

A Black Sense of Place: A Cartographic Conversation with Katherine McKittrick

Christine Vogt-William and Stefan Ouma

Introduction

This keynote conversation took place between Black feminist geographer Katherine McKittrick (Queen's University, Canada), economic geographer Stefan Ouma (University of Bayreuth, Germany) and literary and cultural studies scholar Christine Vogt-William (University of Bayreuth, Germany) at the 2023 annual conference of the Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellence at the University of Bayreuth.^{i,ii} The conversation took Professor McKittrick's highly acclaimed book, *Dear Science and Other Stories* (2021) as its point of departure at a time when other prominent scholars had also called for productive encounters between African Studies and Black Studies (e.g., Daley and Murrey 2022). McKittrick, Ouma, and Vogt-William are invested in mapping out reflections applicable to the transdisciplinary field of African Studies. The term "field" reflects the spatial nature of African Studies as comprising a plethora of knowledge production sites with epistemic perspectives from geopolitical and geophysical locations on the African continent and its diverse diasporas, challenging the colonial origins and hegemonic modes of knowledge production. The conversation considers knowledge production processes and research practices from specifically Black spatialising vantage points, which Ouma and Vogt-William identify as salient to productively disrupting African Studies as an intellectual and political field.

Dear Science and Other Stories (2021) combines poetic approaches with an erudite Black epistemic politics concerned with how Black diasporic communities, implementing the optics of "Black," have worked through geographic expressions of white supremacy. Here the term "Black" conveys more nuanced political, poetic, and intellectual ways of being, rather than functioning as a mere racial category grounded in colonial logics. Thus, this

conversation sounded and mapped distinct Black epistemic values through intersectional readings of power relations in structural, cultural, and disciplinary sites of knowledge production (Collins and Bilge 2018, 7–11). Notably, the concept of the intersection and its accompanying sociopolitical and epistemic identity vectors are, in and of themselves, spatialising metaphors. As members of the Africa Multiple Cluster, whose mission is “Reconfiguring African Studies,” both scholars engage with the entanglements of the arts and the sciences in this valuable book. In their own moves towards reconfiguring from distinct diasporic perspectives, Ouma and Vogt-William consider the potentialities of envisioning, and perhaps even generating, African Studies research paradigms and practices more aligned with the multi-local and the multi-vocal intersections of “a Black sense of place” where power is scrutinised, navigated, negotiated, resisted, and reclaimed.

Four “hooks” emerged from the conversation: 1) the expression, “a Black sense of place” runs like a refrain through *Dear Science and Other Stories*; 2) intersectionality is deployed both as a mode of critical praxis and as an analytical tool; 3) Black historicity is understood in terms of the spatiotemporal relations between the African continent and its diasporas, and the colonial nature of African Studies should therefore also be approached from the perspective of Black historicity; and 4) reconfiguring African Studies is meant to engender Afrofuturist visions grounded in “a Black sense of place.” With these hooks, Ouma and Vogt-William continue an “unfinished conversation” (Akomfrah 2012) about “doing African Studies with African scholars” as a process of “becoming,” a “product of history, memories [...] public and private perceptions,” resonating with McKittrick’s reading of diaspora as “doing”—that is, as method.ⁱⁱⁱ Conscious of their own positionalities, situated knowledges and loci of enunciation, Ouma and Vogt-William embark on a process-oriented “cartographic conversation,” a collaborative mapping exercise aligned with a decolonial sensibility. In conclusion, McKittrick provides a final commentary to Ouma and Vogt-William’s reflections from her own Black Canadian diasporic perspective.

Taking Soundings of *Dear Science and Other Stories*

How to think about the relationship between space and knowledge and why this requires a radical transdisciplinary approach

Katherine McKittrick (KM): I think one of the key questions or connections that I make in *Dear Science*... is between disciplinary knowledge and the production of space. After I completed *Demonic Grounds* (2006), I became incredibly interested in methodologies and thinking about how disciplinary knowledge—especially, but not only, in the academy—was a kind of mapping exercise. If we look at the establishments of departments or departmentalisation, if we look at the history of how the university was built more broadly and what it does to contain knowledge, we can observe that knowledge and space are demarcated and produced simultaneously. We can think of just the bones of an academic institution: hallways, signs, office spaces, labs, and how they produce a kind of spatial footprint that is entangled with knowledge.

In my field, I have always told this as a joke, but it is not a joke. In my “interdiscipline,” which is Black Studies and Gender Studies, some anti-racists have bigger offices than other anti-racists. And I have thought a lot about that for many years in terms of who gets funding and why, from the federal government, and how that upholds a particular type of knowledge that is not anticolonial, for example. Once we make this connection between knowledge and space, we can momentarily open the ways that radical interdisciplinary knowledges or radical interdisciplinarity can possibly destabilise this logic.

For me, when we are doing our best interdisciplinary work, we are not setting up a camp or bordering our knowledge systems. We are not resting comfortably within the walls of an already existing and calcified knowledge world, which for many of us is often the academy. We are seeking out ways to enact or write about or struggle toward liberation and it can be incredibly painful and uncomfortable to breach those existing knowledge systems. So, fields like African Studies, Caribbean Studies, Asian Studies, or “other” kinds of “area studies” disciplines hold a special currency in the academy [...].

