

## The Geographies of Blackness and Anti-Blackness: An Interview with Katherine McKittrick

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**L**ET ME START BY ASKING YOU the prototypical question historically asked of Black people in Canada: Where are you from? That is, where are you from biographically and intellectually? Can you tell us something about your personal origins and give us a sense of the intellectual trajectories, detours, or routes that led you to questions of geography, space, and place?

I was born outside of Toronto, Ontario, and grew up in small Ontario towns—on Georgian Bay and near the Grand River and in and around the borders of the Niagara Escarpment. It wasn't until I moved to Toronto that I came to read these places as black. This is to say that while most of the areas and regions I grew up in were predominantly *demographically* white—I often proclaim that Michael Jackson and Prince *brought black to me*, musically, while I lived these places—when I began to study black diaspora cultures I realized that these very locations were also inflected with all sorts of meaningful racialized archives: Negro Creek Road, the Sheffield Museum, the black slaves owned by Mohawk leader Joseph Brant/Thayendanegea. This was coupled with ongoing, but often unacknowledged, racialized labour: the migrant workers, mostly Jamaican men at the time I lived in these regions, who fueled the local economies. So my biographical story has always been one that is in tension with blacklessness—a blacklessness that is and was always black, of course. My intellectual narratives emerge from these kinds of tensions. I have always been interested in the ways in which narratives of the past—fictional, archival, historical, poetic, musical—emerge in,

and help make sense of, the present. I have a BA in History and English Literature from University of Ottawa and while there I read. I read everything I could get my hands on: Morrison, Ondaatje, Chaucer, Plath, Amis, Tolstoy, Wright, Munro, Nabokov. Anything: biographies, autobiographies, histories, historical fictions, poems, short stories. I did a second BAH in Women's Studies at York University and then continued my MA and PhD in the same field there. My BAH and MA degree allowed me to explore how theories of identity are linked to corporeality and embodiment: I was interested in the limits and possibilities of identity politics and also how black feminist thought works out and undoes identity claims, too, as seen in the writings of bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, M. Nourbese Philip, Audre Lorde. This was coupled with an interest in the works of Stuart Hall, Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha. When I began my PhD work I began to explore these kinds of questions alongside texts like Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*, Rinaldo Walcott's *Black Like Who?*, Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark*. I also took a course with Walcott—a course that looked at range of black intellectuals but also, for me, invited new reading practices. I still think about that course and re-reading Frantz Fanon with new eyes! I also began to read Sylvia Wynter at this time and studied, her "Beyond Miranda's Meanings" really closely. All of this was also coupled with feminist geography. My PhD supervisor, Linda Peake, introduced me to this field of study and really encouraged me to explore how questions of race and blackness inform geographic thought. With this, I began to also read the work of Clyde Woods, Ruthie Gilmore, Bobby Wilson. I started to think about why authors like Toni Morrison and Edouard Glissant and Dionne Brand paid such *beautiful* attention to space and place. By beautiful I mean pleasing and delicate and dazzling and brilliant even if it is putting forth a sense of place that is wrapped in awfulness. And I thought, yes, the long history of black dispossession and violence—this world, that world, a world not only covets the idea of ownership and racial subjection but rewards practices of capital accumulation, which is also a world where black is always owned and un-owning—necessarily informs a black sense of place. A kind of geographic beauty emerges; this is where Nella Larsen's (metaphoric *and* material) *quicksand* comes from! This also led to my ongoing interest in how academic disciplines—often our very questions as David Scott notes!—are necessarily replicating a system of knowledge that we seek to undo because these systems of knowledge seek to "make" and thus "take up" space on the very terms that exclude them! What happens when we notice the ways in which our intellectual politics—our feminist or anti-racist or activist politics—are deeply embedded in practices of territorialization? All this as an audiophile, too.

**In the chapter, "Nothing's Shocking: Black Canada" from your book *Demonic Grounds* you state that Black people "are not supposed to be Canada, and**

contradict Canada; they are surprises, unexpected and concealed.” And you go further to spatialize this element of surprise—to examine how it has shaped the racialized geography of Canada. Following this, how has the specificity of Canadian geography and the spatial configuration of Black people within it shaped your own methodological and theoretical approaches to Black Canada? And can you say something more generally concerning how it has shaped the institution and field of Black Canadian Studies as a whole?

