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INTERVENTIONS

On the Poetics of Migration, Black Geographies, and Nervous Conditions

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The Context

This conversation began in Winter 2023, at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, Canada. At the time we were collectively studying Black geographies. As faculty and students who are part of the Black diaspora yet have very different experiences of displacement, our discussions revolved around the uneasy connections between education, university life, migration, and Blackness.

Inspired by the writings of Simone Browne, on January 25, 2024, the [Revolutionary Demand for Happiness working group](#) organized a conversation that revolved around the poetic possibilities of migration, mobility, immobility, borders, and boundaries. Paul Akpomuje and Aaliyah Strachan organized the event, and it was moderated by Katherine McKittrick. Akpomuje, a Nigerian poet and doctoral student in the Queen's University Faculty of Education, read a set of his poems that discussed themes such as surveillance, visas, travel, and home. The poems were paired with community stories about displacement and belonging; we made connections between over-policing, governmentality and government papers, racial capitalism, family and kinship ties, and the difficult and onerous work of traveling as members of the Black diaspora. We also homed in on understanding the racialized underpinnings of the "international student" category at Queen's

University—a figure that is monetarily required-desired, yet is also rendered institutionally unrooted and out of place.

Pressed to think through and build on the energy that was shared in January 2024, the conversation below between Milka Njoroge, Paul Akpomuje, Adesoji Babalola, and Katherine McKittrick acts as both a follow up and extension to the Poetics of Migration event.

Where We Are

Milka Njoroge is a PhD candidate and migrant student in Gender Studies at Queen's University. Prior to landing at Queen's, Milka studied in Finland, and prior to that, in Kenya. Adesoji Babalola is a PhD candidate in Cultural Studies at Queen's and an international student from Nigeria. Paul Akpomuje is a Black international graduate student, also from Nigeria, studying at Queen's University in the Faculty of Education. Katherine McKittrick is the Canada Research Chair in Black Studies and a Professor of Gender Studies at Queen's University.

Part One: Placemaking and Black Geographies

Katherine: Paul, maybe you can talk a little bit about the Poetics of Migration event that led us to the conversation we're having today.

Paul: The Poetics of Migration was a poetry event and open conversation that invited participants from the Kingston community—Queen's and non-Queen's—to come together to engage with themes such as travel, mobility, migration, displacement, and dislocation. The event was held at Pedal Works Café as a way to encourage people from all walks of life to join us—we didn't want this to be just for students and faculty from Queen's. Aaliyah Strachan, who is a part of the Revolutionary Demand for Happiness group, recommended Pedal Works, and it ended up being the perfect location for the event; after the event, some participants mentioned that it was one of the few events that brought members of the Black community in Kingston together in one space, specifically outside of the Queen's University campus. Many responses to the event also revolved around questions of safety, as many participants felt the off-campus space was safe and accessible. For many Black people in Kingston—students and otherwise—Queen's University actually feels unsafe and dodgy! Events at Queen's feel so enveloped in whiteness; we are scrutinized by this white racial gaze—like Fanon!—and the Poetics of Migration event countered this in part because it was held off campus. The response to the off-campus location is important, because it points to the themes we wanted to centre: movement, mobility, and navigating difficult spaces, which are linked to enclosure and surveillance. The location allowed many participants to not just talk a little more freely, but to move a little more freely, too.

Katherine: Before we met to revisit the Poetics of Migration event, I revisited a few key texts to help me get grounded. I read some work by Alana Butler and returned to *Teaching to Transgress* by bell hooks. As you were talking about the difference between the Poetics of Migration event and Queen's University more generally, Paul, it reminded of bell hooks's observations at the very beginning of *Teaching to Transgress*, where she talks about being taught in a one-room schoolhouse by a Black teacher and how this teacher was not only directing the class, but part of

the wider community; her role was to teach Black children about Blackness in all its forms, in addition to working hard to ensure the children thrived in typical school subjects. What is stunning about her observation is that she teaches us how the integration of the 1950s and 1960s, which is so often lauded, was paired with the loss of these very specific Black community- and education- centered modes of education. So, when you talk about the difference between these sites—between the university and a Black-owned community space, Pedal Works—hooks’s observations are realized in a new context. At the Poetics of Migration there were both Black and non-Black folks present, but there was a sense of learning, teaching, and sharing ideas that emerged from Black studies and Black organizing. The Poetics of Migration was an event where the typical surveillance of the university was removed and stories were opened up.

