Geotheorizing Black/Land:

Contestations and Contingent Collaborations

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In this article, researchers from an academic institution and researchers from a community-based organization theorize a recent collaboration. This "contingent collaboration" was designed to analyze interviews that had been conducted by the community organization and required the purposeful negotiation of two thresholds, one methodological, the other empirical. Writing together across diverse experiences with academic research, the authors consider the implications of the settler colonial roots of social science, the voyeuristic tendencies of academic researchers, and the historical presence of Black people as "other" in the academy for academic-community research partnerships.

> Thresh, hold: separate the seeds, gather them back . . .
> you're in the middle of all this reaching (Richter 3).

Thresholds mark the brink of entry and departure: transitions from one kind of place to another. The original act of *threshing* was to tread upon grain to separate it from stalk, that is, to walk with purpose. To hold one's attention on the threshold of entry and departure, to attend to the marker of change is to recognize a shift in what is possible.

In much of empirical social science research, investigators trained and employed by the academy enter communities to conduct inquiry on

the lives of individuals, families, and other groups. This is both the history and the contemporary practice of research, a practice simultaneously normalized and contested by practitioners and theorists. Social science disciplines have their origins in studying "the other," (Jones and Jenkins), origins which have been comprehensively exhumed and criticized, and at the same time, the academy *continues* to produce and reward researchers interested in conducting research *on* the other (Smith). Critical scholars have examined the politics of research conducted by "insiders" or "outsiders" (Fine), have considered the ethics of social science disciplines with regards to their colonial (Wolfe) and/or racist origins (Guthrie), and have forwarded alternate participatory (Torre and Ayala) and community-led approaches to inquiry (Lykes) which may undo some of the exploitative and voyeuristic tendencies of social science inquiry (Tuck and Guishard). Scholars have wondered whether social science research can be recuperated from its problematic origins (Tuck and Guishard) or whether it will always be a tool used to both produce and dispossess the other (Wilson).

Yet important ruminations on the purposes, methods, and ethics of research are overlooked if we see the academy as the only domain of systematic human inquiry. This essay discusses an inquiry project that takes place outside of the tradition of academic social science. It emerged directly in response to needs expressed by stakeholders and community members, and it is rooted not in academic disciplines, but an emergent, still inchoate, community aspiration toward well-being. The article discusses one of the strategic, "contingent collaborations" (Tuck and Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor") undertaken in the project and a methodological threshold that came into view through this collaboration. The essay then considers a conceptual threshold that is at the very core of the inquiry project. The exposition of both of these thresholds is meant to offer new perspectives on the purposes of research, the possibilities of contingent collaboration, and the politics of inquiry for over-researched but underseen communities.

We write about two thresholds in this article, the first a threshold to be maintained—to be believed—and the second to be actively disbelieved and contested. The first threshold (the one to be maintained) is that between/of stories (into) data. The second threshold (the one to be disbelieved) is concerned with Black life as ungeographic/becoming geographic. Thresholds require our interaction, our attendance or disbelief. As we know it, thresholds demand reflection and conscious

movement. Moving ahead might mark something new whereas staying put may reinforce what has already happened.

Before sharing more about the Black/Land Project and launching into the discussion of the thresholds, we need to say more about the "we" voice that we are employing in this article. Three of us (Mistinguette, Allison, and Tavia) are Black women and members of The Black/Land Project (BLP). Though the three of us are geographically distributed, working collectively using various technologies, our shared efforts have been to serve as caretakers of this work from its inception and soon after. Eve and Brian are not members but are collaborators with BLP. Brian identifies as a Black man and is a graduate student at State University of New York at New Paltz, a comprehensive state university. Eve is the only author who does not identify as Black. Instead, Eve identifies as Unangan (Aleut), from St. Paul Island, Alaska, and she works as a faculty member at State University of New York (SUNY) New Paltz. Because of these various identities and relationships to the inquiry project, writing as a "we" is somewhat precarious—there are times the "we" includes all of us; includes two of us; includes some, but not all of us. Along with those of us authoring this article, Kondwani Jahan Jackson, also a Black man and graduate student at SUNY New Paltz, was part of the collaboration.

