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Beyond Geographies of Race

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Enthusiasm for Black geographies has grown significantly since it was formalized in *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place* (McKittrick and Woods 2007). With an increase in interest in this framework has come an increased potential for the misapplication of the aims defined in its origin. Now is the time to reiterate the purpose of Black geographies. We suggest that although within the purview of geographies of race, Black geographies provides insights beyond this unit of study that are reliant on particular sights, valuations, methods, and liberatory practices. *Key Words:* *Black geographies, Black studies, geographies of race.*

For the 2015 conference of the American Association of Geographers (AAG), LaToya Eaves convened the panel “Black Matters Are Spatial Matters.”¹ The session is one of a number of key moments in the maturation of Black geographies. At the start of the session, the panelists were presented with a number of prompts. One read, “Black geographies is often discussed in terms of spatial production and relations to space. However, what about optics? Is there a way of seeing that is necessary for the production of Black geographies, in academe and everyday life?” We do not recall the specifics of each participant’s response. In this article, though, we would like to pose a rejoinder: “If it is necessary for scholars to adopt an alternate (and perchance, ontologically defined) spatial imaginary to acknowledge and produce Black geographies, to what extent is this achievement possible by our non-Black colleagues? If possible, what are the processes through which one assumes such sight?” We ask because we believe sight to be a taken-for-granted aspect of Black geographic thought and action.

This article is a genealogy of scholars and schools of thought that have laid the foundation for Black geographies’ growing reception within and beyond the discipline. Included in this examination is a discussion of the crux of Black geographies as we see it: What it does, what it unveils, and how it is, at once married to and divorced from geographies of race. In so doing, we scribe this subfield—inspired by

McKittrick’s (2021) experiments with the canon—Black geographies-as-Black-studies to signify its station as a wing of this insurrectionary field.

An assessment of Black geographies would not be sufficient without discussion of its disciplinary antecedents (see Hawthorne 2019). Critiques of the hydraulics of racial marginalization in geography have been present in the field since the 1950s. Geography’s association with questions of race, however, predates critical studies of the topic. In her 2013 AAG presidential address, Kobayashi (2014, 1103) traced geography’s early and “outmoded” studies of race. Despite the wealth of research on race in other fields, for a number of geographers in the 1930s, the study of race mirrored that of the nation’s response to the problem of the color line: ignorance and avoidance, not to mention instrumental support for imperial projects (see Kirsch 2014). Kobayashi (2014), in her attempt to “avoid relativism, hagiography, presentism, inaccurate attributions, or over-generalizations” (1103), was generous to this generation of scholars. Her quest to understand why geographers were not swayed by facts from other disciplines and contextual factors from the world around them obscures the likelihood that as beneficiaries of a racially stratified nation that had yet to meet the blunt end of the Black power movement, many of our field’s pre- and peridisciplinary forefathers² were not concerned with addressing the spatialities of racial inequality (see Ashutosh 2018).

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After the politically and spatially disruptive period of the 1960s (see Watts 2001), and no doubt prior to, a minority of geographers directed their attention to the color line. A 1971 special edition of the *Southeastern Geographer* centered geographies of Black America, addressing various facets of segregation and Black living conditions in urban settings. Therein, Birdsall (1971, 85) referenced the “flurry of interest and activity” in the study of the spatialization of Black communities in the United States. He also spoke of “the racial variable” and suggested, “since one of the primary features of Black America has been its spatial separation from White America, other research efforts might deal with the characteristics of individual and group isolation created through this separation” (85). Although an early adopter of geographies of race, Birdsall, influenced by the field’s positivist tradition, considered Black communities variables to be computed. Moreover, his understanding of Black geographies was limited to areas proximal or distal to White residential spaces. As inquiries on race and racism proliferated, the focus on Black places as marginalized spaces continued to be the norm.

