

An abstract artwork featuring a dark, charcoal-colored figure in a reclining or crouching pose. The figure is rendered with heavy, textured strokes. Surrounding the figure are light, ethereal washes of blue and grey, suggesting a misty or underwater environment. The overall composition is vertical and expressive.

Tiffany Lethabo King

# The Black Shoals

OFFSHORE FORMATIONS *of* BLACK *and* NATIVE STUDIES

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TIFFANY LETHABO KING

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Cover art: Charmaine Lurch, *Sycorax Gesture*. Courtesy of the artist.

To those who dance, share drum skins,  
chase smoke rings, and brush tongues  
to know each other's languages.

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## PREFACE

Something about listening to this Anishinaabe woman's story, with its unfamiliar contours, brought into sharp relief the grooves, dips, depressions, and crevices that I had never paid attention to all of the times I had run my fingertips over the familiar skin of my own narrative of slavery. I thought I knew all of its dry patches, oil slicks, depressions, raised surfaces, grooved fault lines, and loosening jowls. I know the texture of that face. However, when I listened intently to her talk about how she and her people, the Anishinaabeg, and the other Indigenous peoples in this hemisphere have been stalked by the death shadow of genocide daily, then I began to know something new. As she spoke, I paid attention to the depth of the grooves, took the time to pursue the strange feeling of each rough cut that had been etched over time. A particular line between my eyebrows took on a new curve and depth. Running my finger over it, I found that I could poke clear through its threshold into new regions of "my slavery." On the face of my Blackness, I could feel a new clammy and terrorizing cavern whose depths swallowed the length of my finger.

When I felt around and realized the new and unfamiliar about the slavery with which I had become so comfortable, it changed me — and I do not mean changed in a neat, orderly, or containable way. It unmoored and disassembled me in ways that I and others did not expect. I could no longer be accountable only to myself, my ancestors, and my story of experiencing Blackness and its slavery that had been passed down over my lifetime. When I say unmoored, I mean that I could not continue life as I knew it. In the fall of 2007, I decided to take a leave of absence from the doctoral program I had just begun at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE). I told my department at the time that I was having "health issues."

I needed to sort out what had happened. “Health issues” provided a cover for the undoing that I had experienced. This was more than a mental health crisis. I do not believe that we have any language available for what I experienced so intensely in 2007 and what I experience less acutely now.

There was something about the way this Anishinaabe woman spoke of genocide. I knew that it had everything to do with now, with tomorrow, with yesterday. With then. And more so, it had everything to do with slavery. Someone else’s “story bearing” informed me that there was more to the experience of slavery.<sup>1</sup> My ancestors knew something more; they knew, tasted, smelled, and felt the edges of multiple deaths. They knew more than just their own death.

To share the hemisphere with Indigenous people also experiencing the day-to-day terror of conquest molds the form of your own experience with conquest as slavery. What my unnamed ancestors knew of slavery was life- and world-altering. They knew of a terror that exceeded the memory and understanding of what we think we know of slavery. I do not believe that genocide and slavery can be contained. Neither has edges, yet each is distinct. Each form of violence has its own way of contaminating, haunting, touching, caressing, and whispering to the other. Their force is particular yet like liquid, as they can spill and seep into the spaces that we carve out as bound off and untouched by the other.

Slavery and genocide linger in places we do not expect and cannot yet see or define. Their touch can arrive in an illness, a “not feeling right,” or not wanting to rest your feet on the ground. Their presence can feel like not being able to fully expand your lungs. In a more profound sense, it and they are a haunt. In the words of Eve Tuck and Christine Ree, “The United States is permanently haunted by the slavery, genocide and violence entwined in its first, present and future days. Haunting does not hope to change people’s perceptions, nor does it hope for reconciliation. Haunting lies precisely in its refusal to stop. Alien (to settlers) and generative for (ghosts), this refusal to stop is its own form of resolving. For ghosts, the haunting is the resolving, it is not what needs to be resolved.”<sup>2</sup>

Genocide and slavery do not have an edge. While the force of their haunt has distinct feelings at the stress points and instantiations of Black fungibility and Native genocide, the violence moves as one. To perceive this distinct yet edgeless violence and its haunting requires a way of sensing that allows moving in and out of blurred and sharpened vision, acute and dulled senses of smell. It requires the taste buds at the back of the throat and the pinch of the acidic in the nerves of the jawline. Edgeless distinction

is a haptic moment, shared, and a ceremonial Black and Indigenous ritual.<sup>3</sup> This project is an act and ritual that spans ten years.