Milka: I have been thinking about that for a long time. I think I was confused about Kingston; it is such a strange place. Katherine, you told us in a class last year that when we think of Kingston as a prison town, it provides an analytical frame to think about the kinds of relations or the kinds of encounters we as Black people have in this town. I’m also thinking, Paul, about the way you describe Queen’s as dodgy. I really like that and what it meant for the people who were present at the event to really feel welcome in the space.

Adesoji: I liked the fact that the Poetics of Migration event did not take place on campus because universities are colonial institutions, where diverse forms of freedom are still largely restricted and controlled. And for me, that space—a Black-owned space—was a liberatory space because surveillance was largely absent. To pick up on what you said, Milka, so many academic institutions blur the boundaries between prisons and schools, especially in relation to how freedom is defined. We know the prison and the school are different, but they also entwine in terms of how the production of knowledge is disciplined and shaped. Surveillance matters to all learning environments. Taking the Poetics of Migration event and the conversations therein off campus felt like a kind of resistance because it focused on gathering—gathering students, faculty, and the wider Black community—and linked this to stories. As you know, sharing our Black experiences can be complex and difficult: there are experiences of trauma, barriers, restrictions, discrimination, rejections, and racialization as well as experiences of resistance, solidarity, and survival. So, the conversations allowed us to freely share and untangle those complicated experiences that we often encounter as Black people and as migrant students.

Katherine: One of the important things for me about the event, which is in part based on Paul’s PhD work, is that our sense of place is tied to what he calls “visa stories”—so passports, visas, paperwork, stamps, and other kinds of documents get expressed through the category of the “international student,” who experiences all kinds of governmental barriers, barriers that we also see in relation to migrants, refugees, non-citizens, and so on. I wonder if we can think about the space of the Poetics of Migration, of that particular conversation in 2024, as a kind of anti-colonial and diasporic placemaking activity. So many Black folks from different parts of Africa, and different regions of the Caribbean, Canada, and the United States were there. Was the production of space at that moment also the production of a safer space? No space is safe of course, but there was a sense that this event fostered a safer space or a “less dodgy” space off campus, and that this act of placemaking was generated by Black communities who were, for the most part, not born in Canada—those with student and/or work visas, in fact. And many of the difficult stories, Soji, that you were alluding to—the stories of violence, surveillance, anti-Blackness, racism, sexism, and

homophobia—they circulate and move through any environment. Violence is also intensified, depending on who you are and where you are. And all of this is happening—the safer space, the less dodgy space, the spaces of violence—within the context of a prison town. And so, we must loop back! How or what does the figure of the international student or the migrant student *do* to the space where Poetics of Migration occurred? What is at stake in all these processes?

Milka: I think the figure of the international student disrupts the safer space. I was also thinking about Pedal Works as a kind of third space, or paradoxical space. On my way to the event, I was thinking, *why did I choose to take the bus? This is so far away from campus and my home.* Which means I was also thinking, *I can't believe they didn't have this event at the university.* But then it actually ended up working out so well. I felt so free. Then, I juxtaposed that to the many events that have happened on campus that I marked on the calendar, and then actually didn't go to, even though they were much closer. So, there is that part—the connections between place, distance, joy, and community and how they underpin or challenge our expectations. There was also for me a sense that we could share the stories, and perhaps the distance produced that feeling: there was no anthropological gaze whereby someone might have thought, *I could have a whole research book based on this.* It was wonderful how we could share these stories and the stories would remain there, at the event site. They would remain in that cafe space *and* we would carry those stories. I have so many stories that I carry, many that I haven't shared, so there was something happening there...it was kind of like a secret society. I don't know...there's something about the university that compels the kind of anthropological gaze I mentioned, or, a kind of "diversity" motif, one where the event is recorded to prove equity is being enacted. I experienced it as a free space—we could all share whatever was coming to mind.

Katherine: Yeah, I love that because it's like a secret space, a place to generate or even hold on to opacity. All the Blackness is there. It was Black geography right in the making, in some ways. I like the idea of the stories staying there, *in* Pedal Works. I feel like it's almost the lesson of the event. I like that way of thinking about it, Milka.

Adesoji: I want to emphasize again the community of global Blackness that emerged from our gathering—there were Black people from all over Africa and its diaspora. And the conversations generated, for me, a kind of Afrofuturistic thinking because it pointed to different identities and experiences, all in one place, partaking in an event that wasn't actually supposed to happen because we are always separated and pried apart, according to country, degree, discipline, gender, sexuality, class. The gathering expressed an impossible Black community, a futuristic potential—in Kingston!

