

Toward a Live(d) Black World for Black Children

A Review of Amari Johnson's *Under a Black Star: The Maroon Impulse in New Orleans*

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This review of Amari Johnson's Under a Black Star examines his autoethnographic account of the BlackStar community in New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Johnson reframes marronage away from overdetermined focus on escape and instead as pursuit of freedom, a process of disengagement, flight, and reengagement. I analyze the central concepts in the book and how they articulate a desire-based pedagogy. Following Johnson's lead, I situate this work within Black geographies to think through how these practices create safety and possibility for Black children while also raising critical questions about making a live(d) Black world on Indigenous lands.

Key words: *Black children, Black geographies, desire-based pedagogy, Indigenous sovereignty, marronage*

My favorite subject is ourstory, because it teaches me about my culture, where I came from, and who I am. ... It feels good because I finally get to know who I am instead of just being just a random person.

Yaa, age 9, student at Kamali Academy
(*Under a Black Star*, p. 114)

Amari Johnson's *Under a Black Star* (University of Minnesota Press, 2025) is an act of "clandestine cartography" (p. 10), a mapping of the worlds that Black people build for themselves, hidden in plain sight. This autoethnographic account of community construction offers a vocabulary of liberation rooted in a grammar of pursuit. As a text in conversation with Black geographies, the book is insightful for childhood studies because it provides a narrative case study of a community

enacting its own pedagogy against neoliberal policies that pathologize racialized children. This review will analyze the book's central concepts and explore their implications for creating desire-based educational futures for Black children.

Grounding the narrative: The BlackStar community

Under a Black Star is set in the Algiers neighbourhood of New Orleans, a city grappling with state-managed abandonment and violent neglect following Hurricane Katrina. The book tells the story of the BlackStar community, a collective that formed around "the sibling institutions of BlackStar Books and Caffe and Kamali Academy" (p. 3). Cofounded by organizers Baakir Tyehimba and Samora Camara, BlackStar Books was a bookstore, community centre, social hub, and a "hole in the wall" performance venue that provided a space for Black life to flourish. Its sibling, Kamali Academy, was a K-12 homeschool collective founded on the principle of "education for liberation" (p. 3), inviting community members to participate in its design. In a city whose public school system had been decimated and replaced by a corporate charter school model, Kamali offered an African-centered alternative. Its curriculum prioritized psychological well-being, cultural identity, and community connections over the test scores

and disciplinary regimes marking the new educational landscape of the city. These BlackStar institutions were the concrete answer of a community seeking to build the world it desired for itself and its children.

Importantly, Johnson does not romanticize the project, noting that the community was still “dependent on a system we were trying to escape” (p. 134), with the founders living off graduate student fellowships and its physical location vulnerable to foreclosure, a fate that eventually forced the school to move. This tension between the desire for autonomy and the reality of dependency animates the entire narrative.

Johnson’s choice of autoethnography is a political and methodological commitment. He is not an outside observer but an active participant in the BlackStar community’s founding and maintenance, centering his own memories, friendships, and family history to make meaning of the “anatomy of this desire” (p. 10) manifest in the community’s work. In doing so, he refuses the extractive, objectifying gaze of traditional anthropology. For him, the method is the message: Black life is the source of Black theory. This approach allows him to capture the “warm data” (p. 73), the texture and feelings that constitute a “live(d) Black world” (p. 11), which he describes as a reality that exists on its own terms beyond white supremacist regulation and the confines of academic frameworks that foreground “Black death, nonbeing, and anti-Blackness” (p. 11). The book is an analysis told from within, demonstrating how the politics of community self-determination might be encountered when writing a book for an academic audience.

The book’s central arguments: A grammar of pursuit

Johnson’s primary theoretical work is his reclamation and rearticulation of marronage and the maroon impulse, which he defines as “the process and practices by which African people escaped from the dominant social and political order to build autonomous and independent communities” (p. 2). He uncouples marronage from being solely a historical artifact of chattel enslavement and reframes it as an ongoing, transtemporal cultural tradition of the African diaspora oriented by the desire for “autonomy, community, and freedom” (p. 6). The world-making impulse of the maroon, he argues, is a process of pursuit, not simply one of escape. This forward-looking “maroon impulse” animates a fluid, interconnected process that Johnson frames as disengagement, flight, and reengagement.

The process of marronage begins with disengagement, the psychic and political refusal of the dominant social orders and their enclosures. This act of refusal leads into the phase of flight, which Johnson aligns with fugitivity, presenting it as a necessary step of physical and mental escape. But the process reaches its maturation in the reengagement phase. This overall process is what Johnson calls the “blossoming of fugitivity” (p. 91), where the motion of escape transforms into the collective work of building the desired world.