The Black/Land Project

The work of The Black/Land Project (BLP) began in 2010; the organization was formally founded in 2011 by Mistinguette Smith (co-author of this article). Mistinguette's work began as a community educator and nonprofit manager, working in various communities on AIDS education, health education, and later, food security. The question that inspired both the formation of the organization and the creation of the BLP inquiry project is: *Why do Black people talk about their relationships to "the environment" differently than people in mainstream environmental movements?* This question first crystallized in 2010 during a retreat for educators and social activists at the abandoned campus of the Snow Hill Institute, a historic Black private high school in Wilcox County, Alabama, founded in 1898. While walking the grounds, discussion among the Black educators and social activists turned to how Black peoples' responses to the disproportionate impacts of environmental injustices on Black communities are increasingly well

documented (e.g., D. Taylor). Yet a lack of descriptive work about how Black people defined their own relationships to land—beyond constructions of dispossession and environmental degradation—persists. Taking inspiration from Isabel Wilkerson's *The Warmth of Other Suns*, which articulates the collective memory of The Great Migration as an historically African-American relationship to land and place, Mistinguette conceived of a series of community interviews with diverse members of Black communities as a way to begin exploring how Black people define their relationships to land, in their own words and ways, today. Mistinguette did this without formal training as an academic researcher, instead proceeding with the conviction that, for herself and for her community, these narratives mattered for the past, for now, and for the future.

Comprehensive studies on the relationships of communities of color to the environment are uncommon in the scholarly literature. Of the work that does exist, one study determined that Black US residents are equally or more concerned about environmental issues than white US residents, (Mohai and Bryant) and another found that Black people are more likely than other groups to make concrete lifestyle changes to protect and care for that environment, and to organize locally to address those issues (Mohai). Yet existing studies do not address why and how Black people may hold fundamentally different relationships to land and place than mainstream policy perspectives assume. The BLP interviews reveal that Black interviewees often frame their relationships to land in unexpected ways; for example participants have described urban gardening as a way to stake a claim to permanency, education, economic citizenship, and community leadership, rather than only as a vehicle for food security. The BLP inquiry project sought to bring these often buried perspectives to the surface and to provide new and diverse articulations of environmental relationships and responsibility. The central activity of the organization has been to conduct interviews with members of Black communities, resulting in narratives marked by chattel slavery, migration, segregation, desegregation and re-segregation, self-determination, and regeneration.

The Interviews

From 2011 to 2013, The Black/Land Project conducted interviews with 33 adults who self-identified as Black and who lived in the Great Lakes area (Ohio, Michigan, Upstate New York); urban and rural Massachusetts;

and Washington, DC. Interview participants ranged in age from their early 20's to early 80's. Participants all self-identified racially as Black; they self-identified their ethnic identities as African-American, Caribbean-American, of mixed race/ethnicity, and Nigerian-American. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in person in participants' homes, workplaces, farmyards, urban gardens, and other locations participants felt represented their relationship to land. Interview participants were selected through referrals from other participants.

Many participants were surprised to be asked about their relationship to land; as city dwellers, some at first insisted that they didn't have a relationship to land, which they thought of as rural and agricultural. To clarify the value of diverse relationships to land, interviewers prompted participants to think of land as "anything that's not on water," and as explicitly inclusive of public land, land owned as property by individuals or groups, heirs' property, land title held by groups (such as churches, schools, or recreational associations), cemetery plots, and locations that have a history of occupation and definition by Black people.

With this enlarged idea of land in mind, interview participants began to shape the direction and course of the project. Many participants were eager for their stories to be part of an interview project—but only if what was learned from their stories was returned to their community, in service to their community. "We have been studied to death," commented one participant. "People come here, study us, and we don't hear about it until we read about it in the newspaper from some conference happening in Washington, DC, and they didn't even bother to tell us back here." In that same vein, another participant clearly expressed her intentions for her interview to be used as more than just an individual narrative: "Don't waste my time," she admonished. "You'd better make something out of this."

Participants experienced their own personal narrative as unique and with coherent meaning standing alone; however, many described a clear intention and expectation that these narratives could be most utile to Black communities if they were looked at together with the stories of others and raised up, amplified. This intent has become codified in other BLP activities, which have included creating teach-backs and discussions based on regional interviews, workshops mapping the actual and desired relationships Black people have to urban land, mapping and

countermapping patterns of Black land ownership/tenancy, and collecting questions about relationships to land, as defined and experienced by Black people, and turning them into teaching tools (e.g., M. Smith).

