

WHEN HEADS BANG TOGETHER: CREOLIZING AND INDIGENOUS IDENTITIES IN THE AMERICAS

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In her 2019 book, *The Black Shoals*, Tiffany Lethabo King warns that “settler colonial discourse structures the ways that people think about and simultaneously forget . . . that Black and Native death are intimately connected in the Western Hemisphere” (2019, xiii). This warning is similar in spirit to Jody Byrd’s call to decenter “the vertical interactions of colonizer and colonized” and recenter “the horizontal struggles among people with competing claims to historical oppressions” (2011, xxxiv). What happens to the lifeways of creolization when brought under the scrutiny of such analyses? To ask this question differently, how might creolization, as a theory of Afro-diasporic experiences shaped in histories of chattel slavery, displacement and migration, working against structures of anti-blackness, approach a vigilance for what Lorraine Le Camp (1998) names the “terranullism”—a Doctrine of Discovery world-orientation that reads land to be colonized as either vacant or all but vacated of civilized human communities—that grounds much of settler colonial discourse?

I. THE GOAL

My hope is to put together a conceptual space out of which we can theorize the possibility of abolitionist-decolonial alliance-work toward a world beyond white, settler violence. In determining that conceptual space, I foreground the need to acknowledge the non-translatability between/across the singular histories of anti-blackness and anti-indigeneity, *even* as we recognize these violences as co-constitutive of the conquest logics of the Americas. That is to say, both anti-black fungibility and indigenous removability (or erasure) in the form of *corpus nullius* are inextricably entangled in the violent circuits of relations into which colonialism places life, land and bodies. Nevertheless, as I allude to above and aim to flesh out in greater detail below, these are *incommensurate* modalities of violence, which then locate blackness and nativeness, respectively, into incommensurable positions from which resistance against settler violence might unfold.

My aim is to show that, as a consequence of this, the position of the native is such that they encounter the violence of assimilation, of belonging to the state as *subjects of empire*. The position of the black is such that they face the violence of possession, of belonging to the state as *objects of empire*. To be sure, both are technologies of capture, but their “how” are quite different (and incommensurably so, is what I want to argue). Hence, in theorizing the (multi-pronged) necro-political structures of the settler state, such differences already point to an untranslatability across racialized dispossession and occupation of indigenous land and life. It points to an untranslatability that (for instance) needs to centrally contextualize demands for both black Americans and migrants of color to be “disturbed by [their] own settler status” (Tuck and Yang 2012, 9). And so this incommensurability ought to inform both theory and practice of abolition and decolonization (again, as they are pursued *simultaneously* and not at the expense of each other).

I utilize Édouard Glissant’s conception of “opacities in relation” to work through these questions. Ultimately, I want to argue that opacity should be at the center when it comes to doing decolonial and abolitionist work together. In the section that follows, I offer some conceptual detail of Glissant’s notion of opacity. I propose that, in keeping opacity at the center of work simultaneously devoted to decolonization and abolition, we let go of the expectation for transparent clarity of terms, for mutual, “once and for all” understanding, and for a knowing of our various experiences of colonial violence modeled in what Glissant will name “onto-thinking.” As both an epistemological and ethical framework, opacity will orient me toward a knowing (and ultimately, an acting-with) that unfolds *despite* being unable to completely conceptualize (as in, *capture* under a concept) the experience(s) of communities other than my own. This kind of framework joins what Eve Tuck and K.W. Yang offer in their 2012 work as an ethics of incommensurability, a comportment through which “solidarity lie[s] in what is incommensurable rather than what is common across these efforts” toward moving beyond settler colonialism (28). What I hope to add on to Tuck and Yang’s intervention are the ways in which this incommensurability captures not only the decolonial singularity they powerfully outline, but a singularity to the radical demand of abolitionism *alongside* and as well.

To say this differently, though there is much overlap between my use of Glissant’s account of opacity and Tuck and Yang’s conception of an ethics of incommensurability, I aim to highlight that the experiences out of which decolonial *and* abolitionist demands emerge are dynamic and meaningful in a concrete sense. Hence, as Tuck and Yang make clear, these intricacies (everyday, concrete) are never sufficiently static to freeze in some conceptual grasp. I hope to show that opacity at the center would orient us toward a theory and praxis that can attend to the mutually unsettling (and hence never fully reconciled) work of abolition and decolonization together. It is my claim that oriented as such around opacity, the theoretical frames we develop to do this work avoid the following two pitfalls: (1) pursuing decolonization and indigenous restoration of sovereignty in a way that upholds anti-blackness; and (2) pursuing possibilities of black abolition (possibilities that think “black” and “free” together) in a way that props up settler logics.

As a way to translate what Glissant’s conception of opacity might look like in an everyday, on-the-ground politics (simultaneously committed to both decolonization and abolition), I

bring Byrd’s conception of “horizontal cacophony” and King’s account of “shoaling” into conversation with Glissant’s formations. My hope is to offer these three frames—Antillean (Glissant), indigenous (Byrd), and black feminist (King)—as a conceptual latticework for making legible the imaginative capacities needed to formulate both decolonizing and abolitionist possibilities together. In preparation for this work, the following section will detail Glissant’s conception of opacity.

II. GLISSANTIAN OPACITY

In his work on Antillean life-worlds, formed against a backdrop of violence in the Americas, Glissant (1997) uses the notion of compositeness to name communities whose relational modes center opacity. The composite community is opacity in relation. It is a model of Relation in which difference exists as *both* irreducible *and* in relation, and this is, in large part, a reflection of how compositeness de-priorities certainty and stasis. It is this feature of opacity—its conceptual affordances for thinking what is both *irreducible and in relation*—that captures what is most at stake in the work I aim to accomplish here. Despite the truth of claims like Tiffany King’s, which remind us that “Black and Native death are intimately connected” (2019, xiii), it is also the case that the variables of settler colonial violence that shape the Western hemisphere produce competing claims across black and indigenous lines respectively.¹ One example that comes to mind is the four hundred thousand total acres of (at its foundation) stolen/contested indigenous land that was promised to formerly enslaved black peoples at the cusp of the Reconstruction era (Gates 2013). How do we hold together these claims (competing, often to the point of being irreducible with respect to each other) alongside their relational intimacy, their proximities to each other given colonial violence? To pose this in more Glissantian terms, how might we think about the stakes of abolition and decolonization as both irreducible and in relation?

According to Glissant, composite relationality, a mode of relation with opacity at the center, is *errant* relationality. It captures the epistemic and ethical orientation of communities whose indigestible differences remain even as they relate to each other in a way that is both collaborative and in concert. Composite communities, centered in opacity and grounded in errant relationality “gather” together, on Glissant’s account. As I offer a trace of this notion of errantry (to highlight how it works and perhaps more importantly, how it *doesn’t* work), I hope to show that Glissant’s notion of opacity gives us at least one way to think together what is both irreducible and in relation. It is at this juncture that the stakes and/or implications of abolition and decolonization lie.