This entire process flourishes under what Johnson theorizes as the “unseen presence” (p. 10), a form of “strategic invisibility” (p. 10) that allows for “clandestine community creation and maintenance” (p. 10), and enables Black worlds to thrive outside the surveillance and control of a hostile society. Johnson uses the metaphor of a black star to demonstrate this, engaging it as a theoretical celestial body that emits immense light but whose gravitational pull is so strong the light is trapped, rendering it invisible to the outside world. In Johnson’s words, it is a “luminous world hiding within its darkness” (p. 60). These concepts are grounded in Johnson’s foundational assertion of a live(d) Black world over Black death and nonbeing.

A pedagogy for Black childhood: Desire and decolonial personhoods

The story of Kamali Academy offers childhood studies a case study of a community creating its own pedagogy. In the epigraph, 9-year-old student Yaa implies a question about the pedagogical conditions that must exist for a Black

child to be able to say “I finally get to know who I am instead of just being just a random person” (p. 114). Reading Johnson’s work through the frameworks of desire helps to answer this question. The story of Kamali Academy is a story of refusal and desire. It materialized a community-led flight from an educational system designed to harm their children. I read Johnson’s descriptions of Henson Academy, an all-boys charter school, as a case of what Idara Essien (2019) calls the “pathologizing culture” (p. 11). Essien argues that the education system inflicts harm by systematically treating Black life and culture as a deficit to be corrected. Johnson shows this in practice. His students, in the wake of Katrina, are not offered support but extreme disciplinary control. The post-Katrina charter school system, with its focus on producing compliant, test-taking subjects for a low-wage economy, is designed to foreclose the possibility of Black children imagining or building otherwise worlds. The story of Mama Afivi’s son Kwame, who stops speaking after internalizing his school’s message that “I must be bad” (p. 88), shows the psychological violence Black children face in mainstream educational systems.

The creation of Kamali Academy was an intervention against this foreclosure and toward more desired worlds. Imagining the maroon impulse of the BlackStar community as pursuit brings Johnson’s work into conversation with scholarship on desire-based approaches. Reading his work alongside Eve Tuck’s (2009) call to move away from damage-centered research, which defines communities by pain and brokenness, helps us to understand the BlackStar community’s project as a political and pedagogical one. Tuck argues for desire-based research that documents complexity, hope, and wisdom. This is the move Johnson makes in explicitly writing beyond narratives of Black death. The live(d) Black world he documents is a desire-based world, one that acknowledges suffering without being defined by it.

As such, the story of Kamali Academy is not about children “at risk” and is focused not on deficits but on what children, their families, and their communities desire: a world that affirms their humanity. This focus aligns with Justin A. Coles (2022), who describes Black desire as a response to the unique structural violence of anti-Blackness. Coles theorizes “Black-centric youthtopias” as educational spaces wherein Black youth can critique anti-Blackness and imagine new realities. In his autoethnographic descriptions of BlackStar Books & Caffè and Kamali Academy, Johnson provides an illustration of these youthtopias in practice. School days began with a daily ritual of affirmations where Black youth reconfigured themselves, claiming “I am the seed of my Ancestors. I am the hope of today. I am the builder for those unborn” (p. 93), followed by pouring libations and other explicitly African-centered pedagogies. In this way, the youth of Kamali Academy were participants in a community actively creating counterstructures to an oppressive society. This pedagogy creates what Monisha Bajaj (2022) might argue is the foundation for “decolonial personhoods” (p. 148) grounded in solidarity and historical truth. This is what the parents at Kamali Academy sought: an education that protects their children’s spirits and equips them to build their own futures.

Geographies of childhood: Safety, space, and the unseen presence

For scholars of childhood studies, Johnson’s work offers a way to understand how space and place construct different kinds of childhoods. He situates his work in relation to the field of Black geographies, which challenges the neutrality of mapping and centers the ways Black people have always created their own spatial meanings and placemaking practices (McKittrick & Woods, 2007). Johnson’s narrative inhabits and extends this intellectual project. His rendering of the city of Algiers offers what Willie Jamaal Wright (2019) names an “unruly environment” (p. 1135), a space shaped by infrastructural neglect and institutional abandonment yet repurposed through Black social life into a site of liberation. In this way, *Under a Black Star* moves beyond description to reveal a geography of refusal structured through care, kinship, community, and insurgent spatial practice. It can be read as a case study in how these practices create geographies of safety and meaning, especially for Black children.

