# Ontology / Psycho

## ontology

#### Afro-Pessimism fails to understand failure. Transformative revolutions can make new worlds through relational humanisms.

Gordon 17 (Lewis R, Professor of Philosophy @ UConn, “Thoughts on Afropessimism”, Contemporary Political Theory, Volume 17, Issue, 1, pages 105-137, December 7)

I begin with this tale of philosophical abstraction to contextualize Afropessimism. Its main exemplars, such as Jared Sexton and Frank Wilderson III, emerged from academic literary theory, an area dominated by poststructuralism even in many cases that avow ‘‘Marxism.’’ Sexton (2010) and Wilderson (2007) divert from a reductive poststructuralism, however, through examining important existential moves inaugurated, as Daniel McNeil (2011, 2012) observed, by Fanon and his intellectual heirs. The critical question that Afropessimism addresses in this fusion is the viability of posed strategies of Black liberation. (I’m using the capital ‘‘B’’ here to point not only to the racial designation ‘‘black’’ but also to the nationalist one ‘‘Black.’’ Afropessimists often mean both, since blacks and Blacks have a central and centered role in their thought.) The world that produced blacks and in consequence Blacks is, for Afropessimists, a crushing, historical one whose Manichaean divide is sustained contraries best kept segregated. Worse, any effort of mediation leads to confirmed black subordination. Overcoming this requires purging the world of antiblackness. Where cleansing the world is unachievable, an alternative is to disarm the force of antiblack racism. Where whites lack power over blacks, they lose relevance – at least politically and at levels of cultural and racial capital or hegemony. Wilderson (2008), for instance, explores my concept of ‘‘an antiblack world’’ to build similar arguments. Sexton (2011) makes similar moves in his discussions of ‘‘social death.’’ As this forum doesn’t afford space for a long critique, I’ll offer several, non-exhaustive criticisms.

The first is that ‘‘an antiblack world’’ is not identical with ‘‘the world is antiblack.’’ My argument is that such a world is an antiblack racist project. It is not the historical achievement. Its limitations emerge from a basic fact: Black people and other opponents of such a project fought, and continue to fight, as we see today in the #BlackLivesMatter movement and many others, against it. The same argument applies to the argument about social death. Such an achievement would have rendered even these reflections stillborn. The basic premises of the Afropessimistic argument are, then, locked in performative contradictions. Yet, they have rhetorical force. This is evident through the continued growth of its proponents and forums (such as this one) devoted to it.

In Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism, I argued that there are forms of antiblack racism offered under the guise of love, though I was writing about whites who exoticize blacks while offering themselves as white sources of black value. Analyzed in terms of bad faith, where one lies to oneself in an attempt to flee displeasing truths for pleasing falsehoods, exoticists romanticize blacks while affirming white normativity, and thus themselves, as principals of reality. These ironic, performative contradictions are features of all forms of racism, where one group is elevated to godlike status and another is pushed below that of human despite both claiming to be human.

Antiblack racism offers whites self-other relations (necessary for ethics) with each other but not so for groups forced in a ‘‘zone of nonbeing’’ below them. There is asymmetry where whites stand as others who look downward to those who are not their others or their analogues. Antiblack racism is thus not a problem of blacks being ‘‘others.’’ It’s a problem of their not-being-analogical-selves-and-not-even being-others. Fanon, in Black Skin, White Masks (1952), reminds us that Blacks among each other live in a world of selves and others. It is in attempted relations with whites that these problems occur. Reason in such contexts has a bad habit of walking out when Blacks enter. What are Blacks to do? As reason cannot be forced, because that would be ‘‘violence,’’ they must ironically reason reasonably with forms of unreasonable reason. Contradictions loom. Racism is, given these arguments, a project of imposing non-relations as the model of dealing with people designated ‘‘black.’’

In Les Damne´ de la terre (‘‘Damned of the Earth’’), Fanon goes further and argues that colonialism is an attempt to impose a Manichean structure of contraries instead of a dialectical one of ongoing, human negotiation of contradictions. The former segregates the groups; the latter emerges from interaction. The police, he observes, are the mediator in such a situation, as their role is force/violence instead of the human, discursive one of politics and civility (Fanon, 1991). Such societies draw legitimacy from Black non-existence or invisibility. Black appearance, in other words, would be a violation of those systems. Think of the continued blight of police, extra-judicial killings of Blacks in those countries.