Glissant critiques what he names “onto-thinking,” which describes the reduction of uncertainty for the sake of understanding and epistemological safety. Difference has a place

¹ Though I treat these categories as mutually exclusive, I do recognize that there are subjects in the Americas who are both black and indigenous. My treatment of these categories as mutually exclusive are for the purposes of this paper, which is to delineate how the distinct pillars of anti-black and anti-indigenous violence unfold in the white supremacist settler state.

in this model only at the expense of its reduction, which is to say, no longer as difference in itself. As an alternative to such thinking, Glissant offers the model of errantry, whereby the errant thinker pursues knowledge in a way that can account for the complexity of becoming and movement. In other words, errant thinking is thinking compatible with the irreducibility of difference, and not thinking made possible through a flattening of its object's singularity. My question here is: What are the implications of thinking errantly (or, at the very least, of *not* thinking onto-logically) for making intelligible the incommensurable yet intimately entangled claims of abolition and decolonization, claims that are ultimately informed by and respond to the violences of black fungibility and native elimination that co-constitutes the power terrain in the Americas?

Ultimately, Glissant theorizes the “all” of totality differently (and decolonially) by giving opacity a central role in his determination of relation. As such, relation is not grounded in a transparency of differences, but rather, in their *inaccessibility* to the totalizing reach of the All. That is to say, a Glissantian roadmap brings into relation what will retain its opaqueness, what will *resist* reductionist totalizing *through* its opaqueness as it gathers into the “all” of Relation. It would be difficult to mark a point of relation in such a gathering principle, if that point is of the order of a universal and totalizing gaze that might capture everything on its own terms. Any point of relation in Glissant's Relation would be quite opposed to such colonial cartographies of mapping.

But what we *can* say about the point of relation in Glissant's Relation is that it moves with the dynamism of experience, connects as it diffracts with that dynamism. Hence, if onto-thinking moves toward universality, then errant-thinking moves toward a gathering of singularities that does not universalize (does not sum up what is gathered), even as those singularities exist as mutually inseparable, in Relation. To state this in terms of the work I take on in this paper: though the ontological negations that aim to reduce blackness to possessed *objects* of empire (on the one hand) and the ontological erasures that aim to reduce indigeneity to participating *subjects* of empire (on the other) are opaque to each other, it is *out of that opacity* that decolonization must be inseparable from abolition (and vice versa).

Hence, the world shows up for the errant thinker in its ambiguity, but it is *as* an ambiguity that the world is given over as an object of her knowing. She doesn't anticipate smooth sailing through the world. Instead, she is called to specialize in a bumpy (cacophonous, even, to anticipate the work of Byrd) relational living. For errant-thinking, “world” is a moving totality of *opaque* singularities that are linked together (entangled, one might say) despite their resistance to reduction. I propose, here, that we might also understand Black and Native death in the Western hemisphere, as well as the respective stakes of abolition and decolonization, in this way: as a moving totality of *opaque* differences, intimately entangled in the wake of settler colonial violence *despite* their mutual irreducibility. If we theorize the beyond of settler colonial violence in this way, then these loci of opaque differences—blackness and indigeneity—present themselves as the impossibility of being possessed by some all-encompassing (all-understanding) theoretical gaze. Instead, it is as conceptually uncapturable that we must theorize the entanglement of these matrices of violence, as well as the possibility of moving beyond its logic, in yet another entanglement of abolition-

decolonization. To say this otherwise, with Glissant’s account of opacity at the center, there is no surmising or assimilationist move that allows us to reduce the demands of abolition to those of decolonization, or vice versa. And yet, both must be pursued together, given the ways in which coloniality has always functioned out of the entanglements of Black and Native death. It is for this reason that I turn to opacity as a way to think “irreducible” and “in relation” together.

The following sections offer some ground for the claim about this entangled irreducibility between the locations of blackness and indigeneity in the colonial matrix. The hope is that this will support what I summarize as the two pitfalls we avoid when theory and praxis sufficiently attend to the mutual incommensurability across abolitionist and decolonial demands for an elsewhere. These two pitfalls are (1) a pursuit of native sovereignty at the expense of Negrophobia, and (2) a pursuit of black abolition at the expense of indigenous erasure. To reiterate, it is in remaining in this incommensurability—keeping what is unsettling/disruptive as such, so that our knowing is errant with opacity at the center—that possibilities of an elsewhere emerge.

III. WHAT’S INCOMMENSURABLE ACROSS BLACKNESS AND INDIGENEITY?

The Americas is founded on the conquest and settlement of indigenous lands and built out of labor procured through the conquest and enslavement of stolen Africans.² As such, the region represents a nexus of bio-power (usurpation and control of bodies) and geo-power (usurpation and control of land/non-human worlds). Decolonial scholars have established that it is this nexus that constitutes the white supremacist, settler violence of this so-called New World. In his work, *A Third University is Possible*, K. Wayne Yang (paperson 2017) points out that it is much more productive for us to understand these technologies of violence in terms of “necro-power”: the killing/suspending/stalling of life (non-human *and* human) for the sake of conquest and domination.³

The inextricable entanglement of this necro-power calls us to sit with the complex proximities between Black and Native death, between (in other words) these various inflections of the “necro” at play. About the history of black enslavement, Jared Sexton writes that because racial blackness has always been reduced to occupy a “social life of social death,” blackness, in the context of settler colonial violence, articulates a radical singularity (2011, 15). That is to say, the abjection of blackness in the Americas is singular to that position, such that it is “indexed to slavery and it does not travel” (21) to other violences of exclusions and dispossessions that exist within the necropolitical web of power relations in the Americas. As this non-universalizable position, the violence of becoming black (on Sexton’s account) reveals an ontological divide between what Frantz Fanon (1986) names the “zone of nonbeing” that is lived as blackness, and all other onto-modalities of the

² In their work, Eve Tuck and K. W. Yang (2012) trace the ways in which this project rests on a first move that transforms indigenous land to forms of property.

³ See also Achille Mbembe (2019).

social, political and cultural. Yang puts it this way: “The ‘slave’ should not be analyzed as a category of labor (we should not ‘reduce Blackness to a mere tool of settlement’), but rather as an ontology of total fungibility” (paperson 2017, 11-12). Here, Yang aims to establish the distinction between (on the one hand) occupying a social category through which your humanity is made available for exploited capital labor, and (on the other hand) being part of social arrangements such that it is precisely one’s *being-ness as human* that is in question. In this latter case, the enslaved person’s use-value is infinite and infinitely exchangeable—it is the currency through which these circuits of capital accumulation operate. Hence, at the discursive level, the humanity of the enslaved person is sufficiently liquefied to allow for the ontological malleability that the category of African chattel enslavement signifies, so as to not only meet the labor demands of a plantation economy, but also and alongside this, the discursive and libidinal demands of white supremacist sentimentality.⁴ We might think of this distinction between “exploitable labor” and “total fungibility” as a difference in categories of being whereby blackness as a category, because it falls *outside* of the basic ontological resistance required for exploitation, is “absolute availability” and “absolute exchangeability.” Yang continues: “The technologies of anti-blackness create ontological illegibility or criminal presence . . . lethal geographies, carceral apparatuses . . . non-personhood, and so on” (paperson 2017, 11-12). In other words, there is no “there” there, except for use-value. In a similar vein, Tiffany King argues that “Black fungibility—rather than labor—defines and organizes Black value within relations of conquest” (2019, 23). All of this is singular to the production of blackness, or rather, to what necro-power in the Americas needs blackness to be in service to settler violence.

