

## **Towards Black Planetary Studies**

### *Inaugural Address*

My greetings and thanks to ...

I am the product of many teachers. I begin by thanking them. Enkosi, siyabonga, thank you. I began my schooling eLusikisiki in the former Transkei Bantustan at a point where the schooling system was imploding. My father died when I was in sub b. My mother moved me and some of my siblings to boarding school eNqabeni eNatala where we would learn English and escape the implosion. I repeated the first three grades of school. This is to say that I spent six years of schooling doing three grades. When the developmental delay and adjustment disorder eased up, I finally began to enjoy schooling. My accent comes from my time at school in the sugarcane plantations of the south coast. We shared classes at that school. Grade 3 and 4 in one room. Grade 5 and 6 in another. Although the school was far from home and my mother and other siblings, it saved me. This faraway school, deep in the sugar plantations, also traumatised us. The peers that I left behind at my first school in Lusikisiki either did not finish schooling or died in the dying years of the 90s pandemic. I pour libations in their memory and all the dead.

Forgive me for the autobiographical account, but it is part of the journey of what this lecture maps out as 'Towards Black Planetary Studies'. My mother is a central part of this journey. When I finished school, she told me that I could study anything I wanted and she would pay for it as long as I passed. I enrolled for my undergraduate studies at the University of Cape Town. I then completed my postgraduate studies at the University of Natal, Durban and later did my PhD at the University of the Witwatersrand. My grandmother who was very protective over her daughter once called me aside and asked me to give her daughter a break from varsity fees. My mother never complained. She is 82 years old now. She is frail. It gives me pleasure to give her the support she gave to me.

I studied psychology and literature and am registered as a psychologist even though I do not practice. For me, psychology has never truly spoken to the black condition and it does not resonate with the lives of people in my village of eMbayi, eMmfinizweni. So, when I did my honours, my research project supervised by Dr Sylvia Magoja looked at black people's

experiences of affirmative action in Durban. My Masters, supervised by Prof Jill Bradbury, looked at the narratives of a generation of black men as they transitioned from boys to men and from apartheid to democracy. My doctorate, supervised by Dr Christoph Maier looked at how employment equity discourses contribute to identity making. All these were concerned with black life. But they still did not speak to my fellow villagers because they were largely middle class and urban stories. In my non-scholarly work life, I worked as a project manager for NGOs delivering HIV&AIDS training and treatment to working class communities. Later at Wits, I worked on supporting the careers of black and women academics as part of the transformation project in the Transformation and Employment Equity Office.

As my post PhD research began to take form, I continued to take black life seriously by attending to the unhappy affects of black people. Rage became a central lens through which I looked at community life. What might we learn by pausing on black rage as it inflects the lives of black women, men, and queer people? How might we revisit history? A substantial part of my scholarship has looked at organisational life too. Universities have been an important nub of analysis and this is captured in a text I co-edited with Professors Grace Khunou, Edith Paswana and Katijah Khoza-Shangase on black academics in the country.

The central thesis of my work on rage is that rage is black love. To rage is a profound assertion of mattering. A central interest has therefore been to interrogate, sit with, and learn from how black rage operates as a project of love. And how to love this way is to do the work of reparation, of staking a claim, of resisting, of choosing beauty, and of being in community. Practically, rage calls for change in the status quo. It is decolonial. Theoretically, it unsettles the push towards happy affects. In its multiple registers, rage is black joy too. In its enactments, it is inflected by an erotic of pleasure, pain, movement, and a sociality of black gathering that refuses an unremarkable bleeding out. Black rage demands witness. And I'd like to see some of my work as engaged in witnessing. Perhaps, as care.

In this context, black is a contested index of being. However, because my investments are in care before precision and the boundaries of identity, in my work, blackness is fugitive, creative movement, and it is an avoidance of stasis. The b of my black is a small b that has always been buoyant, shape shifting, creative, moving, liquid, and evasive. It is a mournful formation which recognises the weight of racialisation, but it is simultaneously riotous because it is refusal too. An unruly middle finger rather than the last word. It does the

work of blackness. Survivance and livingness in planetary context.

