

Decolonization

Indigeneity, Education & Society



Not Nowhere: Collaborating on Selfsame Land

by Eve Tuck, Allison Guess and Hannah Sultan

If, as David Herman proposes, "storytellers use deictic points and other gestures to map abstract, geometrically describable spaces onto lived, humanly experienced places," then the subjective component of space turns it into an infinite series of authorships—or so it seems—wherein speaking subjects both define it and are defined by it.

--Hortense Spillers, *Topographical Topics: Faulknerian Space*, 2004, p. 535

Do you remember where we are? No way where we are is here.

--Fred Moten, *Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)*, 2013, p. 743

We write to you from the middle of something.

It may not really be the middle, but it is not the end and it is not the beginning.

We write to you from somewhere, though as we write we are geographically dispersed. We write as collaborators in the truest sense--committed to one another's personal, political, poetical, and professional projects. But our [collaboration is contingent](#) because of how we are differently implicated and invested, differently coded, by settler colonialism, Indigenous erasure, and antiblackness.

We [repeat the story](#) of how we came to collaborate carefully, because every time we retell it, it ignores how the rest of us came to come to know one another and choose again and choose again to work in contingent partnership.

Eve and Mistinguette Smith met several years ago at a summer institute hosted by the [Public Science Project](#). When they learned that they were both researching and theorizing relationships to land--Eve as an Unangan ciswoman scholar and Mistinguette as a Black woman/founder of [The Black/Land Project](#)--they agreed to find a future way to be in connection and conversation.

Along with Allison, Hannah, Tavia Benjamin and other members of The Black/Land Project, Mistinguette has worked for the past three years to interview and record the narratives of members of many Black

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communities as they describe their relationships to land *as Black people*, however that identity presents itself in their lives. Eve has theorized decolonization of Indigenous land (with K. Wayne Yang), [Land education](#) (with Marcia McKenzie and Kate McCoy) and the significance of [place in social science research](#) (with Marcia McKenzie). What is important about that first fifteen minute encounter between Mistinguette and Eve is that they discussed the tripled relationships between Indigenous peoples, Africans-made-into-chattel, and white settlers (see also Byrd, 2011; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Wilderson, 2010). We discussed these tripled relationships as antagonisms (Wilderson, 2010), but also spoke of the need for more thought and attention given to the relationships between Indigenous peoples and Black peoples. This is to say that the imbrication of settler colonialism and antiblackness was what sparked our collaboration-- but more, our desire has been to supersede the conventions of settler colonialism and antiblackness toward another kind of futurity. Not knowing that futurity is what makes our collaboration contingent, but knowing that there are many futurities available to us brings us to the work. This post is meant to be in conversation with other Black writers and Indigenous writers on land, Indigenous dispossession, and antiblackness, but also Indigenous sovereignty and futurity, Black futurity and optimism, and again, land.

The Black/Land Project

The Black/Land Project was founded to amplify, re-narrate and regenerate the relationships that Black people engage with land, including past relationships, present relationships, and future relationships. The Black/Land Project has lovingly crafted interview experiences from members of Black communities in Flint, MI, Las

Vegas, NV, Cleveland, OH, upstate New York, among other places across the US. Interview participants identify racially as Black, and from lots of different ethnic and national backgrounds, including African immigrants, Afro-Caribbean, Afro-Latino, African American, and mixed race Black peoples. Interview participants have been diverse in age, gender and gender expression, sexuality, and in the amount of time lived where they live.

The Black/Land Project (BLP) has conducted its work entirely outside the academy and, until recently, completely separate from the codes and discourses that preoccupy academic inquiry. This is not to say that the interview inquiry project has not been conducted in a way that is ethical (it has) or systematic (it has) or antitheoretical (it isn't). Instead, the protocols and theorizing have emerged relationally between The Black/Land interviewers and the interview participants. Rather than bringing (outside) theory to the inquiry, participants and interviewers have engaged in what Allison has come to call a "geotheorizing" of Black relationships to land.

Eve, along with Brian K. Jones and Kondwani Jahan Jackson (SUNY New Paltz), began working formally with The Black/Land Project through an American Studies Association Community Partnership Grant to support BLP in organizing and analyzing their now numerous interviews (see Tuck, Smith, Guess, Benjamin & Jones, 2014). Along with this work, Eve also agreed to help bring BLP's work to new audiences. Part of the tension of writing to academic audiences has been how to frame the relevant literature and theory that interfaces so powerfully with what BLP has sought to do: it isn't accurate to say that BLP's work has been informed by the (academic)

theorizing of antiblackness, settler colonialism, Black optimism, and futurity; yet, it is useful to presume that from where ever those theories came, Black/Land's work has come too.