Paul: I want to return to what Milka said about the stories being carried and also staying in the place of the event—maybe we sort of created a storied monument. Black geographies are intense! I'm thinking about plantation geographies like the auction block, the cemetery plot, the field, and all the locations of violence and murder and resistances to these terrors. Those are all locations where stories live, and sometimes if you visit those spaces, you hear the stories again—they come alive. The topics we touched on, like migration, migrant experiences, border-crossings, and visa students, highlighted the intersection of location, stories, storytelling, and space-making. A Black place was made because we storied it, and the stories themselves were laden with Black geographic experiences!

Katherine: I think it is also important to note that the conversation was not staged, but really organic; in some ways, this allows us to see how important dialogue is to the production of space. As Soji said, these conversations are an articulation of global Blackness and Afrofuturism—if you believe in Afrofuturism, of course! I'm not saying I don't believe in Afrofuturism, but somehow I veer towards a different future that is built on and bends back and sometimes beyond the historical-present we are now enduring. In any case, what is really important, I think, is how storytelling—the activity of storytelling—is giving us a future. Or, storytelling, because it is an act of placemaking, is an invitation to have these organic and almost casual, but also urgent, conversations about what our collective futures should be.

Milka: For me, it shows that the stories are actually not just abstract, but they live. They live in the concrete, in the cement of the floor, in the materials that make the cafe what it is. I'm also thinking about this because being Katherine's student, and also reading Ruth Wilson Gilmore, I have come to understand that we have to think about space concretely, more materially—it is not only abstract, it is living.

Katherine: Here we have a beautiful representation of Blackness in Kingston, but that representation of Blackness is not homogeneous. And ideally, although we do not know the space and its inhabitants totally, we are also advocating a queer-positive, trans-positive, pro-Indigenous vibe, too! And that's really exciting to think about. Of course, I am never fully and totally hopeful. I still think that terror is around the corner. But the desire for a better future, which sits very closely to that terror, is meaningful for me. It is good for my heart, or my soul, or my brain, depending on your perspective!

Part Two: Nervous Conditions

Katherine: When I was preparing for our conversation, I was looking over some of the articles I have read on international students and higher education, and many of them pointed to what I can only call the “conundrum” of the international student. The main thrust of these articles is that the Black international student arrives in Canada from elsewhere and we should attend to their newcomer “culture shock,” then teach them to integrate into the existing system. These were the main two narratives, which are really typical immigrant narratives that also cast Canada as the benevolent faceless caregiver. The difference we see with scholars like Alana Butler is the focus on integrating a different kind of care—what Leanne Simpson calls decolonial love—into our pedagogical practice. This means shifting away from prioritizing the depersonalized nation, towards things like curriculum development. It reminds me a little of what hooks said about the one-room schoolhouse, but it also points to the tricky work of decolonizing the curriculum. This dovetails with one of Paul's ongoing interests: mentoring, and woman-mentoring, and the gendered underpinnings of mentoring. I must ask, “might we rethink this!?” I am thinking specifically about Audre Lorde's call to teach young boys and men to be feminist and how this might apply to mentoring generally: mentoring students, mentoring junior faculty, and co-mentoring. Decolonizing the classroom, in the context of equity-diversity-inclusion (EDI) mandates, has never involved the feminist project of teaching men to be feminist or to ethically employ feminism or Black feminist thought. The EDI mandate, in fact, concretizes the

“conundrum” I just mentioned. It demands depersonalized care and a model of integration, which are colonial processes that are knotted to organized abandonment!

Milka: I also want to say something about that care work and the trickiness you mention. A pedagogy of care in schooling is incredibly difficult, because it can so easily approximate maternal care. This can become extractive: the Black woman is set up to give and give and reproduce the existing system. As a student, I am grateful to study with Black faculty, but I also wonder about the care work that is needed by the same Black faculty. The expectations that you're pointing to, Katherine, uncover what is expected from Black women mentors who are supposed to be placeholders for mothers. I don't have a perfect answer, but I really think that it's something that we need to think critically about, especially as international students. We do not want to repeat or replicate that model of maternal care; we want to foster a kind of back-and-forth relationship that is mutual.