I wonder if black Canadian studies is institutionalized or specific or fielded—it certainly isn’t operationalized as such. So your question returns me to “Nothing’s Shocking,” as well as what I note above with regard to how blacklessness is black and blackens geography in ways that are, depending on perspective, unintelligible. The black surprise, the blacklessly black, ideally welcome a longstanding diasporic presence that cannot be understood on the geographic terms that make them possible—because they do not, in fact, emerge from a space of colonial conquest and ownership or discreet positivist inclusion or exclusion but from an absented presence. I wonder, too, if black Canada is more routed than rooted because it is portrayed as, and therefore can only be understood in terms that disallow, or cut up, black roots! But your question also makes me wonder if the black *geographies* of Canada—which are inhabited by those who are here but unwelcome and erased and, like the rest of the nation, connected to a lingering and impossible slave past—refuse its institutionalization. So, on what terms does one make a *space* for the impossible? What would this look like? How does one ethically honour Brant’s slaves and give them a historical-ideological-geographic *space* in Canada while also recognizing Brant’s status as an Aboriginal colonial subject and slave owner? One would have to trace the ways in which the normalized logic of unfreedom, which hinges on secreted anti-black violence, informs a version the nation can only bear to recognize these slaves in their removal and Brant as a figure that enacts an aboriginality that is certainly more-than-human—that is closer to but not quite euro-modern whiteness in its slaveholding status—than blackness! Excised subhuman blackness and almost-respectable aboriginality, and all as though there are not deep connections between plantation and reservation logics! Perhaps a geographic pedagogy of unbearable unrecognizability is in order!

**We’ve asked a number of writers to respond to the question, What is Black Canadian thought? Your thoughts?**

I suppose this would be a body of work that engages creatively and critically with the Canadian nation-state and global matters. So this can only be an interdisciplinary and diasporic undertaking—one that brings together not only a range of thinkers but also honours multiple sites of inquiry.

Black Canadian thought, ideally, asks not only what or where or who black Canada is, but also how colonialism and transatlantic slavery—modernity—continues to unleash the kinds of lists that scholars like George Elliot Clarke (began!). Dionne Brand, Rinaldo Walcott, Nourbese Philip, Afua Cooper, Barrington Walker, as contributors to black thought in Canada, stand out for me. They offer what I consider a conceptual frame that brings black Canada into view and, at the same time, discloses the racialized workings, and thus failures, of the nation-state and the attendant unmet democratic promises of modernity. This kind of frame situates black Canadian thought within the context of diaspora—the intellectual and creative and historic narratives that are always locally outer-national. The 2012 ‘Black Canada’ special issue of *Southern Journal of Canadian Studies* offers a range of approaches to black Canadian thought, too. David Austin’s most recent book, *Fear of a Black Nation*, is exemplary here: archives, the sixties, novels and creative acts, protest, surveillance, anti-black violence, diasporic and global protest, and a very smart undercurrent that asks us to think about how these historically present black matters, which are all bound up in Montreal, Canada, but opening up layers of elsewhere, allow us to imagine more ethical futures. David’s work, I think, clarifies and opens up black Canadian thought in meaningful ways.

**In your 2008 interview with Carole Boyce Davies you asked her to “talk a little about how feminism works in [her] analysis.” How would you respond to the same question?**

A quarrel and unmet promise. I respect and embrace most aspects black feminist thought as well as the work of feminist scholars like Chandra Mohanty and Gloria Anzuldúa. I could not get through without Audre Lorde.

**You’ve been working on and with Sylvia Wynter for some time. Can you speak about her in a more personal sense, especially as a teacher and mentor?**

I have been working with Sylvia since about 2007 and reading her work for twenty or so years. We just finished a long conversation titled “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, To Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations.” I am very appreciative of the time we have spent together. She is an intellectual whose project parallels that of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida and others. Yet, in my view, she exceeds and challenges their work by extending the insights of Frantz Fanon and drawing attention to how race figures into genealogies that ask not only what it means to be human, but also how we came to be human in ways that are adverse to blackness and co-relatedly, how—for the sake of not just our collective selves but the planet, whose environmental decline began with slaves moving across

