

HUGO KA
CANHAM



RIOTOUS DEATHSCAPES

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My mother is present throughout this book. As a protagonist, a facilitator suggesting other protagonists, sitting with me when my ideas ran out and unwittingly planting seeds that drove the manuscript. Deep down, this book is about her. In all my prior scholarship, I have not written about home or emaMpondweni. It is fitting that my first foray into this new writing begins at the place of my birth and with my mother. When other university work threatened to stall the writing of this book, Lusikisiki was a refuge that reconnected me to the people who are at the heart of this text. It is where my ancestral spirits fortify me.

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At Duke, I worked with the most exacting editor who wanted this book to be its best possible self. She often saw ahead of me and nudged me to look up from where I was. I am grateful for the years of working alongside Elizabeth Ault. Benjamin Kossak worked patiently with me through the final stages of the process. In many ways, this book throws down the gauntlet in relation to where African-based voices can be published, which voices are heard, and under what conditions our voices can travel across the world.

I interviewed a number of villagers for this book. I am grateful to the mostly old people who opened their lives and hearts to me. Their words have shaped this text. I hope to have captured their anguish and their joy. Some died while I was in the process of completing the manuscript. This book is for them but for their descendants too. My neighbors and the villagers whose lives have intersected with mine are in these pages. By focusing on a single place, I wanted to write a book about expansive forms of blackness because the homogenizing narrative jarred with my own experiences of blackness as a village boy. I wanted to provide a portrait of women and queer adolescents as black agents. The people I know as black are old men

who have not gone to school. They are not big men. Adolescents teach me to rethink temporality. The old women of my village have always held me close, and they have allowed me to explore a boundless blackness. Readers will encounter horizontal forms of blackness founded on relation and an insistence that no one history or place on the globe has monopolies on blackness. *Riotous Deathscapes* is about place. The rolling hills. The rocky outcrop. The roaring ocean. The flooding river bend and the graves that dot the riotous black deathscapes. The book is forged in this hardness and beauty. I have used the hardness in the content of the book. I have borrowed the form from the beauty that sutures the hardness. *Riotous Deathscapes* is an incomplete portrait of Mpondo life. I hope that those whose experiences I transcribe here will forgive my lapses and any wayward interpretations.

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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO WILLFUL AFRICANS WHO CONTINUE
TO THEORIZE AND LOVE—EMAMPONDWENI AND IN OTHER
BLIGHTED ZONES OF ABANDONMENT.



River ferry crossing
the Umzimvubu River at
Port St, Johns. Courtesy of
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TO BE RELEGATED TO THE MARGINS is to be in a state of being perpetually emotionally charged. Feelings coursing near the surface. Catching feelings. Shackled to emotions. In a defensive posture. Touchy. Surly. Chips on our shoulders. Charged in ways that those who are fully human do not have to be. Charged in ways that surprise others. Seeing into the past and future and connecting invisible but sedimented histories of trauma. Over-analyzing. I write this book from the place of catching feelings. From the chip on my prickly body. From the disorientating vortex of repeated catastrophe and joyful paradox that is the black condition. This book is about amaMpondo people of Mpondoland, but it is also about black people who are subjugated throughout the world.

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MPONDO ORIENTATIONS

My mother's life is lived quietly in the former Transkei apartheid homeland, in deep rural Eastern Cape, South Africa. We are generally referred to as the Xhosa people. To be more precise though, we are Mpondo people who speak a derivative of isiXhosa or isiMpondo.¹ In my mother's village of Emfinizweni, electricity arrived in 2006 when she was about sixty-five years old. Piped water is a pipe dream. Her candlelit life has been marked by repeated trauma. In the last few years she has fallen on her back at least eight times. In the first of these falls, in 2011, I was with her. She landed with a thud that fractured three vertebrae in her spine. On this occasion, the two of us were marooned in a flooding valley. At her insistence, I stopped the car that we were traveling in. She was worried that the wheels of the motor vehicle would miss the overflowing and crumbling bridge and we would plunge into the river that had burst its banks. She climbed out of the vehicle and after a few steps in the thick mud, she slipped and fell, landing on her back. The falling rain washed the mud from her face as she lay looking into the weeping sky. Her wet hair clung to her forehead, a forehead whose design inspired my own. Beside myself with fear, I extricated her from the mud. Her mouth froze and her breathing stopped. Desperation struck her eyes. A heart attack, I thought. Leaning into her frozen body, I held her mouth and breathed my panicked breath into her—giving