Hence, the abjection that is black social life—a life, to be sure, that “*survives* after a type of death” (Sexton 2011, 23, emphasis added)—is incommensurable with the many other vectors of violence that instantiate life in the settled and colonized landscapes of the Americas. In an important sense, these are ontological claims about blackness as a category, which then serve as an explanation of the enduring parameters in which blackness must be lived (at the more social, cultural and political levels). For instance, to consider blackness as total fungibility is to make sense of the historical arc that connects black life under Jim Crow to our more contemporary prison industrial complex (over-populated as that complex is with black persons). To be sure, this is not to suggest that over-policing and carcerality *only* targets blackened subjects, or that (to bring this back to the specific question at hand) the violence of the settler state does not *also* viciously target indigenous people (or other subjects racialized as non-white, for that matter).⁵ However, it is to highlight the singular function of blackness as a category *for* the settler colonial machine. It is to orient our theory around the “*details of the devil*” (so to speak), instead of glossing over the finely calibrated

⁴ For a thorough analysis of racial power and multiple modalities of anti-blackness in the United States, see Hartman (1997).

⁵ In his discussion of the historical collaboration between black and indigenous intellectuals and activists in the United States, Kyle Mays reminds us that, in the paper he prepared for his attendance of the Universal Races Congress in London 1911, Charles Eastman described the US reservation system as a “miserable prison existence” (Vigil 2015, 374, quoted in Mays 2021, 110). It is beyond the scope of this paper, but I do want to recognize the various forms of carcerality (the prison, the detention camp/center, the reservation) at play in the political economy of the settler state.

differences in how settler necro-power is served by (or feeds on) Black and Native death respectively. As Ikyo Day (2015) reminds us in an analysis of what she names as the hasty “settler/indigenous” binary that sometimes frames settler colonial critiques, the power terrain generated by/through settler violence is hardly a monolithic one. Though the telos of its inner logic ultimately points to material accumulation, *how* that telos determines its realization—at particular nodes of the power terrain—is heterogeneous and often relationally irreducible.⁶ This “how” requires an arrangement of being whereby blackness is purely fungible in ways that, as I try to outline below, indigeneity is not. Nonetheless and at the same time, there *are* formulations under the violence of settler colonialism that are unique to indigenous subjects, which is to say, equally as incommensurable with other non-indigenous vectors of violence. They are also (to frame it in Jared Sexton’s words) “indexed to and do not travel beyond” the category of nativeness.

In what ways does the anti-indigenous violence of the settler state’s necro-politics render the experience of native death untranslatable in other (settler violence) terms? What is the vocabulary of this other kind of singularity articulated by native death? Patrick Wolfe offers the notion of *corpus nullius* to theorize this singularity, citing that *corpus nullius* “express[es] the outer limits of othering that is reached when . . . particular humans [Indians] are excepted from the requirements that govern the treatment of humanity as a whole” (2007, 127).⁷ In what follows, I hope to sketch some important variances between the Native death that Wolfe attempts to capture under the grammar *corpus nullius* and the Black death that the vocabulary of black fungibility frames. But for the moment, allow me to reference what is perhaps the most concrete manifestation of anti-indigeneity under the settler project: the historical phenomena of “Indian removals.”

Elsewhere, Wolfe details the ways in which legal negotiations between a burgeoning settler United States and indigenous peoples ultimately entangled the latter in webs of abjection and denied sovereignty. He reminds us that, under the Doctrine of Discovery, the right of “preemption” concerned native peoples transferring the right of occupancy of their territories. To be sure, preemption in this context ultimately articulated a mere “pseudo-right,” as it explicitly *foreclosed* the right *not* to transfer land or sell.⁸ However, more directed to my discussion here is (as Wolfe also reminds us) a native right of occupancy was precisely not a right of domination. Using the so-called Trail of Tears, one of the many early nineteenth century instances of Indian “removal,” as an example to illustrate this, Wolfe establishes that, under settler law, Indian occupancy *without* Indian domination

⁶ “In the contemporary context, racialized vulnerability to deportation of undocumented, guest-worker, or other provisional migrant populations similarly exceed the conceptual boundaries that attend ‘the immigrant’ . . . folding them into a generalized settler position through voluntaristic assumptions constrains our ability to understand how their racialized vulnerability and disposability supports a settler colonial project” (Day 2015, 106-07).

⁷ We can also imagine the settler violence of anti-blackness being articulated in this grammar. That is to say, we can also read, in the liquidation of black humanity and personhood as expression of another “outer limit of othering,” another modality of exceptions (in black).

⁸ Robert Nichols reminds us of the Black Hills Acts of 1877, “known colloquially as the ‘Sell or Starve Act’ which demanded that Sioux relinquish control of the Black Hills in exchange for government rations to mitigate starvation” after the mass killing of buffalo by the U.S. Army (Nichols, 2020, 2-3).

facilitated a discursive “removability” that was (and is) always-already indexed to Indian-ness. In the words of Chief Justice John Marshall, which Wolfe’s analysis references, settler domination simply needed to be “consummated by possession” (*Johnson v. McIntosh* 1823), fulfilled in practice what was already accomplished in a discursive field of legitimacy and legality, namely that the Indian is understood, in advance (as it were) “to be removed” (Estes 2019, 47).⁹

Corpus nullius (or rather, its violent exceptions) should be understood in this sense. In other words, it is across this rendering of the Indian-as-removable that *corpus nullius* removes indigeneity outside the category of the human. I aim to understand this anti-indigenous settler violence as distinct from (and untranslatable in terms of) anti-black settler violence, which catalogues blackness as infinitely fungible. If, as Wolfe suggests, *the* indigenous act of transgression is to stay put, in light of a discursive Indian removability, then we might say that radical blackness (*the* transgressive act of the black position) is to take flight. I expound on this in the sections that follow, showing how the frames of singularity, incommensurability and untranslatability support a clarified reading of such variabilities across settler colonial violences.

IV. PITFALL ONE: NATIVE SOVEREIGNTY THAT COSTS NEGROPHOBIA

How are we to understand the geopolitical and bio-political determinations of belonging, as they show up in the positions of the black and of the native in the Americas? How are these concepts of citizenship and sovereignty already destabilized at the nexus of bio-power and geo-power, as they pass through blackness and indigeneity, respectively? These destabilizations are what scholars like Byrd and Day point to in their analysis of aboriginal communities in the US and Canada. Namely, both Byrd and Day underscore the sense in which, in these political contexts, the indigenous subject signifies as both native *and* foreign to the settler state. To be sure, such slippages result in the ways in which distinct yet interlocking matrices of colonization (as a project of land accumulation and settlement) and racialization (as a system of mapping meaning and value onto bodies in ways that facilitate land accumulation and settlement) within the settler state map onto and/or call for each other. That is to say, this simultaneous nativeness and foreignness marking indigeneity is a direct consequence of the intersecting goals of the geopolitics and bio-politics at play within a settler colonial context. Hence, what appears to be contradictory terms—“native” meaning “original to a place” and “foreign” meaning “not of a place”—align at a point of mutual reinforcement: the indigenous person is native in a way that gives her a right of occupancy and not a right of domination (to facilitate removal and always-already removeability); she is also foreign in a way that her embodied politics and culture (matrices of racialization) remain forever other than/inferior to “properly” embodied,

⁹ In his account of the historical violence against which the #NoDAPL struggle unfolded beginning in 2016, Nick Estes reminds us, “Native people remain barriers to capitalist development, their bodies needed to be removed—both from beneath and atop the soil—therefore eliminating their rightful relationship with the land” (2019, 47).

rights-claiming citizenship. If we understand settler colonialism at this nexus of geopolitics and bio-politics, the cacophony (to anticipate Byrd's work) across indigenous demands for sovereignty (on the one hand) and black demands for radical abolition (on the other) begin to come into focus.