the middle passage, a logic we still adulate and replicate! — we must redefine the human in new ways! So our conversations have been about the struggle to redefine the human while different logics of race constantly interrupt and make new humans possible. Part of this work, part of what she has taught and continues to teach me, is to think closely about how we arrive at *struggle*. How do we get there, what stories allow us to get there, what stories disrupt and what stories enable new ways of thinking about freedom: the slave ship and IQ data and Biko and Fanon and the Sixties and initiation and June Jordan and our neurological-brain-matter-chemically-responding-to-blackness! I think, with Wynter, one must read, carefully, her expansive reconceptualization of the human, which then allows one to dwell on the particularities of injustice anew. It is worth noticing, too, that what she is bringing to us, intellectually, has not been done before: she is working out and muddling through new humanism in ways that honour our collective human-environment perspectives—which must be understood alongside the predicament of our ecocidal and genocidal world which normalizes post-slave Liberal individualism and posits it as the only available mode of being human—while also, importantly, making clear that her insights, and thus a more ethical world view for us *all*, could only be engendered from the perspective of the ex-slave archipelago. Deep respect and deep love for Sylvia!

**On twitter, you (depressingly, brilliantly) wrote, “I’ve never glimpsed safe teaching (and learning) space. It is a white fantasy that harms.” I’m wondering if you could expand on that as it pertains to the Black student in Canada? How does such a vexed space inform your own pedagogical practice?**

Yes. I wonder a lot about *why* the classroom should be safe. It isn’t safe. I am not sure what safe learning looks like because the kinds of questions that need to be (and are) asked, across a range of disciplines and interdisciplines, necessarily attend to violence and sadness and the struggle for life. How could teaching narratives of sadness ever, under any circumstances, be safe!? And doubled onto this: which black or other marginalized faculty is safe in the academy, ever? Who are these safe people? Where are they? But there is also, on top of this all, an underlying discourse, one that emerges out of feminism and other “identity” discourses, that assumes that the classroom *should* be safe. This kind of “safe space” thinking sometimes includes statements on course outlines about respect for diversity and how the class (faculty? students?) will not tolerate inappropriate behavior: racism, homophobia, sexism, ableism. This kind of hate-prevention is a fantasy to me. It is a fantasy that replicates, rather than undoes, systems of injustice because it assumes, first, that teaching about anti-colonialism or sexism or homophobia *can be* safe (which is an injustice to those who have lived and live injustice!), second, that learning about anti-colonialism or sexism

or homophobia is safe, easy, comfortable, and, third, that silencing and/or removing ‘bad’ and ‘intolerant’ students dismantles systems of injustice. Privileged students leave these safe spaces with transparently knowable oppressed identities safely tucked in their back pockets and a lesson on how to be aggressively and benevolently silent. The only people harmed in this process are students of colour, faculty of colour, and those who are the victims of potential yet unspoken intolerance. I call this a white fantasy because, at least for me, only someone with racial privilege would assume that the classroom could be a site of safety! This kind of privileged person sees the classroom as, a priori, *safe*, and a space that is tainted *by* dangerous subject matters (race) and unruly (intolerant) students. But the classroom is, as I see it, a colonial site that was, and always has been, engendered by and through violent exclusion! Remember Jamaica Kincaid’s Lucy?! How wretched are those daffodils!?! I am not suggesting that the classroom be a location that welcomes violence and hatefulness and racism; I am suggesting that learning and teaching and classrooms are, already, sites of pain. We cannot protect or save ourselves or our students by demanding silence or shaming ignorance or ‘warning’ the class that difficult knowledge is around the corner (as with “trigger” moments—the moment when the course director or teaching assistant says: “look out, I need to acknowledge a trigger moment that will make you uncomfortable: we are going to talk about whiteness!”) All of this, too, also recalls the long history of silencing—subalterns not speaking and all of that. Why is silencing, now, something that protects or enables safety? Who does silence protect and who does silence make safe and who does silence erase? Who has the privilege to demand tolerance? In my teaching, although this is a day-to-day skirmish for me because the site where we *begin* to teach is already white supremacist, I try very hard to create classroom conversations that work out how knowledge is linked to an ongoing struggle to end violence and that, while racist or homophobic practices are certainly not encouraged or welcome, when they do emerge (because they *always* do!) we need to situate these practices within the wider context of colonialism and anti-blackness. This is a pedagogy wherein the brutalities of racial violence are not descriptively rehearsed, but always already demand practical activities of resistance, encounter, and anti-colonial thinking.

I was struck by the *form* of your essay, “I Entered the Lists . . . Diaspora Catalogues: The List, the Unbearable Territory, and Tormented Chronologies” published in *XCP* in 2007. You seem to be thinking through the literal meaning of the word geography—to write space—as it pertains to the notion of diaspora. Can you say something about the origins of the essay and, more specifically, the kinds of decisions and processes that led to its literary form? And, more generally, how do questions of aesthetic experimentation and formal innovation inform your writing of Black space?