her the air that she'd bequeathed to me before my birth. I would later learn that this was the beginning of heightened panic attacks and not a heart attack. I liken this to the Rwandan condition *ihahamuka*—which means without lungs and is common in the wake of trauma such as genocide.² My mother and I did get out of the valley. But faced with roads that jut dangerously out of slippery hills and overflowing riverbanks, my mother lay in bed with a fractured spine for four days over Christmas before the roads cleared sufficiently for us to take her to the hospital. The conditions where people eke out livings in the rural Eastern Cape make black trauma, kaffirization, a quotidian event. My use of the term *kaffirization* is to signal the work of the term beyond the taboo.³ Its use has always been pejorative. I use it here to point to its unhumaning intent.⁴

In a fall in 2015, my mother was shoved over by a young man wielding a smoking gun at her face. She landed with a thud to her head. She screamed cries that echoed in the distance to signal to my younger brother to escape from the house. Forcing her to the floor, her attacker tramped on her chest, forcing her ribs to yield, until she quieted. Hearing the screams and gunshots, my brother gathered his crutches and stumbled out of the back door, swinging on his single leg. He hid in the garden, and using his mobile phone, he called for help. My mother has screamed for help in agony so many times that her jaws have a way of locking. This is a sign of panic setting into her body. Freezing her. Draining the air from her lungs. Attacking her. Her screams carry memories of her husband, our father, who died young. I was six then, and my brother was a year old. She has been attacked so many times that she sits near windows to scan the road for assailants. Every sound must be accounted for. "What was that?" The remote control resides in the folds of her lap ever ready to mute the television. "Did you hear that?" She no longer watches the news and violent scenes on the television. Violence triggers panic. She flips through the channels to avoid bad news. Her favorite television programs are those whose dialogue she cannot hear. She sits and watches in the darkness late into the night, willing and repelling sleep, waiting for gunshots so that she can hobble away because she can no longer run. She is afraid to fall asleep. The trauma has eaten into her bones and resides in her joints, swelling and crystallizing them with arthritis that makes her body ache and age. Her diminished immune system means that the slightest cold gives way to pneumonia. The large bump on her head has subsided now. Through her snow-white hair, her scalp glistens in pain. She is no longer conscious of pain in her ribs. A pain that would wrack her body with every inward breath she took. Her

diaphragm heaving with the movement of her lungs. Crime is rampant. Unemployment supported by neoliberalism's insistence on separating people from land and self-dependence has alienated the youth and is driving them to attack the vulnerable bodies of the aged and debilitated. Young men prowl for money. Raised in a violent historical arc of political, masculinist force, violence is a familiar and ready tool.

My brother, too, knows trauma intimately after multiple encounters. From the car accident that led to his amputation to the stabbing of his abdomen and head and the multiple robberies. Kaffirization is when the doctor does not recognize that a vein needs suturing and applies plaster of paris instead. When the leg becomes gangrenous and the rural hospital cannot do anything about it because it has almost no medical personnel and inadequate medical supplies. When rural life is so cheap that it goes to hospital to die. When it became apparent that my brother's leg was in danger, an ambulance was miraculously found and after a night and ten hours of driving through the rain and mist, my brother arrived first at Mthatha's Nelson Mandela Academic Hospital where he couldn't be helped and then in Durban where he was dropped off at Nkosi Albert Luthuli Academic Hospital. From one Nobel Peace Prize winner and antiapartheid hero to another.

