

Black Nature / Dark Matter Poetics: Camille Dungy's *Smith Blue* and Tracy K. Smith's *Life on Mars*

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On the frontispiece of Camille Dungy's *Smith Blue* (2011), Dungy quotes renowned African American poet Gwendolyn Brooks: "Let us combine / There are no magic or elves / Or timely godmothers to guide us. We are lost, must / Wizard a track through our own screaming weed" (Dungy, 2011: xi). "Wizard a track" (2) incites a personal reinvention; Brooks asserts one can use their particular craft to scour tumultuous lands of "screaming weed" to seek truths and to envision one's own conception of life. Both published in the same year, Camille Dungy's *Smith Blue* (2011) and Tracy K. Smith's *Life on Mars* (2011) reinvent and pave new grounds for black contemporary poetry. Dungy, politically biting, yet tender in her perspicacity, operates through a "Black Nature"¹ subjectivity and ecopoetic² lens. Her acuity and activism pose poignant questions about humans' fragile and interconnected relationships to the planet earth and vice-versa. On the other hand, Tracy K. Smith's poems fashion a metaphysical, David Bowie-inspired futurism to evoke a sense of remembrance for her father, a former Hubble telescope engineer, and to explore vast "Dark Matter"³ questions about human origins, religion, love and the infinite universe. Dungy and Smith "wizard a track," pioneer

and expand black aesthetics through their personal reinventions of traditional poetic forms such as elegy, sonnet, ghazal, etc. In this essay, I will first explore the similarities between the two poets. In exploring the poets' personal, cultural, social and aesthetic backgrounds, I will then compare and contrast their opening poems. Afterwards, I will delve into Dungy and Smith's individual poems by analyzing their use of pathetic fallacy, form, imagery, and elegy. In doing so, I will show how both writers expand black contemporary poetics.

Dungy and Smith share personal, social, cultural, and aesthetic similarities. Dungy and Smith are black women poets who were born in 1972. Dungy was born in Denver, Colorado and Tracy K. Smith in Falmouth, Massachusetts. They are both Cave Canem writers and have each published three collections of poetry. The two poets teach creative writing at the university-level; Smith teaches at Princeton University and Dungy at Colorado State University. They are both married, have a daughter, and live in cities; Smith resides in Brooklyn, New York and Dungy in Boulder, Colorado. Dungy and Smith's aesthetics are both personal and they primarily use free verse to "write in the moment" (Rowell, 2004: 861). Smith and Dungy also share a common theme of loss as their collections include many elegies: the first two sections of poems in Smith's book are elegies in remembrance of her father, Floyd William Smith: "My God, It's Full of Stars" and "The Speed of Belief." Dungy's poems "Prayer for P--," "Arthritis is One Thing, the Hurting Another," "Blue" and "A Massive Dying Off" are elegies written not only about people, but also the deteriorating environment. Lastly, they both employ pathetic fallacy to show the relationship between humans and the planet and, in Smith's case, the entire universe.

In their opening poems, Dungy and Smith veer into separate directions discussing humanity, love, loss, the planet,

and the universe. Camille's Dungy's poem "After Opening the *New York Times* I Wonder How to Write a Poem" serves as a prelude to her lyrical poems about the environment and nature. Dungy begins her poem with: "To love like God can love, sometimes" (1). This line refers to a spiritual awareness about the connection between love poems and God's love. However, with her ambivalent use of the word "sometimes" (1), her tone shifts to a "quiet" (2) meditation. After looking at the newspaper, the speaker strives to find refuge in her environment: "The sort of things I notice: / the bay over redbud blossoms, mountains / over magnolia blossoms" (4-6). This attention to nature as a source of peace has the potential to become the muse for her love poem. The "bay" (5) refers to California's coastal landscapes she repeatedly paints in the backdrop of her poems. However, this romanticized nature dwindles as the next lines evoke sadness and apathy: "There is always something / starting somewhere, and I have lost ambition" (6-7), and "shame fits comfortably / as my best skirt" (8-9). This poem bridges into ecopoetry as she poses questions about the vitality of the planet and its connection to humans. The bulk of her poems reveal how nature and humans are interwoven together and cannot be separated; this political and social consciousness is prevalent in "A Massive Dying Off," "Blue," "Five for Truth" and "Post Modified Food." Dungy strives to make political issues personal in order to educate and raise questions about how our individual choices affect the lands we depend on.

