



Interview with Dr. Tiffany Lethabo King

Dr. Tiffany Lethabo King in conversation with Feral Feminisms' Guest Editors

FF: Tiffany, can you share with our readers about how you have theorized the connections between slavery and white-settler colonialism? What is different about the Canadian context?

TK: Looking for these connections was initially quite challenging. I was trying to theorize a relationship between slavery and white-settler colonialism that went beyond articulating that they were intersecting systems that met up every now and then. I wanted to show how slavery and white-settler colonialism fundamentally gave one another their structure, form, shape, and even momentum. I had to focus on some key sites where this co-articulation or possibility of talking about them at the same time could occur. For example, I looked at some depictions of enslaved bodies in the work of filmmaker and novelist Julie Dash. Dash produced visual moments where one could see the legacy of Native genocide and white settlement on the actual bodies of formerly enslaved women. As an artist, Dash was able to make visible the ways that the violence of the genocide of Native people and the subsequent clearing of the land to make the plantation left their mark on Black enslaved flesh. Dash's visuals made this theoretical work possible in a way that is still difficult within academic theory.

However, I did find some academic theory helpful, particularly the work of Frank Wilderson. In his book *Red, White and Black: Cinema and the Structures of US Antagonisms*, Wilderson's (2010) configuration and deployment of the term "Settler/Master (Human)" throughout the book allows one to think about the Settler (associated with Native genocide) and the Master (associated with slavery) as inseparable. Because of Wilderson's work, I was able to see that the Settler—who is often sequestered off to the frontier and locked in dialectic with the Native—is the same individual as the Master who is relegated to the space of the plantation, and therefore locked in a Hegelian struggle with the Slave. Within Wilderson's ontological discussion, the Settler and the Master are one and the same.

These artistic/conceptual and theoretical moves by Dash and Wilderson helped me theorize the connection between slavery and white-settler colonialism. Their work helped me articulate a connection that went beyond naming either as an epiphenomenon of the other. This work helped me see and read for the connections better. With these new ways of seeing and thinking, I was able to come up with new terms that gave me analytic units like the "Settled-Slave" and the "Settlement-Plantation." I now had a new grammar that was capable of helping me think about and talk about slavery and white-settler colonialism simultaneously.

As far as the differences between the Canadian and U.S. contexts are concerned, I would have to say that Canada's archive on slavery is not as voluminous as the United States'. Canada's archive is newer and doesn't contain anywhere near the sheer number of texts and images that the U.S. or Caribbean archives do. Further, the U.S. landscape is often imagined as one big plantation. Slavery does not haunt the Canadian imaginary in the way that it does in the U.S. Black scholars in Canada still have to labour really hard to convince Canadians that slavery has shaped the nation-state. I had much more material and scholarship to draw upon in U.S. archives in order to theorize the intersections.



FF: In your dissertation, you centre the Black female body. Please tell us a bit more about it.

TK: Black feminist scholarship has often used slavery as a point of departure for re-theorizing gender. For example, Hortense Spillers', Jennifer Morgan's, and Saidiya Hartman's work, which I relied upon heavily, focus on the discursive construction and material uses of Black-femaleness as a condition of possibility for the institution of slavery. Black-femaleness becomes this open sign within the symbolic economy of slavery. It can be turned into virtually anything: productive labour, reproductive labour, and anything else imaginable. It is within Black feminist scholarship that we see this robust theorization of Black fungibility or the unending exchangeability and use of Blackness at the site of Black-femaleness. To gender Blackness as "female" is to make Blackness more malleable and flexible as opposed to making it, as Sylvia Wynter says, "another genre of" the liberal stable human (i.e., white womanhood). What this means, is that gender as a discourse when applied to Black bodies is about making these bodies ever malleable. It is not about imposing coherent humanizing gender upon Black bodies.

What I found particularly useful about Jennifer Morgan's work *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (2004) is that it articulates the ways that the Black "female" body becomes essential to the productive and reproductive work of slavery as a project of spatial expansion during the early years of settlement in the West Indies and in the low country (coast of South Carolina and Georgia). It is due to this contextualization of the enslaved Black "female" body within the project of settlement and expansion that I could begin to think about Black "female" bodies as metaphors for and units of settler space. I will also say that Katherine McKittrick's work in *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and Cartographies of Struggle* (2006) theorizing Black women as geographic subjects was also extremely important for how I was able to think with the Black "female" body in my work.

FF: What is your understanding of decolonization?

TK: For me, decolonization is a process that has to do with working ourselves out of ways of thinking, feeling, and desiring that keep us stuck. A part of that work is realizing that we don't have to want or need the toxic (for lack of a better term) things that we have learned to depend on. This kind of change is generally really scary, hard, and can be lonely. We also can't always predict what this (decolonial) work will look like and require of us. It can be so many things. It's hard to say what it is or is not. However, I do tend to recognize it when I feel it.

I think that on a fundamental level the process of decolonization requires that we are undone and unmoored by the idea of living in a way that requires mass death (in its various forms) in exchange for other's self-actualization. By become undone, I mean it really has to fuck us up in our core and make us relentless about seeking out and making alternatives possible. And also realizing that the alternative can be much more pleasurable than the current situation that we are merely surviving. Also, decolonization is not just about the ascetic project giving things up but fundamentally about creating new and pleasurable ways of living.

FF: Who are some of the scholars/theorists who have greatly influenced your thinking and work?

TK: It was at the University of Toronto that I was introduced to the work of Sylvia Wynter. More specifically, it was the ways that Katherine McKittrick and Rinaldo Walcott were deeply and sincerely engaged in an ongoing dialogue with Wynter that was really inspiring and made



me pick up her work. Wynter's essay "1492: A New View" allowed me to think about the ways that the very construction of Blackness in the 15th century helped inform the project of Conquest, Native genocide, and settler colonialism.

