standing as a reminder of violence and death" (28). Spotlighting images of bodies of water in "literary, filmic, and cultural texts," from an ecocritical lens, Wardi goes so far as to posit that African American expressivity engenders a "redefinition of ecocriticism" (14). The essays collected here embody not only a rethinking of extant meanings of ecocriticism, but also summon new ways of reading water imagery in artistic narratives, subsequently commending, building upon, and intensifying Wardi's work.

Gathered here are chapters which address something of the following questions, all intended to augment African American artistic theorizing, environmental and/or ecocritical meditation: What roles do bodies of water play in African American art forms? More specifically, how does the trope of waterways get interwoven into works by African American writers and filmmakers? How do waterbodies operate within and across African American storytelling? What is the relationship between characters and bodies of water within a particular text? Another way to phrase that question would be to examine the ways in which bodies of water impact on, thwart or enhance the experiences of the character(s). What seems to be the link between water and the collective African American cultural and socio-historical experience? What are the ways in which ecocriticism might be an auspicious framework for pondering bodies of water in African American

innovative works? Finally, what do the authors seem to convey to readers about bodies of water in the context of the narrative at large?

Chapter Essays¹

So much African American storytelling is set on United States' coastlines, riverbanks, oceans, and estuaries; involves the navigation of bodies of water; or personifies the location of both spiritual and material nourishment from water bodies, at least. We have discovered a new collection of literary voices, authors who are retelling the Middle Passage story with attention to the Atlantic Ocean "and" to the enslaved people's journey across the sea, from West Africa to the United States. That is, not the journey in isolation or, better yet, removed from the sea. Such a re-adjustment, a re-focusing, opens up a space in which to examine the Earth's bodies of water as these are experienced by African Americans, themselves. Hence, our volume complicates, extends and deepens, offering rich and refreshing possibilities for reading African American narratives.

Ultimately, what all the artists across several forms and scholars contemplating those forms assembled here seem to share is the notion of bodies of water in African American creative endeavors as embodied. That is, the combined interpretations assembled in this work recognize waterways as a material force awakening the necessity of developing complementary and radical interpretations, other ways of seeing, knowing, and locating meaning within and articulating human existence in all its various manifestations.

*

In Austin Anderson's essay, "Aquatic Knowledge for Those Who Know': Drexciya as Praxis," he draws upon both music and literature to make and apply his argument, revisiting and reimagining the Middle Passage through the music of Drexciya, the electronic techno duo made up of producers James Stinson and Gerald Donald who, beginning with their 1992 album, *Deep Sea Dwellers*, and continuing on in several of their other musical recordings, imagined an underwater world of the same name (Drexciya) inhabited by the children born of pregnant African women captured and thrown overboard during the Middle Passage. Anderson argues that as a result of the utopian Black Atlantis which Drexciya presents, the Drexciya myth can serve as a praxis for Black hydro-poetics whereby African diasporic people have a special relationship with the sea, and the ocean becomes a site of "possibility, belonging, and freedom" (17) for them

rather than one of trauma and death. Using songs from selected Drexciya EP's, Anderson highlights three key aspects of Drexciya as praxis: "belonging, nonmodernity, and cross-species intimacy" (19), and then uses close readings of Nikki Finney's poem "The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau," Michelle Cliff's novel *Abeng*, and the rap lyrics from Lupe Fiasco's album *Drogas Wave* to illustrate how these elements can be used to read Black diasporic texts involving oceanic submergence. He examines belonging in Finney's poem; nonmodernity in scenes from Cliff's novel; and cross-species intimacy in Fiasco's lyrics, thus illustrating how the trope of waterways gets interwoven into works by African American writers and musicians.

In "The Ocean as a Queer Black Utopian Space: Rivers Solomon's *The Deep*," Hatice Bay continues in the same vein as Austin Anderson of examining the interwovenness of the trope of waterways in the works of African American writers and musicians through her discussion of Rivers Solomon's *The Deep*, an Afrofuturistic novella inspired by the same Drexciya myth from the music producers James Stinson and Gerald Donald of which Anderson writes and that revisits and reimagines the Middle Passage. Solomon's novella presents a mermaid society known as the Wanjiru comprised of the offspring of pregnant, captured Africans who were tossed or jumped overboard during the Middle Passage voyage. The protagonist of the novella, Yetu, is a young woman who has inherited the gift of memory and serves as the historian of the group but is burdened by her task of carrying the collective memories of the Wanjiru from the beginning of time, which she does all year long except for a few days when she dispenses this history to the rest of the society during an annual remembering ceremony. As a result, Yetu abandons her underwater society in a search for freedom and an individual identity. Using a Black utopian theoretical framework to closely analyze the novella and its protagonist, Bay examines what Solomon seems to convey to readers about bodies of water in the context of her novella and concludes that *The Deep* is a Black utopian text in which Solomon imagines the ocean as a site where alternative dimensions of existence and alternative social structures pertaining to gender fluidity, resistance, freedom, history, and memory are constructed. Thus, like Anderson, Bay posits that the ocean is more than merely a site of trauma and pain, but instead, is a space of resilience, resistance, and flexibility.