So, in *Dear Science...* and across my research in the field of geography, I have tried to point out and build on momentary destabilisations. And one way to do this is to work through and draw attention to the ways Black Studies is inherently interdisciplinary. We consider how African Studies is nested in this interdisciplinary project through the diaspora and through anticolonial activities that are produced within the context of the continent itself. This is the work of producing intellectual and creative works that refuse nation, borders, nationalism, white supremacy, and racism. I guess this is a long way of saying that *Dear Science...* is less interested in producing or upholding a field of knowledge that might have a magical answer to our oppressive academic fields. Also, it is worth repeating that interdisciplinary fields are also incredibly oppressive. They are not magical. They are also incredibly exclusionary, so I am less interested in producing a field of knowledge that will “fix” our oppressive academic fields and more interested in activities that unsettle the geographic traces that make those fields possible.

Hook One: The Expression “A Black Sense of Place” Runs Like a Refrain Through *Dear Science* and Other Stories

KM: [...] One of my favourite ways to think about Black geographies is through relationality [...]. A Black sense of place [...] is an ongoing concept and it is my attempt to think about “diaspora as method.” [...] A Black sense of place is a provisional method precisely because it is relational [...]. Édouard Glissant taught us that relation is not easy or fun or knowable (Glissant 1997) [...]. If relation and relationality are sets of activities that change or mutate according to context, a Black sense of place [...] is not about who we are but where we know from. This must remain terrifyingly open—it has to be open to change, open to failure, and that the liberatory promise that we are working toward may never be realised, and so, relationality allows us to think about liberation or freedom as a process, rather than as a goal or an outcome. [...] You know, I am thinking as well about Edward Soja’s *Third Space* (2003) [...], and all of these ways of thinking about producing knowledge with an outcome that is not something that we can grasp, but rather something that we do [...].

Hook Two: Intersectionality as a Mode of Critical Praxis and as an Analytical Tool

KM: Intersectionality [...] is a useful framework to talk about the doing of anticolonial work, particularly if we insist that intersectionality is not stable but stretchy, rather than implying that it is an unchanging analytical frame that you can apply in the same way across time and space. [...] The brilliance of Kimberlé Crenshaw's work on intersectionality and her gift is [...] that it shifts according to place (1991). And she uses the crossroads as her metaphor, and so, if we believe [...] that metaphors always have material traces in them, then she is talking about roads and crossroads [...] where the unresolved contradiction of Black womanhood resides but crossroads shift according to time and place; a crossroad in Canada is different from a crossroad in Germany. [...] What if we think of intersectionality as a place and not a person? [...] It is hard because we live in a world where we are supposed to resolve things, where intersectionality is the answer that [...] will give us liberation. And so, it is a struggle, and holding on to that struggle is not easy for me. I do not think it is easy for anyone. We are looking for a way to resolve our agony, and we may not be able to do so.

Hook Three: Black Historicity is Understood as Spatiotemporal Relations Between the African Continent and Its Diasporas

KM: One of my favourite books is Simone Browne's *Dark Matters* (2015) and one of my favourite quotations comes at the very end of that book, which is her question: What happens "[w]hen Blackness enters the frame"? (161) and what happens, of course, is that the place and space change.

When Blackness enters a room, a store, or a countryside, these places and spaces shift affectively, psychically, and even physically. They become laden with new or different meanings precisely because Blackness holds in it all kinds of complicated histories and struggles that illuminate both Black and non-Black intimacies. Dionne Brand has a very famous, almost over-quoted line from *A Map to the Door of No Return* (2023), where she says, "history is already seated in the chair in the empty room when one arrives." (25). Imagine writing that, imagine what it took to think that through and what history is sitting there when a Black person enters the room. [...] It can be both

liberatory and unsettling at the same time. [...] When I talk about asymmetrical knowledge systems, I am thinking about the entanglements between Black and non-Black communities, which are unevenly expressed and lived. And how Blackness, which carries this monumental history of oppression, resistance and liberation within it, reshapes how we make place. Therefore, while it holds within itself these anticolonial possibilities, they are not guaranteed [...] But that struggle to expose those contradictions is incredibly important in terms of place-making. Thus, it is not just about what happens when Blackness enters the frame, but it is also about how Black folks experientially, empirically, and optically engage the frame. What do they do? The important thing for me always, in addition to grounding ourselves in material geographies, is what kind of activities are taking place in those frames or in those geographies that seem to be so static? How do Black folks agentively remake place and space even if this is at the level of the imagination? Because the imagination and the psyche are geographic scales.

