

# AZEALIA BANKS, SEAPUNK AND ATLANTIS:

## An Embattled Humanist Mixtape

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**ABSTRACT:** Azealia Banks's 2012 *Atlantis* music video garnered attention for its use of imagery that borrowed its visual aesthetic from a group of internet artists who identified themselves as "seapunk." Banks released the video months after seapunk's originators had declared the scene dead and she herself responded to questions about her style by saying "seapunk isn't real, you know?" Starting at Banks's declaration of fakery, this article considers *Atlantis* in the context of the first four songs of the rapper's *Fantasea* mixtape, which map a space/sea continuum that uses Afrofuturist signifiers but also frustrates the future-oriented teleology of Afrofuturism. This frustration works as what Sylvia Wynter calls "embattled humanism," which extends beyond a conception of Afrofuturism that combines the vision of a future elsewhere with the commitment to a present struggle over what it means to be human.

**KEY WORDS:** Atlantis, Azealia Banks, Afrofuturism, embattled humanism, Sylvia Wynter

### Introduction

Azealia Banks released *Fantasea* while her 2011 debut single '212' was still a radio hit. The rapper, whose instrumental tracks span a variety of pop and dance genres, had first caught the attention of listeners in 2008 when, under the name Miss Banks, she posted 'Gimme a Chance' (which she would later re-record with new vocals for her 2014 debut studio album, *Broke with Expensive Taste*) and 'Seventeen' to YouTube. After her ensuing deal with XL Records failed, Banks began rapping under her own name and self-released '212', which was especially popular in Northern Europe and Australia and which led directly to a new record deal with Polydor and Interscope (both subsidiaries of Universal Music Group) (Rosie J, 2012). Banks's fame, then, was on the rise when she released the *Fantasea* mixtape in May 2012. Mixtapes are as old as hip hop and dance music, and were originally used like demos to circulate musicians' work before they landed a major label record deal. Mixtapes, which are generally no longer tapes and circulate primarily as free digital files via the internet, are also released by well-known artists a few weeks or months before an official studio album to help drive interest in the product and are also a common medium for artists to sample tracks without licensing them. This latter kind of mixtape best describes *Fantasea*, which mostly features tracks where Banks raps over another musician's full instrumental.

Of particular interest in this article is the content Banks foregrounded at this point in her career, when she had garnered a significant fan following that was eagerly awaiting her

## Burton: Azealia Banks, Seapunk and *Atlantis*

newest project. Banks placed water imagery and mermaids front and center on *Fantasea* and for most of the last half of 2012, appearing as a mermaid or with “mermaid hair” (ie dyed various shades of green, blue, and purple) at several public events, throwing mermaid balls where her fans were encouraged to attend in mermaid attire, and even adopting the visual iconography of the remote internet seapunk scene for her *Atlantis* video (Hilton, 2012; Maloney, 2012). But even as she looked the part and released songs with titles like ‘Atlantis’, ‘Neptune’, ‘Fantasea’ and ‘Aquababe’ (which opens with the line, “These public pool bitches ain’t really mermaids”), she declined to commit to any real metaphor when given the chance. In a July chat with *SPIN* magazine, she said the mermaid stuff “doesn’t mean anything.” She also pointed out that the seapunk/mermaid connection isn’t apt: “Apparently mermaids aren’t seapunk... But seapunk isn’t real, you know?” (*SPIN* staff, 2012: online). In the mouths of most rappers, the suggestion that something isn’t “real” is often one of the harshest criticisms imaginable. Banks’s evaluation of seapunk’s realness may seem at first blush little more than sour grapes – “Oh mermaids aren’t real seapunk? Well, seapunk isn’t real anyway!” but Banks isn’t going for insult. She seems to say it with a shrug or a wink, as if seapunk’s fakery is exactly what draws her to it. Indeed, seapunk’s birth was an accident, its lifespan brief, and the purpose of its existence the kind of meta-debate about irony and earnestness that the early 2010s specialised in. Through the video’s imagery Banks ties her 2012 performance not so much to seapunk itself but to the ephemera of scenes like seapunk.