In Jill Goad's "'In the Water, Our Reflection Trembled': Water and Liminal Identity in Natasha Trethewey's Poetry," and Catherine Gooch's "'Wave Through the Waters': Water Imagery in Beyoncé's Visual Album *Lemonade*," the two authors examine the relationship between characters/subjects/personas and bodies of water, as well as the link between

water and the collective African American cultural and socio-historical experience. Goad points out former United States poet laureate Natasha Tretheway's acknowledgment of the centrality of bodies of water in much of her poetry, and analyzes selected poems from Tretheway's 2018 volume, *Monument*. The poems in this volume contain numerous references to bodies of water that Tretheway uses to represent her experiences growing up in the southern state of Mississippi as the biracial daughter of a Black mother and white father, and how her individual history relates to the communal history of the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Goad argues that bodies of water in Tretheway's poems act as "liminal spaces for personal and historical identity exploration," capturing the sense of being betwixt and between that Tretheway often felt when conflicted about her place in the world, especially in her southern homeland. Through her analysis of Tretheway's poems, Goad concludes that the link between water and the collective African American cultural and socio-historical experience is one that encompasses past and present, living and dead, individual and collective.

Similarly, in Catherine Gooch's essay, "'Wave Through the Waters': Water Imagery in Beyoncé's Visual Album *Lemonade*," past and future, individual and communal, personal and historical collide as Gooch examines the 2016 visual album/film, *Lemonade*, of singer-songwriter Beyoncé and argues that despite the focus of most critics on the album as one about her marital relationship to rapper Jay-Z, the album is more so one about Beyoncé's growth as a woman and an acknowledgment of the many Black women who have nurtured and inspired that development. Gooch argues that the abundance of visual footage of bodies of water and southern landscapes populated by Black women within the film serve as sources of female strength, empowerment, and unapologetic blackness, as these landscapes and the waterways connected to them are reclaimed from being sites of danger to ones that center Black lives and experiences. Moreover, these waterways serve as the vessels that facilitate Beyoncé's journey (or that of the character she plays) to selfhood.

Catherine Gooch's essay on Beyoncé's visual album *Lemonade* hearkens back to another text that features visual images of bodies of water within a southern landscape populated by strong Black women: Julie Dash's classic 1996 film *Daughters of the Dust*, set on a South Carolina Sea Island where the Pleazant women reside. Anissa Wardi examines Dash's film in her essay "*Daughters of the Dust* and the Poetry of Water" through an ecocritical lens whereby she theorizes its presentation of various bodies of waters as "interrelated sites of diasporic connection" (115). Wardi links the camera Dash uses in her filmmaking to that of the kaleidoscope used by a

character within the film to demonstrate how Dash is able to create a “kaleidoscopic effect” within the film whereby “interrelated patterns emerge” (110). Wardi demonstrates how bodies of water render layered histories just as Dash’s camera presents multiple storylines simultaneously, and she argues that the Peazant family’s migration from the Gullah community of the Sea Islands to the mainland North at the turn of the 20th century highlights waterways as migratory routes and as living sites of history and memory.

The remaining three essays all have historical natural disasters as the setting, backdrop, or context for the texts under discussion whereby bodies of water overflowed, causing flooding that impacted the lives of countless people. Yesmina Khedir’s essay examines Jesmyn Ward’s 2011 novel *Salvage the Bones* that takes place in the days leading up to, during, and in the aftermath of 2005’s Hurricane Katrina, while Catherine Gooch’s essay on 1920s blues music and record company advertisements and Ama Wattley’s essay on selected poems of Harlem Renaissance poet Sterling Brown both have the Mississippi Flood of 1927 as the backdrop for their respective discussions.