I found my brother unconscious on a stretcher in the emergency department of the Durban hospital. He was unattended while his leg decomposed, because the doctor wanted his next of kin. I was told, "To save him, we need to amputate the leg." Here I was, faced by the literal non-choice between gangrene and amputation of which James Baldwin (1984) once wrote. The world spun, sweat surged through my pores. My star athlete, twenty-three-year-old little brother whom I had watched learning to crawl and then to walk. And then run like the wind. My brother whom I had cheered as he won all his races at school. I signed the documents and authorized the amputation. Because the gangrene had spread, they cut high. Above the knee. We told him when he regained consciousness. When the phantom pains wracked his body, we coaxed the leg and told it that it was gone. Talking to the (absent) body. Pleading for the brain to catch up to a past that is ongoing. Two years later, the same body and brain had to process stab wounds. Someone waved a car down when they saw him stagger onto the road with his intestines pushing out of his abdomen. In recent years, we have started to worry for his liver, battered by all the drinking. For brutalized young men, drinking alcohol is not a passing relief or rite of passage into adulthood. It is constant because there is no relief for the haunted.

We worry about my mother and brother. We coax them to move to the city where safety can be purchased at a price. They refuse. They are attached to place and land, graves, the river, and the hills that encircle my home. They are disoriented when they are away from the place they call home. The hills enfold them, and the rivers imprison, soothe, and protect. As for me, I witness the deaths and regular brutalization from both near and afar. Sometimes I am at home with my mother. At other times I was in cities such as Cape Town, Durban, and Johannesburg where I have studied and worked. I escaped the fate of most black people that I was raised with because of these movements that have assured a middle-class life of relative safety. I now live in Johannesburg and consider myself to have two homes: one in Johannesburg and one in the village.

Mpondo Orientations

Riotous Deathscapes is the story about the failures of modernity in a place with alternative modes of being that looks to different timescapes and defies death/life binaries. The different chapters suggest that while the incursions of modernity leave devastation in their wake, the Mpondo people make meaningful livings of survivance in the black deathscapes that mark this place. *Riotous Deathscapes* crafts a Mpondo theory. This theory is conceived in the confluence of the natural world and the jostle of oral narratives against officially sanctioned histories. Its components are a constellation of death, life, the ocean, hills, rivers, graves, and spirits. The theory therefore moves against anthropocentric struggles that invest in the human taxonomy of the Chain of Being. Amidst the multiple dyings in Mpondoland are a defiant people whose timescapes root them in a temporality that rubs against colonial time. What emerges is a livingness that points to blackness and indigenous life precariously unmoored from modernity. We witness a hopelessness that does not surrender to helplessness. This is an ethic of black indigenous people. It is a refusal to languish in a state of victimhood but instead craft rampant dying as a way of living. *Riotous Deathscapes* suggests ways of attending differently to black life on the margins. It offers ways of looking askance as a methodology for black studies from the African continent in conversation with those in the black diaspora. To attend askance is to attend queerly, not in the tradition of Western queer studies but in a queerly African way of looking. To be queerly African is to fail at being a self-contained and actualized modern subject.⁵ It is to be in

relation to multiple others, to eschew the linearity of settler time, and to refuse social formations that are made for Man.⁶ To live queerly is to stay in struggle without seeking escape and transcendence. It is to be both black and indigenous, always porous to possibilities of being remade over time. It is to live in the tributary and confluence of varying crosscurrents that signal relation. Oceanic, spiritual, climatic, death, life, erotic, queer. It is to be attentive to emergent geographies of gendered, sexual, transnational, and racial identities that arise in the wake of rupture. *Riotous Deathscapes* charts a course of black life in vast deathscapes. It is a portrait of life among the dead.

This book offers a theory-method of being that I term *Mpondo theory*. The theory is distilled through a meditation and portrait of black life lived in the rural reserve. My transcription shows how people live in the world and in the body. In turn, I examine how the body is enfolded within the natural world, the spiritual, and systemic realms. I engage in a transcription of this theory to provide a portrait of parts of this life by historicizing it in deep time to demonstrate how amaMpondo have weathered colonialism, apartheid, and neoliberal toxins.⁷ *Riotous Deathscapes* shows how Mpondo theory both predates these historical incursions and responds to the unhumaning of capitalism and antiblackness while emanating a poetics of relation. Although the theory predates capitalism and offers possibilities beyond it, I see it as conveying a vernacular theory of being in a capitalist world. *Riotous Deathscapes* is a practice of the black public humanities as it traces histories that exist in largely undocumented form. It relies on sources that exist outside of organization and formality. While Bhekizizwe Peterson (2019) describes the black public humanities as knowledges that exist in alternative spaces such as community theater, unions and associations, local savings schemes, mothers' church unions, community radio and newspapers—all of which exist beyond the university and formal archives—I widen this to include inscriptive practices such as orality, the natural environment, ritual, family and community storytelling, and other acts of active remembering and imagining that enable intergenerational sociality and resistance. Similar to Aboriginal practices, I center features of landscape in meaning making.⁸ This orthography is not an attempt to make Mpondo people legible to the world as a native informant.⁹ Since Mpondo culture is enfolded in opacity, it would be impossible to make it fully legible. Instead, *Riotous Deathscapes* offers a portrait of rural forms of black life that widen current traditions of black, indigenous, queer, and African studies. This meditation offers alternative modes of theorizing refusal

