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Black Literature and Science in the Age of COVID-19

ABSTRACT Racism in Britain is a public health issue. The health of Black and minority ethnic Britons is shaped by structural discrimination and inequality, leading to illness and, in many cases, death. The Windrush scandal saw the withdrawal of NHS services from those wrongly labelled as non-citizens as well as high levels of stress and anxiety caused by the loss of jobs, homes, benefits, and wrongful deportation. The COVID-19 pandemic has also had a disproportionate impact on Black Britons, who have been found to be four times more likely to die of COVID-19 than white people. How do we do literature and science studies, or medical humanities scholarship, in this context? How do we read, imagine, intervene in, and understand the way that hostile environments and spaces—the street, the hospital, the university—shape the experience of Black Britons in ways which science and medicine are unable or unwilling to capture? Who is the 'we' I am referring to here, and who is 'our' audience for this work? In this essay, I explore some possible responses to these questions, in dialogue with Katherine McKittrick's *Dear Science and Other Stories* (2021) and with the work of other Black thinkers and writers which asks us to carefully attend to our methodological responses to racism across disciplines.

KEYWORDS Bristol, interdisciplinarity, literature, race, science

1

In May 2020, the organizers of the Science, Culture, and Postcolonial Narratives conference wrote to me to ask for a title for the keynote address I had agreed to give at this conference. This was three months into the unprecedented UK lockdown, and by this time a particularly disturbing aspect of the pandemic in the UK was becoming more widely known. On 25 May 2020, *The Guardian* reported that six in ten UK health workers killed

Gill, Josie. 2025. "Black Literature and Science in the Age of COVID-19." In *Science, Culture, and Postcolonial Narratives*, edited by Anton Kirchhofer and Karsten Levihn-Kutzler, 35–54. Anglophone Postcolonial Studies 2. Heidelberg: Heidelberg University Publishing.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.17885/heiup.1126.c23355

by COVID-19 were from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds—a figure highly disproportionate to the percentage of NHS staff who are BAME (Marsh and McIntyre 2020). The British Medical Association has since reported that during the first wave of the pandemic in 2020, 95 percent of doctors who died of COVID-19 were from a BAME background (out of a workforce where 44 percent are BAME) (Cooper 2020). Not only were BAME health professionals dying at a disproportionate rate but this trend also applied to the population as a whole: in May 2020, the Office for National Statistics released figures which showed that Black people in England and Wales were more than four times more likely to die from COVID-19 than white people. I had been thinking about the effects of racism on health for some time before the pandemic, but now experiences of this were in the daily news. While there were concerted attempts to frame the disproportionate impact on BAME people as caused by biological (indeed, racial) difference, such rhetoric was challenged and debunked: for example, the BMA reported that BAME doctors were disproportionately affected by shortages of personal protective equipment (PPE) and experienced higher rates of pressure than white colleagues to work in settings with inadequate PPE (Cooper 2020). The pandemic exposed and brought into public view long-standing patterns of inequality in health between white and non-white populations in the UK, revealing that these inequalities are structural (not genetic) and that little has been done, at a political level, to address them.[1] In fact, the conservative government's "hostile environment" policy, introduced in 2012 to reduce the number of what they called "illegal immigrants," only exacerbated racial health inequalities. The wrongful labelling as illegal of many Black Britons who had come to the UK from the Caribbean as children led to these citizens being deported, losing jobs and housing, and being denied medical treatment because suddenly they did not have the required paperwork. In the case of Sylvester Marshall, this resulted in him being denied radiotherapy cancer treatment by the NHS because he could not prove that he was in the UK legally.[2] Many others suffered stress and other health conditions as a result of their treatment, and many Black Britons and former Commonwealth citizens caught up

1 In 2021, the British government's Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities published a report in response to the Black Lives Matter movement, which concluded that it was Black and minority ethnic people's perception and mistrust of public health services that was the cause of health disparities, rather than racism within institutions (Sewell 2021).

2 He went on to receive treatment and recovered after his case was highlighted by a *Guardian* newspaper investigation in 2018 (Gentleman 2018).

in the "Windrush Scandal" have since died in their 50s and 60s, before receiving compensation from the government (Gentleman 2021).

