



OtherWise: Writing Unbearable Encounters Through the Register of Black Life

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Abstract

This paper explores themes of the liberatory in therapeutic writing. It includes a narrative account of a series of difficult encounters at a writing for wellbeing conference and then reflects on this through an 'otherwise' lens. By engaging Saidiya Hartman's term *otherwise*, the author highlights possibilities for practice in the field as it navigates the unbearable encounter of *race*. Terms such as *therapeutic writing*, *creative writing for therapeutic purposes* (CWTP), and *writing for wellbeing*, which do not explicitly reference the liberatory, or processes of 'getting free', do not account for the experience, knowledge, and possibilities of Black life. Writing OtherWise is proposed as a mode of practice that creates capacity for being with the difficult encounter and expanded possibilities for writing as personal and collective freedom-making.

Keywords: Black life, therapeutic writing, race, wellbeing, otherwise

Scenes from a Difficult Encounter (1)

Let's start with D'Angelo and the story of the conference. You need to know that D'Angelo is singing through my earphones, playing on repeat. Play 'Cruisin'¹ now if you can. Or if not, imagine lush, languid beats; imagine a singing voice that is liquid precision; imagine bass, tenor, and falsetto in the intimate conversation that somehow calls your body to join. Now you know what it is that has me quietly rocking in the foyer when what I really want to do is run for the door. This is why you need to know about D'Angelo. Without D'Angelo there would be no conference, no workshop, and no story to tell. The opening scene takes place in the foyer, where the details of the workshop I will be facilitating later in the day are

pinned up alongside others. Delegates are moving between descriptions making selections and adding their names to lists. Some workshops, because they already have a full quota of names, have been closed. My workshop—open only to delegates identifying as black, brown, or of colour—is currently a blank sheet, an empty bar with a solitary name written and then crossed out, which somehow feels worse than empty. I watch as people squint to read and then blink back their surprise. One delegate tuts and shakes his head; remarks sharply to his companion, ‘Well this isn’t the way to solve the problem, is it!’ Though I’m not sure why I care, his disapproval lands hard, sets off a whole chain of negative thoughts. Hence the need for D’Angelo; for turning up the volume and cruisin’ away as a way to stay in the right conversation.

The Problem (...this isn’t the way to solve the problem is it?)

The problem being what exactly? For me, the problem is that my workshop ‘Wide Margins: Creative Writing as Space for Black Imagination’ does not sit comfortably here. It raises uncomfortable questions, even while constituting part of an ‘equalities’ strand specifically set up to attend to diversity, inclusion, and difference. The words ‘diversity,’ ‘inclusion,’ and ‘difference’ each carry their own set of problem questions: Who is different, and from who are they different? Who is to be included and who is doing the including? How is it that we can achieve a certain diversity—as in be together in a space or institution with our various differences—and still remain in the problem? The delegate who took issue with my workshop did so on the grounds that it is the wrong way to deal with *the problem*. To which problem were they referring? They did not specify, but we would be justified in assuming they were referring to the problem of race and/or racism. What interests me is that a space for Black participants was formulated in that delegate’s mind *only* as a problem or an attempt to deal with a problem, which leads me back to the problem, and set of problem questions, that I am attempting to examine here: How do we recognise the *what else* of Black life; account for what is in excess of a problem; make space for Blackness as more than a problem of racism? How might we, in the midst of the undeniable problems of racism, formulate and describe a workshop intended as a space in which Black people might not (for a moment) be or attend to a problem, and instead attend to our being? Poet Dionne Brand (Graham Foundation, 2018), speaking of language and narrative, offers the context of the problem: ‘[O]ur lived todays are cluttered in frequencies of oppression and responses to oppression...in the presence of our bodies all narrative

utterances are full of attention to racism, bracketed by racism, animated by racism.'

I draw on Brand's work as one writer among many (e.g., Sharpe 2016; Hartman 2019; Quashie 2021) who observe and demonstrate in their writing, being/seeing/imagining otherwise within the inescapable problem; practices of freedom in unfreedom. Quashie writes of what is possible when antiblackness is displaced from the centre of our thinking—a move that does not make the encounter any less difficult but does create breathing space in which to consider that encounter. From here, I think with McKittrick and the frustration that she experiences when attempting to put algorithms into conversation with creative texts. She learns something about herself, concluding that her research questions 'emerge from difficult and often unbearable encounters' (McKittrick, 2021, p. 120). I do not propose an algorithm for the unbearable encounter but think instead about the ways that creative writing and its non-algorithmic processes² can be practices of freedom for unbearable times.