Contingent Collaborations

As The Black/Land Project collected interviews, the prospect of analyzing and synthesizing them in a way that honored the expectations of participants became increasingly complex. BLP lacked access to digital tools for narrative analysis, or skilled partners to bring insight and expertise to the process. Although several universities approached BLP with a desire to offer academic tools and resources, The Public Science Project (PSP, housed at The Graduate Center, The City University of New York) was the first to offer such opportunities with two desired conditions: potential academic partners of color and a conception of co-researching that did not claim to "own" the research product to the exclusion of those who produced it. The relationship with the Public Science Project was instrumental in BLP's understanding of participatory action research, done by, for, and belonging to the communities that shared their stories.

Mistinguette met Eve (a co-founder of the Public Science Project) during a critical participatory action research summer institute hosted by the PSP in New York City in June 2011. Eve, an Indigenous scholar also doing writing and research on issues of land and place, and Mistinguette formed a fast affinity and agreed to look for ways to collaborate and think together. Our goal was not to establish a permanent partnership that would usher the work of BLP into the academy. Instead, the aspiration was to see how the resources of the academy could be leveraged to support the work of BLP (and other organizations conducting their own community-based research), but perhaps even more so, the collective theorizing about land and place which only becomes possible within self-determined contexts. We formed a contingent collaboration designed to move forward our separate efforts to theorize Black (Mistinguette) and Indigenous (Eve) relationships to land in a way that would be mutually informed and constructed.[1]

Contingent collaborations provide a counterpoint to how others have theorized solidarity and allies and require an ethic of incommensurability that recognizes what is distinct between various projects of social justice and decolonization. Within settler colonial contexts like the United States, there may be portions of social justice projects that

simply cannot be aligned (Tuck and Yang "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor"). The partnership between BLP researchers and the researchers from SUNY New Paltz is an example of a contingent collaboration, not because we as individuals seek oppositional or contrary forms of justice—in fact, our visions for decolonization and justice are quite simpatico—but rather in how our partnership is a contingent collaboration because of the colonial history (and future) of the academy.

Our contingent collaboration points to the ways that thresholds are not simply places of crossing from one state to another: They are places that demand pause to mark that passage, and such pauses are necessary to the ethical integrity of the collaboration. Working together with shared purpose across institutional affiliation, life story, and position within a settler colonial structure, we were brought to a series of thresholds. We had to engage these thresholds from different directions and widely different experiences of the nature of inquiry and different positional understandings of the politics of the production of knowledge.

Now that we have provided an introduction to The Black/Land Project and to the community interviews inquiry project at the center of this article, we turn to a discussion of two thresholds that made themselves apparent as we engaged this work.

The Threshold Of/Between Stories and Data: A Threshold To Be Maintained

As discussed above, the participants in BLP interviews had clear instructions for how they wanted their words to be used. They wanted to ensure that their stories were made available to other Black people, to be passed on. Yet as BLP collected more and more interviews, the need to read them alongside each other and to analyze them together became more and more apparent. The stories and interviews could not simply be transcribed and released into the world as a collection; participants agreed to be interviewed at least in part because they wanted to know what was being said across and between the interviews and what sort of story the interviews told together.

Thus, an important methodological threshold made itself known, one that demanded we proceed with a sense of purposefulness, even sacredness. Though our relationships to and roles in the interview project differ, we all understood that social science writ large is an

expansion of the settler colonial project (Tuck and Yang "R-Words"). Bringing the analytical practices of social science to the interview project meant that we had to, at least somehow, contend with the colonial history of those practices. Further, we needed to consider the inherent logics of those practices, which when closely inspected, run counter to the logics and ethics of the interview project.

The collaborations between BLP researchers and SUNY New Paltz researchers (Eve, Brian, and Kondwani) included a conscious examination of the logical and ethical promises/premises that social science seemed to offer: One apparent promise/premise is that social science analytical practices would render the stories told in the interviews more coherent or legitimate. Another dangled promise/premise seemed to be that engaging in analytical practices offered by the academy would permit the academy unmitigated access to the words and experiences of the participants.[2] Thus, the threshold of stories (into) data required a series of refusals of the promises of social science, and a deeply held and felt understanding of what the work of analyzing the interviews is, and what it is not.

