The more-than-geological abyss

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In Neto and Baptista's *Abissal* (this symposium), the ROV *Luso*'s striation of the seabed resonates with the expansionist and colonial aims of the nation-state. As on the surface, the conquest of depth by the land-based Portuguese state is achieved through exploration, enhanced by the logic of the map, to fill what is conceived as a "blank space" with the potential to be made into territory: *cuius carta, cuius regio* (Sloterdijk, 2013). *Luso* stands proud as the ultimate cyborg-hero.

However, like all cyborgs, *Luso* is a multifaceted character: an entity that is simultaneously human, non-human, and super-human; both otherworldly and intimately rooted in statist projections of power. And so the territorial seabed that *Luso* encounters, and indeed constructs, needs to be understood as a technoscientific abstraction made possible through appeals to forces that go far beyond the geological, and through logics of conquest that go far beyond the mechanics of resource extraction. Geology may provide the seabed's material foundation, but the powers of cartographic reason, national heroics, and legal certainty are all drawn upon to paint a picture of the seabed as something that is, but also exceeds, its underpinning geologic nature. Like the construction of Portugal – a small sliver of European coastline – as an ocean-spanning empire, the construction of the seabed as the "natural prolongation" of a nation's territory—the legal concept that provides the impetus for *Luso*'s exploratory mission (UNCLOS, 1983, Art. 76)—is anything but "natural."

This repositioning of the seabed as more-than-geological opens perspectives for conceptualizing those who haunt the ocean's depths. The cyborgs of the deep are not all heroes. They are also the unseen bodies memorialized in the deep, whose hauntings persist even as their stories are covered over by *Luso*'s silt plumes. To uncover other bodies of the deep, we set Neto and Baptista's narrative in conversation with works emerging from the African diaspora that focus on the afterlives of slavery that persist in the abyss, parallelling the way that Neto and Baptista set the story of *Luso* in conversation with imperial imaginaries that, while specifically referencing Portuguese history, also speak to a more universal state imperative to dominate distant frontiers. In particular, we put *Abissal* in conversation with the worlding opened by *Drexciya* and related works in Black studies (Sharpe, 2016; Gumbs, 2020), to understand the dynamic relationality of the Abyss, with its processes of co-

digestion and becoming-with (Haraway, 2016). Like *Luso* itself, the submarine co-habitants that haunt the Abyss both reproduce and push against the expansionist imaginaries of past and future *Lusitanias*, suggesting a range of oceanic futures that probe the limits of the expansionist state. In other words, while the foundation that *Luso* is establishing for the plundering of the seabed suggests a new wave of imperialist expansion, it also suggests to us the possibility to position otherwise. What if we turn our gaze? What other politics and relations can emerge from the trauma being enacted in the ocean's depths? How can thinking-with the ocean subvert our perspective, not for the sake of capital dispossession, but for the imagination and practice of new worlds?

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As we position ourselves within the oceanic (or, one might say, post-oceanic) turn to more-than-wet geographies (Peters and Steinberg, 2019), we approach *Luso* as a figuration of the Abyss, an aquatic cyborg that reveals the social, cultural, and political construction of a space by no means blank, but inhabited by bodies, memories, lives, deaths, stories, hauntings, possibilities. In this positioning, we build on an emerging dialogue between critical ocean geographies and ocean-focused work within Black and decolonial studies. As we argue elsewhere (Steinberg and Palermo, forthcoming), it is impossible to look at the relationship between coloniality and the sea, between "exploration" and the sea-depths, without listening to Black history. We have the response-ability (Haraway, 2016) to try to mobilize our knowledges for the Black subjectivities and bodies on which this relation was and still is consumed, yesterday in the Abyss of the Black Atlantic (Gilroy, 1993; Glissant, 1997), today in that of the Black Mediterranean (Di Maio, 2012; Hawthorne, 2022; Black Mediterranean Collective, 2021), and on into perpetuity in the refractive space of the wake: the trans-oceanic path that reveals, even as it obscures, the ocean's violent archives (Sharpe, 2016).

If, like those controlling *Luso*'s robotics, we look at the deep from above, the Abyss is the space of the White Whale, whose rolling and vaulting in the depths of the sea figures the alliance between modernity, capitalism, coloniality, and the conquest of ocean-space (Sloterdijk, 2013). If the whale's roundness is the symbol of the globe to be conquered—an invitation to expansion and territorial power—its whiteness signals coloniality, the capitalist white, male, heterosexual subject of the world, and the *terra incognita*, to be filled, renamed, mapped, possessed. The Abyss is thus that specific space of the sea in which to relegate the exteriority, the roundness and whiteness, that capital has not managed to reduce to normativity. The Abyss is the

horror to be hidden, that must not emerge, and should stay silent, removed, not registered: the nightmare across which *Luso* now bears its sensors and against which the ROV's successors will bear their scrapers, dredgers, and claws.

If we look at the Abyss from below, by staying in contact with the turbulent materiality of the sea, made of liquidity, circular temporalities, and volumes as capacity (Steinberg and Peters, 2015; Peters and Turner, 2018), a pluriverse of counter-archives, counter-subjectivities, and more-than-wet relationships emerge. Seen from this perspective, *Luso*'s interaction with the water's depth—moving, disturbing, reshuffling, and recirculating silt, water, and a host of organisms—can be seen as a figuration, (i.e., a transformative cartography) of the unveiling of certain situated Abyss stories.

