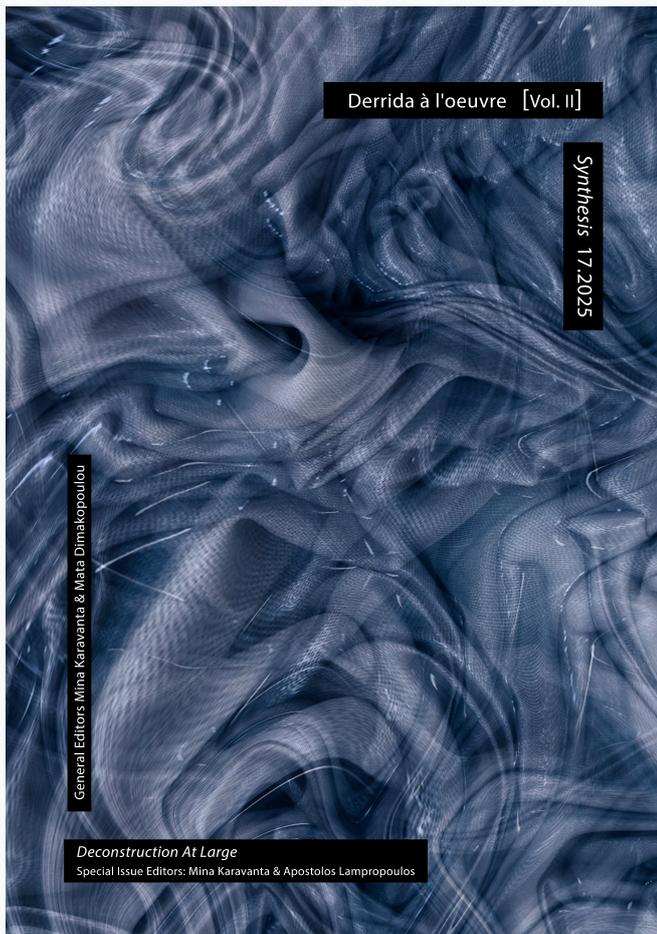


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Derrida à l'œuvre: Deconstruction at Large



Taking Black British Literature to the Deconstruction Table

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Taking Black British Literature to the Deconstruction Table

Joan Anim-Addo

Abstract

This paper interrogates what might be gained by exploring Black British Literature through Derridean lens as framed by Elisabeth Weber's assertion that "Deconstruction is Justice" (2005). Concerns cluster around justice and injustice, how these relate to race, whose voices are heard on the subject and how these fold into philosophical thought's functioning in the academy. The paper attempts to centralise women's and UK voices including Beckles-Raymond's "critical philosophy of race" while amplifying Monahan's insistence that "the metaphor of racism as a kind of global political struggle for territory" is no "mere metaphor."

Black British Literature—a diverse aesthetic born of Britain's erstwhile empire and its interlinked diaspora—is contextualised here within coloniality and resistance as a literary product presenting an urgent complexity that remains little appreciated and largely disregarded in the UK university. At the same time, the field's scholarly growth appears more evident abroad than within the UK. Notably, the corpus raises political, ethical, cultural and aesthetic questions crucial to an understanding of persistent exclusionary academic practice perceived by many as itself requiring urgent decolonial attention. Moreover, as Bhabra suggests, critical theory itself has "not been immune to calls to "decolonize,"" particularly regarding its persistent refusal to acknowledge questions of coloniality's continued impact in the present (2021).

Jacqueline Crooks' *Fire Rush* (2023) and Sara Collins's *The Confessions of Frannie Langton* (2019) contribute a literary focus to this paper. They are selected for their figuring of questions of memory and black confinement. How might justice be brought to the fore regarding such writing and to what effect? How Black British Literature might promote the textual real to foreground the

many contradictions upon which it is founded while exposing injustice is examined through an example that is considered deconstruction praxis.

This paper takes up the implicit invitation to the deconstruction table, that, in “Deconstruction is Justice” (2005), Elisabeth Weber appears to offer to scholars troubled by concerns with injustice, particularly in relation to the humanities and deconstruction’s relationship to the field. Staged in some measure as a provocation, Weber argues that Derrida’s *Force of Law* (1990) so distinctively evidences his unambiguous and definitive approach to justice, that deconstruction can no longer be considered by its critics “as an aestheticizing, apolitical and ahistorical exercise” (38). Reinforcing a signifying openness-to-others position, Weber quotes Derrida’s assertion that “justice, however un-presentable it may be, doesn’t wait. It is that which must not wait” (*ibid.*). Importantly, Weber cites as evidence of Derrida’s stance on justice, his “outspoken” criticism relative to major historical issues including South African apartheid and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. She instances, too, the pattern of increased engagement within the humanities, described as “answering to the others call” (38). Specifically in relation to this last, Weber asserts that Derrida’s writing has undoubtedly contributed to a broad responsiveness to the “other,” particularly given his focus on memory and *aporias*, “that make justice an experience of the impossible” (*ibid.*). Responding to Weber, and alert to the urgency related to the body of work referred to in this discussion as “Black British writing,” the justice orientated approach presented here necessarily remains alert at several scales. Specifically, borrowing from Katherine McKittrick’s concept of black geographies arising from her “plantation thesis” revealing of the persistent “uneven racial geographies” that pattern postslavery lives (“Plantation Futures” 3), key physical spaces of the university—classroom and the discursive space centrally focused on the literary—are considered as important. The discussion brings into play concerns pertaining to region, memory, and an on-going coloniality, philosophy and race. Such a layered focus serves to highlight the particular academic “confinement”—Weber’s term—considered here to typify the UK’s dire situation. That this is linked to the shrinking Humanities at a time when, as Hortense Spillers notes, scholars seem to have “abrogated from any desire...for a vantage point onto a larger sociality that shapes our becoming” (683) indicates only too well the scale of the problem.