Hook Four: Reconfiguring African Studies is Meant to Engender Afrofuturist Visions—From “A Black Sense of Place”

KM: I think “African space” can be thought of in several ways. I would like to think of it through a kind of borderless understanding of the continent of Africa, not “Africa is a country” but as a site of movements and migrations and struggles for liberation [...] In terms of geography, one way to get at this is to undo our allegiance to colonial thinking, where the nation-state is commonsense. What if the borders of Africa are simultaneously strict and porous? [...] African space does some important conceptual work for us in terms of reconfiguring how to live on this planet ethically and in relation to diaspora and diasporic conditions. In this way, those moments of incredibly violent exile—such as the transatlantic slavery—redefines the continent of Africa and moves dynamically, across time and space, and allows us to think about more contemporary migrations of African communities to North America and Europe.

Refractions of a “Black Sense of Place”

Christine Vogt-William (CVW): It is good to reconnect. I want to dwell on a certain memory where we were both involved in setting up a transnational, transcontinental, transdisciplinary discussion at the Africa Multiple Cluster’s Spatialities conference in October 2023. The highlight foregrounded at that conference for me was Professor Katherine McKittrick’s conversation with the two of us on *Dear Science and Other Stories*. As a literary and cultural studies scholar invested in Black feminist thought as well as intersectional and critical diversity literacy approaches, her work pointed out to me the productivity of combining poetic approaches and attention to language together with an erudite Black epistemic politics, which looks at how space works in allowing bodies to move, voices to articulate, minds to think, and imaginations to flourish. So, I would like to hook up to that conversation and hear your thoughts as well. How do you, as an economic geographer, relate to such a complex text like *Dear Science...*?

Stefan Ouma (SO): I really enjoyed the conversation with Professor McKittrick. I am an economic geographer originally interested in agrarian transformations, so some of her earlier work on the plantation (McKittrick 2013) has been very important for me to rethink my own work, which has always focused on plantation type of agriculture.^{iv} But especially in the early days, I had never approached it with the plantation as a category in mind that had been firmly shaped by Black Studies scholars, by scholars from the Caribbean, by scholars from Latin America; also scholars from Asia and Africa. Her previous work was very important for me in this regard, and it was already quite interdisciplinary. It emerged in conversations with Sylvia Wynter and Clive Woods, another important Black geographer who has worked a lot on the American South^{v,vi}. And I think *Dear Science...* is a kind of radical extension of these works because it is really a wild ride across different genres and disciplines. It is very experimental, but it is still held together by an ethos and attitude. That’s why *Dear Science...* is an important work for everyone who wants to transgress different types of boundaries: that is, to break down silos between African Studies, Caribbean Studies and other Afro-diasporic Studies that are usually associated with different territories but also disciplinary boundaries.

CVW: This wild ride is exactly why I enjoyed it so much because she talks about space in all its intersectional nuances. Here I would like to take up the four hooks that we were able to distil for our conversation. The strongest hook for me was this Black sense of place, and that runs like a refrain through *Dear Science...* and it vibes with what you said just now about McKittrick's work about the plantation. And I am referencing a removal of the space of the plantation away from that colonial conception of plantation culture and politics, which shapes a place of death connected to the practice of forced labour, which then has shaped the entire strategy of dehumanisation of Black people. This is firmly ingrained in Black history: to remember this is one of those colonial wounds that still are part of how the space of the plantation is still thought and imagined (and here I am thinking of Grada Kilomba's 2010 study *Plantation Memories*).^{vii} What is interesting about McKittrick's work for me is that she takes the space of that plantation and scaffolds it with a different set of parametres, which then resounds with this idea of a mobilisation of a Black imagination of that particular history, marked by the space of the plantation, as a possible means to re-imagine what Black creativity can be, what Black memory work can be, how Black trauma work processes these types of generational memory, and also what Black agency can mean. I am thinking about how that could be infused with the idea of Black life as a flourishing, resilient parametre, rather than the dated associations of the plantation as a place that fosters a culture of death. And here I am also thinking about Achille Mbembe's *Necropolitics* (2019), which is a strong indictment of how colonial thinking basically decided that one set of people were to be allowed the dignity of life and another set of people were not even meant to dream of life, let alone a good life. These are some of the initial associations and resonances that occurred to me when thinking about Katherine McKittrick's "Black sense of place", in relation to what you just said about plantation space. You are more of an expert in this, seeing as you have looked at plantation economy and agrarian parametres in that context. So, your ideas of a Black sense of place will likely come from a different disciplinary and political locus of enunciation?

SO: These are very good points. In the interview that we transcribed, she says the Black sense of place is her attempt to think about diaspora as method. It is not about who we are, but where we know from. And I think these are two very

important statements, because it really shows that the concept was developed from a diasporic perspective. It brings together thinking about place and knowledge and power geometries. And I found it very useful. Even before *Dear Science...* was out, I had worked with the concept at an event I was invited to in Frankfurt a few years ago by the Initiative for Black People in Germany.^{viii} They had asked me to provide input on Black urban life, and I just want to read out what I made of McKittrick's concept of a Black sense of place—how I reappropriated it from an Afro-German diasporic perspective. But I also want to make the point that you can build bridges from there to many other geographic contexts, including the African context. It might become a little bit more complicated, because some African colleagues might think Blackness is not a category they can work with or relate to. I know a critical Kenyan colleague who once told me he became Black when he came to Germany, and now he is into Black Studies and connected matters. It is not necessarily a category that everyone shares, but I think it is very useful. My input back then was as follows:

How do you walk; how do you talk; how do you make yourself heard? How do you work; how do you love? How do you celebrate? How do you encounter the police? How do you school? How do you play? How do you rent a flat? How do you claim space? How do you talk back? How do you die? Obviously, you would hear very different answers to these questions from white people and even among Black people. Answers to these questions might differ despite some shared lived experiences that tie us together. Why these differences? This gap is firmly related to the power geometries of places—not spaces, the abstract thing lying out there; places: what we make of space through our lived experiences, our building efforts, our imaginations, our ideologies, our narratives. And there is a power geometry to all these processes, because historical forms of anti-Black violence, racialised practices of society and economy making, and projects of white supremacy shape what Black people experience as place.

My input could not have been possible without Katherine's work; hence, I think that this hook is a real reminder of the usefulness of this category.

CVW: I find that what you have just cited from your own input back then also resonates with me as a person with a South(east) Asian diasporic life context here in Germany. While my life in Germany evinces certain interesting points of connection with Black diasporic experiences, I am not going to say that

both types of diasporic experience are the same—they are not. But I do look out for points of connection that enable conversation as somebody who identifies as double diasporic, having been born and brought up in Singapore, and then living in diaspora there as part of an Indian minority, and then coming to Germany and living a minoritised life here. Having said that, I am grateful to have found extremely convivial, generous, and fruitful relationships with Black feminist communities in Germany and in the UK. Hence, the questions that you have raised resonate in very complex intersectional ways for me, as a non-Black and a non-white person of South(east) Asian origins and ancestry, doing the work that I do as a German woman scholar of colour. Hence, I might bring a slightly different spin to understanding what a Black sense of place could be. And here I want to come back to what McKittrick said during our conversation: that this place must remain terrifyingly open—to change, to failure—and that the liberatory promise that we are working toward may never be realised, whereby relationality allows us to think about liberation or freedom as a process, rather than as a goal or as an outcome. Indeed, I think these are concerns pertinent to many Germans of “migratory background” in different ways. The question of freedom is also something that bears scrutiny in our current times as well, when we think about the types of unfreedom that are being imposed on us from various positions. At the same time, how would I as a South(east) Asian German woman of colour, then relate to something that terrifyingly open to change and failure? How might I then relate to a Black sense of place within these frames? For me, the questions of institutional and societal discriminations are matters requiring engagement in the German context. It also colours my view on how German majority society actually practises modes of inclusivity (in varying degrees) towards those of us who are racialised, gendered, and classed, who are identified by the majority society as “bodies from the other side of the world,” to use Sara Ahmed’s words (2006, 121), and also how we are also viewed as “dissonant bodies,” following Nirmal Puwar (2004, 32; see also Galetto, Martucci and Puwar 2024)—bodies who, by their intersectional complexity, thus already generate modes of discomfort for the majority society. Does this complexity then also infuse a Black sense of place and, if so, is this a uniform infusion of that Black sense of place? I rather think not. You would have a different sort of approach to this Black sense of place, but you would also see points of

connection to what I was just trying to articulate as a double diasporic. The conscious embrace then of this idea of a Black sense of place for me is due to my own intellectual debt to Black feminist thinking, which contributed considerably to my own epistemic trajectory as an academic. I know we are not supposed to say we are “activists” because we are all supposed to be “objective,” but given the current climate, I have to say the question of objectivity itself also needs to be interrogated from a Black sense of place. I want to also add that, as a South(east) Asian diasporic, working with a South(east) Asian diasporic sense of place might also connect with the Black sense of place to instigate important conversations. I would say those conversations are necessary, especially since 2025 was the 80th anniversary of the Bandung Conference. Many non-Black scholars of colour might find themselves in that complex and often very uncomfortable position that could be still operationalised by colonial agents today to implement the divide-and-conquer politics among racialised colonised people used in the past that Vijay Mishra talks about in his *The Darker Nations* (2008, 44). And I think this is part of the larger colonial wound addressed in this conversation, when we try to elucidate what a Black sense of place could mean for each of us in ourselves.

SO: I think you raised two very important points here. You mentioned her statement that liberation of freedom is a process rather than an event, a goal or outcome. And I think the current revanchist white supremacist type of backlash is [a] real reminder of this. Trump and those of his ilk really want to go back to a certain time. But I think McKittrick’s statement also relates to the work of another Black feminist scholar, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, who says freedom is a place (Gilmore 2023). So, what you just mentioned about your own positionality bears reflecting on how, when you move around, work, etc., you face your own experiences, which can be read with a Black sense of place in mind, but these experiences are still distinct. Even with folk who may relate to a Black sense of place in more straightforward ways, there are huge differences. Therefore, I think that the concept is a reminder about bringing in place as a process but not forgetting positionality and power geometries. And contingent on this, I see McKittrick addressing intersectionality in one of her other hooks. And I just wondered what you made of her take on intersectionality in the interview?