Jacqui Alexander's work and presence at the University of Toronto at the time also helped me think about how to theorize my work with INCITE! in a way that honoured it and allowed it to function as a serious site of engagement in my scholarship. *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory and the Sacred* (2006) gave me the courage to take on the sacred as a real site of analysis and force in my work.

Further, the ways that scholars like Katherine McKittrick and Sherene Razack were working with space and critical geographies helped me analytically and methodologically. Thinking about the different relationships of Settlers, Black people, and Native people to space/geography was essential for thinking about their relationship to the category of the human. Additionally, thinking about spatial processes and landscapes also provided my dissertation with a methodology or a way of tracking the connection I was trying to elaborate. I must also mention Zainab Amadahy and Bonita Lawrence as important influences. Specifically, their Black and Native dialogue with one another in the article "Allies or Settlers?" is a great model of committing oneself to an ongoing and difficult conversation. It's a good example of how the substance of political work is not always about "getting it right, but about committing to the process."

As far as scholarship on slavery, anti-blackness, and genocide is concerned, my theorizations of the settler colonial project in relationship to slavery and Settler self-actualization would not be possible without the work of Afropessimists and Native feminists. My theorization of Black female flesh as trope for space that animated the Settler's conceptualization of space and spatial expansion would not be possible without Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, Jennifer Morgan, and Frank Wilderson's work. Finally, the work of Native feminists that has often been in conversation with Black feminist scholarship has shaped this project in some important ways. The openings that Haunani Kay Trask, Audra Simpson, Paula Gunn Allen, Marie Guerrero, and J. Kehaulani Kaunani created for thinking about Conquest, colonialism, and settler colonialism in relationship to slavery also made my work possible. And finally, Andrea Smith's contributions –however we categorize them in this moment –were also critical to my thinking.

FF: You have worked with INCITE! Toronto. Did that work inspire your PhD project? If so, how?

TK: The work I did with INCITE! Toronto was invaluable to my work. In fact, my experience with INCITE! gave birth to my project. Our unique conversations, ceremonies, and creative and political work that centered on the Black and Native members of the group required me to shift. The work transformed me in powerful ways. Quite honestly, I tend to have a really difficult time putting the significance of this work into words. One reason why I struggle is because the impact and meaning of this work continues to unfold and reveal itself in new ways that my words can't always keep pace with. Secondly, the work that we did forces me to struggle for a language that can do it justice. What I mean is that I struggle to find a way of talking about this work that doesn't allow people to dismiss it.

I really want people to engage the work. Often when people talk about the kind of transformation that they experience from committing to work that is about staying in relationship with or being ethical to one another, it is dismissed as corny and apolitical. This is



particularly true when Black, Native, and Women of Colour use language like “sacred” and “decolonial.” People tend to roll their eyes or be really condescending. It tends to be brushed off as touchy-feely work that is provisional to true political work.

Our struggle to confront hard questions like, “how have and how do our respective struggles to survive the horrors of genocide and anti-Black racism fuck one another up?” was demanding. I can’t express what hard work this was. We had to think about the ways that surviving genocide and slavery/anti-Black racism (Conquest) set up some impossible terms for Black and Native peoples on Turtle Island. Terms that often required a kind of “either I/we die or you/y’all die” kind of thinking and living. We struggled to find ways to imagine and live our lives outside of that dynamic. We worked really hard with one another in ways that took a considerable toll on us emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually.

This kind of work exceeds that of coalitional politics. And I don’t want it to be easily reduced to that. We often found ourselves at an impasse and could not move forward. This work required that we rethink and question our own investments in and desires for traditional notions of Black freedom and Native sovereignty. The kind of work that requires an unsettling of the self and the way one thinks pushed me to rethink traditional ways of theorizing anti Black racism and Black life. I think this is the legacy of that work.

FF: What would you like to tell racialized students working through questions of white-settler colonialism, connections, and complicity to remember as we continue to do this work?

TK: I think that we should always be struggling for analytic precision. It’s easy to rely on the terms and language that have currency and legitimacy in academia. For instance, it was important for me and other Black folks in Canada and the U.S. to push back against the discourse of “settler.” This resistance to the term is motivated by a number of different things. First, on a very gut and visceral level it is a resistance to a very sloppy conflation that discursively makes white settlers’ and Black people’s relationship to Native people an equivalent one. White settlers and Black people are not ontological/structural equivalents in this hemisphere.

Secondly, my own need to find new and more precise vocabulary is motivated by a sincere desire to think about how Black life and political projects may bump up against and conflict with Native people’s work to end genocide and white-settler colonialism. As a Black person committed to Black liberation, I am also deeply invested in Native life and liberation. These dual commitments in my work can also be tracked in Black intellectual and political thought in this hemisphere. My commitment to both of these projects demands that I be very specific about how Black and Native life is entangled in this hemisphere. Being analytically precise honours both of these struggles and forces us to “do” our politics better. Black people can’t use political and analytical models developed by white settlers.

I think that non-Black racialized students also need to attend to the historical specificity of the ways that their own relationship with Native peoples, the land, and white settlers has been and continues to be structured. “Settler” may not always be the best term to do this complicated and important intellectual and political work. I would encourage racialized students to begin to develop new language to describe and analyze their relationship to Native people, Black people, white settlers, and the land. Settler-colonial studies as a disciplinary formation has historically been preoccupied with theorizing whiteness and its relationship to Native people. This is an important project but I am not convinced that it is capricious and flexible enough to be extended to racialized people. We can always use new language. This is



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something that I am continually working out in my own process of writing my book manuscript. I need to struggle for even more precision and stretch my tongue to speak in new and relevant ways.

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