It should perhaps be stated at the outset, that not being a philosopher but a literary scholar, albeit a rare one by virtue of being Black, British and

established within the UK academy—which in 2009 appointed me its first such full professor for the Humanities—I intend to bring voices, black and female, along with a certain first-person positionality, into the debate. This is especially since the urgency of the situation only worsens while I remain the UK’s sole Black British full professor of Literature. Furthermore, attuned to absences—of women’s voices, Black women’s, and Black British women’s specifically—in debates of this nature, I underscore that I have brought to the figurative table my own chair, along with meanings related to Black Britishness. This includes meanings pertaining to Caribbeanness which is considered, in this context, one of the body of writing’s distinctive sub-sets, corresponding to place of birth in relation to Britain’s former colonial empire. It should be noted, too, that this discussion follows an earlier paper linking some similar negotiation in relation to the writing of Derrida and Edward Said, and questioning black women’s “absence from philosophical discourse” (Anim-Addo, “Towards a Post-Western Humanism Made to the Measure of Those Recently Recognized as Human,” 250), equated in this discussion with considerations of critical theory. Moreover, it should also be underscored that my use of the term “black” in this discussion are aligned with Achille Mbembe’s, who, in *Critique of Black Reason* (2017) writes of those who “transform the name (black) into a symbol of beauty and pride, and use it as a sign of radical defiance, a call to revolt, desertion or insurrection” (47).

Given the justice orientation indicated, it seems appropriate to foreground the question of region and memory which the “at large” focus of this Special Issue surely invites, not the least in relation to Black British Literature. Yet, to highlight a regional focus is to amplify the notion of “confinement,” as Weber describes it, of enclosure, or more appropriately its rupturing through “disenclosure” in Mbembe’s conceptualising of it¹ and of the liminal space that Black British Writing, as a body of work, continues to occupy in the UK university. It is also to centre some of McKittricks’s concerns with space as racialised limitation. That this is significant to the current discussion relates, too, to Spillers’ point, above, and to the “coloniality” that continues to apply in much of the university or Higher Education system, specifically in the UK, seat of Britain’s former empire.

In effect, then, taking Black British Literature to the deconstruction table relates less to a desire to disrupt, than to assess the openness to Black voices, specifically Black British voices, including women’s. In other words, as already indicated, this project constitutes a query concerning “disenclosure” as Mbembe refers to the process of opening up to inclusion, one that is echoed here as of some urgency to the university, perhaps especially to the humanities

in the UK academy. Consider the central taken for granted meanings of the humanities, in terms of its understanding of the human. Consider, too, Black British Writing's painful birth as a direct result of brutal and exclusionary colonial practice in relation to the Black human. Should the effective refusal on the part of the UK university to listen to or address the black human subject through the body of black British writing not be considered unjust?

Relatedly, since the exclusion of black women is a particular focus of my scholarly work, I have previously questioned this as “absence from philosophical discourse” foregrounding, specifically “Sylvia Wynter’s theorising of the human” (Anim-Addo, “Toward a Post-Western Humanism” 250). Notably within this Derrida-Wynter exploration, Wynter frames her appeal to justice as a “second self-assertion” in which the human is reconfigured to include not just Western Man, but the full range of humanity excluded by colonial reasoning (*ibid.*) I suggest that at the core of both Wynter and Spillers’s argument is a lived awareness of coloniality. It is worth emphasising, also, that coloniality—which might be read, indirectly, through a range of UK research findings including Arday 2022; Campion and Clark 2021; and Tate and Page 2018—remains in the twenty-first century no mere abstraction and should not be considered a feature of the all too distant past unconnected to the present.² Within Wynter’s twentieth century appeal to justice, or “second self-assertion,” the human remains still not liberated from colonial reasoning.

In British colonies, published material marketed and forcibly consumed *as education* within my lifetime, for example, illustrates quotidian yet complex meanings of coloniality, including my own direct experience. While such material is no longer in circulation as textbooks, and therefore has vanished, mostly, from library shelves, it should be stressed that the related toxicity—of that which was routinely taught and learnt through such items compulsorily totemised as knowledge—is less easily eradicated. An example of such material is the *Collins’ Wide World Geography Reader*,³ which routinely nurtured the most enlightened—in Britain and its colonies—who would, in turn, shape the academic directions of the next generation of scholars in Britain as well as its varied colonised spaces. For those who succeeded within the colonial system, a particularised colonial geography serviced their formative learning leavened by lessons of Empire—as Austin Clarke’s memoir, *Growing up Stupid Under the Union Jack* (1980), illustrates only too well. In this essay, the *Wide World Geography Readers* typical of such knowledge production of the era serve to illustrate the colonial geography that came to dominate all our thinking. The problem, I suggest, is that this holds for white and black humans raised on such colonial propaganda that too frequently passed for education.

Moreover, such knowledge continues to linger at least subliminally in the memory. All too often undetected, it continues to shape our institutions and the spaces that black humans are permitted to inhabit within them.

That all pupils were made to learn, for example, of the extent of the empire consisting of the “British Isles... colonies, dependencies, protectorates, and spheres of influence in all parts of the world” (Collins 149 n.d.) seems from this distance in time innocuous enough. Yet, it is worth reflecting on what exactly was being learnt, how, and what differentiated the understanding of British Isles readers, for example, as opposed to those—generally considered “natives”—for whom the particular colony was “home.” Learners gleaned from such widely exported textbooks, for example, the following: “Negroes form half the population of the British West Indies. *As a rule, they are lazy, and that is one reason why the islands are less prosperous than formerly.* (Ibid. 112 n.d.). Herein is a key means by which anti-Black racism circulated to inform a differentiated Black/White subject formation hugely detrimental to the black human.