Black Geographers and Issues of Race³

The roots of critical geographies of race rest in the works of Don Deskins and Harold Rose, firsts in the field to study the spatialization of Black urban communities in the United States. Employing spatial modeling, Deskins explored the segregation of White and Black neighborhoods in Atlanta, Georgia (Deskins 1971) and differential travel times as an outcome of residential segregation in Detroit, Michigan (Deskins 1972). Writing primarily during the late 1960s and early 1970s, Rose discussed the spatial distribution and empirical realities facing Black communities in metropolitan areas. One of Rose’s contributions to urban geography was his assessment that ghetto formation was largely due to white families’ flight from inner cities to avoid interracial habitation (Rose 1970). This desire, coupled with real estate agents’ enforcement of segregated living areas sustained separate but unequal housing markets (Rose 1969) and characterized ghettos as communities in which there was no freedom of choice (Rose 1970). Hence, Rose’s insistence on the

need for a “social geography” that would investigate and provide answers to ghetto formation (Rose 1969, 328).

The following generation of scholars would innovate work on the topic of racialization and geography. In the process, they developed a camaraderie based on a shared commitment to upending racial injustice. This coterie of comrades convened at conferences and engaged in lively debates regarding how best to improve Black communities. During the 2019 conference of the AAG in Washington, DC, Ruth Wilson Gilmore attested to the connection she shared with her peers:

Bobby [Wilson] and Clyde [Woods] and I would roll around at AAGs, going out to dinners together and arguing loudly in restaurants late into the night. ... And we argued about the very things that bring us all into this room today. Which is, “How best can we articulate the necessary connections between race and class so that we can chart, in our scholarly work, some kind of research example that all kinds of people can use—organizers and not—towards liberation?” That’s what we were fighting about. We weren’t fighting about who’s right. (Gilmore 2019)

Gilmore’s words suggest that she and her contemporaries were engaged in a collective intellectual practice⁴ committed to improving conditions in the academy and society. As research on race and geography expanded, so, too, did the approaches to exploring these interrelated topics. Attending to race relations in the urban United States, Darden⁵ developed an extensive catalog by studying residential (self-) segregation, public housing, and racial conflict in (sub)urban communities throughout North America (Darden 1973, 1987, 1990, 1995, 2004; Darden, Thomas, and Thomas 1987, Darden, Duleep, and Galster 1992; de Souza Briggs, Darden, and Aidala 1999; Darden and Kamel 2000; Darden et al. 2010; Darden and Wyly 2010). In *Detroit: Race Riots, Racial Conflicts, and Efforts to Bridge the Racial Divide* (Darden and Thomas 2013), he outlined the racial-spatial processes that led to Detroit’s inception as a birthplace of suburbanization as well as its economic and infrastructural fall from grace (see Sugrue 1996).

Having begun his career in 1969 as a graduate student in Clark University’s Department of Geography, one of Wilson’s initial presentations would foreground the criticality of his later works (see Moulton 2022). According to Moulton (2022),

Bobby Wilson and Herman Jenkins, the lone Black geographers within a department lagging in intellectual and representational diversity, “challenged geography to attend to Black geographic matters” (189). Following graduation, Wilson ventured south, where he would set a standard for merging questions of race and class struggle.⁶ Although the early years of his career were dedicated to spatially modeling the segregated nature of Black communities in the U.S. South (Wilson 1977, 1985, 1989), he would eventually take an openly Marxist approach to explain the struggles of Birmingham, Alabama’s Black community. Stating that his mature work was aimed at bringing “the matter of race in U.S. capitalist development into more debate among geographers,” Wilson called on postmodernist and neo-Marxist debates to incorporate race into conversations around historical materialism and class politics (Wilson 1992, 172). Through a historical geography of capitalist production in Birmingham, Wilson (1995) showed how industrialization in the U.S. South was controlled by a southern landed elite from the postbellum era until the Great Depression. Wilson’s interrogation of the intersections of race and class led him to surmise that although class struggle should remain the privileged forum of political activity (Wilson 2000b), racism creates circumstances in which the condition of Black workers cannot be equated with the rest of the proletariat (Wilson 2000a).