To draw out this figuration, wherein *Luso* emerges not as a hero for the conquest of the colonial map but as an agent of mapping that points to alternative way of living-with, we propose conceptualizing *Luso* not simply as the subaltern servant of the Portuguese state but as the cyborg offspring of Afrofuturism.

Although Afrofuturism has turned to a range of "otherworldly" spaces to envision new worlds (Dery, 1994; Eshun, 1999; Womack, 2013), the ocean's depths feature frequently, as a focal point for dis-assembling the category of the human (from dehumanization to posthumanism) and re-signifying the denied memory of slavery for the reappropriation of the future's imagination, while elaborating on the pervasive role of the ocean as a space of loss and liberation in critical thought emanating from the African diaspora (e.g. Gumbs, 2020; Gumbs and Sharpe, 2022; Jue, 2017; Walcott, 2021; Wardi, 2016). Afrofuturism thus repositions the deep sea as the Abyss. Here, the sea is not empty, a space of abstraction, or a death-world, but a living space, with inhabitants, co-habitats, stories, narratives, relations, imaginations, and memories, all embodied in, with, and through water and its volumes.

Starting in the 1970s, the electro-techno duo of James Stinson and Gerald Donald called *Drexciya* imagined and constructed an entire mythology connected to the emergence of sea-related worlds. The Drexciyans are the inhabitants of the abyss of *Black Atlantis*, born from the pregnant women thrown alive in the wake of the slave ships that crossed the Middle Passage. The population of the submerged continent was born from the symbiotic alliance with the creatures of the deep sea: grafts, hybridizations and metamorphoses forming alliances between human, non-human, and more than human, between animals, corals, machines, and the offspring of Black women. The community of Black Atlantis is thus constituted by a porous, partial, relational subjectivity, an aquatic cyborg in multiple points of

fall, representing the continuous becoming-with the materiality of the sea. In constructing *Drexciya*, Stinson and Donald narrate a multi-layered and multi-styled narrative that Eshun (1999) calls sonic fiction: a counter-narrative and sonic cosmology weaving other worlds where the future is no longer to be found in the space of the universe (or through its colonizing vessels), but in the space of the sea, where the Drexciya originate and regenerate, and in which they have built their underwater world (Attimonelli and Haqq, 2018).

The cyborg inhabitants of *Drexcyia* can be understood, after Haraway, as "a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two joined centers of structuring any possibility of historical transformation" (Haraway, 2006: 150). This perspective adds a new dimension to *Luso*'s quest for riches, not just because it proposes a non-linear temporality that would confound investment decisions, but also because it proposes a figuration of materiality that undermines the notions of emptiness and presence that lie at the heart of statist imperatives toward resource extraction and territorialization. In *Drexciya*, and indeed throughout the Black canon of Abyssal writings (see: Pugh and Chandler, 2023; Drabinski, 2019), "invisible things are not necessarily 'notthere'. […] a void may be empty, but it is not a vacuum" (Morrison, 1998: 11). In the drexciyan world, death is signified not by emptiness but by presence-absences, or hauntings. Thus, Saucier and Woods (2014) assert that the Black presence is as if buried, a world of unconscious fantasy in which the ghosts of the crypt return periodically to haunt and torment us, awakened, perhaps, by *Luso*'s lasers.

Coral reefs, aquatic cyborgs, dead bodies, whales, microorganism, bodies of water, tentacular engineers, ghosts from the abyss (Palermo, 2022): these presence-absences, of a past which is never past, that recirculate to question the present and shape the future, are constantly becoming-with the turbulent materiality of the sea, in extension and in excess. These elements, these inhabitants, constitutive of the sea, and therefore sea themselves, are part of its more-than-wet ontology (Peters and Steinberg, 2019). Present through multiple materialities—from the liquid to the gaseous state—the sea becomes atmosphere, its constitutive elements inseparable from its totality, woven together by the narratives reproduced by *Luso and* by the ghosts of Lusitania's past.

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We conclude by turning to Alexis Pauline Gumbs for a final reflection on the ways in which the environmental ruin and spoils of empire wrought by *Luso* are seen anew when a light is shown on the subversive liveliness that persists in the water, even amidst destruction and death. Referencing the African bodies that inhabit the depths, Gumbs writes:

> Their breathing is not separated from the drowning of their kin and fellow captives, their breathing is not separate from the breathing of the ocean, their breathing is not separate from the sharp exhale of hunted whales, their kindred also. Their breathing did not make them individual survivors. It made a context. The context of undrowning. Breathing in unbreathable circumstances is what we do every day in the chokehold of racial gendered ableist capitalism. We are still undrowning (Gumbs, 2020: 4).

The oceanic spaces of conquest constructed by Portugal and its competitors in centuries past are no strangers to drowning. Lives have been lost and environments buried, and these processes surely will continue in *Luso*'s wake, as they have in the wake of vessel's past. Yet Afrofuturism reminds us that hopes submerged are never permanently buried. *Luso* may be unearthing something even more potent than maps and minerals: a future undrowned.

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