It was in this context that I gave the title "Black Literature and Science in the Age of COVID-19" to the conference organizers. I was looking for a way to address what was going on and to think through how it connected to my own ongoing work on the interfaces between literature, literary studies, science, and medicine and questions of race, racism, and racial justice. By then, news of George Floyd's murder was being reported around the world, and within a matter of weeks, the Colston Statue in Bristol was torn down during a Black Lives Matter demonstration. As the director of the Centre for Black Humanities at the University of Bristol during this time, I plunged into organizing and coordinating many academics and students who wanted to see the change being demanded in the city replicated on campus: the University of Bristol has many connections to historic wealthy families linked to enslaved labour, three of whom, including Colston, were (until 2024) represented on the university crest. Staff and students were demanding that the university not only address its past in a more robust and open manner but that it address contemporary racial inequalities within its walls: racism on campus and the lack of Black people in academic positions, to name only two. For two weeks or more, I was consumed by composing and coordinating open letters and emails to management. I had been used to doing this kind of academic activism throughout my time at Bristol, and my experiences have fed into my keen sense that when I write about literary studies, or more specifically about literature and science studies, I cannot separate the theoretical from the practical; that methodology is not simply developed from engagement with theoretical writing and academic debates in journals, but that it is intimately connected with the everyday conditions in which I work and the wider structural inequalities to which these conditions are linked. As I lived through these events of May 2020 and in the months afterward, it became increasingly clear to me that my talk needed to address how the events of 2020—the COVID-19 pandemic, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the wider movement to 'decolonize' universities which gained significant traction from these events—were connected to the fields of study, in particular literature and science studies, with which I have engaged thus far in my career. How can this field address racial injustices and inequalities, and what would it mean for it to do so? And how are the events of 2020 (and the conditions which created them) linked to the relationship between the sciences and the humanities?

In what follows, I attempt to think through these questions and to suggest some (partial, incomplete, and speculative) answers that I hope will

provoke discussion around the methodological norms and established literary critical conventions of literature and science studies in the UK. I begin with a brief overview of how discussions of race, the postcolonial, or the decolonial have been largely absent within the field—a situation recognized in the editors' introduction to this volume, which states of the relationship between science and postcolonial studies that "the cultural imagination of this connection has rarely been made a focus of research" (this volume). Noting the limitations of models of inclusion—where the solution to this absence is simply to 'include' authors, academics, or voices of colour rather than to interrogate the disciplinary mores which omitted them in the first place—I suggest that, instead, the field needs to take seriously the demands of the decolonization movement, in which racial justice cannot be achieved without a thoroughgoing change in knowledge production and recognition of the continuing relationship between disciplinary methods and institutional, social, and political power. Inspired by the provocations of Katherine McKittrick's *Dear Science and Other Stories* (2021), I attempt an undisciplined reading of literature, science, and institutions in Bristol as a way of rethinking the relationship between creativity, academic disciplines, and location and the stories that together these tell when it comes to comprehending Black life. Drawing on the events of 2020 and two Black Bristolian artistic responses to them, I explore how McKittrick's work helps us to reorient questions of knowledge and value which recur in debates about the relations between the sciences and the humanities.

2

In a recently published essay, Michael Whitworth defines the field of literature and science studies thus:

> The historicist study of the relations of literature and science is a critical practice that draws eclectically on a range of linguistic, literary, and cultural theory, and which has also been significantly informed by concepts and practices in the fields of history and philosophy of science, science and technology studies, and the sociology of scientific knowledge. These bodies of theory have crucially enabled it to overcome deeply ingrained cultural assumptions about the relative statuses of literary and scientific forms of knowledge, but its focus on historical frameworks and contingencies means that practitioners have not always fully articulated their working premises, preferring in many cases to build on the practices of their predecessors. As a field, it has been open to theory but ambivalent about theorization.

> Moreover, it exhibits significant internal divisions regarding methodology. In part these correspond to the periods under study, but there are also significant methodological divergences associated with North America and the United Kingdom. North American practice [...] takes a greater interest in contemporary culture, including developments such as posthumanism, visual cultures, digital humanities, programming languages, and video games; it is less interested than its British counterpart in historical literature and culture, as well as in the ways that the incorporation of science into a specifically literary discourse may transform it or call into question its authority. (Whitworth 2020, 2)

Whitworth's accurate description captures the heterogeneity of a field concerned with multiple kinds of intersections between the literary and the scientific. Literature and science studies, a field with a long and substantial history, covers a range of historical periods, critical approaches, and concerns and, in the UK tradition, has been characterized by negotiations of the relationship between the disciplines "found not in the conceptual apparatus of any particular body of theory, but in the critical writing itself at the level of the sentence, the paragraph, and above" (Whitworth 2020, 12). Whitworth's summary essay makes no mention of postcolonial studies, critical race studies, or ethnic studies in its analysis of the different fields and disciplines which have influenced the study of literature and science in the UK, and in this it also accurately reflects the state of the field. These absences are, perhaps, unsurprising given the mode of influence and field building Whitworth identifies as dominant in the UK; building carefully on the practices of predecessors is clearly not a methodology that might readily admit new or radical approaches from other fields or traditions. While Whitworth encourages us "to recognize the critical concepts that are implicit in apparently untheorized moves and that are embodied in the writing, though never explicitly named" (13) as a positive and productive tradition of the field, this mode may also account for the field's lack of engagement with the highly theorized issues of race, racism, and social justice.