When Marika, Christine, Abi, Larissa, and I sat together (to listen and watch smoke rise, shift, and disappear) as Black and Native women,<sup>4</sup> we developed a capacity to know something more — something my ancestors had known but had been rendered unimaginable within the rehearsals and protocols of remembering slavery. Slavery and genocide do not have edges. My ancestors who were enslaved knew more than slavery; they knew the terror of conquest. An Anishinaabe woman helped me understand that. The terror I felt was specifically and unmistakably Black. It was not the terror of a long-lost Native ancestor. It was not a transference of her ancestral terror and blood memory that I picked up on. It was a different kind of vision of yourself that you experience in a truly ethical encounter, a kind of co-witnessing that enables people not only to mirror back pain but also to also implicate one another in our survival. However, also in the witnessing to understand with one another, one realizes that “innocence” does not exist within the lifeways of this hemisphere or the modern world. The endeavor of surviving under conditions of conquest is never clean.

Under relations of conquest, Black and Indigenous people made difficult and agonizing choices when it came to negotiating and fighting for their existence. Often when Black and Indigenous people encountered one another their meetings were mediated by the violence of an evolving humanism organized through their captivity and death.<sup>5</sup> The terms of survival — or, said another way, the circumstances under which you as a Black or Indigenous person lived — were often tethered to the death of the Other. Claims to innocence on the part of Black or Indigenous people are disingenuous and deprive Black and Indigenous life of the agonizing texture and horrific choices that often had to be (and have to be) made to survive under relations of conquest. What is true for Black people is that they also fear for their lives and make shrewd and difficult decisions that at times fall outside their own, as well as larger and shared, ethical frames. Black people can be backed against the wall, make choices out of the need for brute self-preservation. The buffalo soldier can be called into the “war for America.”<sup>6</sup> After all, the Five Civilized Tribes made a choice to enslave Black people to prove the measure of their own humanness.<sup>7</sup> This was, but does not have to be, life and death in this hemisphere.

The conquistador and settler, who perhaps need to be renamed the “conquistador-settler,” established the violent terms of contemporary social relations.<sup>8</sup> Further, the conquistador-settler also mediates Black and

Indigenous relations through the nation-state, press, academic discourse, and even leftist politics. To become or “ascend” to Whiteness is to enact a self—or self-actualize—in a way that requires the death of others. The position of the conquistador is tethered to the process of “ascending to whiteness,” or becoming human under the terms required by multiple versions of the human that keeps the category an exclusive and privileged site of unfettered self-actualization. This historical process of what Rey Chow and Jasbir Puar call the “ascendancy to whiteness” is an open and changing space.<sup>9</sup> Even if people of color (or non-Black and non-Indigenous) can over time occupy the structural position of the “settler,” then critical social theory needs another name for the position previously held by the white settler. If postcolonial subjects, former “Natives” and racialized others, can become the settler, then the white settler has continued to occupy the structural and ontological position of the conquistador, and should be named as such.

The stains and occasional hard, crusty residue of gore that line the crease and gutter where the sidewalk meets the street in Ferguson, Missouri; Baltimore; Seattle; Morton County in Sioux Territory; Vancouver; and Toronto tell the ongoing story of conquest. The brutal violence required to distinguish the human conquistador from the Black and Indian continues into the current moment. The tributaries of blood that M. Jacqui Alexander, Leslie Marmon Silko, Toni Morrison, Joy Harjo, Stormy Ogden, and Junot Díaz describe so vividly and evocatively paint a hue that refuses to coagulate. It is a river with a pulse in the contemporary moment with the capacity to drive its witnesses beyond a place of wellness.

I write this because I still need to heal. And my own healing, Black healing, is connected to Indigenous healing. I also write this as homage to the Black radical politics that have nursed and nurtured me. The Black radical struggle that I know intimately has always contained a mode of self-critique that frequently requires adjustment and revision. Black people constantly “on a move” and remaking the world maintain an ongoing intramural discussion that allows Black politics, movement, and thought to think about itself in relation to an expanding notion of itself connected to others.<sup>10</sup> This open conversation taking place among a dynamic and fluid Black “we” also takes place among Indigenous people. The Black radical tradition that informs this project is the one that I am also writing back to in gratitude. I write back to a porous and forever transforming practice that is an ethical project concerned with encounter.

