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Humanizing the Landscape from the Edge(s) of Empire: Wakanda-Geographies of the Global South

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers South geographies as real-world activations of “Wakanda” zones, zones at the edges of Empire. It offers Southern black expressive cultures (specifically, the Global South nation of Trinidad) as Afrofutural in their capacities for articulating new calibrations of black freedom (in relation to real-world enduring structures of black capture). This paper focuses specifically on the invention of the steelpan in the Afro-Trinidadian village of Laventille, showing that the geography conditioning the instrument’s production is Wakanda-like. As such, it reads, in the technological invention of the steelpan, an Afrofutural articulation of a black freedom. Unlike the black freedom central to the cinematic rendition of Wakanda, the black freedom of Laventille’s steelpan world is not completely disentangled from global systems of anti-black violence. However, steelpan’s expressive culture does establish, in the present, a futural gesture of what it means for black living to overflow such global systems of black death-making.

KEYWORDS

Afrofuturism; black expressive culture; Black Panther; black world-making; Fred Moten; Global South; steelpan; Sylvia Wynter

I’ve been thinking with the metaphor of entanglement lately, about how the metaphor can be useful for holding together black freedom and black capture – two seemingly opposed signatures of black living in the modern world. In a lecture he gave in April 2022,¹ Fred Moten asks his virtual audience to sit with a similar question, specifically in reference to how black joy and black pain are inextricably entangled in black musical production. “How do this shit go together?” Moten asks. Paraphrasing his expansion of the question, Moten subsequently asks how black music pulls off being loveable not *despite* its entanglement with narratives of black pain, but in its capacity as vehicle for that narrative.

This paper is an invitation to expand such ruminations to black expressive culture more broadly (music, mythical tale, dance, fictional narrative, oral creativity). I aim to frame these spaces of black imaginative creativity as *eventful*, in the sense described by Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, as ones that “change the limit between possibility and

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¹Fred Moten’s lecture in April 2022 was titled, “The Drum Machine, or the (Poly)Rhythm of the Iron System.” The virtual event was sponsored by the School of the Art Institute of Chicago: <https://www.saic.edu/events/fred-moten-0> (last accessed June 13, 2022).

impossibility.”² In that limit change, *how* black freedom and black capture are entangled with each other are invented anew, such that (to return to Moten) *how* the shit goes together becomes a new invention. This paper thinks about Afrofutures in this sense of the new: a new *relationship* between possibility and impossibility. In that sense of Afro-futurity, black freedom and black capture remain entangled, which is to say, rupture into some “elsewhere” in which black living might persist as completely *dis*-entangled from the semiotics and structures of white capture is not quite what’s on the table. Nevertheless, a new *relationship* between what is possible and what is not for black life (where impossibility ends and possibility begins) does institute – gestures toward – something *of the future* that must live in the present. Very much the way *Black Panther’s* cinematic representation of Wakanda – a geography of black freedom and black world-making on its own terms – lives within and alongside a pervading geography of racial capitalism and post-modern Empire. Perhaps we can think of Afro-futures (spatialized as Wakanda-geographies) asymptotically, as what gestures *toward* a radical disentanglement between black freedom and black capture that, though not-quite, is evidence nonetheless of black freedom already “[overflowing] the lack imposed upon it.”³

As a theoretical frame, entanglement allows us to conceptualize how this overflow (these eventful *open and outer*-spaces) happens between and throughout what is entangled. For this reason it is useful to understand the relationship between black freedom and black capture as totalizing *in an entangled sense*. As such, we name this relationship as what, indeed, constitutes *all* of black world-making in the wake of the Middle Passage. But despite this “all,” open and outer space lives among the knots of modernity’s power arrangements, inserting into those power arrangements an open-endedness or undecidability that black expressive cultures, in their creative capacities, have always capitalized on to make space (*and time*) for black freedom gestures. These gestures not only refuse modernity’s calibrations of black capture. They also (more positively) generate something otherwise and elsewhere, something futural that lives outside/beyond the prescriptive/explanatory powers of anti-black logics. In the sense that a fictive Wakanda captures in a cinematic freeze-frame (making real on the screen what can only be asymptotic *off* the screen), the symbolic meanings offered through black expressive culture are futural, working against and despite the strictures of the “now.” So though the logics of black (social and actual) death are in an enduring relationship with black living, it is the very calibration of that relationship that remains unsettled and contested by an Afrofuturist insistence on a Wakanda.

