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The Outside of the Inside: Blackness and the Remaking of Canadian Institutional Life*

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This paper reads Black Canadian literary fiction for what it reveals about the ironic place of blackness in Canadian universities. It weaves together this literary analysis with the author's first-person account of classroom practice in order to illuminate the risks involved for Black scholars and students currently teaching, learning, and producing knowledge within Canadian institutional structures.

Keywords: critical pedagogy, Black Canadian literature, diversity, anti-racism

> "Things might appear fluid if you are going the way things are flowing. When you are not going that way, you experience a flow as solidity, as what you come up against."
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> —Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life.*[1]

There is a scene in a novel published in 2017 by Black Canadian writer Suzette Mayr that helps me think through what happens and what doesn't happen when blackness is included in institutional life. The scene comes early in Mayr's satiric, magic realist novel. A tenured Black English professor at the fictional University of Inevia discovers that the building in which she works is "possessed"[2] and intends to do her harm. Although she is able to gain entrance to the university building—she is pleased when "the electronic front doors slide open and wait for her, like gentle non-racist butlers"[3]—once inside, the

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1 Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham, NC: University of Duke Press, 2012), 186.

2 Suzette Mayr, *Dr. Edith Vane and the Hares of Crawley Hall* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2017), 85.

3 Mayr, *Dr. Edith Vane and the Hares of Crawley Hall*, 23.

architecture of the building springs to paranormal life, rearranging itself in the corners of her vision. Suzette Mayr writes:

> She's traveled through every part of Crawley Hall since she started her job seven years ago but this hallway looks unfamiliar, the stairs redundant—what kind of pointless architecture is this? . . . She jogs toward the dawning sunlight slanting through the window in the exit door. It says Push. But the door pushes back. Locked . . . She spins and rams her back into the door but this door is so locked it's really just a wall. . . . Hairs prickle awake on the back of her neck, her shoulders, her forearms. *Where is she*?"[4]

Mayr's novel reveals how, in Sarah Ahmed's terms, the walls of Edith Vane's institution have sedimented history into a barrier. "Only the practical labour of 'coming up against' the institution," Ahmed writes, "allows this wall to become apparent. To those who do not come up against it, the wall does not appear—the institution is experienced as being open, committed and diverse."[5] Mayr's novel speaks to the ironic position of Black professors and students in Canadian institutional contexts in the present moment: although the university understands itself as a bastion of liberal democracy, progressive thinking, and fair practice, it remains, as Frances Henry and her coauthors put it, "a racialized site that still excludes and marginalizes non-White people, in subtle, complex, sophisticated and ironic ways."[6] As Mayr's character learns, inhabiting such institutional spaces is not the same thing as having residence. How precipitously, Edith Vane discovers, the inside can become the outside! Mayr's novel is a humorous and cathartic satire of campus life, but it also reveals the paradox of "institutionalizing diversity": even when blackness is "included," it is not always inside.

In this article, I begin by offering some context for understanding the current place of blackness in Canadian institutional life. But because, as Henry and her coauthors note in their *The Equity Myth: Racialization and Indigeneity at Canadian Universities* (2017) "little is known" about the experience of racialized—that is to say non-White—professors within the professoriate, "especially in the social sciences and humanities,"[7] I turn my attention to contemporary novels by Black Canadian writers Suzette Mayr and Kaie Kellough in order to illuminate some of the risks involved for Black scholars and students currently teaching, learning, and producing knowledge within Canadian institutional structures. Methodologically, I read these two works of literary fiction as testimonials—as works that speak meaningfully through their modes of representation and registration of affect about the place of blackness in postsecondary contexts. Although it is true that literature offers something different than testimony, they are interwoven and related. As Michael Richardson puts it in his recent study of literary representations of torture, "literature is less definitive, more loaded with potential meanings. Not immediate, but eventual. Not concrete, but gestural. . . . paradoxically,

4 Mayr, *Dr. Edith Vane and the Hares of Crawley Hall*, 20–22.
5 Ahmed, *On Being Included*, 174.
6 Frances Henry, Enakshi Dua, Carl E. James, Audrey Kobayashi, Peter Li, Howard Ramos, Malinda S. Smith, *The Equity Myth: Racialization and Indigeneity at Canadian Universities*, (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2017), 3.
7 Henry, et al., *The Equity Myth*, 5.

