

I Wish

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Abstract

The letter charts my relationship to geography through a letter to Donald Deskin Jr. From Black geographer junior scholar to pioneering Black geographer, this letter uses Black geographies as an analytic to think through Black geographical knowledge, practice and kinship.

Keywords

Black Geographies, education, kinship, academic knowledge production, letters

Dear Dr. Donald Deskin, Jr.,

I wish I had gotten the chance to know you. Being a Black undergraduate major in geography is a strange mix of excitement, bewilderment, and utter confusion, especially when I had to explain to other Black folks what I was in school for. Typically, the follow up response was “you mean you know state capitals, or you make maps.” Depending on the person and my mood, I would either give a quick reply of: I study people, places, and things (cheekily), saying loudly that I study nouns, or I would explain how I use geography as an object to understand both the beauty and the ugliness of the world around me.

I wish I had gotten the chance to know you, Dr. Donald Deskin, Jr. A pioneering intellectual who became a geographer when, so few Black men were (Deskin 1969, 1972, 1981). A former college and NFL football player who brought his experience as an athlete directly into the classroom. While geographers often joke about Michael Jordan being the highest paid geographer and allude to him being the first professional athlete in geography in the US, you came before him by at least thirty years.

I wish I was able to ask about your experience as an undergraduate and graduate student at the University of Michigan. You received a BA, an MA, and a PhD from a geography department that no longer exists. How did you feel when the Department of Geography at the University of Michigan was dismantled in 1981 (Huntley and Rosenblum 2020)? How did you make the transition to the Department of Sociology? These are questions I have as you took a harrowing situation and made the most of it as you became a beloved teacher in the Department of Sociology.

I wish you had gotten to know me. In my first encounter with a geography professor, I was told that I was a jack of all trades with the ability and potential to do many things. I wonder what you would have seen in me as a young Black man from South Carolina with an insatiable intellectual curiosity without intellectual direction. Would you have spoken to me about harnessing that curiosity and applying it with finesse and dexterity? Would you have been able to relate to me through your experiences as one of the few Black geography professors in the Americas? I wonder...would you have encouraged me to pursue an academic journey? Or would you have told me to pick another vocation or simply made me aware of all the potholes, stop lights, traffic, and road work that I would encounter along the way?

I wish you were able to see what geography looks like now. I hate that I did not learn about you until after you passed away. I hate that you are not here with us to see some of the incremental changes that have come about through the institutionalization of Black geographies as a sub field. I wonder what you would think about geography in its current iteration. I wonder if you would connect your work to these changes that have given us Black geographies and provided the infrastructure for other subfields to thrive in less than advantageous conditions.

I wish things were different, but I know that we are still connected. You are my ancestor; I am your descendent. We are still able to be in community through a Black geography of the spirit: absent, but always present. This is how I relate to you even when there are holes, gaps, and distance between us. But what is distance and time to those who are made up of and are the creators of Black geographies.

With Love, DeWitt King

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