In his essay, dann j. Broyld offers the Underground Railroad as what historicizes such contestations, as a model for “untangling the threads of the Middle Passage from black world-making in the New World.”⁴ My focus, here, are on the geographies that are conducive to those practices of “untangling” (of *dis*-entangling). *Where* would such

²Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World*, New York University Press, NY, 2020, 167.

³La Marr Jurelle Bruce, *How to go Mad Without Losing Your Mind: Madness and Black Radical Creativity*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 2021, 70.

⁴dann j. Broyld, “The Underground Railroad as Afrofuturism: Enslaved, Blacks That Imagined Freedom, Future, and Space” in *Afrofuturism in Black Panther: Gender, Identity, and the Re-Making of Blackness*, ed. Renée T. White and Karen A. Ritzenhoff, Lexington Books, NY, 2021, 139.

possibilities likely exist? To my mind, such questions point to the Global South in its capacity for activating these disentangling practices. Hence, I turn to that region's expressive cultures in order to offer the Global South as real-world "Wakanda" geographies, located as they are at the outskirts or edges of global Empire. My claim in this paper is that, though a complete untangling evades black subjects, there are nonetheless geographies – "outer spaces," edge spaces, "Wakanda" spaces – that the very structures/logics of entanglement make possible. I consider these geographies in terms of their spatial relationship to Empire's center, expanding upon Broyld's observations that "enslaved people found safety in the remote areas"⁵ of the plantation machine. However, in my own expansion of Broyld's work, I move beyond the historical institution of chattel slavery to ask how, in our postmodern entanglements of black freedom-black capture, these "remote areas" continue to inform, inflect and make possible geographies of Afrofuturity. Geographies that, perhaps in their remoteness, make space for practicing *in the here and now* a black freedom in the mode of a not-yet, a futural tense, a "too soon"⁶ for the still anti-black climate of our contemporary world.

I want to think about the remoteness of these "remote areas" in terms of their proximity to Empire's center. Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* cinematically portrays this edge-space, a space where whiteness and its imperial gaze is *not* the center of black world-making, precisely because it exists at the edge of global Empire. What kinds of cultural inventions are possible when whiteness and its gaze exists at a distance in this way, where black lifeworlds exists not completed *untangled* from global forces of racial capitalism, but are sufficiently removed nonetheless? Though there are many from which to choose, my focus here will be on the musical instrument of the steelpan, explicitly in the context of its birthplace – the hilly village of Laventille, Trinidad. As my focus will be one of the Caribbean "outposts" or edge-regions of an older European empire, I will say a bit about how that geographical context informs how I think about those edge-spaces of our global order. In so doing, I establish the "southness" of the Global South (of which the island of Trinidad is a part) as what activates, in the real world, Wakanda's cinematic rendition of Empire's edge – removed from domination's center, sufficiently inaccessible to domination's reach so as to condition expressions of a black radical imagination of freedom.

South Is a Geo-Political Concept

What does "South" mark, with respect to global systems of modernity that reproduce black dispossession, colonial domination, and white supremacy? Philosopher and decolonial theorist, Mike Monahan urges us to think about the South as a *political* category, as a set of norming mechanisms that produce and uphold global arrangements of power.⁷ He reminds us that when we reduce the "South" to a mere geographic

⁵Ibid., 138.