An immediate observation of many postcolonies is that antiblack attitudes, practices, and institutions aren’t exclusively white. Black antiblack dispositions make this clear. Black antiblackness entails Black exoticism. Where this exists, Blacks simultaneously receive Black love alongside Black rejection of agency. Many problems follow. The absence of agency bars maturation, which would reinforce the racial logic of Blacks as in effect wards of whites. Without agency, ethics, liberation, maturation, politics, and responsibility could not be possible.

Afropessimism faces the problem of a hidden premise of white agency versus Black incapacity. Proponents of Afropessimism would no doubt respond that the theory itself is a form of agency reminiscent of Fanon’s famous remark that though whites created le Ne`gre it was les Ne`gres who created Ne´gritude. Whites clearly did not create Afropessimism, which Black liberationists should celebrate. We should avoid the fallacy, however, of confusing source with outcome. History is not short of bad ideas from good people. If intrinsically good, however, each person of African descent would become ethically and epistemologically a switching of the Manichean contraries, which means only changing players instead of the game.

We come, then, to the crux of the matter. If the goal of Afropessimism is Afropessimism, its achievement would be attitudinal and, in the language of old, stoic – in short, a symptom of antiblack society. At this point, there are several observations that follow. The first is a diagnosis of the implications of Afropessimism as symptom. The second examines the epistemological implications of Afropessimism. The third is whether a disposition counts as a political act and, if so, is it sufficient for its avowed aims. There are more, but for the sake of brevity, I’ll simply focus on these.

An ironic dimension of pessimism is that it is the other side of optimism. Oddly enough, both are connected to nihilism, which is, as Nietzsche (1968) showed, a decline of values during periods of social decay. It emerges when people no longer want to be responsible for their actions. Optimists expect intervention from beyond. Pessimists declare relief is not forthcoming. Neither takes responsibility for what is valued. The valuing, however, is what leads to the second, epistemic point. The presumption that what is at stake is what can be known to determine what can be done is the problem. If such knowledge were possible, the debate would be about who is reading the evidence correctly. Such judgment would be a priori – that is, prior to events actually unfolding. The future, unlike transcendental conditions such as language, signs, and reality, is, however, ex post facto: It is yet to come. Facing the future, the question isn’t what will be or how do we know what will be but instead the realization that whatever is done will be that on which the future will depend. Rejecting optimism and pessimism, there is a supervening alternative: political commitment.

The appeal to political commitment is not only in stream with what French existentialists call l’intellectuel engage´ (committed intellectual) but also reaches back through the history and existential situation of enslaved, racialized ancestors. Many were, in truth, an existential paradox: commitment to action without guarantees. The slave revolts, micro and macro acts of resistance, escapes, and returns help others do the same; the cultivated instability of plantations and other forms of enslavement, and countless other actions, were waged against a gauntlet of forces designed to eliminate any hope of success. The claim of colonialists and enslavers was that the future belonged to them, not to the enslaved and the indigenous. A result of more than 500 years of conquest and 300 years of enslavement was also a (white) rewriting of history in which African and First Nations’ agency was, at least at the level of scholarship, nearly erased. Yet there was resistance even in that realm, as Africana and First Nation intellectual history and scholarship attest. Such actions set the course for different kinds of struggle today.

Such reflections occasion meditations on the concept of failure. Afropessimism, the existential critique suggests, suffers from a failure to understand failure. Consider Fanon’s notion of constructive failure, where what doesn’t initially work transforms conditions for something new to emerge. To understand this argument, one must rethink the philosophical anthropology at the heart of a specific line of Euromodern thought on what it means to be human. Atomistic and individual substance- based, this model, articulated by Hobbes, Locke, and many others, is of a non-relational being that thinks, acts, and moves along a course in which continued movement depends on not colliding with others. Under that model, the human being is a thing that enters a system that facilitates or obstructs its movement. An alternative model, shared by many groups across southern Africa, is a relational version of the human being as part of a larger system of meaning. Actions, from that perspective, are not about whether ‘‘I’’ succeed but instead about ‘‘our’’ story across time. As relational, it means that each human being is a constant negotiation of ongoing efforts to build relationships with others, which means no one actually enters a situation without establishing new situations of action and meaning. Instead of entering a game, their participation requires a different kind of project – especially where the ‘‘game’’ was premised on their exclusion. Thus, where the system or game repels initial participation, such repulsion is a shift in the grammar of how the system functions, especially its dependence on obsequious subjects. Shifted energy affords emergence of alternatives. Kinds cannot be known before the actions that birthed them.