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literary writing [can] convey more of experience than words can represent."[8] By turning to literary representations of postsecondary contexts, I hope to offer "more of experience" than has yet been brought to light. This paper concludes by turning to some practical pedagogical concerns about how to productively teach Black literatures within the paradoxical structures of Canadian academe that continue to be animated by their colonial and anti-Black histories, traditions and values, despite their public commitment to "diversity" and "equity."

Canadian academe has an ironic relationship with race. The student bodies of Canadian universities, particularly those in major urban centers, reflect the racial diversity of the country, where, according to the most recent population census, 22.3 percent of Canadians identify as "visible minorities" or non-White,[9] with "South Asian," "Chinese," "Aboriginal," and "Black" constituting two-thirds of this diverse group.[10] But this diversity is largely underrepresented at the level of the professoriate.[11] Racialized women are particularly underrepresented, and their numbers within academe are increasing only sluggishly. According to one recent study, "visible minority" groups in Canada held 18.7 percent of all doctorate degrees, yet only 12 percent of faculty positions.[12] But, paradoxically, since the 1980s, employment equity policies, along with senior administrative "equity" positions, have proliferated, and many Canadian institutions make strong claims to advancing "diversity." Indeed, the "Canadian model" of employment equity has even extended to other countries, such as Ireland and South Africa."[13] The gap between the diversity claims of Canadian institutions and the everyday lived experiences of racialized faculty and students within those institutions often makes for a disorienting reality. For instance, as a Black woman professor at the University of Toronto Scarborough, I recently discovered that a photograph of me has been used by the university to cover a report on Faculty Gender Equity (2017–18), a report which, despite the "President's Message of Inclusion" that opens the report ("Diversity, inclusion, respect, and civility are among the University of Toronto's fundamental values"),[14] admits at the outset that the document "does not analyze the

8 Michael Richardson, *Gestures of Testimony: Torture, Trauma and Affect in Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 2.

9 Canada. Census of Canada 2016. "Census Profile," https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/171025/dq171025b-eng.htm.

10 Racialized Canadians may understand their identities and histories quite differently than the identity categories demarcated by the census of Canada. For instance, as James Torczyner notes, Black immigrants from majority Black nations may identify as "British," "French," "Somali," and so forth, rather than as "Black" (quoted in George Elliott Clarke, *Odysseys Home: Mapping African Canadian Literature* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002], 280), and thus may not be registered as "visible minorities" in the national census. The problems of defining and empirically measuring the racialized population of Canada serves as an important reminder that "race," as writer Wayde Compton puts it, is "a folk taxonomy; a pseudo-scientific demographic categorization system. Like a national border or a literary genre"—or, indeed, the barriers of educational institutions—"race is only as real as our current social consensus" (25).

11 Henry, et al., *The Equity Myth*, 5.

12 Audrey Kobayashi, "'Now You See Them, How You See Them: Women of Colour in Canadian Academia," in *Racism and the Canadian University: Demanding Social Justice, Inclusion, and Equity*, ed. F. Henry and C. Tator (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 60–75.

13 Henry, et al., *The Equity Myth*, 5.

14 Office of the Vice-Provost, Faculty & Academic Life, *Faculty Gender Equity Report, 2017–18*, May 2019, 3. See https://faculty.utoronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Faculty-Gender-Equity-Report-2017-18.pdf.

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intersection of gender with race/indigeneity. We are aware that the experiences of racialized/indigenous faculty may be different."[15] Although my image covers the outside of the report, the full conditions of my labor are not, in fact, addressed within it. The paradox of such institutional practices around diversity, and, in particular, blackness, can be turned into a question: What happens when we teach and learn in the outside of the inside? What happens to Black professors, Black knowledges, and Black texts when we teach in such uncanny structures—and how can humanities scholarship and pedagogy work to transform the sedimented structures of postsecondary institutions in Canada and elsewhere?