⁶This echoes Frantz Fanon's phenomenological account in *Black Skin, White Masks*, where he discusses his arrival on a scene already structured by the discursive violence of anti-black colonialism. He describes his arrival, and his desire "to be a man among men" as belated, as both too soon and too late. (Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann, Pluto Press, 1967, 112)

⁷Michael Monahan, "Are You a Yankee? Purity, Identity, and "the Southern," in *Thinking the US South: Contemporary Philosophy from Southern Perspectives*, ed. Shannon Sullivan, Northwestern University Press, 2021, 73–89.

category (to what is simply across from/on the other side of North), we lose sight of the political work of that geographic nomenclature. In other words, “[the] apparently “descriptive” appeal to simple geographical terminology... hides the ways in which those in the Global North are beneficiaries of centuries-long projects of the impoverishment of the Global South.”⁸ And of course, wrapped up in this unidirectional extraction and resource-theft (from global South to global North) are the colonial polarities of “center” and periphery’ that underwrite racial capitalism. As I take up the South as a political category, this *spatial* arrangement of center and periphery will be central in how I want to think the “southness” of the Global South, particularly when it comes to the tenor of the black expressive cultures coming out of these regions. These spatialities (the “whereness” of what is south), shapes in unique ways the experience of anti-black, colonial violence. Subsequently, this “whereness” *also* shapes the experience of working on/out black futures in the context of that violence. In other words – and this will be my underlying claim – these spatial arrangements matter when it comes to recognizing and naming, *as* black liberatory practice, the modalities of black life-worlds that are Wakanda-like in their being “off the grid” (as it were) from direct and immediate accessibility to whiteness. I consider southness, or rather, its constellation of everyday and cultural signifying practices, as what unfolds at the periphery of anti-black structures, entangled with those structures but furthest removed from their violent tendrils such that black life-worlds can be (if but for a moment) left alone, very much the way that Wakanda is left alone.

The Caribbean as Empire’s Frontier Zone: Nailah Blackman’s “Iron Love”

The archipelago of Caribbean islands figured uniquely into Europe’s colonial project. Unlike the settler colonies in North America, the Caribbean islands served as sites of wealth extraction for the various imperial powers (Spain, England, France, Portugal, the Dutch) that had a hand in the material pillaging of the so-called New World. There are some exceptions to this rule, but what this meant was that white Europeans on the islands were primarily there for carrying out the business of colonial administration.⁹ In other words, for the most part, the Antilles were not outfitted for European *settlement*, but rather as frontier-zone capital factories – land for resource-extraction, enslaved “units” of free labor – that provided the material for an early modern capitalist machine. And what *this* means is that, in the Caribbean context, black life worlds emerged, quite literally, at the edges (they were *outposts*) of Empire. Brutal and effective colonial domination made its mark in these outposts, to be sure. But the mode of entanglement between black life in the Caribbean and colonial domination is one across a distance, a distance that in no way *untangles* these edge-zones from the violence of colonial-racial domination, but it is a distance that prompts the following questions. Do such entanglements across *distanced* proximities offer a unique register to cultural productions of black freedom? Does distance affect what is possible, as far

⁸Monahan, “Are You a Yankee?,” 76–77.

⁹As an important exception to this were poor, white peasant classes (mostly Irish) who were transported to the Caribbean as sources of labor, before the Atlantic trade in stolen Africans took effect.

as enacting a different relationship to possibility and impossibility (as far as enacting “event zones,” in Zakiyyah Jackson’s words, of black living in/against a climate of black death-making. Is geographical remoteness central to the Wakanda-conditions that facilitate working out Afro-futures?

Soca artist, Nailah Blackman released her single, *Iron Love* in 2019, paying homage to “Professor” Ken Philmore.¹⁰ Ken Philmore was a well-known arranger of steelpan music, and was iconic on the panyard scene since around 1980. So his death in 2018 was a real loss for Trinidad’s cultural world. It’s significant that Blackman’s 2019 single is rooted in this way – honoring one of the more recent steelpan giants. *Iron Love* is really about foregrounding the historical and cultural significance of the steelpan, not only as a musical instrument invented on the island, but more importantly, as an instrumental invention conditioned by the entanglements (between black freedom and black capture) of its birthplace. In other words, *Iron Love* recalls the entanglement between a history of black radical insistence on world-making and joy-making and a history of colonial domination (the administrators of which were acutely aware of the “dangers” of such black cultural productions in the colonies). The material history of the “oil drum turned steelpan” is that history of entanglement, and well as an Afrofuturist activation of making space and time for black freedom.