It bears questioning: first, how truthful Collins’ “negro” statement might be. Second, what are the many meanings that arise from such a statement? Third, why was the unspecified period “prosperous” and for whom? Also, which learners throughout the Empire—from the British Isles, through to its “colonies dependencies, protectorates and spheres of influences” (Collins 149)—might have been expected to register similar meanings after reading such a pronouncement? Finally, how detrimental might such information be for the subject formation of some learners, even if it is assumed that the majority were not “Negroes”? The questions posed in this discussion serve also as reminders of core lessons taught by Frantz Fanon about whose writing Mbembe concludes, “It is not difficult to fathom why... decolonization came to be so closely associated with the fundamental concept of being, time, and self-creation” (*Out of the Dark Night* 53). Should such a recent past not be considered in terms of injustice? Arising from this, and as Black humans fashion their “self-creation” through writing, what meanings might be understood by our universities persistently not valuing the knowledge that Black British writing offers?

In terms of “being,” children growing up in the colonial Caribbean, for example, given their generally impoverished post-slavery circumstances, including severely limited schooling opportunities, were all too frequently expected to learn *by heart* about the greatness of the “Mother Country” which the Collins textbook, for example, depicted on every page. At the same time, to successfully navigate the schooling system, they, like their peers in the

“Mother Country”, were expected to internalise untruths and distortions, such as above, favorable to Britain and Britishness alongside statements hugely detrimental to their sense of self. Moreover, especially given the expense of the imported colonial textbooks, rote learning was frequently the single feasible teaching method available in poor colonised settings, as indeed in ill-funded settings within the so-called “Mother Country.” The black and white, or perhaps the sum of it is that at one level, black children were being routinely—and inhumanely—made to internalise negative stereotypes about themselves while white children’s superior positionality was being simultaneously reinforced. Does not such a situation—reflected alongside others in Black British Literature—suggest the need for justice?

That black and white children and adults might meet in very different social or educational circumstances in later temporal settings seemed to be beyond the colonial imagination, but what would happen when they meet in future periods of migration either in schools, in universities, or indeed, in professional positions? Who would occupy which positions? Who would be the producers of knowledge and who, the consumers? McKittrick’s black geographies helps us to interpret the spatialising that has only just begun to be addressed in UK universities and is currently and sweepingly being addressed primarily by directing black bodies into “doing diversity,” not into scholarship. However, as Sara Ahmed highlights, for some scholars, “the word diversity invokes difference but does not necessarily evoke commitment to action or distributive justice” (53). Furthermore, as Ahmed assesses it, for some, “the institutional preference for the term diversity is the sign of the lack of commitment to change and might even allow organisations such as universities to conceal the operation of systematic inequalities.”

Thus, the current state of UK higher education reflects accurately the problem that has been created over time, and which Gabriella Beckles-Raymond takes up in her essay, addressed primarily to Black UK academics, “A Love Letter to Black British Intellectuals: ‘Do We Really Want to be Integrated into a Burning House?’” Beckles-Raymond’s “burning house” represents none other than the UK university system currently undergoing radical budgetary cuts, consequences and related control impacting the near invisibility of Black British scholars within the system.

Shedding light on the history of the coloniality of the UK situation, the ‘Uses of Colonies’ section of the compulsory Collins’ textbook, above, further projected the coloniser’s singular view regarding the roles of colonised territories. Thus, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and South Africa, for example, furnished new homes “for the overflowing population of the mother country”

(Collins, 151 n.d.). The value of such colonies also derived from their natural products including timber, corn, gold, meat, wool, and diamonds. On the other hand, reinforcing that “the sun never sets on the British Empire,” Malta and Aiden, for example, were designated as shelter for warships and storage while Singapore and Hong Kong were appointed as “trading stations... from which British goods are distributed” (ibid.). Most importantly, such markers of Empire were designated as “markets for British manufactured goods” (ibid.). Why this is important to the debate is that, despite scholars finding it difficult to absorb, the published book represents at so many levels, just such another market for British goods. And what market can there possibly be for books by people presented for centuries as unable to think?

In other words, the marketisation or commodification of published material might be traced also to within the hallowed, rarified world of academia, including its literary and philosophical spheres. Furthermore, in a world that has evolved from predestined or predetermined racial and social groupings and their related book markets, one such place where current absences should be pinpointed is the university, especially as viewed from angles familiar to those habitually excluded, though persistently seeking opportunities to represent themselves as thinking beings, as highlighted here through Black British Writing. The bodies in UK classrooms, on academic panels and glimpsed in conference halls in European institutions alert us to this situation of exclusion and its possible meanings, if we care to notice and take steps to call it out.

Conversely, to directly address what has happened to the colonial learning discussed above is also to begin to appreciate that much of it persists in that which has begun to be recognised as coloniality, inclusive of large and small acts of racism and attendant violence. Often dormant, a residual violence lies, also, in absences such as that which many within the university refuse to acknowledge. Danielle Davis calls out such absence when she states:

Philosophy struggles with dark ‘otherness’ and struggles with gender. This is because the spaces of philosophy are both colonised and epistemically violent to those outside the realm of the Western canon, while also perverting those who are within it with the consequence of uncritically replicating coloniality and misogyny (3).

It is in acknowledgement of such absence, its consequences rooted in coloniality, and its derived practices that this paper speaks. The absences already noted—those of black British women especially—connect also with questions of region in relation to literary discourse.

Surprisingly, perhaps, there is also an ongoing and increasing determination to move forward,⁴ and though seldom discussed, a focus on region carries its own complexities, particularly involving concerns with race, itself central to this discussion. In this regard, Albert Atkin's distinctive knowledge of the "racial landscape" within philosophical discourse suggests a need to proceed with some caution (515). As Atkin warns, even within critical philosophy of race, an "Americentrism of the subject" is to be found and with it, a "comfortable isolationism" (ibid.). Therein lie pointers to key limitations that serve to inhibit development within the field. Might deconstruction theorists be happily considered as mainly habituating such "comfortable isolationism?"⁵

Bringing a different geography to the fore, primarily that of the UK and its largely hidden, ongoing racial injustice rooted in colonial practice, some caution seems prudent. Yet, returning to Weber's argument, the appeal persists, not the least through its referencing of the 'era of the witness' alongside Derrida's specific 'witnessing' within it, in terms that bring into relation Toni Morrison's focus in *Beloved* on the "disremembered and unaccounted for" (1987). For such reasons, and because I carry first-hand knowledge of the racial injustice which Morrison treats so meaningfully within the *textual space*—further discussed in this paper—I speak to Weber's intervention as invitation to the *deconstruction table*. At the same time, although it should be underscored that my approach is tentative, given a wider, interlinked and necessarily historical awareness, the Derrida "at large" focus represents without doubt an important step in the process of "disenclosure" required of deconstruction and Derridean thought.

