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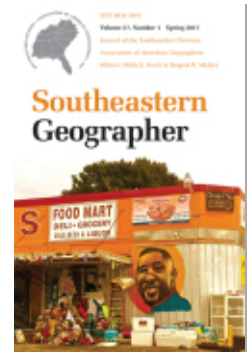
Commentary: Worn out

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Commentary

Worn Out

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Worn down, in a debasement more eternal than apocalypse. But that is nothing yet.

—Edouard Glissant,
Poetics of Relation, p 6.

When LaToya Eaves asked me to write a commentary on black geographies, I was in the midst of teaching two courses: a graduate level seminar called Black/Geographies/Liberation and a third year undergraduate course called Black Feminist Thought. At that time, I thought: this will be easy, look at all you have read and taught and discussed over the term; look at everything that is black and feminist and geographic. The books in these courses included *Black Feminist Thought*, *If I Can Cook/You Know God Can*, *Butch Queens Up in Pumps*, *Souls of Black Folk*, *Freedom as Marronnage*, *Trumpet*, *Kindred*, *Dark Matters*, *The Black Atlantic*, *Golden Gulag*, *Black Girl Dangerous*, *Poetics of Relation*. My easy comfort was disrupted when I noticed *Demonic Grounds* had turned 10 years old when LaToya made the request. The book is aging. I have never read the book myself. I have glanced through it, taught it (only once), read passages occasionally, thought about it, given presentations on it. But I have never sat down and read this book, cover to cover. I never liked the subtitle (Black Women and the

Cartographies of Struggle), which was recommended to me by the publisher. The book was originally named as my dissertation was: *Demonic Grounds: Black Women, Geography, and the Poetics of Landscape*. The original title couples Geography – the discipline and Eurocentric cartographic acts and the subversive geographies black women make – with the work of Edouard Glissant.

Glissant offers us a radical spatial politics that harnesses creative energy and the entanglements of world-wide relation engages the difficult project of honoring our collective inter-human lands without the mandate for conquest, without territorialization (Glissant, 1997, p 50, 31). So my ease unraveled into a terrible discursive burden with this old and aging book I wrote but have not read and a subtitle that erases black poetics. I have begun to forget parts of the book and in this have had to face the parts that are unforgettable. The auction blocks, for me, demand a kind of brutal unforgetting. The archives on slave auctions that I visited when researching the book – those sites delineated, sometimes with loud precision and sometimes through silence, practices of terror-making that require violent sexist anti-black dehumanization. Even as black women, men, and children are subverting and tearing down the dominant order

of knowledge at the moment of sale, the auction block makes the dehumanization of black peoples agreeable and profitable and delightful and awful and painful and desirable to witness. These memories need to be excised, forgotten. But of course they are not. The auction block as described by McKittrick in *Demonic Grounds*, I read somewhere, provides a way to think about the stage and about contemporary black performativity and black women's role in popular culture. I want to forget this. The dehumanization of black peoples is agreeable and profitable and delightful and awful and painful and desirable to witness. How can I forget this? I don't want it anymore.

The final book we read in the Black/Geographies/Liberation graduate seminar was Dionne Brand's (2002) *A Map to the Door of No Return*. In the beginning of the book Brand discusses the ways in which blackness and black subjectivities emerge from lost memories, forgotten stories, unknown places:

My grandfather said he knew what people we came from. I reeled off all the names I knew. Yoruba? Ibo? Ashanti? Mandingo? He said no to all of them, saying that he would know it if he heard it. I was thirteen. I was anxious for him to remember.

I pestered him for days. . . Papa never remembered. Each week he came I asked him had he remembered. Each week he told me no. Then I stopped asking. He was disappointed. I was disappointed. We lived after that in this mutual disappointment. It was a rift between us. . . The rupture this exchange with my grandfather revealed was greater than the need for familial

bonds. It was a rupture in history, a rupture in the quality of being. It was also a physical rupture, a rupture of geography. . . My grandfather could not summon up a vision of a landscape or a people which would add up to a name. And it was profoundly disturbing. (p 1–5)

In *Map*, I think that Brand argues that the cosmogonies of black geographies are not about geography, as we know it, at all: they are not about Africa or African countries; they are not about auction blocks or the middle passage or the fields or the big house; they are not about whites only signs or swaths of black poverty and underdevelopment; they are not about the Caribbean or Europe or the slave ship or the North or the South or the underground railroad or north stars or prisons; they are not about the census data, the ledger data, the blood data, the tracks of land; they are not about homeplace, or the margin, or the color line, or spiteful 124.

These are black geographies (and non-black geographies, too), but they are not where blackness comes from. *There is no from*. There is no there, or somewhere, or place that a black from is anchored to. This means that our historically present black geographies—the Africas and the prisons and north stars and 124—are from nowhere. They are inventions, just as we are.