That literature and science studies in the UK and Europe has overlooked questions of race, the postcolonial, or the decolonial is evident from a cursory glance at edited collections of essays published in the field within the last 15 years or so. The *Routledge Companion to Literature and Science*, published in 2011, includes a section on different sciences, a section on "disciplinary and theoretical approaches" such as "deconstruction," "feminist science studies," and "posthumanism," and a section on periods and cultures, but has no chapters on postcolonial studies or race (Clarke and Rossini 2011). The *Cambridge Companion to Literature and Science* (2018) has

no chapter on postcolonial studies, critical race studies, or Black studies in its theory section, and a search of the book returns nothing for the word 'postcolonial' (while 'race' appears a few times). Another volume, *Literature and Science* (2008), opens with a discussion of controversial novelist V. S. Naipaul's comments on English departments (he suggested that they should be closed down and that only science should be taught in universities) (Ruston 2008). While giving the editor an opportunity to describe continuing debates which pit science against the humanities, and to discuss what is described as the amorphous and difficult-to-define discipline of English, there is no consideration of postcolonial or critical race approaches in English or of writers of colour in relation to science.[3] So concerned are these books with addressing the science and humanities divide that they often fall back on a conception of the humanities, or indeed of literature, in which the work of writers of colour or postcolonial writers is notably absent. Instead, they more often make use of the 'classics' of British and European literature, references to which pepper their introductions and overviews.

There is evidence that things are starting to change. The introduction to *The Palgrave Handbook of Twentieth and Twenty-first Century Literature and Science*, which was published in 2020 and contains chapters about and by a range of Black and minority ethnic writers and thinkers, states that "the emerging field of literature and science coincided with the increasing attention to problems of social inequality, power, and violence" and that "[a]nalyses of how literature might inform a more socially just science, as well as how science frames discourses and material practices relating to colonialism, race, sex, labor, and state formation, are at the heart of the field of literature and science" (Ahuja et al. 2020, 5–6).[4] These statements about the field perhaps reflect more of a North American context than they do a European one, and the differences between fields in the UK and the US were addressed in two special issues in 2017 and 2018 on the "State of the Unions" in the UK-based *Journal of Literature and Science* and in the US-based *Configurations*. The first issue noted "the lack of attention to postcolonial critique within literature and science" and how "this is

3 While it is acknowledged that "this volume could never have represented all of the historical periods of literature or science; neither the many genres of literature nor subjects of science; and not the multitude of possible methodologies that might be used in considering the relationship between the two" (Ruston 2008, 7), the absence of these topics and concerns is still noticeable.

4 The *Routledge Research Companion to Nineteenth-Century British Literature and Science* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017) also contains chapters on science and empire in its "Contexts" section.

indicative of wider concerns about what the field has concurred is central and consequently what is marginal" (Littlefield and Willis 2017, 3). The second noted that

> [r]acism, gender equality, and gun violence, articulated most dramatically by Black Lives Matter, #MeToo, and the multiple marches and protests that students have staged against mass shootings in schools, are now an everyday reality in our communities and in the news. Presumptuous though it may seem to relate these grand developments back to our corner of the humanities, their knock-on effects on higher education will be considerable (Sudan and Tattersdill 2018, 255–56).

A similar trajectory can be seen in the medical humanities, which, in undergoing a critical turn, has also seen calls for a focus on literature and perspectives beyond the Western canon and on questions of race.[5]

But calls are not action, and it remains to be seen what attention to the postcolonial, or an engagement with racism, might look like in these fields beyond the rather straightforward inclusion of the works of writers or academics of colour—an increasingly standard (and long-standing) response across the academy to 'problems' related to diversity. In their introduction to the "State of the Unions" special issue in the *Journal of Literature and Science*, Martin Willis and Melissa Littlefield consider what has been marginal in literature and science studies and what is now entering the field (which includes the topics of literature and technology, science fiction, and postcolonial critique) and suggest that

> [e]ither the field of Literature and Science will begin to break-up into smaller derivations as it evolves, or it will begin to accrue other territories. It is perhaps more likely that the latter is the field's immediate future and that it is already (and perhaps for the first time here articulated) in the early stages of accrual (2017, 3).