I write this because I trust Black people. I trust the radical and always

shifting ground of Black freedom dreams.<sup>11</sup> I also trust Black freedom dreams when they consider Native freedom. This project confronts the various ways that Black politics and Black studies continue to deal with and incorporate the struggle against Native genocide into its ethical frame. This book is a multivoiced conversation. First, it is a Black intramural conversation. Second, it is a conversation with Native studies and Native peoples who face genocide and a dispossession so profound that even “land” cannot adequately speak to the loss. Third, it is a “talking at” and back to conquistador-settler knowledge formations. Specifically, this conversation is a confrontation with the ways that conquistador forms of discourse, like colonial and settler colonial studies, attempt to mediate discussions between Black and Native peoples, Black studies, and Native studies. White colonial and settler colonial discourse structure the ways that people think about and simultaneously forget the ways that Black and Native death are intimately connected in the Western Hemisphere.

Finally, and most important, like most scholars, artists, and people, I write to live with myself. Beyond keeping one up at night, a haunting can grant an inheritance. My inheritance is that, as a Black person living under relations of conquest, I care about Native people’s survival. And I do not care because I have a Native grandmother or ancestor. I care because the Black radical politics that I have inherited cares about Native people.<sup>12</sup> It does not do it in response to political cajoling or guilt. It does not do it in the hope of coalition. It does not do it out of self-hatred. This ethics that eschews and actively resists genocide as an order of modernity and making of the human subject proper is an ethics of Black radical struggle, period. It is a Black radical politics that proceeds and moves toward Black and Indigenous futures.

#### PROCEEDING TOWARD THE RIDGE

I write from atop a ridge, which is a part of the Appalachian foothills. The Muskogee Creek and the Cherokee were the first to caress the curve of the slope that started at the lips of the Chattahoochee River’s banks and stretched into an immense mountain range. Pines once sprouted at whim at the very top of the peak. A special pine served as a meeting place between the two nations; a place of encounter, shared breath, speaking a rhythm, flow, and exchange between two peoples at the base of the tree. The place of Creek and Cherokee encounter would be cleared of its meaning, name, and vibration to serve as an artery of commerce. Commerce—

rice, cotton, bodies, chattel — would flow into this artery from a railroad terminus. The rail line that ran through the new city would connect the port at Savannah across the mountains and to the Midwest.

The rise and fall of the city's topography forces drivers to modulate their speed as they move through Atlanta. Over the five years I lived in the city, I had become so used to the hilly terrain that I barely took the time to notice how I moved. My movements became more guided by proprioception, force, and the steering wheel and the gears than any conscious and measured movement. Only in the last stages of writing this book did I consciously begin to search out the best geographic metaphors for this project and start to pay attention to the naming and renaming of the space I traversed daily.

For instance, if I am not in a rush to get home in the evening, I will drive through the city. I will take Auburn Avenue through the "Old Fourth Ward," where Martin Luther King Jr. grew up, and make a right on Boulevard, which takes me south to Memorial Drive. Memorial Drive takes me east to Moreland Drive. As I bear right and south on Moreland, I cross Interstate 20, named after Ralph David Abernathy, and shortly reach a road on my left (to my east) called Flat Shoals.<sup>13</sup> Once I get to Flat Shoals, I can take it across Glenwood Avenue all the way to where Flat Shoals runs into Bouldercrest.

When I take Flat Shoals I always have to watch carefully and reduce my speed to be ready for young folks racing across the street and to linger long enough to identify the range of music blaring from local establishments. It could be hip hop, bluegrass, New Orleans brass bands, or punk that cuts the panes of my car windows and seeps into the space of my car on any given afternoon. Even the smell of a "wanna be" New York City pizza joint on a particular day will make me trust my bad faith that what comes out of Grant Pizza East in Atlanta will approximate what I can find at home in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic region of the country. A number of the activities on Flat Shoals make you slow down or shoal your movement on the road. Until I lived here, close to the Flat Shoals interchange, I was unfamiliar with the geologic and oceanomic term "shoal." It was only as the last chapters of this book ran their fingers along the Black contours of this landscape of conquest in the Western Hemisphere that I felt compelled to look for a better organizing metaphor and thread that readers could use to guide their way through the book that I got the notion to look up the term. And like other authors in the final phases of their work, I found what I was looking for very close by. In some sense, I found it under my feet, in

the very geography that my Blackness was now living on, creating on, and contending with.

I soon found shoals everywhere. The crease on my forehead between my eyes that felt different after receiving the wisdom and witness of an Anishinaabe friend became a shoal. It slowed or shoaled my movement. It gave me pause. After finding it again for the first time, it made me slow down whenever I ran my fingers over my face and my own history and experience of being a descendent of the enslaved. Any dry patch under my nose or oily patch on my forehead became a new and concerning place to study and care about.

