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# Book Review

## Sounding Land and Sea: Listening for Unheard Voices in Tiffany Lethabo King's *The Black Shoals*

King, T. L. (2019). *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

### Introduction

Genuine listening, if we can ever achieve it, is a challenging and unending effort. *The Black Shoals* does not let up the challenge but demands that we strain harder, eyes peeled and ears cocked for voices and narratives buried beneath a dense history of articles, images, and sound bites. Tiffany Lethabo King gestures toward what to listen for, and if we follow, we inevitably hear three distinct currents: discourse supporting white colonialist history, counter-discourse illuminating Black and Indigenous histories, and if King's suggestion of a conversation and a new lexicon goes heeded, a continuing discourse shared by Black and Indigenous communities that has made no butts about its independence. I am still listening, and it hurts.

### Contribution

King views multiple depictions of Black and Indigenous identities as objects for revisioning: novels, film, sculpture, cartography, and graffiti. Her approach of analyzing multiple modes and reading bodies as multimodal compliments Vega's work on the curation of aural experiences. In King's adoption of the shoal as her operative metaphor and thereby recurring image throughout *The Black Shoals*, she responds to Goeman, Somerville, and Diaz's efforts interest in the adherence of land and water to the lives of Indigenous peoples.

King contributes to "discourses of Black conquest that rupture the humanist tradition and hegemonic hold of White settler colonial studies" (p. 18). Her interaction with the notion of *conquest* puts her into conversation with Sylvia Wynter and Hortense Spillers, articulating the idea that conquest predates Columbus (p. 19). King's analysis of "[Revisiting Sycorax](#)" and her interview with artist Charmaine Lurch finds a home with Rachel Jackson and Phil Bratta's (2020) discussion of curated experiences that highlight the colonial oppression of Indigenous peoples in "Decolonial Directions." Similarly, Romeo Garcia (2018) highlights counterstories called *corridos* that counter Texas's colonial history with the voices and stories of Indigenous peoples in "Corrido-ing State Violence."

King's primary contribution to this conversation with *The Black Shoals* is her call for Black and Indigenous communities to begin a conversation, and the language she suggests for beginning

that conversation. She offers an opportunity whereby “Black studies attempts to engage Native studies on ethical terms that unfold in new spaces” (p. 10). King’s engagement with Wynter’s concepts of Man<sub>1</sub> (*homo politicus*) and Man<sub>2</sub> (*homo oeconomicus*) serves to “enflesh” (p. 100) the unheard narrative that King seeks to amplify. The oppressive dangers of humanism, even liberal humanism, and the registers of “humanity” established and engrained by that ongoing lexicon, are unveiled and speak volumes in King’s elucidation of Man<sub>1</sub> and Man<sub>2</sub>.

## Overview

*The Black Shoals* opens loudly on the 2015 defacing of a Boston statue of Christopher Columbus with the words “Black Lives Matter.” King points to the expression of both Black and Native voices in this act of resistance. She connects Columbus’s exploration with colonization of the Americas and eventual enslavement of Black peoples in the interest of British and American expansion. Chapter 2 treats cartography as a form of writing the human. Building on Katherine McKittrick’s concept of “[B]lack Atlantic livingness,” King asserts that William Gerard De Brahm’s 1757 map of South Carolina and Georgia represents an effort to suppress life and activity of Black and Indigenous peoples through a language and a false history of peaceful discovery, expansion and settlement (p. 76).

The porosity of indigo-stained bodies comes under the microscope in Chapter 4. King zooms in on the cartouche of Black bodies processing indigo on de Brahm’s map, rereading the cartouche as a “spatial imaginary” alongside Julie Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust* (p. 116). Chapter 4 continues the analysis of Dash’s narrative in multiple iterations alongside Miles’s *The Cherokee Rose*. King discusses the common experience of subjectivities shared by Dash’s and Miles’s Black and Native characters. Histories of shared violence can be the basis of a new conversation, given the porosity of both parties: “Porosity provides an analytical opening to bring bodies of literature about Black and Native erotics, sexuality, and decolonialization together to have a conversation about Black and Indigenous relationality that can exceed the notion of coalition as a conceptual and political space of impasse” (p. 143).

