



## *Book Review Forum*

**Katherine McKittrick**, *Dear Science and Other Stories*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2021. ISBN: 978-1-4780-1104-0 (paper); ISBN: 978-1-4780-1000-5 (cloth)

### **Author's Response**

#### *1. Stories About Love: For Ladipo Famodu and Temitope Famodu*

For the Word is love

And has been absent from our butterflies.

—Edward Brathwaite, “Wake”, from *The Arrivants: A New Word Trilogy*, 1973

The Experiment: Both precise and expansive, the read of *Dear Science and Other Stories* by Ladipo Famodu and Temitope Famodu knits together the various epistemologies that sustain the density of prevailing (biocentric) knowledge systems: measurement, quantification, calculation, spatialized data, approved methods of study, proven scientific facts, legibility, passive metrics, logical loops, discipline and disciplinarity. Without dwelling on the brutal outcomes of race-thinking, Famodu and Famodu show that scientific racism approbates knowledge and normative ways of thinking—in the routinized approval of white and Eurocentric worldviews, generally, and through the authentication of racial hierarchies that are nested in and produced through our scholarly pursuits, specifically. In this, they identify one of the more difficult tasks I set out to work through in *Dear Science*, which was to notice how the fictive aspects of scientific knowledge (that harmful objectivity that categorizes and organizes and hierarchizes and assesses humans as absolutely different based on genetic-biologic-phenotypic-consanguine-geographic descriptors) inform common-sense epistemologies, including academic methodologies, yet do not totally foreclose alternative ways of being, living, sharing, theorizing. The important task for me—as Famodu and Famodu note—was avoiding falling into the critique-trap that invariably and incessantly dwells on a “polemical review of science” that recites and profits from

upholding the terror that is paired with scientific racism and biological determinism *without* abandoning science (black knowledge, analogues, physiologies, late September, sounds, technologies, the sea, weights and measures, waveforms, exhaustion, light years). Just as *Dear Science* is not a summation of and treatise on violence, it is not, as Famodu and Famodu note, an exercise that is invested in hiding violence either; rather the book tries to expose the material consequences of scientific racism without generating research outcomes that position black people, black women, black queers, black humanity as passive objectified victims of white supremacy. How might this happen? *Dear Science* is an experiment with the insights of Sylvia Wynter and her insistence that we are a bios-mythoi species (that is, we are a storytelling species which means our flesh and blood and cells and muscles and bones *are sutured to* [they do not precede] our communicative activities); Famodu and Famodu thus draw attention to the different ways I try to express this throughout the text: storytelling as theory, storytelling as method, method-making, radical vulnerability, noncomputability, letters, black life, breaches. Their review tracks frustration and care and curiosity. What I thought was quiet and what Famodu and Famodu also uncover is that the vertebra of *Dear Science* is a kind of unbearable-unwritable love of beautiful ideas. In this, they highlight how *Dear Science* might—I do not know if I am successful or convincing—provide a pathway to seeking out “worlds of thought” that honour black livingness (our imaginations and ideas and songs and geographies and theories and stories and ways of being as they are entangled with capacious sciences like our hearts and the stars and the groove) as a future-forever methods of liberation.

Listen to: “Just a Little Bit”, by Etta James, from her *Tell Mama*, 1968

## 2. Sometimes the Song is Enough: For Maria Ryan

We thought he was formless, but I think now he was tormented by order, what was outside it.  
—Michael Ondaatje, *Coming Through Slaughter*, 1976

Maria Ryan reads three key encounters within *Dear Science and Other Stories*—with Sylvia Wynter, with Jimmy Cliff, and with columns—as affective sites that take the text beyond itself. For Ryan the three encounters generate destabilization, unbearable sadness, stumbling, and discomfort. Reading her affective-experiential responses (to friendship, to song, to lists), three interlocking processes arise for me: the work of reading a text, the work of telling a text, and the work of showing what a text can do.

