



DEAR SCIENCE *and Other Stories*

KATHERINE MCKITTRICK

DEAR SCIENCE AND OTHER STORIES

ERRANTRIES

*A series edited by Simone Browne,
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Katherine McKittrick

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Cover art: Farley Hill National Park, Barbados.
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For Sylvia.

For Ellison,

again.

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There is no life that is not geographic.

—RUTH WILSON GILMORE

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HE LIKED TO SAY THAT THIS LOVE WAS
THE RESULT OF A CLINICAL ERROR

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tracked and remains somewhat quiet and unlisted. I appreciate the musicians who interrupted and complemented these stories as well as the dozens of friends and colleagues who provided recommendations, shared songs and albums, and passed on playlists and car tapes (for the latter I am indebted to Cam McKittrick). These stories were, in part, supported by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council (Insight Development Grant and Insight Grant) as well as the Antipode Foundation.

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CURIOSITIES (MY HEART MAKES MY HEAD SWIM)

Dear *Science and Other Stories* is a collection of ideas I have been gathering since about 2004.¹ The project began as a curiosity. I was originally interested in how race is attended to in feminist science and technology studies and how black feminists and black scholars work through the thorny racial privileges and biases that animate this field. My contribution to this conversation was to center black creatives (poets, musicians, visual artists) and think through how they attend to science in their work. I sat with June Jordan's kerosene and irradiation and phosphorescence.² I sat with the kerosene and irradiation and phosphorescence not to discount scientific racism and biological determinism, but to ask questions about how black worlds are not always wholly defined by scientific racism and biological determinism. I sought to draw attention to how black creatives work with scientific concepts in innovative and humanizing ways—attentive to racism, yes, but not understanding scientific racism as the only way to define black life.³ This was complemented

The title of this story, "My Heart Makes My Head Swim," is from Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (1952; rpt., New York: Grove, 1967), 140.

1. The title of this collection of stories, *Dear Science*, is borrowed from TV on the Radio, *Dear Science*, Interscope, 2008.

2. June Jordan, "Inaugural Rose," in *Directed by Desire: The Collected Poems of June Jordan*, ed. Jan Heller Levi and Sara Miles (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2007), 297.

3. I shy away from black science fiction and Afrofuturism and, for the most part—when addressing science specifically—settle on exploring the ways black creatives engage science outside these genres. Although this list is a too-small sample of the expansive work in black science fiction, black speculative fiction, and Afrofuturism, see Kodwo Eshun, "Further Considerations of Afrofuturism," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 2 (Summer 2003):

by ongoing research on Sylvia Wynter's "demonic model," which she discusses in her essay "Beyond Miranda's Meanings," and the concepts of "autopoiesis" and "science of the word," which she takes up in a number of her essays. The demonic model, taken from physics, is used by Wynter to think about the intellectual and conceptual ground through which Caribbean women recalibrate the meaning of humanity. "Autopoiesis" is a term developed by biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela. It is used by Wynter to show that we invest in our present normative mode of existence in order to keep the living-system—our environmental and existential world—as *is*. This is a recursive logic; it depicts our presently ecocidal and genocidal world as normal and unalterable. Our work is to notice this logic and breach it. Wynter's extension of Aimé Césaire's "science of the word," speaks to interdisciplinarity, dislodging our biocentric system of knowledge, and showing that the natural sciences, the humanities, and the social sciences are, when thought together, generative sites of inquiry.⁴ In using concepts such as these—scientific terms that are not cast as purely and objectively scientific yet retain within them traces of the hard sciences—Wynter theorizes race outside raciology and positions blackness and black studies as an analytics of invention. My curiosity led me to think about the humanizing work black creatives illuminate in their scientifically creative and creatively scientific artworlds, while also drawing attention to the disruptive work that black feminists and black schol-

387–402; André M. Carrington, *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016); and Sami Schalk, *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction* (Durham, NC: Duke University, 2018).

4. Sylvia Wynter, "Beyond Miranda's Meanings: Un/Silencing the 'Demonic Ground' of Caliban's 'Woman,'" in *Out of the Kumbla: Caribbean Women and Literature*, ed. Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990), 355–372; Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick, "Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations," in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. Katherine McKittrick (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 9–89. See also Aimé Césaire, "Poetry and Knowledge," in *Lyric and Dramatic Poetry*, trans. Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990), xlii–lvi. A biocentric system of knowledge that assumes we are, totally and completely and purely, biological beings, beholden to evolution and its attendant teleological temporalities, rather than humans who are physiological-story-makers, both bios *and* mythoi, who produce fictive evolutionary stories about our biological selves. "Biocentric" is defined numerous times throughout this text, although the explanation in the story "(Zong) Bad Made Measure" is the most comprehensive.

ars do (as they breach the recursive field of feminist science and technology studies and other disciplines).

