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Reprise Editor's Introduction

Between a Knee and the Overrepresented Ground of Man — On Black and Other Human Archipelagoes

BRIAN RUSSELL ROBERTS

George Floyd couldn't breathe. He desperately said so some sixteen times in less than five minutes while the Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin held him handcuffed on the ground and pushed a knee into the back of his neck: "I can't breathe. Please, the knee in my neck." One of the witnesses to Floyd's in-progress killing addressed the arresting officers and implored, "Get him off the ground You could have put him in the car by now. He's not resisting arrest or nothing." But the assault continued, with Floyd's neck compressed between a knee and the ground. For masses of viewers who saw videos of the killing, Chauvin's knee not only compressed Floyd's neck but ruptured the thin façade of what some may imagine to be justice, regardless of racial background, before the law. Chauvin's knee became a pointed yet blunt incarnation of persistent and ongoing systemic racism within US police forces and the justice system more generally.¹

Pleading for his life, Floyd asked for respite from the knee: "Please, the knee in my neck." But as the previously quoted witness to Floyd's killing pointed out, it was also a question of the ground: "Get him off the ground." The ground—that most fundamental, material, and commonsensical manifestation of geography. If police forces and the justice system have not been racially just, one would think that the ground, the vast and apparently inert thing upon which we walk every day, could be impartial. Indeed, one might think that the ground—this immediately present incarnation of geography—could be racially just at least by virtue of its very inertness.

And yet, like the witness to Floyd's murder attested, there is *something* about the ground. Black theorists have been making this point about geography for decades and even centuries, with W. E. B. Du Bois, in a famous quotation from his 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk*, pointedly predicting the geographical grounds of the racial struggle he foresaw for the twentieth century: "The problem of the twentieth century

is the problem of the color-line,—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea.”² These grounds—these geographies of racial struggle—have never been inert. And if the knee in Floyd’s neck has vivified some viewers’ conviction regarding systemic racism within the US criminal justice system and the United States more generally, it is my hope that the four readings included in this edition of *Reprise* will help elucidate the epistemic racism that infused, and continues to infuse, the ground that pushed up against Floyd’s neck as Chauvin pushed down. Such an assessment of the ground has implications for how we understand US ground and geography within larger transnational and planetary geographies, promising to help us reevaluate, rescale, and reontologize the question of geography’s racial valences within Transnational Americanist approaches and other arenas of thought and activism.

This edition of *Reprise* includes four pieces of writing whose original publication dates range from the early nineteenth century to the late twentieth century and to the early twenty-first century. First, we read an excerpt from the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte* (1837), a title often translated as *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*. The present excerpt, “Geographical Basis of History,” is drawn from an edition of the book published as *The Philosophy of History*, translated by J. Sibree.³ Second, we read an agenda-setting essay by Jay L. Batongbacal, a Filipino legal scholar and Associate Professor of Law at the University of the Philippines. This essay, titled “Defining Archipelagic Studies,” originally appeared as the concluding chapter for the 1998 essay collection *Archipelagic Studies: Charting New Waters*.⁴ A third reading is by Katherine McKittrick, Professor of Gender Studies and Cultural Studies at Queen’s University in Kingston, Canada. This is the fifth and final chapter of McKittrick’s 2006 book *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*.⁵ *Reprise*’s fourth reading is by Gary Y. Okihiro, Professor Emeritus of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University and Visiting Professor of American Studies and Ethnicity, Race, and Migration at Yale University. His contribution is titled “Island Race,” originally published in the *International Journal of Okinawan Studies* in 2012.⁶ In republishing the latter three pieces, we gratefully acknowledge copyright permission granted by the copyright holders: respectively, the University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies, the Regents of the University of Minnesota, and the Research Institute for Islands and Sustainability at University of the Ryukyus.⁷