CVW: When I asked her how she considers intersectionality in her own work, she stated that intersectionality is not stable—that it is stretchy, rather than implying that it is unchanging. And she says that the brilliance in Kimberlé Crenshaw’s development of the theoretical approach of intersectionality is that it shifts according to place. The notable aspect is the “inter-” of the intersection, which is transported in the theory of intersectionality—this is essentially a spatial metaphor. We are talking about an intersection —a crossroads, which can be considered a contact zone, a node, and a mode of encounter. It can be seen as a space of conflict, where entities might negotiate or intend to continue a chosen trajectory, and could find themselves impeded or enabled (see Crenshaw 1989, 149–152; also, Crenshaw 1991, 1244–1245; 1299). So here, McKittrick addresses the spatiality of the intersection, which I want to connect with Henri Lefebvre’s ideas of lived space, perceived space, and conceived space (2013). Hence, we see this idea of the intersection working in all three instances, sometimes simultaneously. McKittrick also says here that Crenshaw uses the crossroads as a metaphor, which will always have material traces in it—thus the actual physicality of roads and crossroads are referenced in this theory—which McKittrick then leaves open for us to engage with as we wish. Here McKittrick considers the lived, perceived, and the conceived aspects of space, where she talks about how the unresolved contradiction of Black womanhood resides at a crossroads, which shifts according to time and place: “a crossroads in Canada is different from a crossroads in Germany.” This is part of McKittrick’s poetic navigation, which demonstrates a salient disciplinary and conceptual boundary crossing. For me, this illustrates how McKittrick herself has embraced that terrifying openness to imagining freedom and invites us into that conversation around intersectionality. While she finds it expansive and elastic, she does not allow conceptual borders to intimidate her from exploring the metaphoricality of the physical crossroads and roads, leading into the phenomenological and philosophical ideas of Black womanhood being trammelled by multiple modes of power dynamics regarding race, class, and gender. While referencing Crenshaw’s work, McKittrick talks about how this theory also travels. Such theoretical travelling entails how intersectional outlooks, experiences, and oppressions, could be very different in Canada, as opposed to how it manifests here in Germany. When we think about a Black sense of place for our work then, we might want to consider Germany as a diasporic space in process,

when McKittrick talks about diaspora as doing—as method. So, there is a sense of continuity, a sense of historicity, where she does not aim for closure. These are some of the valuable insights on intersectionality that I found in *Dear Science...*, which McKittrick cogently expanded on during our conversation.

SO: McKittrick then gives intersectionality this material twist, whereby, in an additive understanding of intersectionality, you may have race, class, gender, etc., and then place is added as an additional variable. But McKittrick effectively spatialises intersectionality by emphasising its multiplicative complexities (see also Tamale 2020, 250) when space is considered with race, gender, class etc., to produce places intersected by these identity vectors (among others), where power is exerted, (re)claimed, negotiated, resisted. I think in the very beginning, when she talks about the relationship between knowledge and space, she occasionally wonders why certain anti-racists, certain feminists, have larger offices—larger workspaces, than others. Thus, even with people in the same progressive group, you see fractures and differences, and these acquire expression in terms of a certain materiality, which then shapes the agency of people.

CVW: And that materiality is infused with power.

SO: Exactly, it is infused with power. My feeling was also that it is a more unusual take on intersectionality. Would you agree with this, given your broad experience with the concept? Or would you say it merely brings something to the surface that many other people writing on intersectionality already have in mind, but just do not address in the same way?

CVW: I see it in two different frames. On the one hand, McKittrick basically names the materiality of how intersectionality works. And she connects the philosophical question of place here with the idea of diaspora as doing, as method, as process, where she literally shows us how space is infused with power and how these discourses of race, class, and gender congeal around certain bodies who mark the space of the conceived intersection. On the other

hand, in real time in the material world, experiences of intersectional oppression take place, which we understand as structural discrimination due to the politicising of bodies through race, class, and gender. So, what I get out of McKittrick's reading of intersectionality is that while you have this conceived space of the crossroads where power operates, you also have specific bodies who embody those crossroads as well, and that opens a wonderfully complex layer. This interrogates how we look at racialised, gendered, and classed bodies embodying certain spatial mobility practices, which raises vexed questions about how these bodies belong to certain spaces or not, and here I am alluding to the idea of citizenship. I find this Black feminist geographical approach to intersectionality an extremely creative and elastic one, which moves us towards unravelling a more productive implementation of intersectionality theory in our own scholarship. I am not saying intersectionality is perfect—I do not think Crenshaw or the other intersectional pioneer Black feminist scholars meant for it to be perfect (and I would ask: by whose standards?). McKittrick pinpoints one of the biggest advantages of this theoretical trajectory: its adaptiveness, its stretchability, its expansiveness, and this is a good example of how she works with her own idea of a Black sense of place. So, for me, this would encourage more nuanced enquiries into how intersectionality works in spaces like Canada and Germany, for example. How does this work in a space like Trinidad and Tobago? Or India? Or Singapore? In African countries? This opens more points of engagement for us to actually engage with that thick, rich, and varied scholarship around intersectionality in our various disciplines. In this, I believe that McKittrick has given us a means to set intersectionality theory itself on a more liberatory trajectory.