Rickie Sanders holds the distinction of being the first Black woman to earn a PhD in geography in the United States. With a career that spanned four decades, Sanders stated the significance of her presence was that she “stayed the course” and followed her varied interests (R. Sanders, personal communication, April 15, 2020). Like other Black geographers of her generation, her early studies were supported by quantitative methods. Many of the findings drawn from these studies “didn’t fit in a regression model” (R. Sanders, personal communication, April 15, 2020). As a doctoral student and junior scholar, Sanders (1980, 1987) researched the informal activity of rural African women. Her early work, on alternative economies and urban informality, coincided with disciplinary provocations. In one essay, Sanders (1992) critiqued the “Eurocentric bias in the study of African urbanization” (204) and its inability to account for variations in development. In later works, Sanders called out gender bias

(Sanders 2000), limitations in geographic gender studies (Sanders 1990), and the effects of White privilege on geography (Sanders 2006) and geographic education (Sanders 1999).

The scholarship of Ruth Wilson Gilmore merges conversations on race (Gilmore 2002) and political economic shifts (Gilmore 1999) with grassroots, abolitionist activism (Gilmore 2008, 2018). Gilmore’s research recognizes the salience of race and capitalism, while envisioning possibilities for how we might organize and relate to one another in space. Her study of the state of California is a thorough examination of how the rollback of Keynesian social spending was a response to a variety of capitalist crises in the late twentieth century (Gilmore 1999). She explained how this rollback was at least partially legitimated via the public demonization of Black and other racialized communities, particularly following the radical politics of groups like the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP). Thus, the resultant rise in incarceration was a profoundly racialized phenomenon, with Black and Latinx populations disproportionately represented in the ranks of those incarcerated (Gilmore 2007, 111).

Efforts to Build a Black Base

In his role as the Director of the National Science Foundation–funded Commission on Geography and Afro-America (COMGA), Deskins targeted students at historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) for recruitment into geography graduate programs (Darden 2019). He was not alone. Other figures influenced the growth of Black students, Black professors, and Black thought (see Moulton 2022). North Carolina Central University’s (NCCU) Department of Geography,⁷ through the foresight of Dr. Theodore R. Speigner, established a recruitment relationship with graduate programs throughout the Midwest. According to James Johnson, an NCCU graduate and Distinguished Professor of Strategy and Entrepreneurship at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Speigner used connections within the AAG, COMGA, and the National Council of Geographic Education to become an instrumental, although little-known figure in the diversification of the discipline. Speigner started the Department of Geography at NCCU with a master’s degree in geography from the University of Iowa, an accolade that

was known, colloquially, as “the Black man’s PhD” (J. Johnson, personal communication, 2017).⁸ Committed to the advancement of geographic education in public schools, Speigner called on geographic organizations to “remove the blight of racism from American geography” through investing in the training of Black geography teachers (Speigner 1969, 388). Determined to see more Black men⁹ earn graduate degrees, Speigner channeled budding scholars into various graduate programs.¹⁰ Recalling Speigner’s influence on his graduate education, Johnson stated:

He’d write these glowing letters for you, man. You’d look at the letter [and] say, “Doc, you must be drunk. This ain’t me.” But he’d write these glowing letters and tell you [about] all these schools. So, when I was graduating, I think I applied to eleven schools, and I got into all of ’em. And, I went into his office and I laid all the letters down. I said, “Doc, I don’t know what to do.” He reached in the pile [and] says, “Here. Go to [the University of Wisconsin] Madison. I ain’t had nobody go there yet.” That’s how I ended up at Madison. ... Everybody had faith in him, that it was gonna work out. (J. Johnson, personal communication, 2017)

Through this brief oral history of Speigner and NCCU’s Department of Geography, it is clear that in addition to the cooperative work of Black geographers, HBCUs were strategically working to integrate the discipline.¹¹ Together, their efforts would lay a representative and scholastic base for Black geographies.¹²

Renewed Interests in Race

Come the late 1990s and early 2000s, the stage was set for a deepening of reflections on geographies of race. Whereas early researchers considered the spatialization of Black communities, subsequent generations had begun to explore the structural issues that contributed to racialized oppression. By the turn of the twenty-first century, a newer generation of scholars forged critical and theoretical inquiries of race and the discipline itself (Schein 2002). Geography’s renewed focus was evident in a 2002 special edition of *The Professional Geographer* on race and geography. The collection was the outcrop of a 1998 gathering held at the University of Kentucky.¹³ This workshop birthed timely critiques of geography

and the social sciences (see Pulido 2002; Woods 2002) that have since provided encouragement to the younger scholars of color.¹⁴