I watched this video again (a few times over) in writing this paper. Its opening scene is an aerial view of Laventille, a predominantly Afro-Trini town, situated throughout the Northeast hills of Trinidad. In the aftermath of the abolition of slavery on the island (in 1834), The Hill (as it’s colloquially called) was a place of retreat and refuge for a large majority of African ex-slaves. Laventille continued in this capacity, as a settlement and now town for Afro-Trinidadians, and it is in this capacity that The Hill was (and is) a cultural mecca of sorts for the emergence of black cultural production in Trinidad. Indeed, Laventille is marked as *the* birthplace of the steelpan. Blackman locates her ode to *Iron Love* here, because Laventille serves as a premier site for what I identify as edge-zones, as Wakanda-geographies in which cultures of black liberation and cultures of anti-black domination entangle in unique ways. In the comment section below the music video, a commentor (JoshTheGreat) writes, “I love this video because even though sometimes we live in places where life could be so hard, we can still find a way to see beauty.” I would add: we still find a way to *make* beauty. Laventille’s geographical history of being a place of refuge for formerly enslaved blacks is particularly significant insofar as it sits right along the outskirts of the nation’s capital of Port-of-Spain. There’s a scene in the video where the camera captures Laventille’s vantage point, looking out from the *edges* of Port-of-Spain proper, toward the booming/resource-rich capital. This scene is significant to both the history of The Hill and to the narrative I read from Blackman’s curation. There will probably be little surprise to know that, because of its emergence as a region of refuge for black ex-slaves, Laventille continues to this day to be a region of deep economic disinvestment. In this sense, this real-life Wakanda zone completely diverges from its cinematic rendition of abundant material prosperity (to be sure, there *is* no real-life force field that will ever shield or bring about complete distanglement from racial capitalism.)

¹⁰<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kpyOLwZ8Fqo> (last accessed June 12, 2022).

Laventille is, quite literally, an enclave of poverty and joblessness that persists even as Trinidad's growing GDP makes it one of the more economically thriving of Britain's former West Indian colonies.¹¹

All of this to say – *Iron Love* is not simply an ode to the sweetness of the steelpan, but rather what I take to be an intentional articulation of how, at the edges of a resource-rich center and despite a pervasive material disinvestment, cultures of black joy emerge as black liberation and/black agency-making. We can think about Laventille itself as a “south-periphery” *in its own right*, within a broader periphery of Trinidad as a global south nation. To be sure, Blackman's music video is careful to signal the material poverty of The Hill. But in her signaling, she precisely points out that colonial/neocolonial domination isn't the only story of The Hill. Domination serves as the historical backdrop of black life worlds using resources (or the absence thereof) in ways that are technically saavy,¹² so as to invent instrumentations of black agency. *Iron Love's* story, in other words, is one of Afro-descended practices “humanizing a landscape”¹³ (to paraphrase Sylvia Wynter) despite that landscape's pervasiveness of social death.

Referencing the geographer, Denis Byrne, Tiffany Lethabo King reminds us that “colonial landscapes ... are always contested landscapes that are dynamic and capable of being manipulated ... by the colonized to resist the domination of the colonizer.”¹⁴ These contested geographies – entanglements between domination and audacious freedom practices of the dominated – are “nervously” controlled (according to Denis Byrne's account). That is to say, administrators of domination have always been aware that reductions to social death (to zones of nonbeing) are never fully accomplished, and are always in need of violent reinforcement within all facets of life (social, cultural, psychical). Within such geographies of black capture, it is particularly productions at the *cultural* level of black life about which these administrative forces of white violence have tended to be most “nervous.”