SO: I just want to return to the first hook, where she talks about the relationship between knowledge and space, which are demarcated and produced simultaneously. Here she takes the office of an academic institution as an example for this and certain power geometries central to this, right at the intersection of both space and knowledge. And I just want to extend this a little bit from her academic context in Canada to other spaces. You could replace the office with a plantation or the factory floor or the hotel (e.g., in Kenya's tourism sector). You often cannot think of such spaces without considering colonial legacies. Some would go as far as saying that highly

digitised work environments can be connected to surveillance regimes on plantation work, because current technologies allow you to objectify labour to an extent which has not been possible for a long time, unless you have full control over labour, as during the age of enslavement (Ouma and Premchander 2022). For me, McKittrick's take on knowledge and space is relevant for the study of concrete places. But it is also a call to transcend narrow spatial frames: any place being studied is always embedded in larger relationships. One also should be willing to transcend narrow disciplinary views in studying certain practices or places. For example, a transatlantic take on "modern" agriculture in different African continental contexts would be generative, since insights from Caribbean Studies, and studies around plantations in the American South and Latin America would be cogent templates to enable studying what goes on in other parts of the world. For me, McKittrick's work is an invitation to embrace what geographers Patricia Daley and Amber Murrey have recently called for in their paper on "defiant scholarship": that African geographies and Black Studies, as intellectual fields, need to be brought into conversation (Daley and Murrey 2022). Having enjoyed her thinking about knowledge and space, I will conclude this reflection with another important bit from the first hook, where McKittrick asks: who gets funding and why from the federal government, and how does that uphold a particular type of knowledge that is not anticolonial? At the present moment, with Trump and his revanchist white supremacy project in mind, this question becomes even more pertinent (Hamilton 2020; Inwood 2019). I believe she probably was thinking about the old funding landscape when she phrased this, where some anti-racists just get more money than others. There are good reasons for that. But now, with the Trump regime's straightforward attacks on American academic institutions, that reflection takes on a level of gravitas.

CVW: I think the conversation about knowledge production is definitely highly relevant in our current times, and, for me, McKittrick can be considered almost prophetic in bringing up that particular aspect in 2023. Back then, I do not think any of us had ever imagined that there would be a US president who would launch a full-scale attack on academic freedom and higher education institutions in a country where they have always enjoyed a very strong reputation in scholarship excellence—which, of course, is

something that Germany's own higher education branding is very much invested in. In the abstract sense then, we are not necessarily referencing the actual physical place of a university itself, but rather the idea of higher education institutions. Which bodies within this space actually have the types of knowledge that are considered most valuable and should be consistently supported; that is, provided with resources, infrastructure, personnel, and so on? We would want to ask which disciplines have been the bulwark, the mainstay of setting up the preferred types of knowledge frameworks that everyone ascribes to in the frame of "excellence scholarship." In this frame, then, we note that the space where knowledge is produced itself is highly politicised. We have had that argument going on here in German higher education institutions for a fair few years now. I would say, in the last ten years, it has come out in public—the fact that those with definitional authority in German higher education spaces were making statements like: "We only do objective and rational knowledge production. We do not do identity politics; we do not entertain ideologies. This is a place of academic freedom." So, it is interesting to see now how the discourse in and around German university spaces demonstrates an increasing awareness of the politicisation of higher education. This position also bears some scrutiny in light of the very visible rise of the far right, which has its repercussions not only in the greater German sociopolitical context. Such developments can have ramifications for German higher education institutions as regards funding policies, the preference for and promotion of certain disciplines, the marginalisation of certain types of knowledge, how faculty is put together, how hiring practices are set up, which bodies can be considered experts in their respective fields, and so on. Thus, the politicisation of German university space demonstrates which bodies have been allowed access to these spaces, which bodies have been allowed to exercise their expertise and have actively contributed to how disciplines have been shaped, how teaching and research have been shaped, what types of impact research activity has had on the greater sociopolitical context, how resources are distributed. The materiality of space is referenced when we talk about offices, furniture, and appliances, considering who has the better coffee machine, computer hardware or other facilities. So how are certain bodies expected to use these spaces? How do we address the interrogation of power in these particular spaces? Do we see a need to change how these spaces have

been shaped? Because the way these spaces are shaped also influences how and by whom knowledge is being produced. So why is it that when it comes to scholars of colour and Black scholars in German higher education spaces, it appears quite difficult for many to imagine a Black woman scholar as a professor, as an expert in their field? Why is it a matter of surprise to see a woman scholar of colour giving a lecture? There are interesting reactions and behaviours that merit interrogating how this particular society sees itself, and how the same society shapes these spaces. Of course, these questions merit deeper engagement, and that will probably require more research, but I just want to articulate this idea of how knowledge and space and bodies interrelate, and that the entire relationship is infused by power dynamics. This is often forgotten or not even registered in the higher education context here in Germany (often due to the notion of flat hierarchies): that structural, disciplinary, cultural, and interpersonal power dynamics are all interlocked and shape each other. How are German culture and its symbolic value being understood and mobilised in the German university space? How does that power accrue to structures within the university? What kind of power does German culture have? Who actually then embodies German culture and German structural power in the university space? When it comes to disciplinary power, we can understand “disciplinary” in two ways: 1) how we exert the power of definition on our particular academic disciplines, and 2) how certain bodies in the regimented and hierarchical space, like the German university, are disciplined to do certain things that are expected of them. So how do cultural power and structural power then exert their impacts on certain bodies? How are these bodies contributing to the shaping of the academic disciplines?