The book provides multiple examples of this Black geographic praxis. First, Johnson details how the physical location of BlackStar Books & Caffè was intentionally hard to find. This geographic strategy created a material “unseen presence” that functioned as a space of refuge for children and the community. It was a space where children could go after school, a node in a community network that provided a form of safety that the state and its institutions actively undermined. Second, he describes how the community erected its own street signs for *Nguvu* (Power) and *Uhuru* (Freedom). When the community did so beneath the official city signs, they were creating a rival map asserting a different world into being. For the children in the BlackStar community, this act reoriented their world, offering coordinates where they and their communities were at the centre. Finally, Johnson theorizes the “hole in the wall” (p. 118), analyzing how an ordinary room was socially and affectively transformed into a “Black heaven” (p. 121). This demonstrates that Black geographic praxis is both about physical location and the creation of alternative worlds. For children, these intentionally crafted spaces offer a different kind of childhood, one defined by safety, community, and self-determination rather than by the surveillance and control of formal institutions.

By the end of the book, the physical café and school have closed. Johnson shifts the reader’s focus away from reading this as a failure, directing our attention to the generative nature of the process of marronage itself. He argues that the triumph of the BlackStar community resides in its capacity to transform its participants, to offer what he calls a rehearsal for what freedom looks like. The success of the BlackStar community should not be measured in permanence but instead by the “productivity of their existence” (p. 135), the ways it seeded possibilities for living otherwise.

A relational critique: On Black geographies, marronage, and Indigenous sovereignty

It is here, in the act of Black placemaking on the Gulf Coast, that Johnson’s narrative pushes me to confront a deeper set of questions about land and sovereignty. Reading this book as both a scholar of Black geographies and someone with maternal roots in Louisiana Creole communities, I am prompted to inquire more deeply into the material and spiritual relationship between Black life and the lands of the Gulf South. This region, where many of my kin continue to live, is a site of contested geographies shaped by dispossession, forced assimilation, refusal, creolization, and survival under conditions of anti-Blackness, anti-Indigenity, extraction, and pollution.

The book’s extension of marronage as taken up in Black geographies (Winston, 2021) becomes even more urgent when we consider the increasing ecological precarity of the Gulf South, where warmer seas and the expansion of petrochemical refineries form a tangle of heightened risk that disproportionately falls on Black, Indigenous, and poor communities. As the region continues to face land loss and escalating storms, it is unlikely that state-managed abandonment of its residents, as seen with Hurricane Katrina, will abate. In this context of precarity, Johnson offers a language for the impulse to build autonomous communities with their own food systems, educational models, and internal networks of care as a protective, unseen presence, an infrastructure of survival against both state and storm.

However, in reading the book, I found myself chewing on a complex question about land and place, prompted by Malcolm Ferdinand’s (2022) work on the “colonial silence of wilderness.” Ferdinand warns against celebrations of marronage that reproduce a colonial gaze by framing landscapes as “empty” or “wild,” thereby erasing the Indigenous peoples who were there first. While Johnson’s urban setting is distinct from “wilderness,” Ferdinand’s critique about the deep histories of land remains pressing because, as Bang et al. (2014) note, even when “altered, impacted” (p. 39), urban land is “yet still, always, Indigenous lands” (p. 39). This compels me to ask what it means to build a Black commons on the unceded ancestral lands of the Chitimacha, Houma, Choctaw, and others.

As the field moves to imagine more just futures and nonhegemonic childhoods, we must examine whether our models of liberation risk enacting or exacerbating forms of erasure. The maroon impulse to flee, build, and protect emerges within a settler colonial state and unfolds on lands that remain Indigenous. For me, this surfaces the complexities of sovereignty and self-determination in a settler colonial state and invites me to consider how the righteous and necessary project of Black refusal and fugitivity from the plantation, which Black feminist geographer Katherine McKittrick (2011) describes as a foundational geographic locus for racial violence that continues to structure contemporary geographies, could be brought into deeper solidarity and accountability with Indigenous sovereignties and refusals of the settler state. Johnson does not answer this, nor should the book be expected to. In its clarity and integrity, however, *Under a Black Star* makes it possible for us to ask the question with the seriousness it deserves. It is a necessary step in conceiving of a pedagogy that grapples with both freedom and land.

Overall, Johnson's work challenges childhood studies to take seriously the autonomous, world-making projects that Black communities have always enacted to safeguard their children's survival and well-being. It compels the field to see Black community practices, like creating homeschool collectives, beyond the language of "school choice" and, instead, as acts of marronage, strategic refusals of institutional harm and a reengagement in the necessary work of building alternative forms of care, relation, and learning toward a world where Black children can be free. This is especially vital in a time of hyper surveillance, standardized data-driven schooling, erasures of racial violence from learning materials, and the persistent school-to-prison pipeline, exacerbated by police presence in schools. Johnson's work invites the field to think about the fugitive work of creating pockets of marronage, spaces both outside and within institutions, where Black children might find nurturance for the ways they are already practicing daily acts of refusal and survival. These are rehearsals for another world.

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