On the one hand, support for such similar praxis is evident in Barnor Hesse's direct questioning through his paper, "Derrida's 'Black Accent: Decolonial Deconstruction,'" which offers much needed encouragement towards change. Hesse's focus aligns with my concern with textual space that brings racial injustice and decoloniality to wider attention. This is part of the work that many black writers, whether scholarly or more focused on the craft of writing, take seriously.⁶ Indicatively, referring to an interview given by Derrida in 2004, Hesse probes whether within Derrida's writing, there remains a "hidden kernel" either not yet discovered or not "sufficiently recognized for its *value* to his work" (4). Such *value*, Hesse suggests, points to "the logic of deconstruction as one specifically directed against Eurocentrism," which in turn "opens up a pathway" for those who are "interested in the relation between deconstruction and decoloniality" (ibid.).

It seems worth underscoring that a stance against Eurocentrism relates to recognition of the long *durée* of racialised colonial injustice including a

persistent misrepresentation of the Black human. Furthermore, as Hesse reveals, Derrida claims both to have *always* had an “investment in the question of racism” (5) and to have confirmed a sensitivity to “diverse racisms” linked to his childhood in colonial Algeria. These arguments appeal to my own praxis—developed, in part, from early classroom teaching attuned to Paulo Freire’s theorising (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*) amongst others, especially that of feminism, that insists on a cycle through which theory informs action leading to further insights.⁷ Also, following Hesse, I find particularly promising, in terms of possibility, the glimpse of that which might be considered Derrida’s *shifting*, colonial-centric *geography* that informs my own interest in deconstruction and decoloniality. A focus on geography certainly promises to assist with movement from the enclosure that currently typifies much deconstruction rhetoric tied to semantics and esoteric, seemingly exclusive debate.

From the above and relative to a black geographies conceptualising, this paper turns to focus primarily on spaces that evidence racial injustice in the UK. Three main sections follow. The first examines the interlinked spaces—textual and physical—those of Black British Literature and of the UK university classroom, the latter, itself one within which the textual, as space revealing of black British thought is invariably absent or severely limited. Each indicates on-going racial injustice deeply connected to British colonial practice. The second section addresses the question: what might be gained by examining through a deconstruction lens such “secreted racism” (McKittrick) within the university? The third considers deconstruction as praxis by drawing on an example of my own writing addressed through the university space within a praxis that moves beyond witnessing and involves a “politics of friendship,” about which Derrida is voluble.⁸

To reiterate, I speak primarily as a black literary scholar within the UK’s racialised scholarly landscape, which might yet be described as proving itself in the twenty-first century, incapable of organically producing black scholarship (Rollock, 2019; Arday, 2022; Singh et al 2023). Since racial injustice serves largely to exclude black and female voices, as scholars, they are foregrounded in this discussion. Additionally, having found theory itself to function at times as the very engine of Eurocentrism in the university classroom, a space considered here insufficiently highlighted as perpetuating racial injustice, I have been concerned to modify the theoretical through a process referenced in earlier publication as *carnivalising theory* (Anim-Addo, *Touching the Body* 228-75).

The process of *carnivalising*, as I argue it, adds and makes evident other-than-European cultural traces within a selected theorising stance, thus

rendering the original ideas more meaningful within, or with reference to, a cultural artefact, for example, a novel, which does not share—in part or as a whole—the same culture as the selected theory. Such cultural-theoretical adjustment acknowledges the long-term impact of the colonial project—regardless of the coloniser—within which we humans have all become implicated.

Importantly for this discussion, then, negotiating the present requires of us key intellectual meeting points, or crossings, to best enable our inhabiting of this shared planet, to best adapt and survive. Indeed, it is just such an intellectual crossing that this paper—ever mindful of the significance of even a little reciprocity—is attempting. Wynter, author and theorist, mentioned above, in her theoretical deliberations alters the scale of such negotiation when she refers to her conceptualising as “a second self-assertion,” of the human “as opposed to merely the Western bourgeois” that undertakes the task of the “altering of our systems of meanings, and their privileged texts.”⁹

That Wynter’s writing, particularly *The Hills of Hebron* (1962), was forged first through fiction and playwriting within the UK’s Windrush context is taken to be significant, particularly in its openness to a process of carnivalising theory as I have argued elsewhere.¹⁰ To briefly elaborate, the notion of carnivalising allows a theorising process that is more dialogic and open to cultural perspectives including those habitually dismissed—such as that of the Caribbean, or even of the more heterogeneous Black British field—from considerations of critical theory. Similarly, Sealey and Davis (2024) suggest a theoretical praxis that centralises “thinking with the Caribbean,” which they reference as “creolizing critical theory.” They argue that “in centring Caribbean thought as critical theory,” they “aim to demonstrate the critical interventions for modes of thinking for which Black and Native death is not a side issue, but rather what is most urgent for critically reimagining the category of the human (xviii). They cite Gurminder Bhambra’s alert, which, referring specifically to “institutional critical theory in North America” emphasises the enduring pattern within which, essentially, theory circulates “around specific figures of European Enlightenment, and its critique does not venture outside that frame.” I suggest, that in many ways, Bhambra’s observation applies more widely. Such argument might readily include the UK. Indeed, in questioning where deconstruction stands regarding such matters this discussion highlights a similar phenomenon, one that appears to many “others” to be increasingly pressing. If Bhambra is right, what impact might such material have on university classroom learning? How might this link to the rarity of Black British philosophy scholars in the UK university, for example? How might “secreted racism” be involved?