The suggestion here is that other genres, subjects, or theories such as 'the postcolonial' will become incorporated into the field; the financial language of "accrual" implies that the field will benefit from the addition

5 See, for example, Sarah Atkinson, Bethan Evans, Angela Woods, and Robin Kearns, "'The Medical' and 'Health' in a Critical Medical Humanities," in which the authors argue that the medical humanities has a role in "looking beyond the classics of the Western canon to engage with forms of creative practice that may unsettle and disrupt the ways in which particular bodies and subjects are defined as healthy or not" (Atkinson et al. 2015, 77).

of what was previously marginal. Yet how what has been central—often the canonical—will be affected or impacted by this incorporation of another 'territory' is uncertain. Writing on 'the canon' in 1989, the Black feminist literary scholar Hazel Carby argued that, while an expansion beyond the English literary canon to include texts written by Black authors and writers of colour is important, "[w]e should not be satisfied [...] with our mere inclusion in the academy. My Caribbean course, for example, should be part of the process of redefining Englishness that is implied in the structural organization of English departments" (Carby 1999, 241). Carby critiques tokenistic approaches where "the politically correct thing to do is to make sure that your collection of essays, or your conference, includes the obligatory black perspective" (238) and argues instead for these perspectives to provoke a redefinition of the study of English as a means of addressing "the deeper problem," which is "the ways in which our society is structured in dominance" (238). Addition or inclusion are simply not enough—the challenge of the 'marginal' is a challenge to the structure, organization, and methodology of the whole.

Carby's words evidence the long history of demands for institutional change that are now most prominently articulated under the banner of the movement to decolonize universities. This worldwide student-led movement is characterized by calls for an acknowledgement of how current systems of knowledge have been shaped by colonialism, for consequent changes to the shape of the curriculum, and for universities to address their own colonial entanglements as well as the experiences of Black and minority ethnic students. Much has been written about this widespread movement, which is difficult to summarize here; but the essence of the movement, as I understand it, is focused on consciously linking research, teaching, institutional cultures, and lived experience to the continuing reverberations of colonization; as Nelson Maldonado-Torres puts it, "Decolonial movements tend to approach ideas and change in a way that do not isolate knowledge from action. They combine knowledge, practice, and creative expressions, among other areas in their efforts to change the world" (2016, 7). It is perhaps because of the movement's emphasis on action and change, rather than simply theorizing and discussion, that it has received substantial criticism from both within and outside the academy, to the degree that, as Robbie Shilliam contends, "criticism of the decolonizing project has gained more traction than the project itself" (2018, 59). While, as Achille Mbembe notes, "Calls to 'decolonize' are not new" (2021, 56), these calls still have the ability to "generate anxiety and fear"—something Maldonado-Torres names as his first thesis on coloniality and decoloniality:

> Addressing colonialism and decolonization as anything more than past episodes or events raises anxieties and fears: anxieties about the legitimacy of the normative citizen-subject and the social, political, and economic order that sustains it, and fears about the very presence and the potential action of those who typically address these topics in this way—that is, the colonized. These kinds of anxiety and fear lead to multiple forms of evasion, to micro-aggressions, and to open aggressive behavior. Anyone who introduces the question about the meaning and significance of colonialism and decolonization most likely faces a decadent and genocidal modern/colonial attitude of indifference, obfuscation, constant evasion, and aggression, typically in the guise of neutral and rational assessments, postracialism, and well-intentioned liberal values. Education, including academic scholarship, national culture, and the media are three areas where this modern/colonial attitude tends to take hold and reproduce itself. (Maldonado-Torres 2016, 8)

Faced with calls to examine and critique "subject, object, and method," which are "key terms in the modern/colonial conception of knowledge" (Maldonado-Torres 2016, 18), those maintaining the status quo feel threatened and attempt to further undermine their questioners as "irrational" or lacking objectivity through "bad faith responses" which "are already inscribed in disciplines, methods, and texts" (9). While academics often construct reasons for agreeing with the principles of the struggle but not with the practices of advancing it (7), politicians in the UK have called decolonization "censoring history" and "negative" (Stubley 2021). While, as Maldonado-Torres (2016) acknowledges, student movements are not perfect (6), and as Mbembe notes, "we still do not have a precise idea of what a 'truly decolonized knowledge' might look like" (2021, 56), the problems in the project, such as the way "decolonization is easily reduced to a matter of origins and identity, race and location" do "not constitute sufficient grounds for an outright repudiation of the decolonizing project. After all, the uncompromising critique of the dominant Eurocentric academic mode—the fight against what Latin American critics call 'epistemic coloniality,' that is, the endless production of theories that are based on European traditions—is still necessary" (7).