Banks’s dalliance with seapunk’s visual style unlocks the sonic aesthetics and politics of her aquatic themed *Fantasea* tracks. The opening four songs – ‘Out of Space’, ‘Neptune’, ‘Atlantis’ and ‘Fantasea’ – map an underwater locale that is also rife with Afrofuturist references. While Plato’s Atlantis functions mostly as a foil to Athens’s greatness, the “lost” city has taken on an aura of mystery and allure in recent popular media. Instead of a power-hungry empire destroyed by fate, Atlantis has come to represent greatness lost, a utopia buried just out of reach, embodying “our most idealistic hopes and most acute paranoia” all at once (Merchant, 2011: online). Drexciya, as demonstrated by Gaskins in this issue, is an Afrofuturist undoing of Atlantis, an unlikely civilisation born from death and situated at the edge of interdimensional jump-holes from which its citizens can emerge from the ocean’s depths; and Banks’s *Fantasea* plays with a similar Afrofuturity. The difference, though, is *Fantasea* is neither a fate - like Atlantis - nor a launching pad - like Drexciya. Rather, by employing a visual aesthetic that “doesn’t mean anything” and “isn’t real,” Banks provides a filter through which we can hear an Atlantis that has no teleology, no destination or purpose beyond the contours of its own looping aesthetics. What follows is an analysis of the opening four tracks of *Fantasea*, revolving especially around the selection and deployment of samples, as a site of what Sylvia Wynter calls “embattled humanism.” Where the Afrofuturism of the Drexciya myth wades into the Black Atlantic and conjures a future that runs counter to the transatlantic slavery atrocities committed by liberal humanists, the embattled humanism of Banks’s *Fantasea* signals and then disrupts that future vision by looping it back into the present. Banks’s non-committal relationship to her aquatic imagery, when combined with the opening tracks’ sonic aesthetics and Afrofuturist content, is a performance of a kind of humanism that holds no assurance of a future elsewhere.

### Seapunk, ‘Atlantis’, and ‘Diamonds’

Banks posted the video for ‘Atlantis’ on YouTube early on the morning of 11th November 2012, a video awash in water imagery a month after Hurricane Sandy swept through the

## Burton: Azealia Banks, Seapunk and *Atlantis*

New York area where Banks resides. The opening shot shows Banks standing on a green screen set (of the kind used to interpolate special effects in the background of CGI films), her hair dyed an aquamarine shade of green. Over the course of the first measure, we hear a kick drum pound out the meter, and the green screen transitions with a counterclockwise sweep to a blue-and-purple horizon so that Banks is now standing in the middle of an ocean, the moon hovering impossibly large over her head. A column floats randomly to her immediate right (Figure 1). What ensues is more of the same, all presented with 1990s-style computer graphics. Banks, shuffling through four different wardrobes, dances in front of the green screen as it projects a smattering of images ranging from ancient Greek columns and statues to space/sea horizons to underwater tableaux. Banks leaps from a shark's mouth (Figure 2), rides on the back of a shark, glides across the water perched atop two dolphins (as if they were water skis), poses next to a seahorse, struggles from within an eel's embrace, and runs screaming from three neon jellyfish. She also twirls a trident while squatting on Poseidon's throne (Figure 3). All told, *Atlantis* is two minutes of absurdist, aquatically themed visuals.



Figure 1 – Opening sequence from Banks's *Atlantis* music video (2012)

Hours before *Atlantis* docked on the shores of the internet, Rihanna had performed her hit single 'Diamonds' on the television show *Saturday Night Live* (*SNL*) while standing in front of a green screen populated by dated 1990s-style computer graphics that included Greek columns and ocean vistas. Rihanna's *SNL* 'Diamonds' probably triggered Banks's release of *Atlantis*, which shares the visual aesthetic but was made independently of Rihanna's *SNL* performance. By releasing her video immediately after Rihanna's appearance - and thereby demonstrating that the *Atlantis* video had already been completed - Banks could deflect any charges of plagiarising Rihanna's look (Perpetua, 2012). What neither performer could dodge, though, was the ensuing existential crisis among the seapunk community.