and freedom in the midst of overdetermined dying. It offers possibilities for similarly located people seeking freedom in different chronotopes.

Riotous Deathscapes begins by explicating Mpondo theory and its navigational tool—*ukwakumkanya*. It then situates Mpondoland as the focus of this text through a portrait of the cartographies of emaMpondweni. The text's understanding of temporality is then drawn out in a discussion on timescapes. I then move on to illustrate how this theory is embedded within and informed by a number of cognate fields of thought such as black studies, indigenous studies, queer studies, and debilitation studies. Throughout, I signal some key interlocutors in the black world. The introduction concludes with a chapter outline of the five chapters that constitute *Riotous Deathscapes*.

Mpondo Theory

A way of seeing, knowing, being, and living with and against sedimented devastation. Mpondo theory is *Riotous Deathscapes*' contribution to knitting together black and indigenous studies. To explicate this theory, I begin with a key concept that drives this theorization: *ukwakumkanya*. This concept works as a trinity: it is a feature of Mpondo theory, a practice of the theory, and a scholarly method adopted in this book. As a scholarly method and practice of Mpondo theory, *ukwakumkanya* enables the book to stage a meditation and portrait of black life in the rural margins. In what follows, I begin by sketching the coordinates of Mpondo theory through the practice of *ukwakumkanya*.

I lift my hand and shield my eyes. In isiMpondo, the language that I first spoke as a child, this action is *ukwakumkanya*.¹⁰ Creating a shadow in order to illuminate. Shielding one's eyes in order to see far. The paradox of creating light by blocking the sun's glare. *Ukwakumkanya* is to block out distractions and draw into sharp relief. To throw shade or create a shadow over the face. It enables tunnel vision in order to focus the gaze. *Ukwakumkanya* is to pause. To double take by looking again. Re-figure. Eyes shielded and momentarily closed, one can look into the past. *Ukwakumkanya* is to shield one's eyes in order to attend differently and to consider from another vantage point. This way of looking can also be performative, a pretense not to see. To look blankly or past someone. Looking this way allows us to feign surprise but also to express real surprise. This is a way of looking selectively by adopting a register that enables one to attend anew. By

blocking out what one does not want to see, this is a very deliberate way of looking. It manages and orders excess. It invites multiple gazes, which could include direct, oblique, repeated, and stalled looks. It can be a look of refusal expressed through looking askance, looking away, and blocking out. *Ukwakumkanya* is to imbue the black subject with self-knowledge and interiority. It is to look from a place of consciousness of one's place in the world. From the existential fact of the body and the accompanying attributions we have been compelled to learn about being-black-in-the-world (Manganyi 2019). *Ukwakumkanya* is to attend from a place of survival that is coded in the body and intergenerational knowledges. It is an archive that radiates from a deep history. It is a perspective from which to gaze at the world thus bringing it into sharp relief. To look this way is to center the subject position of the looker. If we imagine a deep temporality within which our ancestors are embedded agents, we can imagine that our *ukwakumkanya* is discursively related to theirs and our ways of attending can radiate backward. It is to recognize black indigenous wisdom borne by ancestors and elders. Before us then is a deep history of attending while being grounded in this place. Standing on a jagged rock high above the seething ocean of Mpondoland, how many ships did our ancestors see? What does this way of looking tell us about our history, and how are we figured differently by self-seeing beyond colonial and state-sanctioned narratives? How does rooting oneself on the seashore or black shoals discursively link our history to a global history of oceanic existence that builds anticolonial praxis and is indigenously ordered away from the sovereign claims of the nation-state?¹¹ What do we see when we look away from the colonial and neoliberal state and instead create *ukwakumkanya*? But seeing is not limited to sight. It is to attend with all sensorial registers. One can scan the sky to divine an approaching storm in the gathering clouds, but with eyes shielded, one might smell the storm approach in the air. *Ukwakumkanya* is to pause and attend through the frequency of the sensorial. Through the method of *ukwakumkanya*, Mpondo theory is a multisensorial experience of life and the world. It displaces imperial emphasis on the visual.