Sealey and Davis further make the point that creolizing critical theory is grounded in concern “about which theories, histories, and practices, are most helpful for understanding the past, thinking the present, and constructing a more liberatory future.” How might deconstruction fare in relation to such terms when the past points to coloniality and its widespread negative meanings not just for those consigned as “natives,” but planetarily, and while the present points to marginalisation or “confinement”? How interested might deconstruction be in a more liberatory future? If so, for whom, and how much does context matter? Is deconstruction to be considered primarily Americentric?

Context: textual–physical spaces and racial injustice (UK)

McKittrick’s scholarship in black geographies central to which is attention to geography as itself racialised and productive of a spatialising of the many aspects of Black lives in diasporic places—as the *Wide World* example, above, illustrates—supports an insider’s view of the history of the UK’s higher education situation variously presented as failing to produce black scholars. In many respects such a situation might be regarded as “secreted anti-black violence,” a term indicative of McKittrick’s conceptualising framework (Hudson 235) which situates such violent practices within the wider context of colonialism and anti-blackness. While violence linked to direct colonial prohibition of the written word for black writers is neither widely remembered nor acknowledged, recent UK publications attest to the continued impact of such publishing barriers (see Kean “Writing the Future”). Alert to the barriers erected through colonialism’s prohibition against black writing feared for “making blackness transparently knowable” (Hudson 238), I argue that such barriers continue to serve a type of territorialising negatively impacting upon Black British literary production. The limited textual space that is opened from time to time, indeed makes Black lives “knowable,” and importantly, has produced among others, the signifying neo-slave genre¹¹ which directly reinvents colonial existence to reveal present-day continuities regarding black lives. The textual spaces to which this paper draws attention, therefore, include the neo-slave narrative, specifically, Sara Collins’ award-winning 2019 novel, *The Confessions of Frannie Langton*, alongside Jacqueline Crooks’ debut novel, *Fire Rush* (2023) and my own libretto, *Imoinda or She Who Will Lose Her name*, a neo-slave narrative serving, here, as exemplifying deconstruction praxis.

Underscoring a Black British focus, I address selected textual spaces to reveal hidden realities of black lives, alongside contemporary Black British

philosophical thought and particularly Beckles-Raymond's, concerned with critical philosophy of race. Beckles-Raymond's focus on "ethical blackness" and the need to reinscribe the UK's earlier moment, celebrated as "political blackness" (2024) committed to "intersectional justice" informs the perspective that I develop here (140). Ethical blackness, as Beckles-Raymond confirms, is an "active commitment" relating directly to "the very urgent matter of the persistent destruction of racialized peoples' lives." In light of such urgency, three key questions arise. First, what might be gained by examining Black British Literature through a deconstruction lens? Second, how might an approach through ethics and intersectional injustice, as highlighted by Beckles-Raymond following Patricia Hill Collins, shed light on (in)justice within present-day UK institutions? Taking deconstruction as affording philosophical praxis, what role might ethical blackness play and how might deconstruction itself be transformed to achieve intersectional justice? The ethical dimension, as Beckles-Raymond argues, "helps create space to have meaningful and very necessary dialogues."

The opening of *The Confessions of Frannie Langton* reveals a black woman whose first words are: "My trial starts the way my life did: a squall of elbows and shoving and spit. From the prisoners' hold, they take me through the gallery, down the stairs and past the table crawling with barristers and clerks." Frannie's words link directly to both Weber's paper, the title of which draws from Derrida's arresting and provocative assertion, "Deconstruction is Justice," which, itself carries a peculiar appeal to those who, like Frannie, have lived "intersectional domination and racial injustice" (Beckles-Raymond). Notably, within the concept of injustice, lived memory is entangled.

Frannie's is an entanglement in a history of enslavement and incarceration giving rise to complexities named or felt as injustice. If as McKittrick argues, "racialised subjectivities, are produced in different geographical and historical spaces" ("Black and 'Cause I'm Black I'm Blue" 127), the reader discovers how Frannie is "produced" as a racialised subject in the liminal spaces—master's plantation house, ship, servants' London quarters, London courtroom and cell—she *must* inhabit. I refer to liminal spaces not as thresholds for learning as betterment but where the Black self learns lived restriction. Such racially inflicted restriction in textual spaces draws from real Black lives. When Frannie who is multiply restricted, is imprisoned in London, the spatial change from plantation to metropolitan city represents merely different scales of racialised confinement. Within this particularised spatialising of blackness, its mobilities include travel from Caribbean plantation to London. The fictionalised textual space is treating affect with regard to blackness,

“as produced within systems of power and intersectional domination” (Beckles-Raymond: 2024).

Similarities are to be found with Crooks’ central character, Yamaye, despite a life story temporally distanced from chattel slavery. A twentieth century inner-city Londoner with a tight circle of female friends, Yamaye’s life is also shaped by race-based hostility revealed as containment within the liminal spaces that structural racism might allow. Crook’s opening page offers a close-up of Yamaye’s friends, referred to as ‘Tombstone Estate gyals’ whose escape from their mean, social housing and intersectionally squeezed lives leads “deep, into the dance-hall Crypt,” an “underworld” space featuring “[D]ance-hall darkness. Pile-up bodies. Ganja clouds” (3) within which they might lose themselves in a ritual re-birth given that this is also primarily a sonic space. Liminality similarly shapes their experience of housing, employment, and education. While Frannie will die because of racial injustice, and Yamaye might die because injustice has exploded into racial uprising and flight to other unfamiliar UK city spaces, in the British university, black students choosing to engage a degree programme are—more than other groups—subject to failure, a situation approximating not to social, but educational death, as lengthy research findings (ECU 2015; Miller 2016; Ross et al 2018, Arday et al 2022) continue to highlight.