Abstract as this sounds, it has much historical support. Evelyn Simien (2016), in her insightful political study Historic Firsts, examines the new set of relations established by Shirley Chisholm’s and Jesse Jackson’s presidential campaigns. There could be no Barack Obama without such important predecessors affecting the demographics of voter participation. Simien intentionally focused on the most mainstream example of political life to illustrate this point. Although no exemplar of radicalism, Obama’s ‘‘success’’ emerged from Chisholm and Jackson’s (and many others’) so-called ‘‘failure.’’ Beyond presidential electoral politics, there are numerous examples of how prior, radical so-called ‘‘failures’’ transformed relationships that facilitated other kinds of outcome. The trail goes back to the Haitian Revolution and back to every act of resistance from Nat Turner’s Rebellion in the USA, Sharpe’s in Jamaica, or Tula’s in Curac¸ao and so many other efforts for social transformation to come.

In existential terms, then, many ancestors of the African diaspora embodied what Søren Kierkegaard (1983) calls an existential paradox. All the evidence around them suggested failure and the futility of hope. They first had to make a movement of infinite resignation – that is, resigning themselves to their situation. Yet they must simultaneously act against that situation. Kierkegaard called this seemingly contradictory phenomenon ‘‘faith,’’ but that concept relates more to a relationship with a transcendent, absolute being, which could only be established by a ‘‘leap,’’ as there are no mediations or bridge. Ironically, if Afropessimism appeals to transcendent intervention, it would collapse into faith. If, however, the argument rejects transcendent intervention and focuses on committed political action, of taking responsibility for a future that offers no guarantees, then the movement from infinite resignation becomes existential political action.

At this point, the crucial meditation would be on politics and political action. An attitude of infinite resignation to the world without the leap of committed action would simply be pessimistic or nihilistic. Similarly, an attitude of hope or optimism about the future would lack infinite resignation. We see here the underlying failure of the two approaches. Yet ironically, there is a form of failure at failing in the pessimistic turn versus the optimistic one, since if focused exclusively on resignation as the goal, then the ‘‘act’’ of resignation would have been achieved, which, paradoxically, would be a success; it would be a successful failing of failure. For politics to emerge, however, there are two missing elements in inward pessimistic resignation.

The first is that politics is a social phenomenon, which means it requires the expanding options of a social world. Turning away from the social world, though a statement about politics, is not, however, in and of itself political. The ancients from whom much western political theory or philosophy claimed affinity had a disparaging term for individuals who resigned themselves from political life: idio¯te¯s, a private person, one not concerned with public affairs, in a word – an idiot. I mention western political theory because that is the hegemonic intellectual context of Afropessimism. We don’t, however, have to end our etymological journey in ancient Greek. Extending our linguistic archaeology back a few thousand years, we could examine the Middle Kingdom Egyptian word idi (deaf). The presumption, later taken on by the ancient Athenians and Macedonians, was that a lack of hearing entailed isolation, at least in terms of audio speech. The contemporary inward resignation of seeking a form of purity from the loathsome historical reality of racial oppression, in this reading, collapses ultimately into a form of moralism (private, normative satisfaction) instead of public responsibility born of and borne by action.

The second is the importance of power. Politics makes no sense without it. But what is power? Eurocentric etymology points to the Latin word potis as its source, from which came the word ‘‘potent’’ as in an omnipotent god. If we again look back further, we will notice the Middle Kingdom (2000 BCE–1700 BCE) KMT/ Egyptian word pHty, which refers to godlike strength. Yet for those ancient Northeast Africans, even the gods’ abilities came from a source: In the Coffin Texts, HqAw or heka activates the ka (sometimes translated as soul, spirit, or, in a word, ‘‘magic’’), which makes reality. All this amounts to a straightforward thesis on power as the ability with the means to make things happen.