I share *Dear Science* not as a project that describes science, particularly black science, through (or as) scientific racism, but as a study of how we come to know black life through asymmetrically connected knowledge systems. Science is present—it is tied to the curiosities noted above—but it is restless and uncomfortably situated and multifarious rather than definitive and downward-pressing.⁵ This is a book about black livingness and ways of knowing. This shift—from studying science to studying ways of knowing—has allowed me to work out where and how black thinkers imagine and practice liberation as they are weighed down by what I can only describe as biocentrally induced accumulation by dispossession. The weight is important here, because it signals not simply a monumental system of knowledge that is fueled by colonial and plantocratic logics, but the weight that bears down on all black people, inside and outside the academy, and puts pressure on their physiological and psychic and political well-being. *Dear Science* takes into account how black intellectual life is tied to corporeal and affective labor (flesh and brains and blood and bones, hearts, souls) by noticing the physiological work of black liberation. These labors are, however, impossible to track and capture with precision. In noticing the physiological work of black liberation, I am asking for a mode of recognition that does not itemize-commodify black liberation and black embodied knowledge. Indeed, tracking down (quantifying and/or endlessly describing) black corporeal and affective and physiological labor belies the kinds of black studies these stories tell. For this reason, affective-physiological-corporeal-intellectual labor, within this text, is momentary and somewhat erratic; I imperfectly draw attention to how seeking liberation, and reinventing the terms of black life outside normatively negative conceptions of blackness, is onerous, joyful, and difficult, yet unmeasured and unmeasurable. Mnemonic black livingness. My heart makes my head swim.⁶

5. *Dear Science* works with scientia (knowledge) in its most general sense. Science (biology, math, physics, and so on) animates scientia, but science (testable materials, systematic methods that result in explanation, experiments and predictions and discoveries) is not the central preoccupation of *Dear Science*. Science is a shadow, a story, a friendship. Science reveals failed attachments.

6. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 140.

Within, I share a series of interdisciplinary stories that are indebted to anticolonial thought and black studies. *Dear Science* argues that black people have always used interdisciplinary methodologies to explain, explore, and story the world, because thinking and writing and imagining across a range of texts, disciplines, histories, and genres unsettles suffocating and dismal and insular racial logics. By employing interdisciplinary methodologies and living interdisciplinary worlds, black people bring together various sources and texts and narratives to challenge racism. Or, black people bring together various sources and texts and narratives not to capture something or someone, but to question the analytical work of capturing, and the desire to capture, something or someone. The stories think through how racism and other forms of oppression underpin the political economy of academic and nonacademic disciplinary thinking (the demand to gather and live with seemingly transparent data, in a range of sectors; living with data [policies, reports, cards and carding] that ostensibly prove that those communities living outside normalcy are verifiably outside normalcy; giving over the data in exchange for capital). Within black studies and anticolonial studies, one can observe an ongoing method of gathering multifariously textured tales, narratives, fictions, whispers, songs, grooves. The textures offer one way to challenge the primacy of evidentiary and insular normalcies, because they are allegedly incongruous. In assembling ideas that are seemingly disconnected and uneven (the seabird and the epilogue, the song and the soil, the punch clock and the ecosystem, the streetlight and the kick-on-beat), the logic of knowing-to-prove is unsustainable because incongruity appears to be offering atypical thinking. Yet curiosity thrives. The industry punch clock calibrates and recalibrates the ecosystem (water . . . rich in corrosive chemicals purged from the factories of its industrial past) and . . .⁷ She asks: What happens when our blood falls to the soil and seeps in? She wonders: What happens to our conception of land when it is an absorbent receptacle for black people's erythrocytes, leukocytes, thrombocytes? She answers: Strange fruit.⁸

7. Malini Ranganathan, "Thinking with Flint: Racial Liberalism and the Roots of an American Water Tragedy," *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 27, no. 3 (2016): 18.