Dr. Edith Vane, the Black woman professor at the center of Mayr's magic realist novel, has been tenured by her university, yet she finds herself continuously "gaslit"[16] by the institutional structures in which she works. As she tries to shake off the attacks of her building—what she thinks of as "paranormal phenomena"—she reflects, "So what if there's a supernaturally contaminated hallway. The building's old and contaminated with all sorts of things. Maybe she's special and that's why the hallway rearranged itself for her" (24). Mayr's character comes to believe that there is something deeply wrong—not with the institution (the walls don't rearrange themselves for anyone else)—but with herself. She acutely senses—and is ashamed of—the "category trouble" her gendered and racialized body produces in pedagogical contexts. As Ahmed writes, "I realize how much we come to know about institutional life because of these failures of residence, how the categories in which we are immersed as styles of life become explicit when you do not quite inhabit them."[17] For instance, it has taken Edith a staggering nineteen years to research and write her 583-page monograph on Beulah Trump-Withers, a Black prairie woman pioneer, and now her dean is threatening to place her on probation. "This university is on track," her dean tells her, "to be in the top 1 percent in the country in terms of excellence and globalization, but to do that we're going to have to shed those who diverge from the Enhance Us strategic plan. You understand, eh, Edith?"[18] Feeling panicked and unbalanced, Edith begins telephone counseling sessions with a psychologist—appointed by the U of I—who supplies her with a mantra: "Say this with me," Vivianne tells her. 'I am the architect of my life; I build its foundation and select its furniture.'"[19] Her psychologist, in other words, encourages Edith to take the "contaminated" structures of the institution deeply inside—so deeply that they begin to structure her at the level of the psyche. Thus, the sedimented structures of the institution don't erode simply because Edith appears to be inside them. On the contrary, the structures persist, though policies of "diversity" and "inclusion" make them harder to see. Ironically, and without being fully inside, Edith helps to make the barriers of the institution appear to disappear—by internalizing them into her own body and psyche. The institution doesn't transform; it is Edith who does.

Just as Edith's presence in the outside of the inside does not affect a decolonization of the institution with respect to blackness, neither does her raced and gendered presence

15 Office of the Vice-Provost, Faculty & Academic Life, *Faculty Gender Equity Report, 2017–18*, 3.
16 Mayr, *Dr. Edith Vane and the Hares of Crawley Hall*, 24.
17 Ahmed, *On Being Included*, 178.
18 Mayr, *Dr. Edith Vane and the Hares of Crawley Hall*, 26–27.
19 Mayr, *Dr. Edith Vane and the Hares of Crawley Hall*, 17.

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serve to disrupt the structures of power that circulate inside her classroom. While Dr. Vane aims to teach her students about the transformative possibilities illuminated by literature, "her head starting to thrum, her ears getting that special, thrilling poetry tingle,"[20] her classroom discussions invariably fall flat; she struggles to find ways of engaging her students. Edith notices, in contrast, the lecture room across from hers "brims with students enraptured with their instructor, Leonardo Baudone";[21] meanwhile, she suspects her own students "all hate her because they smell her panic, how she's bumble-faking key theoretical concepts that aren't in her area: she always mixes up the words *tautology* and *ontology*, and she has to look up what *aleatory* means every single goddamn time. She cringes as they ooze contempt, refusing to take notes, as if everything she says is meaningless."[22] What, we might ask, does Dr. Vane want of her students? A flawed character made even more so by her marginalization within the institution, Edith wants to be recognized by her students as knowledgeable and "meaningful" in herself. But her students encounter their own category trouble in recognizing Dr. Vane and the knowledge she brings into the room as fully legitimate. As Sara Ahmed writes, "When you look like what they expect a professor to be, you are treated like a professor. A somber and serious mood follows those who have the right kind of body, the body that allows them to pass seamlessly into the category."[23] When the recognition Edith seeks in the classroom is not granted, the "somber and serious mood" not automatically generated by the presence of the "right" body in the room, Edith compensates by becoming a conduit of borrowed institutional power. "She scrunches her hands into fists, raises herself to her full, Associate Professor, *Philosophieae Doctor* height. 'This poem is most definitely on the final exam!' she shrieks. The students bend their heads down to their desks and begin to type and scribble in their notes. Yes, she is the worst teacher ever."[24] Ironically, then, rather than challenging what Michael W. Apple calls in *Education and Power*, the university's "hidden curriculum,"[25] the phantom syllabus of every classroom that communicates social hierarchies that serve to reproduce the division of labor, Edith's pedagogy forcefully reproduces these structures.