Although we are republishing these pieces in chronological order by publication date, the collective intervention they make in the way we understand the ground and geography more generally is perhaps best grasped when we consider their pages shuffled among one another and in dialogue with commentary from Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*. Hegel, whose work has been foundational to numerous thinkers and schools of Western thought, narrates world history as the story of the emergence of self-conscious Spirit among humans across time, and in “Geographical Basis of History” he focuses on Spirit’s relation to geography. He explains that geography, this

“extrinsic element,” is “the ground on which ... Spirit plays” (79). If the Spirit of which Hegel speaks exists in an ideal realm, Hegel nonetheless describes for us the specific physical form of the material geography upon which Spirit emerges. “The true theatre of History is ... the ... northern half [of the world], because the earth there presents itself in a continental form” (80). The geographical form of the continent, then, is the very stage of history, the geographical precondition and ground for humans’ entrance into history. Hegel’s Eurocentric, racialized, and racist evaluations of the peoples of Africa, Asia, and Europe have been well-rehearsed. Unsurprisingly, the continent of Europe has been the stage of history’s ultimate culmination, Spirit’s emergence as self-conscious (102). And although history has culminated in Europe (particularly in France, Germany, and England), Hegel looks to the people of the continent of Asia and concedes that “the beginning of History may be traced to them,” even if they themselves “have not attained an historical character” as Europeans allegedly have (101).⁸ As for the continent of Africa? “Africa proper, as far as History goes back, has remained ... shut up; it is ... the land of childhood, which lying beyond the day of self-conscious history, is enveloped in the dark mantle of Night” (91). Elsewhere: “What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical” (99). During the early twentieth century, Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* spoke back to Hegel on the question of self-consciousness, observing that the “American world” was “a world which yields [the Negro] no true self-consciousness.”⁹ And during the early twenty-first century, Chauvin, compressing Floyd’s neck between a knee and a continental American ground permeated by Hegel’s Eurocentric and racist disregard for people of African descent, deprived Floyd of consciousness and then life.

And yet for Hegel, Africa, as a continent, at least met the geographical preconditions to become a potential stage of history. While the continents were the stages of world history, in Hegel’s view, there was a certain genre of ground that was so unhistorical that it was always already unhistorical: places “where the land divides itself into points” (80). Among these points were islands. Consider Hegel’s geohistorical dismissal of the islands of the Pacific and possibly of the East Indies or Malay Archipelago: “[T]he Archipelago between South America and Asia shows a physical immaturity. The greater part of the islands are so constituted, that they are, as it were, only a superficial deposit of earth over rocks, which shoot up from the fathomless deep” (81). This genre of ground is so far beyond the pale that the islands’ people merit no mention within Hegel’s historical narrative in which Spirit plays on geography. Imagine the doubly unhistorical abjection of allegedly unhistorical Africans who were enslaved and brought to the allegedly unhistorical geography of the archipelago known as the Caribbean. And imagine the absolutely abject station, within a Hegelian view of history, of Indigenous peoples of the Pacific who merited no mention—not even as *unhistorical*—because of the genre of ground on which they lived. Hegel at one point articulated it succinctly: “[W]orld history takes account only of those nations which have formed themselves into states. But we must not imagine that this can occur on a desert island.”¹⁰ Certainly, then, Du Bois was speaking back to Hegel when he projected the

twentieth century's future history: "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line,—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea." The European continent's ground disappears from Du Bois's projection, and the American continent's ground materializes, fittingly perhaps, given that Hegel saw America as a "Land of the Future" (87). But more remarkable than Du Bois's decision to present readers with the waning of one continent and the waxing of another was the fact that "the islands of the sea" appear at all in Du Bois's vision of future history—these were the "points" of ground formerly dismissed by Hegel as irretrievably unhistorical. For Du Bois, there would be a new historical dialectic in which people of color were historical actors and seas of islands became a main historical stage.