Studies of race and racism in “cognate disciplines” were also important (Pulido 2002, 44). During the 1990s, there was a surge of critical scholarship on the subject of Whiteness (Roediger 1991; Bonnett 1993, 1997, 1998a, 1998b) and the persistence of racism. A coterie of critical legal scholars argued that racism was rife within U.S. legal institutions (Bell 1992, 1995; Harris 1993; Delgado and Stefancic 2001). Simultaneously, sociologists argued forcefully against the notion that racism is “purely an ideological phenomenon” (Bonilla-Silva 1997, 465). Developing a concept of racialized social systems, Bonilla-Silva (1997, 475) concluded, “once a society becomes racialized, racism takes on a life of its own,” resulting in a society of racism without racists (see Bonilla-Silva 2003). Omi and Winant (1994) demonstrated how structural racism results in racial projects that differentially (dis)advantage populations based on their stratification within the U.S. racial hierarchy. The influence of sociological doctrines on geography is evident in geographers’ reference to the 1997 conference of the American Sociological Association (ASA)¹⁵ and their citing of critical race theorists (see Peake and Schein 2000; Delaney 2002; Peake and Kobayashi 2002; Pulido 2002; Schein 2002).

Interventions within and beyond geography, although genuine and important to geographic understandings of race, at times elide a deep engagement with Black thought and praxis. That is, a number of geographies of race apply theories formulated outside the conditions of Black struggle to cases concerning Black people. This is not to say that theories of power by White European and people of color scholars have no application to the study of (anti-) Blackness. On the contrary. There is no shortage of evidence of Black studies scholars working through such frames of analysis (Robinson 1983; Wilderson III 2003; Weheliye 2014). Moreover, some poststructuralist works share similarities with Black studies: a belief in the heterogeneity of spatial formations, a focus on relational approaches to research, inquiry into a broader range of topics, and “more playful writing styles” (Murdoch 2006, 1; Weheliye 2014).¹⁶ As McKittrick (2021) informed, though, “if we begin with Michel Foucault as our primary methodological and theoretical frame—if Foucault is our referential scaffolding—we will, most certainly, draw Foucauldian conclusions” (23).¹⁷

In her keynote address at Duke University's Feminist Theory Workshop, McKittrick (2017) invoked relationality:

So, part of our intellectual task, then, is to work out how different kinds and types of texts, voices, and geographies relate to each other and open up unexpected and surprising ways to talk about liberation, knowledge, history, race, gender, narrative, and Blackness. The liberatory task is ... [to] posit that many divergent, and different, and relational voices of unfreedom are analytical and intellectual sites that could tell us something new about our academic concerns and our anti-colonial futures.

According to Hawthorne (2019), relationality of thought could disabuse one of "the flawed claim that spatial theory only happens within geography departments" (3). By remaining unaware of the geographic knowledge within Black communities, reports on Black social life across the Black diaspora could result in an uncritical preservation of well-worn discourses (Weheliye 2014). Furthermore, reproducing established geographic methods to measure and comment on Black (un)freedom might simply rename and replicate anti-Black violence (Woods 2002; McKittrick 2014). To ethically engage legacies laid by generations of Black communities, geographers must consider the geographical pronunciations of Black social life (McKittrick 2016). This, we believe, will require alternative optics, analytics, and methodologies, necessities that hardly accompany traditional schools of thought.

Orientation, theory, and methodology separate Black geographies from geographies of race.¹⁸ Extradisciplinary orientation is one of the unique contributions of Black geographies-as-Black-studies.¹⁹ Hawthorne and Heitz (2018) made a similar point in their reflection on the significance of Black geographies to geography and the university: "A Black geographical scholarly praxis entails a willingness to subvert arborescent models of intellectual lineage in favor of queerings, rhizomes, undercommons ... provincializations, or even Sankofa" (150). At its best, Black geographies is guided by a "collaborative intellectual praxis" that is informed by Black ways of knowing and living in the world (McKittrick 2021, 31):

The nonworld and its inhabitants are not beholden to the taxonomic proof that swirls around them, defines them, objectifies them. We are not beholden to the taxonomic proof that swirls around us. Instead, the

nonworld engenders the urgent praxis of unwriting racial taxonomies and its attendant spatial violence. This is the referential work of black studies. The nonworld produces a referential knowledge system that is committed to sharing black ways of knowing and living. The nonworld produces a lesson that cannot be contained in the main text. (McKittrick 2021, 33)

Black ways of knowing are not fully known or contained by the main text or the archive. They are indebted to Black social life, a praxis that gives rise to the analytical frame and spatial production known as Black geographies. By subscribing to disciplinary standards alone, academics elide experiential knowledge and might foreclose forward thinking. In this final section, we engage emerging scholarship on Black geographies and the alternative approaches, unconventional muses, and "methodological instruments" used in the making of this field (Weheliye 2014, 8).