## Burton: Azealia Banks, Seapunk and *Atlantis*



Figure 2 – Shark jaws image from Banks’s *Atlantis* music video (2012)

Seapunk’s origin, as Banks puts it, “isn’t real”. In June 2011 @LILINTERNET tweeted a dream of a “SEAPUNK LEATHER JACKET WITH BARNACLES WHERE THE STUDS USED TO BE” (@LILGOVERNMENT, 2012). “Aside from having the dream and coining the term, I had little to do with it’s [sic] evolution,” @LILINTERNET quipped in Alexis Stephens’s 2011 *Clustermag* feature on the seapunk aesthetic (Stephens, 2011: online). As Stephens outlines, seapunk does not fit neatly into a style or genre category. Finding the connective tissue between, say, MIL3Y \$3RIVS’s “sample of Midnight Star’s 80s club hit ‘Midas Touch’ pitched down and filtered and cutely layered with marine sounds” (ibid) on ‘Follow the Sun’ (2011) and the buzzing, hypnotic aimlessness of Soulja Boy’s ‘Came Out the Water’ (2011) is quixotic, at best, and perhaps misses the point (ibid). Seapunk coalesces around a theme, and that theme is not only sights and sounds related to the ocean but sights and sounds related to the ocean filtered through what prominent seapunker Zombelle describes as “URL/IRL convergence” (Harwood, 2012: online). Here, URL refers to internet spaces, while IRL is text language for “In Real Life.” Zombelle is describing what James Bridle (2011) has elsewhere termed the “New Aesthetic,” a commingling of digital and corporeal worlds, an aesthetic built around the communication between humans and machines. The sonic and visual possibilities of the New Aesthetic are nearly endless, and while Zombelle calls the *Atlantis* video “tacky as fuck,” seapunk’s purposefully loosely defined theme and aesthetic admit the 1990s computer visual nostalgia of *Atlantis* as a product of the movement.

Indeed, seapunkers recognized the *Atlantis* video and the *SNL* performance of ‘Diamonds’ as related to their scene. The intentionally retro graphics of Rihanna’s and Banks’s performances had been the recent palette for a group of internet artists and taste icons who identified themselves as seapunk and they immediately claimed their influence on the two video texts. It wasn’t the first time a seapunk artist’s style had appeared in mainstream music. @LilInternet designed the *Que Que* video for Diplo and Dillon Francis in 2011 and although *Que Que* includes little aquatic imagery, its 1990s-style computer graphics and connection with seapunk’s founder tie it back to seapunk. Though it is unclear who produced Rihanna’s ‘Diamonds’ performance, Banks’s video was produced by Fafi, a

### Burton: Azealia Banks, Seapunk and *Atlantis*

French artist best known for her “Fafinettes” - graffiti images of provocative and powerful women (Nightingale, 2016). Though a *SPIN* article published soon after the *Atlantis* music video was released insinuated that Fafi had dabbled in seapunk themes before *Atlantis*, the only online evidence of this that I have tracked down is a blog post from late October 2012 that features several still images that strongly resemble the aesthetic of the *Atlantis* video (Fafi, 2012). Regardless of Fafi’s relationship to seapunk, seapunk recognised itself in Rihanna’s performance and the immediately ensuing release of *Atlantis*. Seapunkers quibbled online over what this attention meant for them. One part of the underground undersea scene, led by Zombelle, which valued itself in part for its own remoteness from the mainstream, fretted over the co-optation of its style in such public places while another set of seapunkers shrugged and argued, as Jerome LOL put it, “No one Owns the 90s” (Martins, 2012: online).



Figure 3 – Neptune’s throne sequence from Banks’s *Atlantis* music video (2012)

Months before the *SNL* ‘Diamonds’ performance and *Atlantis* videos employed visuals linked with the seapunk scene, @LILINTERNET and @LILGOVERNMENT, the self-proclaimed and widely acknowledged founders of the movement, had declared seapunk dead and taken musicians Redwine and Zombelle to task for trying to profit off of the scene and for generally taking it all too seriously (@LILGOVERNMENT, 2012). By the time Banks sprang from a shark’s mouth in *Atlantis* eight months later, seapunk, according to its originators, was already a thing of the past, a cultural ephemeron whose time expired as quickly as it had started. I am not really interested in litigating here who seapunk belongs to or what “real” seapunk is. Rather, I want to draw attention to Banks’s previous statement that “seapunk isn’t real, you know?” before dedicating a video to its aesthetics several months after it had fallen out of fashion with its initial cohort. Instead of reading Banks as washing ashore late to a mermaid party she doesn’t understand, I take her engagement with retro 1990s-style seapunk aesthetics as a strategic use of that which is fleeting. Banks rode the wave of nostalgia for the 1990s specifically as something that “doesn’t mean anything” but with an earnestness embedded in the aesthetics that wash over her and her audience for the duration of *Atlantis*. I hear a similar connection to the 1990s in Banks’s sonic aesthetics on the first four tracks of *Fantasea*. In the analysis that

follows, I approach these tracks as sounds that are fleeting but classic, a sonic aesthetic that works alongside Banks's seapunk visuals to interrogate the Afrofuturist signifiers roiling in the music and to map out what Wynter calls "embattled humanism".

