Review Essay

Intimate terrains of black possibility

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Frottage: Frictions of Intimacy across the Black Diaspora

Keguro Macharia

New York, New York University Press, 2019, 224pp., ISBN: 9781479865017

The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies

Tiffany Lethabo King

Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2019, 304pp., ISBN: 978-1-4780-0636-7

It is perhaps serendipitous that Tiffany King's *The Black Shoals* and Keguro Macharia's *Frottage* were published in the same year. Though their approaches are distinct, both texts contemplate the possibilities of Black diaspora – not one bound by nationalist or patriarchal structures but by Black intimacies. Each monograph asks after relationships of freedom that are possible for Black people in the wake of conquest, the transatlantic slave trade, and colonial power relations, whose violence persists in discursive and material ways, etching out the structures and boundaries of possibility. In attending to this persistence, the authors allow it to guide their questions of what 'Black' may mean in relation to diaspora and to what Black subjects may legibly and ethically make a claim.

This review essay reflects sustained conversations between its authors who pursue similar political questions from different disciplinary perspectives. We ask about the relationship between diaspora and indigeneity and how this relation, and its different manifestations, organize questions of colonization and freedom. While we did not always agree, our conversations provided clarity on our theoretical (and thus political) commitments and the fault lines produced and created anew when Native Studies, Black Studies, and African Studies meet.

The books under review bring to the forefront the tensions of these scholarly terrains, with significant stakes. King asks that we read together Native feminisms and Two-Spirit writing, colonial map making, Black geography, post-colonial thought, and Afropessimism, such that questions of Blackness, Nativeness, erotics, sovereignty, and the human sit uncomfortably alongside desires for intimacy, freedom, and landedness. Macharia witnesses the friction emerging from the interwovenness of ideas of diaspora, kinship, and sexuality within colonial anthropology, post-colonial literature in continental African contexts, Caribbean/

archipelagic literature, and queer Black poetics. His work likewise asks readers to consider the possibilities for freedom that emerge from vulnerable Black intimacy. Each book is a necessary and urgent intervention. And while on its own neither can nor should have to be exhaustive in its treatment of problematics of such immense scale, when put in conversation, the frictions between their attentions and absences are generative. They are so in underscoring broader questions including the legitimacy of Black land relations within and beyond continental Africa, the possibilities for transcontinental or transdiasporic Black connection, and the sort of politics that might emerge when these dynamics are intertwined.

Frottage opens with the image of a ‘monstrous intimacy’ (Sharpe, 2010) forged in the proximate confinement of a slave ship. The coming together instantiates the kind of queer tension that the concept *frottage* traces. This intimacy is at once needed and, by its inseparability from the conditions that impose it, impossible to want. All the same, it is there. If the opening of *Frottage* offers a glimpse into the weight of its key analytic, its epilogue opens the term into a capacious, peculiarly Kenyan and, by extension, peculiarly localized, peculiarly queer, peculiarly everyday erotics. It is simultaneously embodied, social, gracious, quotidian and, perhaps paradoxically, careful, desiring. *Frottage* emerges as a relation to history, to the future, and to the problem of their simultaneously local and transnational intermingling; to frustration and need and implication with the world; to feeling and sensation and the many things that can only come into being in relation, and to the consequences that follow from their existence.

Frottage is a book of many travels. Moving from involuntary co-confinement to ‘sexuality’, ‘eroticism’, frottage, and ‘intimacy’, Macharia develops an account of the consequences of the projects of disputing and managing Black thingification in the work of Frantz Fanon, René Maran, Jomo Kenyatta, and Claude McKay. Across these varied writers, and through travel from the Caribbean to West and then East Africa and back, *Frottage* sits with the forms of sexuality and intimacy that become central to Black projects of understanding and making claim to being and belonging. In the process, Macharia insists on two moves that might at first glance appear contradictory. The first pushes against a narrowly ‘anti-’ or ‘post-’ colonial reading of the thinkers in question to dwell less in the connections between thinkers and the political moments with which they are now associated and more in the terrain of desire from and to which they were writing. This includes the uneasy division between a post-slavery America and a postcolonial ‘elsewhere’ that, despite its erasures, has become a stable avenue to approach Africa and its diasporas in Black and African Studies. As such, *Frottage*’s geographies are no accident but insist upon a truly diasporic reading of Black political terrains.

