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## BLACK NARRATIVE IN DEEP SPACE

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### ABSTRACT

For Neil Smith, *deep space* is multiscalar and immediate; for Katherine McKittrick, *deep space* is a landscape which repositions black geographies, imaginatively and materially; for Carter, *deep space* is the only landscape which offers the imaginative and material foundations for black liberation. In an auto-ethnographic journeying through a flawed and undiscerning teaching paradigm, and the September 26th protests at Reed College, I challenge the assertion that history is written only by the victors. Introducing Frantz Fanon's process of self-recognition to Katherine McKittrick's mapping of black geographies in *deep space*, this piece offers a peek into the boundless contours afforded by the re-writing and re-telling of historical narratives in deep space.

**Keywords** transparent space, black geography, auto-ethnography, narrative, black liberation, agency

The summer before I was due to graduate from Reed College, I received an email, a letter, and several calls attempting to inform me that I would not be able to register for classes, including the thesis standing in between me and my degree. The college believed I needed to take time—at least a semester—to prove that I could handle the workload and rigor demanded by Reed's curriculum. I was given the choice of either performing the school's expectations at another college for a single term or pursuing my undergraduate degree elsewhere. The school year that had just ended was marked by several large events in my life, at least as it pertained to my academic career, at most as it pertained to who I was becoming. One of those events was a student-led protest with

several demands, among the most urgent of which were: 1) for the college to cease its use of Wells Fargo as its operating bank and switch to one which did not invest in private prisons; and 2) the addition of indigenous people in the curriculum of the only mandatory class offered by the college. As someone whose family has been remarkably disenfranchised by both the prison industrial complex as well as the antiquated curriculum offered by the public education system and, in some cases, higher education, I was easily able to locate pieces of myself at the center of these issues. To view the demands of the protests in proximity to myself only made engaging the protests a matter of engaging my own pain surrounding the exploitation, neglect, and disdain of black people.

“50% of black students at Reed will not graduate” read a banner outside of the dining hall for all to see during a schoolwide boycott and march. A few of the organizers had decided that if they informed the school of the disproportionate rate at which black students have graduated at the college they could move white students, faculty, and administrators to demand that such issues be addressed and reckoned with. Those organizers imagined that a sufficient number of white allies would declare that the racism at play was both glaringly obvious and an illustration of values in opposition to those the college and its student body stood for.

I remember reading the statistic that was printed on the banner and becoming overwhelmed with anxiety. I did not go to a high school that had adequately prepared me for the rigors of this college. I did not have good relationships with academia nor did I have practice asking for help with meeting my academic needs. I did not know that I was allowed to have, let alone had academic needs. I looked over at my partner, someone who had all of those things and thought, “Between the two of us, one of us will not graduate—it’s written in history; this is just the way things have been and will be.” I thought, “It must be me who won’t graduate.”

Call it the inevitability of a Southern, public high school education, or a self-fulfilling prophecy that led me into a deep depression in which I neglected to perform to the school’s standards—I was not allowed to finish my last year of classes, and I did not graduate with the group of friends I spent the bulk of my college career with.

This paper will take the time to address deep space as it serves as a space for the work of black liberation. With Fanonian interpretations of the process of black liberation, I will introduce what Katherine McKittrick describes as a landscape which “offers black geographies exciting spatial possibilities” (2006, 17) in order to contend that the fight for black liberation is one which must be fought in deep space. I argue that any fight for freedom which prioritizes resistance to colonial forces exclusively in traditional geographies over those in deep space are doomed to fail at liberating oneself as a black subject, and moreover, that *narrative* serves as a tool to fight those very fights which require the most attention.

Throughout this paper, I will look to my own auto-ethnographic accounts to explore the contours of my experience of a black, deep space. This paper does not serve to dismiss those engaging in direct action and other forms of activism which relate primarily or even exclusively to traditional geographies, infrastructures, and systems. Nor do I hope that those people enter a self-fulfilling prophecy of eternally and exclusively existing within the white gaze. Instead, I intend

to reinforce the idea sported by Frantz Fanon of the black subject “[achieving] certainty of oneself...[through integrating] the concept of recognition,” a process which takes place within the black subject (1968, 192). My hope is to embolden, inspire, and explore the contours of deep space as they relate to black geographies through the forms of narrative in order to imagine a future of black liberation, a future for myself. Contours of space which appear void of hope for the black psyche’s liberation are, as I attempt to illustrate, the same spaces which maintain the possibility of the black psyche’s prosperity, its existence in a space beyond the limitations of the racialized metrics of the Western gaze.