Katherine: One of the imperfect goals of the Revolutionary Demand for Happiness working group is to work on a co-mentoring model, which is something I learned from Malinda Smith. The main goal is to flatten out hierarchies. Our ideas will not materialize unless members of the working group, as well as those we work with, like Milka, Yaniya Lee, Nasrin Himada, and others, collaborate in non-hierarchical ways. I think we are working hard to develop a system of sharing ideas that understands, in advance, that we learn from each other, and that I, as professor or senior scholar or tenured faculty, do not hold all the knowledge. I think establishing a network where we do collaborative work as best we can is so useful, because not everybody can do this work all the time, myself included. So many Black people are tired. Many of my mentors have also taught me how to be in this place and not have it destroy me, and part of that is implementing a kind of dynamic and improvisational support system.

Milka: I saw a pattern when I studied and worked in Finland—I see it a lot less in Canada, but it is here, too—in which African migrant students come to the West to study, especially with white professors, but these students are seen as the experts in their own fields. They “know” Blackness more than their professors. And so it is assumed that they do not need the support of faculty—their Blackness and Africanness already qualifies them as experts. This is a very narrow way of thinking about identity, and it is really problematic to assume that identity is supposed to inform expertise. It's also a very derogatory way of thinking about the African—who is like this noble savage, who knows so much, who is so wise—and faculty members or mentors will just “take in” that authentic knowledge. As we know, Black knowledge is also rendered thin or unintelligent—what is taken in, what is actually heard, is what Frantz Fanon calls type-Negro!

Paul: I can relate to this, deeply. I was told by a white professor to leave their course because, according to them, I was “too knowledgeable” about the course materials and subject matter. I was also taking the Black geographies course, which allowed me to think about how the production of space is connected to the production of knowledge. So I was given this contradiction: a course with a white professor who casts me out, claiming I “know too much,” and a course on Black geographies that gives me the tools to understand the casting out as the removal of Black knowledge and experiences from the classroom. As a Black/migrant student, there is a level of knowledge you have to possess before you are accepted into a white-dominated space; you cannot be too grounded, but you have to be grounded enough to be accepted.

Katherine: I have sat with your experience, Paul, a lot. What does it mean for a white professor to ask a Black PhD student, who arrives in Canada with awards and publications, to leave the class because they have “too much experience”? Academia is toxic, we all know that, and this dovetails with white supremacy and colonality. For migrant students, or international students, this is especially intense, because what we have illuminated is that normalized narrative, which is that international students are culture shocked, assimilable, experts-in-Africanness, and that they should also be passively grateful newcomers(!). This must necessarily open up a mentorship model that is flexible and unpredictable so that multiple people, with varying strategies—across the diaspora—can enter and exit the conversation and support system as necessary. And while we move in and out of this support system, we must share ideas about dismantling racism, white supremacy, and the colonial contours of the university. I think this kind of model, because it is diasporic and improvisational, creates spaces for non-Black mentors to participate, too. I do not think mentoring should be Black-only-always, just like it should not fall on the shoulders of Black women and Black woman-identified folks, even if some spaces of collaboration are for and by Black folks.

Paul: In one of my poems, “Open Borders, Closed Minds,” I make reference to my experience in the higher education classroom in Canada. When the white professor asked me to leave the class, I saw that as epistemic silencing. As a student of critical race theory, I am connecting my experience to racism. I’m learning not to trivialize my experience, and I think it’s important to write about my experience. I remember my wife telling me that not everything is racism. I laughed and told her that this kind of interaction, this silencing within the context of the classroom and white supremacy, leaves the Black person with the Fanonian “nervous condition.”

Adesoji: Shifting attention to the power of poetics opens up a way to work through the nervous condition for me. Poetics is a site of transformative imagination and healing. As Édouard Glissant teaches us, imagination has the power to change our epistemologies and generate new alternatives. I have experienced racism first-hand on the streets of Kingston—the most alarming was when racist white folks continuously spat at me without any provocation—just as I have met kind and supportive colleagues and friends. My experiences in this colonial town as a migrant Black student has been a blend of bittersweet encounters and wahala, and that is the paradox of being and existence. I try to use poetics to story these encounters by sharing experiential knowledge and thus deepening the meaning of Blackness. So for me, poetics is a site of affordance that grants me entry into that complex realm of generating a voice, storying Black encounters as a moving, colonized, and displaced subject who seeks out collaboration and conversation with those who are also struggling. One cannot flatten out Black subjectivity in the face of poetics that are mobilized to make place and comradery!