Refusals

For Audra Simpson, conducting interview-based research in her home Kahnawake community meant that she had to consider questions such as, "Can I do this and still come home; what am I revealing here and why? Where will this get us? Who benefits from this and why?" (Simpson 78). These questions resonate with the ethical questions—questions of ethnographic refusal—that throb at the threshold of turning stories from the BLP interview stories into data. Refusals are not just a no; they are generative (Simpson). Refusals are situated in a critical understanding of settler colonialism and its representations. Refusal is multidimensional and refusals are situated in a critical standing of settler colonialism and its representations; refusals are in dynamic relationship among communities who refuse, the researched who refuse, and the researcher who refuses—or not (Tuck and Yang). In Simpson's words, "Refusals speak volumes, because they tell us when to stop" (78). She continues,

> I reached my own limit when the data would not contribute to our sovereignty or complicate the deeply simplified, atrophied representations of Iroquois and other Indigenous peoples that they have been mired within anthropologically. (78)

An important intention of the BLP interviews was to avoid recirculating unexamined narratives of Black people as only damaged, focused only on what has been lost, and participant's relationship to land as broken, conflicted, tortured, disrupted, invaded. To facilitate an analysis process that would extend this framing, Eve suggested the use of what she has called a desire-based analysis framework, which focuses on complexity and participant's relationship to land as meaningful, complex, *and* sometimes disrupted (Tuck "Suspending Damage"). BLP's deliberate choice to avoid conducting damage-centered interviews and our later decision to engage a desire-based analytical frame constituted a refusal of the ways Black peoples' lives are usually narrated in social science and in popular media. The choice to focus on complexity and desire was also recognized as a way to render the useful results participants wanted.

Another refusal concerned the notion of data itself. We did not take for granted that the words spoken in the interviews were pre-existing, pristine snapshots of something called "real life." Our discussions and analyses of the interviews never presumed that the stories told by participants were previously "out there," laying fallow, data waiting for collection by BLP (Koro-Ljungberg). Instead, our engagement with the interviews emphasized the ways that the stories shared emerged in response to questions and relationships generated by the interviews themselves. Many participants remarked, for instance, that this was the first time they had thought about their relationships to land in this way, or the first time they had talked about land using these terms. They described being surprised by their own expressed views and by the interpretations they shared in response to the interview questions.

Understanding the interviews and perspectives shared within them as co-constructed and co-theorized made it impossible to enact commonly held assumptions about data analysis. Neither a hermeneutic nor empirical approach was suitable for the political and poetic project of finding a way to read these interviews alongside one another:[3] We did not believe that the interviews or the interview participants were confused or unclear (requiring our intervention), nor were we willing to cede our interpretive power—our obligation to engage reflectively and critically and creatively to what we have heard and learned in the interviews—to the academy or to the public.[4] To provide space to begin to engage the stories as data in a considered way, Eve and Brian designed a two-day workshop held at the SUNY New Paltz. There were several features to the workshop, including: 1) an opening walking meditation

held as a nearby state park 2) readings shared before the workshop and 3) the creation of a "concept tree" that allowed us to develop dynamic and multi-directional codes. We discuss each of these workshop features in turn.

Storytelling Meditation around the Lake. Because it was the first time that BLP and SUNY New Paltz researchers would be working together in person after many months of planning by phone and email, Eve and Brian wanted to create an opening to the workshop that would both allow us to more fully greet one another and also to bring attention to the stakes of our shared work. Eve and Brian designed a walking meditation that took place on a path that encircled Lake Minnewaska, in a state park near the SUNY New Paltz campus. During the meditation, we walked together in silence, paying attention to our footsteps and to our surroundings. At several different points, we broke away from one another for individual exploration of the path. There were three prompts to the walking meditation. In the first prompt, Eve and Brian recounted the origins of social science and its links to settler colonialism, connecting the study of Indigenous peoples to settler desires to accumulate land and the study of Black people to the justification of chattel slavery (Tuck and Guishard). In the second prompt, Eve and Brian recounted more recent accounts of misuse and abuse of stories and human data by researchers, breaches of ethical conduct from the past five years that indicate the strong and persistent ties between contemporary social science and contemporary settler colonialism.

In the final prompt, Brian asked how each of us might decide to move forward within the context of this troubled ethical history and how we might consider the alchemy of stories into data, an alchemy that might not be undone. These shared questions and concerns were critical to building relationships between the BLP and SUNY New Paltz researchers. At the same time, without direct experience in narrative coding and analysis, the BLP researchers had only a theoretical understanding of what it would viscerally mean to turn stories into data. The walking meditation offered an opportunity pause at the threshold between story and data, even though that threshold signified different experiences for each of the collaborators. By preparing a ritual of pause and reflection, Brian helped us to note the significance of the liminal and spiritual nature of threshold crossing, even if we did not yet understand all of its implications.