Macharia’s second move is to insist upon narrating Black intimacy with queer foundations and so departs from the anthropologized narration of Black intimacy through heteronormative, genealogical kinship. Reading the pursuit of a ‘singular formation’ of diaspora – that is, *the* Black diaspora – as risking ‘a logic of kinship,

whether that be biogenetic or fictive kinship' (p. 5), Macharia identifies this logic as restraining other ways, particularly queer Black ways of engaging and enacting diaspora.

Macharia's move away from kinship allows *Frottage* to depart from anthropological modes of reading African and diasporic kinship and from the 'anthropology problem' in African Studies. This work is most clearly the purview of the book's second chapter, which examines how ethnography offers a fantasy ground for kinship. Macharia reads, for example, how René Maran's ethno-pornographic attentions allow the combination of, and the theoretical pivot from, the pursuit of Afrodiasporic-African kinship and the desire for an erotic freedom against Eurocolonial norms and life. Replacing 'kinship' with 'frottage', Macharia conjures a new possibility of accessing queer practices of bodily and complex, conflictual intimacy. Paradoxically, these practices exceed colonial knowledge, even as they are narrated through the colonial discourse of ethnography.

The queerness Macharia identifies is multilayered. Its foundation is presented via a critical reading of Fanon's references to homosexuality as the consequence of the negrophobia at the heart of homophobia. Macharia establishes a pathway from desire-against-pathology to eroticism-against-pathology, a movement from questions of 'fucking' to questions of love, vulnerability, and intimacy that refuses, nevertheless, to lose sight of the importance of fucking. This figural theoretical analysis is given flesh in the chapters that follow through careful analyses of various modes of queer excess. Perhaps one of the most striking examples is the discussion of Jomo Kenyatta's *Facing Mount Kenya*, particularly his references to homosexuality and *ombani na ngweko*, translated by Kenyatta (1965, p. 149, cited in Macharia p. 120) as 'platonic love or fondling'. Macharia shows how Kenyatta's book, in claiming to document Kikuyu identity anthropologically, produces a mythos about Kikuyu freedom from sexual vice. Kenyatta crafts ethnic definition upon a subjugated womanhood and static gender norms, drawing upon a deliberately gendered mythos around Kikuyu creation to affirm the authority of Kikuyu elder men and align that authority with colonial power. Macharia argues that Kenyatta defines Kikuyuness most distinctly against homosexuality, carefully negating the shared homosocial pleasure and community of *ombani na ngweko*. Instead, in ways shared by other accounts of the practice, Kenyatta casts it as mere training grounds for an adult heterosexuality to come.

Macharia's book thrives in the project of tracing the queer intimacies left unseen or unthought, of showing that there is something more than the attentions, desires, and pathways to imagining Blackness and belonging that have been permitted and that we have allowed ourselves. But while the problem of the content of that excess is explicitly part of the book's ambition, it is left in the hands of the reader and, ultimately, of a Black Studies in-the-making. Macharia gestures towards questions about why excess matters, what it might change, what it might make permissible, and with what consequence in the poetics at the close the book, but they are left out

of the analytic content of the book. There is an opportunity in this, insofar as his poetics are flexible in a way that theorization cannot always be, but it is an opportunity for thought that is not fully realized.