Writing For Liberation: Other, Other-ness, OtherWise

Writing for wellbeing, therapeutic writing, creative writing for therapeutic purposes (hereafter CWTP), are terms used to describe how creative writing practices can, in different ways, assist our living. These terms variously articulate the shared goal of wellbeing while also leaving the notion of wellbeing largely undefined. It becomes a space open to multiple interpretations. I add the term *liberatory writing* here since through the register of Black life, writing for wellbeing cannot be viewed separately from, or outside of, attention to the social conditions that threaten, disrupt, and deny wellbeing. Liberatory writing aligns with liberation psychology and its understanding of the dialectical, dialogical, relational, and co-created processes of transformation 'in which we are both liberated and liberate... [and where] no one person does the "liberating"' (Romero & Afuape, 2015). Where creative writing is praxis (action and reflection [Freire, 1972]) and offers space for the development of critical consciousnesses, it has liberatory—and therefore therapeutic—potential.

In 'Writing Against Othering' Krumer-Nevo & Sidi, (2012) note how processes of Othering³ can be disguised by the language of diversity. They propose modes of writing that might resist othering (specifically narrative, dialogue, and reflexivity) but approach this from the perspective of the researcher who 'wishes to know the Other in order to give a voice to

people who were previously ignored' (p. 299). The aim is to resist othering, but the framing of *the Other* as being outside of or ignored by the field (or researcher) is problematic. The conference I described here also wishes, I believe, to resist processes of othering. It establishes an equalities strand to encourage diversity and inclusion. The problem lies in how to conceptualise and practice this inclusion without a) centring *here* as the place to be and b) creating an us (who are here) and them (who are not here and who therefore need to be included). Inclusion becomes an othering process, where the problem lies not in the registering of (real) absences, but in the binary formulations of inside/outside, us/other, that accept and recreate the very logics they attempt to disrupt. I propose OtherWise as another location from which to think and develop practice. The word OtherWise is taken from Hartman's layered description of 'wayward' which includes, 'the practice of the social otherwise, the insurgent ground that enables new possibilities and new vocabularies.' (2019, p. 227)

OtherWise evokes particular modes of experiencing, relating, and knowing as they emerge through *and* as Black life, as it survives a world predicated on antiblackness. I use upper and lower case here in a deliberate attempt to hold space for two separate words, 'other' and 'wise', as they compound to create something new. I want to emphasise the constellation of meaning held by the multiple registers of each component alongside their compound form. OtherWise is offered as a space from which we might better consider the relation of creative writing, therapeutics, and what is referred to variously as Black livingness,⁴ Black aliveness,⁵ Black Being,⁶ and/or Black life.⁷ Specifying Black life here is not to suggest an exploration of concern only to Black people. On the contrary, it is a specific invitation to reflect on all of our dis/interests in Black life and what they might tell us about need and possibility in this field. Black life is positioned here as a space of possibility—the edge of exclusion that is also threshold and gateway; an entry point to possibly the *only* space through which we might genuinely consider a world in which *all life matters*. The relevance of writing OtherWise (as liberatory practice), extends beyond Black life and—in its challenge to an anthropocentric, white supremacist framing of life—beyond the human (Gumbs 2020; Scott 2000). I suggest that practices and tools already existing within the writing-for-wellbeing field also lend themselves to writing OtherWise and attending differently to racialised experience and the difficult encounter of *race*.

Writing OtherWise means thinking beyond representational strategies and the crude categorisations of identity that they necessitate. A potential starting point, and the one from which I work here, is *the otherness of creative writing itself*. In illustration, I draw on the work of Caribbean scholar Sylvia Wynter—philosopher, dramatist, essayist, critic, and giant of afro-diasporic, *Black Atlantic*⁸ thought. Wynter’s work has enabled me to put thought to the sense of the frustration I feel whenever I encounter attempts to explore othering by focusing on *difference*. Work on difference—which I am not suggesting is per se without value—tends to make its point by highlighting the ways in which we are all, in some way or another, different from each other and therefore potentially Other. Burnham’s concept of ‘social GRRRAACCEESS’⁹ (Burnham, 2012) is an example of this approach. It is a model that is still widely used despite having been critiqued for treating social inequalities as mutually exclusive and therefore being limited by a failure to account for or speak to intersectional experience (Birdsey & Kustner, 2020). I include here its failure to account for the ways that otherness is located on, and clings to, *some bodies in particular*. We may all be different, but to live in a black, brown, queer, trans, or differently abled body, for example, is often to live a quotidian sense of otherness that unsettles the comparative framework that would attempt to normalise difference as a series rather than a hierarchical ordering and valorisation of human life.