These focused looks, tarrying gazes, perked ears, attentive nose, touches, and attempts to perceive differently are the driving motifs of this text. To center looking in relation is to adopt a phenomenological orientation to the world. *Ukwakumkanya* is the mnemonic map. It serves as a memory aid and assists us to retain and retrieve memory. In this text, the hill, ocean, river, spirit world, and grave are maps to Mpondo history. I invite the reader to join me in lifting their hand to create a shelter above their eyes and to attend

with me through the illuminating shadow. The place about which I write has a riotous landscape of rolling hills, tempestuous oceans, plunging gorges, meandering streams, disappeared graves, and flooding rivers. *Ukwakumkanya* is a grounded way of attending from these sites.

Ukwakumkanya enables a view that is in solidarity with diasporic blackness but that is grounded in place. This is to suggest that Mpondo theory is related to but distinct from blackness in the diaspora. By attending from here, we tarry in an untypical location that is not forged in the transatlantic slave trade. This way of attending is not a counter gaze. Rather, it is a way of looking that enlarges and decenters black studies from overdetermined ways of knowing.¹² In *The Practice of Diaspora*, Brent Hayes Edwards (2009) uses the term *décalage* to describe precisely these kinds of fault lines:

This black diasporic *décalage* among African Americans and Africans, then, is not simply geographical distance, nor is it simply difference in evolution or consciousness; instead it is a different kind of interface that might not be susceptible to expression in the oppositional terminology of the “vanguard” and the “backward.” In other words, *décalage* is the kernel of precisely that which cannot be transferred or exchanged, the received biases that refuse to pass over when one crosses the water. It is a changing core of difference; it is the work of “differences within unity,” an unidentifiable point that is incessantly touched and fingered and pressed. (Edwards 2009, 14)

This is central for my own thoughts in figuring Mpondo theory in relation to a global black studies. Mpondo theory is true to this location, but it is a part of something more than here. It similarly enlarges indigenous studies by figuring African indigeneity as sutured to blackness—in one body. It expands black queer studies by grounding antinormative being in African locales and using more capacious lenses to attend to how we queer and are queered.

If I were to diagrammatically represent Mpondo theory based on the foregoing, I’d begin by shielding the eyes to capture a quizzical look that is both oriented to the future and historically focused.¹³ The diagram would convey *ukwakumkanya*’s simultaneous vision across sensorial registers. The looker’s feet would be firmly rooted on the ground to signal the present but also to stake a claim to place—not of ownership but of belonging here. The place is the natural world of Mpondoland. The views from these shifting spaces are the praxis that constitute the assemblage of Mpondo theory. But the theory also escapes total legibility. It is uncontainable, riotous, and does not invite nor entertain any desire to be fully grasped in one hand.