Throughout this book, I meditate on this place — the spot in the road, on the route home, and on the way to the familiar places that force you to slow down; the space that forces you to move from the automaton to a more alert driver and navigator. In this project, I both map and trace this geological, geographic, and oceanic place called the shoal. By titling this book *The Black Shoals*, I posit that Black thought, Black study, Black aesthetics, and Black expression function as a shoal that interrupts the course and momentum of the flow of critical theories about genocide, slavery, and humanity in the Western Hemisphere. More specifically, the book intervenes in contemporary discourses and theories of colonialism and settler colonialism in North America that dictate how the academy and “the left” talk about (or do not talk about) Indigenous genocide, Indigenous peoples, settlers, arrivants, and Black people. *The Black Shoals* approaches the territory and social relations of Indigenous genocide, slavery, settlement, place making, and contemporary extension of the bloody project of conquest. *The Black Shoals* also offers up the possibility that specific forms of Black abolition and Native decolonization interrupt normative processes of white human self-actualization. In fact, Black abolition and Native decolonization as projects that frustrate liberal (and other) modes of humanism offer new forms of sociality and futurity.



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## INTRODUCTION

### *The Black Shoals*

*shoal*, *n.* and *adj.*

*n.*

A place where the water is of little depth; a shallow, a sand-bank or bar.

*adj.*

of water, etc.: not deep; shallow

ex. The boat could not come to land the water was so shoale.

The year 1441 is a palindrome. The date's symmetry, doubling and mirroring, slows the eye's movement over it. Fourteen forty-one is also a temporal-spatial marker within Black diaspora studies that scholars use to chart the navigational routes of the Portuguese around the deadly reef-filled waters and rocky shoals of Cape Bojador to the shores of Guinea (Senegal).<sup>1</sup> Gomes Eannes de Azurara, who drafted "The Chronicle of the Discovery and Conquest of Guinea," reported that in 1441 sailors — perhaps including Antham Gonçalves — brought back the first Negroes and "gold dust" to Portugal.<sup>2</sup> The date slows the easy and swift movement of colonial studies, settler colonial studies, postcolonial studies, and some tendencies within Native studies toward 1492 and the shores of the "Americas" as the accepted inaugural time-space of the modern mode and era of conquest. For a number of Black studies scholars, the 1440s mark the commencement of the Portuguese slave trade, as well as European voyages poised for the conquest of territory on the coast of West Africa.<sup>3</sup> These errant and out-of-sync time and space coordinates of Black thought and study produce a shoaling effect — a disruption in the movement and flow — of

time and space reflected in and narrated by Western disciplinary formations and their seminal texts. Throughout *The Black Shoals*, Black thought, movement, aesthetics, resistance, and lived experience will be interpreted as a form of chafing and rubbing up against the normative flows of Western thought. Specifically, *The Black Shoals* will interrupt and slow the momentum of long-standing and contemporary modes and itineraries for theorizing New World violence, social relations, Indigeneity, and Blackness in the Western Hemisphere.<sup>4</sup>

Through the mid-nineteenth century, ship captains' nautical journals, logs, and maps revealed the deep anxiety that unexpectedly running into a shoal caused ships' crews. As a geological and oceanic formation, shoals force one to pause before proceeding. Prior to the 1860s, mariners and sailors lacked a scientific or systematic methodology for measuring depth to the ocean floor.<sup>5</sup> Before the invention of bathymetry, the calculation of probability curves that estimated the latitude and longitude of shoals—rock formations, coral beds, and sandbars—were very difficult to map and, therefore, avoid.<sup>6</sup> For captains, sailors, and others on board a ship, the perils of the sea included crashing into a shoal and the sinking of their vessel. The unexpected appearance of rocks or a change in sea level could force the ship to reroute, turn around, cancel its voyage, or even kill all of the passengers (and cargo).

The word “shoal” has a number of meanings. Geological sources define it as the area in which the sea or a body of water becomes shallow. As a process, it is the movement of the ocean from greater to shallower depths. It is not the shore; it is a formation before the shore or offshore. As a location and geological formation it is often described as a sandbar or a coral reef. It is an accumulation of granular materials (sand, rock, and other) that through sedimentation create a bar or barrier that is difficult to pass and, in fact, a “danger to navigation.”<sup>7</sup> As a geological unit, it is a physical place, a shallower place in the ocean before one arrives at the shore.