### 'Out of Space' and Under the Sea

While Banks dissembles in response to direct questions about what her mermaid style means, her assemblage of sounds and choice of samples combine to form an aesthetics that invokes Afrofuturist politics. The opening track on *Fantasea*, 'Out of Space', involves a musical moment that parallels seapunk's own rise and fall and also introduces the outer space realms integral to many Afrofuturist visions. 'Out of Space' samples the eponymous 1992 song by UK group The Prodigy. In fact, to call it sampling undersells matters, as Banks simply raps atop the full song (a practice she revisits on several tracks on *Fantasea*, including 'Neptune', 'Fantasea' and 'Aquababe'). 'Out of Space', which The Prodigy's Liam Howlett produced by piecing together a number of breakbeat and reggae samples, marks the waning moments of The Prodigy's original musical identity, somewhat derisively named "kiddie rave" by critics (Lahtinen, 2016: online). The group would intentionally pivot to a new sound on their next album, and Banks's *Atlantis* video, which was seapunk after seapunk's originators had given it up, lands on a similar point on the arc of musical taste. 'Out of Space's' position at the beginning of *Fantasea* and its coupling with Banks's overall seapunk vibe just as seapunk was losing its subcultural cache marks 'Out of Space's' sonic aesthetic as just as ephemeral as Banks's undersea imagery.

'Out of Space' also injects elements of Afrofuturity into *Fantasea's* mix. The two vocal samples Howlett places on the track each gesture toward an elsewhere. The intro and outro - "I take your brain to another dimension" - come from the Ultramagnetic MCs' 'Critical Beatdown' (1988), while the interlude - "I'm transcending to outer space, find another race" - samples Max Romeo's 'Chase the Devil' (1976). Romeo's couplet resonates particularly strongly with Afrofuturism, a coin termed by Mark Dery in the early 1990s but with an aesthetics and politics that precede his naming (Dery, 1993). Sun Ra and his Egyptian-pharaoh-crossed-with-antennaed-alien style remain central to Afrofuturist visual iconography, and Romeo's transcendence echoes Sun Ra's myth. Ra claimed to have been abducted by aliens and returned to Earth, not to save it, but to flee with sympathisers to a planet with a completely different notion of race (Sinkler, 1992: 30-31). Sun Ra's space race is emblematic of Afrofuturism's politics: in order to envision a future hospitable to blackness, Afrofuturists craft an elsewhere unsullied by centuries of chattel slavery, institutionalised racism and antiblackness. That elsewhere is often outer space.

Though it may seem odd to kick off an album called *Fantasea* with a song about "transcending to outer space," the political distance between the ocean and space can be negligible. Each can serve as uncharted territory that can be formed in terms friendly to black citizens. Drexciya, in their own 'Running Out of Space' (1999) gesture toward a similar collapse between celestial and underwater abodes. And in Gaskins's (2016) analysis of Drexciya's realm, she notes that the Black Atlantis includes "jump-holes" where a person could move among a number of different dimensions, including from the sea to space and back. In this way, Banks's incorporation of 'Out of Space' doesn't so much run counter to her aquatic theme as it does condition and contextualize it; juxtaposing the two realms invokes Afrofuturity. In *Fantasea*, then, the sea isn't just a random repose. Rather, it exists

## Burton: Azealia Banks, Seapunk and *Atlantis*

along a continuum of elsewheres or third spaces connected by Afrofuturistic jump-holes, portals that take our brains to another dimension (Bhabha, 1994).

But Banks's invocation of Afrofuturism isn't a straightforward vision of elsewhere. Instead, the Afrofuturist signifiers of *Fantasea* are part of a larger ontological project that Sylvia Wynter calls "embattled humanism." Afrofuturism is a kind of antihumanism. Rejecting liberal humanism's hierarchies that have privileged whiteness, masculinity, heteronormativity and ability, Afrofuturism sketches a future apart from liberal humanism. Or, as Kodwo Eshun puts it, "the human is a pointless and treacherous category" (1998: 00[-005]). Wynter's embattled humanism gently shifts the contours of Afrofuturist politics.