As Byrd (2011) tells us, it is out of this confluence of settler colonial power that citizenship in the settler state articulates logical oddities like "foreign/non-belonging citizens" and "native foreigners." Occupying the latter tortured category, Indians in the Americas show up as native to land that never did and would never rightfully belong to them (or belong to them in the "right" kind of way), given their non-proximity to racial whiteness. That is to say, the bio-political determination of black embodiment as improperly suited for civil/political life does discursive work on Indian embodiment as well. Racialized to be both non-proximal to whiteness *and* not entirely demoted to a (black) zone of nonbeing, indigenous foreignness sets the stage for the discordant determinations of treaty negotiations with the state (171). In those negotiations, the state's reading of the Indian's claim to sovereignty is already destabilized via oscillations between racialization and colonization. Indigenous people either become included as "suspect citizens" like other racialized (nonblack) minorities, in which case the position of the state is that it "does not and would not enter into treaties with its own citizens." Or, they become "suspect aliens," cordoned into reservation spaces effectively abandoned by the state, or meted out with the same military and paralegal violence that gets enacted in those "frontier" regions that signify as "open to settlement and (gentrified) improvement" (202).

Stuck in the liminality of a destabilized inclusion, indigenous demands *to* the state (for a return of land and sovereignty) are unrecognizable *by* the state for what those demands actually are. As Robert Nichols reminds us, "American Indians were unilaterally declared citizens of the United States [in 1924], ushering a long period of 'termination'" (2020, 3). Elsewhere, Nichols (2014) describes this inclusion as a "compulsory enfranchisement," making clear how, within this nexus of settler colonial relations, indigenous citizenship is hardly a condition for the possibility of native sovereignty. Rather (and this is the point that Nichols makes in highlighting the historical trajectory that correlates indigenous citizenship with indigenous termination), the state's move away from treaty-making to citizenship also marks the codification of the legal structures that will undermine both tribal identification and, in turn, tribal sovereignty. As such, indigenous enfranchisement (and inclusion, to the extent that we might read citizenship as an expansion of the field of rights-bearing subjects) is constitutively opposed to the possibility of indigenous sovereignty. For these reasons, scholars like Glen Coulthard (2014) problematize platforms of decolonization that pursue state recognition, arguing that indigenous resistance and resurgence must instead be diametrically *opposed* to negotiations with and recognitions by the state.

To return to my earlier account of Indian removability, we can read Coulthard's warning against state recognition as one that acknowledges the limited phenomenological scope of settler colonialism. Within this scope, the Indian appears as either already removed (no longer there in the physical or cultural sense as an impediment against settler expansion) or on their way to being removed (legible only as "what needs to be removed"). State recognition ultimately begins from/within this articulation of indigeneity, which is to say,

already counter to the content of indigenous sovereignty (namely, unmitigated access to territory and decision-making power over the use of that territory). Taking Frantz Fanon as his guide, Coulthard (2007) demonstrates that the social relations of the settler state invariably constitute the identity of native peoples on the state's own terms. What this means is that, via a politics of recognition (and the negotiations for sovereignty rights it often includes), native peoples become "subjects of empire" (6) voided precisely of the cultural and political capacities needed to articulate sovereignty claims against those of settlement.

Coulthard's position troubles Sexton's (2016) claim in "The *Vel* of Slavery" that an inherent "Negrophobia" lives in the very language of sovereignty used to frame indigenous demands for decolonization. To be sure, the value of an analysis like Sexton's lies in foregrounding an urgency for theorizing the colonization of indigenous peoples and the racialized oppression of black people together. At the same time, he argues that, because the brick and mortar of the settler colonial state is one of antiblackness, any interlocution—and he considers the historical treaty-making between the state and native tribes as instances of this—with the state presupposes, at the outset, adoption and/acceptance of this antiblackness (this "Negrophobia"). Sexton cites the work of Frank Wilderson in support of this claim: "treaties are forms of articulation, discussions brokered between two groups presumed to possess the same kind of historical currency: sovereignty" (Wilderson 2003, 236). And so, to the degree that treaties established (or continue to establish) arrangements that determine indigenous land access and indigenous determination of land use alongside the colonial settlement of the land, there is validation of the antiblackness and racial supremacy central to the settler state.¹⁰

Nevertheless, in reading Negrophobia in articulations of indigenous sovereignty, Sexton seems to miss what Coulthard and other indigenous scholars cite as the dangers of locating indigenous articulations of sovereignty within the fraught framework of the state. In other words, when Sexton writes that "the dynamics of Negrophobia are animated, in part, by a [native] preoccupation with sovereignty" (2016, 592), he seems to suggest that the sovereignty demanded by indigenous communities is mappable (can *afford* to be mappable) onto the (white supremacist) sovereignty articulated by the state.¹¹ In other words, Coulthard's critique will point out that at base of an assessment such as Sexton's is an understanding of the treaty (as document, as basis for social relations between indigeneity and the state, as a set of legal and discursive tools) as conditioning a return to native lifeworld possibilities. Coulthard's critique of this understanding suggests instead

¹⁰ As a present-day implication of how these settler treaties are entangled with antiblackness, see Lee (2021).

¹¹ To Sexton's point, there is a historical record of native tribes adopting antiblack policies and politics specifically in the name of the right to act as sovereign nations. Alaina E. Roberts (2022) points to the entanglements between the Five Tribes and their formerly enslaved black members (or freedmen). In the name of sovereignty, these tribes will insist on their right to determine how tribal membership is granted, as well as how rights and privileges are distributed with respect to that membership. Roberts cites a history of tribes adopting policies that work to either marginalize black freedmen or deny them tribal citizenship altogether.

that, perhaps, treaties were one of the few strategic possibilities salvageable out of the indigenous world-ending event of settler colonialism.

The sovereignty that is operational in the indigenous context, Coulthard (2014) writes, *cannot afford* to be of the same historical currency as the state's, because at their core, indigenous demands are antagonistic to the entirety of the settler state, its anti-native violence *and* its antiblack violence. Couching this primarily in terms of free market capitalism, he envisions a notion of indigenous self-determination that “refuse[s] to be coopted by scraps of recognition, opportunistic apologies, and the cheap gift of political and economic inclusion. For Indigenous nations to live, capitalism must die” (2014, 173). To the extent that scholars of political economy like Cedric Robinson are correct in their naming of modernity's capitalism a *racial* capitalism, we might read, in Coulthard's point about the antagonism between indigenous self-determination and capitalism, a similar antagonism between indigenous self-determination and Negrophobia. In other words, if capitalism must die in order for Indigenous nations to live, then so too must Negrophobia.