When the ocean is at low tide, one might be able to wade from the shore beyond a break in the waves and into deeper water or a trough to then come upon very shallow water (or a place where the ocean floor surfaces), where one can finally stand on sand again. Many who fish find the shoal to be an ideal spot. A school, or gathering of fish, also sometimes described as a shoal, often gathers at the sandbar's edges to feed on vegetation. Thus, a shoal is a good spot for catching fish. While also used to describe nongeological matter such as a school of fish, the term is rarely used in humanistic terms, however. Declining in use after the eighteenth

century, the word “shoal” is generally used in the form of a verb to describe how a ship or vessel slows down to navigate a rocky or rough seabed that has risen toward the surface of the ocean. As the waters became shallow, a ship would shoal to avoid running aground.

Because these sedimentations of sand, rock, or coral were often imperceptible until they sank a vessel, the mysterious and shoal-filled ocean floor posed a problem for navigating the sea. As a sandbar, and a particularly shifty formation, a shoal can erode over time, drift, and eventually accumulate in another location. Its unpredictability exceeds full knowability/mappability and in some senses it is what Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick would call a “demonic” space.<sup>8</sup> Because the shoal’s shape, expanse, and density change over time, the shoal is as much a dynamic and moving set of processes and ecological relations as it is a longitudinal and latitudinal coordinate that cartographers attempt to fix in time and space. It is a mobile, always changing and shifting state of flux. As an ecological space, it represents an errant and ecotonal location made of both water and not water. Ecotones are classified within environmental science as a combination or meeting of at least two distinct ecological zones.<sup>9</sup> The shoal is liminal, indeterminate, and hard to map.

As elements of the ocean that not are stable or readily mappable and therefore knowable, shoals slow the movement of a vessel. They cause the ship’s velocity and momentum to change direction, to adjust, and on occasion they force the voyage to stop. The shoal is an impediment and a danger to navigation. Materially, it is a site where movement as usual cannot proceed. Within cultural studies, and more specifically performance studies, Michael LeVan invoked the nautical and geological term to elaborate on the productive tension created within the discipline due to the use of digital technologies.<sup>10</sup> LeVan describes shoals as places, metaphors for contact and encounter, as well as emergent formations. Rising and falling with the tide, the shoal is an interstitial and emerging space of becoming:

Rather, than forming a boundary between land and water, shoals are spaces of contact, friction, and interaction among land and water (framed above, of course by another space of contact: air or atmosphere). The phenomenon of “shoaling” is a sign of this contact: when the surface waves approach a shoal, they slow down, their height increases, the distance between them decreases, and sometimes they are diffracted. Though not an absolute obstacle, a shoal transforms the qualities of the movement of water. Simultaneously, beneath the surface



the movement of water constantly remakes the topography of the shoal. With each give and take of the waves, the zone of contact and encounter is reformed. The encounter transforms each, and each is constituted in part by its transformations.<sup>11</sup>

Like LeVan's interpretation, the Black shoal is certainly a moment of friction and the production of a new topography. *The Black Shoals*, as an analytical and a methodological location, constitutes a moment of convergence, gathering, reassembling, and coming together (or apart). The shoal, like Black thought, is a place where momentum and velocity as normal vectors are impeded. It is the place where an adjustment needs to be made. As an in-between, ecotonal, unexpected, and shifting space, the shoal requires new footing, different chords of embodied rhythms, and new conceptual tools to navigate its terrain. The shoal enables this book to shift its conceptual lens to a liminal space between the sea and the land.

At its surface, the shoal functions as a space of liminality, indeterminacy, and location of suture between two hermeneutical frames that have conventionally been understood as sealed off from each other. I offer the space of the shoal as simultaneously land and sea to fracture this notion that Black diaspora studies is overdetermined by rootlessness and only metaphorized by water and to disrupt the idea that Indigenous studies is solely rooted and fixed in imaginaries of land as territory.<sup>12</sup> Scholars in Black diaspora studies, giving specific attention to late twentieth-century scholars, have mobilized oceanic and water metaphors to theorize Black life, aesthetics, and decolonial politics as breaks with continental European discourse. Similarly positioning itself as a challenge to Western and colonial epistemes, Native studies has centered land at the fulcrum of its analytical, theoretical, and metaphorical maneuvers that challenge colonality. The shoal creates a rupture and at the same time opens up analytical possibilities for thinking about Blackness as exceeding the metaphors and analytics of water and for thinking of Indigeneity as exceeding the symbol and analytic of land.