Wynter (1976) avoids this by questioning the normative foundations of our understanding of the human, narrated as the story of Man and Man’s Others. The story she tells is that of a specific set of ideas that emerged through the period we know as the ‘enlightenment’. She invites us to consider the figure of Man (white, male, able-bodied, straight, cis-gendered, independent, property-owning, rational) as he narrated himself by defining himself *against* an Other (Black, female, queer, dependent, poor, assetless, irrational). Man narrates a hierarchy in which he constitutes the uppermost echelon and in which his *Others* (including the non-human) are, to varying classifiable degrees, lower and lesser. This narrative—with its biocentric basis and fundamental racism (McKittrick, 2021)—has fundamentally shaped our ideas of what it means to be human; ideas rooted in and inseparable from the racialised, gendered, and classed hierarchies through which they were born and through which this story is told and (constantly) reproduced. The desire to establish historical, political, and social distance from the white supremacist foundations of this narrative may be understandable but does not move us in the direction of

social justice. On the contrary, to believe or suggest that we have moved away (or progressed) from this racist science story is to turn away from how it lives on in, and as, the philosophical underpinnings of the very disciplines of study with which we are concerned, and which are viewed as primary sites of knowledge and knowledge production.¹⁰ It is important to understand how the grappling we do with the lived realities of the hierarchical ordering of difference (or human life) takes place within a system of knowledge *based on Othering* and a refusal of the Other's knowledge. Wynter observes that Man, while literally penning up his Others (on reservations and plantations), pens along with them their ways of knowing—the *modes of cognition* (p. 83) that are heretical to his conceptualised orthodoxy. She highlights one exception:

THE MODE OF COGNITION THAT WAS PENNED UP WAS A MODE WHICH WESTERN MAN (ALL OF US, SINCE IT IS NO LONGER A RACIAL BUT A CULTURAL TERM) REMAINS AWARE OF ONLY THROUGH POETRY – AND POETRY AS THE GENERIC TERM FOR ART. (p. 83)

Poetry as a way of knowing is retained but reserved differently—not penned *outside* as Other but *inside*, in a defined disciplinary space called *art*. McKittrick draws from Wynter's work to critique this enclosure of art and the disciplinary processes that in their relentless categorisation 'stack and bifurcate seemingly disconnected categories and geographies [and] disciplines [that] differentiate, split, and create fictive distances between us' (2021, p. 36). She notes the particular bifurcation of creativity and science, and how this split reifies racial difference. In thinking, for example, about the way in which students are encouraged to take up STEM¹¹ subjects over humanities, we might consider how—as a way of *knowing*—future-oriented science is deemed more trustworthy than poetry. Poetry, though appreciated for its aesthetic qualities, is not generally considered scientific, and as such is not readily valued as knowledge or knowledge-producing. We who are Man's Others have been (and are) viewed similarly—as unscientific, irrational, and unproductive. In our Other-ness, Black life and poetry inhabit a devalued common ground, the meanings and possibilities of which are denied and reduced by the dominance of what we call whiteness. Whiteness is a racialised position that, in refusing to know itself, enacts coloniality by assuming itself (and its knowledges) universal. Hill (2017) offers poetry as 'capable of facilitating an engagement with the production of meaning...through insurgent interruptions of dominant narratives' (p. iv) and therefore has potential for decolonial projects. Black life is also insurgent, also an interruption to a dominant narrative of the

racialised hierarchy of Man and his Others. In the relation of poetry and Black life we find liberatory possibility.

Scenes from a Difficult Encounter (2)

Nobody told me to do this—to attempt to squeeze Black life into a conference space that is overwhelmingly white and which I am attending for the first ever time. Even after I walk away and make the decision to avoid the lobby and any further trouble around the signup board—the difficult encounters keep themselves coming. At lunch for instance, when two people ask me at two different times what I am doing here. When I tell them, they look uncomfortable, as in two-second pauses before the next words come, as in faces desperately blanking themselves to avoid betraying what is behind them. We come from very different places—geographically, professionally, and culturally, but recognising this does nothing to mitigate what is unbearable and somehow unsayable. I myself am not exempt. I feel the awkwardness too. Here we are with our shared ground comprising writing practice and having chosen the same fish meal from the buffet. The proposal for a Black workshop space was distilled by my long experience of living while Black, examined and analysed through the even longer lens of the transdisciplinary field known as Black, diaspora, and/or Africana studies. This knowledge was alive and living in me, but not in the near vicinity of my lunch companions, not quite available for use in the heat of my evisceration. We are not able to orientate ourselves into proximity, and so we look at each other blankly and try to be cordial in our lostness. The OtherWise of Black life is long and deep—coeval to so-called ‘modernity’. We should not be surprised that it cannot be navigated or explained in fifteen minutes over a fish fillet.

Also,

I absolutely do not want to.

Knowledge and Knowing – Grounds for Inclusion

Gary Younge once made the point that Black history month is where Black people get to teach white people their history—a humorous way to describe the problem of a certain burden with which Black life is achingly familiar. Education is important, but the labour of it (including emotional labour) is tiring and mostly unpaid. Black studies programmes exist, but outside of this, curricula are rarely constructed with an understanding of Black life as knowledge-producing and epistemically valuable.