Reading the Text: Ryan’s commentary on and review of *Dear Science* showcases how repetition, multiplicity, fragmentation, theory-songs, phone calls, and intertextual possibilities are unique black methods—stories—that shape the book; she also pays close attention to how the strictures of coloniality attempt to (but do not fully) enclose and discipline black livingness and black methodologies.

Telling the Text: Her reading and review threads together the themes of collaboration, sharing, remembering, as they are punctuated by scientific racism and coloniality and empire—those harmful enactments of objectivity that categorize and organize and hierarchize and assess humans as fundamentally different based on genetic-biologic-phenotypic-consanguine-geographic descriptive statements.

What the Text Can Do: Her review reads and nods to, without fully telling, the unspeakable. This is done through affective-empirical-experiential interruptions, italics, ellipses, a footnote on sampling, descriptive sounds, instrumental narrative:

“I felt unsteady.”

“crunchy”

“...this *and...and...and...*”

“...before the drums, guitar and bass kick in.”

“...the key to such repetition was that new elements were added...”

“I stumbled over words forced to break over short lines...”

The partial story (the unspeakable *and...and...and...*), the affective-empirical-experiential gestures (unsteady), the sounds (crunchy, the kick in, drums, bass), and the narrative layers (words, short lines, new elements) fractures colonial and plantocratic and normative scholarly ways of knowing while also demanding the reader imagine worlds outside of *Dear Science* (...this *and...and...and...*).

The encounters (with Sylvia Wynter, with Jimmy Cliff, and with columns) provide the conditions for Ryan to both read and tell the text while also offering extra-discursive radical methodologies that cannot be indexed (I feel as though I have been swimming for seven hours...*and...and...and...*). Some ideas and memories and narratives are out of focus. Thus, Ryan’s incredible engagement with Jimmy Cliff’s “Many Rivers to Cross” lays bare, for me, how this song lives in my heart, forever, how the song is tethered to her sadness, how this song is a theoretical breach, how Cliff’s song-story-sound-theory is indescribable, how sharing songs can be a lesson in quiet collaboration and joy.

Listen to: “Le Grind”, by Prince, from his *The Black Album*, 1994

### 3. *Beyond Capture: For Victoria Ogoegbunam Okoye*

where are you going where

our kind, fulfillment, promise

—Cicely Nicholson, “Daughter, Imagine Her”, from *Wayside Sang*, 2017

The Trick: Employing a beautiful diasporic trick (one that shapes both black placemaking and black storytelling), Victoria Ogoegbunam Okoye begins “from two places” (self-student in the UK and diasporic collaborator-researcher in Accra) that unleash relational geographies: Nigeria, Europe, the Americas, now based in the UK, global black geographies, the academic form, the black Atlantic, the middle-section, the entry, a black sense of place, outward, watery depths, the African continent. *Also, the Sun*. The trick, as I see it, is to hold the self together as these spatial processes move through you and undo you—in the midst of real-psychic migrations, as you are torn apart and reassembled—and to find “inventive and humanizing” worlds that both honour black life and provide clues as to how we might, collectively, build ethical geographic futures.

The Training: Okoye calls attention to how colonial narratives (words, ideas, discourses, language, telling, representation) *make* worlds. She underscores how the production of space is tied to “elemental research principles and intellectual pathways through which we are conventionally trained to know the world and produce geographical knowledge” thus encapsulating the central tenets of *Dear Science and Other Stories*:

1. We are trained to see the world around us as natural-intelligible.
2. We are taught that geography is just geography.
3. We learn that maps accurately represent lakes and rivers and the street corner.
4. We are told, convincingly, to know our place because place is fixed and unalterable and we belong in (and out of) place.

5. For black diasporic subjects (migratory, torn apart) the production of space is a series of onerous enclosures, flanked with terror making (apartheid geographies animated by incredible violence).
6. The accuracies and fixed and onerous places and naturalized realms uphold and generate insular racial logics and race thinking (or, we cannot easily pry apart racism and geography).