So, here and elsewhere, we engage theory not as an origin story, not as a genealogy, but because it may be useful in translating to those who read that theory (or want to) the many ways that Blackness persists to make relationships to land.

Empire/Settler Colonialism/triad/antagonisms/fusings

Writing with Marcia McKenzie, Eve has sought to understand how, among other epistemic violences, settler colonialism has attempted to reduce human relationships to land to relationships to property, making property "ownership" the primary vehicle to civil rights in most settler colonial nation-states. In the United States and other "slave estates" (Wilderson, 2010), the remaking of land into property was/is accompanied by the remaking of (African) persons into property, into chattel (Wilderson, 2010; Spillers, 2003, Tuck & Yang, 2012). The remaking of land and bodies into property is necessary for settlement onto other people's land. To be made into property, according to settler colonialism, Black people must be kept landless (see Tuck & McKenzie, 2014) and thus exceptionalized from settler

communities.

These manifestations of property suggest multiscale discourses of ownership (McKittrick, 2006). These include discourses of "having 'things,' owning lands, invading territories, possessing someone," all "narratives of displacement that reward and value particular forms of conquest" (McKittrick, 2006, p. 3).

McKittrick observes,

(This) reward system repetitively returns us to the body, black subjecthood, and the where of blackness, not just as it is owned, but as black subjects participate in ownership. Black diasporic struggles can also be read, then, as geographic contests of discourses of ownership. Ownership of the body, individual and community voices, bus seats, women, "Africa," feminisms, history, homes, record labels, money, cars, these are recurring positionalities, written and articulated through protest, musics, feminist theory, fiction, the everyday. These positionalities and struggles over the meaning of place add a geographic dimension to practices of black reclamation. Yet they also illustrate the ways in which the legacy of racial dispossession underwrites how we have come to know space and place, and that the connections between what are considered "real" or valuable forms of ownership are buttressed through racial codes that mark the body as ungeographic (pp. 3-4).

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relations of settler colonialism and antiblackness. As Wilderson (2010) observes about the United States, there are three structuring positions, antagonisms, which converge to typify relationships of power and place, ultimately remaking land into property. Each of the three structuring positions (“Savage,” Slave, and Human in Wilderson’s analysis) are “elaborated by a rubric of three demands: the (White) demand for expansion, the (Indian) demand for return of the land, and the (Black) demand for ‘flesh’ reparation” (p. 29).

Jodi Byrd’s borrowing of the word *arrivants* from African Caribbean poet Kamau Brathwaite in place of “chattel slave,” refers broadly to people forced into the Americas “through the violence of European and Anglo-American colonialism and imperialism around the globe,” (2011, p. xix). This nomenclature is a recognition of the ways in which *arrivants* both resist and participate as settlers in the historical project of settler colonialism. The word “*arrivants*” helps to highlight the complicity of *all* *arrivants* (including Black people) in Indigenous erasure and dispossession, because settler colonialism “requires settlers and *arrivants* to cathect the space of the native as their home,” (ibid., p. xxxix; see also da Silva, 2013). But “*arrivants*” may also conceal the unique positioning of Blackness in settler colonialism and the complicity of white people and nonwhite people (including Native people) in antiblackness.

Thus, settler colonialism fuses a set of (at least) tripled relationships between settlers/settlement, chattel/enslavement, and Indigenous/erasure. Following a [discussion between Patrick Wolfe and J. Kehaulani Kauanui](#), Eve has written (with coauthors) elsewhere about this set of relationships as a

triad, perhaps even a triangle. As Eve and K. Wayne Yang have argued, this set of relations is tangled (and though it initially appears as a footnote in [Decolonization is not a metaphor](#), it is perhaps even more important for this discussion):

[A]lthough the settler-native-slave triad structures settler colonialism, this does not mean that settler, native, and slave are analogs that can be used to describe corresponding identities, structural locations, worldviews, and behaviors. Nor do they mutually constitute one another. For example, Indigenous is an identity independent of the triad, and also an ascribed structural location within the triad. Chattel slave is an ascribed structural position, but not an identity. Settler describes a set of behaviors, as well as a structural location, but is eschewed as an identity. (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 7)