We might turn again to Robert Nichols's work to further understand the level of antagonism driving Coulthard's critique of a “recognition” approach toward native sovereignty. Nichols's work is centrally concerned with the complexity involved when “dispossession” is used to articulate indigenous claims. The scope of this paper will not allow for a full retracing of Nichols's analysis. However, it suffices to note his clarification that the social relations that make notions of “property” meaningful are unique to colonial settler hermeneutics. In other words, these social relations are (in a general enough sense) absent within indigenous understandings of the world. “To claim property in something,” Nichols writes, “is, in effect, to construct a relationship with others, namely a relation of exclusion” (2020, 31). In this sense, the kinds of brokering alluded to in Sexton's (2016) and Wilderson's (2003) analyses, between the settler state and native peoples, would *first* need to interject these (absent) social relations of exclusion so as to prescribe a proprietorial relation between the native and the territory in question. As Nichols (2020) reminds us, “when European colonizers encountered the diverse societies of the so-called New World, they frequently found the Indigenous peoples had no conception of land in [the] abstract and narrow sense” that could be deployed/presupposed by social relations of property. Hence, the imposition of these proprietorial relations to land is just that: an invention and imposition *by* the settler project *onto* indigenous sense-making. But what most acutely underscores Coulthard's point (about indigenous self-determination needing to reject, in its entirety, all of settler arrangements) is when Nichols notes that “the dispossessive process [changes] background social conditions such that the actualization of the [indigenous] proprietary right in question is necessarily mediated in such a way as to effectively negate [that right]” (32). To put this differently, the imposition of social relations that invents the very concept of indigenous property in land cannot be disaggregated from the imposition's primary agenda: the removing of the native for the purpose of *taking away and prohibiting of access to* the territory *cum* land. Any brokering between the colonial state and indigenous subjects begins here, which is to say, constitutively produces what Nichols names a process of indigenous dispossession. For our purposes (and to return to Coulthard's critique), it constitutively produces an *impossible* indigenous sovereignty and/or self-determination.

My turn to Glissant's work on opacity recognizes that, despite the mutual untranslatability of these processes, the settler state's theft of bodies (for use as indefinitely-fungible currency in racial capitalism) and land (invented as indigenous property so as to be *taken* for settlement's extractivism and capital expansion) are inseparable. This inseparability means that if/when indigeneity demands a sovereignty that *includes* Negrophobia (that is, a sovereignty that is legible to the state), it is ultimately demanding a sovereignty that includes the very settler necro-power it aims to resist. (This, I think, is the crux of Coulthard's point.) And so, as a matter of conceptual framing, there exists an articulation of "indigenous sovereignty," the form of which is already beyond and other than what the state is able (or willing) to recognize. By the very nature of settler colonialism, the state cannot afford to hear "indigenous sovereignty" (in this "beyond" sense) for what it means. By extension, indigenous sovereignty cannot mean what it *needs* to mean if it deploys the same historical, Negrophobic currency of the state.¹²

V. PITFALL TWO: BLACK ABOLITION THAT COSTS INDIGENOUS ERASURE

It is undeniable that indigenous communities do have access to a (stolen) sovereignty which they can claim. Said otherwise, there *does* exist a category of sovereignty that shows up as "to be retrieved" via demands that, upon heeding to warnings like Coulthard's, recognize the discursive traps of state recognition/state negotiation. Within these discursive traps, indigenous articulations of sovereignty claims run the risk of reducing the native person to a (*subjugated*) subject of empire. I argue that there is no such risk available to the racialized descendants of black slaves. In other words, configured through the singular violence of anti-blackness, black persons in the Americas are always already the *objects* of the empire: fungible, usable property void of any kind of self that might even be *misconstrued* as occupying a subject positionality. As possessed object, the black never enters into the kind of sovereignty demands available to the native. Hence, I locate this founding premise of "possessed *object* of empire" at the center of pursued possibilities of an otherwise future for black freedom and black belonging. Consequently, work toward abolition would need to

¹² As Kyle Mays (2021) points out, the historical record of the settlement of native land and black enslavement includes fraught moments of indigenous adoptions of antiblackness. For instance, he reminds us of a treaty signed in 1823 "between the Florida Native nations and the US government, explicitly [stating] that tribes that capture Africans who escaped their captivity would be compensated" (Mays 2021, 67). Relatedly, in an opinion piece published with *Aljazeera*, Roberts writes, "[t]he fact that by the time of the [American] Civil War black chattel slavery had been an element of life among the Five Tribes for decades is rarely discussed" (2018). Roberts goes on to remind readers that the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment ended chattel slavery only for enslaved black people within the boundaries of what, in 1865, constituted the United States. Beyond that boundary (in so-called "Indian Territory"), the Five Tribes continued to keep in captivity the black people they owned as slaves. In the context of my current analysis, my use of Negrophobia is not divorced from these concrete historical instances of native practices of black enslavement. However, my intention is to move beyond this historical record—one that, as Mays argues, does not capture in the main the native-black relationalities within the terrain of settler colonialism—to think about the broader theoretical antagonisms and alignments among indigenous sovereignty, black abolition and colonial political economy.

attend to this mode of capture, which “inclusion and/or enfranchisement” historically (and conceptually) prescribes for lived blackness.

This section begins with this founding premise as it articulates a second pitfall to avoid in abolitionist-decolonial theory and practice. This is the pitfall that locates demands for black freedom within a hermeneutics of indigenous erasure. As I will show, in heeding this founding effect of antiblack violence—black as possessed object of empire—the native erasure operational within this pitfall should not be read within the same register as the assimilationist programs of the state with respect to native peoples. To be sure, assimilation has historically worked to “disappear” nativeness, to get nativeness “out of the way” so that the state’s political economy might expand unencumbered.¹³ However, even in instances when demands for black abolition either align with or leave uncriticized such anti-native violations by the state, the location of blackness within the attending power terrain does not make it possible for a black politics to explicitly engage in its own programs of native elimination. As Mays notes, desires/demands for black abolition might “[reproduce] an idea,” but such reproductions are “not the same thing as having the power to use a narrative in order to commit violence,” or to explicitly enact the native elimination central to the state (2021, 40). Nonetheless, to the degree that native erasure and black fungibility are of one (settler colonial) piece, a black abolitionist politics that leaves uncriticized the anti-native logics of settler violence is unable to carry out its own abolitionist project of radically dismantling the settler state. As I will argue, such reproductions of native elimination are something for which black abolitionist positions ought to be accountable. I will also argue that such reproductions *undermine* the very telos of an abolitionist demand (similar to how Negrophobia undermines the possibility of indigenous sovereignty). However, for now, I want to stress (along with scholars like Mays) that, because blackness occupies the position of “possessed *object* of the state,” the modality of indigenous erasure that can, at times, be coded into demands for black abolition is not of the same modality as the erasure of native sovereignty written into settler programs of native assimilation-elimination. Simply put (and to return to Mays), “discourse is connected to power, and Black people [as possessed, subject-less object] don’t have the power to subjugate Indigenous peoples” (Mays 2021, 40).

To return to the more central point of this section, alongside the dangers of scripting indigenous sovereignty demands in the settler state’s language are also the dangers of using that language to script demands for black abolition and home-making. As the possessed *object* of empire, blackness is figured as the ontological *negation* of subjecthood. That is to say, out of that zone of nonbeing that Fanon (1986) acutely analyzes, blackness is determined as impossible subjectivity, impossible sovereignty, and incorporated into the US state only as object of infinite use value, infinitely capturable, infinitely fungible.

¹³ It is for this reason that Patrick Wolfe (2006) includes settlement’s assimilationist policies within its larger commitment to indigenous elimination: “genocide emerges as either biological (read ‘the real thing’) or cultural—and thus, it follows, not real. In practice, it should go without saying that the imposition on a people of the procedures and techniques that are generally glossed as ‘cultural genocide’ is certainly going to have a direct impact on that people’s capacity to stay alive (even apart from their qualitative immiseration while they do so)” (398-89).