Exquisitely attentive to the noninert quality of the ground in relation to both Du Bois's geographical model of the colorline and the geographical model (embraced by Hegel and others) in which men of Europe emerge as the culmination of world history and humankind, Katherine McKittrick's chapter "Demonic Grounds: Sylvia Wynter" brings focus to the enormously and enduringly important work of the Jamaican critical theorist and novelist Sylvia Wynter. In particular, McKittrick dedicates her chapter to conveying, mediating, and interpreting the geographical aspects of Wynter's work. Referring to Wynter's narrative of the emergence of Man (in which European "Man comes to represent the only viable expression of humanness, in effect, overrepresenting itself discursively and empirically"), McKittrick explains, "I am interested in following alongside [Wynter's] argument regarding the invention of Man, and discussing this in relation to what might be called Man's geographies. So, how do Man's geographies get formulated, cast as natural truths, and become overrepresented?" (124, 123). How do these geographies of Man interact with—and engage in the "geo-racial management" of—the subaltern geographies inhabited by humankind more broadly (129)? What, in other words, went into creating the ground of Man, the racist ground that in May 2020 became Chauvin's putatively natural collaborator, pushing up against Floyd's neck as the knee pushed down? Within McKittrick's explanation of Wynter, the "transparently abnormal" grounds against which Man's transparently normal geographies attain definition emerge as "the uninhabitable and archipelagos" (128). Hence, as far as the geography of overrepresented Man is concerned, we are left staring back at Hegel and others' continental-historical model in which the continents have been and continue to be overrepresented, even as people of African descent are cast as perpetually unhistorical actors, putative failures for having managed to remain unhistorical even when nature afforded them with the fundamentally historical geographical stage of the African continent. According to Wynter, people of African descent in the United States, who as part of the Black Diaspora descend from "the most impoverished of all the earth's continents" (qtd. in McKittrick 132), become honorary inhabitants of the planet's "poverty archipelagos" (qtd. in McKittrick 131), which are "defined at the global level by refugee/economic migrants stranded outside the gates of the rich countries ... with this category in the United States coming to

comprise the criminalized majority of Black and dark-skinned Latino inner-city males now made to man the rapidly expanding prison-industrial complex,” with the “prison system of the United States [becoming] the analog form of a global archipelago” (qtd. in McKittrick, my ellipses, 132). McKittrick explains these as “archipelagos of poverty, hemmed in and categorized by global color-lines” (133). Existing on the threshold of Wynter’s poverty and carceral archipelagoes, Floyd was—even as he was an individual human, a son, a sibling, and a father—a human-geographical aberration on overrepresented Man’s geographical stage. And it was overrepresented Man’s overrepresented continent that pushed up on Floyd’s neck as Chauvin’s knee pushed down.

But McKittrick and Wynter are dedicated to radically reenvisioning world geography and history, against Man’s stranglehold on georacial management. McKittrick explains that Wynter’s work “allows us to consider the ways in which space, place, and poetics are expressing and mapping an ongoing human geography” in which Man does not overrepresent the human (122). And McKittrick herself, via this affordance of Wynter’s work, projects stories of “[n]ew and old archipelagos mapped across Man’s and black geographies, unsettling how the ‘whole world’ is imagined by Man and his human others” (139). The archipelago functions here as a contestatory geographical form that opens up not simply onto the colorline between Black people and white Man but rather, in Du Bois’s words, onto a colorline between “the darker [and] the lighter races,” a line that tangles across the planet, including upon and amid “the islands of the sea.” Hence, it is useful that Gary Y. Okihiro’s essay “Island Race” offers a reminder of a European historical-geographical narrative prior to Hegel, and subsequently elided by Hegel, which was not only able to see island-based humans but ascribed to many of them the albeit dubious world-historical significance of being a race, namely, the Malay race. The short essay “Island Race” is useful and illuminating for a handful of reasons, and particularly so in relation to McKittrick’s and Wynter’s positions on Blackness and archipelagoes. If many people of African descent have inhabited poverty and carceral archipelagoes as a result of Man’s georacial management strategies regarding the ground, then in seeking to understand Blackness’s archipelagoes (old and new) we might look toward georacial management as it has taken place—and been contested and radically reimagined—within material archipelagic spaces.