There is an alchemical quality to power. The human world, premised on symbolic communication, brings many forms of meaning into being, and those new meanings afford relationships that build institutions through a world of culture, a phenomenon that Freud (1989) rightly described as ‘‘a prosthetic god.’’ It is godlike because it addresses what humanity historically sought from the gods: protection from the elements, physical maledictions, and social forms of misery. Such power clearly can be abused. It is where those enabling capacities (empowerment) are pushed to the wayside in the hording of social resources into propping up some people as gods that the legitimating practices of cultural cum political institution decline and stimulate pessimism and nihilism. That institutions in the Americas very rarely attempt establishing positive relations to Blacks is the subtext of Afropessimism and this entire meditation.

The discussion points, however, to a demand for political commitment. Politics itself emerges under different names throughout the history of our species, but the one occasioning the word ‘‘politics’’ is from the Greek polis, which refers to ancient Hellenic city-states. It identifies specific kinds of activities conducted inside the city-state, where order necessitated the resolution of conflicts through rules of discourse the violation of which could lead to (civil) war, a breaking down of relations appropriate for ‘‘outsiders.’’ Returning to the Fanonian observation of selves and others, it is clear that imposed limitations on certain groups amounts to impeding or blocking the option of politics. Yet, as a problem occurring within the polity, the problem short of war becomes a political one.

Returning to Afropessimistic challenges, the question becomes this: If the problem of antiblack racism is conceded as political, where antiblack institutions of power have, as their project, the impeding of Black power, which in effect requires barring Black access to political institutions, then antiblack societies are ultimately threats also to politics defined as the human negotiation of the expansion of human capabilities or more to the point: freedom.

Anti-politics is one of the reasons why societies in which antiblack racism is hegemonic are also those in which racial moralizing dominates: moralizing stops at individuals at the expense of addressing institutions the transformation of which would make immoral individuals irrelevant. As a political problem, it demands a political solution. It is not accidental that Blacks continue to be the continued exemplars of unrealized freedom. As so many from Ida B. Wells-Barnett to Angela Davis (2003) and Michelle Alexander (2010) have shown, the expansion of privatization and incarceration is squarely placed in a structure of states and civil societies premised on the limitations of freedom (Blacks) – ironically, as seen in countries such as South Africa and the United States, in the name of freedom.

That power is a facilitating or enabling phenomenon, a functional element of the human world, a viable response must be the establishing of relations that reach beyond the singularity of the body. I bring this up because proponents of Afropessimism might object to this analysis because of its appeal to a human world. If that world is abrogated, the site of struggle becomes that which is patently not human. It is not accidental that popular race discourse refers today to ‘‘black bodies,’’ for instance, instead of ‘‘black people.’’ As the human world is discursive, social, and relational, this abandonment amounts to an appeal to the non-relational, the incommunicability of singularity, and appeals to the body and its reach. At that point, it’s perhaps the psychologist, psychiatrist, or psychoanalyst who would be helpful, as turning radically inward offers the promise of despair, narcissistic delusions of godliness, and, as Fanon also observed, madness. Even if that slippery slope were rejected, the performative contradiction of attempting to communicate such singularity or absence thereof requires, at least for consistency, the appropriate course of action: silence.

#### **Ontology is contradictory, self-aggrandizing, and devolves into anti-political moralizing – it ignores institutional engagement which is a better way to engage anti-black racism.**

Gordon 21 – Professor of Philosophy and Department Chair at University of Connecticut, PhD in Philosophy at Yale, founder of the Center for Afro-Jewish Studies, Honorary Professor in the Unit for the Humanities at Rhodes University, South Africa; Chairperson of the American Philosophical Association Committee on Public Philosophy; and Chairperson of the Awards Committee and Global Collaborations for the Caribbean Philosophical Association, of which he was the organization’s first president [Lewis, Freedom, Justice and Decolonization, Chapter 5: Thoughts on Afropessimism, Copyright Year 2021]

At this point, the crucial meditation would be on politics and political action. An attitude of infinite resignation to the world without the leap of committed action would simply be pessimistic or nihilistic. Similarly, an attitude of hope or optimism about the future would lack infinite resignation. We see here the underlying failure of the two approaches. Yet ironically, there is a form of failure at failing in the pessimistic turn versus the optimistic one, since if focused exclusively on resignation as the goal, then the “act” of resignation would have been achieved, which, paradoxically, would be a success; it would be a successful failing of failure. For politics to emerge, there are two missing elements in inward pessimistic resignation to consider.

