

Riotous Deathscapes and New Psychologies: Toward Ecoscapes of Decolonial Desire

[BOOK REVIEW]

Ka Canham, H. (2023). **Riotous Deathscapes**. Duke University Press. 228 pages. E-ISBN: 978-1-4780-1959-6/ Hardcover ISBN978-1-4780-2422-4

Riotous Deathscapes is about many voyages, and we are generously invited into some of its crossings through this powerful tome of decolonial desire penned by Hugo ka Canham. The text speaks to “blackness and indigenous life precariously unmoored from modernity” (p. 4) and offers Mpondo theory as a different way of looking at black lives on the margins. ka Canham’s exploration of Mpondo history, ontoepistemology, and dissident desires offers a compelling theoretical framework for understanding the intricate dynamics of marginality and liminality for those differentially marked by coloniality. He crafts Mpondo theory from the immanence of Mpondo life – the visceral, affective, sensorial, material, imaginative, and metaphysical. Mpondo lifeworlds embrace a fluid, relational ontology, existing in a liminal space between myriad ecological, cultural, and political currents. Defying linear timescales and static spatiality, Mpondo ontoepistemology is at once rooted in place and morphing in struggle in the face of relentless violence and debilitation.

ka Canham breathes life into this theory through the practice of “*ukwakumkanya*” that is woven throughout the text. *Ukwakumkanya* is a Mpondo way of attending to the world. As an act of shielding one’s eyes to see clearly without glares and distractions, to see far, to look askance, and to look away, *ukwakumkanya* brings forth

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a powerful decolonial methodology. It centers the subject position of the looker who looks “from a place of consciousness of one’s place in the world (p. 7). ka Canham is emphatic that seeing within the practice of *ukwakumkanya* is not just about activating visual registers. This kind of “looking askance” engages multiple sensorial registers while also challenging notions of who can speak, hear, touch, smell, feel, and see. Crucially, *ukwakumkanya* is a way of attending queerly. As ka Canham elaborates:

To attend askance is to attend queerly, not in the tradition of Western queer studies but in a queerly African way of looking. To be queerly African is to fail at being a self-contained and actualized modern subject. It is to be in relation to multiple others, to eschew the linearity of settler time, and to refuse social formations that are made for Man. To live queerly is to stay in struggle without seeking escape and transcendence. (pp. 4-5)

While ka Canham’s arguments are primarily framed within the context of black studies, *ukwakumkanya* can be read as a potent episteme beyond and away from overdetermined ways of knowing (and looking) imposed upon various colonized subjects; the ideas, much like roots of ancient trees, reaching across continents to nourish a shared soil of decolonial thought. It is from this episteme that I read myriad webs of decolonial desire in *Riotous Deathscapes*—of entwined refusals, mourning, and hauntings—that conjure up new psychologies as ecoscapes of decolonial desire.

***Riotous Deathscapes* is about multiple, layered refusals.** ka Canham’s use of “cylindrical epiphenomenal temporality” (p. 80) refuses the linearity of settler time – moving fluidly between past, present, and future and refusing singular narratives. For example, he writes:

If we imagine a deep temporality within which our ancestors are embedded agents, we can imagine that our *ukwakumkanya* is discursively related to theirs and our ways of attending can radiate backward. . . Before us then is a deep history of attending while being grounded in this place. (p. 7).

In reimagining geography through Mpondo cosmology, where “hills, rivers, and oceans are not just physical features but sites of ancestral power and resistance” (p. 94), the text performs spatial refusals. The text also smudges those carefully drawn lines between academic disciplines, discourses, and methodologies. Centering Mpondo theory with its insistence on the interconnectedness of the living, dead, and natural world, ka Canham illuminates an ecoscape that refuses Western onto-epistemological dualisms (e.g., affect and analysis, human and non-human). Queering Mpondo history and resistance, *Riotous Deathscapes* refuses heteronormative understandings that are often pre-determined or overdetermined; demonstrating instead, what it means to be “always porous to

possibilities of being remade over time. . . to be attentive to emergent geographies of gendered, sexual, transnational, and racial identities that arise in the wake of rupture.” (p. 5). Through these multiple, layered refusals, *Riotous Deathscapes* does more than describe decolonial resistance; it performs it, inviting readers into decolonial ways of thinking, feeling, and knowing.