Consequently, it is not unusual to inhabit a shared field of practice (e.g., therapeutic writing) yet be without a common language with which to meet. I would aver that even if the first delegate had been less opinionated

and more curious, and my lunch companions less embarrassed and more able to ask why the workshop had been set up in that way, we would still have struggled in conversation. We needed (and did not have) common terms of reference. Strategies for inclusion often miss this need, particularly when their focus is on having different faces in a room (institution, advertising campaign, etc.). A focus on appearing diverse—on what we look like in general—bypasses crucial questions about knowledge and ways of knowing. For example, what experiences, ways of knowing, cultural and social productions are present here? How are these recognised and valued as knowledge? Which of these knowledges are considered essential (core curriculum) and which end up in more marginal spaces of specialism, supplementary seminar, or elective—in the space of minoritised ‘difference’? Or, put differently, how many of you, having read this far, are still wondering what kinds of knowledge I am talking about?

A List (things I am talking about)

List making is a writing practice that I use and return to frequently. I like the open-endedness of lists; the ways they serve to map (but not enclose) a territory; how they can be brief and also contain multiple starting points for longer, deeper explorations. Lists help us know what needs to be gathered to keep on being and/or to make things anew, the conceptual ingredients required to break out of the violent hold of hierarchical ordering. The following is the beginning of a list of terms and ideas that might have supported conversation in the difficult encounter:

Black(ness)

Used to describe people with particular phenotypical features and levels of melanin—eumelanin and pheomelanin—that produce a range of skin colours (Prescod-Weinstein, 2021).

Outcome of the non-scientific, and non-evidence-based idea of race; a process of racialisation *turning certain human beings into ‘Black’ humans* (Kinouani, 2021); a socially constructed phenomenon; the West’s *most iconic creation* (Moten, 2003, p. 33).

An invention, coeval with the invention of whiteness.^{[12](#)}

A word used to describe people of African descent.

A word used to describe, under the umbrella of political Blackness,^{[13](#)} people of African and Asian descent, and from other non-white groups with a shared history of colonisation in one form or another. A term used to describe a commitment to liberatory politics (Andrews, 2018).

An interdisciplinary study; a field that has become less interested in the fictive construction (of race) itself than in what can be learned by observing and thinking about how this fiction is lived as reality (McKittrick, 2021).

Diaspora

‘[T]he scattering of people across spaces...’ is how McKittrick starts to define diaspora in a glossary of terms ‘for readers who don’t deal very well with unknown words or who want to understand everything’ (McKittrick, 2021, p. 171). The entry for diaspora, which spans two pages, is filled with ellipses—pauses that somehow signal acknowledgment the impossibility of comprehensive definition. Diaspora is defined as desire... relationship... sociocultural rupture... return... remittance... sites that map Holocaust memorials... songs that sample the music of Bob Marley played on local radio stations. The form that McKittrick uses on the page evokes diaspora as ‘processes of unsettling, recombination, hybridization, and cut-and-mix’ (Hall cited by Keguro, 2019, p. 21). The layering and juxtaposition of terms evokes Keguro’s *Frottage* (p. 28), a work that is interested in ‘tracking the black diaspora as dispersal and dissonant intimacy’ and as ‘a multiplicity of sense-apprehension.’ Diaspora is always in excess of the words with which we attempt to capture it and carries its own poetic force. Nayyirah Waheed (2013), in a poem titled ‘myriad/disconnect,’ offers diaspora as ‘breathtaking,’ ‘in stunning pain’ and ‘a great many things all at once.’ For those of us who want to understand everything, *a great many things* at once provides a place to pause...

Black Atlantic

A term proposed by Gilroy (Gilroy, 1993); identifying a culture that is not specifically Black African, American, Caribbean, or British but an *all-of-these-at-once-culture* transcending nationality and ethnicity and making something new.

The Wake and the Weather

Sharpe (2016) thinks about the afterlives of transatlantic slavery and deploys the term ‘wake’ and its multiple registers to describe the persistence of the past into the present. Sharpe describes how logics from the historical past, that required Black labour while simultaneously denying its value and the inherent value of Black life, continue and are reproduced in the present. She invites us to consider how we inhabit and are inhabited by the Wake; to consider terror as visited on Black life from the perspective of the ways we live in and

despite that terror. The terror of antiblackness—a total climate—is described as *the weather*.

Black Aliveness/Livingness

Black life as it moves through the wake/weather of antiblackness; the excess; the more than problem; that which survives; that which insists as in ‘—we, *Black people everywhere and anywhere we are, still produce in, into, and through the wake an insistence on existing: we insist Black being into the wake*’ (Sharpe, 2016, p. 11).