In comparison to Dungy's "After Reading the *New York Times*," the first sentence in Tracy K. Smith's "The Weather in Space" also mentions God as she begins with the question: "Is God Being or Pure Force?" (1). This rhetorical and metaphorical query highlights the numerous unanswered questions riddled in her poems about death, God, the universe, and love. Smith addresses the unnamed "it" (2, 3) as an ambiguous re-

placem for vastness who we do not understand. Smith proposes humans cannot forecast the “weather in space” because chaotic “storms kick up” revealing “nothing is ours” (4-5) and human beings are not in complete control. Furthermore, in spite of this realization, Smith grapples with a teleological notion that humans give meaning to this “gangly doll” (4) by “chasing,” (5) even though “we” (showing a common human understanding) are to certain “lose” (6) and eventually die. In spite of knowing humanity’s common fate, her last lines “so alive—faces radiant and panic” (6-7) combine the universe’s wondrous brilliance with fear to show that humans are simultaneously fearful, amazed, and awe-inspired in not understanding “it” in its entirety. Smith’s awestruck tone resonates throughout her kitschy science fiction and space poems that contend with and ask larger questions (like her first sentence inquires) about death, origins, one’s purpose, and the universe. Examples of these poems include “It and Co.,” “My God is Full of Stars,” “The Museum of Obsolescence,” “The Largeness We Can’t See,” and “Do You Wonder, Sometimes?” In the proceeding sections, I will examine Dungy and Smith’s individual poems and relate them to their opening poems’ thematic elements, poetic devices, and motifs.

Camille Dungy and Black Nature

Camille Dungy has written three poetry collections: *What to Eat, What to Drink, What to Leave for Poison* (2006), *Suck on the Marrow* (2010) and *Smith Blue* (2011). She is also the editor of *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry* (2009), the first anthology that focuses on black nature writing (Johnson, 2010: 1). Her anthology and poems seek to place black voices in conversation with the natural world in order to elucidate blacks’ “natural experiences” (Dungy,

2011, 760). This anthology captures voices as early as the late prodigious 18th century writer and poet Phyllis Wheatley. Dungy compiled these poems in order to uncover the silences of black nature poets and to show how black writers can reinvent what a nature poem is and can do. For example, Evie Shockley writes: these poems show the “ways nature can make us feel uncomfortable” (Shockley, 2011: 764). This liminal threshold corresponds to Dungy’s definitions of “Ecotone” and serves as a prime example of her black aesthetic reinvention that unsettles and signifies normalizations of “nature writing”:

“Ecotone: liminal space, agitated place where this way and that break their fists into open hands then thread together in a knot of fingers: that zone we move in, neither here nor there, not fully this mode but not entirely that groove either: time of functioning ambivalence: corridor both a blossoming mystery and a landing-strip cleared for take off and landing: alleyway of the natural world; trickster landscape; crossroads; bivouac: overlapping areas, unstable places: a state of mind.” (Dungy & Matthews, 2008: 20)

Moreover, in her piece “On *Black Nature...*” she writes, “So as long as the definition of ‘natural poetry’ aligns itself with a placid and pastoral tradition, the work of many of these [black] writers will not be included” (Dungy, 2011: 762). Depicted in *Smith Blue*, Dungy is concerned with how black writers challenge and bring new voices to nature writing. As previously mentioned, Dungy aligns herself with the genre of ecopoetry, poetry that is ecologically and environmentally conscious:

“As we advance our view of what it means to

interact with the natural world and include conversations about environmental justice, ecology, and historically-informed environmental practices, there will be more room for nature poetry that might be viewed as politically-charged, historically-biased, culturally-engaged, and potentially antagonistic.” (Dungy, 2011: 762)

Ecopoetics and Elegy

Dungy’s poem “Blue” is an example of her ecopoetic aesthetics. “Blue” refers to her book title and to Smith’s Blue, a species of endangered coastline butterflies. Rudi Mattoni named the butterflies posthumously after his lab partner and friend Claude I. Smith. This elegy is divided into three sections and delves into the connection between the endangered status of Smith’s blue butterflies and the vulnerability of humans against their environments, namely Smith’s tragic death at Half Moon Bay (42). Dungy takes a politically charged and emotive stance with the first line “One will live to see the Caterpillar rut everything” (1). Dungy puns on the “Caterpillar” (1), the corporate construction brand, which incidentally kills the Smith’s blue butterflies. She reveals how machinery—man-made invention—destroys everything: “seacliff buckwheat cleared, relentless / ice plant to replace it, the wild fields bisected... along this coastal stretch endangered, everything” (2-6). The first eleven lines are one sentence, imbued with dashes, commas, and an onomatopoeia with the Dungy’s fictionalized imagery of Smith’s first sighting (9). This elongated sentence emphasizes the heavy urgencies of coastal and fauna endangerment (6-8) threatening a mere “solitary blue butterfly” (11). Within this, Dungy employs pathetic fallacy to connect nature as sharing