I was an eight-year-old child in the third grade when I first learned about the Civil Rights Movement, but it wasn’t until middle school that I learned the grim details of the enslavement of black people. My white teacher told us stories of black people being forced to pick cotton in the blistering sun, and how at his whim, a slave owner could and would whip that black person until her body was covered in welts that bled, and surely stung. As the class continued, I was told stories of the slow and painful process black people had engaged in for freedom: marches, protests, out-right refusals of poor treatment. These narratives of the past were shaped and told to me by white teachers who, whether they knew it or not, were offering me narratives of how I might understand the past of my ancestors and, accordingly, a past of my own. These narratives of the past were not the historical facts I was to assume them to be, but a moment, to quote Walter Benjamin, of “History” as the “subject of a structure whose site [was] not homogenous, empty time, but filled by the presence of the now.” On the subject of historical progress, Benjamin explicates that such a “progress” which automatically imitates “a straight or spiral course” lends itself to a perception of progress continuing through a uniform ordering of time (1986, 261). In other words, with these narratives, these snapshots of a particular historical perspective, my teacher was describing her present position on the meaning of my blackness, and offering my vulnerable, naïve, and impressionable mind a way of understanding my own identity. Suddenly, my body began condensing; I became smaller; I took up less space. I sunk deep into the corner of my body when the *other* children laughed at the various photos showcasing the welts sustained by black people during antebellum slavery. I became *nothing* and certainly did not want to become like those bodies—beaten, mocked, black. Katherine McKittrick would refer to this despatialization of the sense of place—a “becoming nothing” of my bodily schema—as a moment assuming “geographic inferiority”: my ability to produce space and engage with geographic processes had become hindered and, therefore, so had the amount of space I would allow myself to take up. Simultaneously, however, the mere act of producing such a limited space for myself to exist in showcases alternative spatial experiences and imaginative inventions of spatial production—I had produced a space wherein only *I* reserved the power to condense or expand my landscape through determining my own selfhood.

### (b)lack Liberation

In the chapter *The Black Man and Recognition* in his book *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon describes the process of the black subject coming to determine herself for herself (as consciousness tends to do). First, the black subject finds herself “occupied with self-assertion and the ego ideal” (1968, 186). When in the presence of another person, the black subject is constantly

comparing her value to that of the other, asking: “are they smarter than me?”, “do I deserve to be here if I am unlike most who *are* here?”, “is there anyone else like me against whom I can measure my worth for the sake of raising my ego?”

In engaging with these instances of self-afflicted, psychological warfare, the black subject, in Fanon’s words, “steers his course through the other” and comes to produce a Self whose value and identity remains dependent on “the Other” and their comparative positionality. This struggle to secure one’s identity and positionality illustrates an unstable space of adventure for the black subject, a space unmappable by the Cartesian coordinate system, a space unknown and undervalued by the sociologists and urban city planners who create maps of areas which prioritize “transparent spaces.” In order for the black subject to arrive at a comfortable and secure position regarding her identity, she must be recognized by the other for her *humanness*, her “essential value outside of life,” as Fanon puts it, rather than through a mediation of her blackness; when the black human, then, reaches beyond herself and chooses to recognize the other for their humanness as well, not only is the other freed from the confines of the black subject’s psyche, but the black subject is also freed from the confines of their psyche’s invention of the other’s imagination and gaze. However, when the other refuses to recognize the being-for-self of the “black subject,” the black subject enters a space of desire, a space full of risks, a space where death of the self must be looked straight in the eyes and the black subject must *demand* to be recognized by the other. If the other does not perform a similar process of recognizing the humanity of the black subject outside of her blackness, no human world may exist (1968, 193). Fanon concludes the chapter by addressing the fact that the black subject who was once freed from enslavement by the master is still acted *upon*, has her freedom *granted* to her by the master, and thus does not truly enter into a new life but operates from an alternative “way of life” (1968, 195).

So what does all of this talk about the recognizing of consciousness and being recognized by “the Other” have to do with space? At this point I would like to shift gears and focus on what Neil Smith coins “deep space” or, as Katherine McKittrick describes it, “the production of space intensified and writ large, [including] ideological and political shifts that impact... and organize the everyday in multiple contexts and scale” (2006, 15). I understand Fanon’s process of recognition occurring exclusively within deep space, and therefore, it is within deep space that I believe the fight for black liberation, human liberation against the “white world determined to imprison and objectify” through the refusal to recognize the black human, must be fought. And it is within deep space that I understand black “geographies” as possessing the ability to, as McKittrick states, “shed light on real social conditions and identities,” but further, to re-determine themselves for themselves through the act of narration.