The first is that politics is a social phenomenon, which means it requires the expanding options of a social world. It must transcend the self. Turning away from the social world, though a statement about politics, is not in and of itself political. As we have seen, the ancients from whom much Western political theory or philosophy claimed affinity had a disparaging term for an individual resigned from political life—namely, idiōtēs, a private person, one not concerned with public affairs, in English: an idiot. I mention “Western political theory” because that is the hegemonic intellectual context of Afropessimism; I have not come across Afropessimistic writings on thought outside of that framework. We do not have to end our etymological journey in ancient Greek. Recall that extending our linguistic archaeology back a few thousand years we could examine the Middle Kingdom (2000 BCE–1700 BCE) of Kmt’s Mdw Ntr word idi (deaf). The presumption, later taken on by the ancient Athenians and other Greek-speaking peoples, was that a lack of hearing entailed isolation, at least in terms of audio speech. The contemporary inward resignation of seeking a form of purity from the loathsome historical reality of racial oppression, in this reading, retreats ultimately into a form of moralism (private, normative satisfaction) instead of public responsibility born of and borne by action. The nonbeing to which Afropessimists refer is also a form of inaudibility.

The second is the importance of power. Politics makes no sense without it. As we have seen throughout our earlier reflections on power, Eurocentric etymology points to the Latin word potis as its source, from which came the word “potent” as in an omnipotent god. If we again look back farther, we will notice the Middle Kingdom Mdw Ntr word pHty, which refers to godlike strength. Yet for those ancient Northeast Africans, even the gods’ abilities came from a source. In the Coffin Texts, HqAw or heka activates the ka (sometimes, as we have seen, translated as soul, spirit, womb, or “magic”), which makes reality.20 All this amounts to a straightforward thesis on power as the ability with the means to make things happen.

There is an alchemical quality of power. The human world, premised on symbolic communication, brings many forms of meaning into being, and those new meanings afford relationships that build institutions through a world of culture, a phenomenon that Freud, we should recall, rightly described as “a prosthetic god.” It is godlike because it addresses what humanity historically sought from the gods—protection from the elements, physical maledictions, and social forms of misery. Such power clearly can be abused. It is where those enabling capacities (empowerment) are pushed to the wayside in the hording of social resources into propping up some people as gods that the legitimating practices of cultural cum political institutions decline and stimulate pessimism and nihilism. The institutions in Abya Yala and in Northern countries, such as the United States and Canada, very rarely attempt to establish positive relations to blacks, and Blacks the subtext of Afropessimism and this entire meditation.

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The remaining question for Afropessimism, especially those who are primarily academics, becomes this: Why write?

It is a question for which, in both existential and political terms, I do not see how an answer could be given from an Afropessimistic perspective without the unfortunate revelation of cynicism. The marketability of Afropessimists in predominantly white institutions—perhaps as an exotic phenomenon that affirms white standpoints as ontological sites of legitimacy—is no doubt in the immediate and paradoxical satisfaction in dissatisfaction it offers. Indeed, if Afropessimists were correct, their only solace would be in black institutions, but that, too, would pose a problem since the argument is that such institutions lack agency because, as black, they are absent. This is not to say that critical black and Black thinkers should not do their work in predominantly white spaces. It is simply that the argument of the impossibility of their doing so makes their location in such places patently contradictory. We are at this point on familiar terrain. As with ancient logical paradoxes denying the viability of time and motion, the best option, after a moment of immobilized reflection, is, eventually, to move on, even where the pause is itself significant as an encomium of thought.

#### Social death theory is wrong---conflates the oppressors’ view with the truth of black of existence, which re-centers the slave owner’s perspective and prevents struggles for re-humanization

George Lipsitz 17. Professor of Black Studies and Sociology at the University of California, Santa Barbara. 2017. “What is this Black in the Black Radical Tradition?” in Futures of Black Radicalism, ed. by Johnson and Lubin, 2017. p. 108-110.

