Book Review: Dear Science and Other Stories by Katherine McKittrick

In **Dear Science and Other Stories***,* **Katherine McKittrick** *positions Black storytelling 'as a way to hold on to the rebellious methodological work of sharing ideas in an unkind world'. Exploring how Black creatives have always used such interdisciplinary and rebellious methodologies to invent ways of living outside of prevailing knowledge systems, this richly poetic and sonically-driven project constructs a theory and method of storytelling, demonstrates reading practice as a way to undo discipline and embodies the reimagination of the academic text as a genre, writes* **Anna Nguyen***.*

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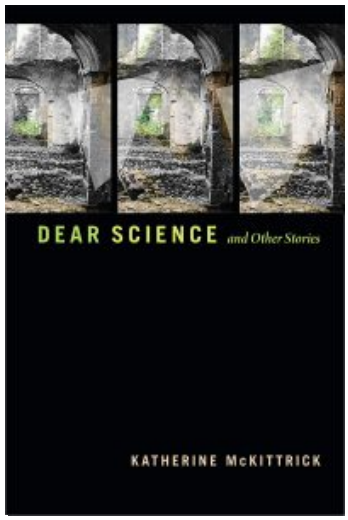
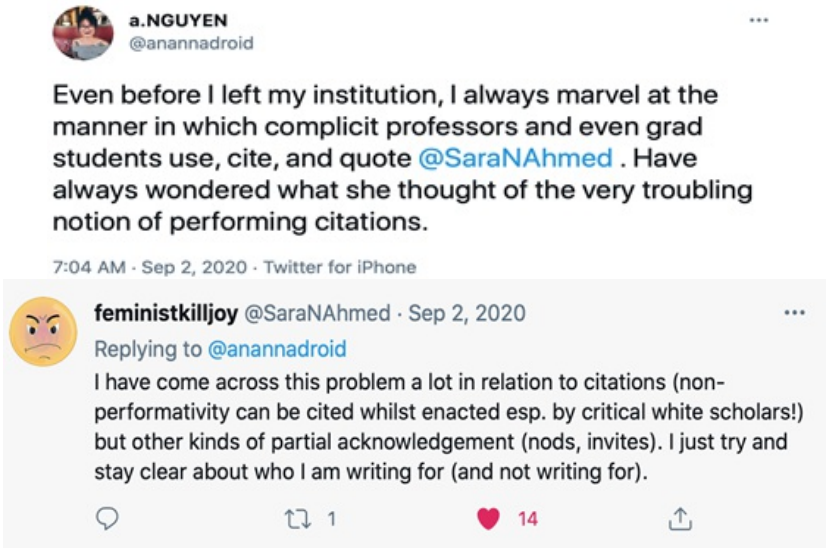
***Dear Science and Other Stories*. Katherine McKittrick. Duke University Press. 2021.**



I think a lot about citations and what their function might be, whether in a stylistic or conceptual sense. Famed for her insights on citations, Sara Ahmed's work is constantly reproduced and reflected upon in numerous essays and articles. If thoughtful readers follow Ahmed's work and trajectory, such as her decision to leave academia, they might ask themselves why they cite her feministkilljoys blog or her general oeuvre, particularly those readers who are white academics and who rehearse her provocations on violent structures like the university. What is the use, to echo another title by Ahmed, of citations when scholars attempt to use them in their own work? What is the work being done to challenge hegemony and dominant structures? If we imagine citations as a pushback against hegemony, how do we centre the voices that have been continually pushed out but simultaneously amplified?



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A way to think of citations as a normative project is to consider them as an analytical category. In her newest book, *Dear Science and Other Stories*, Katherine McKittrick, Professor in Gender Studies at Queen's University, structures her thoughts in a series of stories that centre Black life and Black experiences 'as a way to hold on to the rebellious methodological work of sharing ideas in an unkind world' (7). For those who have read and use McKittrick's work, they will recognise the significance of Sylvia Wynter here in this book, and elsewhere, whose own scholarship has dealt with narrative, storytelling and human sciences. As indicated by the title, McKittrick works through how Black creatives and scholars attend to science in their own work. As important as the character and role of science is in the book, McKittrick does not hold an absolute view of what science might or could be; instead, the stories she shares are connected through knowledge systems, Black livingness and liberatory ways of knowing (3).

Science, then, is imagined as a kind of storytelling, in which McKittrick weaves in theory, literature, poetry, music and her own observations and thought processes as a way to also understand theory as a form of storytelling (7). There is no bifurcation of theory and practice; rather, the two, which are typically separated in traditional academic writing, are presented together to build on McKittrick's argument that Black creatives have always used interdisciplinary methodologies to create their stories and futures.