Like Sun Ra returning to Earth to gather some like-minded thinkers and leave, Afrofuturism cares very little about preserving the category of the human, engaging alien ontology as an ontological category unsullied by liberal humanism. Wynter, on the other hand, finds the human to be a treacherous but not pointless category. Wynter's "embattled humanism" is a humanism that "challenges itself at the same time you're using it to think with" (Wynter in Scott, 2000: 154). In embattled humanism, Wynter acknowledges that the concept of the human has been poisoned by Man, who stands in as the archetype of liberal humanism and who Wynter describes as a "Western bourgeois conception of the human... which over-represents itself as if it were the human itself" (2003: 260).<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, Wynter also works from the belief, as is evident in her assessment of Man's overrepresentation of himself, that the category of the human still holds value and is worth wresting away from Man. In other words, embattled humanism, which places no positive value on Man or his concept of liberal humanism, remains deeply invested in the category of the human all the same. It is a deeply pragmatic approach to humanism, one which recognises that real power and material resources are bound up in and controlled by Man's conception of the human so that, should embattled humanism's ontological reclamation project succeed, that power and those resources can be redistributed to those who have been left out of Man's humanism. In his analysis of technologically mediated R&B vocals, Alexander Weheliye lands on an embattled humanist point (though he does not call it that): "Instead of dispensing with the humanist subject altogether, these musical formations reframe it to include the subjectivity of those who have had no simple access to its Western, post-Enlightenment formation" (Weheliye, 2002: 40).

Embattled humanism, Wynter's lifelong insistence on reclaiming the human, is a two-pronged approach:

- 1) Be human in a way that can exist apart from Man, apart from liberal humanism.
- 2) Dissolve Man so that he cannot choke off other ways of being human.

The first prong overlaps significantly with Afrofuturism's vision of elsewheres, but the second suggests that elsewhere isn't enough. Battling on two fronts at once, embattled humanism provides its own cover. Existing apart from Man may be a compelling future, but dissolving Man can bring relief in the present. And while dissolving Man might help shape an elsewhere that ends up being *right here*, a true elsewhere offers the possibility of

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<sup>1</sup> Wynter's work traces a shift in Man - what she calls Man<sub>1</sub> and Man<sub>2</sub> - that roughly captures the shift from liberal to neoliberal politics (Wynter, 2003: 264).

being a different kind of human even if Man persists. While Banks's use of 'Out of Space' invokes Afrofuturity, the way she combines it with, on the one hand, other genre samples on the album and, on the other hand, seapunk visuals and themes, complicates the teleological antihumanism of Afrofuturism and replaces it with an embattled humanist present.

'Out of Space' forms a bookend with 'Fantasea', the album's fourth track, which, after the more "watery" 'Neptune' and 'Atlantis', returns to a hook that joins water and space as Banks promises to "be your fantasea" while yearning to take you "close to the moon." These four tracks coalesce sonically as well as thematically in a way that marks 'Out of Space' as something more than passé "kiddie rave." The breakbeat hardcore sound of 'Out of Space' joins drum-n-bass and UK dubstep samples - with 'Neptune's music track including a sample of Ikonika's dubstep track 'Heston' (2010) while 'Fantasea' features Banks rapping atop Machinedrum's drum-n-bass track 'Fantasix' (2011) - to flesh out a family of closely related rave and dance genres. There's no straight line to draw through the "broken beat" genres<sup>2</sup> but jungle is an early 1990s genre born of a single breakbeat.<sup>3</sup> Drum-n-bass, a term often used synonymously with jungle, tends to incorporate more synthetic sonic elements alongside the jungle breaks, and UK dubstep in the 2000s would push that digital synthesis to extremes in terms of frequency spread and modulation. Again, 'Out of Space's' position at the beginning of the mixtape matters. When paired with Banks's seapunk vibe, we can hear 'Out of Space' as an instance of a sound that is out-of-date, an aesthetic losing its subcultural value. When followed by the more recent drum-n-bass and UK dubstep samples of 'Neptune' and 'Fantasea' though, 'Out of Space' becomes more classic, a moment of breakbeat hardcore situated at the beginning of a fount of musical creativity spouting related genre styles.