The genesis of the shoal in this project emerges from the larger project of Black diaspora studies. More specifically, the shoal gains its force from the traditions of Caribbean poetics and studies. Black diaspora studies as a project concerned with landscapes of domination and struggle has attended to and meditated on the sea and oceanic relations for some time. The Atlantic emerges as a central geographical body of the field, as well of as this project. During the late twentieth century and into the early

twenty-first century, the enduring metaphor and actual space of the ocean has pulsed through Black diasporic literature, criticism, art, and theory. The Middle Passage and “crossings” of African-descended people in particular has animated and served as an arterial through line in Anglo-African American, Anglo-Caribbean, and Black Canadian, as well as Hispanophone and Lusophone, traditions. Hard to escape, the ocean and its legacy has crested again and again in Hortense Spillers’s notion of the “oceanic,” Édouard Glissant’s “archipelagic thought,” Paul Gilroy’s “Black Atlantic,” Kamau Brathwaite’s “tidalectics,” Antonio Benítez-Rojo’s “rhythm,” and Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley’s “Black Atlantic, queer Atlantic.”<sup>13</sup> While often evoking a space of connection, transit, passage, and flow, the ocean has also functioned as a complex seascape and ecology within Black diaspora studies that ruptures normative thought and European discourse.

Glissant’s archipelagic thought in *Caribbean Discourse* that moves away from and out of sync with continental thought figures the ocean as a space that striates or interrupts the smooth flow of continental thought. More recently, Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake* and its wake work has reanimated Black studies’ capacity to ripple and disturb the surface of the ocean. While these diasporic currents all offer modes of intervention, what I intend to think more carefully with is Brathwaite’s conceptualization of tidalectics. I tarry with tidalectics because of the way that Brathwaite brings it into consciousness as a ritual enacted by Caribbean people with the sea and sand (and land). It is also important to note the ways that Brathwaite’s tidalectics function as a form of what McKittrick calls Glissant’s “poetics of landscape” that make space for Black geographical expressions of saying, feeling, writing, and imagining space.<sup>14</sup> In 1995, Brathwaite and Nathaniel Mackey had a conversation about poetry and Brathwaite’s body of work. In the book *ConVERSations with Nathaniel Mackey*, which records moments from the poets’ dialogue with each other, Brathwaite reconjures an image that helped him explain the arc of his poetic mediations on the question “What is Caribbean/the Caribbean?”<sup>15</sup> Looking from a house on a sandy cliff, Brathwaite takes in the following image:

This is an ole yard, okay? and this old woman is  
sweeping, sweeping the sand of her yard away  
from her house. Traditional early morning old  
woman of Caribbean history.<sup>16</sup>

The old woman is described as temporally belonging to the “early morning” and spatiotemporally as a “woman of Caribbean history.” She is en-

gaged in a peculiar dawn ritual that Brathwaite cannot fully understand the first time he views it. While Brathwaite can feel how the ritual is urged on by a compulsion to hold off impending collapse — specifically, the chaos that poverty can bring — he does not understand the “why” or the usefulness of the act of separating sand from sand. Why would the woman enact a ritual to sweep sand away from sand and a residue that will return before the next break of dawn? Brathwaite ponders:

She’s going on  
like this every morning, sweeping this sand — of  
all things! — away from . . . sand from sand  
seen? . . . And I say Now what’s she doing?<sup>17</sup>

After another gander, Brathwaite realizes that “she is in fact performing a very important ritual which [he] cannot fully understand but which [he is] tirelessly trying to.”<sup>18</sup> Initially, the woman’s movements and ritual were perplexing and opaque. He recalls waiting for another dawn to catch the woman’s silhouette moving against the “sparkling light.” When Brathwaite looks again, he says that it “seems” as if the woman’s

feet,  
which all along I thought were  
walking on the sand . . . were  
really . . . walking on the wa-  
ter . . . and she was tra-  
velling across that middlepass  
age constantly coming from wh  
ere she had come from — in her  
case Africa — to this spot in  
North Coast Jamaica where she  
now lives.<sup>19</sup>

The movement of the woman — who “was always on this journey” — forward and then back again mimics the movement of the sea. There is more than a “sandy situation” at hand.<sup>20</sup> The woman is not just walking across the sand. The woman is also walking on water. Although Brathwaite uses “really” as a clarifying adverb, I do not interpret the “really” as a displacement of the sand. I see an interplay between the sand and the ocean. The ocean does not simply burst through and overwhelm the entire scene. The sand that will (always) return remains entangled with the ocean.<sup>21</sup> I hold on to Brathwaite’s image of the sand — and ocean — to move with

it to his discussion of how his way of doing Caribbean poetics disrupts the time, meter, and rhythm of the colonial imposition of the pentameter on poetry and prose. Much like Brathwaite's poetics, the shoal also disrupts colonial geographies, scales, and measures that separate the sand and the sea.