Despite London’s long established black population—some five centuries at least (Anim-Addo, *Longest Journey* 1995)—black students are unlikely to find themselves taught by black professors since black professors have only recently been considered of value to the university system. Minimally represented in the most prestigious universities and in academic subjects, such as philosophy, black (full) professors are territorialised in the UK university system, principally in “new,” less prestigious universities. Nicola Rollock’s research (2019) uncovered 25 black women full professors in the UK in 2018. She interviewed twenty, of whom only two had been professors for more than ten years so that the entire UK was best positioned to boast a record two black women full professors at the turn of the 21st century. Half of Rollock’s sample was born overseas, a factor which doubtless contributed to their cultural resilience within the UK university system, itself with a long history of educational malpractice begun in the colonies and followed by post-Windrush moments of crisis within British education history involving the offspring of the formerly colonised (Coard 1971; Stone 1981). Such is the enduring legacy of racial inequality currently being highlighted within the UK university.

In effect, real life opportunity or lack of it is reflected in fiction and in turn is corroborated through educational data for the achievement of black

students in the UK. Black students, unlikely to be directed towards books in which they might find Black British thought must find acceptable ways of addressing available material—much of it colonially derived—in order to successfully manoeuvre within the UK system. It bears repeating that Black British thought, as writing of any genre, occupies minimal space in the UK university. The first Black British Writing postgraduate programme was validated only in 2015. It should be noted that the body of work became acceptable in the UK university context first as “writing,” to be differentiated from Literature which is valued aesthetically. Following such acceptance this body would later be reconfigured and selected as Literature. Placing Black British literature within the debate about deconstruction, then, it is important to consider the liminal space that this corpus occupies in the UK university. Similarly, that the crucial question concerning race and its relation to injustice is currently being played out within UK universities offers one way of reading 21st century reality in which Britain is belatedly discovering itself as having been incapable of producing black scholars through the entirety of its educational system.

The UK University’s Secreted Racism

That *real* life chances are as precarious as those drawn via fiction might be illustrated through educational data for the achievement of black students in the UK. Black voices have spoken out regarding such spatialising through a long history of educational (mal)practice begun in British colonies (Gordon, 1963) and followed by post-Windrush moments of crisis within British education history significantly involving the offspring of the formerly colonised. Such is the enduring legacy of racial inequality currently being highlighted within the university (Alexander and Arday).

Moving from the signalling of ways in which chattel slavery and colonialism have served to assign restrictions—including the carceral—an approach to ethics holds some promise of further addressing the difficulties that persist in the present. Writing, for example, about an earlier period when different UK groups, including Asian, African and Caribbean in Britain, coalesced as “politically black,” Beckles-Raymond asks about the kinds of movement that might be made “towards the language of the ethical, while simultaneously reconstituting the ethical such that it entails a commitment to “intersectional justice” (“Conserving Ethical Blackness” 128). The proposition is interesting for the way in which it appears to stretch the concept of justice beyond a legality linked strictly to the law and those whose official business it is to enforce it. Moreover, borrowing from Patricia Hill Collins’ analysis of

intersectionality, Beckles-Raymond notes Collins' understanding of the nature of institutional legality and how it functions, namely, that even when laws need to be changed, institutions do not readily respond to the need for change without widescale pressure.

Similarly, the process of moving towards reconstituting the ethical so that it entails a commitment to intersectional justice, as Beckles-Raymond reminds us, requires "thinking beyond" a strict correspondence between justice and the law. Moreover, she proposes that the language of the ethical serves as a reminder "of the spiritual and moral transformation to which the pursuit of intersectional justice tends," but also its "commitment to planetary and human flourishing as the good" (128). By means of understanding, then, that all might contribute to the process of intersectional justice, a radical possibility for change is opened and gives way to praxis combining both theory and related practice.

Such practice might be discerned through approaches taken in the wake of the "Black Lives Matter" movement. Most usually thought of as anti-racist praxis, it stresses a role for all in unlearning and disrupting a range of "fallacies" including: (i) individualistic (ii) legalistic (iii) tokenistic (iv) ahistorical and (v) fixed (Desmond and Emirbayer). Relative to such thought, this article contemplates how the space that the deconstruction table represents, might be one where Black voices are heard, specifically Black British voices, especially given that only too few Black British voices—women's for example—are involved. Again, the UK's dismal record—of 1,166 undergraduate modules in the UK, only one was found directly addressing the philosophy of race (see Chauhan et al)—suggests answers to the absence of UK philosophical voices on the subject. Rather, as for Black British Literature as a corpus, interested students might be considered as having had to negotiate through a hostile environment characterised not by Beckles-Raymond's notion of "the good," but rather, "a squall of elbows, shoving and spit" (ibid).

Praxis: *Imoinda* at Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, Or, What White Women Might Choose To Do

Agreeing Hesse's notion of deconstruction as intervention while responding to Elaine Swan's, "What are White People to Do? Listening, Challenging Ignorance, Generous Encounters and the 'Not Yet' as Diversity Research Praxis" (Swan), this section centralises the question of praxis. Swan offers an exacting account of the necessary task of theorising praxis, while acknowledging the range of extant critical race perspectives, including traditions

by women and Black scholars, and pointing to three key methods of praxis encouraged by theorists to date: “political ‘listening,’ challenging racism and developing generous encounters” (560). While Swan successfully represents such action at a theoretical level through attention to a range of activist voices, I shall attempt to illustrate the praxis to which she points through an example involving my own writing and some deep transformative action—albeit framed by the caveat that such examples are only too rare—on the part of white colleagues, women, who took the crucial first step towards such praxis. Notably, this example began with the key step of making the choice to act upon the world in relation to a matter appearing to be unjust. To emphasise the point: it should be underscored that the first step towards praxis is making a choice to take action; that is, to actively engage the kind of “thinking beyond” to which Beckles-Raymond refers.

