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Harnessed the Storm—Rereading Drexciya with The Black Atlantic

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ABSTRACT

In this short article I attempt to expand upon Kodwo Eshun’s reading of Afrofuturist Detroit techno duo Drexciya. Developing Eshun’s connection between Drexciya’s underwater mythology and Paul Gilroy’s 1993 monograph The Black Atlantic, I consider the implications that the Drexciyan oeuvre has for questions of racialized traumatic experience, intercultural identification, and hybridized global cultural imaginaries. I argue that the Drexciyan sonic-fiction, broadly conceived, allows us to understand the productive potential that intercultural identifications allow for self-expression and also the opportunity to understand these outside our own limited local, national, and cultural boundaries.

Almost 20 years after the death of founding member James Stinson (1969–2002), within underground electronic music, the influence and significance of Detroit electropioneers and visionaries Drexciya continue to grow. With a complex and enigmatic aquatic mythology, combining elements of science fiction and the myth of Atlantis, developed across a slew of albums, extended play albums (EPs), and single releases, Drexciya is a sustained aesthetic and fictional performance of considerable potency. Published over the 10 years from 1992 until 2002, these releases are regularly cited (FACT, 2010; Sherburne, 2012) as examples of the Detroit techno-electro sound at its most classic. On the one hand, the Drexciyan sound remains stubbornly resistant to incorporation into the vast sonic lexicon of pop music production, which is always ready and able to digest and sanitize any idiosyncratic, local forms and idioms within its own perpetual regime of primitive cultural accumulation. But on the other hand, its undertheorization and underthematization are also somewhat curious. Both of these anomalies can, I suggest, be read as symptomatic of an indigestible core at the heart of the Drexciyan project. Expanding on the link made by Kodwo Eshun (1998) between Drexciya and Paul Gilroy’s 1993 The Black Atlantic, I want to provide a reading of the Drexciyan sonic fiction that expands it as an allegory of Black Atlantic experience. Moreover, I want to show how tracing this allegory in detail allows insight into the continued relevance and salience of Drexciya in conceptualizing the experience of overcoming trauma, the political value of imagination, and models of transcultural identification. Together, these artistic interventions point toward the utopian potential of transnational and transcultural identification and exchange.

I first discovered Drexciya when, in my early teens, I was developing an interest in electronic music. Gradually I became obsessed, piecing together fragments of their musical fiction, one poorly labeled mp3 file at a time. The music gained an elevated quality in my mind, providing a strange solace through the difficulties of adolescence. Between the density and suggestiveness of the mythos, and the invention and complexity of the music, Drexciya seemed to offer not another mirror of the world I moved through, but a portal out of it.

I made connections between my home city of Glasgow and Drexciya’s Detroit. The city and the neighborhood I lived in were “postindustrial,” with poverty and high crime rates. That something as life-affirming could come out of Detroit, a city which bore (to a greater extent) all these same afflictions, gave me the sense, however dimly, that it was possible for me to escape the constraints of
my own environment. But as I became more aware of the reality of my own experiences, and how they in fact diverged from life in Detroit, I began to think more critically about the nature of these identifications. Without ever experiencing racism, or the legacy of slavery, or an extreme post-industrial urban collapse, were these emotional connections mere fantasy, projections of a problematic kind? In what follows, I hope to engage with these issues and to understand how the Drexciyan sonic fiction gives us an opportunity to understand those identifications that go beyond cultural or national boundaries.

The aesthetic of “Afrofuturism,” of which Drexciya is often quoted as a key touchstone, has in recent years moved out of contemporary art spaces to become a fashionable pop culture reference point. Recent major Hollywood films such as Black Panther (2018), as well as the work of pop musicians like Janelle Monae, have helped to cement this increasing visibility. Indeed, the appropriation of this set of artistic and cultural interventions in the omnivorous maw of the culture industry has become so thorough that one intervention advocates a moratorium, asking us to instead imagine “a world without fantasy boltholes: no portals to the Egyptian Kingdoms, no more deep dives to Drexciya” (Sym, 2013). While recognizing the value of such critiques, I contend here that there remain important elements of the Drexciyan sonic-fiction project that go beyond this caricature.

Kodwo Eshun’s brilliant and highly influential writings on Afrofuturism and Drexciya first made the link situating Drexciya in relation to Paul Gilroy’s pathbreaking 1993 book The Black Atlantic (Eshun, 1998, 2003). But despite this early identification of the thematic parallels between the Drexciyan project and Gilroy’s, remarkably little work has been done to expand and unpack these shared resonances and concerns (the valuable work of Nettrice Gaskins [2016] is a rare exception). Maybe this lack of engagement is related to the repetitive and obsessive focus on trauma, recurring again and again in different forms within the Drexciyan sonic fiction, which perhaps makes it difficult to confront. This concern with trauma, I think, is foregrounded most starkly at the level of timbre, tonal structure, melodic figure, and musical structure, but is also made obvious in track titles, liner notes album titles (as in their their 2002 album Harnessed The Storm, from which the title of this paper is taken), and the few interviews that attended the group’s erratic release schedule.

