

## Book Review | *Dear Science and Other Stories*, by Katherine McKittrick (Duke University Press, 2021)

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In *Dear Science and Other Stories*, Katherine McKittrick tells a recursive tale of Black thought, Black life, Black loss, Black triumph, Black brilliance, Black love, and yes, hallelujah, Black science. By drawing together ideas from geography, Black feminist thought, literature, computer science, feminist technoscience, and philosophy of science, McKittrick maps out an ecosystem that understands Black thought and creativity as Black liberation. The book succeeds as a major contribution to these fields and points to a needed overlap between them. In other words, *Dear Science* is an ambitious, significant text with deep roots.

To read *Dear Science* is to be caught up in its own recurring algorithm of what McKittrick calls “black livingness” (3). Black livingness, McKittrick argues, is contained in how we—Black people—tell stories about our universe, and importantly, our selves are always contained in that universe. To define the phrase beyond that is to risk oversimplification: the entire book is a simultaneous definition and noticing of Black livingness. In the final pages, McKittrick does hint at the conclusion we are meant to come to, which is that “black rebellion, the work of liberation, regardless of scale, is livingness” (186).

It has now been a year since I first read the book, and every text I have picked up since reading this book has been read through the prism of McKittrick’s words. In this sense, *Dear Science* is an enormously successful, lengthy refrain. Because the work drew my attention to the “affective-physiological-corporeal-intellectual labor” (3) of Black/intellectual life, I was called to read myself and my work through the text—and indeed all Black creative work that I have since engaged with in any serious way.

*Dear Science* functions as an important intervention in a moment where there are extensive and at times vitriolic debates about defining “Blackness,” “Black life,” and the very idea of whether there is such a thing as Black living(ness). Rather than choosing a side in the debates, for example, about Afropessimism vs. its critics, McKittrick chooses to comprehensively notice “the physiological work of black liberation” (3). The lingering question, of course, is what counts as Black liberation work.

And it is here that *Dear Science* takes a strong position, answering this question affirmatively and analytically, rather than through the lens of what is not Black liberation. Black liberation is co-produced by intellectual work that loves on Black people, that notices our *bios* and *mythoi*, which as the Jamaican philosopher and novelist Sylvia Wynter articulated them, are our matter and meaning. That is to say, the physicality and creativity of Black livingness.

Those who are familiar with McKittrick’s work as a Black feminist geographer will not be surprised to hear that to read her is to read the world through the lens of her reading of Wynter. Their seven-year exchange, which appears in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, specifically the chapter “Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations,” echoes throughout *Dear Science*, including in its fundamental discursive framing around “science” itself. In a footnote, McKittrick explains that her reading of science is through the idea of *scientia*. In my view as a practicing scientist, this is a reading of science’s roots back into science: a challenge to the scientific establishment to develop a firmly established commitment to rational knowledge production. One might argue that science as an institution has already made this commitment, but the fact that one must continuously make the case for how Black thought is scientific thought suggests otherwise. Black stories of Black livingness articulate *bios* and *mythoi*, and the fact of Black positionality in humanity. In this way, *Dear Science* reads as an experiment with Wynter’s theory of *homo narrans*. By noticing Black “corporeal and affective labor,” our understanding of the entire species is illuminated.

Simultaneously, by orienting around this word, this institutional structure that has so much power, McKittrick channels Wynter’s refusal to be disciplined into categories that are not constructed with Black flourishing in mind, quipping that “Discipline is empire” (36). As McKittrick notes in her January 2019 letter that begins “Dear Science,” at the end of *Dear Science*, “To be black is to recognize and enervate the fictive perimeters of you, Science” (186). Black liberation work is disruptive to disciplining, to disciplines. Black livingness is both made possible by Black resistance and it is also transcendent, made possible, recursively, by its own undeniability. Here again we see McKittrick experimenting with what it means to apply Wynter’s ideas: to revise how we read ourselves and each other through a broad conception of science.

A complete mapping of Black livingness, particularly in relation to science, requires excavating how science has aided and abetted in the construction of Blackness. McKittrick attends to this in "(Zong) Bad Made Measure," a deep dive into scientific racism, race science, and how Black studies exists in part as a refutation of scientific racism but also sometimes reifies one of scientific racism's core principles, that race is biological nature. The story told in this chapter addresses "the social production of biologically determinist racial scripts" and how they "can be dislodged" by a confrontation with Black livingness and Black labor (125).

Continuing her own discursive confrontation with the constraints of a white-dominant academy, McKittrick does not write only in paragraphs that span the page's margins. In "(Zong) Bad Made Measure," she also writes in parallel columns, giving us the option of reading horizontally or vertically, a topography on the page that evokes a multitude of distinct experiences, all of them required to get at the completeness of the story.

The word *Zong* itself references a grotesque eighteenth-century incident where the Europeans crewing the ship *Zong* drowned over one hundred kidnapped Africans because it led to more profit than letting their captives live. The word also now has a secondary invocation for those familiar with Black (Canadian) literature: poet M. NourbeSe Philip's book-length poem, *Zong!* Thus, its invocation functions as both a reference, yes, to Black death, but also to Black storytelling and Black livingness through poetry.

This portion of the book is preceded by a playlist compiled by McKittrick and fellow Black intellectuals. The list of songs acts as a buffer between the analysis in "(Zong) Bad Made Measure" of the theory that underpins scientific racism and race discourse and the chapter that precedes the list, "Failure (My Head Was Full of Misty Fumes of Doubt)." "Failure" is about the digitization of racism and its production of Black death and suffering, or what Safiya Umoja Noble (2018) has called *algorithms of oppression*. McKittrick outlines her attempts to write her own algorithm, with the understanding that "algorithms are future-making mathematical equations" and "our methodologies are, in themselves, forms of black well-being?" (116). Again, McKittrick is unpacking what Black liberation possibilities look like. Rather than rejecting algorithms, she considers what Afrofuturist possibilities can be imagined with and articulated through them.

McKittrick ultimately expresses a sense of failure because, after trying to teach herself the fundamental tools of algorithmic work—specifically, how to write computer code—she finds herself unable to take up the necessary tools. When I interviewed her about *Dear Science for Public Books*, I suggested that collaboration is essential for Black liberation (Prescod-Weinstein 2021b). I

wondered whether, if McKittrick had tried to develop the algorithm with a Black scientist, the outcome might have been different.

There is a way in which this letter at the end feels as if it was directly written to me, the lone Black woman particle physics theory professor living in a world that cannot imagine me, one in which I must conjure myself daily. Perhaps it is seeking collaboration. My own book *The Disordered Cosmos* is certainly prefigured in her note that “reader wrote of future pathways...quarks and curved space” (2021a, 187), because indeed that is what my book is about. My suspicion is that part of the richness of *Dear Science* is exactly that so many Black thinkers and makers will find that they have an intimate connection with the book. Here is a book in which we are imagined, theorized, and brought to life.

Each exquisite sentence of *Dear Science* is comprised of layers of meaning. Still, McKittrick thought carefully about the importance of readability and how the physicality of the book would be experienced, complete with pages for notes at the back of the book. I appreciated the deliberate decision to eschew endnotes in favor of footnotes that could be read in tandem with the text. Though sometimes the footnotes are physically disruptive to the page, it produces a book that is easier to navigate than ones with endnotes often are. There is also an aesthetic to the book, which is printed on glossy paper and midway through contains a curated exhibit of artistic photography. On each page of *Dear Science*, readers will find a reminder that Black (livingness) is beautiful, complex, and brilliant.

## References

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## Author Bio

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