Especially since details of this project have been published elsewhere¹² and because my colleagues’ account, “Reclaiming the Human: Creolizing Feminist Pedagogy at Museum Frontiers” by Viv Golding and Maria Helena Lima remains available, I intend to briefly highlight only a few key points in relation to the research.¹³ First, the event that the colleagues explore gradually evolved from its beginnings as a process of “political listening”—Swan’s term—undertaken by my late colleague and friend, Giovanna Covi, who invited me to speak at her university and whose articulation of our shared interest might be understood as follows:

... a poetics of creolization as becoming, which is a status of constant in-between-ness, a continuous process; as such, it does not partake of the order of filiation, but rather of the order of alliance (see Deleuze and Guattari); creolizing is thus developed from affiliations (see Edward Said). Consequently, it does not inquire about genesis and lineage, upon which the colonial project has been built, but rather about relations among differences (see Lorna Burns). This is where, I contend, the hope to build a justly shared “planetary” (see Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*) rests (Covi, “Creolizing Cultures and Kinship” 106).

While a longer-term planetary vision is key to Covi’s thinking, what appears on reflection to be significant is the initial choice she made by wilfully acknowledging “relations among differences” within the university space. Regarding such “differences,” she chose first to activate the role of listener to a Black colleague as a crucial first step in the process. In this instance and notwithstanding Ahmed’s judicious warning (Swan), the action proved pivotal for the group that would subsequently develop as joint researchers. Before this,

we were never considered diversity researchers; rather, we were Literature specialists. We were also feminists, a positionality generalisable from McKittrick's "a quarrel and unmet promise" assessment (Hudson 236).

In this instance, however, Covi's "political" listening, as a feminist, contributed substantially towards "begin[ning] to work as a form of white praxis." In the longer term, this initial action would become a "responding to racism in research" (Swan). In other words, Covi's action—as a first step—should be read not merely as "listening" but as active understanding that all might contribute to the process of intersectional justice. It is precisely such a step that—often precarious, often involving potential professional risk to the self—nonetheless opens the type of radical possibility for change to which Beckles-Raymond refers and which, once begun, might give way to praxis combining both theory and necessary practice.

In the longer term, Covi's initial listening as praxis would lead to the first publication of my libretto, not in the UK where patterns of coloniality persist in relation to publishing Black British Writing. As Kristina Huang writes:

In 1996, writer and professor of Caribbean literature Joan Anim-Addo counter-wrote Behn's *Imoinda* through a libretto, titled *Imoinda, or She Who Will Lose Her Name*. In the twenty-five years since its first appearance, Anim-Addo's *Imoinda* has generated a number of scholarly and musical collaborations, and has been published in two versions: a 2003 bilingual edition, in English and Italian, published with academic essays in Trento, Italy; and a 2008 edition printed for a student production of the opera at the School of the Arts (SOTA) in Rochester, New York (Huang, *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, 2021).

Notably, Covi's action took place at the turn of the twentieth century, a time when it was particularly difficult for a Black British woman writer to be published as a novelist in the UK, let alone have a libretto published—a genre far too close to high European culture for publishers to consider such black publication marketable and therefore worth publishing. Yet, Covi's praxis, involving "thinking beyond" the real danger of hostilities within her prestigious university—verbal attacks, being disregarded for promotion, and so on—nevertheless focused on "seeking a solution." The result was a resolve upon which, again, she acted to make the text, *Imoinda*, possible.

On one level the problem demanded a seemingly straightforward "thinking beyond": a contemporary black woman had written a literary response to Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (1688), which, for scholarly reasons,

needed to be published. An established scholar herself, determinedly introducing literary “others” into her European classroom, Covi, by the process of translation, would make the writing available for critical study. By this means, the text first published bi-lingually, became available in English, so that publication in Italy marked the beginning of possible ongoing, wider dialogue. A generous encounter? Without doubt. Yet, Huang’s emphasising in 2021 *Imoinda*’s “silence” since publication, sounds a note of caution: “Productions around *Imoinda* have circulated across the United Kingdom, Italy, and the US. And yet, beyond Anim-Addo’s own essays,¹² there remains only a smattering of English literary scholarship that explores her counter-writing of Behn’s colonial “trope of blackness” (ibid).

How might scholars deconstruct such “silence” if not in the belief that the publishing—academic system/symbiosis would always result in the best available rising to the surface? Who is moved to action against silence of this nature, and why? Covi’s marked “thinking beyond,” her “seeking a solution” and “generous encounter” might be similarly identified in the action of another colleague, Maria Helena Lima, who also shared a “creolization” interest in the literary text and its place in the university classroom. Once the *Imoinda* text became available for classroom readers, Lima’s solution-seeking turned to how the libretto might—for further impact—be performed. Setting in motion a subsequent “generous encounter” with a composer colleague, Glenn McClure, in her university, Lima’s collaborative action resulted in the performance mentioned by Huang as “a student production of the opera at the School of the Arts (SOTA) in Rochester, New York.”

By such means, a series of “generous encounters” would predate Golding and Lima’s museum-based research, designed overarchingly as “networking research.” While “diversity research” would not have been the team’s chosen descriptor, the term is useful within this debate concerned with questions of justice and correspondingly, injustice.¹⁴ Notably, the term, diversity, might well, in time, serve as historical marker of the ways in which patterns of governmental change shape the university. Meanwhile, a question hovers around Humanities’ scholars’ relationship to the “doing” of “diversity work.” Has “diversity” always been the domain of non-humanities scholars? If so, why? What about diversifying the literature curriculum or that of philosophy?