Like Macharia's book, King's *The Black Shoals* traces the political life of intimacy within diasporic and decolonial contexts. King argues that Black radical politics is at its strongest ethically when it concerns itself with a 'fluid Black "we"' and the relationships with those around Black people, particularly Indigenous peoples. Tending to Black-Indigenous relations forms a critical part of the ethical project of Black freedom for King. As such, and second only to the primacy of intra-black exchanges, she offers *The Black Shoals* as a conversation with 'Native studies and Native peoples' against 'conquistador-settler knowledge formations' (p. xiii). Her work participates in a renewed conversation amongst Black and Indigenous peoples in what are currently called the United States and Canada. King wrestles with the metaphysical, ontological, and epistemological consequences of colonial violence in the western hemisphere and brings Black critical theory and queer and feminist Native studies into these debates. King underscores the analytic necessity of attending to settler colonialism and chattel slavery as ongoing conquest. Situating its onset in 1441, she proposes a notion of conquest grounded in the Portuguese slave trade between the African continent and the Iberian Peninsula, thus offering a frame through which to relate the transatlantic slave trade and the conquest and settlement of the Americas to conquest on the African continent. The latter, however, appears largely as a specter throughout the rest of the chapters.

The book's overarching metaphor of the shoal signals how considering blackness can complicate otherwise flat narratives and ideologies of conquest. A shoal, as the place before the shore 'where the water is of little depth' (p. 1), serves as a material index and foil for ships attempting to reach land. Similarly, Black shoals, for King, play out as geographic, political, and theoretical interventions particular to the Black experience of conquest and chattel slavery on Turtle Island. These shoals interrupt certain claims to land or liberation that overlook Black historical, cultural, political, and ontological contexts. The shoal as metaphor is meant to propose a conversation about the intersections of 'Black abolition and Native decolonization' (p. xv) as political struggles. Here, as for Macharia, the intimate and the erotic emerge amongst violence. In chapter three, King reads this dynamic through the visual and material effects of Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*. Contemplating how black (skin) and blue (dye) interact, what stands out for her is what she names the 'porosity' of blackness as a condition through which the protagonists are rendered vulnerable to the crimes of conquest through the poisoning of forced indigo cultivation. The stains made flesh index 'the violence that makes the plantation and settlement' and 'produces [the protagonist] as a fungible body' (p. 131) – a structural and intimate violence built around Black erotic hypervisibility. King reads the image as making 'visible multiple kinds of violence' (p. 131), including enslavement and native genocide as part of economic production.

King draws on a notion of fungibility theorized in Afro-pessimist scholarship to argue that the captive African-made-object through chattel slavery takes on the characteristics of a commodity at the level of material and libidinal economies. While fungibility opens Black subjects to white usage as objects, it is a slippery dynamic, as is white-conquistador-mastery. Here, King articulates a break with Afropessimism to insist that fungibility does not bind Blackness into ‘unfettered domination’ (p. 25). King proposes that the slipperiness of fungibility is a vulnerability and an affordance, even a ‘resource’ (p. 128), certain to bring forth suffering but also capable of provoking moments of fugitivity and slippage into new forms through intimacy. Blackness comes to serve as that which is subject to contamination, a force of ‘spreadability and boundarylessness’ that can become an erotics representative of ‘an alternative orientation and relation to objects, plants, and human and nonhuman elements in the world’ (p. 130). This is a delicate claim. As King herself notes, it is an overdetermination of Blackness with hypersexuality and nature that incites such an erotics. At the same time, it is this overdetermination and its resultant Black porosity that makes possible a different way of being in the world. This libidinal dynamic troubles claims for Black sovereignty and is in tension with persistent and uneasy demands for Black self-determination.