Mayr's novel doesn't reveal whether the poem under study in Dr. Vane's classroom —the one that produces "that special, thrilling poetry tingle" for Edith, but which fails to engage the students—is written by the fictional Beulah Trump-Withers or another Black Canadian author. Whereas a decade ago, Black Canadian literature rarely entered the postsecondary classroom (and when it did, it occupied the status of a "supplement" to the national canon), in recent years Black Canadian literature has largely been absorbed into the national literature and is regularly taught as such. Indeed, the two anthologies most frequently adopted in undergraduate Canadian literature classrooms, Cynthia Sugars and Laura Moss's two-volume *Canadian Literature Texts and Contexts* (2009),[26] and Donna Bennet and Russell Brown's *An Anthology of Canadian Literature in English*

20 Mayr, *Dr. Edith Vane and the Hares of Crawley Hall*, 90.
21 Mayr, *Dr. Edith Vane and the Hares of Crawley Hall*, 91.
22 Mayr, *Dr. Edith Vane and the Hares of Crawley Hall*, 93.
23 Ahmed, *On Being Included*, 176.
24 Mayr, *Dr. Edith Vane and the Hares of Crawley Hall*, 91.
25 Michael Apple, *Education and Power* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 133.
26 Cynthia Sugars and Laura Moss, eds., *Canadian Literature: Texts and Contexts*, vols. I and II (Toronto: Pearson, 2009).

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(2010),[27] both include some writing by Black Canadian authors. Given the insights generated by Mayr's novel about institutionalizing blackness stated previously, I want to turn now to the question of teaching Black literature in Canadian postsecondary contexts. What happens and what doesn't happen when Black literature enters the Canadian literature classroom?

It is not only Black professors who are relegated to the outside of the inside of Canadian institutional life. Montreal author Kaie Kellough's deconstructed novel, *Accordéon* (2016), argues that the same uncanny structures that Edith encounters at the University of Inivea are animated when Black literature enters institutional spaces. The context of Kellough's novel is the series of widespread student demonstrations that took place in Montreal in 2012 against the tuition-fee hikes proposed by liberal premier Jean Charest. The narrator of the novel doesn't come from the perspective of one character's mind; rather, the perspective is that of the multitude—it comes from the street, from below. The narrator of the novel is the multitude of dispossessed in Canadian and Quebec society: an immigrant or an exile, a Muslim woman, a working class Quebecker, or a Black Canadian who is forever regarded as an outsider, despite generations of ancestral history in the country. Through this diffuse narrative perspective, Kellough meditates on what happens—and what doesn't happen—when a radical and experimental novel like this enters Canadian institutional spaces. He writes:

> My process is based on the idea that although immigrants are required to adapt to their immediate environment, some part of them always stays outside of that environment. Some part of my language always stays outside of people's minds, out in the streets. Some part of my language is resistant to polite conversation, something is other, is outer, is out of order, and I can't change that. I can't be inside the machine, the classroom. I am outer, I am not acceptable, and that knowledge carries a deep wound, but I don't want to be acceptable. . . . I don't want to have my monologue taught politely on your undergraduate syllabus, but rather to move of its own accord, to swerve and scatter if it wishes. . . .[28]

What Kellough's novel argues, in other words, is that so long as the structures of the institution remain animated by their anti-Black, as well as colonial and patriarchal, histories, there is a part of a literary text that will stay outside of our classroom, that will not or cannot participate in the reproduction of dominant social relations of which the university is a part. Those of us who teach Black and minoritized literatures will know this to be happening in the classroom when—no matter how radical the text is we are teaching—the social relations in the room remain absolutely the same: predictably hierarchical, orderly, and polite. Even when I teach works such as Dionne Brand's *A Map to the Door of No Return*,[29] which powerfully draws awareness to the histories that haunt the rooms we are in, students still raise their hands to speak; we take turns talking; I still assign essays and grade them. The disruptive and revolutionary aspect of the literature has moved to the outside of the classroom.

27 Donna Bennet and Russel Brown, eds., *An Anthology of Canadian Literature in English* (Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press Canada, 2010).
28 Kaie Kellough, *Accordéon* (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring, 2016), 39.
29 Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2002).

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What are the implications of these insights on our day-to-day teaching practices in the classroom and on our pedagogy? What can humanities pedagogy do to challenge the invisible structures that novels by Mayr and Kellough make visible? I conclude this paper with a short case study from my own classroom.