Golding and Lima’s research events subsequently took place within a context that sought to uncover how, as the researchers write, “radical pedagogies” might “attempt to undo the consequences of Western modernity,” inextricably linked to colonialism (ibid.) Not surprisingly, “how museums might help, given their vexed histories” was also highlighted. Also, fully aware of the

“backdrop of oppression and privilege, and the weight of these” (Golding and Lima) in relation to the challenging museum context, the co-researchers nonetheless pursued “generous encounters” within the museum, as in other research sites, namely Italy, the Caribbean, the UK and USA. At the same time, the “networking” research was only possible because rare UK funding had in this instance been gained.¹⁵

Unmistakably, it is through the praxis of these white colleagues with whom I had long been a research collaborator that even the “smattering of English literary scholarship” exploring *Imoinda* as “counter-writing of Behn’s colonial trope of blackness” exists. Yet, I must insist regarding the ongoing debate, that the will towards praxis cannot continue to focus centrally on the either or of Whiteness or Blackness. Rather, it needs urgently to factor in action such as that which Beckles-Raymond refers to as acting upon a “commitment to intersectional justice” (2024). It is through such commitment that I was privileged to glimpse how my literary writing—Black British writing—might be engagingly presented within both the theatre space and the museum space with students. Similarly, the research action within the “transnational space inherent in *Imoinda*” alongside the “heritage” housed in the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, further extended earlier research and “politics of friendship” involvement with Viv Golding.

On many levels, then, *Imoinda*’s metaphorical travelling is cast as one of praxis. As such, the museum example involved a collaborative workshop placing the text, a neo-slave narrative, so as to highlight the museum’s “largely conceal[ed] performative and interpretative violence” (Hesse 6, citing Derrida), or problematic colonial history. Lima and Golding, therefore, highlight—among other things that their research addresses—the frontier site between the university and the museum, understandings of the text and its context, ways in which these further critical thinking, as well as emotional and sensory (re)connections with musical forms and art globally. They foreground, too, intercultural knowledge and creolised feminist-pedagogy, specifically in relation to hierarchies of power and control, responsibility, dialogic practice involving teachers and students, and witnessing, not the least, the raising of “diverse voices through embodied learning and multisensory activities.” One such student voice, that of Victoria Sandock, refers to her trail relating to “concepts of a shared history and global relationships,” finding “different connections that in turn displayed cross-cultural influences,” and to mimicking *Imoinda* to “rewrite the narrative of these artefacts for a different audience” (55). Thus, the students involved in revisioning “aspects of specific artifacts” engaged seriously their own and others’ learning within the museum site.

While Golding and Lima's publication does not mention praxis, these colleagues certainly did praxis, with its particularised combining of both theory and practice, as well as its working through the witnessing process to allow further insights for students and museum visitors. Nor did they mention "politics of friendship" which proved an important mechanism that made possible this praxis. All of this returns us to the question: why bring black British literature to the deconstruction table? Without doubt, the "at large" or wider context for considering Derridean ideas—beyond the play of the narrowly theoretical—allows possibilities that have not been immediately evident and might yet serve meaningful change on a wider scale. That is, even as regime change settles over western universities. As Davis asks, can philosophy itself "be a mode of change, for change" and how might it support "those traditionally outside of philosophy" to "take ownership of philosophical space"? Within such possibility lies Spillers's "larger sociality" plea and Beckles–Raymond's vision of intersectional justice.

Notes

- ¹ For a full discussion of decoloniality and disenclosure, see, Achille Mbembe, *Out of the Dark Night*, Columbia, 2021, especially Chapter 2.
- ² Austin Clarke's, memoir, *Growing up Stupid Under the Union Jack* offers a poignant reconstruction meaningfully illustrating the recency of the colonial schooling phenomenon and its impact.
- ³ Since neither author nor date is given in the Collins Wide World Geography Reader, references will be made throughout to Collins n.d.
- ⁴ See, for example, *Blacklines*, Issue 1, 2021, with its "coloniality" focus, and Issue 4, 2025, which engages with "Crossings" in terms of aesthetics and criticism as well as publication advancement and scholarly community.
- ⁵ That is, "happy" as in self-protection from "bad feeling." See, Ahmed's discussion of happiness (163-8).
- ⁶ See, for example, Pete Kalu, "The Fall of the House of Penrhyn' ('...Penrhyn')" in which the author discusses the re-purposing of the stately home, Penrhyn Castle, within a revisioning of history in his contemporary narrative.
- ⁷ I refer here to feminist praxis, not necessarily discussed as such but indicated in, for example, my "Activist-mothers Maybe, Sisters Surely? Black British Feminism, Absence and Transformation." *Feminist Review*, vol. 108, 2014: 40-66.

- ⁸ See, Derrida, Jacques. *Politics of Friendship*. Translated by George Collins, Verso, 1997.
- ⁹ Wynter addresses this concern in her essay, “Beyond Miranda’s Meanings: Un/Silencing the demonic ground of Caliban’s woman. *Out of the Kumbla: Caribbean Women and Literature*. Edited by Carol Boyce Davis and Elaine Savory Fido. Africa World Press, 1990, pp. 355-72. Also cited in “Towards a Western Humanism Made to the Measure of Those Recently Recognised as Human,” 251.
- ¹⁰ My unpublished paper on Wynter’s *Hills of Hebron* is referenced in Anim-Addo, “Towards a Post-Western Humanism,” p. 270, n.4.
- ¹¹ The Neo-Slave genre is fully discussed in two Issues of *Callaloo*. See, *Callaloo* 40, 4 (Fall 2017) and 41, 1 (2018).
- ¹² See also, “A View from The Outside Looking In’: Writing the Libretto Imoinda, Or She Who Will Lose Her Name.” *Writing in Practice: The Journal of Creative Writing Research*, vol. 9, 2023.
- ¹³ Additionally, as Sarah Ahmed suggests, diversity work might also be thought of as praxis (Ahmed, 173).
- ¹⁴ The *Imoinda* production was supported by the New York State Music Fund and involved School of the Arts (SOTA) students actively engaged in all aspects of the production.
- ¹⁵ *Research and delivery of this paper at the 8th Derrida Today Conference—Athens, Greece, 10–14 June 2024—was generously supported through a Leverhulme Emeritus Research Award.*

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