Why should these developments and debates be of especial interest to scholars of literature and science? For one, as I have argued elsewhere, there are significant commonalities between the interests of literature and science scholars and scholars concerned with decolonization: both are concerned with the critical role that disciplinary classification plays in shaping knowledge, with the constitution of and relationships between disciplines and methods, and in how some knowledge is variously ordered

and valued in relation to other forms of knowledge (Gill 2018, 283–88). Literature and science scholarship has often used as its starting point (the history of) debates about the relative value of the humanities as compared to the sciences; as Martin Willis argues, "there are two key moments which have continued to influence the field in its present state. The first was the two cultures debate between C. P. Snow and F. R. Leavis in the late 1950s and early 1960s, while the second was the science wars, initiated by Alan Sokal in 1996" (2015, 2). While much work in the field since has been focused on points of commonality, intersection, reciprocity, and 'two-way traffic' between the literary and the scientific (rather than the "mutual incomprehension" which Snow argued characterized the relationship), it has nevertheless been the case that much contemporary scholarship is often focused (even if implicitly) on asserting literary value—that literature can illuminate (the production of) scientific knowledge, fact, principle, or practice—against a backdrop of "charged rhetoric around science and the humanities" including "the continued rhetorical pitting of STEM against the humanities as a justification for differential funding" and "the increased application of the scientific lab model to the infrastructure of the humanities" (Ahuja et al. 2020, 9–10).[6] In recent years, humanities scholars have found themselves needing to defend the humanities against the encroachment of scientific principles and methods of measurement that are sometimes put forward by university management or, indeed, by scientists themselves as a way of breaching the so-called science–humanities divide. Thus, just as interdisciplinarity, collaboration, and mutual influence are emphasized by scholars, there is also an acute awareness of the need to assert the value and utility of humanities methods as distinct from those in the sciences.

Scholars of decolonization also understand there to be commonality and reciprocity across disciplines but in a way which is, perhaps, less positive and which is less interested in the relative status of the humanities in relation to the sciences than in how all established disciplines' methods and norms contribute to the kind of unequal valuing of different kinds of knowledge which would otherwise excise literature and science scholars. The decolonization movement understands the different disciplines of the academy to be much more aligned to one another, taking as its object of analysis 'the university' as a whole, where the division of knowledge is not

6 In 2020, the British Academy and UKRI introduced the acronym SHAPE, standing for Social Science, Humanities, and the Arts for People and the Economy, to act as an equivalent to the well-known acronym STEM (standing for Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) which is seen to positively attract more students to those subjects.

between the sciences and the humanities but between academic knowers and knowers outside of the institution. For Mbembe, the movement to decolonize and moves toward interdisciplinarity are linked: he writes,

> attempts at 'transcending our disciplinary divisions' have in fact been happening partly in response to a set of contestations affecting the disciplines that constitute the foundations of modern knowledge. Some of these contestations are of a political nature. In the case of South Africa, they have to do with profound and still unresolved questions of racial justice (2021, 80).

The situation in the UK is, perhaps, less advanced, but the focus of the decolonization movement here certainly opens up a different possibility for literature and science scholars examining the relations between the disciplines: it points toward the need to analyse critically, rather than celebrating or valorizing, the ways in which scientific and literary practices cohere to produce dominant structures of knowledge and to shore up institutional cultures. Rather than starting from a position of defending literary knowledge in the face of the domination of the sciences, literature and science scholarship might begin the more reflexive task of understanding how its own disciplinary omissions, indifferences to injustice, or unexamined norms contribute to a wider academic self-reinforcing and dominating system of knowledge.

3

An example of how this might be done is to be found in Katherine McKittrick's book *Dear Science and Other Stories* (2021), which addresses the limitations of contemporary academic scholarship in the humanities when it comes to questions of race while at the same time modelling an interdisciplinary approach that offers a different orientation toward science from a humanities perspective. *Dear Science* consists of a series of stories which model, in their forms, the kind of interdisciplinary, creative scholarship that McKittrick puts forward as a counterpoint to established academic methods, where, she claims, "referential beginnings and referential scaffoldings shape conclusions" (2021, 23). Drawing on the work of Sylvia Wynter, one of McKittrick's central claims is that academics—including those whose work concerns race—are trapped within a "biocentric system of knowledge" (2). Various definitions are offered of this complex idea throughout the book, but in sum, McKittrick writes that