One must start by identifying the central role played by the trauma of slavery. The canonical articulation of what we can call the Drexciyan mythos is to be found in 1997’s compilation album The Quest. The liner notes contend:

> During the greatest Holocaust the world has ever known, pregnant America-bound African slaves were thrown overboard by the thousands during labor for being sick and disruptive cargo. Is it possible that they could have given birth at sea to babies that never needed air? [...] Are Drexciyans water-breathing, aquatically mutated descendants of those unfortunate victims of human greed? Have they been spared by God to teach us or terrorize us?

The Drexciyan sonic fiction, by so foregrounding the trauma of slavery, compels us to read it as an artistic intervention of the utmost seriousness, concerned with the most pressing problems of modernity. The Middle Passage constitutes a foundational moment for the Drexciyan civilization, creating a rupture in the historical narrative that somehow manages to reclaim from this moment a paradoxical and impossible moment of victory. This civilizational inauguration, in opening up a new horizon over and against the really existing world, creates the possibility of triumph even in the wake of the most abject historical destitution.

This imaginative intervention allows us to understand better the ambiguous statement made by Eshun, that upon reading the liner notes for The Quest, he was struck by its

> “epic, world historical sequence of evolution. When you look at it now, it’s just one page of one CD, an insert, but it was a lot. It was enough to just in a way take the fantasies that you projected and then scale them up to give them this kind of world historical dimension.” (quoted in Rubin, 2017)

It is not clear exactly in what sense Eshun takes the Drexciyan project to be “world historical,” but one way is to read it most literally: that the Drexciyan project asserts itself, however implausibly,
audaciously, into the imagination as an event to be considered of the same magnitude as the founding of nations, the collapse of empires, or great historical changes over the longue durée. Such a claim at first pass might only register as absurd, but for those of us for whom, like Eshun, the Drexciyan project continues to demand an ongoing and devotional attention and enthusiasm, it remains somehow warranted.

The logic of this claim accords with Gilroy’s articulation of the unique importance of musical expression within Black Atlantic diasporic cultures for the gestation of countercultures, the articulation of coded frameworks that offer mechanisms to model and assert political agency and self-determination. In this reading, the sphere of musical expression, that most abstracted, transient, and ephemeral form of artistic and cultural expression, becomes asserted and claimed as having the permanence, objectivity, and significance of the most lasting forms of creative endeavor. This allows us to understand the political logic operant within the Drexciyan sonic fiction, one that we should attend to closely in our attempt to thematize.

Indeed, this logic can be further abstracted as a model of the emancipatory moment that inheres in the imagination as such; any moment of creative expression contains the germ of a potential counter-power. The imagination is a site of elemental freedom that goes beyond any dominating social formation or historically overdetermined set of empirical restrictions. The imagination is always already the site that exceeds, explodes, and negates any real-world limitations and constraints. The critique of “Afrofuturism” that it is “mere” escapism thus misses a crucial point, the importance of imaginative potential as a means to construct new worlds in the ruin of this one: A bolthole can also be a waystation.