Black Feminisms/OtherWise

We cannot think OtherWise without referencing Black feminism, the scholarship and praxes that foreground Black women as *intellectual producers, creative agents and political subjects* (Nash, 2019, p. 5), and within which, thinking OtherWise is a major strand. Psychotherapist and Black feminist Gail Lewis’s¹⁴ powerful evocation of OtherWise has stayed with me partly because her description of visualsonic resistance¹⁵ touched, and therefore drew upon (and on) the archives of my own memory. Lewis remembers—as do I—a predigital age of unlicensed radio where the airwaves were tightly controlled and where Black music, the music we wanted to hear, was not deemed worthy of play time by legal stations. There were very few, if any, opportunities to enter the mainstream to broadcast for ourselves, and so-called ‘pirate’ radio stations became the lifeline, the line that answered life’s call for the music that could (and did) nourish and sustain. For this to happen, transmitters had to be positioned in elevated spaces across the city. The authorities forbid this, and set themselves the task of hunting, raiding, and confiscating this equipment. In a tense, ongoing dance, Black life wove its way across the blocks, the rooftops, tower to tower, flipping and moving and making its escape. As listeners, when the broadcasts cut to white noise, we sometimes let the dial sit to maintain the frequency, but even if we immediately switched to other stations, we knew to keep checking back. We knew that Black life was literally moving above our heads, in the process of making its (re)connections, and so we waited. Its movement was OtherWise: silent, unauthorised, and largely unseen but always alive; the transmission of life that was always on its way coming (again). In this telling, OtherWise is the life that is there to feel and know *if* we have the senses for it; when our aerials are set to it; when we are tuned to pick up its multiple, and moving, registers.

The omissions of this list are far more than the inclusions. It is offered as the briefest of orientations for these scenes of difficult encounter, so that

we might consider them OtherWise. OtherWise is wisdom available to all when we have the courage to set our antennae towards it; when we can receive it and in the process start to move away from Whiteness as a practice of hierarchical being. I draw on this wisdom here with specific attention to imagination and recognition, history and memory, and knowledge.

Scenes from a Difficult Encounter (3)

If we only view the margin as a sign marking the condition of our pain and deprivation, then hopelessness and despair penetrate the very ground of our being. It is there, in that space of collective despair that one's creativity, one's imagination is at risk. (hooks, 1989, p. 21)

As a writer reading, I came to realise the obvious: the subject of the dream is the dreamer. The fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly consciousness. (Morrison, 1992, p. 17)

Wide Margins: Creative Writing as Space for Black Imagination. This is the title of the workshop I will be facilitating. I have not been able to fit enough Toni Morrison and bell hooks into the 50-word synopsis for the conference brochure. It could be that I am the only person here who really knows what I mean. As we move between the first and second workshops we have chosen, I glance at the boards. Still no signups for my workshop. At this stage, it could be that even I do not know what I mean. I guess 50 words is not enough. One day I will write more. Today though, I listen to D'Angelo.

Imagination and Recognition

When titling this workshop, I drew from bell hooks's and Toni Morrison's writings on margins, imagination, and Black life. I also read Brown (2017) on emergent strategy and was encouraged to propose a space in which the outcomes were not predefined. Brown describes imagination as 'the only known edge of existence'¹⁶ and our current circumstances as an *imagination battle*: 'We are living in the ancestral imagination of others, with their longing for safety and abundance, a longing that didn't include us, or included us as enemy, fright, other' (p. 16).

The idea of an imagination battle echoes with another idea from psychoanalysis, specifically the concept of projection. Projection—a psychological defence mechanism that works by placing one's own (often

negative) traits in another (person/object)—is a concept familiar enough that it features in discussion both inside and outside the field of psychoanalysis. Less discussed, within and outside of the field, is how projection is shaped by, and within, *and is inseparable from*, the total weather of an antiblack climate. Racism is, as Brown alludes, the projection of a collective imaginary. Ancestral imagination as a formulation allows us to conceptualise—by naming—what we are living in at the same time as it also speaks to the ways we might also live beyond what we are in. Through imagination—by imagining *OtherWise*—new worlds become possible. Imagination, as both technology and method, is here a practice of freedom; a way to get free. Titling the workshop ‘Wide Margins: Creative Writing as Space for Black Imagination’ was an attempt to capture some of these ideas in words; an attempt to evoke the wide margins of poetry as spaces in which we might meet the marginalised experiences of Black life; an attempt to evade the capture of the white gaze and the limits of its Africanist persona; an attempt to imagine beyond the edges of (antiblack) existence; an attempt to live, and be, *OtherWise*; an attempt to show this is what we do.