Readings on Refusal and Beyond Coding. Prior to our retreat, Eve sent a collection of readings by Indigenous, Black feminist, and critical qualitative researchers, by Mirka Koro-Ljungberg, Elizabeh Adams St. Pierre, Tuck and Wayne K. Yang, St. Pierre and Alicia Youngblood Jackson, and Katherine McKittrick. The readings troubled notions of research, data, analysis, and coding, but also the promises of social science research to reveal truths or provide insights more compelling than stories themselves. To facilitate a discussion about the readings, Brian created a presentation and hosted a discussion about the need for refusal within social science research. Brian's presentation attended to the opportunities for refusal as an analytic practice, and how

> analytic practices of refusal provide ways to negotiate how we as social science researchers can learn from experiences of dispossessed peoples—often painful, but also wise, full of desire and dissent—without serving up pain stories on a silver platter for the settler colonial academy, which hungers so ravenously for them. (Tuck and Yang "Unbecoming Claims")

The discussion that followed emphasized how the goal of refusal is not for "objects to become subjects in the academy, but contrarily, to *object to* the very processes of objectification/subjection, the making of possessors and possessions, the alchemy of becoming-claims [original emphasis]" (Tuck and Yang).

Creating a "Concept Tree." *How* to analyze the BLP interviews required much consideration. In most cases, the assumption is that qualitative data will somehow be "coded" as part of an analysis process, and certainly, some way of systematically reading and bringing together the content of the interviews was needed and desired. Yet coding is not a neutral act and it "masks the power relationships about who comes to know whom in the creation of knowledge" (Tuck and Yang). St. Pierre and Jackson warn researchers away from collapsing analysis or treating interviews as "brute data"—those data which cannot be questioned through the supposition of another interpretation, or be discredited through additional reasoning (C. Taylor 30)—when coding. In particular, St. Pierre and Jackson are concerned about research analysis

> that treats words (e.g., participants' words in interview transcripts) as brute data waiting to be coded, labeled with other brute words (and even counted), perhaps entered into statistical programs to be

> manipulated by computers, and so on. In some cases, words are reduced to numbers [parentheses original]. (St. Pierre and Jackson)

Through these practices of formalization, "Words can be sorted into categories and then organized into 'themes' that somehow naturally and miraculously 'emerge' as if anyone could see them" (St. Pierre and Jackson).

Heeding warnings from St. Pierre and Jackson not to be seduced by the promises of coding or to avoid collapsing analysis and coding, we searched for a considered approach to analyzing the interviews and to learn what was said across and between the interviews. As a tentative attempt, Eve turned to a tree-based mapping exercise that she has used in much of her teaching and participatory action research (Tuck "Re-Visioning Action") as a way of collectively mapping relationships between humans, ideas, institutions, and power (Tuck "Urban Youth and School Pushout"). This approach is a variation of a popular education exercise developed by Paulo Freire—The Problem Tree—in which participants trace relationships between everyday injustices, widely held societal attitudes, and underlying ideologies (Ferreira and Ferreira). We used this process to develop a set of codes (we did not discard this language, though we problematized it) that went in multiple directions to attend to expressions of complexity and desire (Tuck "Suspending Damage") in the interview transcripts.

Though our use of the tree-based mapping exercise could be the focus of a separate article, briefly, we moved through the exercise as follows: We first spent some time reading the transcripts from the interviews, making notes on specific instances in which *participants indicated complex, desire-based relationships to land*. These specific instances were written down on sticky notes and became the leaves of the tree. The leaves are the everyday instances or examples of a given relationship, situation, or in Freire's work, a problem (Ferreira and Ferreira).

After we generated the leaves, we asked ourselves, *What are the beliefs or assumptions that feed the leaves?* These beliefs and assumptions would form the ripples of the tree's trunk (the tree-mapping exercise obviously does not follow the biological construction of a living tree!) It was important that the beliefs and assumptions on the trunk did not "go in a particular direction," meaning that they did not speak for the interview participants. Instead, they were the widely held societal views to which interview participants were speaking (back).