In order to understand the connotations of “deep space,” it might help to first work towards an understanding of “transparent space.” In *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, McKittrick describes transparent space as, “space [which] assumes that geography... is readily knowable, bound up with ideologies that work to maintain a safe socioeconomic clarity” (2006, 5). Synonymous with traditional geographies which reflect a world of “white European practices of domination,” a world which is “economically, racially, and sexually normative, or seemingly nonblack,” transparent space appears as a battleground for the black subject and indeed

it is (2006, 2). It may help to think of deep space as a space that recognizes and includes transparent space (the bed you slept in) but also includes the space you may have dreamt or occupied while unconscious, whether or not you have ever stepped a physical foot in that space. Through geopolitical legislation such as rent increases, strategic placements of less than affordable grocery options in predominantly black neighborhoods and cities, state-sanctioned neglect of resources such as fresh and safe water and culturally relevant education crafted to challenge and empower black youth, transparent spaces are included in the social production of deep space, but deep space is not typically acknowledged in transparent spaces. Put differently, all transparent spaces are part of the production of deep space but deep space is not always included in the production of transparent space. In addressing why these transparent, or physical spaces are unfit for certain processes of liberation, we should reflect on McKittrick's argument that, "while black people certainly occupied, experienced, and constructed place, black geographies were (and sometimes still are) rendered unintelligible." She continues that because "racial captivity assumes geographic confinement" and geographic confinement illustrates a process of despatialization, "black geographies... do not make sense in a world that validates spatial processes and progress through domination and social disavowal" (2006, 9). Black people, then, are left to their own devices and means of marking, navigating, and negotiating the terms of their deep space since the state refuses to recognize their needs, their humanity, and the fact that they exist in space. Yet, it is for this very reason that McKittrick recognizes deep space as a space which, "offers black geographies [or people] exciting spatial possibilities" (2006, 17).

I would now like to return to the earlier account of the Summer of 2017 when I learned I would not be allowed to register for classes at Reed in the Fall of 2017—I believe that the narrative I was able to construct about this period of my life serves as a rich example of the power afforded to the re-working of narratives.

At the time of the call, I was conducting research in Flint, Michigan, so after receiving news that I had only a few weeks to collect my things and move out of my summer housing, I froze in terror. In what felt like the blink of an eye, I was suddenly burdened with anxiety about how I would be able to move my belonging while nearly 3,000 miles away from Reed, how my parents would be disappointed that their trophy-child had failed, and how I had begun the path outlined by the quote on that dreadful banner that read, "50% of black students at Reed will not graduate." Losing access to housing, healthcare, the guarantee of food, my only source of income, and a great degree of access to my only social-support network was a special type of terrifying for me—it was as if everything that *could* go wrong *did* go wrong. I struggled for months to save enough money to rent a room, and my survival relied heavily on the support of some friends that made sure I had food to eat every day and a roof over my head every night. I can only imagine what turn my life might have taken had it not been for my fiercely loyal and financially-able community. At the time, I believed my only options were to return home to my parents and persevere through the trauma of our dynamics, something that I had reason to believe was a risk to my physical safety, or pray that my friends' generosity did not expire before I was able to survive on my own. By the end of the summer, I had all but accepted that I might not be graduating from Reed. However, it did not take long for me to challenge this belief; over a brief period of time, I decided to believe, with little reason, that if I wanted to graduate from Reed, I could. I am not sure why or even how I believed I could fight

against odds that appeared so clearly stacked against me, but within a day, I had decided that I would do anything and everything within my power to fight against being part of that 50% of black students that would not graduate from Reed. With an unfaltering determination to imagine what felt like the impossible, I was at least able to reach out for support from my community (friends, faculty and administrators), and with their support, I was able to attend classes at Portland Community College for a term, and received all A's—enough to grant me re-admission to Reed in the Fall of 2018. I graduated from Reed in December 2019, and that semester I ranked within the top 25th percentile of my class.

Deep space is a space where black agents reserve the right to act as such—we are able to choose our positions as they relate to the Other and we are able to choose whether or not we will recognize ourselves as the counterpart to an other. But most importantly, we are able to re-write, re-tell and re-member the histories of our ancestors, which, in turn, retain the power to influence our present and render imaginable the possibilities of our future.

