

**Frottage: Frictions of Intimacy across the Black
Diaspora.**

Keguro Macharia.

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How do we imagine what it means to be human in the present day? What is involved in understanding freedom and how it operates in Africa and the Afro-diaspora? How do we think through care and pleasure

within diverse historical moments characterised by “the obscene labour of how humans are transformed into objects” (1). What happens when black and queer inhabit the same spaces and even bodies, in Africa or its diaspora? These are some of the core questions that Keguro Macharia grapples with in *Frottage: Frictions of Intimacy across the Black Diaspora* (hereinafter referred to simply as *Frottage*). Guided by the evocative and lingering image of slavery, Macharia sets out to construct a deeply new appreciation of both blackness and queer studies in Africa and the black diaspora. He achieves this by engaging with a rich archive of texts that focuses “on the speculative ways that black diaspora thinkers and artists imagined [...] usable histories and liveable lives” (3). Also, interestingly, the texts that Macharia engages with do not openly represent queer subjectivities or fail to represent them. Given the fact that the texts and archives that Macharia engages with do not openly portray queerness, he attempts to complicate texts that are not normally considered queer. As he explains, “instead of pursuing explicitly queer or trans figures, each chapter mines the resources of the erotic to imagine freedom” (29).

Frottage is composed of four interrelated chapters, which each focus on a specific thinker: Frantz Fanon, René Marin, Jomo Kenyatta and Claude McKay, respectively. This ensures that the range of the archive that Macharia works with is geohistorically diverse. It moves from Fanon’s Martinique and France, to the Central Africa of Maran, Kenyatta’s Kenya and the UK as well as McKay’s Jamaica. As he moves from and across these different geohistories and spaces, Macharia is interested in how the intimate and the sexual are central in imagining and theorising black being, belonging and struggles for freedom. In exceptionally expressive and introspective prose, Macharia proposes frottage as both a theory and a method with and through which to reevaluate and reconsider the Afro-diaspora by converging on “the ways the public pursuit of pleasure can often be uncomfortable and coercive” (5).

Macharia posits that frottage allows for the uncovering of the traces of the past in a way that “offers a richer, queerer account of how diaspora functions as intimacy” (5). Macharia draws on Max Ernst’s artistic method which “consists of layering paper over a surface (a floor or a desk, say), and using charcoal or pencil to rub over the paper to reveal the traces history has left on that surface” (4). As a methodological intervention, frottage enables the rereading, speculation and creation of meaning from traces that become apparent only

through reading over and rubbing against narratives, past lives, archives and recorded histories:

Frottage tries to grasp the quotidian experiences of intra-racial experience, the frictions and irritations and translations and mistranslations, the moments when blackness coalesces through pleasure and play and also by resistance to antiblackness. More than simply proximity, it is the active and dynamic ways blackness is produced and contested and celebrated and lamented as a shared object. It is bodies rubbing against and along bodies. Histories rubbing along and against histories. It is the shared moments of black joy and black mourning (7).

The friction between histories, narratives and archives from Africa and its diaspora, simultaneously creates critical irritation and multifold possibilities of pleasure: “ongoing rubbing, leading, at times to pleasure, and, at other times, to irritation, and even possibly to pain” (5). Such an encounter, founded on friction, should not be viewed negatively. Rather, it should be considered as a potentially productive process that gives social legibility to previously marginalised and under/unrepresented ways of being. This idea can be seen in the chapter that examines Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*. Macharia sets out to imagine queer figures which Fanon was unable to envision in this book. Fanon, in Macharia’s argument, “was too homophobic to be considered a foundational theorist of sexuality” (31). Against such thinking, homosexuality is performed as a metonymy. It is performed in Fanon’s world as images of actions, both failed and realised. These actions include attempted rape and attempts at fellatio. In spite of Fanon’s supposed homophobia, his work is important in that queerness cannot be necessarily imagined without the blackness that he stages through *Black Skin, White Masks*.

The introduction of *Frottage* is fascinating for the way in which Macharia lays sophisticated theoretical ground for the compelling readings that he offers in the four main analytical chapters. The introduction grapples with notions of “thinghood”, kinship, hybridity and movement. The most central of notions is what he terms the “genealogical imperative” (8) or “the structure of blood descent” (8). In rubbing against different histories and archives, Macharia is guided by the need to recover kinship and a genealogical imperative which is embodied in a shared vocabulary that transcends geohistorical differences. Even as there is an attempt to find some sort of common ground, the works of the different writers that Macharia works with do not produce a cohesive or harmonious narrative. They produce, rather, cacophonous voices

that refuse concord. The only unison that is found in the works composing the archive that Macharia deals with is how the individual works all broach different ways of striving towards freedom. The desire to uncover and recover ties of kinship requires a critique of normative familial genealogies. Macharia suggests a move away from the heteropatriarchal imagining of the family especially of the heterosexual couple because “focusing on the heterosexual couple misses how African and Afro-diasporic intimate structures and traditions generate their own forms of normativity and queerness” (10). In this line of thinking, queering the family comprises unsettling the genealogical descent which privileges and offers legibility and visibility to reproductive heteronormativity.

Frottage is an important addition to theoretical work that makes it possible to think about black and queer subjectivities in Africa and the African diaspora. The book’s strength lies in the way it applies the method of frottage in making visible and legible subjectivities that have been rendered illegible and also invisible by heteronormativising power structures and sociocultural processes. Through friction, at once irritating and pleasurable, it is possible to imagine the freedom of black and queer bodies. Such imagining of freedom for queer and black bodies in Africa and its diaspora is important in liberating blackness and queerness from their positions of thinghood as they assume new legibilities and visibilities.

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