> [a] biocentric knowledge system assumes that, as a species, we have evolved differentially according to our ethnic-racial differences. The result is a kind of Malthusian spatial-racial fallout. Race functions to naturalize this conception of the human. We must keep in mind that biocentricity is not the same as scientific racism or biological determinism. Scientific racism and biological determinism are ideologies that animate a pervasive biocentric belief system. (McKittrick 2021, 127)

According to McKittrick, the biocentric system is one which posits "black subjects as naturally unevolved and less than human," a system that does not recognize biocentrism itself as a fictive narrative (2021, 126). Yet it is a system which underpins academic study and which, McKittrick contends, is primarily characterized by an emphasis on capturing data. Academic knowledge and methods are focused, McKittrick argues, on "the primacy of evidentiary and insular normalcies," "the logic of knowing-to prove," and the asking of "questions that result in descriptive-data induced answers" (4–5). These methods produce "a self-replicating learning system" (45) that, when it comes to the study of race, objectifies Black life through "the tendency to seek out and find marginalized subjects, who then serve as academic data and provide authentic knowledge about oppression" (32). A phrase that McKittrick repeats throughout the book is that "description is not liberation" (45) because the production of data, the tracking and quantifying of Black life, never really escapes the underlying biologic system which centres and repeats the objectification of Black people. This is even the case for scholars of race and racism, who, McKittrick argues, in supporting a social constructionist understanding of race, leave "the logic of biological determinism (and therefore racism) [...] within view" (134). She writes that the

> social production of race can, inadvertently, mimic the crude classification and typology of humans according to racial–sexual differentiation: naming these racial and racist rankings and groupings and taxonomies of humans is replicated over and over again—whether as truth claims or socially produced fictions that seek to undo the weighty singularity of biological determinism (133).

McKittrick recognizes that this poses an "analytical conundrum" for anti-racist scholars, one which "echoes the concerns Fanon identified in 1952: How might we think about the social construction of race in terms that notice how the condition of being black is knotted to scientific racism but not wholly defined by it?" (135).

McKittrick poses several interrelated answers to this question which there is not space to detail here, but one way of beginning to counter the data-driven, biocentric, descriptive logic of the academy that McKittrick offers is for scholars to develop a new understanding of the relationship between Blackness and science, particularly Black creativity and science, a relationship that moves away from the assumption that Black worlds are "wholly defined by scientific racism and biological determinism" (2021, 1). Instead, McKittrick invites us to view Black creatives as "scientifically creative and creatively scientific" (2), which happens when we are able to "be uncomfortably satisfied with the unmeasurability of black life" (121). Black creativity, McKittrick contends, exposes and confronts the data-driven logics of academic study, and we can begin to understand how it does this if we (as scholars) adopt an interdisciplinary or, rather, 'undisciplined' methodology. This methodology involves "the generating and gathering of ideas—across-with-outside-within-against normative disciplines—that seek out liberation within our present system of knowledge" (47). This undisciplined method, encompassing, among other things, "gathering multifariously textured tales, narratives, fictions, whispers, songs, grooves" (4), requires a shift in understanding of the relations between the humanities and the sciences because it is a method which understands that "science and story are not discrete" (9). This idea will be familiar to most literature and science scholars, but McKittrick's following suggestion that "we know, read, create, and feel science and story simultaneously" is perhaps less so. The aim, McKittrick contends, is not to describe science but to

> [s]tudy [...] how we come to know black life through asymmetrically connected knowledge systems. Science is present [...] but it is restless and uncomfortably situated and multifarious rather than definitive and downward-pressing [...] This shift—from studying science to studying ways of knowing—has allowed me to work out where and how black thinkers imagine and practice liberation as they are weighed down by what I can only describe as biocentrically induced accumulation by dispossession. (McKittrick 2021, 3)

McKittrick's method, then, consists of a refusal of disciplinary conventions and an embrace of storytelling where "telling, sharing, listening to, and hearing stories are relational and interdisciplinary acts that are animated by all sorts of people, places, narrative devices, theoretical queries, plots. The process is sustained by invention and wonder. The story has no answers" (2021, 6). It is a method that not only refuses disciplines but refuses distinctions between the academic and the objects of her

study, as "fact-finding, experimentation, analysis, study, are recognized as narrative, plot, tale" (8) and McKittrick becomes a storyteller, and in so doing reduces the distance between her work and that of the creative writers whose texts she discusses. This rejection of objectivity in favour of participation in the Black worlds in which she is invested, the insistence in thinking across disciplines, texts, and places, is crucial because it is the separation of the sciences from the humanities which McKittrick, via Wynter, identifies as the defining characteristic of our current system of knowledge; a system which has produced race and limited understandings of Blackness. She writes, "the work of discipline, so neatly and so quietly tied to the biocentric infrastructures of empire, forbids a genre of blackness that is not solely and absolutely defined by and through abjection, subjection, and objectification" (45–46). It is only by working against "the bifurcation of science and creativity," a bifurcation which "reif[ies] racial differentiation" (137), that we can start to move toward a different understanding of Black life.