Like the ocean, meandering river, hill, graves, and spirit world, it is never fully knowable even to those who practice it as a way of life. It is not unlike Tiffany Lethabo King's (2019) shoal—the surfacing of the ocean floor close to the shoreline, whose unpredictability exceeds total mappability and full knowability.¹⁴ Mpondo theory is akin to John Paul Ricco's description of an affective occurrence that is a formative force but is less than an event whose function is traceable as neither cause nor effect. Ricco contends that this affective occurrence “is in this sense inappropriable: incapable of being claimed and owned or made one's own—but it might also be what cannot be expropriated, stolen, or taken away from you” (2019, 22). At its nub, Mpondo theory suggests an opacity and a meditative posture of neutral affect that refuses commensurability precisely because *ukwakumkanya* is about a mode of relation that resists reader's mastery of the theory. The commitment to “contingency, conjuncture, and extemporizing” suggests a posture that is averse to the will-to-possess, to systematizing and mastery (Ricco 2019, 24). This works alongside Édouard Glissant's (1997) duty to errantry—an insistence on the poetics of relation that do not commit to rootedness, possession, origins, or totalitarianism. *Ukwakumkanya* finds resonance in Glissant's poetics of relation as these ways of being are forged in relation to self and the other rather than in forms of dominance and supremacy—for example, in how the Mpondo responded to Khoekhoe neighbors fleeing settler genocide and white and enslaved Asian and African shipwreck survivors who were castaway on the Mpondo coast. Because the Mpondo people have themselves not mastered *ukwakumkanya* since it comes to them like a mother tongue—and they hold it contingently—it cannot be appropriated. Readers of this book may relate to it, but they are not likely to master it because it is not possible to absorb the subjective and ontological interiority of the margins. Instead, my invitation is for readers to inhabit the world that *Riotous Deathscapes* portrays in order to explore possibilities for how we might reconsider modes of living in abandoned zones.

Following the navigational tool *ukwakumkanya*, a second defining feature of Mpondo theory is the place from which we attend. It is rooted in the past through the centering of ancestral knowledges and continuities between the living, the death bound, and the dead. This relation to the dead is signaled in *ukwakumkanya*'s ability to look back while simultaneously looking forward. As the coronavirus advanced on the rural countryside in May 2020, the concept of *ukwakumkanya* recurred in my daily telephonic conversations with my mother. She told me that old folk like

her were focusing their gaze with dread on what would be illuminated. For her, *ukwakumkanya* gave a foreboding historical vision. She described how she occupied her sleeplessness with counting the people who'd died during the wreckage wrought by the AIDS pandemic across our villages. Here, her way of attending to the specter of the coronavirus evoked dying and the ancestral. As a way of attending, dreams are also a form of *ukwakumkanya*. Dreams can fill one with a sense of foreboding, uncertainty, or wonder based on what one sees, smells, hears, touches, or tastes. Dreams link us to futures and pasts. *Ukwakumkanya* provides us with a simultaneously grounded and abstract concept of timespace which Vincente Diaz described as "a product of social and cultural formulation and reckoning" (2011, 27). What we attend to therefore is always discursively located. A gaze from the village is a form of grounded theorizing that reckons with what has gone before, what we are living through, and what awaits us.

The theoretical preoccupation of Mpondo theory primarily responds to dual pressures that Mpondo people struggle with. The first is the long history of colonial and apartheid subjugation and how its entanglement with neoliberal capitalist cultures has had devastating effects on this community. The second pressure is how neoliberal capitalist cultures are variously implicated in the many forms of dying and death detailed in this book. Mpondo theory both precedes these pressures and responds to them. The book is organized around a demonstration of the operation of this trilogy—colonial/neoliberal capitalist cultures, dyings and death, and riotous resurgence.¹⁵ *Riotous Deathscapes* therefore articulates a cosmological, lived, and embodied form of theorization into a matrix of meaning-making that spans death and life. It is a theory of being in relation to persons, ancestors, the natural world, life, and death. Mpondo theory has a complicated set of relations to individual capitalist notions of ownership. It favors shared and environmentally conscious use of the land and ocean's resources characterized by moderation.¹⁶ In practice, it demonstrates a collision between different epistemic legacies of individual ownership and communal sharing. This theory responds to capitalist extraction with a defiant declaration that embraces both living and dying to maintain relations to land. The regularity of death and suffering means that Mpondo people have normalized dying into their way of life. This theory begins with death because in the Mpondo life cycle dying precedes living. Since the ancestors that provide meaning for how we live are already dead, the source of knowledge and life is death. To take the dead seriously is to be attentive to the ghostly elements of social life. Avery Gordon (1997) asserts that a confrontation with ghostly elements

requires a major reorientation in relation to how we make and conceive of knowledge. Because the land and water are central to how people die, live, and order their lives, my theorizing is grounded in the sociality enabled by the environment, spirits or supernatural, and embodiment. Reflecting on indigenous people on Turtle Island and their forms of theorization, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson contends that “As political orders, our bodies, minds, emotions, and spirits produce theory and knowledge on a daily basis without conforming to the conventions of the academy” (2017, 31). Because theory has come to be imagined as belonging to particular bodies and places, this is an unconventional way to think of it. However, with this text I continue a tradition of insisting that theory is present even among the unhumaned.¹⁷