Perhaps it is obvious that there is (again, at least) a tripled relationship between these nonanalogous locations--but what exactly do these locations comprise? Identities? Structural pigeonholes? Flexible prism points? These questions continue to challenge us. In conversation with Leigh Patel, Eve has constructed some [renderings of the triad](#) as groups described by their actions, yet all of these are still/also actions committed by settlers (grabbing land, “eradicating” Indigenous peoples, bringing in slaves, etc). In K. Wayne Yang’s teaching, he describes the triad as a rubber band, bending and stretching to accumulate and not/equivocate. [Eve has written with C. Ree](#) about the tripled relations perhaps being zombies, ghosts and monsters. Indeed, decolonization is not a metaphor, but we continue to need compelling metaphors/ways to understand the fusion of relationships generated

by settler colonialism's relentless attempts to make Indigenous land and Black bodies into property.

Theorizing antiblackness and Blackness

Among theorizations of blackness and fugitivity (Moten, 2008), blackness as value and excess (da Silva, 2013), blackness as fungible (King, 2014), blackness-qua-violence (Douglass & Wilderson, 2013), the work of The Black/Land Project most directly coheres with Spiller's (2004) theorizing of Black spatial practices and McKittrick's (2006) theorizing of Black life as ungeographic, at the same time that BLP insists on the acumen of Black people's narrations of their relationships to land. Seeking definitions of Blackness beyond accumulation and fungibility (similar to Wilderson, 2010, p. 59; King, 2014), the Black/Land Project has engaged in interviews to co-construct Blackness-as-resistance (James, 2013b, p. 68), and refuse the ever-circulating tropes of Black people as landless.

Fred Moten (2008) lyrically points out these creative im/possibilities of blackness as "thing" - an object without being and without value, whose very value lies in its resistance to the foundations of capitalist value, being, and thingness. Moten asks:

What if the thing whose meaning or value has never been found finds things, founds things? What if the thing will have founded something against the very possibility of foundation and

against all anti- or post-foundational impossibilities? What if the thing sustains itself in that absence or eclipse of meaning that withholds from the thing the horrific honorific of "object"? At the same time, what if the value of that absence or excess is given to us only in and by way of a kind of failure or inadequacy—or, perhaps more precisely, by way of a history of exclusion, serial expulsion, presence's ongoing taking of leave—so that the non-attainment of meaning or ontology, of source or origin, is the only way to approach the thing in its informal (enformed/enforming, as opposed to formless), material totality? (p. 181-2)

These questions form a musical fugue of "Black optimism"¹ (Moten, 2013), akin to the grounded theoretical moves that The Black/Land Project (BLP) has made in deciding to attend to the questions that Black people ask and answer about their relationships to land (see also Joy James, 2013a, on Afrarealism). Regarding her participation as an interviewee in the BLP inquiry project, I.B. explains that her interests are in...

...relation to the genealogy piece and not knowing--what people don't know because they don't have

¹ Moten writes five years later, "I have thought long and hard, in the wake of their [Wilderson and Sexton's Afro-pessimism] work, in a kind of echo of Bob Marley's question, about whether blackness could be loved; there seems to be a growing consensus that analytic precision does not allow for such a flight of fancy, such romance, but I remain under the impression, and devoted to the impression, that analytic precision is, in fact, a function of such fancy... Like Curtis Mayfield, however, I do plan to stay a believer. This is to say, again like Mayfield, that I plan to stay a black motherfucker" (Moten, 2013, p. p. 738; ellipses inserted).

access to that knowledge or it hasn't been passed down to them. Moving and transience and separations of families and all that stuff; that makes it hard to track. To know whom your people are and where you really come from and where your history is rooted, that really interests me. I wonder how much that plays a role in other Black peoples' experiences. Finding where they come from and who are their people. Because there is strength in knowing that kind of stuff. [Interview excerpt]

Like many of the co-participants and co-theorists of the Black Land/Project, I.B. points to the importance of learning from the routes and roots of the presumably rootless, the geographies of those presumed ungeographic, and the genealogies of those presumed kinless.