Offering one such opportunity, Okihiro begins his essay as follows: “In the annals of European science, there is only one island race. That race and the four others are a gift of the Enlightenment to the world courtesy of the imperial science of taxonomy” (39). He explains that the famed taxonomist Carl Linnaeus, in his 1735 book *Systema naturae*, held that *Homo sapiens* existed in four varieties or races, “corresponding with the then conventional continental divisions of Europe, Asia, Africa, and America” (39). As for the aberrant “island race”? Okihiro recounts that Linnaeus’s student Johann Blumenbach named a fifth race in the 1795 version of his study *On the Natural Variety of Mankind*. As Okihiro summarizes, this was “the Malay variety,” with Blumenbach positing “that Malays were intermediate between the Caucasian and Ethiopian, or African. Malays were mainly island peoples of the Pacific and Indian oceans,

including the islands of Southeast Asia and of the clusters called Micronesia, Melanesia, and Polynesia” (39–40). Okihiro does not celebrate Blumenbach’s declaration of the existence of this island race. In fact, he underscores the false and problematic hope that some Filipino US nationals in California felt as their designation as Malay (rather than Asian or Mongolian) temporarily permitted marriage across the colorline before the California state legislature added the Malay race to the list of races prohibited from marrying the race of Man (41). To me, however, Okihiro’s article is perhaps most vividly a reminder of the way Man’s continents perpetually erase the archipelagoes of humankind. Okihiro reports that “[t]he island race proposed by Blumenbach” is “now subsumed under the Asian continent and race” (42). At another point, he explains, “The four continents, races, and civilizations prevail in [Western worldviews and scholarship], whereas the island race, like islands physically and metaphorically, is nowhere to be seen” (40).

The archipelago, then, is a perpetually disappearing ground. On one hand, this seems to be a despairing geographical form for Wynter to use in metaphorizing Black life. But on the other hand, the archipelago is a radical geographical form, consistent with what McKittrick highlights as the world-remaking potential of Wynter’s geographical interventions. The radical remaking associated with the archipelago’s perpetually disappearing ground surfaces momentarily at the end of Okihiro’s essay as he suggests that although the Enlightenment’s sole “island race” was “a fiction of the European mind in the act of empire,” the notion of this Pacific and Indian Ocean race “suggests a union of land and sea” (42). That is, for Okihiro, the act of recalling a generally forgotten “island race” is also the act of remembering that the archipelago, as a geographical entity, is made not only of ground (geography’s proverbially fundamental element) but also of water. In other words, the continent has not been the only overrepresented geography of overrepresented Man. The ground itself has been perhaps even more fundamental and hence more overrepresented. And the archipelago counters the ground’s naturalized geographical overrepresentation because it is made up of vanishing portions of ground (the small “points,” as Hegel called them) and large swaths of water.

Hailing from one portion of what has sometimes been called the Malay Archipelago, Jay L. Batongbacal’s chapter “Defining Archipelagic Studies” helps to further an understanding of what it might mean to think, as McKittrick and Wynter do, about Blackness vis-à-vis the grounds and waters of the archipelagic form. More specifically, Batongbacal’s essay spurs us to consider how a Black neck compressed between a white police officer’s knee and US continental ground relates to Du Bois’s projection of a planet-spanning colorline that exists from “America [to] the islands of the sea.” As part of establishing the University of the Philippines’ Systemwide Network on Archipelagic and Ocean Studies, Batongbacal edited a collection of essays titled *Archipelagic Studies: Charting New Waters*. His essay “Defining Archipelagic Studies” is the concluding chapter of the edited collection. Keenly aware of the way Euro-American thinkers have stacked the geo-epistemological deck in favor of the continent, Batong-