McKittrick's work is in the vein of much Black feminist thinking, which has for some time called for storytelling to be recognized as a form of theorizing in academic contexts where Black people and their creative work has often been excluded from the theoretical. Emphasizing the open-ended, the dynamic, and the unverifiable, McKittrick resists attempts to capture, to contain, and to discipline as she grapples with ways of apprehending Black life beyond death, the body, and trauma. But what she adds to this is an explicit reckoning with science which I think offers us a different approach to literature and science studies, an approach that might be applicable to everyone in the field, not only postcolonial or critical race scholars. At base, McKittrick is as critical of the methods of the humanities as those of the sciences, and I think she encourages us to be less defensive and more open to the possibility that the humanities may be just as implicated as the sciences—in the kinds of questions it asks and answers it seeks—in maintaining certain structures of power. Her intervention forces me to ask myself how much of my own work has been descriptive or data-driven, even as it has, particularly in my book *Biofictions*, sought to understand race beyond disciplines and to articulate "multiple and untracked enunciations of black life" (McKittrick 2021, 105) through literature. But her work also inspires me to think, read, and know in a different way, and in the final section of this essay I would like to attempt an undisciplined reading of the events of 2020 from the perspective of where

I know from;[7] that is, a reading which encompasses my thinking around disciplinarity, decolonization, race, literature, and science and medicine as much as it does my physical and academic location at a university in Bristol in the UK. What would it mean to tell a story that begins not with a description of the state of Black health in Britain but which, instead, decentres disciplinary norms in order to access a new understanding of Black life through undisciplined knowledge, practice, creative expression, and science?

I begin with a statue. That of Edward Colston, which was torn down in Bristol on 7 June, 2020 following a Black Lives Matter demonstration. I want to suggest that the Colston statue, when it stood, was a significant public health issue. Public health is defined by the WHO as "the art and science of preventing disease, prolonging life and promoting health through the organized efforts of society" (Acheson 1988, 431–37).[8] The Colston statue was a celebration of the slave trader Edward Colston, and while it remained standing, it was a symbol of injustice; a symbol of a failure to account for the legacies of slavery in a city still very much shaped by racial inequalities. A source of pain and oppression for the city's Black residents and their allies who had been campaigning for its removal for years, the statue was a symbolic representation of racism and part of a wider hostile environment; symbolic of a system which is, no doubt, biocentric in the way that McKittrick describes. Colston alone was responsible for the enslavement of 84,000 Africans, 19,000 of whom died during voyages to the Americas and the Caribbean. His statue was a material symbol of the continuance of ways of thinking about Black people as less than human, of the residues and remains of colonialism that permeate public spaces and institutions, including universities, and which continue to impact on the health and wellbeing of Black people today.

So the people of Bristol's undisciplined act in removing the statue, in the midst of a global pandemic which has affected Black people disproportionately, I think can be viewed as a public health intervention. They removed a source of real, felt pain; their act was a healing act which creatively countered the logics of historical remembrance, and the joy of this moment was captured by Vanessa Kisuule, who was the Bristol City Poet from 2018–2020. Her spoken word poem "Hollow," published on Twitter, went viral in the days afterward:

7 The phrase is taken from an exercise developed from McKittrick's work by Eugenia Zuroski (2020).

8 This is the definition adopted by the World Health Organisation in 2011 (iris.who.int/handle/10665/373580)

You came down easy in the end.
The righteous wrench of two ropes in a grand plié.

Briefly, you flew, corkscrewed, then met the ground
With the clang of toy guns, loose change, chains, a rain of cheers.

Standing ovation on the platform of your neck.
Punk Ballet. Act 1.
There is more to come.

And who carved you?
They took such care with that stately pose and propped chin.

Wise and virtuous, the plaque assured us.
Victors wish history odourless and static.
But history is a sneaky mistress.

Moves like smoke, Colston,
Like saliva in a hungry mouth.

This is your rightful home,
Here, in the pit of chaos with the rest of us.