To be able to attend to and write about this old Caribbean woman of history and her humble morning ritual, Brathwaite needed to write in a different meter. More specifically, for Brathwaite to see (and for me to see) "the sand between her toes" as she crosses the ocean, he will have to write toward a knowledge and understanding of the Caribbean through his poetry in another rhythm.<sup>22</sup> "'They' (these imposed meters) could not allow me to write the sunlight under her feet—she walk on water and in the light, the sand between her toes, the ritual discourse of her morning broom."<sup>23</sup> Brathwaite's image of a morning ritual of survival, gratitude, and perpetual crossing of the "middlepass age" keeps the ebb and flow of the tides touching the shores of the continent of Africa and the coasts of the Caribbean.<sup>24</sup>

Brathwaite writes of this ebb and flow as another errant movement that puts Caribbean life and history outside Western traditions such as Hegelian dialectics. Of the Caribbean people and their tidalectic movement against Western linearity and progress, Brathwaite writes: "Why is our psychology not dialectical—successfully dialectical—in how Western philosophy has assumed people's lives should be, but tidalectic, like our grandmother's—our nanna's—action, like the movement of the ocean she's walking on, coming from one continent/continuum, touching another, and then receding (reading) from the island(s) into the perhaps creative chaos of the(ir) future."<sup>25</sup>

Brathwaite's tidalectics resonate with the kinds of connections and disruptions that *The Black Shoals* attempts to achieve. First, tidalectics confound the binary and dialectical thinking that would separate ocean from land and render Black people and Indigenous people as an antagonism. Second, Brathwaite's meditation on the confounding movement and ritual of the old woman gestures toward a kind of life that is beyond transparency, a Black life that does not willingly show or give itself away to any observer and a penetrating gaze. Brathwaite's initial state of confusion summons Glissant's notion—or, rather, his "demand"—for "the right to opacity."<sup>26</sup> Glissant described his notion of opacity as an "irreducible singularity," writing, "The opaque is not the obscure, though it is possible for it to be so and be accepted as such. It is that which cannot be reduced,

which is the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence.”<sup>27</sup> Elucidating on Glissant’s poetics of landscape as a challenge to traditional geographical formulations and their “familiar tools of maps, charts, official records, and figures,” McKittrick draws attention to the ways that Glissant’s language—and in this case, Brathwaite’s Caribbean and diasporic “poetic politics”—can conceptualize a kind of “uncharted” surroundings that are continually made, remade, or unmade by Black fugitives working with furtive Indigenous communities.<sup>28</sup> The Black shoals are a part of the “uncharted” and at times invisible geographies of everyday Black life and ritual.

The woman’s movement as something that could not be reduced to a daily ritual of moving/cleaning sand held deeper (and unknown) meanings for Brathwaite. This nonreducibility is an element of Black thought, Black life, and Black aesthetics that *The Black Shoals* desperately honors and protects. As a metaphor, the shoal cannot be reduced to the ocean, the shore, or an island. It always has the potential to be something else that cannot be known in advance. In addition, the shoal exceeds easy liquid metaphors. The shoal as a metaphor and an analytic can slow the reflex and compulsion to always anticipate that Blackness (people, aesthetics, symbols) will show up as liquidity, fluidity, and flow.<sup>29</sup> Liquidity as a totalizing metaphor for Blackness is not just an ethical problem for depictions of Black life and the Black radical (and political) imagination—it also effaces the generative conceptual problem of Blackness.<sup>30</sup> For instance, what happens—or needs to happen conceptually—when Black diasporic people, aesthetics, and politics land and encounter Native peoples’ cosmologies and resistance to conquest? In an attempt to register this shift, the shoal disrupts the nautical and oceanic coherence of Blackness as only liquid and enables other modes of thinking about Blackness that opens up other kinds of potentialities, materialities, and forms. Anna Reckin reads Brathwaite’s tidalectic as a “creative process” that brings various texts (struggles and experiences) together and creates new ones.<sup>31</sup> Reckin writes of Brathwaite’s tidalectic as process, as gathering space and “Legba’s crossing.”<sup>32</sup>

The shoal is an alternative space always in formation (expanding or eroding) and not already overwritten or captured by the conceptual constraints of the sea or the land. If we conceptualize the shoal as a geological, oceanic, and geographical place, we can also imagine it as an actual and metaphorical place of juncture or a crossroads. Shoals are often found a few hundred feet offshore. Sometimes as sandbars or, at times, limestone formations, shoals often prevented vessels from coming all the way to the

shore to anchor. When a vessel anchored offshore, small boats would travel up to the side of a ship to retrieve passengers and cargo to take to shore.<sup>33</sup> If a vessel could anchor near a sandbar — a shoal — offshore, crew, cargo, and captive slaves from the hold could stand, sit, and wait on the sandbar for a boat or could wade to shore themselves. For the members of the community/shoal that emerge from the ship's hold, it is perhaps the last shallow place to rest your feet before the last canoe ride or swim to shore. It is another in-between space other than the hold to temporarily squat and reassemble the self on new terms.