Let us look at the Africa Multiple Cluster with its remarkable agenda of reconfiguring African Studies by doing African Studies with African scholars. But who defines African Studies in Bayreuth and the Cluster at large and who are the African scholars that Africa Multiple would like to engage with? Do they—researchers and research agendas—come straight from the continent, or might they also somehow or other be involved in diasporic contexts? Which African scholars and what kinds of research agendas and theoretical approaches are deemed desirable?

SO: I just want to connect the two things you said with her fourth hook, where she talks about Black historicity as a spatial and temporal relation between the African continent and its diasporas. So, the revanchist project we have been seeing going on for several years now, with liberal, conservative and far-right forces partly united in trying to push back progressive (epistemic and social justice) agendas, including critical race theory and gender studies. In Germany, demonising a so-called “postcolonialism” spectre supposedly running rampant in German academia has become a fashion (Ouma 2024). Isn’t that move actually about installing some sort of provincialism, so that a tightly demarcated take on German history from a majority perspective is the only one imaginable? But you might see this type of provincialism in the domain of African Studies as well (see Clapham 2020). Katherine McKittrick is working against such provincialism by asking, together with Simone Browne, what happens when Blackness enters the frame? What happens if you study extractivism in the mining industry in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo and you bring in Blackness as a register (see Sithole 2020),^{ix} as a prism? What happens if you study labour relations in the tourism sector in Kenya and you bring in Blackness? In this vein, I think this is again encouragement to adopt transdisciplinary and transgeographical approaches in knowledge production practices.

CVW: I find that a very fraught conversation, but I am very grateful that McKittrick raised it, because one of the challenges that I have been confronted with as the Director of Gender and Diversity here in the Africa Multiple Cluster here in Bayreuth was the strong conviction that Blackness has nothing to do with Africa. With regard to the question of whiteness and Blackness—it’s always fascinating to see how white scholars keep disavowing whiteness, and then, by extension, disavowing Blackness, while using phrases like “we are all human beings.” I find this a rather wilful move towards a certain amnesia of actual colonial relations based on racial hierarchies, which still reverberate today in the way societies are organised, in the way institutions organise and function, in the way resources are distributed, in the way definitional authority is accorded to certain bodies. As a non-Black feminist scholar of colour, I am very careful, since I can only speak from an outsider position in relation to Blackness (and this depends very much on how Blackness is defined), and I have been able to learn through my conversations

with Black scholars and those who identify as African if they do not identify as Black. This can be a vexed and uncomfortable space of articulation, because it also calls for the agency of self-designation (see also Crenshaw 1991, 1297; and Vogt-William 2025, 75fn2). It can be challenging for those who ascribe to decolonial thinking, especially when it comes to interrogating racial hierarchies, where we do not want to reify phenotypical difference as an organising principle, because of the discrimination, the suffering, and the oppression that arises from this. But at the same time, there is something to be said for self-definition, where Black scholars, activists, and artists have reclaimed the designation of Blackness, in order to imbue it with their own specific forms of multilateral agency. So, should one then perhaps ascribe to many Black senses of place? This then also raises the question of how somebody like me can form, practise, and implement my allyship with Black colleagues, Black artists, Black scholars, many of whom have become close to me and are part of my diasporic space in Germany, where I find my own community of practice to inculcate a sense of German belonging, which is different from a white majority understanding of what being “German” is, what German culture is. Am I then also operating from a connected Black sense of place by wanting to disrupt hegemonic white majority understandings of being “German” by aligning myself in community with Black scholars, colleagues, artists—many of whom are activists? Am I then also stretching this idea of a Black sense of place? Because, as I have read McKittrick, she intends this Black sense of place to be part of doing diaspora as method. Would diaspora then be as expansive and inclusive?

SO: This is a really important point that builds a bridgehead to the last hook McKittrick has offered us here, which squarely addresses the question of reconfiguring African Studies. It also gives that question an Afrofuturist thrust: how should the future then look like for McKittrick, in reconfiguring, rethinking, unsettling, as a community project, but also in creating a kind of borderless understanding of the continent of Africa, and how to make that current understanding of African space move beyond the continent by bringing in the diaspora? It may address allies from different parts of the world. How to make this an “African space”? McKittrick clearly says that kind of conceptual work is for us: to unsettle things, to reshape the world, including

our own academic practices. What did you make of her futurist take on the question of “reconfiguring African Studies”?