Analytic

McKittrick and Woods (2007) stated that among Black geographies "we find a history of brutal segregation and erasure as these processes inform a different or new approach to the production of space" (4). As Black geographies grows, the different or new approaches that will comprise this subfield will require the adoption of unorthodox understandings of the world in which Black communities exist. Black geographies are the beneficiary of looking at the world from the condition of Blackness and the various experiences and spatialities therein. It is reliant on a particular line of sight and recognizes a "condition of possibility" beyond the world and our present writing of it (Chandler 2003, 192). Black optics (ways of seeing; see Sharpe 2016) inform blues epistemologies (ways of knowing; see Woods 1998), and finally, Black spatial imaginaries (conceptualizations of space; see Lipsitz 2007).

Conversations on Black geographies cover a range of topics and locations. Although attention to Black geographies in the U.S. South remains relevant to the literature (Bledsoe et al. 2017; Bledsoe and Wright 2019), scholars have introduced topics that have moved far beyond demographic trends, the persistence of segregation, or race-based oppression. In the context of the U.S. South, scholars have drawn on varied sources to disrupt taken-for-granted notions of regionalism through a Black queer

identity (Eaves 2017); identified and explored processes of gentrification and ghettoization in urban spaces (Wright and Herman 2017); reflected on the intergenerational transmission of community and genealogical narratives and collectivity (Scott 2019, 2020); and studied the communal and faith-based organizations dedicated to Black alternative agriculture practices and food justice (McCutcheon 2013, 2015, 2019). Some have even noted the lived experiences of those in Black towns (Purifoy 2021, 2023). Others have explored Black-led politics of abolition (Winston 2021a), how an abolitionist politics finds expression in phenomena like marronage (Winston 2021b), and how maroon communities can take a variety of formations (Bledsoe 2017; Wright 2020). Geographers have also examined Black experiences beyond the United States as well, showing how the entrepreneurship of young Black women in Italy informs new ideas of Blackness and what it means to be Italian (Hawthorne 2021); the continued practices and discourses of maroon communities in the Colombian Caribbean (Guillen 2021); and Black resistance to extractive industries in northeastern Brazil (Bledsoe 2020).²⁰

All of these interventions take, as a starting point, the ability of Black collectives to analyze and influence the world around them. Through this work, present-day Black geographies research challenges us to think about how Black communities see, understand, and comport themselves in the world. It also highlights how Black lives and livelihoods, although under constant assault, are omnipresent (Noxolo 2022). Furthermore, and this is a crux of Black geographies-as-Black-studies, they illustrate how within the corridors of Black social life are the germs of Black geographic thought.

Optic

The optical implications of Black geographies-as-Black-studies are clear in an open letter penned by Sylvia Wynter in the wake of the not guilty verdict for the four officers who trounced Rodney King. Wynter (1994) questioned, “if, as Ralph Ellison alerted us to in his *The Invisible Man*, we see each other only through the ‘inner eyes’ with which we look with our physical eyes upon reality, the question we must confront ... becomes: what is our responsibility for the making of those ‘inner eyes?’” (2). It is the eyes of our structured consciousnesses

that Wynter argued made it possible for police to use the eponym “no humans involved” when responding to crimes involving Black victims. These inner eyes also enabled a jury to acquit said officers despite overwhelming visual evidence. She furthered that “the central issue that confronts us here, [is] whether we ... will be able to move beyond the epistemic limits of our present ‘inner eyes’ in order” to transform our present orders of knowledge (Wynter 1994, 11). The optics under discussion here reach toward that transformation, not solely by imposing strict rubrics for what gets to count as work in Black geographies, but rather by advocating for a retraining of one’s inner eyes to see new pathways for categorizing, organizing, and making sense against disciplinary protocols.

