

Book Review Forum

Katherine McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2021.
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There is a story in *Dear Science and Other Stories* in which Katherine McKittrick shares the experience of her collaborative conversations with Sylvia Wynter—the feelings and possibilities of their continuing conversations, home visits, and phone calls. Describing how she feels after departing Wynter’s home after a day of sharing and theorizing and listening and storytelling, she writes, “I feel unsteady. This is what possibility feels like. Maybe this is what possibility feels like” (p.71). This is typical of McKittrick’s lilting prose throughout *Dear Science*; prose that rings true in one’s mind and rolls smoothly off one’s tongue, but also destabilizes.¹ For me, reading *Dear Science* stirred deep feelings and an almost physical response—it felt like one’s legs weak and wobbling on stepping back onto the land from the boat. While reading *Dear Science* I felt unsteady. I felt an opening that other ways of sharing knowledge through (un)silent pages is possible, that there is theory in refusal, that sometimes the song is enough. McKittrick goes on to share that after her visits with Wynter, “Each time I leave I am weary and worn out ... Each time I leave I feel as though I have been swimming for seven hours ... A combination of speechlessness and fast thoughts and tireless sharing and stories that I can never remember fully and then I leave and I lose focus” (p.71). This feeling, this near breathlessness, this *and ... and ... and ...* is how I read this book which cannot be grasped fully, that sometimes demands that you

¹ McKittrick’s use of repetition and variation throughout *Dear Science* acts as a sort of prose sampling: “Now it is true that the genius of African culture is surely its repetition, but the key to such repetition was that new elements were added each go-round. Every round goes higher and higher. Something fresh popped off the page or jumped from a rhythm that had been recycled through the imagination of a writer or a musician. Each new installation bore the imprint of our unquenchable thirst to say something of our own, in our own way, in our own voice as best we could. The trends of the times be damned.” Michael Eric Dyson on Robert Glasper Experiment featuring Patrick Stump and Common, “I Stand Alone”, *Black Radio 2*, Blue Note Records, 2013.

lose focus, and in which McKittrick invites the reader so generously to wrestle alongside her about the liberatory past and present and future of black studies, without promising anything but the possibility of learning through radically open sharing.

And, as the title of the book implies, this sharing takes the form of stories. McKittrick presents stories and storytelling as a rebellious methodology and an invitation to “live with the difficult and frustrating ways of knowing differentially” (p.7). McKittrick’s stories in *Dear Science* challenged me to expand my expectations of what a story is or could be. Some of the stories begin reminiscent of more traditional academic written forms, but fracture into numbered lists and columns and doubt and song. Some of the stories are reproductions of photos in black and white, photographed resting, perhaps, on the author’s desk and separated from each other by pages of satisfyingly crunchy tissue guard paper, tantalizing transparencies that obscure as they protect.² One of the stories is an instruction to listen and dance to a litany of black song.³ McKittrick invites the reader to read (and look at and listen to) all of these stories in any order, and although I could not override my training to read this book in the linear way that its codex form suggests, it felt more like reading a commonplace book, a personal compilation of knowledge assembled to resist linear reading and designed to facilitate connections, highlight resonances, and generate new ideas. In McKittrick’s orientation towards story she gave me a glimpse of what all those of us disciplined by our training could gain if we move away from the normalizing of argument as the exalted form of knowledge-creation and to allow ourselves to listen and read and write in a way that is “neither disengaged nor wanting to master what it sees and hears” (p.8, quoting Georgis 2013: 18).⁴

All of the stories in *Dear Science* are connected through McKittrick’s rich and deep citational practice which is foregrounded in the story “Footnotes (Books and Papers Scattered about the Floor)”, an exploration of black citational practices and a love letter to voracious and broad

2 The ebook version of *Dear Science* represents these sheets of tracing guard paper as blank grey pages only on their verso; the tactile and sonic experience of this design decision is only available to readers holding the print edition.

3 I could not resist these instructions. This is a book that demands regular dance breaks and speakers turned up high.

4 Listen to and read David Chavannes, “Sounding is a Queer Way to Know”, 21 January 2020:

<http://www.dchavannes.com/read/2020/1/21/sounding-is-a-queer-way-to-know> (last accessed 21 October 2022).

reading. McKittrick advocates for footnotes not merely as a place where a certain type of knowledge is legitimized and given genealogy, but as a space for unknowing, for collaborating, for the showing of the process of the sharing of ideas, rather than a rigid defense of an argument. In this story there are long discursive footnotes on subjects from recent developments on our understanding of how children learn representation and referencing in childhood development studies to an outrageous incidence of an artist plagiarizing NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* (And I would point everyone here to read and dwell in footnote 27 of the chapter "Footnotes", in which McKittrick analyzes so clearly the politics of citation for black graduate students, and which contains the perennial reminder that "'Doing race' is not the same thing as undoing racism" [p.25-26].) But, as a musicologist, it is the simple footnotes that direct the reader to listen—simply, listen—to particular songs that I find the most subversive citational practice in *Dear Science*.