8. Danyel Haughton, your question still sits with me. See also Katherine McKittrick, "Plantation Futures," *Small Axe* 17, no. 3 (November 2013): 1–15; Billie Holiday, "Strange Fruit," Commodore, 1939.

Agony. Also, assembling ideas that are seemingly connected (the weight and the measure, the cloth and the silk, the road and the vehicle) fuse and break apart how we know, because we seek out continuities and ruptures. And curiosity thrives. The weight (pull of gravity) and measure (calculation) are overlapping and different (uncommon weight/uncommon weight/new weight . . . water parts) and . . .⁹ What is meaningful, then, are the ways in which black people are interdisciplinary actors, continually entangling and disentangling varying narratives and tempos and hues that, together, invent and reinvent knowledge. This interdisciplinary innovation illuminates, to borrow from Mark V. Campbell, multiple skills and ways of knowing that privilege collaboration and bring into view unorthodox practices of belonging that discredit ethnic absolutism and its attendant geographic fictions.¹⁰

This is a way of living, and an analytical frame, that is curious and sustained by wonder (the desire to know). This is a method that demands openness and is unsatisfied with questions that result in descriptive-data-induced answers. Black studies and anticolonial thought offer methodological practices wherein we read, live, hear, groove, create, and write across a range of temporalities, places, texts, and ideas that build on existing liberatory practices and pursue ways of living the world that are uncomfortably generous and provisional and practical and, as well, imprecise and unrealized.¹¹ The method is rigorous, too. Wonder is study. Curiosity is attentive. Black method is therefore not continuously and absolutely undisciplined (invariably without precision, invariably undone).¹² Black method is precise, detailed, coded, long, and forever. The practice of bringing together multiple texts, stories, songs, and places involves the difficult work of thinking and learning across many sites, and thus coming to know, generously, varying and shifting worlds and ideas.

9. M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Toronto: Mercury Press, 2008), 55–56, 59.

10. Mark V. Campbell, “Everything’s Connected: A Relationality Remix, a Praxis,” *C.L.R. James Journal* 20, no. 1 (2014): 97–114. See also Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

11. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence,” in *Futures of Black Radicalism*, ed. Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin (New York: Verso, 2017), 225–240; AbdouMalik Simone, *Improvised Lives* (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2019).

12. To be totally undisciplined can perhaps undermine the intellectual labor of black people who rigorously and generously share and build and remember stories and lessons that we collectively utilize as we move through this world. We are not always undone. Our undoing is practiced, patient, focused.

Sometimes this is awful because we are gathering dense texts and uncomfortable ideas that wear us out. Sometimes this is awful because we are aware we cannot know forever, yet we are committed to the everlasting effort of figuring out how we might, together, fashion liberation. We have no time. This rigor is animated by diasporic literacy, VèVè Clark's wonderfully useful reading practice that investigates and shows how we already do, or can, illuminate and connect existing and emerging diasporic codes and tempos and stories and narratives and themes. Clark shows how diasporic literacy is structured through "recognized references sharing a wealth of connotations."¹³ She theorizes Mayotte Capécia, Mahalia Jackson, Jomo Kenyatta, food, furnishings, and laughter as grammars, figures, and practices that are written into creative-intellectual texts as prompts.¹⁴ These literacies function to expand the text outside itself (the prompt opens a door). Kenyatta and laughter are not endlessly explained and unpacked; instead, they cue what does not need explanation but requires imagination and memory and study. Diasporic literacy signals ways of being and ways of living (memories, imaginations, mnemonics), that we know and share in order to collectively struggle against suffocating racial logics. Like sorrow songs. Like freedom dreams. Like erotic. Like flying cheek-bones.¹⁵

STORY

The ideas and curiosities gathered in *Dear Science* are bundled and presented as stories. Telling, sharing, listening to, and hearing stories are relational and interdisciplinary acts that are animated by all sorts of people, places, narrative devices, theoretical queries, plots. The process is sustained by invention and wonder. The story has no answers. The stories offer an aesthetic relationality that relies on the dynamics of creating-narrating-listening-hearing-reading-and-sometimes-unhearing. The sto-

13. VèVè Clark, "Developing Diaspora Literacy: Allusion in Maryse Condé's *Hérémakhonon*," in *Out of the Kumbia: Caribbean Women and Literature*, ed. Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990), 308–309.