As I began my book, *Riotous Deathscapes*, I started to directly engage scholarship that returned me to my village. This project allowed me to come full circle. Here, I would engage lives that scholarship studiously avoided or wrote patronisingly about from a distant perspective. But most importantly for the title of my address today, it drove me towards an area of scholarship that I (with the help of my colleagues at the ISHS) would later conceive of as Black Planetary Studies. In this book project, rural communities defied the hierarchy of being that separates people from land and the broader natural world of waters, plant and animal life. It refused responsibility for Anthropocentric devastation. I agree with Ramon Grosfoguel when he suggests we should reframe anthropocentrism as whitepocentrism since it is white racial capitalism that has devastated our climate and world.

*Riotous Deathscapes* also questioned the boundaries between indigenous and black life. Consequently, my conception of blackness implicates indigeneity. By thinking from a specific and grounded location, the project sought to theorise the black world from and beyond EmaMpondweni. Since death is an ever present reality of black life across the epochs of conquest, slavery, and the long season of colonialism and ongoing racial capitalism, *Riotous Deathscapes* wrestled with death in its multiple registers. Importantly for me, the project consolidated efforts into thinking in a transdisciplinary manner and to work on difficult subjects with beauty and care. My writing always insists on beauty. This has been part of my long resignation from psychology. What I have elsewhere characterized as “A walking away”. I’d like to theorise this as a long unmooring from discipline and an embrace of what Édouard Glissant evocatively theorised as errantry and opacity.

### **Black Planetary Studies**

To profess is to arrive at a niche. In this lecture, I outline this niche, not as a claim to knowledge in the possessive register, but to attempt a demarcation of a clearing from which I think and theorise. Having recently established the Centre of Excellence for Black Planetary Studies, what I next gesture towards is the ensuing iteration of my work of caring for black life. I have outlined how I work with blackness. But, I can summarise this approach as a form of holding black life and death with care. Next to the planetary, blackness is a perspectival orientation. A way of apprehending the planet in a range of registers. Rinaldo Walcott tells us

that transdisciplinarity and an embrace of deformative methods that refuse containment are the hallmarks of black study. Black care demands this, and a planetary approach, insists on it. Following Fataar et al (2022, 3), the vision of the planetary is to turn away from human or anthropocentric lenses and to formulate and practice a “multi-species reading in which the history of humans is understood as part of multiple species’ planetary existence, with much longer historical cycles”. It is also a part of the turn towards new materialism. However, the since the black planetary is not an unethical, free-floating signifier, it owes its fidelity to blackness. Which is also to say, black freedom through black ways of knowing.

The research agenda of black planetary studies adopts a black onto-epistemological frame to knowledge that centres black ways of knowing, living, and creating. It brings together black, indigenous, and planetary studies in the service of breaking ontological boundaries to redraw temporal parameters, recast the human in relation to natural ecologies and to think across species in ways that attend to relation and co-constitutedness. It responds to the need to think beyond the limitations of the Anthropocene. This centres place, the interface between the human, oceans and other waterbodies, spiritual and ancestral cosmologies, plant and animal ecologies in our multispecies world, and black solidarities across geographies. Solidarities with island communities whose archipelagos are receding into the ocean. Abandoned zones where people live without State provision of water. Palestinians murdered with genocidal impunity.

A planetary orientation invests in the salience or sentience of materials and things such as waters, rocks, plants, insects, land, animals and air. Since black and indigenous worlds have always made room for these co-constituting interspecies relations, the concept—black planetary studies—is a pithy way of framing this approach to knowledge. This frame does not distinguish between the disciplines and cuts across the humanities, natural sciences, environmental and climate studies, religious and geological studies, black and queer studies, and art. Air, sand and water are of interest to the extent that we need them to live physiologically, but we also depend on them to fortify ourselves against evil, to cleanse misfortune, to conduct ritual, to heal, and to commune with ancestors. This has onto-epistemological implications for us. Black planetary studies take an interest in health, spirituality, water as an element for living, cleansing, as a way or reading history, as discursive, as aesthetic and as a matter of social and environmental justice, conflict, peace and establishing forms of solidarity. It is all encompassing.

## Present and Future Trajectories

Tying into UNISA's marine studies catalytic research niche, water bodies such as oceans and rivers are central to my thinking of the black planetary. I end this lecture by gesturing towards a book project currently underway. The book signals the direction of the black planetary turn that my current and future work in the Centre of Excellence for Black Planetary Studies, takes. Since I see myself as halfway through my career, it is important to gesture to this futurity. The remainder of the lecture is a reading from parts of the introduction of the draft manuscript of an upcoming book.