Cedric Robinson's trace of the draconian bans against African expressive cultures on an island like Trinidad is a poignant reminder of this. During the period between official emancipation and official independence, British colonial administrators often cracked down on those “profane festivals such as Canboulay and the jamaet Carnival, where thinly veiled disregard for Anglican and Catholic moralities abound...”¹⁵ Interestingly enough, swooped up in the colonial codes that restricted Afro-Caribbean

¹¹A telling anecdote to share – Barack Obama visited Trinidad in 2009 when the country hosted the fifth Summit of the Americas. As part of the “facelift” done to the capital's skyline, a five-foot wall was put up to cut off from view the “wealth disparity of island's slums.” See https://www.cleveland.com/world/2009/04/wall_built_outside_trinidad_sl.html (last accessed June 13, 2022).

¹²The technological aspect of what it means to transform the oil drum into the steelpan should not be lost on us. This brings to mind what dann Broyld notes in his chapter on the Afrofuturity of the Underground Railroad – the use of technology has always been central to Afrofuturist renditions of practicing/enacting black dreams for freedom. The “iron man” is no less a techy than the fugitive slaves who developed the navigational expertise necessary to chart out freedom tracks toward the North. Much like the urban black youth of the South Bronx in the 1970s whose technological skill produced Hip Hop's record scratch, the “iron man” is central to an Afrofuturist tale of sabotaging a technological matrix to open up space for black freedom.

¹³Sylvia Wynter, “Jonkonnu in Jamaica,” *Jamaica Journal* 4, no. 2 (1970): 35.

¹⁴Tiffany Lethabo King, *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 108.

¹⁵Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 246.

expressive cultures was the African drum. And then it was in response to (*against*) the banning of the drum that the oil drum was repurposed – very much in the technological sabotaging spirit that animates Afrofuturism¹⁶ – for making the kind of music to which *Iron Love* pays homage. Historical traces like Robinson’s serve as a reminder that the political economy of colonialism, of empire and white supremacy has always understood itself to be vulnerable to that “spirit of liberation”¹⁷ insisting on itself in black expressive culture. Colonialism’s political economy has always understood black self-determination as a site of ongoing struggle. Even as an imaginative space, Wakanda-geographies are considered dangerous for a machinery that requires black subjects to full acquiesce to the “less than human.”

Nailah Blackman’s *Iron Love* storytelling signals that though it is somewhat removed from intimate proximity to white people and their norms of racialized violence, black life in the Global South is nonetheless mapped out by that racialized violence. But alongside and entangled with these unavoidable structural entanglements with white domination is the world of the steelpan – the technological sabotaging that gives rise to instrumentation that foregrounds black living. To my mind, the world of the steelpan *worlds* (in an actional sense). It is a space-making event, worlding into existence conditions for the possibility for black living despite and against pervasive (but not over-determining) structures that prescribe social death. This open-outer space (Laventille) from which the oil-drum-turned-steelpan emerges is at the edges of anti-black domination. An edge shaped by that domination, but an edge that enables an overflowing of that domination, nonetheless.

Concluding Thoughts: Plantation’s Edges and Outer Space(s)

In *The Black Shoals*, Tiffany Lethabo King describes the indigo plantations used for the production of blue dye. She writes, “As described in historical literature, the area of the plantation marked off for indigo processing was a fly-and-insect-infested contact zone ... [This] nether region ... is a liminal place that represents a space that is at once both inside and at the very edge of the plantation.”¹⁸ Like King, I am also compelled by spatialities (geographies) that are “both inside and at the edge,” activating asymptotically the “otherwise black living” that the cinematic Wakanda depicts as an outer edge completely disentangled from the inside. An “otherwise black living,” from the “inside and at the edge,” that both *includes* laboring in black captivity and *also* “exceeds the rubric” of (is more than) laboring in black captivity. The double-claim I’m trying to tease out here is not only that the signature of that “more than” is tangibly unique at the peripheral edges of power. But also that this “more than” is most apparent at those peripheral edges of power (more apparent, in other words, in the South). We see this in Blackman’s video imagery. In the midst of a resource desert produced in the wake of colonial domination, a surplus narrative – a “more than” of black living – comes through.