The product of this thinking is a political binary with native sovereignty on one side and Black porosity on the other, a binary mirrored in the text’s conceptual refrain of ‘black abolition and native decolonization’. *The Black Shoals*’ effort to center conquest promises to see intra-Black and Black-Native relations differently because it tends to the violence of the forces of slavery and settler colonialism in creating this very binary. But the binary risks reification, even as King points to Native feminist scholars who argue for a historically and culturally specific sovereignty that is ‘living’ and ‘in constant flux’ (p. 149). Returning to Black and Native relations – specifically, Seminole solidarity with Black people in the face of colonial attacks – King asks:

[C]an Native sovereignty bring about a porous notion of self that opens itself to accepting the erotic potential of the other – in this case, Black, flight, porosity, and chaos? ... Might a new grammar emerge at the erotic shoals of Black and Native porous futures? (p. 151)

These questions mark King’s desire for a Native ethical sovereign relationship with Blackness at its core. At the heart of this Blackness–this possibility–is Black porosity, a porosity that we find difficult to distinguish from non-sovereignty. By the end of Chapter Four, the reader may be asking themselves whether Native peoples may also be porous, or if it is only the Black (non)subject who is porous. Put differently, does porosity signal a categoric non-sovereignty that is peculiarly Black? Or ought we take King’s analysis of porosity to suggest that non-sovereignty (Black, Native, and otherwise) conditions the subject (and perhaps nation) – even if differently – into possibility? Though it appears that *The Black*

Shoals moves towards the latter, it is the former where it often dwells. Non-sovereignty is historically fixed to Black people because of the particularity of Black porosity. This line of argument positions Blackness as not only that which must be flexible or fungible but also positions Black people as those whose overdetermined flexibility is required for any sort of coalition to hold.

In *Frottage*, Macharia's focus on Black intra-relationality avoids questions of interracial coalitional politics altogether. On a surface level, one might read *Frottage* as silent on and even a refusal of sovereignty with a capital S. Indeed, Macharia refuses to frame Fanon, Maran, Kenyatta, and McKay as (solely) anticolonial thinkers or thinkers of the post-colonial sovereign nation, and only the third chapter's analysis of ethnicity in *Facing Mount Kenya* is even remotely concerned with the post-independence period. But it is possible to find questions of sovereignty in the text, whether as a suggestion of the autonomy of the local in the coda or inescapably looming over Macharia's examination of Kenyatta. And yet, the question of sovereignty is a historical variant of the principal question Macharia poses in *Frottage*: the question of freedom and where to seek it. Read through this lens, Macharia's refusals gain further theoretical valence: if freedom is not Sovereign, and doesn't look like Kinship, but instead is intimate, physical, sexual, Black, then this is perhaps not a rejection of sovereignty but a deliberate choice of how to direct one's political, social, and theoretical attention. Moreover, Macharia both insists on a diasporic account of political life and refuses to cede ground to the political as a domain of a different order to that of frottage and its intimacies. And yet we are left wondering what such freedom might look like.

This recurring question finds some relief in King's final chapter 'A Ceremony for Sycorax', which reads the sorts of intimacy that are possible among Black diasporic peoples and the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island through Canada-based artist Charmaine Lurch's wire sculpture 'Revisiting Sycorax'. Macharia's *Frottage* mirrors Lurch's aesthetic on its cover with an image of Kenyan sculptor Gor Soudan's 'Eatings II', a sculpture partially constructed from wire collected after street protests. 'Revisiting Sycorax' returns to the figure of Sycorax, the Algerian-born witch and mother of *The Tempest's* protagonist Caliban. Both Sycorax and Caliban have been read as either Black or Indigenous, with the birth of Caliban as the troubled, not quite human colonial subject of the 'New World', even as he is named after the Caribs of South America. As King argues, Lurch's rendition of Sycorax urges the viewer to contemplate both Black and Native women (and one must here include Black Native women) in the Americas 'as co-presences for each other and as a singular entity in mid-motion' (p. 186). In the movement of red and black wire – industrial, opaque and transparent, malleable – the viewer cannot quite distinguish where one line ends and another begins. For King, then, 'Lurch renders Indigeneity and Blackness indistinguishable' (p. 186).