I laughed then breathed deeply when I followed a footnote that instructed, simply: "Listen to Jimmy Cliff, 'Many Rivers to Cross' ... " (p.38). I heard my remembered version first, before pulling it up to listen. It would be hard to argue against the theoretical and affective work of those opening bars, that opening solo organ, hymn sliding in to gospel, and then an amen-cadence out of which comes Cliff's plaintive vocal, before the drums, guitar and bass kick in. As a child I found this song unbearably sad, and on listening to it as I read this chapter, that Sunday-night-blues feeling returned. I listened, then returned to the text. And so, the footnote that instructs us simply to "listen" is not only a fulfillment of McKittrick's direction to "honor the creative text as a theoretical text", but it is also a practice against what McKittrick pinpointed earlier as "two bothersome analytical habits" (p.51-52; 48). The first habit is "the tendency to seek out and find marginalized subjects, who then serve as academic data and provide authentic knowledge about oppression. The second is the tendency to privilege some theoretical or academic work as the methodological and intellectual frame through which to analyze the data" (p.48-49). The use of these processes describes and reinscribes black objecthood, sometimes even as they are used to focus on resistance and liberation. In contrast, in McKittrick's Jimmy Cliff footnote she is not referencing an article analyzing "Many Rivers to Cross", nor is she citing lyrics, neither is she suggesting what a particular reading of the song through some

theoretical lens or concept may offer. Instead, the song stands as something that contributes in itself, as an invitation to engage with the sharing that happens and the knowledge that is created through listening. The footnote demands action and thought and feeling from the reader/listener beyond the scope of mastery. Cliff is not the subject of study, but a fellow theorist. And the sentence that the footnote is attached to reads simply: “Discipline is empire” (p.38). In *Dear Science* McKittrick offers the reader many opportunities to be undisciplined in their thinking, to challenge the norms of fields of study and, perhaps most importantly, she draws our attention to how dangerously easy it is to reify biocentric constructions of blackness even in work that attempts to demonstrate how such thinking is the product of anti-blackness and colonial processes.

McKittrick incisively analyzes this problem—that the belief in blackness as a biocentric reality is so constantly and dangerously replicated through modes of scientific thinking that it is impervious even to the idea that race is a social construct—in the story “(Zong) Bad Made Measure”. Part of this analysis is a powerful couple of paragraphs critiquing the mobilization of the “black body” in academia as the prime site of racial violence, a preoccupation that reinscribes colonial ways of knowing blackness as always being corporeal. In opposition to this, McKittrick shares a chapter that is about the unimaginable horror and chilling racial logic of the killing of captive Africans on the slave ship *Zong*, but that refuses to retell that violence. Instead, McKittrick presents “a story of unabandonment” in which she reads the story of the *Zong* as “assertions of black life and black poetic effort” (p.138). At the heart of this story are five-and-a-half pages where McKittrick explores how knowledge is created about and through the *Zong* by presenting her writing in three parallel columns, each of which meditates on different methods through which the *Zong* can be read (p.140-145). McKittrick directly asks the reader to read down and across these columns, but she implores us to “ask not how we describe and get over the awfulness and brutality but, rather, how we live with our world, differently, right now and engender new critical interventions” (p.139). This is not easy reading, not merely because of the subject matter, but because reading prose set in narrow columns forces a fragmentary and disjointed reading experience, and I stumbled over words forced to break over short lines and struggled with reading complex theoretical reckonings with line breaks every three to four

words. This is a text that demands that the reader be uncomfortable and dwell in the limits of analyzing what happened on board the *Zong*. McKittrick's columns seem to be a creative challenge to the dehumanizing tabature of the archives of slavery, in which, as Hazel Carby (2019: 345) writes, "[s]criveners created order from disorder with pen and ink, purging the subterfuge and insurgency of the enslaved from their account books". Instead of the cold certainty of anti-blackness, these columns table doubt and possibility. I look forward to sharing these pages with students when teaching the historiography of slavery, as its non-linearity offers a productive and potentially liberatory way to grapple with histories of slavery.

Dear Science is undoubtedly an interdisciplinary book that will appeal to a broad audience. But the science of the book's title remains at its heart. McKittrick encourages us to think generously about method and collaboration but insists that it is vital that this methodological and interdisciplinary expansiveness must also include science in all its forms. If those of us in the humanities and social sciences neglect to attend to algorithms, quarks, computer science, and even the disturbing growth of racial science, our work will be limited. Perhaps the most powerful moments of *Dear Science* arise when McKittrick documents methodological limits and what she perceives as failures in her own work, because her radical sharing of these moments of uncertainty and rupture point towards all that is to be gained when we work towards undoing disciplinarity to find ways to tell stories that imagine and enact freedom.

References

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