It is as *use value* for a settler colonial agenda that blackness—both in its iteration as chattel slave *and* within a broader abolitionist struggle subsequent to Emancipation—often travels in settler discursive territory shaped by indigenous erasure. As an historical instance of how black emancipation strivings are put to use within settler colonialism’s project of indigenous elimination, Roberts (2022) references the complex web of domination that shaped black and native encounters in the aftermath of the US Civil War. She notes that, at the war’s end in 1865, the Five Tribes of what is now Oklahoma (Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, and Seminole) were punished for “siding with the Confederacy.”¹⁴ As punishment, the United States forced them to enter into new (post-Civil War) treaties that (i) emancipated their black slaves, and (ii) *required* the tribes to surrender forty acres of their territory to each of their former slaves/their families. I quote Roberts directly in her naming of this historical moment as one in which “black people [more specifically black freedom dreams] are used as a tool to weaken indigenous sovereignty.”

I point to this history to stress that, within the context of settler colonial practices, iterations of black aspirations for emancipation/abolition/full humanity are capitalized upon for the sake of undermining indigenous self-determination/landed sovereignty. Does this make the black person’s position (within this matrix of settler domination) a settler position? To ask this differently (perhaps with an eye to Patrick Wolfe’s assessment), does the formerly enslaved in this historical moment *become settler* as their settling of native territory participates in the structure and “organizing principle” (2006, 388) of native elimination? My argument is that such a reading is both decontextualized and reductive, failing to account for (in a robust enough sense) the backdrop of power structures that prescribe “fungible object” status to blackness. As a further problematizing of this indigenous/settler binary, Wayne Yang notes that, at least in the context of the Americas, “Black people are often confronted by the *impossibility* of settlement, because antiblackness positions Black people as ‘out of place’ on land” (paperson 2017, 8).¹⁵ What is the content of this “being out of place” on land? Is it a matter of not being where one calls “home”? Is it a matter of relating to “home” in more complex (maybe diasporic) ways?

Whatever the precise nature of this impossibility, it is one that centers a messy yet necessary complexity when it comes to historical moments like the one that marks the black-native relationality of a region like “Indian Territory.” As Day (2015) puts it, “the logic of antiblackness complicates a . . . binary framed around a central Indigenous/settler opposition.” This binary is one in which one is a settler, *with* access to all the accompanying power and political entitlements, or Indigenous: “there is conceptual difficulty in folding the experience of racial capture and enslavement into the subject position of the ‘settler’” (Day 2015, 103).

¹⁴ Roberts (2022) complicates this pronouncement, pointing to a much murkier positioning of the Five Tribes in the historical unfolding of the Civil War.

¹⁵ In *An Afro-Indigenous History of the United States*, Mays (2021) actually argues for an understanding of blackness in the Americas as a modality of displaced indigeneity. And in this sense, it is more apt to find, in so-called New World blackness, an originating connection to place and lineage. Of his readers, he asks, “[w]hat if we remembered that those Africans forced to come to the British colony of Virginia were, actually Indigenous people? How would that help us think differently about early Atlantic encounters between Indigenous peoples from the African continent and those of North America, and beyond?” (3).

Sexton's (2010) juxtaposition of an originary natal alienation of blackness against indigenous landlessness is useful, here. "The nativity of the slave," Sexton writes, "is not inscribed *elsewhere* [available to be retrieved] . . . but [is] rather *nowhere at all*" (41, emphasis added). And so, on the one hand, there is the geopolitical (and cultural) groundlessness of which a resurgence of indigenous sovereignty is a corrective. That is to say, decolonial articulations of indigenous sovereignty is about reclaiming determination over territory, for the sake of renewing the cultural and epistemological organization of lifeworlds that are properly indigenous (Whyte 2017). And then on the other hand, there is the *ontological* groundlessness—what Saidiya Hartman (2007) describes as the irretrievable loss of one's mother—for which no articulable demand can serve as a corrective. Though it by no means exhausts the cultural and existential emergence of blackness in the Americas, this ontological groundlessness does account for what we might call the originating principle of New World blackness. In other words, blackness in the Americas is always in relation (even as black life refuses *reduction*) to this principle. As scholars like Hartman (1997) and Hortense Spillers (1987) show, this is the originating principle that facilitates the kind of radical tearing—from history, lineage, language, culture—that might effectively transform human beings into chattel. Sexton's (2010) formulation of "(black) settlement as impossibility" attempts to capture this. Hence, in this question of the precise nature of "settlement as impossibility" for lived blackness, I foreground this incommensurable difference (a difference that cannot be translated across shared terms) between an ontological groundlessness (of a loss of the mother) and a geopolitical groundless (of a loss of land). My claim is that it is from here that we begin to wrestle with pursuits of black abolition as they move alongside, against, and within a settler minefield of indigenous erasure.

In 1867, Frederick Douglass remarked on the "composite" nature of the United States as he argued in favor of Chinese immigration. He expressed faith in a newly emerging nation that attempted to bring together, under a single national identity, multiple races, religious and cultural commitments, citing the "principle of absolute equality" as that upon which the success of this national experiment rested. "Composite Nation" explicitly wrestles with the place of the formerly enslaved and indigenous peoples in this context. Douglass writes: "Europe and Africa are already here, and the Indian was here before either. He [the Indian] stands today between the two extremes of black and white, too proud to claim fraternity with either, and yet too weak to withstand the power of either." Diagnosing this as an ailment of a white government committed to racial hierarchy, Douglass continues, "The [national] policy of keeping the Indians to themselves, has kept the tomahawk and scalping knife busy upon our borders, and has cost us largely in blood and treasure" ([1867] 2007).

I offer Douglass's remarks here as a curious instance of both seeing and erasing, or perhaps, "seeing *as* erasing" indigeneity in the context of grappling with the stakes of black citizenship (a path that, in 1867, opened onto a promise of black freedom and full humanity). As a newly enfranchised citizen of a nation at least principally built on civic equality for black Americans like himself, Douglass's position in "Composite Nation" lives in a discursive project that leaves unquestioned the legitimacy of US settlement and expansion. By extension, his position also leaves unquestioned the presumption that "the

Indian who was here before” would simply adjust into the alignments of US citizenship, *even as* that citizenship built itself out of the destruction of Indian lifeworlds. Furthermore, Douglass’s critique of a national policy that “keeps Indians to themselves” assumes that, were it not for such policies, the Indian *would already* avail herself for inclusion. In other words, Douglass’s reading stops short of seeing that the Indian’s *refusal* of a composite national project is, in fact, a refusal of the very legitimacy of that project.

Ultimately, Douglass’s understanding of black freedom via a pathway of American citizenship (or at least the promise of it) reproduces the indigenous erasure necessary to the founding of the American nation. It is an iteration of indigenous erasure that consigns native peoples to a past, or “‘the dustbin of history’ . . . precluded from changing and existing as real people in the present [through] regenerating [indigenous] nationhood” (Lawrence and Dua 2005, 124). Against a backdrop of ontological groundlessness, Douglass’s position might be understood within a history of New World blackness faced with the task of forging a sense of home on land fraught with multiple matrices of domination. I want to argue that this pathway to black freedom—via a citizenship cut from a fabric of native erasure—is hijacked to the degree that native erasure and black fungibility are of one (settler colonial) piece. Nevertheless, Douglass’s participation in a project that (I argue) is ultimately set up to read him (in his position as “black”) as an infinitely fungible *object* of empire ought to be appropriately contextualized. We should read his assessment of the pathway of American enfranchisement in the context of a founding black natal alienation (black as ontological groundlessness), which ultimately animates the position of black possessed object of empire.