Okoye presents us with a brilliant pedagogical reminder: we are conventionally trained (taught) to assume (that is, *know*) that geography is “just geography” and in this we reify a system that categorizes and organizes and hierarchizes and assesses (situates/localizes/maps/assembles/arranges) humans as absolutely different based on genetic-biologic-phenotypic-consanguine-geographic descriptors. And: We must (we do) live this differently. How do black folks live this differently? What are some other lessons?

The Postern Lesson: Okoye takes the wreckage (the training ground; see 1-6 above) and threads it with black livingness: also, the sun. As Okoye notes, in *Dear Science* I want to centre black life and black Atlantic livingness; I do not want to dwell on victimhood. In *Dear Science* I try to unhinge the uninhabitable from blackness and black life. I know we must, somehow, live with and name harm, but the living and naming must be anti-colonial. In *Dear Science* I try to demonstrate how black studies scholars have provided a set of methods and instructions that rework and respatialize how we read and engage black life (interdisciplinary inventions, sonic stories, the remix, the playlist, vellum, affective-physiological-narrative-musical-theoretical narratives, a black sense of place, and so on). Okoye’s review employs these kinds of methods (her commentary is an activity, not a description) and the training ground collapses and frays (it cannot sustain itself!). And she shares Ousmane Sembène’s sun (we can hold this, what if we hold this?).

Listen to: “Sweet Sweet Victory”, by Mad Professor, from his *Dub Me Crazy!!*, 1982

#### 4. *The Dilemma: For Lioba Hirsch*

a list of jumbled images

none of which takes me away long enough to forget

—Juliane Okot Bitek, “Day 79”, from *100 Days*, 2016

Design: In noting that “methodologies carry immense responsibility” Lioba Hirsch observes that knowledge frames and analytical arrangements “construct worlds in our minds and build the reality we inhabit”. Hirsch’s insights signal how methods, and thus our research outcomes, are life-making and world-making. There is an urgency here, because if the research plan (what we do with our ideas, our methodology, our questions) is overshadowed by typical instructions (put forth by Western academia) our life-making and world-making cannot adequately attend to (care for, love, learn from) black worldviews. Indeed, as Hirsch reminds us, black preventable death looms, and our methodologies can both predict and normalize a grim self-replicating biocentric system. *Dear Science and Other Stories* offers one way to map and remap our research plans by suggesting storytelling is a black methodology; this points to longstanding black diasporic and

Array: Without naming it, Hirsch gestures to radical or rogue interdisciplinary, one of the key methodologies used and put forth in *Dear Science*. Here, she notices how storytelling is paired with narratives, questions, and geographies that cannot be contained by Western academia: sites of wonder; disobedient inquiries; the terrifying unknown; black futures; demonic grounds; otherworlds; outside. In her concluding remarks, she wonders how we ethically share our stories and how we might protect joy (a place of generosity) in the face of racism and hostility. Her wonder looped me back to her introductory remarks, where she draws attention to how black scholars navigate white systems of knowledge and she smartly notes that this is “the dilemma of diaspora”. The key, for me, is the navigation. The diasporic dilemmas (navigations) I write of in *Dear Science* are an array of activist, creative, and intellectual tools that help us wade through systems of power and remake scholarly

black diasporic feminist practices that meld intellectual and creative worlds, while also wrestling scholarly pursuits away from frameworks that are designed to: seek out (find data) and assess (apply method) and conclude (grim world is proven) that genetic-biologic-phenotypic-consanguine-geographic descriptors are unerring.

It is sometimes lonely.

Listen to: “Maybe”, by the Ink Spots, from their *Whispering Grass*, 1940

structures and infrastructures; these are future-dreams and already existing methods of liberation. The dilemma of diaspora, as a geography and method, is it is a mode of spatial belonging (the outside, demonic ground, nowhere) that emerges from painful displacement; this mode of belonging enlivens the capacity to view and become familiar with the limits of prevailing systems of knowledge (e.g. monohumanism) and therefore provides the conditions to generate radical methodologies (activities!) that call into question, subvert, and break apart the grim self-replicating system that is calcified by race-thinking and organized abandonment.

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