Banks's *Fantasea* opens with an aesthetic loop with no firm teleology. If 'Out of Space' appears only as a classic, then we have a story about transcendent artistic practices, a vision of the future built on the work of the present. If 'Out of Space' appears simply as a vestige of "kiddie rave," then we have a story about cultural ephemera, a fleeting present moment with a ruptured future. By making both stories audible at once, *Fantasea* defies any firm conclusion and instead forces the listener into a musical moment that is not headed in any particular direction, that has no predetermined narrative arc. This non-teleological aesthetics works to destabilise the futurity of Afrofuturity. When performed in the context of the Drexciya myth, Afrofuturist jump-loops that transport people to other dimensions serve as a counterpoint to trans-Atlantic slave trade atrocities, a Black Atlantic resurrection that alters the trajectory of the past in order to envision a new future. But by lumping together the space and water signifiers of Afrofuturity in a non-teleological aesthetic loop, *Fantasea's* jump-loops just circle back on themselves in an ongoing present moment that remains agnostic about what the future holds. Instead of forging a future apart from Man, *Fantasea* repeatedly disrupts visions of the future to reset its listeners in the present. In embattled humanist terms, the need for an elsewhere exists, but only in conjunction with a politics of the now that works to dissolve Man in order to help ensure the creation of Afrofuturism's elsewhere. In this way, Banks's 'Atlantis' functions as the lynchpin of *Fantasea's* embattled humanism.

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<sup>2</sup> Broken beat" referring to drum loops that do not include a kick drum on every beat, as in the tradition of house and techno.

<sup>3</sup> Namely, the so-called 'Amen break' from the Winstons' 'Amen Brother' (1969).

### 'Atlantis' and Embattled Humanism

'Atlantis', the third track on *Fantasea*, is not like the aquatic songs that surround it. Produced by O/W/W/W/L/S, 'Atlantis' features the only newly-composed instrumental among the first four songs, and while it does not fit very neatly into a genre category, its four-on-the-floor kick drum separates it from the broken beat tradition of 'Out of Space', 'Neptune', and 'Fantasea'. I have already traced the visuals of the *Atlantis* video as a performance of ephemeral aesthetics that works alongside Banks's other mermaid and seapunk activities to help condition how we hear the samples she raps over - classic and passé at once - but 'Atlantis' does its own sonic work, too.

Though 'Atlantis's' instrumental is newly composed, the mixtape version of the song includes one sample, pulled from Sun Ra's 'Twin Stars of Thence' (1978). As I have already touched on, Sun Ra stands as a particularly emblematic figure in Afrofuturity - and an artist who includes an album titled *Atlantis* (1969) in his oeuvre. Zuberi notes that "Sun Ra's audiovisual presence [has] been looped, sampled, appropriated, and re-voiced" in the "contested formation of Afrofuturism" so that his inclusion among the space and sea loops of "Atlantis" marks the song as not just a site of seapunk visual excess but also an important point in *Fantasea's* sonic aesthetic, too (Zuberi, 2004: 93). Unlike the other samples used in *Fantasea's* first four tracks, 'Atlantis's' Sun Ra sample sits in juxtaposition to Banks's voice and the formal composition of the song. O/W/W/W/L/S's production ends on a bright snare hit with a long reverberant tail. After the snare fades to silence, we hear the opening twenty seconds of 'Twin Stars of Thence', which includes its own bright snare hit that lands on the second beat of each measure and has a reverberance that tails off over the course of four beats, like 'Atlantis's' final snare does. Though the snare sounds aren't identical, they serve as the only sonic link between the 'Atlantis' instrumental and 'Twin Stars'.

The snare that ends 'Atlantis' is different from the one included in the bulk of the song's instrumental. This bright, echoing snare lands three times: before each of the two iterations of 'Atlantis's' verse, then at the end of the song. While the 'Twin Stars' sample is separated from the rest of the song, the snare hit, which has previously prepped the listener for Banks's verse, folds 'Twin Stars' into the mix as a displacement of Banks's voice. While the three tracks surrounding it destabilise the futurity of Afrofuturism by looping the future back onto the present, 'Atlantis' plays with time in a different way. The two verses of 'Atlantis' are identical; when given the opportunity to say something different, Banks simply repeats herself. The third reverberant snare hit, then, conditions the listener not only to hear Banks's voice but to hear exactly the same lyrics she's rapped twice before. Instead, the Afrofuturism of Sun Ra takes over. Instead of a vision of the future, Sun Ra's Afrofuturity is pulled into a repetitive loop that ultimately goes nowhere but back to its own beginning. Further, by simply cueing 'Twin Stars' from the beginning but positioning it as the outro to 'Atlantis', 'Twin Stars' opening becomes 'Atlantis's' close. Banks's *Atlantis*, like Drexciya's mythic undersea world, includes jump-holes but instead of another dimension, Banks's jump-loops bring us right back to where we are. The visuals of the *Atlantis* video - whose soundtrack *doesn't* include the Sun Ra sample - offer a clue to what's happening when Ra gets pulled into a non-teleological loop. Ali Colleen Neff theorises Banks's use of seapunk and water imagery as a representation of Mami Wata, a water deity rooted in sub-Saharan Africa who instantiated in the Caribbean, too (Neff, 2014, 2016). The presence of a powerful female deity in the *Atlantis* video - one who sits on Poseidon's throne and, in a reorientation of the masculine-heavy imagery of the Drexciya myth, leaps from a shark's mouth (perhaps as the mother thrown overboard who revives