All of this to say that for a project of black abolition that imagines (within the context of the Americas) conditions for the possibility of black freedom, the starting point is one to which scholars like Sexton (2010) point: ontological groundlessness and ruptured kinship/lineage. Black abolition works against this radical absence of relation to both place and lineage. To be sure, we might read a black enfranchisement project like Douglass’s (and perhaps also like Dr. Martin Luther King’s centuries later) as more antiracist than it is abolitionist (that is to say, as projects that pursue better and more equitable inclusion into the nation-institution of the United States). However, to the degree that such aspirations ultimately ignore “the ongoing colonization of Aboriginal peoples in the Americas” (Lawrence and Dua 2005, 123), this perpetuation of the myth of a legitimate nation state (clearly at the foundation of Douglass’s “Composite Nation”) is out of an ontologically *impossible* “black settler” position. It is also as “impossible settler” that a project of black decolonial abolition would have to be imagined and theorized about.

Unlike the native body’s capacity to haunt the settler state with a reminder of its illegitimacy (indigeneity needs to be *removed/eliminated* for the myth of *terra nullius* to take hold¹⁶), black corporeality signifies as the outcome of a complete “deracination” (Sexton 2010, 41). Blackness as natal alienation rests on a complete *tearing up* from any ontological ground upon which it might haunt what it is already possessed by. Laid out in these terms, we’re called to trouble the overdetermining binarisms that drive analyses

¹⁶ See, again, Estes: “Because Native people remain barriers to capitalist development, their bodies [need] to be removed—both from beneath and atop the soil” (2019, 47)

like Wolfe's (2006), which reduce the ongoing dynamic of settler colonialism into "native/settler" terms. In these binary terms, persons within the geopolitical spaces of settler states are either indigenous or (via migration, transplantation, and even captured enslavement) settlers (Euro-descended settlers, non-Euro-descended *and* black descendants of the enslaved). And as settlers (according to Wolfe), they must reckon with their settler complicity. Given the incommensurable difference between landless *subjects* of empire and selfless/possessed *objects* of empire, this "native/settler" binary makes it difficult to ascribe "settler" status to the "experience [and afterlife] of capture and slavery," where (to say again) blackness continues to signify as the deracinated objects of empire (Sexton 2010, 41).

To reiterate, the native faces an eliminationist violence of assimilation, of becoming *subjects* of empire. The black faces the violence of possession, of belonging to the state as fungible *objects* of empire. I point this out not to claim that the ongoing indigenous displacement from stolen land (and indigenous erasure more broadly) is "less bad" than the constitutive natal alienation of blackness. Rather, I point this out to acknowledge an irreducible incommensurability around which abolitionist and decolonial alliances should be organized. How might such alliances unfold, with this untranslatability at its center?

VI. DECOLONIZATION: OPAQUELY ALLIED, HORIZONTALLY CACOPHONOUS, AND ALWAYS SHOALING

One indigenous critique of certain iterations of abolitionist politics is that it misrecognizes the (settler) nature of the state from which it demands civil rights/protections. This critique is similarly structured to Sexton's (2010) reading of Negrophobia into certain iterations of native "sovereignty" demands. In other words, both critiques highlight that, mediated through terms set by the settler state, repairs and returns for native and black people are set up in opposition, such that a pursuit of one is tantamount to leaving the other behind. In her work at these intersections of Native and Black studies, King reminds us that "white colonial and settler colonial discourse [facilitates a forgetting of] the ways that Black and Native death are intimately connected in the Western Hemisphere" (2019, xiii). To say this differently, such dominant discourses aim to *analyze* (as in, break apart into discrete positionalities) what is ultimately always-already an entangled synthesis: the violences of black fungibility and indigenous erasure that, though twinned, are both of a single piece. And so, my turn to both King and Byrd (2011) is to find theoretical frames to think these entangled violences together. Most notably, I turn to their work in order to explore Glissant's (1997) conception of opacities in relation (outlined in section I above) within this contextual terrain. The goal is to explore the theoretical orientation of "opacities in relation" as what might help us articulate what it means to avoid the two pitfalls I note above: *forgetting* the intimacies of this entanglement and *presupposing a translatability* that tries to reduce the terms of one death into another.

Hence, it would seem as though just as indigenous demands for sovereignty must remain *unmediated* (unrecognizable) by the state, so too do black demands for/toward abolition. To the degree that these two matrices of settler violence intersect, it is here: at

their respective loci of radicality, which is otherwise than the state. That is to say, radical iterations of decolonization and black abolition would be impossible outside of them being pursued together. But furthermore, to pursue them together is to already look beyond (elsewhere than) the state. As I read both King (2019) and Byrd (2011), but perhaps especially King, this is more than a claim about alliance or solidarity between black and native communities in the Americas. Rather, it is a claim that asks us to think intimately synthesized entanglements that swirl around an opaque meeting place.

Again, I name this meeting place “opaque” since black fungibility is untranslatable in the terms out of which native elimination signifies, and vice versa. Nonetheless, it is possible to imagine a radical “otherwise” (an elsewhere beyond settler violence) in which *both* modalities of capture are no longer. *How* we work through/toward that “otherwise,” *how* we re-imagine our human-to-human (and human-to-other-than-human) relationality beyond settler colonial possession will unfold quite differently (opaquely untranslatable with respect to each other, perhaps), depending on where we start within these settler entanglements of black and indigenous capture, respectively. This “how” (as process, as journey, as striving) is singular to the logics of one’s starting point. It will be singular to the (native or black) negation/capture at play, since it matters if my starting point is a fungible object possessed *by* the state or nullified subject assimilated *into* the state. A decolonial abolition (or abolitionist decolonialism) must wrestle with these side-by-side singularities and with their subsequent incommensurability as precisely what conditions its possibility. In other words, though the ontological negations that aim to reduce blackness to possessed *objects* of empire (on the one hand) and the ontological erasures that aim to reduce indigeneity to participating *subjects* of empire (on the other) are opaque to each other, it is *out of that opacity* that decolonization must be inseparable from abolition (and vice versa).

Horizontal cacophony

Byrd (2011) develops the notion of a horizontally-oriented “cacophony” as what allows a decolonial option to show up. Her claim is that horizontal cacophony begins in the *plural* histories within empire, and unfolds in the politics and culture that is beyond the discursive metrics of the settler state.¹⁷ In other words, by “horizontal,” Byrd attempts to foreground the dynamics of power that unfold *across* (and among) locations on the receiving-end of racialized settler colonial violence, similarly leveled with respect to power as a consequence of being on the receiving-end of that power. Though ultimately shaped by the state’s grammar of violence, this horizontal cacophony points to ways of signification that are “beyond” (and perhaps also “below”) the terms set by that violence. As such, it is a cacophony that complicates the story often deployed by the state (from its *vertically*-oriented power position) about a multicultural plurality that moves smoothly

¹⁷ Byrd’s notion of horizontal cacophony brings to mind (from the arena of popular culture) Ryan Coogler’s (2022) Marvel film, *Wakanda Forever*. In it, Coogler de-centers the geopolitics between Africa’s Wakanda and the neo-imperial West, so as to center a fraught (and perhaps cacophonous) geopolitics between Wakanda and Talokan, the underwater indigenous nation that has re-imagined itself against the historical violence of settler colonial genocide.

toward (better) inclusivity. Instead (according to Byrd), in a horizontal cacophony that will “decenter . . . the vertical interactions between colonizer and colonized” (2011, xxxiv), pluralities “bang their heads together” in determining what radical exits might look like, from both the bio-power and geo-power of the white, settler state (Howe 1994, 108). The imagery of “heads banging together” conveys the rather *bumpy* (i.e., *not* smooth) difficulty involved in working across pluralities that aren’t simply different and co-existing cultural orientations, but are positioned in terms of incommensurable historical violences, with perhaps incommensurable notions of what it means to resist (and move beyond) those violences.