Prior to its now diffused reception, Black geographies, and in particular, Woods’s (2002) attunement of Black social life to the tenors of academia, was misunderstood (see Camp and Pulido 2019). For example, what became an epistemological contribution was the distillation of an ontological intent:

Clyde actually at first used the term “Blues ontology” and tried to explain what he meant by this. I had wrestled with ontological debates before ... and thought that seeing the Blues ontologically would be too abstract and too easily divorced from concrete empirical interpretations. Being as supportive as I could, I urged him to use the term “Blues epistemology,” a Blues-based way of knowing, rather than ontology. (Soja 2012, 3)

All this leads us to the question of whether a Black optic,²¹ similar to a theory or method, can be adopted—and, particularly, by non-Black scholars. We believe this to be within the realm of possibility (see Vasudevan and Kearney 2016; Ramirez 2019; Williams 2021). Consider Heynen’s engaged work with residents of Sapelo Island in McIntosh County, Georgia. Setting aside academic laurels, while expending institutional resources, Heynen’s labors are committed to furthering the traditional lifeways of this community through replanting heirloom sugarcane and restoring oyster beds. There is also Reese’s (2019) use of altar work as an ancestral practice of knowing beyond the homogenizing narrative of the “The Sugarland 95” in Fort Bend County, Texas. These extradisciplinary examples demonstrate the difference between an archival practice of recovering histories and an ancestral practice of honoring them.²²

Although our consideration of the future of Black geographies takes stock of the representation of its purveyors, our primary concern is not whether Black scholars will represent the future of Black geographies. It is, instead, how Black geographic thought comes into being, within and beyond a Black corpus.²³ Black geographies requires that practitioners be led by a Blackened consciousness, a way of seeing and knowing the world informed by the condition and experiences of Black being. For this to happen, viewers²⁴ and actors must embrace the challenge of disrobing themselves of the trappings and limitations of this world. The work needed to understand, chart, and illustrate Black lives requires one to be in communion with what Hartman has named “the position of the unthought” (Hartman and Wilderson III 2003, 185).²⁵

A Blackened consciousness informs theory and praxis and is theory-as-praxis. Robinson (1983) saw this relic as “the preservation of the ontological totality granted by a metaphysical system that had never allowed for property in either the physical, philosophical, temporal, legal, social, or psychic senses” (168). This optic represents “a kind of blackened knowledge, an unscientific method, that comes from observing that where one stands is relative to the door of no return and that moment of historical and ongoing rupture” (Sharpe 2016, 13). The adoption of a Black optic might require a funerary of White logics and methods (see Pulido 2002; Bonilla-Silva and Zubechi 2008). Although those of the Black diaspora maintain a privileged (not inherent) position to such critical sight, this lens is available to non-Black subjects. An engagement with this consciousness is of particular importance for scholars whose research is positioned at the intersection of Blackness and geography. In the brief section that follows, we illustrate these assertions. Our aim is to exemplify that in different sociospatial and historical contexts of pan-African liberation struggles, select individuals have been led by the experiential knowledge of Black communities.

Analog

This section adds historical-material substance to what has been an analytical and disciplinary argument. Our purpose is not to give a roadmap for how to adopt a Black optic, but to illustrate its possibility with examples from political struggles across the Black diaspora. The responsibility for how is

incumbent on the researcher or practitioner who seeks to take up this frame. Neither are we suggesting that changes in ideology and praxis at the level of individual performance will dislodge the hegemonizing logic of anti-Blackness. It might, however, provide an inspirational lighthouse for those interested in this field of study.