By centering *ukwakumkanya*, I amplify the lives of my protagonists and treat their truth claims with the gravity of theorists.¹⁸ I rely on stories, allusions, traces, and residue that I read off surfaces. I am preoccupied with how one accounts for a history that is undocumented in the written form. How does one write when oral and cosmic archives are primary forms of being and where writing is not a customary archival form? Given the marginality and unimportance of Mpondoland and her people to the colonial project, even the colonial archive is unproductive for this project. The archive fails. There are liberating dividends from a failed colonial archive. There is a freedom and license to stick more closely to the voices of the people and the surfaces of this place. I therefore turn to collective memory scripted on bodies, in the lay of the land, in the hum of the ocean, in the familiar sight of young people’s despair, in the mounds of earth that cover bodies felled by AIDS and state-sponsored neoliberal violence, and in abandoned schoolgirls’ dreams. My method of the black public humanities works in tandem with Hartman’s (2008) concept of critical fabulation—a labor that seeks to paint as full a picture as possible of the lives of black enslaved people and other black undesirables.

The form adopted in this text is conscious of Rinaldo Walcott’s 2020 Twitter provocation that a core feature of black studies is an abiding commitment to form. This commitment is based on the recognition that traditional disciplines are unable to engage the fullness of black life. Black studies is an alternative space necessitated by the fact that the disciplines have been complicit in the unhumaning of black life. A subversion of disciplinary academic form is central to this break from the disciplines. I embrace this injunction and adopt forms that enable a fuller trace of the contours of Mpondo sociality. Throughout the text, I try to surface

what the chosen form reveals about black indigenous life and how the text battles against disciplinary strictures. For *Riotous Deathscapes*, deformative praxis is an investment in coproducing knowledges with Mpondo protagonists. As an insider and coprotagonist who self-references, it is not possible for me to engage with questions of sampling. I make choices as a member of the community involved in coproducing a portrait of villagers. I am not unaffected by the stories that assemble this text. Another expression of deformation is the claim to theorization with the explicit naming of Mpondo theory. This waywardness is a form of marking this work so that it is not conceived of only as data but as theory. As a deformative gesture, this work is not invested in seeking a place at the table of theory.

Instead, Mpondo theory is an emplaced way of responding that draws on black and indigenous ways of being and resisting. It is wary of the generalizing universal eye. The theory intersects with other forms of indigenous theorization. It however centers the features around which Mpondo ways of dying and living occur. Mpondo responses to being unhumaned may cohere with or diverge from similar communities elsewhere on the continent and in the Global South. By focusing on Mpondoland, I gesture to how globalization and neoliberalism have coopted indigenous ideas such as ubuntu.¹⁹ *Riotous Deathscapes* thinks from a place that registers a radically different kind of precarity and (im)possibility. The national and global imaginaries cannot account for Mpondo theory precisely because it is a substantially more difficult geographical and mental place from which to think. While my focus is emaMpondweni, I anticipate that the African village across the continent grapples with survival in the aftermath of slavery, colonial and neoliberal devastation, and ongoing neglect. In response, villagers work against the production of forgetful subjects and insist themselves into history.

To theorize from the African village, I lean on Frantz Fanon's (1967) sociogeny to argue that all cultures are lived locally rather than universally.²⁰ Sea-level theorization deepens particularity but offers something beyond the particular. Sociogeny works against canonical narratives. This text is about meeting people where they live. The fact that I am part of them and part of elsewhere inflects this meeting. In many ways, then, I am simultaneously self-writing while also writing my coprotagonists. This writing takes seriously the idea that the problems I narrate are socially produced and not inherently a part of the people and the place and therefore unchanging. Sociogeny enables multiple histories that are grounded in community. Since truth is a process of endless recovery and revision (Marriott 2011), this