Chapter 1 begins with the defaced Boston statue; Chapter 5 ends on triumphant Sycorax. King’s analysis of “Revisiting Sycorax” and her interview with Lurch demonstrate that the new conversation championed in *The Black Shoals* is being put into the public arena in a way that invites a plethora of audiences to listen.

## A Multimodal Structure

The structure of *The Black Shoals* feels like a series of shoals. The shoal is both land and water, a textural theme reflected in the progression of ideas. Particular concepts and images, like indigo-stained bodies, fluidly connect each chapter to the next, yet we get mired in each chapter, our feet deep in the sand as we crook our ears listening for the sound of silenced voices. Across the book, King’s analyses and the conversations she moves through are haunted by the porosity, fugitivity, and fungibility of Black and Indigenous bodies, and we never stray far from them. We move from the original disruption of Columbus’ symbol and the associated

narrative to a discussion of conquest that is informed by and part of that narrative. We zoom in simultaneously on de Brahm's map and Black bodies in Chapter 3, entering the skin's stained pores so that we may become intimate with the oppressed body, listening from inside.

Chapter 4 extends the intimacy of Chapter 3 to include eroticism. The whole of the oppressed body comes into focus. By the end of Chapter 4 we see embodied symbols of the potential union between Black and Indigenous peoples, and we can hear the voices they exercise and give rise to. King hears hope in children's hybrid languages (p. 166). Finally, in Chapter 5, we wind up in a museum hall viewing "Revisiting Sycorax," which both calls us reconsider Black and Indigenous bodies and to rethink the traditional heuristics through which we consider not just Shakespearean art, but in a greater sense, all of white settler colonial history and studies. The full scope of "Revisiting Sycorax," as King invites us to see, feel, and *hear* it, cannot easily be grasped but for the imaginative and treacherous path that is *The Black Shoals*.

### **The Multimodal Shoal**

As both land and water, the shoal is sustainable yet malleable. It is multimodal and ambiguous. King says that Black bodies, the objects she analyzes, even the book itself are shoals. She writes, "Black bodies are sites of instability. The tremors and movements of muscles in action are at once motions of laboring bodies, captivity, and debasement, as well as possible maneuvers and contortions that escape totalizing violence" (p. 138). By imagining peoples, places, bodies, and objects as shoals, King reframes them in such a way that they become both solid and liquid – malleable, but somehow still concrete. While rewriting, she allows us to remember the other writings that have shaped them with other histories and other rhetorics. King's method of revisioning texts does not ignore former readings. On the contrary, it works with them to demonstrate alternate possibilities. She encourages us to hear new voices and new narratives that have been there for some time but have not been recognized in academic or public discourse.

King invites us into the space of the imaginative so that we may see not just new ways of reading but the reality of multiple, conflicting narratives that constitutes an ongoing rhetoric—one that echoes communities' histories as the objects of violent oppression and at times manifests violently. We experience multiple modes of seeing and listening to the same text at once. King's counter-analysis of de Brahm's map is particularly engaging. King writes, "Yet counter-cartographies that en flesh flat spaces and embed Indigenous stories and place-making into the map are geographies that need to be used in tandem with archival spatial records to craft more critical cartographies" (p. 100).

### **Conclusion**

*The Black Shoals* is a guide to listening differently. This can be difficult when we have been swimming in pools of colonialist history and continental philosophy. King argues that our "Cartesian epistemes" keep us from other ways of seeing (p. 115). She states her strategy outright: "I read for Black life in the depths of indigo plantation degradation." By performing

deliberate readings—revisionings—against the grain, King seeks ways to disrupt dominant White colonial discourse while turning up the volume on narratives that many of us never knew existed. She shows us new ways to listen, necessarily difficult but by no means impossible.

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## REFERENCES

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