After we mapped the ripples of the trunk, we asked ourselves, *What are the systemic or ideological anchors—roots—that inform the trunk?* These anchors circulate through society as meta-narratives, in this case about Blackness and relationships to land. Some of these meta-narratives were the "master" narratives that arise from the settler-slave relationship as defining Blackness; other roots reflected powerful African diasporic ontological concepts.

After using the concept tree to (in Allison's term) "geotheorize" the complexity of Black relationships to land, we used the beliefs and assumptions from the trunk to serve as nuanced, multidirectional codes for use in reading and excerpting interview narratives. Our codes were not themes, nor were they interpretations. Instead, they were openings for interview participants to co-geotheorize with us about their lives and relationships to land. In the next section, we discuss another threshold that made itself known during our collaboration and share interview excerpts that demonstrate what we mean by openings for interview participants to co-geotheorize with us.

Black Life as Ungeographic: A Threshold to be Disbelieved

The Black/Land Project (BLP) formed in order to gather and analyze stories about the relationship between Black people, land, and place. Its very founding pushes back against and refuses accounts of Black people's lives as *ungeographic.* The word "ungeographic" comes from McKittrick's *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, in which she insists that, "Black matters are spatial matters" (xii). McKittrick's focus is not on providing a corrective story that finds or discovers supposedly lost relationships to land (xii). Her focus, like that of BLP, is to argue that

> space and place give black lives meaning in a world that has, for the most part, incorrectly deemed black populations and their attendant geographies as "ungeographic" and/or philosophically undeveloped ... the language and concreteness of geography—with its overlapping physical, metaphorical, theoretical, and experiential contours—must be conceptualized as always bringing into view material referents, external, three-dimensional spaces, and actions taking place in space, as they overlap with subjectivities, imaginations, and stories. (McKittrick xiii)

McKittrick's *Demonic Grounds* demonstrates the falseness with which social science has portrayed blackness as ungeographic, seen only in "hierarchical, stereotypical, human/inhuman terms" as "ostensible impossibilities" (5). McKittrick observes that, "the production of black spaces in the diaspora is tied to locations that were and are explicitly produced in conjunction with race, racism, captivity, and economic profit" (9). Thus, colonial geographies required Black displacement and placelessness, so that while Black people have of course always experienced, occupied, and constructed place, "black geographies were (and sometimes still are) rendered unintelligible [parenthesis original]" (9). Still, McKittrick contends that a priority project is to recognize that Black geographies have been constructed, even in (and in spite of) landscapes of domination and that "black imaginations and mappings are evidence of struggle over social space" (9). In this section of the article, we discuss the threshold of Black life as un/geographic as a threshold to be *disbelieved*. To do this, we share some of the insights from BLP interviews to show how Black people are already telling stories of (our) personal geographies.

One overarching purpose of BLP has been to identify how Black people self-define Black relationships to land and place. In mulling over this diversity, we have identified significant variances in how Black people in the United States have defined their relationship with land. Much of Black identity is informed by being a descendant of the African diaspora and experiencing trauma due to the racialization of that identity. When defining what it means to be "Black," BLP interview participant Z.C. shares:

> I usually say Black as in descendant of people who are/were from the African continent and other places who came here under duress or otherwise and have formed a united identity under political circumstances.

This definition takes into account that Black people have come to the United States in a variety of ways, but once they arrive, a shared political and societal status can create an identity. This experience of racial identity development can aid individual and group survival, but has the countervailing impact of flattening and dislocating the breadth of individual or collective experience. In her interview, L.S. spoke about this, saying:

> Because you are considering Black people at large, the diaspora, and so many of us are coming from different—literally multicultural backgrounds—from Africa, and from the other continents inhabited or

encountered by the people with whom we have encountered, I think it's partly the multiplicity of experience that goes so far beyond what is considered the American experience on land because that really is the Euro American experience by definition, even with the admission of some Native American examples. The richness remains to be recognized.

Black people in the United States have a "rich" and vast array of experiences, histories, and lineages that have brought them to this specific space and place at this moment in time. These complex nuances affect how Black people experience land and articulate their own personal geographies.

For many who identify as African-Americans, relationship to land presumes a shared historical, geographic, and socio-cultural origin, if not a common contemporary relationship to land. Although "Africa" comprises a notably generalized sense of place, the relationship to land can be a very personal experience that grounds a family history or worldview. Participant T.G. shares how he thinks this collective-personal dynamic impacts his relationship with land:

> You know we often don't talk about it; I think that there is a profound relationship between people of African descent and the land because we come from a people that didn't really look on land and ownership as being the way we approach material gains here. I think that the relationship of people to land is a part of who we are.