Riotous Deathscapes is about mourning. ka Canham writes: “Mourning fuels our resistance and advances the ongoing evolution of Mpondo theory as a response to devastation” (p. 102). Here, Mpondo mourning becomes a collective, political act of asserting subjugated and dehumanized existence, of resisting colonial and capitalist erasures. Re-reading the text amidst the genocide in Gaza and the grotesque exercise of Israeli settler colonial occupation of Palestine, brings up echoes of Palestinian resistance poetry. In Mahmoud Darwish’s poetry (e.g., *The Earth is Closing on Us*), we encounter time collapsing in ways that weave present struggles with historical dispossession, where grief becomes a way to assert enduring Palestinian existence in the face of settler colonial erasures that impinge on every aspect of Palestinian life and lifeworlds. In both Mpondoland and Palestine, death emerges as a critical nexus of colonial violence and decolonial resistance, where the dead becomes a battleground for human dignity, indigenous sovereignty, and—as paradoxical as it may seem—survival; in these very spaces of profound loss, indigenous practices of how the living engage with the dead become powerful acts of refusal and reclamation.

In fact, Riotous Deathscapes is also about haunting. ka Canham employs *ukwakumkanya*—a way of looking askance or sideways—to uncover hidden capitalist histories, multiple dyings (and overkilling), and dissident possibilities within possession narratives and encounters with the occult. In the following excerpt, he speaks about the “living dead:”

This theme of people seeing themselves as living dead ricochets forward into the present and the future. In times of state violence and despair resulting from inequality, death is meaningless as there is nothing to be lost. . . While Biko contends that the dead don’t care, I suggest that those they leave behind do care and that the act of dying is itself an ethic of care and livingness. At the Kongo, people were prepared to die rather than lose being in relation to the land. Without land, they were living dead. In this preparedness to die, the Mpondo people were not laying individualist capitalist claims to the land. They were fighting for retaining communal access to the land. (p. 187)

Although *Riotous Deathscapes* exceeds any analytical or disciplinary framework of psychology, it does offer us a vision of a different psychology. In the rolling hills of Mpondoland, where the ghosts of colonial violence linger and the wounds of

capitalist exploitation fester, a different kind of psychology emerges: one that is raw, visceral, and deeply rooted in the land itself. *Riotous Deathscapes* plunges us into a world where the living commune with the dead, and where acts of cannibalism and vampirism become desperate grasps at freedom in a landscape of relentless dispossession. This psychology is not about the experience of *being human*, nor is it meant to be a *humanizing* psychology. It is but a psychology of the porous boundaries of the human – one that opens up the expansive realm of the occult as a way to explore opacity and fugitivity, of accessing queer temporalities and erotic possibilities beyond heteronormative and capitalist frameworks. It is a psychology that embraces messy experiential realities configured along these boundaries under conditions of extreme duress. *Riotous Deathscapes* conjures up a psychology that listens to voices in languages that the academy finds untranslatable and in decibels that it strains to hear, pulsing with rhythms that defy settler time. To resist neocolonial and neoliberal co-optation, to be a psychology that dares to dream of liberation, we must learn to dance to the syncopated beats of these myriad voices. We must see through eyes that look askance and feel with bodies that remember ancestral truths. Here, in the interstices of sedimented devastation, lie the seeds of decolonial desires that cannot be caged by the barbed wires of disciplinary boundaries or held hostage by the lure (or threat) of institutional recognition. It is a knowledge that lives in the marrow, always becoming, never fully grasped.