

## *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)

### **This Place, Outside**

The methods we use matter. They allow us to construct worlds in our minds and build the reality we inhabit. Methodologies carry immense responsibility with them but are often seen as a means to an end. *Dear Science and Other Stories* encourages us to think about how we know, not what we know.

Sylvia Wynter taught me that radical theory-making takes place outside existing systems of knowledge and that *this place, outside* (demonic grounds), is inhabited by those who are brilliantly and intimately aware of existing systems of knowledge ... (p.23, emphasis added)

This place, outside, is a theoretical ground, but it is also a deeply embodied and felt one. It is a Black place and an African place, both young and old, which will most likely remain and resist the mainstreaming of decolonising and abolition geographies. This place, outside, is both uncomfortable and comforting. It is often lonely and bizarre and wonderful, but also the meeting place of soon-to-be friends. It is a wonderful place. It is also a difficult place to inhabit because the whiteness of academia, of geography and of science, has meant that thinking from this place has seldom been encouraged.

This begs the question of who do we write for, with and against? Who do we want to be understood by, and who do we need to be understood by, if we want to keep reading and writing and thinking and participating in the creation of knowledge and new perspectives within white Western academia? It encapsulates the dilemma of diaspora and its many possibilities. The question of who we need to be understood by is particularly relevant for those of us who engage with and critique the so-called hard sciences. McKittrick's writings on algorithms and their denial of Black livingness speak to this; the ways in which algorithms

map out the certainty of Black death and deny our imagination the possibility of Black futures. Methods matter for the stories we want and are able to tell. And while McKittrick's book is a collection of stories, which powerfully question the ways in which science and methods and disciplines have shaped how we understand Black life and death, it is also, and possibly even more powerfully, a collection of other stories—stories that affirm and celebrate Black life, stories that spell the existence of Black livingness. Importantly, as McKittrick reminds us, this Black livingness has always been there, has always existed and does not need to be resuscitated by us; maybe at times, we just need to readjust our focus.

Katherine McKittrick's work has always been a guide and companion to being a Black geographer and engaging with Black geographies. To me, and to other Black geographers I believe, her work has counteracted disciplinary loneliness and reaffirmed our sense of the world, of reality and the fact that the ways in/through which we know are still held by anti-Blackness. Her work is generous and generative. Through McKittrick's writing worlds are opened up and undone and possibilities laid out, which allow us to think freely. What is at stake here is a way of doing geography that questions the facts of the map and of the data we have access to. How we read reality and how we analyse it. And so McKittrick's work, and its longstanding engagement with Sylvia Wynter, counteracts anti-Blackness. It allows us to question the objectivity of science itself and push against the misleading tenet that science is unbiased and Black critique interpretative. And so *Dear Science* reads like a guidebook to abandoning the parameters of traditional geographical thinking. To embrace new methods. To cut up the map and plait it into new and radical and radically honest representations (Barrett 2021). To do science, anew. To engage in "practical activities of resistance and encounter, disobedient inquiries, wonder, and anticolonial thinking" (p.150). To do science.

It takes courage to think from this place, outside, and courage to admit that not everyone inhabits it equally. It takes courage to think otherwise. "The *otherwise* requires a commitment to not knowing" (Olufemi 2021: 17). To disrupt the taught rhythms of our thinking and writing and accept the uncertain, the improbable, and the unfinished. McKittrick refers to "an unknown that does not terrify" (p.45, quoting Glissant 1997: 9), but I think that at times the unknown is terrifying and that is ok. That embracing the terrifying unknown is part of undoing the disciplinary and epistemic borders within which our thoughts are channelled. To think otherwise we need to blast those borders open and be ready for

abandonment. As Lola Olufemi (2021: 10) writes: “This method emerges from the substance of everyday things. So, *excuse me* if it seems at times like I am grasping at nothing. I am. Hold on with me.” To think from this place, outside, means accepting that what may seem like *nothing* to some is also worth holding on to.

A way of writing that encapsulates Black livingness and many of the ways McKittrick pushes us to think towards, are Naya Jones’ (2021) “black dream geographies”. To me, they signify ways of reading the present that also open up the possibility of Black *otherlives* and *otherworlds*, ways of thinking Black aliveness and livingness even when faced with Black death. These stories are hopeful and affirming. They inspire courage. McKittrick and Jones encourage us to think about the stories we tell and foreground, the stories untold, and the perpetuation of antiblackness in how and which stories are told. And so, underlying the different stories in *Dear Science* is the understanding that these are stories, that theory-making is story-telling and that science tells stories. The scientific methods we use matter in the stories we can tell and the worlds those stories allow us to construct. Equally important in her writing is the confirmation that the traditional parameters of academic disciplines, geography among others, do not, in their current forms, allow for stories about Black lives (not bodies) to be told that do not also reaffirm antiblack biocentrism. The “project of academically attending to race ... cannot always bear black life” (p.45). As she reminds us: “Description is not liberation” (ibid.).

And so her work makes me return to the question of whether and how to write about Black livingness and Black joy in particular. Similarly to the methods we use, what we reveal and what we obscure about Blackness matters. Moving away from a sole focus and a fascination with Black death is imperative, but I continue to grapple with how much and what to reveal about Black joy. I was recently reminded that building an archive of Black, subversive, and subaltern joy within the academy is important to counteract disciplinary whiteness and the antiblackness of the epistemic canon. But I am protective. I still hesitate to put forward that we should reveal everything. I advocate for obscuring as method. At least until the world has changed. Until we have learnt to tell other stories and tell them responsibly. Until our thinking and writing is structured by other rhythms, not only within Black Studies, but within sciences more broadly. It may be a while until we arrive at that place. Perhaps we will never get there. And that is fine. Because McKittrick’s work, and Black Studies more broadly, are offering us a home, a safe space, outside, which is

empowering and life-affirming and generous. I want us to applaud McKittrick's work. I want us to celebrate and cherish and protect this place, outside, and to get lost in it.

## References

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