In 2018 I taught an evening graduate seminar at the University of Toronto called #BlackLivesMatter: Contemporary Black Canadian Literature. For the first four weeks of the course things proceed as usual. The thirteen students and I discuss a range of texts, beginning with Robyn Maynard's recently published social history, *Policing Black Lives: State Violence in Canada from Slavery to the Present*,[30] to NourbeSe Philip's long experimental poem, *Zong!*[31] My multicultural student body (Black, south Asian, Muslim, White) and also queer and differently abled, are earnest, honest, respectful of me and of one another, and respectful of the texts under study. They are highly attuned to the circulation of racialized and other forms of power in Canadian society. Our conversations are passionate but also, always, orderly. Then, in the fifth week, a new student appears. She is registered in the course but lives in the United States. She flies into Toronto for this class in order to give her presentation on NourbeSe *Philip's Bla_K: Essays and Interviews*.[32] The student sits right by the open door, and I worry that she might get up and leave before her presentation begins. Yet she stays and gives one of the most powerful, soul-shaking presentations I have witnessed in ten years of teaching. Drawing on Black feminist methods that hold that the experience of Black women provides a unique and important perspective on power, this student offers her own personal narrative that weaves in and out of NourbeSe Philip's text. She testifies to her life experience as a Black woman who grew up in the foster care system. She tells us about inheriting from her family a legacy of struggle with mental health and addiction. The student breaks down while presenting. The students and I are likewise shaken. A long silence unspools after the student finishes speaking. In that silence we collectively begin to realize how abstract our conversations have been all semester. We realize how many voices never enter this classroom; stories especially from working-class Black folks, people with mental illnesses; people with active addictions. I am extremely uncertain, after the presentation ends, about where to lead the class, and I am conscious of a strong desire on my part to steer the conversation toward safer waters. I struggle against my training to stay with it. We slowly begin to talk about the intellectual history of the West, which privileges reason over madness and emotion; maleness over femaleness, femmes, and queer folks. We talk about crying in the classroom as an important form of labor that can shift and unsettle sedimented things.

The direction our conversation takes on this night is fraught with its own perils. I remember, for instance, the scene Fanon writes on the train, when he is hailed into "a racial epidermal schema"[33] by a young boy, and Fanon must confront the dehumanizing linkage of blackness with "unreason" in the "legends, stories, history, above all

30 Robyn Maynard, *Policing Black Lives: State Violence in Canada from Slavery to the Present* (Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2017).

31 Marlene NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!: as told to the author by Setaey Adamu Boateng* (Toronto: Mercury Press, 2008).

32 Marlene NourbeSe Philip, *Bla_K: Essays and Interviews* (Toronto: Book *Hug, 2017).

33 Franz Fanon, "The Fact of Blackness," *Postcolonial Studies: An Anthology*, ed. Pramod K. Nayar (Maldan, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 15–32, esp. 16.

historicity"[34] with which blackness has been identified. But in contrast to the scene Fanon writes, this night in our classroom opens for me feeling that something else is possible in the classroom in the intentional disruption of the "somber and serious mood" I am expected, somehow, to set. We decide as a group, for instance, to steer away from the words *ontological* and *tautological*—perhaps not coincidentally, the words that Edith Vane continually mixes up. We decide we will begin each class by sharing food together. It feels like a good start, but we also know that it is the broader institutional structures that must be transformed before our work of reading Black Canadian literature can really begin. The structure of tuition fees that makes postsecondary education effectively closed to the working-class, poor folks, and people on disability; the corporatization of the university that instrumentalizes knowledge as profit; the system of assigning letter grades to student work, which perpetuates hierarchies in the classroom: these are a few of the structures that need to be challenged in order to turn the university inside out.

Since this course ended, and in light of my own experience as a professor, I have begun to think more deeply about why people who have historically been excluded from the university—Black, racialized and Indigenous, working class, poor, disabled, trans—would want to enter the university in the first place. We might ask whether the university even deserves the knowledge, experience, and affect such people bring. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, having never had a Black professor at any stage of my education, I believed that what was needed to effect a radical transformation of the institution's structures and investments was for us to break in. It's becoming clearer to me now that the problem of the university is not (only) a personnel problem. The sedimented structures of the university are shifty, yet difficult to shift. Those of us who "keep going no matter what we come up against," as Ahmed puts it, do so because the university remains a center and source of social power—as well as one of hope. We keep going in order to put the pressure of ourselves on the great bulwark of sedimented history as well as all the possibility represented by the institution in order to turn those structures to greater and greater justice.

34 Fanon, "The Fact of Blackness," 17.

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