human emotions and sensibilities. The salient three words “fragile” (15), “alive” (39), and “blue” (51) are the last words in each section. By using these three words, Dungy relays a connection between Mattoni’s struggle to keep the both the fragile butterflies and Smith’s name and memory alive. In addition, the word “blue,” resonating throughout Dungy’s collection, not only evokes her seascape environment, but also her melancholy. By blending ecopoetic pathetic fallacies with elegy, Dungy re-invents the elegiac form to show how man-made travesties are killing the environment and all its flora and fauna.

“A Massive Dying Off” is another example of Dungy’s ecopoetic elegy that expands a nature poem by asking moral questions about human responsibility to the environment’s deterioration. In light of modernity, this poem reveals how America’s consumption culture makes the flora and fauna die off. However, we ignore this problem(?) and “plug in [our] iPods” (21), “buy new shoes” (2), drive to “Costco” (14), and listen and then ignore the news “on NPR” (29). The lines are scattered across the pages, representing the lifeless and swollen sea life that stays afloat. Dungy vehemently demonstrates the destruction caused is lost in conversation with the news. The italicized lines represent the radio’s announcements and the sea creatures’ deaths as afterthoughts; the words are pushed to the sides of the pages and hover in small fragments. This locality also illustrates “*Sea stars, jellies, anemones, all the scuttlers and hovers / and clingers along the ocean floor. A massive dying off, further displacing / depleted oxygen* (18-20). By picturing two voices, one that is standard font and one that is italicized, the poem shows the dual presence of wildlife and humans on the planet. This juxtaposition shows how humans have both causes the harm, yet individuals do not take part in aiding nature’s despair and mercy. In the last section, the poem shifts to an ancestral past. In this imagination, Dungy uses the pronoun

“your” to personalize the poem for the readers. She incites that our actions have had a transhistorical and global impact, forcing us to consider the historical implications of our actions with the present question: “What can you do?” (62). She further contends nature will come back to haunt us with the “rising dead” (61). When you see a dead human on the surface, will you then finally take action?

Floriography and Pathetic Fallacy

Dungy’s use of the words “coreopsis” (10) in “Blue” is a prime example of Dungy’s plant taxonomy and pathetic fallacy mixings, which formulate her distinct ecopoetic language. Dungy’s fascination with nature, species and the outdoors is prevalent in her essay “Floriography, More or Less.” She explains: “We all inhabit language different... I know my landscapes like I know my native language. I move through them with fluency, though my knowledge is incomplete. There is always more to discover. There is always more to know. It’s all changing, it’s all growing. It’s an old, old world that I can always learn to describe anew.” (Dungy, 2011: 784). Dungy describes anew an apocalyptic, war-ridden world with her poem “Daisy Cutter.” By doing so, she creates her own militarized floriography. Similar to her pun on the “Caterpillar” (1), in the poem “Blue,” she puns on “Daisy Cutters” as they not only connote flowers, but also scattered wartime bombs built to kill ground citizens. Dungy’s interconnection of taxonomy and pathetic fallacy is prevalent: “gladiolas, purple carnations / dark as my heart” (3), “bouquets of fire” (6), “black iris with their saber-bloomed blooms” (12), “flamethrowers: the peonies” (13). Through these intense pathetic fallacies, the flowers become the speaker’s refuge during this mass toil and warfare. Simultaneously, the flowers empathize with emotions; the humans become “[a]

stalk of green panic” (25) and “sprigs of blossoming heartbreak” (27). As a result, within these violent images, Dungy repeats, “the way we carry on” (18, 30) throughout the poem to show the human habits of violence and destruction in world and how nature intertwines and protects through devastating means.

In reference to the repetitions of the humanistic “way we carry on” (18, 30), Dungy’s titled poem “The Way We Carry On,” through another mode of pathetic fallacy, alters the human perspective by showing nature’s subjectivity and voice in through its own rhythms and cycles in life. The speaker commands the readers to pay attention: “There is the sky... This temperate sky / will not comfort you someday” (1, 3-4) and “Come over here / and see what the bird’s nest is doing” (9-10). This attention to these delicate and tender moments—through the acute detailing of temperature, colors, textures and tints—show our need to listen to the earth’s subtleties and be conscious of its own synced rhythms that humans are not a part of. “It” (1, 12), seen in the first and last line of the poem, refers not only to the “sky” (1) but also encompasses the infinite possibilities networks of that are orchestrated as by nature. As Tracy K. Smith demonstrates in her poem “It and Co.” the vastness of “it” (the universe) is “like some novels: vast and unreadable” (13-14) and encompasses the planet’s uncontrollable powers and influence in the world. Although humans have the ability to endanger the environment, nature’s perspective has its own agency and course, and does not require the presence of humans.