Getachew (2016) argued that the Haitian Revolution and the subsequent 1805 Haitian Constitution modeled an egalitarianism unmatched by the French Revolution. In realizing the largest abolitionist uprising in the history of the Western Hemisphere, Black Haitians demonstrated an ability to not only diagnose their condition, but to successfully militate against it. In their process of self-liberation, Haitian freedom fighters conceived of Black struggle in terms of a commitment to the destruction of anti-Black logics and relations—a fact evidenced in the postemancipation legal landscape of their new Black nation. By giving citizenship to German and Polish men who fought alongside Haitian revolutionaries and exempting them from the prohibition on property ownership placed on White men, “blackness was reconceived as a political category that signaled ‘historical or potential resistance’ to slavery and colonial domination. It was the contributions of Germans and Poles to the revolutionary war that allowed them to become Haitian citizens and therefore black” (Getachew 2016, 15). In this way, certain actors, through a commitment to destroying slavery—if not the master–slave relation—joined an emergent Black subjectivity.²⁶ Perhaps theirs was a step toward the “irruptive doubling of death” to which Chandler (2003, 179) and Dubois (1962) referred in their studies of John Brown’s onto-abolitionist becoming, or the spatial praxes of Wilderson’s III (2008) Afrikaner interlocutor, Trevor.²⁷ By giving up their consciousness to aid in Black liberation, those above were “[re]configured as such by way of his being with reference to the Negro in America” and the Black diaspora (Chandler 2003, 191).²⁸ These are but a few examples of how an absorption of Black optics forwarded lives of reinvention toward the rebirth of humanity.

Finale

With the growing reception of Black geographies, it is important to delineate this subfield from its predecessor—to discuss how is it both geographies of

race and, yet, distinct from this school of thought. Explanation is necessary so that scholars do not conflate all studies of Black communities—or studies by Black scholars—with Black geographies. We suggest, as have others (Hawthorne and Heitz 2018), that overlaying given forms of inquiry unto the existence of diasporic communities might obfuscate the discrete forms of theorizing and place-making made by Black livelihoods. Black geographies, as outlined, relies on alternative optics, ideas, and methods for conducting research into the spatialized lives of Black folk. If a Black optic is a lens with the capacity to disform canons (Judy 1993), then a project of Black geographies—as a form of Black studies—is to cultivate sight in a world where Black optics are overwritten to overrepresent the West’s hegemony of knowledge.

In reiterating the core of this subfield, it was paramount to conduct a genealogy of scholars and schools of thought who laid the foundation for Black geographies’ growing reception. In so doing, we invoked influential Black geographers and their studies of race in the United States. Next, we discussed the resurgence of studies of race in the 1990s and early 2000s with the aid of poststructuralist thought and critical race scholarship. This cross-disciplinary acknowledgment included discussions of scholars whose critiques of sociology and history exposed their methodological limitations. Drawing inspiration from these challenges, we argued that Black geographies relies on unique ways of engaging space drawn from the condition of Blackness and the experiences of Black communities. As a result, we believe critiques drawn within Black geographies are aligned with the field of Black studies, its long-standing critique of the university, and its commitment to the betterment of Black communities.

Last, building on questions posed at the 2015 AAG conference, we asked whether it is possible for non-Black researchers to contribute to Black geographies. We conjectured, as have our progenitors (Woods 1998, 2017; McKittrick 2006, 2011; McKittrick and Woods 2007), that a Black optic is not unyielding and can be assumed by those living beyond the condition of Blackness. We suggest, however, that to do so, non-Black researchers must be “authorized by Black revolutionary ensembles of questions” (Walsh 2016, 2). More than a study of racial inequality or the spatialization of race, Black geographies is a knowledge form born of the

suffering and social life of those throughout the Black diaspora. Thus, attempts to conduct this work must coincide with a commitment to indigenous Black lifeways and “new social visions premised on social justice” (McKittrick and Woods 2007, 11). Only then can Black geographies truly be seen, known, and replicated.

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Notes

1. Panelists included Aretina Hamilton, Priscilla McCutcheon, Rashad Shabazz, and Willie Jamaal Wright.
2. We are referring to individuals like Friedrich Ratzel, Ellen Semple, and Halford Mackinder, as well as institutionalized names such as Rand McNally.
3. For a more comprehensive list, see the work of Darden and Terra (2003) and Jordan’s evolving catalog of Black geographers (AGS 2023).
4. A collective practice of Black study (see Kelley 2016).
5. Darden was the ninth Black student to earn a PhD in geography from a U.S. university.
6. For more on the scholarship of Bobby Wilson, see *The Southeastern Geographer’s* 2022 special issue.
7. NCCU’s Geography Department is now the Department of Geosciences.
8. Speigner commuted between NCCU and the University of Michigan–Ann Arbor to earn his doctorate in natural resources and environment.
9. Black women had yet to receive the kinds of recruitment efforts that are now paramount at Queens College, the University of California, Berkeley, and the Graduate Center at the City University of New York.
10. At times, Speigner’s students—one of whom was Bobby Wilson—overlapped during their graduate education, an act of providence that aided their social inclusion within predominately White institutions.
11. Joseph S. Wood and Mark Barnes hope to resuscitate interinstitutional alliances. In 2020, they organized Advancing Geography and Geoscience at HBCUs and MSIs for the Race, Ethnicity and Place Conference. This impulse is now a National Science