In describing his own relationship to land, T.G. highlights the importance of tracing the physical geography of his unique family surname beginning with the arrival of the first of his African ancestors in the US in 1799. Because his ancestors arrived as indentured servants rather than chattel slaves, T.G. describes the significance of having a documented geographic trail of their migration from Delaware to New Jersey:

> What was important is that we found where they came from and where they set down. We know, 1799, where our people hit the shore . . . [I]t's hard to describe the elation because all of a sudden we could now touch that history. It wasn't just Aunt Itty telling a story about some folks she had heard about. This wasn't something just passed down happenstance. We were actually seeing documentation, actual records that give life to people.

The idea that Black people's relationship to land is ungeographic often presumes an over-simplified relationship: that there is a single history of Blackness, a narrative that emerges from the experience of African

people enslaved as chattel in the Deep South and their descendants. In contrast, this participant's narrative describes the overdetermined nature of both racialized blackness and African-American ethnic identity and its current and historical relationship to place.

While Black people clearly experience their relationship to land as physical and geographic, there can still be a cognitive dissonance around the meaning of that relationship, particularly at the ungeographic/ geographic threshold. A.O. explores that dissonance in her interview:

> My relationship to land is also confusing because oftentimes I don't feel like I quite have the language to articulate how it makes me feel, or the place that it holds in my family and my own history and my visions for the future.

Although the participant is bereft of words that give meaning to how she experiences land in this way, having the space to think and be able to name these feelings of confusion brings her closer to her own history and "visions for the future."

In conducting the interviews, we found that, as events, they often provided space for creating the language that the participant seemed to be stretching and yearning toward. Participant Y.A.'s comments reveal yearnings toward language that seem to be forming during the interview itself.

> So I mean there is a part of me that feels connected, I suppose, to every place that I've lived in some way. I made it home for the time that I live there, but there is still this drive within me that keeps me kind of moving, kind of nomadic. And why is that?

> And I think there's a sadness that I feel about not knowing where home really is or not having a real sense of where is my home. And as I got older, it becomes more troublesome to me in some way, but the information that I'm seeking, the knowledge that I'm after, it just sometimes requires that I go somewhere else in order to get it.

While Y.A. can make places home and find connection to place in some way, her words convey a sense of longing to create and articulate a geographic narrative that encompasses both an emotional space she recognizes as home, and the tangible, physical features of place.

The accounts shared in the interviews both acknowledge and supercede McKittrick's assumption that the boundaries of Black geographies are drawn as marginalization by or resistance to enslavement/

colonization or other forms of racial struggle. Embedded in participants' narratives are quiet, poetic, and desire-based articulations of sovereignty and *becoming* of the land, rather than springing from it or being foreign to it. Examining the existence of these geographies, which do not depend upon state citizenship or property ownership to establish their geographic claims, places us on the threshold of a new ways of understanding relationships to land.

Because our interview participants so clearly wanted for their stories to be told alongside other stories in this inquiry project, for us, the threshold of Black life as ungeographic/geographic easily became a threshold to be disbelieved, to be kept at the hold. Black lives were not ungeographic prior to our study, nor were they made geographic through their telling, through our analysis, or through the composition of this article. Though the ungeographic/geographic is a threshold that is intellectually engaged by the academy, for us, it was not salient because Black lives are *always already* geographic, and the ways they regard their own lives are, using Allison's phrasing, *always already geotheoretical*. In the interviews, participants spoke directly to the supposed quandary of Black life as ungeographic, sharing accounts of being located in and experiencing belonging in specific places, irrespective of attempts at displacement, migration, or relocation.

Conclusion

Our active disbelief in narratives that define blackness as an ideological space without a location on land helped us hear Black theorizations of geography as more than recognition by the state or a physical place mappable by GIS. In fact, in the interviews, the experience of being Black was so tied to experiences of land that Black people identify themselves as neither native to the land nor required to work that land, but instead as *becoming* the land itself. L.S. poetically describes her coming into awareness of race and the western landscape as simultaneous and overlapping:

> I knew as a five-year-old can know things; I knew that sunlight made my skin because my skin looked just like those hills in the distance and looked just like the land around me, like a burnt honey brown. And that sky flowed in my veins. So I was made by earth, made in earth, made by it, and I believed it. And I heard words like "colored," but within my family, among my parents. I never heard conversations

about race. It didn't know it. It wasn't part of anything that I could know. So when I heard the word "colored," I thought that meant the coloring by the light of the sun, by the blue of the sky, by the land itself.