14. Clark, "Developing Diaspora Literacy," 308–309.

15. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; rpt., New York: Vintage, 1990); Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon, 2002); Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," in *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 53–59; M. NourbeSe Philip, *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* (Charlottetown, Canada: Ragweed Press, 1989), 51–53.

ries do not offer lucid tales or answers; rather, they signal ways of living in a world that denies black humanity (or, more aptly, the stories signal ways of black livingness).¹⁶ The story-text itself, read aloud or quietly, is an imprint of black life and livingness that tells of the wreckage and the lists and the dance floors and the loss and the love and the rumors and the lessons and the heartbreak. It prompts. The story does not simply describe, it demands representation outside itself. Indeed, the story cannot tell itself without our willingness to imagine what it cannot tell. The story asks that we live with what cannot be explained and live with unexplained cues and diasporic literacies, rather than reams of positivist evidence. The story opens the door to curiosity; the reams of evidence dissipate as we tell the world differently, with a creative precision. The story asks that we live with the difficult and frustrating ways of knowing differentially. (And some things we can keep to ourselves. They cannot have everything. Stop her autopsy.) They cannot have everything.

I present *Dear Science* as a series of stories as a way to hold on to the rebellious methodological work of sharing ideas in an unkind world. Sharing can be uneasy and terrifying, but our stories of black worlds and black ways of being can, in part, breach the heavy weight of dispossession and loss. Our shared stories of black worlds and black ways of being breach the heavy weight of dispossession and loss because these narratives (songs, poems, conversations, theories, debates, memories, arts, prompts, curiosities) are embedded with all sorts of liberatory clues and resistances (PFUnk/F.U.N.K.).¹⁷ Sharing, therefore, is not understood as an act of disclosure but instead signals collaboration and collaborative ways to enact and engender struggle. As a collection of stories, too, *Dear Science* understands theory as a form of storytelling. Stories and storytelling signal the fictive work of theory. I hope this move, at least momentarily, exposes

16. Barbara Christian writes: "I am inclined to say that our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, because dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking. How else have we managed to survive with such spiritedness the assault on our bodies, social institutions, countries, our very humanity?" Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 68. See also Saidiya Hartman on "critical fabulation," in "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (June 2008): 1–14. Hazel V. Carby's *Imperial Intimacies: A Tale of Two Islands* (London: Verso, 2019) is, for me, a beautiful and creative work that offers a mode of storytelling that captures and bends disciplined-interdisciplined genres.

17. Listen to Prince, "F.U.N.K.," NPG Digital, 2007.

the intricacies of academic work where fact-finding, experimentation, analysis, study, are recognized as narrative, plot, tale, and incomplete inventions, rather than impartial treatises. As story, theory is cast as fictive knowledge and insists that the black imagination is necessary to analytical curiosity and study. Story is theoretical, dance, poem, sound, song, geography, affect, photograph, painting, sculpture, and more. Maybe the story is one way to express and fall in love with black life. Maybe the story disguises our fall.

Kevin Young offers a rich analysis of black stories, storying, storytelling, and story-making. He outlines how black stories can be acts of keeping something or someone or somewhere hidden (desire, love, half of the story, where it's at, kin). He also addresses how the practice of twisting stories and narratives (lying, counterfeiting, remapping, recoding, forging) subverts, refuses, and resists racism.¹⁸ Thus, the work of telling and the story itself enmesh, to offer not a descriptive tale but a strategic lesson in and for black life. With this in mind: the content of the story is a lesson (you, we, recode and forge and invent, this is how we live, I will keep your secret); the act of teaching and telling the story is collaborative (I will share this with you, coauthor this with you, and live this life with you, I will tell you my secret); the contents of the story are multifarious and interdisciplinary (characters, plots, twists, metaphors, unexplained codes, places, secrets, connotations, structure the lesson and telling). The lesson, the telling, the contents, are ways of life (ways of being). The story, too, Dina Georgis writes, has the capacity to affectively move us and, at the same time, incite a listening practice that is "neither disengaged nor wanting to master what it sees and hears."¹⁹ If the function of the story is to invite the reader-viewer-interlocutor-listener to feel, respond, and be moved, it also, Ruth Wilson Gilmore reminds us, establishes powerful alignments (provisional and not) that are put to work with and for loved ones.²⁰ Gilmore shows how utilizing various narrative devices and reading across materials (photocopies, pamphlets, newsletters, scripture, statistics, drawings, announcements, charts, legal documents and cases, theories) engenders practices of solidarity and collaboration that

18. Kevin Young, *The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness* (Minneapolis: Graywolf, 2012).

19. Dina Georgis, *The Better Story: Queer Affects from the Middle East* (New York: SUNY Press, 2013), 1, 18.

20. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

work within existing, and imagine new, geographies of liberation.²¹ The story, as interdisciplinary method, is thus tasked with immense and hopeful possibilities. The story is the practice of black life. With and for love. In this way, and as an interdisciplinary methodology, the story— theoretical, creative, groovy, skilled, action-based, secreted, shared—is a verb-activity that invites engagement, curiosity, collaboration.