Foundation-sponsored project dedicated to advancing participation in geography by students of color.

12. See Darden and Terra's (2003) list of Black geographers at institutions of higher learning.
13. Also in attendance were Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Bobby Wilson, and Déborah Berman Santana.
14. Imagine reading "Reflections on a White Discipline" as a first-year Black graduate student with no background in the field. This essay was a beacon of light, a sign that there was a place for us in this discipline, and better yet, that we could make this place our own.
15. The Bridges for Sociology: International and Interdisciplinary Conference held at the APA Annual Meeting, August 1997, in Toronto.
16. Weheliye (2014) related Giorgio Agamben and Michel Foucault with Black writers who founded similar, if not more novel, analyses.
17. "This is not to say that Black subjects are free from espousing dominant modes of geographic thought, but rather that these sites, and those who inhabit them, can trouble those modes of thought and allow us to consider alternative ways of imagining the world" (McKittrick and Woods 2007, 5).
18. Elsewhere, Bledsoe (2020) offered a methodological genealogy of Black geographers and "geographies of blackness" (1003). Although there is overlap, not all geographies of Blackness fold well into Black geographies.
19. At its formation, the objective of Black studies was to address limitations in canonical fields and to address the social ills affecting the Black diaspora (Hare 1972). Although exhibited in Black studies programs and departments, this objective is enacted beyond its disciplinary home through a fluid practice of Black study (see Kelley 2016).
20. The list of authors grows faster than one can cite.
21. Thought on black(ened) speculative patterns vary and are often informed by the arts (see hooks, 1992; Sharpe 2014, 2016; Camp 2023).
22. When Heynen speaks of his work on Sapelo Island, he often invokes the memory (and spirit) of the late Cornelia Bailey.
23. And, might we add, beyond the discipline of geography.
24. Black and non-Black viewers.
25. Elsewhere, Hartman (2008) suggested that a grasp of this position requires "a willingness to look into the casket" (4). Wilderson III (2008), on the other hand, believed an onto-abolitionist becoming requires restraint, to "stay in the hold of the ship" (500). In their own terms, McKittrick and Woods (2007) coined this place "the underside" (4) and "the realm of the unknowable" (7). We understand that there are differences between the assumptive logics of those operating within these traditions of Black studies—namely regarding the Black subject (i.e., as slave/not as slave) and its embodied experience within civil society (i.e., social death vs. Black livingness). We believe each of these scholars begin from a similar position, however: that the

transient logics of chattel slavery disrupt and inform global iterations of Black social life.

26. Badiou (2012) rejected citizenship developed in opposition to the characteristics of those perceived as nonlocals (e.g., hijab, Black skin, language). Rather than an identarian clanship, he suggested those organizing around a politic build belonging through a reduction of "separating names" (77).
27. See Wilderson's III (2008) entry, "Summertime in June 1993," in *Incognegro: A Memoir of Apartheid and Exile*.
28. One might also look to the lives of Grace Lee Boggs and Yuri Kochiyama for evidence of those who abandoned their inheritance as "junior partners of civil society" in the United States (Wilderson III 2015, 139). Boggs is known for theorizing the contradictions of capitalism and (r)evolutionary futures from the purview of postwar Detroit, Michigan (Boggs 1998). Kochiyama's place in the Black freedom struggle was cemented 21 February 1965 at Harlem's Audubon Ballroom. Kochiyama's dedication to the struggle for Black liberation was so sincere that the Provisional Government of the Republic of New Africa recognized her as its first non-Black citizen (Chimurenga 2014).

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