Morrison’s dreamer, viewing Black life via the projected light of the white gaze and unable to clearly see, misses what, and more crucially *who*, is before them. This engenders, from the perspective of Black life, an ongoing struggle with being repeatedly mis-seen and unrecognised. Whilst opacity (Glissant & Wing, 1997) has value in Black life (what is not seen might also escape appropriation or attack), recognition is a psychic need. Failures of recognition have psychic consequences (Benjamin, 1990; McKenzie-Mavinga, 2007). Despite being fully visible and present, Black life finds itself relegated to the social periphery, hypervisible and invisible (Fanon, 2008), an experience also described (Greene & Stewart, 2015) as *living in the Blackground*. However we describe the experience, an absence of mutual recognition in relationships diminishes the quality of mental space that connects us—the third space that Benjamin refers to as *intersubjective relatedness*. Without the recognition of racial trauma, and racially embodied trauma (Menakem, 2021), the space in which we might make links between feelings, thoughts, and context is also diminished. Writing, as a practice that facilitates, opens, or expands these *third spaces* is liberatory (and therefore therapeutic). If our intention is to be therapeutic, our work must attend to the failures of recognition that mitigate against these spaces and their being available and open.

I conceived of ‘Space for Black Imagination’ as a move in this direction, albeit a move that another conference delegate objected to on the basis that it was *not the way to solve the problem*. To my mind, this objection emanates from multiple failures of both recognition and imagination. The delegate is unable to either recognise or imagine Black life as existing *outside of being a problem*. Let us not dismiss this as an individual failure, but rather understand that, in the context of a world thoroughly conditioned by antiblackness and standing in the space of an unnamed whiteness, this view *makes sense*. McKittrick (2021) describes this as the *commonsense of antiblackness*; the conditions of an antiblack world being such that Black is constituted as a problem, is always a problem, is always (only ever) in need of a solution. What if this person spoke aloud what others were thinking? Projection works to foreclose imagination and position Blackness such that it cannot be seen outside of a problem-solving rubric, where ‘*what is expected from black people is [only] blackness*’ (Quashie, 2021, p. 10). Quashie invites us to both recognise and imagine the aliveness possible in a black world¹⁷—a world in which ‘*what we expect and get from black people is beingness*.’ To write *Otherwise* is to accept this invitation: to welcome the opportunity to engage the poetic and the *capacious landscape* (Quinn-Hall, 2016) of poetry, as space where recognition and imagination are possible and where an appreciation for the aesthetic of wide margins can be extended into sociopolitical registers.

An Unbearable Encounter (4)

The conference is being held in Engineers House in Bristol—a two-storey, porticoed limestone building that, as it looks up to Clifton Down, seems very sure of itself, smug even. It has been here since the 1800s. There is no reason to think it will not be here for hundreds of years to come. The words ‘historic’ and ‘majestic’ whisper themselves up and down its halls and stairways. The students and tutors occupying its rooms spoke of its grandness. So when I entered for the first time as a student in 2016, and all of this was drowned out by the cry of blood—ancestral blood—I felt at odds. Another unbearable encounter.

History / Memory

I am deeply grateful to NourbeSe Philip (2018) for her description of time spent at the Gladstone Library in Wales, which offered me a way to conceptualise my trouble with Engineers House. As one of a party of tourists being led on a historical tour through the ruins of Hawarden Castle, Philip describes how, as they enter through what they are told is Leopold’s Gate, the name shocks her. The guide confirms that it is named

after Leopold, the late Belgian King, but is unclear on the details (he visited in 1819). Philip describes the shock of this sudden confrontation with a brutal history—Leopold, creator of the Belgian Congo whose system of extracting wealth involved extensive, population-decimating mutilation and murder of African people. She writes:

Here in the bucolic Welsh countryside the stench of blood is fresh. The past has reached out and touched me. And among these twenty or so people, I am the only one even aware of this man's history. We all troop through King Leo's gate to see the ruins of the castle. What ho! and Tally Ho! *Their history*. My memory. (Hunt & Lundy Martin, 2018, p. 316) [emphasis mine]

I felt at odds with Engineers House in a way that cast a shadow over my excitement to learn. The wariness that emerged in our interaction was compounded in my study group when (like Philips) I felt that *I was the only one*. Writing supported a navigation of these encounters, and a certain flexibility and creative approach within the programme itself also helped. Our learning environment stretched beyond the physical classroom and into the outdoors; we were able to commune with trees, wander down residential streets, and trek uphill to look out over Clifton gorge. The freedom to wander, practice journaling, read, write, and share allowed me to be with what was, even when it was unexpected, unmirrored, and unrecognised. Writing facilitated my *being*; was a reflexive practice through which it was more possible to be with entangled histories and presents, including the memory of slavery and colonialism, and the psychic wear of 'other(ed)-ness.' To write OtherWise is to be prepared to encounter the troubles and violence of the archive without looking away; to reckon with what is and is not considered historical or worthy of note; to account for omissions, erasures, and brutal extractions. OtherWise is writing antennae that track the excess; the outside and beyond of familiar, commonplace, or sanctioned narratives; that make room for the effects, and affects, of that excess—room capacious enough to hold stories of the grand and majestic alongside their difficulty and unbearableness. *Their history, my memory*.