L.S.'s reflection expounds our understanding of Black people as geotheroretical, as bodies at the threshold of race and land. It refuses commonly accepted damage-based narratives about formative experiences of racial signifiers like skin color and commonly accepted geographic signifiers such as territory and ownership. L.S.'s story highlights the imaginative possibility that Black people have and continue to theorize their own relationships to land. These narratives have not been previously recorded because they can only be produced within Black communities, under the conditions of sensitive inquiry and the act of listening for personal geographies as an expected and real practice of Black people. The possibility of translating these forms of inquiry and geotheorizing for an academic audience was unleashed by our collaboration. The work of our shared inquiry project was neither to present nor interpret the geotheoretical contributions of Black participants, but to uncover a shared language for the articulation of their desire-based relationships to land.

This is more than a story about what happened when BLP formed an academic partnership with a faculty member and graduate research assistants at SUNY New Paltz. In coming together, all of us in the contingent collaboration had to attend to the thresholds of stories (into) data and Black life as un/geographic. We found the serious reflection and meditative crossing of the threshold of stories (into) data compelling and necessary work necessary to maintain the ethical integrity of the longer life of the community interviews inquiry project. The second threshold—that of whether Black life is/isn't ungeographic—is a preoccupation in and of the academy. This was an external threshold of sorts, one that is circulated and considered in social science, but was thwarted, exploded, refused by the geotheoretical accounts provided by interview participants (see also McKittrick). We came to see this as a threshold to be disbelieved.

An Epilogue

Almost all of the interview participants, without prompting, understood and expressed a knowledge that had perhaps always been available to us,

yet not threshed from our latent understanding; Black life is very much connected to land in the past, present, and the future. Experience is land-based and could only have happened on solid earth. Land is personhood for some, for others, a ceremony of becoming. Land is also mnemonic: a relationship to land is both an obligation of care to the land itself, and a method for remembering the truths about place, culture, and identity. The terms of relationship—whether that is Black relationship to land or the relationship between data and stories—must grow from the longings and desires of those who need the definitions to help communicate to each other the ways they walk together, struggle together, and experience life and death together. Such acts of self-definition are sacred happenings and belong solely to the groups that embody the totality of what occurs on these sacred grounds. In so valuing the sacredness of Black relationships to land and to the experiences that happen on that land, we have a right to refuse the exploration and the excavation of the academy, whose only demonstrated desire (so far) has been to explain away how Black people are/aren't a people torn asunder from past racialized experiences. The interviews conducted were intimate reflections that told a long overdue story. For The Black/Land Project, the intention has always been to work with Black people to *thresh our own stories, gathering the seeds that have meaning for us.*

Acknowledgements

Notes

[1] Together, Eve and Mistinguette secured a community partnership grant from the American Studies Association so that Eve and graduate research assistant Brian K. Jones could provide direct support in managing and organizing interview narratives, analyzing data and determining findings, and preparing findings for dissemination.

[2] In examining the promises of social science, we grappled with what Eve and K. Wayne Yang ("R-words") have written about as three axioms of social science research. The first axiom is that in much of social science, the subaltern is only invited to speak her/our pain. The second is that there are some forms of knowledge that the academy doesn't deserve. The third is that academic research practices may not be the intervention that is needed (Tuck and Yang 224). The threshold of stories (into) data required recognition of these axioms.

[3] A hermeneutic/interpretive approach (C. Taylor 25), assumes that the text or other object of analysis is confused, incomplete, unclear, cloudy, requiring an interpretation to reveal an underlying coherence or sense (St. Pierre). By contrast, empiricism relies on "brute data," data that cannot be questioned through the supposition of another interpretation, or be discredited through additional reasoning (C. Taylor 30). This understanding of knowing assumes that there is a "given out there, a brute datum, an object, that exists ahead of the interpretation of a subject—that assume(s) that the subject/object distinction even exists" (St. Pierre 224).

[4] Considering the axioms of social science offered by Tuck and Yang (discussed in endnote 2), we see the ways in which the academy might not be responsible to/with the stories revealed in the BLP interviews.

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