In the fifteenth century, for those who did not enter (or leave from) the arched threshold of the Door of No Return, sandbanks and shoals were the last spots of sand that an African embarking the slave vessel stepped on before being carried into the hold. The shoal was also a place just off the coast of the archipelagos of the Caribbean and the ports of the British Carolinas where the enslaved Africans arrived in the New World and took their first wobbly steps on a small bar of sand, where they stumbled forward, slipped, or crashed and were made to stand before wading into a shorter stretch of water that would finally bring them to the shore — a place where an adult could hoist a child higher on a hip to get a better grasp before wading to shore; a place that caused unsteady sea legs to slip beneath themselves into a tumble and tangle of coffles and iron banging together. At the beginning or end of other planned voyages, the sandbars could also present another opportunity to kill the ship's crew, seize the vessel, and head back to the sea in the other direction. Or, as in Paule Marshall's retelling of the story of Ibo Landing, the shoal could have been the place that Ibo decided they would turn around and walk past the boat back home.<sup>34</sup> The shoal is a small uncovered spot of sand, coral, or rock where one must quickly gather, lose oneself, or proceed in a manner and fashion not yet known. In a temporal sense, the shoal is also the location that offers a moment to reassemble the self as an amphibious and terrestrial subjectivity. Not just water (fluid, malleable, and fungible) but also a body landed. A place and time of liminality where one becomes an ecotone, a space of transition between distinct ecological systems and states. A place to come to terms with a changing terrain that demands that you both walk and swim to shore — and whatever the shore may bring.

In addition to rethinking Black epistemologies and conceptual ecologies, I also use the shoal as a way of moving Black diaspora studies to reconceptualizing Indigenous people as also connected to water and the oceanic. Vincente Diaz, a scholar of Pacific Island communities that consti-

tute Oceania, works within seafaring epistemologies (ocean travel, chant, moving islands) to honor the ways that “land, sea and humans are mutually constitutive of one another.”<sup>35</sup> Taking into consideration the “very long history of geo and oceanographic dispersal” and travel, Diaz’s work, as well as other Pacific Islander Indigenous scholars, challenge notions of Indigenous “rootedness” in static time and space.<sup>36</sup> Thinking with Indigenous mobilities, migrations, and relationships to the sea, I hope to engage an important proposition that Seneca scholar Mishuana Goeman poses. More specifically, Goeman asks, what might “forms of analysis or action” that center “indigenous conceptions of land as connected, rather than land as disaggregate parcels at various European-conceived scales” of accumulation look like?<sup>37</sup> Colonial European scales disaggregate space into reservations, nation-states, continents, hemispheres, and water. Goeman offers that we “position land and water as always connected.”<sup>38</sup> Goeman asks, “what if we think of waterways in the way my Pacific Islander colleagues, particularly Vincente Diaz and Alice Te Punga Somerville, have positioned waters as connected with the currents rather than water as that which divides continents, islands, and land?”<sup>39</sup> For Goeman, Somerville, and Diaz, “the binding of land and water to the political, cultural and social life of indigenous peoples requires an ethics of care and responsibility.”<sup>40</sup> *The Black Shoals* is a site where Black studies connects land and water. The shoals also represent an analytical and geographical site where Black studies attempts to engage Native studies on ethical terms that unfold in new spaces.

This project tracks where and how Blackness interrupted the linear and smooth flow of modern and postmodern thought on the questions of slavery and genocide. Ultimately, this book asks, What changes does the Black shoal require of normative routes and knowledge systems that consider the ways that Black presence in the Americas casts a shadow on and informs the projects of genocide, settlement, and the remaking of “the human” under ongoing relations of conquest? As an accumulation of Black thought, aesthetics, and politics, the shoals of this project halt the all too smooth logics of White settler colonial studies. More specifically, *The Black Shoals* arrests settler colonialism’s tendency to resuscitate older liberal humanist modes of thought to create new poststructural and postmodern forms of violent humanisms that feed off Indigenous genocide and Black social death. The shoals as the analytical, theoretical, and methodological sandbars in this book place White settler colonial studies, as well as certain tendencies within Indigenous/Native studies (and Black studies) that align with White humanist thought, under stress. *The Black Shoals* forces