Take your twisted glory and feed it to the tadpoles.
Kids will write raps to that syncopated splash.

I think of you lying in the harbour
With the horrors you hosted.
There is no poem more succinct than that.

But still you are permanent.
You who perfected the ratio.
Blood to sugar to money to bricks.

Each bougie building we flaunt haunted by bones.
Children learn and titans sing
Under the stubborn rust of your name.

But the air is gently throbbing with newness.
Can you feel it?

Colston, I can't get the sound of you from my head.

Countless times I passed that plinth,
Its heavy threat of metal and marble.

But as you landed, a piece of you fell off, broke away,
And inside, nothing but air.

This whole time, you were hollow. (Kisuule 2021)

The event reverberates in Kisuule's poem through images of dance, song, and poetry; the statue's fall is a creative release from the "heavy threat" felt by the poet when she walked past it. The movement and sound of the statue crashing to the ground is imagined as a source of inspiration for poets, children, and rappers, as for once it isn't a Black body which lies destroyed

but a once-celebrated hollow likeness of a man who, in Kisuule's words, "perfected the ratio, / Blood to sugar to money to bricks." This accounting, this data, is "permanent," Kisuule reminds us; but it is also displaced and, like the statue itself, ultimately hollow. Instead, Kisuule offers us in the performance of her poem an embodied, healthful, and joyful expression of Black life and creativity that emerged from this momentary release from the trauma of 2020. The crashing statue and poem together create sonic waves (and, in the case of the statue, literal waves) that pass through a city "throbbing with newness," an unquantifiable rebirth with reverberations that travelled up the hill to the University of Bristol and its Faculty of Life Sciences.

With the worldwide spotlight on Bristol, the University of Bristol began to intensify its efforts to address its historic ties to the transatlantic slave trade; and one of the things to emerge from this was, in fact, another statue. The Faculty of Life Sciences announced that it had decided to commission a statue of Henrietta Lacks, the African-American woman who, as she was dying from cervical cancer in 1951, had cancer cells taken from her body and cultured by a medical scientist, creating the first cells to survive outside the human body—an immortal cell line. Taken without consent, the existence and usage of the cells only became known to her family in the 1970s, and it is only more recently than that that the story of Henrietta Lacks has become more widely known. HeLa cells are now used routinely around the world and have played a role in many medical breakthroughs and research, including at the University of Bristol, where they have been used in COVID-19 research. Sculpted by Black Bristolian artist Helen Wilson-Roe, who had previously produced portraits of Lacks and established a relationship with the Lacks family, the recently erected statue is the first public statue of a Black woman made by a Black woman in the UK. With the announcement also came a commitment to "an educational plan that will mark the start of the Faculty of Life Sciences working on the decolonisation of our curriculum" (University of Bristol 2021). In this, the Faculty of Life Sciences joins many departments, schools, and faculties each working on a decolonizing agenda and, in many cases, working together on this ongoing process.

What I think this demonstrates, or rather an aspect of the story that I'm trying to tell here through the example of Bristol and my university, is that the broad and global movement to decolonize is arguably where the greatest contact, communication, and cross-disciplinary work between the sciences, arts, and the humanities is taking place within the contemporary university. It is decolonization and the search for racial justice which is bringing scientists and humanities scholars, as well as artists, writers, and

community activists around the same table, to share and discuss ideas and strategies in the name of changing institutional culture. It perhaps remains to be seen whether researchers across disciplines will continue to operate within the same closed biocentric system of knowledge, but the whole point of the decolonization movement at its most radical—and we can certainly debate what kinds of non-radical or watered-down versions of this project may be emerging—is to bring into question the dominant system of knowledge and the disciplinary cultures and divisions that persist within it. The events of 2020, within the broader context of the movement to decolonize, have in Bristol brought about projects which traverse the medical, scientific, humanistic, artistic, and public; conversations which refuse the usual boundaries of faculty, and academic vs non-academic, and perhaps offer an opportunity to start to overcome the "bifurcation of science and creativity" and the attendant reduction of Blackness to abjection that McKittrick describes. The city's Black poets and artists, like Vanessa Kisuule and Helen Wilson-Roe, celebrate this change, and their work and engagement with the city and university points toward ways in which we might begin to re-envision Black health and life through creative research, art, and writing in which data capture and description are replaced by a renegotiation of the definition and boundaries of science and creativity which speaks directly to the communities in which we work and live. For those of us who work in literature and science studies, the lesson, I think, is for us to recognize the kinds of interdisciplinary tales that might otherwise pass us by; stories in which we, through our institutions, cities, and communities, are deeply embedded.

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