This book emerges from wanderings along the east and southern African ocean shoreline—body sometimes submerged in water and other times, feet leaving momentary traces on the sea sand. What emerges when we stick to this coastline? Along with Gabeba Baderoon I ask, “If we turn to the water, what do we see?”<sup>1</sup> What enraging yet submerged histories tug at my feet? What would a heat map of African east and south coast slavery look like here since these coastlines have tended to be read differently to the more studied west African shore?<sup>2</sup> Citing Gaston Bachelard, Elizabeth DeLoughrey writes that, water is an element “which remembers the dead.”<sup>3</sup> Like so many scholars of black studies, for DeLoughrey, the Atlantic looms large, so large that, I argue, it blocks out the surge and histories of other world oceans. She writes of the poem recited by school children in the Caribbean.<sup>4</sup> In the poem, the children cannot move past the Atlantic. It chokes them in a kind of stranglehold and aquatic stasis. This book is an experiment in thinking the Indian Ocean and South Atlantic in black—from the vantage point of African life here, freed of the stranglehold and heft of the Atlantic.

**Put up the slide on corals as black archives here (+\_ 18 minutes into talk). Keep for about 2 to 5 minutes.**

The book project is anchored in corals as a theoretical formation. Rocky corals are of geologic and symbolic significance for thinking with the ocean, water, planetary, interspecies relations, life and death anchored in the slave histories, genocide, and collisions between the vast temporalities of a coastline which includes and exceeds the Swahili coast. A movement—a treading that moves to and from Mombasa and Namibia and all the waterways in-between. Rocky reefs are not a common feature of the South African coastline. It was only on my walks treading the East African shoreline that I witnessed their prevalence as geologic

rock forms whose skeletal hulk hugs the shoreline. On a black littoral geography with things to hide and which refuses commemoration, my search for slave pasts found vague traces. This required other forms of attending which drew my attention to abundant geological forms that have borne witness in long time. Corals as bones.

Corals are a material reality in the seascape, but they are also a powerful metaphor and methodology for this project.<sup>5</sup> Katherine McKittrick reminds us that “metaphors are not just metaphoric, though. They are concretized. This means—if we believe the stories we tell and share—that the metaphoric devices we use to think through black life are signaling practices of liberation (tangible, theoretical, imaginary) that are otherwise-possible and already here (and over there).”<sup>6</sup> For this project, corals are a metaphor of this kind. Delicate underwater animal growths of astounding beauty and aliveness but also concreted formations that have witnessed brutality in geologic temporality.<sup>7</sup> Their appearance represents an alive deadness. A watching. A living fossil.<sup>8</sup> Taking corals seriously heeds Achille Mbembe’s call for us to re-animate things and beings that appear lifeless.<sup>9</sup>

Reanimating materiality is to stake a claim on the planetary which is often denied to Africans. This is also a racial reckoning. Katherine Yusoff observes that “while the Anthropocene is a new geologic time interval that pries open a speculative dimension to planetary thought and material relations, it also requires that the histories of matter and their subjective-racial formations not be forgotten.”<sup>10</sup> Thinking with the materiality of corals that stick stubbornly to the East African shore compels us to slow down from the planetary flight towards the postracial. Rocky corals and coral reefs oblige us to think backwards.<sup>11</sup> They are palaeo-archives that doggedly insist on the geologies of race. Of slavery and genocidal hauntings. A raging in Toni Morrisonian temporality of *time always now*.<sup>12</sup> Yusoff surfaces the valiance of matter when she observes that “the temporal inscription of matter makes political claims on the past and present.”<sup>13</sup>

This text contends that corals make claims on us to reckon with the suppressed traces of slavery on coastlines abandoned by history. It works with coral rock as a queer theoretical formation and a kind of geologic undercommons that Yusoff articulates as a geologic kitchen-sink realism—raced, sexed, gendered, and shot through by economic relations. Édouard Glissant is an important model for thinking of corals as representing archipelagos of

thought and imbuing material forms with black sociality. Indeed, although this is not a ‘geological’ project, there are lessons in corals.

