Shoals of 'unsettlement': A review of The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies by Tiffany Lethabo King

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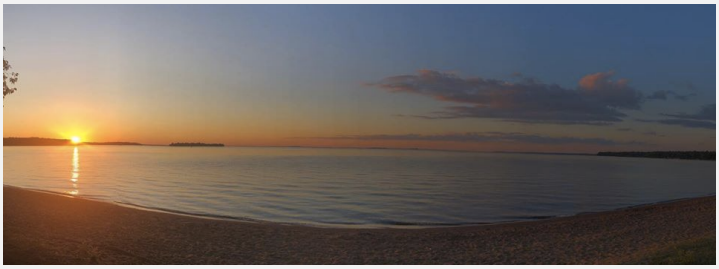
Back to Web Version



In the settler colony, what might it look like to draw together both Black Studies and Indigenous Studies in a way that can lead to new possibilities, new emergent properties, and a new path to view the ways that settler colonialism touches bodies and touches life within its histories and within its borders? In *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies*, Tiffany Lethabo King pulls the reader towards these possibilities through her articulation of how Black epistemologies meet Indigenous epistemologies in ways that unsettle how each is viewed in relationship to each other, as well as their entangled relationships to the multiple spaces of the settler colonial state.

King uses the idea of the shoal, its linkages to land and water, the connotations of the shoal within Black diasporic studies, and the very real definition of the shoal as an

ever-changing and unpredictable formation. By doing so, King re-orients us to the possibilities that come from bringing together Black and Indigenous Studies. She demonstrates that histories, geographies, and ways of being, are also unpredictable and shifting, yet are vital foci to bring together Black and Indigenous liberation within the settler colony.

Throughout the book, King does this in several effective ways. In one chapter, it is via the description of the 'errant grammars' that are used to describe and define Black and Indigenous bodies within the contexts of settler colonialism. In another chapter, it is through an interrogation of the ways that colonial cartographies inscribe Blackness and Indigeneity within given spaces. Another chapter explores the very 'fleshy'—to borrow a term from Povinelli (2002)—ways that slavery and colonialism touches the Black body, via the ways that fungibility, porosity, and indigo dye define and shape Black life on the plantation. In the concluding chapters, King explores the nature of Black-Native erotics and what this can create in the realm of Black-Native cooperation and shared liberation, leading to new forms of existence and being, intellectually, physically, and politically. King continually returns to the idea of shoals as zones of contact where these new forms of existence can spring forth, albeit zones that are constantly shifting and remaking themselves, unsettling conceptions of what they should be, but rather demanding our attention towards what they could be.

The time has never been more fortuitous to be engaging with the work that King presents in this book. There are clear and vocal conversations of Black fungibility—and liberation, driven by the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor (among others) and their accompanying protests. These exist alongside conversations of Indigenous visibility and sovereignty driven by events such as continued Indigenous resistance against pipelines, the recent *McGirt* court case, and increased pushback against Indigenous representation in settler colonial society (NoiseCat, 2020). Exhortations that Indigenous liberation in this settler colony can only exist alongside Black liberation continue to grow in volume, and in acceptance in both Black and Indigenous consciousness. Indigenous people are recognizing the undercurrents of anti-Blackness that have afflicted their communities and are confronting it. It appears that we may be headed towards, yet another shifting shoal, one that may promise liberation and vitality for all who are marginalized and oppressed.

In the process of writing this review, I have had the pleasure to discuss this work with several of my good friends and colleagues. Our shared excitement and desire to

engage with this book and its intellectual contributions was apparent. However, I quickly found that I was discovering a 'shoal' of our own with several of my colleagues regarding our thoughts on the role of Indigenous thought and epistemologies within the context of the book. Our conversations centered on whether or not Indigenous thought was being centered in the book or whether it lay more in the background, taking a backseat role to the admirable intellectual contributions of Black scholars such as Katherine McKittrick and Sylvia Wynter. It was not that there was a dearth of Indigenous scholarship—King skillfully tends to the work of Audra Simpson, Leanne Simpson, Kim TallBear, Eve Tuck, and more. However, we felt unsettled (no pun intended) in relation to the ways that Indigenous thought contributes to the 'shoal' and grappled with how to reconcile Black and Indigenous epistemologies in this inherently shifting context. I argue that this is the beauty of King's work—the point that she seeks to make is using the shoal as an object of inquiry is a re-positioning the ways that we do academic work in reference to the settler colony. In defining the intersection of Black and Indigenous Studies in the settler colony as another shoal that is shifting and remaking itself, she implores us to engage in some direly needed self-reflexivity.

To return to Chapter 1, King criticizes settler colonial studies as being white-dominated, and prone to viewing relationships in the settler colony as consisting of a settler-Indigenous dyad, erasing Black people from the narratives of violence and domination that underpin the very field. "The field of White settler colonial studies has yet to truly reckon with the ways that it erases Indigenous knowledge and forms of Indigenous politics of decolonization…Also, the field reproduces a rigid settler-Indigenous binary that erases Black people and anti-Black violence from its analytical frame," says King (2019: 66-67). I think that this is a powerful moment in King's narrative where settler colonial scholars are placed right on a shoal and may not even realize it—we are viewing the very unsettlement of settler colonial studies. What is to be done? In order to move forward, one might have to literally backtrack. King's work provides us with a potential roadmap towards an alternative viewing of the relationship between the settler colony, Black people, and Indigenous peoples—what King terms 'black vernaculars/grammars of conquest' and Indigenous feminist scholarship. This couches inquiry into settler colonial violence within the lived experiences of the very groups that have been targeted and are continued to be targeted, rather than from the gaze of the settler themselves.

I view King's book as an open invitation for us as Indigenous scholars to dismantle the myopic settler-Indigenous dyad that is endemic in settler colonial studies, and to

recognize and embrace the possibilities that can spring forth in the contact zones between Indigenous scholarship (especially Indigenous feminist scholarship) and Black scholarship and epistemologies. It is not up to the settler to define this relationship, but it is up to Black and Indigenous scholars and people, coming together to create new possibilities and new ways of knowing. Rather than viewing the 'shoal' as a zone of uncertainty, we must view its unsettled quality as intrinsically important to unsettling the very intellectual theories and canons that define our existence in this settler colony. At this moment when the prospects and possibilities of Black and Indigenous liberation are closely tied together, the shoal that is being constructed is itself an emergent property that we must do our part to help shape. Although we may not know what will ultimately come of our work, we can take hope in knowing that it will ultimately be better than what came before, as we work to dismantle settler colonialism and its futurity.

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