In “In the Wake of Hurricane Katrina: Water Imagery in Jesmyn Ward’s *Salvage the Bones*,” Yesmina Khedir contemplates the development of the novel’s protagonist, Esch, a motherless fifteen-year-old pregnant teenager who lives in Mississippi with her father and three brothers as the family awaits the arrival of the hurricane. Unlike Beyonce’s visual film *Lemonade* which includes scenes of female community in which Beyonce pays homage to the Black women who helped to guide her in her growth and development, Esch, in Ward’s novel is without a female community. With no mother, sisters, or female friends, Esch looks to mythological figures and her brother’s pregnant female pitbull to help her come to terms with what it means to be a mother. Using both hydrofeminist and trauma/memory theory, Khedir argues that in addition to the flood waters causing death and destruction that recalls the Middle Passage, they have a transformative effect upon Esch when she has a near-drowning experience that causes her to embrace her maternal subjectivity. Thus, Khedir concludes that bodies of water in the novel serve a double meaning, as sites of both death and rebirth.

Some eighty years before Hurricane Katrina’s damaging effects, the Mississippi Flood of 1927 took place, causing catastrophic damage and death across several states. In Catherine Gooch’s essay “High Water Everywhere”: The Mississippi River in 20th Century Blues Music and Race Record Ads,” she examines how Black blues musicians documented the tragic effects of this event through their blues lyrics, letting their audiences

know the impact the rising flood waters from the Mississippi River had on Black communities. Closely reading the lyrics of Blind Lemon Jefferson's "Rising High Water Blues" and Charley Patton's "High Water Everywhere" Parts I & II about the Mississippi Flood of 1927 and juxtaposing them with an analysis of the record company's advertisements for these songs, Gooch argues that just like during slavery, the Mississippi River once again becomes a site of trauma for Black people while being a source of exploitation and commodification for the white power structure. She contends that while these blues artists were singing about "the Mississippi's power to exploit and oppress" the community (62-63), the record company sought to exploit the natural disaster for its own financial gain. Not only did they profit off of these blues artists' songs about the Flood while underpaying and taking advantage of the artists, but in their advertisements for these songs, the record companies often reduced the Flood and its impact to a fantastical event, used language that showed callousness toward the trauma suffered by Black communities that were negatively affected by the Flood, and eventually, erased the reality of the Flood from its promotion of these songs.

The Mississippi Flood of 1927 also serves as the historical backdrop for Ama Wattlely's analysis of two of three Sterling Brown poems in her essay "River Symbolism in Three Sterling Brown Poems," and like the blues artists in Catherine Gooch's essay above who document "the Mississippi's power to exploit and oppress" the community (62-63), so too does Brown in his three poems. Wattlely's chapter provides a close reading of Brown's "Children of the Mississippi," "Foreclosure," and "Riverbank Blues," and argues that unlike many of his writing predecessors and contemporaries, Brown's depiction of rivers does not present a positive view of these waterways, or even a nuanced one. Rather than rivers symbolizing sites of calm, serenity, and continuity, or ones of both trauma and freedom or resistance, in Brown's three poems, rivers consistently symbolize an oppressive force that acts in alliance with a white racist society in hindering the socioeconomic advancement of Black people. Wattlely points to Brown's personification of rivers, especially the Mississippi River and the Missouri River, in ways that highlight their antagonistic roles in the lives of Black people. Moreover, she argues that Brown's negative depiction of these rivers stems not only from their association with slavery, but from the Mississippi Flood of 1927 which occurred five years prior to the publication of Brown's 1932 collection *Southern Road*, and which Brown alludes to in two of the three poems she analyzes, thus providing another historical basis that reinforces the destructive view of rivers that Brown presents in his poems.

Note

1. The parenthetical page numbers in this section refer to the authors' chapters in this book.

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(The following is a selected list of secondary critical sources that examine water as a trope in literary texts or present ecocritical theories of literature)

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CHAPTER ONE

“AQUATIC KNOWLEDGE FOR THOSE WHO KNOW”: DREXCIYA AS BLACK CULTURAL PRAXIS¹

AUSTIN ANDERSON

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 utopia² 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 hydropoetics 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 hydropoetics by asking, “How does the ever-present specter of the transatlantic slave trade...propel us to theorize Black ecopoetics 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 hydropoetics 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 hydropoetics “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 hydropoetics 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.³ 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 countermemories 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.”⁴ 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 Hydropoly Spores” on *Neptune’s Lair*; “Song of the Green Whale” on *Harnessed The Storm*; “Sea Snake” on *Deep Sea Dweller*;