Turning to look and listen more closely to questions of musical form allows us to expand on a reading that focuses on questions of trauma. The Drexciyan sound, taken as a whole, appears as a remarkably coherent gestalt, despite considerable formal heterogeneity between tracks, albums, and their many pseudonymous side projects and alter identities. One aspect that spans virtually all of this diverse output is the singular use of an obscure feature of a handful of Japanese synthesizers produced in the 1980s, “oscillator cross modulation.” Cross-modulation features were included on a number of synthesizers produced for the mass market in the 1980s, as music technology companies like Roland and Korg began to come up against the timbral limitations of the then-dominant “East Coast” synthesis paradigm. The possibilities for the musician to shape the timbre of the synth were largely fixed in this design scheme by the oscillator waveshapes determined by the manufacturer, which were limited in number. To increase the tonal range, companies began to allow complex modulation routings between different oscillators, which could create strange, complex, and unpredictable new tonalities. This method of synthesis had been possible since the earliest days of synthesizer music, but often had been used in a somewhat haphazard fashion, resulting in random, chaotic, or noisy sound effects. Examples might be found on early BBC Radiophonic Workshop records. The Drexciyan genius can be found in their singular and virtuosic mastery of this method. The chaotic, erratic, and clangorous tones that this synthesis technique produced are brought, in a high-wire act, within precise and subtle control. Harmonics sear across the entire pitch range with a caustic tonality that tears at the ear. And yet, simple melodic figures, controlled with deftness and subtlety, reveal hidden accents, inflections, and complexities that could not otherwise be discerned. The effect is for a bubbling, drifting chaos to be given an extremely high degree of articulation. The repetition of a melodic figure over the space of a 6-minute track allows for deft tonal shifts that drift up momentarily, threaten to violently overwhelm the piece, but are somehow kept within a narrow range of control. For the listener, in tracks like “Wavejumper” or “Danger Bay” (The Quest, 1997) the effect is to feel thrown across a volatile and constantly shifting manifold of threat and potential danger—at any moment the thread threatens to fray out of coherence and into a chaotic register, yet is always somehow contained and brought back. This singular use of synthesizer capabilities, quite beyond what its original designers would have intended for it, speaks to the true originality and mastery of their craft.
Taking seriously the emphasis placed on musical invention and practice as a site of cultural expression of considerable density of signification, we can read this stylistic technique, which appears as a kind of motif again and again across the Drexciyan oeuvre, as a kind of sonic metaphor of trauma. In “Wavejumper,” the lyrics invite such an interpretation: Over a skittering percussive intro, an inscrutable voice warns the listener: “You must face the power of the black wave of Lardossa, before you can become a Drexciyan Wavejumper.” This latter seems to imply some kind of formative (if traumatic) encounter or test that confers a status of strength. This does not seem to be that unique capacity to suffer marked out for derision by Gilroy toward the end of The Black Atlantic: not “a theory of black martyrdom, in which the downtrodden were canonised before their misery could be sifted for its special moral magic” (p. 217), but rather something more threatening; for those who are able to harness this experience, there opens up the possibility of powers that would be unknowable to those who have not passed through the traumatic experience. Such a reading then can be read as a twist of, an intensification and amplification of, the logic of Marshall Berman’s famous definition of Modernism, as “making one’s way through the maelstrom [of modern life] and making it [one’s] own” (1982, p. 16); a Drexciyan modernism seems to imply that it is possible to make one’s home in the wake of the diremption of trauma.

This last point then prompts us to consider another overlooked aspect of the Drexciyan corpus. While there has been some analysis of the recordings released under the name “Drexciya,” no critical work has considered their broader catalogue released under other pseudonyms, such as “Abstract Thought,” “The Other People Place,” and “Transllussion.” Taking this broader view of the Drexciyan oeuvre increases its relevance to themes identified by Gilroy, pointing toward the productivity of cultural encounters across national, cultural, and ethnic boundaries. To look at one part of this catalogue in closer detail, the 1995 album Elektroworld, released under the Elecktroids moniker, brings questions of cross-racial and cross-cultural encounters more clearly into focus. Billed in the promotional material as “a personal tribute to those well-known pioneers of the electro-disco-beat; Kraftwerk” by “the four young sons of an electrician,” the alternately joyful and sad tracks are intensely moving in their proximity to and distance from the style and sound of Kraftwerk. The latter’s bright and elegant melodies and computerized beeps become here even more saturated to the point of psychedelia. The simple cover makes ambiguous any racial characteristics; four men in coveralls, colored yellow with the sky behind, loom enigmatically. On the third track, “Japanese Electronics,” a simple vocal refrain repeats the title, again and again, over a playful beat.

Referents to the “real world” are mostly studiedly avoided in the Drexciyan oeuvre, but are here given central prominence, if puzzlingly. The signs dotted through this release, of transcultural and transnational identification and desire—Germany and Kraftwerk, Japanese futurism and technology—point to the potential of the modern experience to furnish us, via mass media and personal electronics, with possibilities of going beyond the limitations of our own narrow, limited spheres of culture and nationality, striking up, across space and time, novel and more complex and productive nodes of identification. That, for these young sons of Detroit, the route to the greatest cultural, politically and historically informed self-expression was to be found in part via German techno-pop and an ingenious mastery of Japanese consumer electronics continues to be of a moving and deep political and cultural salience today, at a time when we are often encouraged to identify only within the walls erected around us.

The Afrofuturist aesthetic in its Drexciyan manifestation still has lessons to teach us. It allows us to understand better the affective processes generated within the dense webs of mass media and technology that now form the backdrop to much of cultural life. The experience of trauma and diremption that everywhere, if unevenly, mark the historic transition to, as well as the lived experience of, modernity reverberates through these webs. These reverberations can produce moments of fantastical identification between individuals and groups with extremely divergent social, political, and economic histories. In a historical juncture in which, across the globe, nativist and ethno-nationalist forces are on the rise, the Drexciyan project allows us to perceive some ways that the Black Atlantic cultural imaginary, as a territory that expands beyond the limitations of
geography to encompass larger swaths of psychological terrain, implants itself on a global collective unconsciousness and creates unlikely linkages, hybrid cultures that cross these bifurcated histories. We can understand such hybrid cultures both as opportunities for self-expression and as mechanisms through which to interrogate our own limited perspectives. In the process, we can come to better understand both our own experiences and those that exceed our own: Perhaps boltholes can be meeting places, too.

**Notes on contributor**

*Mick Harvey* is a writer and independent researcher based in Glasgow. His interests include the political economy of neoliberalism, the labor process, and critical theory.

**References**