Corals enable the assemblage of a theoretical formulation of the book. They point us to the oceanic life and deaths of coral growth and their concretion and surfacing below and above water. Their creation of the shoals and shoreline, hulking presence as seabed coral mounds, their protrusions, pebbling, and dispersals give form to the text. Corals are central too, to the fortifications that hint at slavery and colonial time through monuments and forts that dot the African shoreline. The text suggests that corals above water are forms of rage rendered conscious. Scars of things endured—in their harvesting to build slave warehouses and colonial forts, and an endurance through watching and witnessing the arrivals and departures of slave vessels. Coral reefs and rocky reefs know violence and might be imagined as barometers of sedimented rage. I work with corals as historical texts and testimony. Following Meier, I suggest that corals “trouble the boundaries between the physical, mental, and cultural...” and help us to historicize human and more-than-human entanglements as memory aids and co-witnessing.<sup>14</sup> From Edward Casey, I learn that it is instructive to trace the sensuous self-presentation of materials beyond their mere accumulation. To take the hardy form of corals seriously is to attend to these qualities and layers of meaning.<sup>1</sup>

The book is in search of something ephemeral—perhaps contained in the ebb and flow of the ocean, things washed up on the shore, hieroglyphs of the rocky corals, frenzied worship, otherworldly ritual, and mournful treading’s in the space where waters break, rub and touch sand, stone, bone, and flesh. Since it exists in the planetary sphere—between ocean, land, rock, people, ritual, movement—this story is difficult to surface.

## **Acknowledgements**

I have used the I voice a lot today. But as we all know, we never walk alone. There are ancestors. But there are also you attending this lecture or elsewhere at home and in the world. There is Professor Peace Kiguwa, my respondent today with whom I first taught a module on Critical Social Psychology in 2006 and with whom I co-authored my first academic publication. It is apposite that she is my respondent today. I am grateful that Prof Norman

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<sup>1</sup> Casey, Edward 2002, 683.

Duncan pushed us towards each other. Without knowing me, 17 years ago, Norman Duncan recruited me to the academy with a phone call. His commitment to ideas, to ensuring inclusivity, and to protecting young black academics is part of the reason I am here today.

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Don Andrews and Bongeziwe Mabandla. Claude Ndlovu. My mother, Mary Canham. My six siblings. Shaun. The children of my family. These are people that I love dearly. They hold me



with care. There are others too. But my time has lapsed.

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<sup>1</sup> Baderoon, Gabeba. The African Oceans—Tracing the Sea as Memory of Slavery in South African Literature and Culture. *Research in African Literatures*, 40,4, (2009, 91), 89-107.

<sup>2</sup> Saidiya Hartman's (1998) *Lose your mother: A journey along the Atlantic slave route* and Paul Gilroy's (1993) *Black Atlantic* are seminal diasporic examples of this work.

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth DeLoughrey, *Heavy Waters*, 2010, 704.

<sup>4</sup> This is a poem by Lorna Goodison— "Arctic, Antarctic, Atlantic, Pacific, Indian Ocean."

<sup>5</sup> Tiffany Lethabo King has similarly used the shoal as method and metaphor to "throw normative theories, methods, reading practices, aesthetics, and associations off course" (2019, 40).

<sup>6</sup> McKittrick, Katherine, *Dear Science and other stories*. Duke University Press. 2020, 12.

<sup>7</sup> Jan Vandersmissen (2016) contends that Jean-André Peyssonnel is generally credited for demonstrating coral's animal nature.

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth A. Povinelli (2016) critiques how for liberal recognition, the figure of the indigene has been represented as a living fossil.

<sup>9</sup> Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*. 2017, 181.

<sup>10</sup> Yusoff, 2019, 2.

<sup>11</sup> Kaylee Smit (2024) helped me to distinguish between coral reefs which are plentiful in tropical oceans and rocky reefs which are more commonly found in colder waters. On coral reefs in warm waters, corals produce the rock on which they grow through their secretions of calcium carbonate. These are known as hard corals. In colder waters on the southern seas, soft corals thrive on existing rock formations in the ocean.

<sup>12</sup> Toni Morrison makes this simple yet groundbreaking revelation in her novel *Beloved* (1987).

<sup>13</sup> Yusoff, 2019, 2.

<sup>14</sup> Meier, 2016, 5.