

formed in water

*Where the sound sits
is upon the shores of the ocean, and
on the jetty boards at Tilbury dock –
residue remaining where arrivals walked
were in the thuds of lapping water,
perhaps traced from another ships wake.*

*Years before in the hold of ships –
while pressed together as passengers
and as extracted bodies –
a touch was felt, deeply,
like those within a mother's arms.*

*(Reflections on Ayesha Hameed's essay on the Black
Atlantis, 2016)*

It begins in water

[return]

As with the formation of our own bodies these thoughts began in water. From the depths of the oceans to the surface of the seas, they washed towards a British coastline and arrived at my feet while stood at the shore. As I looked outwards, I thought of the historic curiosity towards a world that exists beyond the horizon. I thought of how our ancestors may have felt while encountering the same barriers of water, and if, perhaps, these oceanic barriers offered safety through its isolating quality.

I've been thinking about my Dad's journey through the Irish sea, and if the condition of roots change while replanted in different ground. I've been thinking about how a place that's relatively close to our geographic home can feel like a world away from here. I've been thinking about my Grandparent's journey across 4000 miles of Atlantic Ocean. I wonder what objects they had in their pockets – whether there were keys and tools for a new life in London, or if there were reminders of memories and homes left behind.

"...I've been thinking about Édouard Glissant and the space between – and using the body of water as this potential meeting place where you don't have to consider notions of citizenship, you don't have to consider the here(ness) or there(ness) of our identities..." – [P. Boswell, 2022]

[object]

We ate Tamarind often at Grandma's house in Streatham. Together, hours would pass watching TV and cracking shells of the sweet and sticky fruit. After her insistence on us keeping the jewel-like seeds, we would always find these black diamonds stacking in bottles and jars around her home.

It was only last year that my Mum told me about her upbringing in Notting Hill, and how the road she grew up on was demolished but now is the site of a community garden. I thought of this in relation to my Grandma's seed collection, as well as my Grandad's journey to London. Before arriving in the UK, he worked as a logger and gold-pro prospector in Guyana – through these extractive occupations he was able to fund his journey to London and place his roots in Notting Hill. The similarities with these extractions both hold cyclical qualities in their afterlives – that being, of materials taken from the earth and returned, and of the self removed from native land while discovering cultural paths for reconnection. Although I've thought about this separately through my family's journey, the space that Blackness has been held in relation to the earth, land, and object, has historically been told through a proximity to European settler colonialism and existing hegemonic structures.

"The racial categorisation of Blackness shares its natality with mining the New World, as does the material impetus of colonialism in the first instance. This means that the idea of Blackness and the displacement and eradication of indigenous peoples get caught and defined in the ontological wake of geology" – [K. Yusoff, 2018]

I think about the heroic generation of Windrush arrivals, and I think of how the subtext of the British invitation could be understood as a call for resources, energy, and Black bodies. I think about the first arrivals at Tilbury Dock in 1948, and how the estuary breeze may have felt cooler on that day. I think of the first night of sleep many arrivals had in the Clapham South deep level bunker, and what the repurposing of a WW2 bomb shelter meant within this context. I think of the planting of Black seeds within the earth, and I think of eating Tamarind with Grandma.

[sound]

I began considering extraction in relation to Blackness and the Atlantic while researching ExxonMobil's ongoing oil exploration in Guyana's offshore regions. While exploring the depths of the ocean, this thinking overlapped with my curiosity towards the Detroit techno duo Drexciya's creation of a Black Atlantis. Through their music, Drexciya shared the sound of an eponymously name underwater civilisation – originally populated by the unborn children of enslaved women

who were thrown overboard during the Atlantic middle passage.

"We can imagine Drexciya as the aquazone that surrounds an isolated archipelago somewhere in the Black Atlantic, with dimensional portals to Africa, North America, Europe and beyond Earth. These oceanic islands of music technology are separated from our physical reality. Drexciya's fictionalised frequencies exist in a dimension beyond the known, providing a passage for a dispersed people, connecting them to a homeland." – [N. Gaskins, 2016]

The genesis of Drexciya's idea found its roots within the sounds of George Clinton's Parliament-Funkadelic but were more closely linked to Paul Gilroy's work on the Black Atlantic. Within this, Gilroy resisted the notion that Black Atlantic cultures are formed through, and derived from, a marginal proximity to dominant national cultures – but rather, its creation and existence sits within the desire to transcend structures of nation states [Gilroy, 1993]. The escaping quality of this transcendence can be heard within music, within the escaping sounds in jazz, within the unending beat in blues, within the low ends of dub and reggae, within the infinite loops and samples in Hip-Hop.

"Citing how blues, and its unending part, without climax or end, established time outside of European sense of time and factory time, blues time is taken as space and territory free from enslaved labour" – [K. Yusoff, 2016]

I find the articulation and understanding of these ideas far easier while in the presences of sound and through feeling where it takes me – while standing near subwoofers at reggae soundsystems and basement techno clubs, while feeling a back-breaking bass that guides my movements – while sensing a closeness to those around me, while music fills the space between our bodies – while hearing the last song of the night, and thinking of how time escaped us on a sweaty Saturday morning – while returning home to eat the last piece of Guyanese roti, while feeling, for a moment, how a home elsewhere felt so near.

Words by J D Rooney.