The tracking of black impossibility and complexity is not new to black studies, as we know: black is in the break, it is fantastic, it is an absented presence, it is a ghost, a mirror, it is water, air; black is flying and underground; it is time-traveling, supernatural, inter-planetary, otherworldly; it is in between the lines and it is postcolonial; black is bulletproof and magical and

in every dark corner; black is social death, afro-pessimist, afro-optimist, afrocentric, afropunk, afrofuturist, soulful, neosoul, blues; it is negritude, postslave, always enslaved; black is like who/black is like me; black is everywhere and everything; it is make-believe and magic. Black is fantastic, what Richard Iton describes as “the minor key sensibilities generated from the experiences of the underground, the vagabond, and those constituencies with, against, marked as deviant—notions of being that are inevitably aligned within, in conversation with, and articulated beyond the boundaries of the modern” (Iton, 2008, p 16). These black impossibilities are not new: so many of us are too real to be real. The impossibility thus leads to the invention of black nonpersonhood, and the accompanying biocentric codes that naturalize racial hierarchies, all of which are coupled with ongoing black struggles to assert and reinvent black humanity as fantastic. Unjust and inequitable social systems, like racial capitalism, are underwritten by a refusal of black humanity and a refusal to recognize the *struggle* to assert black humanity; this is a refusal, then, of both black humanness and the praxis of being human.

This is, as we know, Frantz Fanon’s (1967) predicament, a shameful yet lauded knowledge system that “objectively cut away slices of his [human] reality” (p 116). We have, then, is a corporeal predicament: skins and masks are everywhere, coding the human project as a disavowal of blackness that is harnessed to a longstanding struggle that tracks the black fantastic as an enunciation of what Sylvia Wynter (1995) calls a new world view.

So, to return to Brand (2002). She writes: “places and indeed those who

inhabit them are fictions” (18). She writes: “Everyone thinks that a city is full of hope, but it isn’t. Sometimes it is the end of imagination” (110). She writes: “water is another country” (56). She writes: “in the diaspora, as in bad dreams, you are constantly overwhelmed by the persistence of the spectre of captivity” (29). She writes: “The road knows that wherever you find yourself you are” (152). The puzzle I am trying to work out is: how do we think about black impossibility in relation to geography and black geographies? If there is no *from*, where are we? What do we do with the profoundly disturbing impossibility of black geographies that unfold into prisons, north stars, apartheid, and swaths of premature death?

It is worth repeating here some of my signposts: the terrible discursive burden, the brutal forgetting, the fantastic and impossible, the corporeal predicaments, the profoundly disturbing door of no return – the nowhere of black life. What I want to propose is that the nowhere of black life is one of many useful analytics through which to orient our political vision of black geographies.

The project of black studies, which has long worked through the monumental workings of corporeal dispossession, has also consequently conceptualized liberation and modernity as tied to multi-scalar spatial processes that cannot easily replicate the prevailing order of geographic knowledge. This is to say that the profoundly disturbing nowhere of black life, in fact, provides a template to imagine the production of space not through patriarchal and colonial project trappings (e.g. we want our own space, and to own space, on your (anti-black colonial) terms, give us a place in your system) but instead

as a project that, to borrow from Glissant (1997), engenders relations of uncertainty (e.g. space is relational to praxis of black human life, black geographies are therefore not nouns but rather are verbs that are ongoing and never resolved). The corporeal predicament – the body weighed down by an unforgettable history – is there, but it is not knowable as a suffering object that reinforces the global web of anti-blackness. So, in this conceptualization of black geographies, the nowhere of blackness is not rendered non-existent, rather fosters an *outlook* that is structured by, but not necessarily beholden to, crass positivist cartographies.

This kind of analytics, I hope, does something new to the black body – dislodging it as the only source of black knowledge (and therefore liberation), while also honoring it as the location through which black anti-colonial praxis emerges. The geographic puzzle, then, becomes one of cautiously reordering our methodological approach to anti-blackness, so that the question of liberation is not tied to already existing analytical cosmogonies that refuse black life. This is a brutal unforgetting that wants a different future for the unforgettable.

What I have learned from black studies about black geographies is that we might be joyous about the impossibility of wholly institutionalizing black knowledge. This is not about forgetting black queer, feminist, trans, or other insurgent voices, it is about knowing them differently, outside the institutional structures that crudely spatialize the black body – not black people, not black humanity – as only usefully captive and unfree and crudely demarcated as disconnected to other genres of being human. Prevailing geographic

systems prop up this logic: there is a reason a certain analytics of flesh (rather than humanity) is academic currency. I don't want this anymore. I want to forget this. Or, I want to know black life differently. When I wrote *Demonic Grounds* the work of Sylvia Wynter allowed me to think black life differently. I want to remember this, and to remember the radical geographic work of black studies, where the fantastic nowhere of black life allows us to puzzle out new and unexpected – and undisciplined and unacceptable – modes of being human.

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Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle (Minnesota), edited Sylvia Wynter: *On Being Human as Praxis* (Duke), and co-edited, with Clyde Woods, *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place*. Other works can be found in *Small Axe*, *cultural geographies*, *Gender, Place and Culture*, *The Black Scholar*, *CLR James Journal*, and *The Journal of Social and Cultural Geography*. Katherine edits the book series, *Errantries* (Duke) is editor of *Antipode: A Radical Journal of Geography*.