## Burton: Azealia Banks, Seapunk and *Atlantis*

and survives alongside her children) pushes directly against the misogyny of Sun Ra, with whom “only Black men get to go to Outer Space” (Zuberi, 2004: 95).<sup>4</sup> The teleology of Ra’s Afrofuturity is a strictly masculine one, so by pulling his sample into a loop that constantly refers back to her voice, Banks pulls Ra’s space ship out of orbit so that it splashes down in a sea that she rules.

In this way, Sun Ra’s inclusion in ‘Atlantis’ works as an extension of the aesthetic loop Banks creates in the opening tracks of *Fantasea* and a further destabilisation of Afrofuturism’s futurity. By separating Ra from the rest of the song’s instrumental, by setting ‘Twin Stars’ apart from Banks’s rapped vocals, ‘Atlantis’ can be heard as marking Sun Ra’s overt Afrofuturism as something that exists just outside of the boundaries of *Fantasea*’s formal composition. At the same time, the snare hit that cues the song’s verse opens a jump-loop that transports the listener from Sun Ra to Azealia Banks and back. Banks’s loopy approach to Afrofuturism destabilises its teleology without opposing it outright, in much the same way embattled humanism can be read against Afrofuturism: creating an elsewhere is necessary work, but so is remaining in the present to counter Man, who will otherwise wreck the future the same way as he has wrecked the past.

### Conclusion

Wynter’s insistence on the category of the human is strategic. Because Man has filled the term “human” with value and then colonised it, a vision of the future that is hospitable must wrest that term - and the value it holds - from Man. The point is not to become Man but to frustrate the discourse that props him up. It is a perspective that, as Katherine McKittrick outlines, “holds in it the possibility of undoing and unsettling - *not replacing or occupying* - Western conceptions of what it means to be human” (McKittrick, 2015: 2). The work of undoing and unsettling is a present, immediate one, so that Wynter’s embattled humanism stands as an extension of Afrofuturist visions that focus on the abandonment of Man’s abode by supplementing it with a concurrent strategy for pillaging his resources on the way out. McKittrick frames Wynter’s vision as not “teleological - moving from colonial oppression outward and upward toward emancipation - but rather [one that] consists of knots of ideas and histories and narratives that can only be legible in relation to one another” (ibid). Where Drexciya returns to a site of colonial oppression and creates a myth that lifts up and out toward emancipation, Banks’s seapunk ‘Atlantis’ frustrates that teleology at every turn, constantly returning the listener to the present moment, adding a second, embattled humanist prong to Afrofuturism’s exit strategy.

*Fantasea* is an embattled humanist mixtape. Banks engages and critiques Afrofuturism by creating many of the same jump-loops we hear in Drexciya’s work but contextualising them in an aesthetic loop that projects no actual future. In this way, *Fantasea* makes audible Afrofuturism’s vision of an elsewhere while constantly looping it back into the present moment in a sonic aesthetic that is at once classic and fleeting and therefore neither classic nor fleeting. In the same way embattled humanism’s two-pronged approach provides an out in case one of its projects - separating from Man and dissolving Man - should fail, *Fantasea* incorporates themes that suggest a separation from Man without committing solely to that separation. Banks’s loops, where the classic might be the passé, where the beginning of one song is the outro of another, where a snare hit turns a voice into a jazz ensemble, question the assurance of a future elsewhere and reset the listener

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<sup>4</sup> Thanks to one of the anonymous peer reviewers for suggesting the shark reading.

## Burton: Azealia Banks, Seapunk and *Atlantis*

into the immediate present, a two-pronged sonic aesthetic that pushes Afrofuturism through a jump-loop into an Atlantis floating in an embattled humanist sea.

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