SIMULTANEITY

Sylvia Wynter writes that we are a “storytelling species,” while also observing that our stories—especially our origin stories—have an impact on our neurobiological and physiological behaviors.²² Her observations draw attention to the natural sciences as well as interdisciplinarity, emphasizing a dynamic connection between narrative and biology (stories have the capacity to move us). In addition to contesting a teleological-biocentric genre of the human, the dynamism between biology and narrative affirms the black methodologies noted above: science and story are not discrete; rather, we know, read, create, and feel science and story simultaneously.²³ Or, we tell and feel stories (in our hearts), and this telling-feeling tells-feels the empirics of black life. Reading across our curiosities, the story and imagination are testimonies grounded in the material expression of black life. The story has physiological components. And stories make place.²⁴ This means the metaphoric, allegorical, symbolic, and other devices that shape stories also move us and make place. These narrative devices, so thick and complicated in black studies, demand thinking about the interdisciplinary underpinnings of black studies beyond an additive model.²⁵ Conceptualizing stories and attendant narrative de-

21. Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 182, 212–248.

22. Sylvia Wynter, “Towards the Sociogenic Principle: Fanon, Identity, the Puzzle of Conscious Experience, and What It Is Like to Be ‘Black,’” in *National Identities and Socio-political Changes in Latin America*, ed. Mercedes F. Durán-Cogan and Antonio Gómez-Moriana (New York: Routledge, 2001), 30–66.

23. “I burst apart.” Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 109.

24. “I hurried back to Eatonville because I knew the town was full of material and that I could get it without hurt, harm or danger.” Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (1935; rpt., New York: HarperCollins, 1990), 2.

25. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–1299; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990; rpt., New York: Routledge, 2000), 18.

vices as *tied* to extraliterary sites (place, body, home, for example) is an interdisciplinary-intersectional reading practice that interlaces the material and the metaphoric. Here the work of Neil Smith and Cindi Katz is useful.²⁶ They ask us to think about the ways different kinds and types of geographic terms—space, location, position, mapping, and so on—are often utilized without attending to the politics that underwrite these terms. Specifically, the material, concrete, and grounded work of physical-material space goes missing in some theories that draw on space and spatial concepts. A research statement such as “I am going to map the feelings of racialized domestic workers and discover their spaces of containment” clearly demonstrates troubling spatial metaphors that emerge from and embrace colonial reasoning. Conceptualizing certain geographic terms in this way also reifies the absoluteness of space and casts it as an empty container, thus naturalizing uneven geographies and their attendant social inequities. Leaning heavily on metaphoric concepts risks fixing social identities in place because it ostensibly puts forth a “floating world of ideas” that are simply hovering around us.²⁷ This kind of outlook removes social actors from the production of space and other infrastructures. This is not a call to disregard metaphor but, instead, a plea to take seriously how metaphors are necessarily illuminating, and are indeed structured by and through, the complex groundedness of black life—as extraliterary-storied-material-metaphoric-interdisciplinary-dynamic-curious-scientifically-creative (feeling). Rather than disregard metaphor, we sit with metaphor.

Thinking through the interdisciplinary interplay between narrative and material worlds is especially useful in black studies, because our analytical sites, and our selfhood, are often reduced to metaphor, analogy, trope, and symbol. To borrow from Hortense Spillers, black people are, in many instances, conceived through “mythical prepossession.”²⁸ What happens when we, black people, are read or analyzed as pure metaphor? And what kind of metaphors are we? I suspect, in some cases, we are metaphor-

26. Neil Smith and Cindi Katz, “Grounding Metaphor: Towards a Spatialized Politics,” in *Place and the Politics of Identity*, ed. Michael Keith and Steve Pile (New York: Routledge, 1993), 67–83.

27. Smith and Katz, “Grounding Metaphor,” 80.

28. Rhetorical wealth, telegraphic coding, overdetermined normative properties. Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 203.