Narratives transmitted through media, including but not limited to books, music, TV series, movies, and other tools of knowledge production such as maps, have great power. Think back to the two cases offered by my experience, first with the college from which I have since received my undergraduate degree, then to that moment in the middle school classroom when I was harshly made aware of my otherness. Both of these examples contain narratives which had been offered and accepted by me: that only 50 percent of black students have graduated and, so, *will* graduate from Reed College; and that black subjects during the early 17th century were subordinate and under the all-powerful influence of whiteness, a historical fact which had extended hundreds of years before me, and thus, *must* extend hundreds of years beyond me. Neither of these narratives were liberating; neither of these narratives made me feel empowered; neither of these narratives reflected to me my agency, my ability to choose my own reality. I opened my mouth wide and was fed whichever reality whiteness had chosen to offer me in that moment, realities which draw one's attention to the supposed dispossession, non-geography, and inhumanity of the black subject which McKittrick is describing in her book.

However, as I am no victim to the gaze and influence of whiteness, I now recognize what McKittrick refers to as deep space's ability to facilitate the “release [of] the self from... processes of ‘public silence and private terror’” (2006, 22). In her book, *Rock My Soul*, bell hooks discusses the ways in which the imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist, hetero-patriarchal society in which we are embedded is oftentimes a direct threat to the cultivation of a healthy and empowering black self-esteem. It is important to note here that I believe self-esteem exists within the realm of deep space, a space socially produced more so by one's relationship with themselves rather than an other—a relationship engaged in one's subconscious. One way black people can begin to practice the cultivation of a healthy self-esteem is by “[living] consciously” (2004, 69). hooks draws from Nathaniel Branden's *Six Pillars of Self-Esteem* to define conscious living with “respect for the facts of reality... the facts of our inner world (needs, wants, emotions) as well as the outer world” (2004, 71). A life of conscious living, a life of recognizing my emotional boundaries and needs before they reach a place of deteriorating my slowly and carefully crafted self-esteem, a life of only allowing myself to approach my desires and identity with the utmost respect for who I *want* to be(come), who I *know*

myself to be is indeed a life free of the “public silence and terror” to which Dorothy Allison alludes. That being said, hooks discusses how most African Americans, “[l]ike other Americans, especially white folks... made freedom synonymous with not needing to be critically aware...[imagining] that they could be free like... white Americans... [the freedom] to have the privilege of walking through life in an unconscious dream state” (2004, 71). Whiteness benefits from this narrative by offering the black subject what seems like their only options: either abandon your blackness through assimilation and unconsciously live in a society whose state does not recognize your humanity, or become the victim, the helpless, subjugated black person who seeks handouts, like a fool, from those who will only ever hand them to you out of pity.

I sometimes wonder what the world *could* be if black people realized that the power to re-call and re-member a past which makes us feel empowered—a past in which the enslaved black people brought across the Atlantic to perform labor that *seemed* like it only served whiteness were, possibly, playing the cards dealt to them, a subversive act of maintaining their survival, to some degree a choice—is well within our grasps. Perhaps we would realize that we are the true historians of black narratives, that we *can* re-imagine the space and power we possess and inhabit in the present, that we can almost *taste* the futures that align most with our highest selves, our consciousnesses. For me, this narrative reflects far more agency on behalf of black people than the narrative of our pasts, presents, and futures existing outside of our realm of self-determination, and is a narrative which can only be engaged with within the boundless contours of deep space.

By now I hope it is clear that the contours of deep space, the nooks and crannies, the ever-expanding landscapes which appear to be but suffocating crevices, when explored consciously, preserve the power to embolden, empower, and implant new racialized, geographical landscapes. Through the working, re-working, weaving, re-weaving, membering, re-membering, telling and re-telling of narratives which work to empower black geographies, black people possess an infinite power to travel across and beyond multiple historical landscapes. These landscapes embody space which recognize the varying ways in which the black subject’s consciousness exists in itself, for itself, outside of the white gaze and beyond the imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist, hetero-patriarchal society in which we may come to see ourselves embedded in. And while Katherine McKittrick notes that traveling to those very “real and possible” landscapes of black geographies, “requires a return to and engagement with painful places, worlds where black people were and are denied humanity, belonging, and formal citizenship” (2006, 33), I, for one, can attest to the fact that such arduous work is never done in vain and can, in many cases, lead one to a path of boundless possibility which extends far beyond the need for recognition for anyone besides one’s self.

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