An Unbearable Encounter (5)

I am asked to arrive early to be on hand to explain my workshop. I am the only workshop facilitator asked to do this. I am told that they do not feel qualified; that they are not clear about things. I am not clear about things. I am not clear about how I ended up here. I feel angry. I am not clear about why I am replaying D'Angelo over and again or why I have a desire to plug in to the PA system and rock this big bully of a house with some

bassline. Except maybe this is a way to be angry without being seen as the angry Black woman; or a way to drown it all out—the people, the people giving opinions, the people needing clarity, the people abandoning me by their ignorant ‘innocence,’ the people wanting to know and tell. I can feel how much I don’t know, and the much knowing that I need to unknow. I can feel that my body knows something but that what it knows cannot be expressed here. Something like not wanting to explain anything to anybody. After hovering for a minute or two, we quietly cruise away.

Unknowing, Undiscipline, Making Anew

Unlike some other disciplines, the field of therapeutic writing does not valorise objectivity or insist on transparency and coherence. It can accommodate, but does not demand, positivist knowledge. If anything, research within our field leans toward post-structural approaches and the narrative turn. There is widespread acceptance that the *what we know* is inseparable from our positionalities—the *where we know from*. Programmes currently running¹⁸ cannot (yet) claim a commitment to decolonial methodologies¹⁹ but show some willingness to think creatively when it comes to what can be included and how learning can be evidenced. It is within this context, and buoyed by the ground-shifting work of Katherine McKittrick (2021), that I offer D’Angelo’s groove as *theoretical insight*, as the text with which—in a moment of difficult encounter—I could be with the questions arising. McKittrick offers Black music and cultural production as psychic and physiological experience. She acknowledges the song for helping us ‘think consciousness without being distracted by the demand for clarity’, containing the ‘something else going on’ that is not easily captured by certain other analytics, and performing (referencing Robin James, 2012) the ‘*what we cannot know but love to hear*’ (p. 67).

McKittrick also highlights reading outside ourselves to ‘actively unknow’ ourselves. Practices of therapeutic writing, which commonly draw from a wide range of texts, implicitly embrace ideas of ‘reading outside of’ and ‘actively unknowing.’ I frequently refer to Le Guin’s ideas on *unlearning* and *unteachers* (Le Guin, 1989) and link this to *wake work*, and Sharpe’s call for undiscipline. She observes that we are ‘disciplined into thinking through and along lines that reinscribe our own annihilation’ and suggests that there is a need for us to ‘become *undisciplined*’ (2016, p. 13, emphasis mine). As it is used here, undisciplined does not describe being sloppy or lazy, but rather, being *disobedient* (McKittrick, 2021). In stating that current disciplinary structures and methods reify rather than counter antiblackness, both Sharpe and McKittrick cite Wynter’s work on the

human. McKittrick (2015) highlights Wynter's call to undo the 'narratively condemned status' (Wynter, 1994, p. 7) ascribed to Black people within Man's description of the human as *homo sapiens* (the one who knows). She employs the description *homo narrans*—the storytellers, the ones who tell ourselves that we know—and explores how by doing this, we make ourselves. This process of making ourselves—*autopoiesis*—operates with a recursive logic which, by investing in our present normative modes, maintains them.

Writing OtherWise relies on autopoiesis—our capacity to *make ourselves anew* (Gumbs, 2020)—and engages undiscipline, unlearning, and unknowing ourselves as crucial freedom-making practices. These practices are crucial because we will not address the problems we find with the same mind that made them (Moray, 2020). Technology has huge potential, but algorithms can only calculate answers to problems that they already understand ('what we care about comes before the equation' [McKittrick, 2021, p. 109]); algorithms, when applied to nonuniform problems (e.g., the problems of being human), generate unpredictable and incalculable outputs. The poetic, as an alternative mode of cognition with the capacity for undiscipline and absent of the need to know everything, can respond OtherWise to problems. The poetic can cross and refuse disciplinary borders; can refuse hierarchies and disrupt practices of Othering; can assist our unknowing, unlearning, and making ourselves anew.