CVW My understanding is that McKittrick is clear that future thinking means change at several levels: personal, disciplinary, political, social, psychological—to address just a few contexts. Change is terrifying but necessary, and the spectre of failure will need to be confronted, especially when we are impatient for those changes to actually occur. But I would share a certain optimism with McKittrick in the sense of consistently working together in community, wherever we can find it, towards the vision for and realisation of Afrofutures that allow for more open and accountable types of relationality. There is still much to be done, definitely much to be learnt, and more conversations to be had.

KM: Wow. I have to begin by thanking you both for this conversation and your reflections on our 2023 discussion. I remember so clearly not being able to travel and the quick accommodation to hold my session online. I begin here because the setting was one of kindness, which we seemingly only have glimpses of in these terrible times. The context, as you both note, has changed in just two years. We are living in and through radical reconfigurations of space, place, location, wherein ecocide and genocide are exacted on the most vulnerable across scales. A Black sense of place is not what it was in 2023—it must be reimagined alongside Palestine and Sudan, and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), just as we must remember how the plantation produced the conditions for authoritarianism and revolution and, as well, recognise how (and where) Palestine and Sudan and ICE were already, and forever, in our hearts. I am spinning, as I am certain you are. In Canada, anti-immigration policies are quietly shifting and calcifying, and in the USA, Trumpism is both reviled and desired, depending on your location. So, to riff on your comments above, the urgency is not a solution, per se, but rather how we live in this moment—where we each are—and find the courage to stretch and revise our intellectual work, our friendships, our creative acts, and our analytical attachments. I am so appreciative of your insights—our conversation here has pressed me to think even more about diaspora as method and what this might offer for demystifying and unsettling the seeming

impenetrability of white supremacy and the attendant global circuits of power that produce and reproduce geographies of harm. I think we agree that the work is daunting, but it is also terribly open and, as the abolitionists and anticolonial scholars and creatives teach us, we need to gather resources, make connections and friendships, revise, rewrite, remake, because this destabilising work is always already in the works (Gilmore 2022; Wynter 2003).

Notes

- i While redacted for brevity with omissions are marked as [...], the text combines excerpts from the original conversation for a post-interview cartographic conversation that also includes a brief reply by Professor McKittrick. We thank M Rossmeier for help with editing this piece.
- ii Vogt-William's tenure as the Director of the Gender and Diversity Office of the Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellence (first funding phase 2019–2025) ended on 31 December 2025. At the time of publishing this piece, Vogt-William is no longer a member of Africa Multiple, nor is she affiliated with the University of Bayreuth.
- iii The Unfinished Conversation, for example, deals with identity not as an unambiguous creature or being but instead as a “becoming” that is in constant flux, a product of history, memories, and the intersection of public and private perception. One of the most influential proponents of this idea was the cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1932–2014), for whom identity and “ethnic” affiliation, rather than fixed terms, were components of an “unfinished conversation.” See also John Akomfrah in conversation with Julia Grosse (Grosse and Baden 2023, 102).
- iv In a seminal paper, McKittrick (2013, 3) underlines that “[the] plantation thesis uncovers the interlocking workings of modernity and blackness, which culminate in long-standing, uneven racial geographies while also centralizing that the idea of the plantation is migratory. Thus, in agriculture, banking, and mining, in trade and tourism, and across other colonial and postcolonial spaces—the prison, the city, the resort—

a plantation logic characteristic of (but not identical to) slavery emerges in the present both ideologically and material.”

- v In her introduction to Black Caribbean philosopher Sylvia Wynter’s work, McKittrick observes, in relation to the ongoing multifarious struggles of global poverty as attributable to, but not limited to, just the economic: “Wynter thus calls for a solution that understands our global crises in relation to her correlated models of being human [...] and [...] for interrelated solutions to interrelated problems, rather than as singular and particular dilemmas that merely require singular and particular disciplinary solutions” (McKittrick 2015, 39).
- vi In their co-edited volume *Black Geographies*, McKittrick and Woods unequivocally state: “a black sense of place and black geographic knowledges have both been undermined by hegemonic spatial practices [...] and seemingly unavailable as a worldview. [...] black geographies demand an interdisciplinary understanding of space and place-making that enmeshes, rather than separates different theoretical trajectories and spatial concerns” (McKittrick and Woods 2007, 7).
- vii Kilomba considers how the past and the present operate in the placement of the Black subject: “[...] ‘plantation’ and ‘memories’ describes everyday racism as not only the restaging of the colonial past, but also as a traumatic reality, which has been neglected. It is a violent shock that suddenly places the Black subject in a colonial scene where, as in a plantation scenario, one is imprisoned as the subordinate and exotic “other.” Unexpectedly, the past comes to coincide with the present, and the present is experienced as if one were in that agonizing past [...]” (2010, 13).
- viii The Initiative Schwarze Menschen in Deutschland, founded in 1985, is a nationwide network working towards connecting Black people throughout the country. See ISD website.
- ix In his 2020 volume *The Black Register*, South African political scientist Tendayi Sithole defines the Black register as “the ethical operation of blackness liberating itself in its own name. It is a register that does not border on the generality and the totality of the universal. Its specificity

[...] is bringing to the fore fundamental questions that must deal with the dehumanization of blackness” (2020, 6–7).

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