Recognising the fictive work of theory, McKittrick views fact-finding, experimentation, analysis and study as narrative, plot and incomplete inventions (8). Specific examples include the concept albums of Detroit-based electronic and house duo Drexciya (52), lines from Dionne Brand's *A Map to the Door of No Return* (63-70), photos and a playlist in the story titled 'The Kick Drum is the Fault' (122-124). These are just some of the illuminating examples found in McKittrick's argument that these types of storytelling are animated by Afrofuturism, anti-colonial work and how discussions of race 'in relation to discipline and interdiscipline are enriched by thinking across texts and places' (45).

In the second story, titled 'Footnotes (Books and Papers Scattered about the Floor)', McKittrick examines the materialities that are animated through our research and written ideas: citations, endnotes, footnotes, references, bibliographies, texts and narratives, parentheses, sources and pages (15). In particular, she is interested in referencing or citing texts in Black studies and 'how this referencing uncovers a lesson that cannot be contained within the main text' (19).

McKittrick examines the genealogy of Ahmed's work, particularly within her radical project of excluding white men in citations. McKittrick reflects on her own struggle 'with the outcome of this citational project' (20), noting that while many Black scholars do read and cite men, they are 'moving beyond Ahmed's project by producing intellectual narratives that envision renewed liberatory infrastructures that are stitched together not by specific names, but by *the practice of sharing ideas* about how we might and can resist multiscalar injustices' (28, emphasis in original). Further, McKittrick writes that: 'while I brokenheartedly abandoned feminism many years ago, I did not abandon black feminist thought. What is important about Ahmed's refusal of white male citations, for me, is that it inadvertently historicizes citational politics that have *always* informed black feminist thought and black studies' (29, emphasis in original). And for McKittrick, Black studies as a citational project is 'sharing ideas about how to struggle against oppression': the citational project is not about inclusion or exclusion but how liberation and sharing are radical theories and methodologies (30, 73).

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In the story '(Zong) Bad Made Measure', McKittrick interrogates the terrains of feminist science studies and feminist philosophies of science to think about the intersection of race in these fields. She discusses the 'difficulties of reading, teaching, and analysing racial violence particularly when we rely on data sets that seek to grapple with race by relying on the axiom that biological race is socially produced' (129). This kind of language, too, centres and reifies science despite us trying to do the very opposite: 'all science matters or possibilities are foreclosed by biological determinism because blackness must be positioned as purely biological and scientifically inferior in order for the critique, ''social construction'', to make sense' (134-35).

The important lesson here is not the foregone conclusion that science is indeed racist or that science, like everything else in this material and social life, is socially constructed; instead, naming scientific racism, as McKittrick writes, falls back on a biocentric model. 'In this formulation, scientific racism continues to have the last word precisely because it is recursively enacted as socially constructed,' she writes. She generously reminds the reader that the critique might be conceptually useful but, citing Frantz Fanon, pushes us to think that being Black is not only defined by racist constructions in science (135).

Reading the richly poetic and sonically-driven *Dear Science*, we can see the many complex projects and thoughts of McKittrick's work. The stories are citational observations and calls for a theory and method of storytelling and reading practice as a way to undo discipline (41), a reimagination of the academic text as a genre and incomplete visions of defining 'science'. The text itself is artfully arranged, breaking from the conventional academic structure, especially in pages 140 through to 145. In addition to the story '(I Entered the Lists)', where McKitttrick provides a glossary of terms (171-77), the importance of footnotes, too, is a stunning way to rethink what their function might be.

These footnotes are just as important as the stories and detail much of how authors of particular texts are in conversation with each other. In my podcast chat with author and professor Kiese Laymon, he said something that has stayed with me as I read and reread *Dear Science*. On the topic of reading and using theoretical language in writing, Laymon connects the method of reading social theory in his own writing practices: 'The act of putting words on a page, assembling them in a particular way, putting punctuation – that is an art. That is actually art. Theory writing, instruction writing, poems […] there is an artful attempt to assemble language to get a point across.' And we see this artful care throughout McKittrick's stories.

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To return to the topic of citational projects, one might read this review as an attempt to further extend one's own projects with McKittrick's very own. Yet, how do we cite carefully without attempting to universalise McKittrick's particular contexts and without losing her nuanced observations? At the end of the book, McKittrick returns to the title via a letter addressed to Science, a nice summary of the entire project. For readers, especially for non-Black readers, we are reminded that important work is never a solitary act, but one that is an ongoing collaborative effort.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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