When read through *Frottage*, this melding raises the urgency of probing how attentions to Black and Native life are themselves troubled by conquest. Macharia's work underscores this predicament for Black life, cautiously insisting on addressing the anthropological gaze and how it has delimited what can be said about Black life and shaped how freedom might be imagined. While geography as a discipline is scrutinized in the early chapters of *The Black Shoals*, a critical discussion of anthropology is absent. This perhaps makes it more difficult for the book to fully consider the problems of epistemic inheritance that structure claims to intimacy, desire, and the self. *Frottage* offers a different route into these problematics. In its reading of the diaspora, the anthropological gaze is always there, ready to assert the varied practices that we might, in another context, call indigenous. But just as Macharia demonstrates the confinements of colonial methods of attention, study, and fantasy, he also makes transparent that they are not all-consuming.

Thinking Sycorax capaciously as a transatlantic figure of colonized womanhood and her disavowal as well as a symbol of the entanglement of Black and Native concerns, then *The Black Shoals* closes on its theoretical high note. Sycorax blurs easy distinctions between Black and Native subjects, on the one hand, and between Blackness and Nativeness as sites of collective political action, on the other. Sycorax thereby returns us to 'conquest' as a conceptual frame. Like the shoal, Sycorax operates as a site of interruption and respite. But where the shoal complements, and perhaps exceeds, the archipelagic and oceanic, Sycorax asks how we might be able to think Black people not only in the interstice, troubling the waters, but troubling, too, the land?

'Revisiting Sycorax' offers King a means for theorizing actual relationships among Black and Native people and the ritual and ceremonial practices through which these relationships and their desired politics are enacted. These rituals work to recognize and hold 'distinctions without edges' (p. 200) and, responding creatively to the different but shared violences of conquest, grasp a collective abolitionism. King's ceremonies emphasize the need for both vulnerability in a chosen collective and a sense of shared obligation. They cannot be reduced to the political, and yet the political animates them. Read together with *Frottage*, King's account of ritual provides a sense of political ambition that is perhaps less apparent in the frictional relationships Macharia contemplates. *Frottage* deals most carefully with the problem of collectivities that have been created through imposition and with the project of wanting through them. But it leaves open the question of the kind of life our desires can build. This leaves 'freedom' open to multiplicity but also declines to wrestle with the problem of freedom's politics. The conversation between these texts staged here invites us to consider how we might bring the intimacies and erotics of *Frottage* from the interpersonal into a willful collective – into thinking, perhaps, not only the diaspora we have but the diaspora we want to make.

Just as Macharia offers a set of directions to pursue the question and practice of freedom, King's reading of a post-conquest Sycorax offers a corollary schematic. If

Frottage is concerned with what it means to want freedom-in-Black-community, *The Black Shoals* considers the solidarity that Blackness and indigeneity might carry in their pursuits of freedom. For King, Sycorax points to the necessity of this mutual obligation and offers a bridge between disparate conceptions of ‘Native’ and ‘Black’ in U.S. and Canadian thought and a space for conceiving a joint projects and obligations. This is the work of mutual constitution and conversation. As a politics- and world-making praxis, King argues, ceremony is the bridge between constitution and conversation and the guiding frame through which Native/Black common ground might be thought in North America.

The Black Shoals and *Frottage* offer important and nuanced contributions to political and intellectual conversations about sovereignty and freedom. They do so within the context of Black diaspora and of an erotics that is made possible by conditions of Blackness within diaspora. As opposed to a project of kinship, erotics allows the reader to consider desire as it emerges not from a project of restoration but from an already existing constellation of relationships and the possibilities and pitfalls they afford. In these relations, Black is both part of a shared (and contested) identification, but it is also an ‘other’ in its history and place. Shoals and frictions emerge when Black is rubbed against Black, Black Native, Black not Native, and Native. Here both freedom and sovereignty are productively nuanced. Macharia’s and King’s works are critical interventions into a political theory, with Black Studies at its core.

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