I like that essay, yes. It is commentary on interdisciplinarity and also a response to the increasing number of encyclopedias and other handbooks that were being churned out in the discipline of geography. I was asked to write an entry on bell hooks for one, and diaspora for another. I was recently asked to write two entries, for two different encyclopedias, on Sylvia Wynter—and, as the editor instructions made clear, there could be no overlap between these entries on Wynter, what I wrote for each had to be unique! So that piece is about lists, and our contemporary compulsion to list, and how this is enmeshed with the kind of data collection that informed slavery (where the corporeal features and other characteristics of those in bondage were listed at slave auctions). But, yes, that work is also concerned with the production of space and how one might write blackness in a world that rewards territorialization. It repeats Fanon's insight—"I entered the lists"—to notice how one is not just passively listed, but that one experientially enters into data as well; this repetition is coupled with a mash-up, the pushing and running together of a number of quotations and ideas. So, the production of diaspora space, on the page, provides a way to think about how geographic constraints provide the conditions to rework those lists that seek to make blackness transparently knowable. I guess in many ways that essay is about the interlocking frustrations that arise from writing in the academy—an unjust colonial space that constrains—and demanding that a different way of knowing, and taking up space, can and has been engendered by marginalized peoples. It tracks how we might recognize black intellectual insights and bring them into our academic worlds when these worlds despise blackness and do not believe these insights to be valuable because such black insights, in addition to being cast as normally unintelligent, do not engage in practices of accumulation through territorialization. That essay ends with Dionne Brand's *Inventory*. It is long poem that has no answers to these and other kinds of predicaments. This poem turns to and engages the reader. The list stares you in the face and asks the reader: what are you are going to do about these global atrocities and systemic injustices?! The list, the awful and hurtful list, puts ethical demands on the reader. Our work is not done!

**The figure of anti-Black violence—and the spatialization of anti-Black violence within the institutions of modernity (the slave ship, the plantation, the prison)—cuts through your work. In the contemporary sense, where and how do you see points of resistance to that violence? And do you see the possibility of a spatial politics of Black liberation?**

There are always two things on my mind when I am researching and writing about blackness, black geographies, and practices of violence: the repetitive circulation of anti-blackness, from past to present and back; and, the ways in which we take up racial violence in our academic work. I am concerned

with the ways our *analyses* of histories and narratives and stories and data can actually honour and repeat and cherish anti-black violence and black death. If our analytic *source* of blackness is death and violence, the citation of blackness—the scholarly stories we tell—calls for the repetition of death and violence. Spatially, then, the plantation folds over into the prison which expresses its carceral underpinnings within the urban and which are mapped onto the tourist island and back again to the plantation and forward to asymmetrical and racist residential patterns that keep the poorest poor on our planet in slums. Analytically, there seems no way out, except to name these repetitions—even in their continuities *and* ruptures—and ask those who are the foci of these analyses, poor black people, to *live up* to a version of humanness that they are necessarily excluded from. Put differently, the system itself does not change: plantation logic steadies different kinds and types of racial violence; and, our analyses honour the violence by naming it (as wrong and unjust) and asking the condemned to escape violence and join to the very system that thrives on anti-blackness! This is the Fanonian predicament that underwrites the academy: the subhuman is invited to become human on terms that require anti-black sentiment. So, for me, one way to dislodge this kind of analytic thinking is to both expose its naturalness (of course violence is wrong and unjust, but why is naming it *naturally* at the heart of our academic *conclusions!*), to draw attention to black thinkers that provide deliberate commentary on the ways in which blackness works against the violence that defines it (so here I look to the work of Wynter among many many others, Audre Lorde, Fanon, Saidiya Hartman, as well as a whole range of black creative thinkers and musicians), and to demand that this deliberate commentary be central to how we think about and organize the planet and our futures. It is a lofty demand! But I do think, following Wynter, that transatlantic slavery provided the conditions through which we *all*, in different ways, *came to* a new world view; and this history of the human, if re-historicized on the terms thinkers like Wynter lay out, is also one that provided the conditions through which many black subjectivities articulated an anti-colonial practice that did not (and cannot and does not) envision the emancipatory terms of teleological democratic-abolition—for it is this system, these terms, that guarantees and profits from and repeats anti-black violence.