Tracy K. Smith and Dark Matter

Tracy K. Smith is the author of three collections of poetry *The Body’s Question* (2003), *Duende* (2007) and *Life on Mars* (2011). Her recent collection *Life on Mars* (2011) was

the recipient of the 2012 Pulitzer Prize. Similar to Dungy's confrontation with nature and its inhabitants, Tracy K. Smith reveals in a PBS interview with Ray Suarez that "a poem is an opportunity to kind of interrogate myself a little bit and see in what ways I'm complicated by situations like that... like somehow connected to it in ways that might be uncomfortable" (Suarez, 2011: 1). Her poems constantly question human origins and play with philosophies and allusions to pop culture. For example, in the title poem "Life on Mars", Smith employs a kitschy futuristic David Bowie-influenced aesthetic to show how humans have outlandishly imagined the future. Smith operates through a "poetry of self" (Rowell, 2004: 862) as the subjects of her poems in *Life on Mars* contend with her father, daughter, metaphysical human experiences and relationships with the universe, etc. Ryan Sharp reviews *Life on Mars*: "using space as the great unknown to explore the unknowable is very clever, and Smith executes this extended metaphor as a way to engage readers into her way struggles through the vastness of her loss" (Sharp, 2012: 521). While writing her book, Smith's father, one of the first Hubble Telescope engineers, passed away. Tracy K. Smith's motifs of space and futurism elegize her father in his love for science fiction and his profound contributions to planetary discoveries. As Smith meanders through these possibilities, she excavates her way into contending with the unknowable: loss, death, and our significance as human beings on this earth.

Space and Elegy

Smith's poem "My God the Sky is Full of Stars" is one of the first poems introducing her science fiction aesthetics. This poem is divided into five sections and the first section begins with: "We like to think of it as parallel to what we know,

/ Only bigger” (1-2). Smith focuses on “it” as something intangible and indescribable. As a result of “it,” even campy popular cult movies such as *Omega Man* (1971) and “Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968)” (68) try to explain “it” in its infiniteness and wonder. Through the allusion of “Charlton Heston” as the last white man in the film, she teeters on how *Omega Man* (1971) serves as a social text for black men in America. Smith plays on the kitschy hyper-played racial undertones that valorize “the last white man living”, the premise guiding the movie’s explicit racism: “like Moses: arms raised: arms raised high, face an apocryphal white” (28) and “Hero, survivor, God’s right hand man... He sits straight in his seat, takes a long, slow high-thespian breath / Then lets it go.” (35-38). In this poem, she exposes how cliché, corny, and racist representations of the future universe have been imagined. To counter this, in section five, line 88, Smith cites her father and her work with the Hubble Telescope: “The first pictures came back blurred, and I felt ashamed / For all the cheerful engineers, my father and his tribe. The second time, / The optics jibed. We saw the edge of all there is-- / So brutal and alive it seemed to love us back” (101-104). In this last section, Smith moves away from pop cultural racism to show how her father had a huge significance with our scientific knowledge of the universe, its existence, and its images.

Smith’s poem “Life on Mars” is a reference to David Bowie’s glam rock ballad “Life on Mars?” Bowie’s song is about the American consumerism during the 1970’s. Smith’s “Life on Mars” strings together news clippings and bites around the world. She interrogates why certain things happen: “How two sisters, say, can stop knowing one another” (13), “there was a father in the news kept his daughter / Locked in a cell for decades” (16-17) and “prison abuse by US military personnel at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq (Section 8, 73). She tries to

reckon with these events by saying: “Every day. To ourselves and one another. And what / If what it is, and what sends it, has nothing to do / With what we can’t see? Nothing whatsoever / To do with a power other than muscle, will, sheer fright?” (106-109). Smith contends with the fact that humanity will never be able to fully examine what or why things happen to us. As suggested in “The Weather in Space,” we can only go along with the chaotic storm and bring meaning that is productive, salient, and filled with our own conceptions of love. Whatever “it” is remains undisclosed to us, and we will perhaps never understand “it” in its entirety.