batongbacal explains to readers that, in examining “the archipelagic character of the country” of the Philippines, he and his colleagues were taking up “challenges that have largely been ignored under the weight of decades of biases brought about by training in disciplines developed and dominated by Western continental countries” (183). Placing a still finer point on what Okihiro alludes to in “Island Race,” Batongbacal states that the very first of archipelagic studies’s “basic premises” is that it involves “*the study of the distinct characteristics of an archipelagic environment, the special interactions between its terrestrial and marine components, and their impact on the society dependent upon them*” (185, Batongbacal’s italics). The overrepresented geographies of the continent and the ground subside, as Batongbacal and his colleagues decontinentalize and unground their thought, such that the traditionally standard terrestrial component is still represented (but no longer overrepresented) and is now engaged inextricably with the traditionally erased nonground of the marine component.¹¹

While Batongbacal emphasizes the archipelagic topography of the Philippines, he does not resurrect—or even allude to—the Malay race named by Blumenbach. Nor does he bring up anything like Du Bois’s planetary colorline. What, then, might an essay like Batongbacal’s tell us about the question of georacial management as it has played out on the ground of the continental United States, as police officers have ignored the words of Black citizens who have pleaded for breath? The answer, I would suggest, resides at the intersection of recent scholarship on environmental justice and Batongbacal’s emphasis on questions of the archipelago’s terraqueous environment. In his 2017 book *What Is Critical Environmental Justice?*, the environmental studies scholar David Naguib Pellow quotes from a 2015 article coauthored by US Congressman Keith Ellison and activist and author Van Jones: Thanks in large part to Black Lives Matter, “the call for racial and economic justice is getting louder and stronger. But while we are out on the streets fighting for equality, *our kids are being poisoned by the air they breathe.*”¹² In contextualizing this quotation, Pellow reminds readers that “‘I can’t breathe!’ were Eric Garner’s last words as a police officer choked him to death on Staten Island, New York in July of 2014”; thus Pellow traces the colorline “from a police chokehold on Eric Garner’s neck to the air pollution choking communities of color suffering asthma epidemics related to toxic industrial operations allowed to function with near total impunity.”¹³ While we cannot forget that many police killings of Black people are indicative of systemic racism within the justice system, Pellow further leans on the phrase “I can’t breathe!” to underscore systemic racism within the larger human environment. He looks toward the “element of air [as] an agent” that may “mobilize people in the BLM and [environmental justice] movements” against the killing of Black people by either the fast violence of chokeholds or the equally material but slow violence of air pollution that disproportionately affects—and kills in—what McKittrick and Wynter reference as archipelagoes of Black communities.¹⁴

Hence, Batongbacal’s essay, with its allied warnings against “environmental management policies [that] are formulated chiefly for the land environment” while “neglecting our vast [archipelagic] seas” (188), and its call for “cooperation between

the inhabitants of the archipelago and the non-inhabitants whose activities nevertheless have an impact on it" (189), points toward a convergence of environmental-racial interests between the Black archipelagoes of the United States and the archipelagoes of the global colorline which Du Bois called "the islands of the sea." Certainly, if "I can't breathe!" can be a cry of protest vis-à-vis the continental ground of Man against which Chauvin compressed Floyd's neck, then it might also attain purchase along the planetary colorline that has been and must be a crucial heuristic within Transnational American Studies and its several overlapping and otherwise allied arenas of study. The phrase might be taken as an apropos and incisive protest against what the Marshall Island poet and environmental activist Kathy Jetřil-Kijiner has underscored as Man's terrorizing environmental policies that continually raise the specter of "drowning," of being deprived of breath, as islands are inundated by the ocean and as floods rise in the Philippines, Pakistan, Algeria, and Colombia.¹⁵ Indeed, the pleading and insurgent phrase "I can't breathe!" may be a reminder of—and call to action against—the systemic racism that runs (whether via the fast violence of a knee or the slow violence of carbon pollution and deadly flooding) along the planetary colorline as it tangles through the racially alive grounds and waters of the Black, Indigenous, and other human archipelagoes that span the planet.¹⁶