¹⁶See note 12 above.

¹⁷Robinson, *Black Marxism*.

¹⁸King, *The Black Shoals*, 113.

In a chapter on Afrofuturism, Hanif Abdurraqib invites us to think about “the Black people who try on the aesthetic of outer space,” an aesthetic that, on his account facilitates that “reckless and grasping pursuit of a world beyond this one.”¹⁹ In Abdurraqib’s account of this “aesthetics of outer space,” I read an invitation to think expansively about the spatiality of the “outer” in “outer space.” To my mind, it is an invitation to ultimately think inventively about the nature of the “else-where” and “else-when” that Afrofuturism’s futurity activates. Can an “aesthetics of outer space” – a futural aesthetics – also be an aesthetics of the nether, liminal spaces that Tiffany Lethabo King marks on the indigo plantation? Can the space of the *outer* also be “at once both inside and at the very edge of the plantation”? In a hip-hop course that I co-teach, we talk to our students about the enduring role of the cypher – that circular clearing that marks all sorts of Hip Hop narratives and aesthetics. We think about the cypher’s capacity to make a place, *within* the death-scape geographies that backdrop those neighborhoods out of which hip-hop began, for doing blackness otherwise. If Afrofuturism’s aesthetics of the “outer” is also about practicing, imagining, narrating into an kind of aesthetic existence such places for an otherwise living, then perhaps we can think of the “outer” (its else-where and its else-when) as what signifies through hip hop’s cypher practices. That is to say, the “outer” as not a complete *rupture* from the “inner” of plantation violence, but rather as entangled with – “at once both inside and at the very edge” of that plantation violence. If outer space isn’t really about marking some utopian universe that is completely disentangled with a violent anti-black chemistry, but instead, a place that spatializes *event zones* – where temporality isn’t just an unfolding destiny of black capture, but rather one that, perhaps alchemically “[changes] the limit between possibility and impossibility,”²⁰ – then outer space can be in the Global South. The *sound* of outer space can be the iron sounds that come from The Hill, both inside of and at the very edge of Port-of-Spain, making a place for an oil drum (vessel for capitalist extraction and neocolonial domination) to become, in the hands of the very people subjugated by that neocolonial domination, an instrument of black expressive culture.

In using the aesthetic narrative of Nailah Blackman’s *Iron Love*, my hope is to have foregrounded Southness as a Wakanda-geography, spatializing Empire’s edge zones in a way that conditions the production of expressive cultures that alter the relationship between black freedom and black capture. In that regard, the edges of Empire can serve as event-zones out of which an Afrofutural newness might be practiced. Blackman’s visual narrative points back to legacies of black world-making in Southern spaces (“edge” spaces, outer spaces) that bring to mind what Sylvia Wynter describes as black practices of “humanizing the landscape” in a New World. Against the plantation, Wynter writes, “the slave plot on which the slave grew food for his/her subsistence, carried ... *other* conceptions of the human to that of Man’s ... So the plot exists as a threat. It speaks to other possibilities ... ”²¹ Perhaps, also, to *outer* possibilities that shift where impossibility ends and possibility begins for black living. In that recalibration of the “how” of the entanglements between black freedom and un-freedom, a

¹⁹Hanif Abdurraqib, *A Little Devil in America: In Praise of Black Performance*, Penguin, March 2021, 134.

²⁰Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 167.

²¹Sylvia Wynter and David Scott, “The Re-Enchantment of Humanism,” *Small Axe*, September 8, 2000, 169.

cypher event – a real world Wakanda – might condition, even but for a moment, gestures toward a future made in/for black freedom.

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