In addition to her poems about science fiction and space (i.e. “Sci-Fi” and “The Largeness We Can’t See”), “The Speed of Belief” is also in memoriam to her father. In the third section of her poem, Smith structures her poem in ghazal (a type of poem that is written with a minimum of five and a maximum of fifteen couplets). Ghazals traditionally evoke “melancholy, love, longing and metaphysical questions” (poets.org). Through this ghazal, Smith alludes to the “storm” (4) from her poem “The Weather is Space.” Smith asks, “What does the storm set free?” (1). Does it set humans free? In this section of the elegy, Smith repeats the word “walk” (35-48) at the end of each couplet. This idea of walking represents a slowed down view of living as someone takes careful steps into an unknown territory and abyss. Smith grapples with her father’s unknown destination as she strives to reinvent her father’s surroundings and life. Later in the poem, Smith in imagining her father’s death “realize[s] the door leading out was open. / I walked through, and my eyes / Swallowed everything, no matter / How it cut. To bleed was my prize: / I was free, nobody’s daughter, / perfecting an easy weightless laugh” (74-79). In this tender moment, Smith realizes how fragile human lives are, “open” (74) to death’s powerful presence and uncertainty at any moment. In this poem, Smith

questions how can one live with death and continue while simultaneously “perfect[ing] an easy weightless laugh” (79) that is filled with so much grief, awe, fear and unanswered questions.

Life on Mars

In Smith’s last two poems “When Your Small Form Tumbled Into Me” and “US & CO,” she writes about her daughter’s birth and love as another awe-inspired “it” that brings new kinds of love and meaning to her life. In her PBS interview with Ray Suarez, Smith states,

“The other thing that was happening during that time I was writing this book was I became pregnant with my daughter. And that was another big ‘it’ that, in some ways, I was really was really grateful for, because it gave me a sense that, not only is there this ever-after that our loved ones disappear into, but there’s some source that might be generating other people, other... loves.” (Suarez, 2011: 1)

In the first two sections of her book, Smith writes about her father’s death through space, sci-fi and cosmic images. However, her last poem switches from a galactic landscape to a grounded “terrain” (3). In “US & CO.,” Smith writes that, after loss, one must “feel around making sense of the terrain, / on our new limbs / Bumping up against bodies / until one becomes home” (3-6). These lines suggest a persistent, trial-and-error, voyage to find renewal in life and love. As humans, we continually strive to connect and find security and comfort with loved ones. Smith nods to nature’s cycle, similar to Dungy’s poem “The Way We Carry On”: “Moments sweep past. The grass bends / then learns to stand” (7-8). Similar to Dungy’s conception of “Black Nature,” Smith realizes the unknowable “dark matter”

will follow its own cosmic cycle. As Smith continues in her interview, her love for her daughter became “a beautiful kind of cyclical thing that I was able to write into” (Suarez, 2011: 1) and a closure for her father’s death. Intertwined with nature’s rhythms by the end, Smith’s resiliency and love will continue to “learn to stand” (8), and her father’s love will always be with her and live on in her poems.

Conclusion

In these collections of poems, I examined how Camille Dungy and Tracy K. Smith expand black poetics and aesthetics by inventing their own languages and styles through free verse, elegies, and pathetic fallacies. I showed how Dungy recreates a “Black Nature” ecopoetics that contends with environmental, ecological, and wartime issues. In contrast, Smith grapples with “Dark Matter,” unexplainable forms of life that somehow intricately weave together death, love, loss, and hope in her life. In her futurism, Smith contends with a genuine love that she knows will keep the human race going. In analyzing Dungy and Smith’s poems, I found similarities between the ways in which they investigate nature and the universe. Through their distinct, yet interconnected experiences and art, they both demonstrate nature follows its own course even as humanity creates meaning out of it. Relating back to Gwendolyn Brooks use of the word “loss,” however cryptic and uncertain it may be, it is up to an individual to bring meaning and significance to their humanity, shining through love, activism, consciousness-building, etc. Dungy will continue to write and fight for the planet’s existence. Smith, similarly, will continue to write, ask questions, love and keep her father’s image alive. Original, poignant, and indelible, both *Smith Blue* (2011) and *Life on Mars* (2011) are forces to be reckoned with in the canon of

contemporary American poetics.

Notes

¹ Camille Dungy is the editor of *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Poets*.

² Term from “Poetic Reflections: An interview with poet Camille T. Dungy,” Interview with Maisha Z. Johnson, December 14, 2010.

³ Refers to Smith’s phrase “dark matter” (1, 29) in her title poem “Life on Mars.”

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