Theorizing land

When we say at the outset that we are writing from the middle of something, that something has to do with Black life constructed as landless on stolen Indigenous land, land as epistemology and ontology for Indigenous peoples, and Black narratives which recover relationships to that selfsame land. This is the tangled² inspiration for our shared work, and the reason our collaboration must always for now (in this futurity) be contingent. In the following passages, to help describe the something (not the thing [Moten, 2008; da Silva, 2013] but not *not*

² This is one of the key differentiations that Wilderson (2010) makes between the Slave and the Savage-- The Savage, though a "genocided object" (p. 51) is afforded an ontology (afforded by a genealogy derived from land, presumably, or at least prior occupation of it) whereas the Slave, positioned within a grammar of suffering (p. 11), is denied an ontology so long as she is denied freedom. The Black/Land Project's work takes up an entirely different line of suppositions.

the thing) we place side by side some of the articulations of land and place--by Indigenous peoples (the first two selections) and by Black peoples (the latter two selections)--that expose the various wheres that we are.

This is where our women first planted corn. They have planted it again and again. Each year we have harvested enough to roast and dry and store away. These fields look after us by helping our corn to grow. Our children eat it and become strong. We eat it and continue to live. Our corn draws life from this earth and we draw life from our corn. This earth is part of us! We are of this place... We should name ourselves for this place!... You see, their names for themselves are really the names of their places. This is how they were known, to others and to themselves. They were known by their places. This is how they are still known.--Charles Henry (Apache) quoted in Basso, 1996, p. 21; ellipses inserted

Land is our mother. This is not a metaphor. For the Native Hawaiians speaking of knowledge, land was the central theme that drew forth all others. You came from a place. You grew in a place and you had a relationship with a place. This is an epistemological idea... One does not simply learn about land, we learn best from land. --Manulani Meyer (Kanaka Maoli), 2008, p. 219, italics original; ellipses inserted

Spatial practice, written on by climate and ideology, as well as history and geography, is so impressed by human bodies in relations that it is fair to say that, given the year, one could tell how he or she "felt" about the Mississippi, either vicariously or experientially--the Mississippi of the "Trail of Tears," 1838, the Mississippi of the great floods of 1927 and 1993, the Mississippi of summer 1980, when I crossed the river from the

west, enroute to Memphis, at the end of a honeymoon, the Mississippi of the Golden Arch of St. Louis, the Mississippi of 2003 and the official opening of the Louis Armstrong Memorial, Algiers Landing, New Orleans. Of the three dimensions of locatedness, the place of the Mississippi, as of any other topographically representable space, would express its thickest solidity of meaning because it is the scenic apparatus that bristles with "man/woman," "race," "class," "region," and the long arcs of desire in which the sexualities are prolonged and declared; the site of the emblematic and mystic chords of the memorial, place therefore defines what Hannah Arendt calls "the location of human activities" (1958, p. 73), the closest space, the topos with an intimate name. -- Hortense Spillers, 2004, p. 558-559

You know we often don't talk about it. I think that there is a profound relationship between people of African descent and the land because we come from a people that didn't really look on land and ownership as being the way we approach material gains here. I think that the relationship of people to land is a part of who we are. In other words, I think African Americans coming from Africa, we came from a communal relationship among us as people but also on relating to that which nurtures us and supports us. So the relationship with land was very organic in my opinion. It meant that we had a very personal relationship, almost spiritual, a kind of respect for it and an understanding that there is a relationship between us and land...[Native peoples] used land like water. It was fluid. Depending on which cultures you look at, whether they are particularly stable people or wanderers what have you, the relationship with land was very important. I think that we see some of that in people who are farmers, who

worked the land. But people who live in cities and buy condos and whatnot, we don't see land in that way at all. There isn't that relationship. But I do think that, particularly people of color and certainly Africans and Native peoples, land is not just simply dirt. It's not just simply space and stuff. It is a part of who we are. I think it is part of how we define ourselves. It really is. -- T.G. Black/Land Project interview excerpt

Blackness as (not) nowhere: fantasy in the hold

Moten (2013), reading Wilderson (2010) explains that the settler and 'the savage', unlike the slave, have been afforded cartographic practice-- Wilderson notes of the settler and 'the savage': "although at every scale their maps are radically incompatible, their respective 'mapness' is never in question (p.181). The "capacity for cartographic coherence.... secures subjectivity for both the Settler and the 'Savage' (ibid.). Moten observes that because blackness is denied a cartographic practice, the interplay between thingliness and nothingness that relates to blackness plays out "outside and against the grain of the very idea of self-determination—in the unmapped and unmappable immanence of undercommon sociality" (Moten, 2013, p. 752). Moten calls this playing out "fantasy in the hold." The hold is a holding of movement (of "nothing yet and already" objects [Harney & Moten, p. 93]) and the hold of the ship (ibid., p. 94) -- suspended in dislocation.