Notes

- ¹ Details and quotations from the scene of Floyd's murder are drawn from *The New York Times*, "How George Floyd Was Killed in Police Custody," June 1, 2020, video, 9:31, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vksEJR9EPQ8&bpctr=1605135702>; and Brian Dakss, CBS News, "Video Shows Minneapolis Cop with Knee on Neck of Motionless, Moaning Man Who Later Died," May 27, 2020, video, 5:44, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/minneapolis-police-george-floyd-died-officer-kneeling-neck-arrest/>.
- ² W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. Brent Hayes Edwards (1903; reprint, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 15.
- ³ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: The Colonial Press, 1899), 79–102. Subsequent references to this work are cited parenthetically.
- ⁴ Jay L. Batongbacal, "Defining Archipelagic Studies," in *Archipelagic Studies: Charting New Waters*, ed. Batongbacal (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Printery, 1998), 183–94. Subsequent references to this work are cited parenthetically.
- ⁵ Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 121–41, 167–69. Subsequent references to this work are cited parenthetically.

- ⁶ Gary Y. Okihiro, "Island Race," *International Journal of Okinawan Studies* 3, no. 1 (2012): 39–42. Subsequent references to this work are cited parenthetically.
- ⁷ Thanks go to Teresa S. Encarnacion Tadem of the University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies, Jeff Moen of the University of Minnesota Press, and Yoko Fujita of the Research Institute for Islands and Sustainability for facilitating permission from their respective institutions. Thanks also to Batongbacal, McKittrick, and Okihiro for their generosity and support for these republications.
- ⁸ On France, Germany, and England, see Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, 102. Although England is on an island, Hegel seems to bestow honorary continental status on England as part of the European continent.
- ⁹ Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 8.
- ¹⁰ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, trans. H. B. Nisbet, introd. Duncan Forbes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 96.
- ¹¹ Intriguingly, for as continentally oriented as Hegel is in his discussions of history, he sees water space as a facilitator among different continents and thus a facilitator of continent-based history; Hegel 87–88, 90–91.
- ¹² Quoted in David Naguib Pellow, *What Is Critical Environmental Justice?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), 48, Pellow's emphasis. For the original publication of this article, see Keith Ellison and Van Jones, "Pollution Isn't Colorblind: Environmental Hazards Kill More Black Americans," *The Guardian*, July 23, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jul/23/black-lives-matter-air-pollution>.
- ¹³ Pellow, *What Is Critical Environmental Justice?*, 47, 48.
- ¹⁴ The quotations from this sentence are from Pellow, *What Is Critical Environmental Justice?*, 48–49. My use of the term *slow violence* draws on Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).
- ¹⁵ Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner, "United Nations Climate Summit Opening Ceremony—A Poem to My Daughter," *Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner*, blog, September 24, 2014, <https://www.kathyjetnilkijiner.com/united-nations-climate-summit-opening-ceremony-my-poem-to-my-daughter/>.
- ¹⁶ This imagination of interarchipelagic connections between BLM and the islands of the sea might be considered analogous to connections forged between another continent-based American movement and the Pacific Islands, as seen in the poetry of Jetñil-Kijiner and the CHamoru (Chamorro) poet Craig Santos Perez. See Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner, "#noDAPL," *Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner*, blog, September 5, 2016, <https://jkijiner.wordpress.com/2016/09/05/nodapl/>; and Craig Santos Perez, "Water is

Life,” Craig Santos Perez, website, November 3, 2016, <https://craigsantosperez.wordpress.com/2016/11/03/new-poem-water-is-life/>. On the question of the continent, archipelagic thought, and Black–Indigenous connections, see Tiffany Lethabo King, *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 5–12.

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