Katherine: I really love that. And I think that provides a way for us to think about Milka’s insistence on defining herself as a migrant graduate student, which totally displaces the international student category, but also opens up diaspora as a methodological and experiential way of being. I have noticed that many Black students, including those from the United States, become Black or differently Black in Kingston. There is a different kind of racial narrative at play; a different version of white supremacy gets hoisted on non-domestic students in Kingston and at Queen’s University. Travel and migration feed into this, as does diaspora, in that we all move

differently, we all enter the classroom differently; yet the overarching system, which is basically an expression of imperial-colonial violence, is a kind of constant. At the Poetics of Migration event, a lot of students and faculty talked about the burden of traveling, and they had very difficult border stories, which can be read alongside Paul's PhD project and his work on visa stories. Over-policing was mentioned over and over. In some ways, the figure of the student disappears, and we are all thrown into this bin that both depersonalizes us and wears us out. For me, this is why poetics matter—good or bad, the creative text and the Black migratory or diasporic story is, as Soji said, a site of deep struggle and connection!

Milka: I'm also really interested in the figure of the non-white, or migrant, or international student. It's very ambiguous, especially in Canada. In Canada, the migrant figure has more clarity than the student. So, it was actually in coming to Canada that I started to ask myself how (or where) I identify myself. I now use "African migrant student" or "migrant student." I wanted to see what happens when the word "international" is removed, and I wanted to see what happens when the word migrant enters the conversation. The figure of the migrant signals the extractive relationship that the nation, in this case Canada, has with its migrant population. Students are part of this extractive economy, but so are migrant workers who come to pick berries or apples. Short-term contract workers enter the conversation in important ways. For me, maybe that is also the role of poetics: to open up a politicized understanding of our place in the world, to change the terms and words, to allow the migrant to enter the conversation. And how does this get animated by the income we, migrants, generate for this country? How do we function as a reserve army of labour, to use Stuart Hall's words? When I came to Canada, I did not necessarily understand myself as an immigrant, but my migrant sensibilities have been concretized.

Katherine: That's brilliant. The question of profit looms, right? The international students, migrant students, also get tagged as and are identified as poised for performing low-wage surplus labour, just as they must endure higher tuition and exorbitant food and housing costs and are often supporting family both locally and afar. In our conversations, Milka, you have mentioned that you are part of the union, which is PSAC [the Public Service Alliance of Canada], and that you consider yourself a migrant student. You also rightly insist that you are a worker. Many students, particularly at an elite institution like Queen's, don't consider themselves workers. And you are a worker in the same way I am a worker or our administrative staff are workers—albeit with very different experiences in terms of wages, workload, and so on. What you have so smartly pointed out, Milka, is that this question of work, or the activities of working, also open up different ways to relate to each other around labour, race, gender, location, travel, language, migration, the classroom, and more. The identificatory work of the migrant, or the African migrant student or migrant student, totally unsettles those normalized ideas about the international student.

Milka: Solidarity with other migrant workers, it's really for me. It also breaks the exceptionalist way of thinking that there is a job waiting for me because I'm in Canada as an international student. What is the job awaiting me?

Part Three: Our Findings

We end with Milka's question to draw attention to how migrancy opens up solidarities and connections by redefining labour outside of typical university hierarchies and the expectations of the nation.¹ At the same time, migrancy uncovers the limits of the category of international student. The Poetics of Migration event at Pedal Works functioned similarly: for a moment it became a space of relationality, animated by all sorts of diasporic experiences and identifications, yet it also drew attention to the structural and geographic enclosures and violences that shape the day-to-day lives of Black students, faculty, and staff. Paul's poetry laid these complexities and contradictions bare, with his poems and poetic form functioning to name how places and activities—the university, Kingston, the campus, Pedal Works, the streets, the stories, and the poems shared at the event—condition hopeful Black geographies.

¹ As we finalized this draft, non-domestic students in Canada were facing increased restrictions on their mobility and well-being. The fear of what we can only describe as “migratory crowding”—a familiar anti-immigrant trope that imagines non-white communities swarming an otherwise benevolent space—circulates and shapes policies on study permits, work permits, visas, and family (re)unification. See:

<https://www.yorku.ca/news/2024/05/08/setting-the-record-straight-on-refugee-claims-by-international-students/>

<https://www.ctvnews.ca/politics/it-s-very-unfair-international-students-face-uncertain-future-in-canada-after-rule-change-1.7056300>

<https://immigration.ca/new-study-visa-rules-international-students-implemented-by-ircc-canada/>

<https://globalnews.ca/news/10771596/nearly-13k-international-students-asylum-2024-data-shows/>