An Unbearable Encounter (6)

Post-lunch, and the discomfort I am most concerned with is my own. My fiercest wish is to not be here—so fierce that I am not relieved when I see that there are now two people signed up to attend the workshop. In fact, by committing me to deliver what I have promised, these two names block my exit. Of the unbearable encounters played out here, not following through with the promised space would feel like the worst. I do not want to frustrate Black imagination. Hence, at 3 pm, I am in a small room at the back of Engineer's House, connecting D'Angelo to a speaker and grooving for real. I am happy to see the two names become bodies and other chairs get filled as extra, unsigned delegates arrive. There are smiles and nods but also something else; something tentative and watchful, that can't quite be said; a sense of discomfort that could just be mine but is probably not. Introductions are followed by writing and sharing and laughter and tears. As intimacy grows deeper, sharing becomes possible, including—perhaps only five minutes from the end of the workshop—a confession. The last person to enter the room admits that they themselves objected to the workshop; could not see the need

for this Black space. The reason they signed up they say, was because, as a person of colour, they could. Their intention was to find out what it was all about. They address me directly; ‘So if you don’t mind me asking, what exactly is the point of this?’ Potentially it is the most difficult encounter of the day.

OtherWise in a Difficult Encounter

OtherWise is not an escape from the difficult encounter nor a way of avoiding the problem, which we can never really claim to be outside of. OtherWise here is a mode of practice that refuses the problematising of Blackness; that refuses to accept Black life as consumed by or subsumed within the difficult encounter that we call race.

OtherWise is transdisciplinary; a practice of undiscipline; shifting the grounds of knowledge (how we know and where we know from); shifting the story we tell ourselves about who we are; ‘processes of creating-narrating-listening-hearing-reading-and-sometimes-unhearing’; ‘sharing stories as creative, rigorous radical theory’ (McKittrick, 2021, p. 73). OtherWise is something like liberation; like escape; like not being able to escape and still trying; like *maroonage*, petit and grand.²⁰ OtherWise is the place you need to know that you already know; a possible world; the world you make that makes you possible. OtherWise is the re-wording that makes a re-worlding; is more than, open-ended, dynamic, and unpredictable; is the refusal to capture or be captured; is knowledge that resists being grasped, what will not be owned; and is alert to the alarming proximity of comprehend and apprehend; is a pas de deux of infinite generativity and the opacity that guards it; is the joy and mischief mocking the storyteller trying to shape it to beginning–middle–end. The storyteller does her best. She gathers scenes—scenes to think and feel with; scenes to recognise and be surprised by; scenes to write, wander, and wonder with. She writes in anticipation of scenes not yet written, scenes waiting at the edge of existence known as imagination.

Encounter (*)

‘What exactly is the point of this?’

I have no ready answer but am at least breathing and being and back in my body from where an emergent response is possible. I invite everyone present to reflect on our time together—on what has been written and read and shared. ‘What of this would and would not have emerged in a different, not specifically Black space?’

There is silence. There are nods. The questioner nods too, says, ‘Yes. I see.’

I ask if that answers the question.

‘Yes,’ they say again, ‘it does.’

The question will come again of course. Unlike me, it is not exhausted. An unending supply of difficult encounters is no doubt ahead, but for today at least, we settle.

Notes

1. ‘Cruisin’ (D’Angelo) from the 1995 album *Brown Sugar* (originally written, produced, and recorded by Smokey Robinson for Motown Records in 1979)
2. Or Sylvia Wynter’s *demonic ground* described by McKittrick (2006).
3. The writers adopt a specific sociological definition of ‘Othering,’ namely, as the attribution of inferiority to difference rather than a psychological definition which describes the process of differentiation of the Self from Others.
4. McKittrick (2021)
5. Quashie (2021)
6. Sharpe (2016)
7. As in the coalition Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) and the political social movement #BLM, Black Lives Matter.
8. Further attention is given to these terms later in this paper.
9. Upper case GRRRAACCEESS following Burnham (2012).
10. For in-depth exploration of the self-sustaining dynamic of whiteness that exists in philosophy, see Mills, C. (1998).
11. Acronym for ‘science, technology, engineering, mathematics.’
12. <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2021/apr/20/the-invention-of-whiteness-long-history-dangerous-idea>
13. A term from British sociology, much discussed for its limits, frustrations, and possibilities (Sivanandan, 1990) (Swaby, 2014) (Andrews, 2016)
14. This conversation is available here: <https://www.nts.live/shows/revolution-is-not-a-one-time-event/episodes/the-masters-tools-will-never-dismantle-the-masters-house-3rd-august-2020>
15. Sharpe (2016, p. 21) describes Black visualsonic resistance to the imposition of non/being.
16. <http://adriennemareebrown.net/2015/10/28/there-is-an-edge-ode-to-radical-imagination/>
17. Quashie’s definition of a Black world is not one where the racial logics and harming predilections of antiblackness are inverted, but one without race prerogative ‘where every human question and possibility is of people who are black’ (2021, p. 2)
18. For example, the MSc and Practitioner Certificate at Metanoia Institute.

19. See Tuhiwai Smith (2012).
20. *Petit maroonage* or running away; a strategy of resistance in which individuals or small groups escaped their plantations for a short period of days or weeks and then returned. *Grand maroonage* refers to people who removed themselves from their plantations permanently.

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