project is attentive to the new truths that are possible and the leaps that villagers take out of an overdetermined history. To see blackness as unstuck from canonical history is to embrace a certain buoyancy from which reimagining can occur. To be in community with the spiritual world is to disrupt teleology, and to resist development is to be out of time with neoliberalism. When villagers resist Western civilization as the only version of the future, they make room for different ontological possibilities. What openings exist and how do leaps through openings potentially take us out of the imprisoning black history of colonialism? The text is attentive to the leaps and ways in which we take flight. Throughout *Riotous Deathscapes*, the co-protagonists, the stories they tell, and the historical figures and events with which I engage point to a fugitive orientation to the world. Read sociogenetically, then, the black state of being in the village is an art of studied refusal with moments of capitulation. Tina Marie Campt (2019) asserts that the practice of refusal is to reject the conditions of the status quo as livable. In her conception, negation is generative for its potentialities of how we might live otherwise. The practice of refusal draws on a black history of fugitive and rebellious existence. Throughout the text we observe different ways in which amaMpondo say no and embrace waywardness in a demonstration of Fred Moten's (2018) conception of fugitivity as an ongoing desire to escape. If desire is a driving impulse for life, the Fanonian leaps in the break produce alternative socialities where ancestors walk among us and where choices are framed more broadly than life and death. In *Riotous Deathscapes*, sociality is death defying. It is driven by an imaginary that takes us to spaces and possibilities beyond death—to what else happened.²¹

Mpondo theory proposes another way of articulating the *being* of being black. Rather than mounting an argument for why we are deserving of being human on the terms of Sylvia Wynter's *Man*, Mpondo theory offers a decentered view of being. Decentered from whiteness and constitutive of the natural, animal, spiritual, and ancestral worlds. In this conception, the beingness of being black and indigenous is not about recuperating the human, dominion, elevation, reason, possessing an essence, or reestablishing an alternative center. It is neither posthuman nor entirely animalist.²² In this project, I explore what is liberated when we conceive of being as elastic, reciprocal, and unbounded. It is exactly the consignment of the Mpondo to the status of the unhuman that enables this yearning to be both in and outside of the human—to be boundless. Mpondo theory is invested in the indigenous, natural environment and the ancestral. As a people who have remained on our motherland, we are not alienated since our beingness

derives from being in place. Our order of consciousness is based on our specific social reality fortified by *ukwakumkanya*. Mpondo theory therefore assembles black being as an orientation that is less about precision but more oceanic. Located but in motion.²³ This portrait of Mpondo life suggests that it is unenclosed.

Cartographies of Mpondo Spatiality

If indigenous spatiality is unbounded and dynamic, mapping has the effect of binding space and rendering it static in ways that enable capitalist claims to privatization. Mpondoland has largely evaded the colonial, apartheid, and postapartheid cartographers' lenses. Almost all cartographies of South Africa move from a great level of detail to a general inexactness with significant gaps on the maps when Mpondoland appears. Indeed, as colonial cartographers were more interested in "the manufactured image of complete knowledge" rather "than gaining the actual knowledge itself," its illegibility became an important subaltern attribute for the Transkei (Braun 2008, 2). The lack of interest in the area and its supposed unknowability means that a sea-level theory—a planetary perspective from below—is how the territory is mentally mapped by its inhabitants, outside of any formal processes.²⁴ AmaMpondo have always known our world. Oral accounts as well as my own experience clearly demonstrate that we know one hill from another. The pathways of our rivers, the secrets of their depths, and ritual histories are intimate parts of who we are. The ocean's shoals tell us our history in the ebb and flow of the tides. The valleys and spaces between our villages are stories of our lineages that speak to how we relate. Our graves are relational zones with our ancestors.

How do we capture this complexity in a modern cartography whose audience is always external to the area and whose goal is abstraction? If, as Joel Wainwright and Joe Bryan suggest, "mapping indigenous lands involves locating indigenous peoples within . . . a grid of intelligibility" (2009, 155), we may have to ask what the value of a mapping exercise is. How might a work of cartographic abstraction reproduce unequal power relations by erasing complicated interests and historic sets of relations? To continue a line of questioning posed by Wainwright and Bryan (2009, 156), "what are the possibilities, and limits, of this particular effort to calculate the incalculable, to demarcate the indemarcatable"? Given this incommensurability of indigenous mapping and impossibility of capturing the