On my reading, the cacophony of heads banging together conveys that this pursuit of radical exits is always in-process and rarely follows straight (neat) lines of progress. For this reason, these radical exits are perhaps to be found at the level of everyday practice and culture-making, where the virtuosity of living, though messy and beyond codification, is often about resisting, responding to, and sometimes refusing the settler state’s claims to have exhausted all options.¹⁸ At that everyday level, politics happens beyond state mechanisms, and as cacophonous, is often unrecognizable to those state mechanisms. Here, I am interested in thinking about these horizontally-oriented cacophonies in terms of opacity (as it is developed in Glissant’s work). It would seem as though with a first premise of opacity, we avoid those assumptions of a reductive translatability across terms that are entangled. I return in order to unpack this in a concluding section, but not before turning to King’s conception of shoaling work.

Shoaling

King’s approach to theorizing the entanglements of decolonization and abolition is grounded in a black feminist ethical framework, whose driving principle is “we leave no one behind” (2019, 26). Through her use of the shoal as metaphor and organizing principle, this black feminist ethic moves beyond the rubric of alliance or coalition. More radically, it means that we are *no longer able* to conceptualize black abolition propped up by native erasure, or native resurgence, sovereignty, and rematriation propped up by black fungibility. Much like the cacophonous nature of Byrd’s (2011) horizontally-situated, difficult and bumpy “head-banging” work, King (2019) turns to the shoal’s geological formation as what will *also* take us beyond a neat, settler-derived dichotomy between landed and oceanic/diasporic sensibilities. In other words, as conceptual metaphor, the shoal complicates readings of black freedom as always creolizing and diasporic and native sovereignty as always landed and static.¹⁹

¹⁸ In a conversation with hosts of the podcast *Millennials are Killing Capitalism*, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Robyn Maynard (2022) point out that it is often real-world practices (of building coalitions, of living among and with each other) that relational alternatives between black and native peoples become activated beyond the options offered by racial capitalism and settler colonialism. My motivating interest in this paper is to explore theoretical language to articulate what already happens “on the ground.”

¹⁹ To reference, again, Coogler’s (2022) *Wakanda Forever*, this complication certainly animates the film’s rendition of the geopolitics between the Wakanda and Talokan nations.

As a geological formation, shoals are those unanticipated land formations encountered out at sea, at a sufficiently significant distance from where shore/shoreline begins, so as to surprise and catch off guard when they are encountered. Shoals, in other words, *slow sea traffic down*, demand a pause so as to reconfigure plans and paths previously thought to reliably bring you to your desired destination (to perhaps even *reconsider* that destination *as* desirable). “Materially,” King tells us, these sites are “where movement” — and perhaps *also business*—“as usual cannot proceed” (2019, 3) and where what constitutes knowledge-production turns errant, in-process, and tenuous. She repurposes this *geological* phenomenon for methodological use, taking the shoaling effect in a physical world to the shoaling of theory itself into a conceptual space in which the intimate entanglements of black and indigenous life might be thought together. The conceptual effect of this shoaling of theory is to ultimately make space to imagine a re-routing of the navigations set by settler colonialism’s “business as usual.”

And so, “[r]ather than speaking only in the terms or vocabulary of liberal notions of Indigenous sovereignty and Black citizenship” (King 2019, 46), we are invited by both King and Byrd to consider different soundscapes and registers of communication. These alternative vocabularies move us beyond the mediating effects of settler discursivity, which serve to diametrically oppose resistances against native erasure and black fungibility respectively. I would like to suggest that the different soundscapes that emerge from a shoaling framework are then of a similar register to Byrd’s (2011) cacophonies. Both of them bring to mind soundscapes that are emergent, indeterminate/in-process, and unanticipated. Hence, we might frame in terms of *shoaling* practices those horizontal “colonized-colonized” communicative practices whose work decenters the vertical “colonized-colonizer” ones that so often pit indigeneity and blackness in the Americas against each other. Via a shoaling of theory itself, possibilities emerge for decolonial and abolitionist work to find “new formations, alternative grammar and vocabularies . . . that reveal the ways that some aspects of Black and Indigenous life have always already been a site of co-constitution” (King 2019, 28).

Far from static, and therefore far from capture-able by some unifying principle guiding the onto-thinker outlined in Glissant’s (1997) development of opacity, contact at the foundation of communities in Relation—contact that is cacophonous, that (as with the shoal) unsettles those settler-arrangements of who belongs and who doesn’t—is moving, perpetually shifting and unsettling what dares to offer itself *as* settled. Like the geographical navigations that must contend with the shoal, communities in Relation (contending with opacity at the center) proceed indeterminately and tenuously. This is because, as King notes in her work, the happenings in question are neither legible nor knowable in advance. But this is precisely why a shoaling way of theorizing about the Americas allows us to move via paths that are not yet etched out by settler narratives, new paths not yet conscripted to block a thinking about “conquest and colonialism as fundamentally constituted by slavery as much as they were constituted by genocide” (King 2019, 59). We might say that this shoaling of theory is an accomplishment of (or at least a possibility for) Glissant’s errant thinker, positioned as she is in a knowing relationship with such unpredictability.

VII. CONCLUDING REMARKS

“Opacities in relation” re-imagines community as one in which a totality might also be accountable to the relations across plural histories within, even (*or especially*) as those histories are incommensurable with respect to each other.²⁰ Despite that incommensurability, accountability is shaped by the principle of “no one being left behind.” My hope is to have shown that the constitutive open-endedness and movement of Glissant’s notion of compositeness foregrounds the productive capacities in Byrd’s (2011) notion of a horizontally-oriented cacophony and the imaginative capacities that King (2019) captures in her metaphor of shoaling work. I should also note that, indeed, Byrd’s focus on the horizontal picks up a key metaphor for Glissant, which is the errant-like rhizome spread of the mangrove. Both call attention to the significance of movement that is non-linear (*anti-linear*, even) and of anchoring that is *not* for the sake of stasis and entrenchment. (The rhizome, after all, is growth that is shallow instead of deep.) The mangrove grows on swampy liquid-ground. It insists on life where land and water intertwine. Likewise, the shoal *also* lives at the intertwining of land and water, and perhaps can also help us theorize a similar insistence on life *out of* the violent entanglement of black and native death-dealing technologies.

And so when “heads bang together” in the afterlives of empire, it seems apt to say that we have arrived at a point where “[black] diaspora collides with settler colonialism” (Byrd 2011, xix), where any possibility of decolonization and black abolition must emerge as transformative accountability *to* this collision point and must reckon with the entanglement of blackness and indigeneity in the Americas. Community across blackness and indigeneity conceptualized errantly and with *opacity at the center* would be open-ended in the messiness of a rhizome’s routings. The compositeness of such community would be less about final resolutions and more about the shoaling communicative practices of ongoing (and bumpy) community-formation. My hope, here, is to have shown that this lattice-work of the shoal, the cacophonous, and the opaque opens productive possibilities for both theoretical and political work committed to taking on decolonization and abolition together in the co-constitutive radical departure from settler colonial capture.

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²⁰ Glissant’s formulation allows for possibilities of political accountability as well. Time does not permit me to elaborate this here, but I do treat this question of political accountability in detail in my book *Creolizing the Nation* (2020).

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