

Book Review Forum

Katherine McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2021.
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In a world that is shaped by empiricism, what does it mean to put a wager on black imagination? What unravels when we question the building blocks of objectivity? The book *Dear Science and Other Stories* by Katherine McKittrick unsettles biological determinism—or the notion that one’s abilities, dreams, and futures are predetermined by genetics—in a critique of science as the all-knowing arbiter of truth and objectivity. This book holds the ponderings and provocations that have come from McKittrick’s curious engagement with multidisciplinary *as* black studies. By reading in and with black studies, *Dear Science* is a discipline-shattering love letter to the possibilities imbued in the black imagination.

Dear Science is structured as a collection of 19 different stories, designed to be read in no particular order. Readers become participants as they flip through the scaffolding of McKittrick’s brain—a comprehensive and abstract milieu of method-making mapped onto geographies of liberation. From the outset, this book is organized differently from traditional academic texts, and is written with poetic prose. First, the entire construction of the book actively employs the methodologies in which the text argues. Second, many stories begin with McKittrick’s own critical and introspective reflections based upon the collective and circular systems of shared knowledge in which she has come to such deductions. Here particularly, she enacts the same citational generosity she calls for, by referencing across media, and bringing traditionally siloed discussions, such as science and technology, critical care and creativity, into conversation with one another.

To begin, McKittrick opens the book with a critique of the seemingly impenetrable facade of objectivity, which surrounds scientific inquiry. Rather than working within the confines of measurement, quantification, and calculation, McKittrick invites the reader to approach these methods as narrative devices with material consequences. Boldly, she positions

theory as an act of storytelling, calling attention to techniques and methods of study that quietly shape and limit what is understood as valid, legitimate findings. Definitive answers are not sought, nor given, but the reader is invited to sit with curiosity.

Each story within *Dear Science* critiques a particular method of study which abstracts and obscures, calculates and reifies a world that produces knowledge which depends on repeatable outcomes. Positioning scientific knowledge as a means to prove, to explain a particular phenomenon. This framework cannot bear the possibilities of black life because here, the black subject is legible solely as a site of resistance, foreclosing any meaningful engagement with black life and livingness as valid starting points of knowledge production. Instead, McKittrick elevates the role of narrative (both in the creation and telling of the *story*) in disrupting logical loops which begin and end with racialized dispossession and violence. This can be observed in one story entitled “The Smallest Cell Remembers a Sound”, where McKittrick exposes the flaws of classic methodological practice by positing the opportunities offered in what she terms “method-making”. McKittrick legitimizes and honors black embodied knowledge. In so doing, she proclaims that being and living black is enough. Here, the university’s project of isolating, analyzing, then “producing” new knowledges is put into question. The inherent legitimization of black embodied knowledge, experiential knowing, and collective consciousness subverts the role of the university, which codes, describes, and reduces blackness to numbers and parameters that must be legible. Despite their best efforts, our current university systems uphold colonial projects of domination and classification which further perpetuate structural anti-blackness. If one must present, publish, and peddle a concept in order for it to be taken seriously, everything outside of the Euro-American academy is voided. If *thought* is only deemed legible by processes of disciplinarity using approved methods, *Dear Science* is a disrupting force that invites critique and subversion of this standard. As an alternative to the colonial methodology of the neoliberal university, McKittrick suggests that we employ practices of “method-making” that prioritize, instead of predict, possibility. This pedagogical intervention has the potential to shift the ways in which scholars, and everyday people, see and know the world, by questioning the very notions of *how* we know what we know.

Because complicating everything taken to be true about science can be quite dizzying, *Dear Science* embraces a methodology of radical vulnerability. McKittrick admits her difficulty in writing and assembling such a collection of texts, which together do not fit neatly within a single academic discipline. These humanizing reflections make accessible the liberatory futures for which she advocates, especially in the chapter “Failure (My Head Was Full of Misty Fumes of Doubt)”. In it, McKittrick assembles a spatial-temporal critique that algorithmic logic is incapable of honoring black life. Through building her argument, she holds close the feelings she experienced while conducting her research, sharing how overwhelmed with frustration she was in reading a study that is central to this chapter. In the study, researchers developed a predictive algorithm that took spatialized data and historical records as inputs for crime prediction software. She laments the passive use of metrics, which bind blackness to preventable death. Her intervention in this self-replicating system is to move towards open-endedness. To center the “nonmeasurability-noncomputability of black life” in order to reassess the original research question. This work exemplifies the task of recognizing and breaching logical loops, which exhibit anti-blackness as commonsense and automatic.

Ultimately, *Dear Science* is the product of a truly interdisciplinary scholar. McKittrick is unafraid of what she does not know, embraces her curiosity, and takes seriously her radical interdisciplinary method-making. Reading across disciplines encourages us to both unsettle and reinforce the ways in which we know what we know. To resist the coloniality of the university’s disciplinary bounds, we can and must read liberally from many perspectives. Above all, these are stories about love. This book is a love letter, more than a polemical review of science. By focusing on the life-making methodologies that define black studies, such as the act of imagining new ways of being and knowing, McKittrick transmutes the radical care that her intellectual communities espouse. Building from black feminist theory, the Black Radical Tradition, and science and technology studies, McKittrick contributes to, and expands, understandings of black studies to include worlds of thought and method-making that cannot commonly survive in one single division of the academy.

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ANTIPODE

Ladipo Famodu

Artist // Designer // Researcher

Chicago & Amsterdam

astroafrostudio@gmail.com

Temitope Famodu

Department of Global and International Studies

University of California-Irvine

tfamodu@uci.edu

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