Yet, the participants in the Black/Land interviews press against this suspension, this dislocation. They are inhering a different logic/logistic, one that insists upon the fullness of (an exclusive) Black geography. T.G. describes the substance of Blackness in place:

The issue is trying to find richness. I mean let's face it, when I'm going to get a haircut, I know where I'm going. I'm not going down to the shopping center. I'm going back to the hood where they cut hair. You get in a barbershop and in the course of two hours in the barbershop, you've solved all the problems of the world because we have all the answers. -- T.G. [interview excerpt]

In the interview, T.G. unpacks his decision to continually go back to the *hood* within the context of anti-black development strategies, which, under the guise of increasing the ‘diversity’ of a neighborhood, trick away Black cartographic coherence. Yet, T.G. also suggests that in Blackness, there are endless possibilities.

Likewise, Moten asks:

Can this sharing of a life in homelessness, this interplay of the refusal of what has been refused and consent, this undercommon oppositionality, be a place from which to know, a place out of which emerges neither self-consciousness nor knowledge of the other but an improvisation that proceeds from somewhere on the other side of an unasked question? But not simply to be among one's own; rather, also, to live among one's own in dispossession, to live among the ones who cannot own, the ones who have nothing and who, in having nothing, have everything. (Moten, 2013, p. 756)

Black geographies have been relegated to the hold because of settler constructions of property

and scarcity. In this, Black people become viewed by white settlers as place-holders on stolen Indigenous land.

The truth is, white settlers have no problem *giving* Indigenous land to Black people, until they want it back.

S.P. recalls:

What's also very interesting is that we bought in to this neighborhood where the houses were going for an average of \$250,000 before we moved in. When we moved in, they were under \$100,000. So you had this influx of people of color buying in and you had this rush of people wanting to sell as the neighborhood began to look different. [Interview excerpt]

S.P. later explains how the phenomena of ‘white flight’ has allowed other people to move in and, as S.P. puts it, “make roots” in a new location.

For The Black/Land Project, land is not just about what is owned. Ownership, according to the storytellers who contribute to the BLP, is not the most important relationship to land.

Mistinguette recalls one interviewee who said, “Land ownership is a temporary and revokable agreement between you and the government.” People often describe their relationship to land “as something that owns them.”

Blackness as *not* nowhere means that Black claims to place happen somewhere, on selfsame land. In this regard, struggles against dislocation and gentrification cannot be warranted as the antidote to nowhere. Not nowhere also evokes the Black double consciousness of

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unfounded yet found relationships to selfsame land - similar to the afropessimist optimism of Moten, the wisdom of some BLP participants who identify the Black desires to be *not* nowhere without becoming a settler somewhere.

Black dislocation within the settler state is always an unfinished and incomplete project. Policing tactics, gentrification, vigilantism, and political isolation find justification in the settler colonial truism that Black people should not be where white settlers want to be. Yet the struggle to resolve Black dislocation can obscure the fact of Indigenous erasure and resilient, radical relationship to that selfsame land. There isn't something easy to say about this.

Decolonial futurity at the henceforward

Henceforward, the interests of one will be the interests of all, for in concrete fact everyone will be discovered by the troops, everyone will be massacred—or everyone will be saved.

—Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*

Writing about the process of decolonization and the search for a Black cyborg, Joy James

meditates on the saliency of the word *henceforward* in these lines from Fanon (1963). Henceforward is “both exhortation and puzzle” (James, 2013b, p. 58) referring to a (later) pinpoint-able time and space in which the turn toward mass resistance to oppression materializes. Connecting the henceforward with what we have written elsewhere about futurity, it is the future that is made possible in the present, it is the time and space in which we can tumble into something that will be arranged differently, coded differently, so that our locations and labors are more than just who we are to the settler. Henceforward is the start of the future now. James tells us that for Fanon, decolonization, at minimum, means that the colonized will change places with the colonizer. What decolonization can be at maximum remains to be seen, but for it to be more than merely a change in personnel, this requires the colonized to “have visions rather than mere dreams” (James, 2013b, p. 64). For James, it all hinges on the henceforward because, without the henceforward, there is only mutually assured destruction.

**We write to you from the middle of the henceforward,
from the middle of the rage against the hold.**

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