Three miracles seem to characterize the history of Black people in the United States. The very survival of Black people in the face of murderous brutality and genocidal intent qualifies as a miracle. The enduring reality of Black humanity in a society that has used every means at its disposal to destroy Black dignity and deny Black people the opportunity to exercise their full humanity appears miraculous. The historical record of democratic aspiration and achievement by Black people, of creating democratic opportunities for themselves and extending them to others, seems to defy normal rational explanations. Despite the social death at the center of the slave system and the organized abandonments of today's neoliberal capitalism, despite beatings, lynchings, shootings, mass incarceration and systematic impoverishment, Black people have survived and thrived. In slavery, African people in the Americas owned virtually nothing, not even the skin on their backs. They had every reason to give in to despair. Yet they somehow managed to survive, to extend recognition and respect to each other while in bondage, and to maintain a commitment to the linked fate of all humans. Time and time again, Black people have countered vicious dehumanization with determined and successful re-humanization. Insisting on their own humanity and the humanity of all people, even that of their oppressors, they have been at the forefront of what Dr. King called “the bitter but beautiful struggle” for a more just and better world. From the egalitarian politics of abolition democracy in the wake of the Civil War and the participatory democracy of the civil rights movement to the contemporary insurgencies waged under the banners of #BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName, struggles for Black survival and Black humanity have repeatedly linked the termination of existing racist policies to the creation of new democratic practices and institutions. Forced to cope with the nadir of political evil over centuries, Black people have responded consistently by forging advanced concepts of a deeply politicized love. Perhaps precisely because brutality and oppression can make people decidedly unlovable, African people in America have been adept at finding ways to perceive something left to love inside themselves and in others. That ability has enabled their survival, the preservation of their humanity, and their emergence as the nation's foremost champions of democracy and social justice. The people who were systematically denied access to the fruits and benefits of democratic citizenship and social membership turned out to be the people who valued democracy the most and who did the most to extend it to others. [END PAGE 108] Cedric Robinson has demonstrated that the three miracles were not really miracles at all, but rather products of a collective intelligence developed over generations of struggle. In Black Marxism, Robinson defines the Black Radical Tradition as “the continuing development of a collective consciousness informed by the historical struggles for liberation and motivated by the shared sense of obligation to preserve the collective being, the ontological totality.”1 Thus in many ways, the greatest achievement of the Black community was itself, its emergence as an aggrieved and insurgent polity committed to social justice. The “Black” in the Black Radical Tradition is a politics rather than a pigment, a culture rather than a color. Yet this Blackness does not presume a unified homogenous community with only one set of interests, needs, and desires. On the contrary, Robinson's research reveals that the key building blocks for Black survival, Black humanity, and Black democracy came from the lower rungs of Black society, from the plantations and slave quarters, out of the contradictions of the rural regimes of slavery and debt peonage and the living conditions in ghettos of northern and western cities. Experience taught the Black poor and the Black working class that racial capitalism entailed “an unacceptable standard of human conduct”2 that they needed to counter with a politics that was “inventive rather than imitative, communitarian rather than individualistic, democratic rather than republican, Afro-Christian rather than secular and materialist.”3 Robinson's emphasis on political struggle as the main explanation for Black survival, humanity, and democracy reminds us not to confuse the grandiose aspirations and illusions of the powerful with the actual lived experiences of those they control. Slavery did mandate legally and militarily supported social death, but slaves worked assiduously and effectively each day, every day, each year, and every year to create a rich social life.4 As Robinson argues, “Slavery gave the lie to its own conceit: one could not create a perfect system of oppression and exploitation.”5 Domination produces resistance, and resistance plants the seeds of a new society within the shell of the old. As Robinson explains in Black Movements in America, "The resistances to slavery were the [END PAGE 109] principal grounds for the radically alternative political culture that coalesced in the Black communities of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the era of revolutionary, liberal and nationalist impulses among Europeans in North America.” 6 Declaring Blacks to be less than human could not make them so, even in the eyes of their oppressors. Research by John Blassingame, George Rawick, Sterling Stuckey, Herbert Gutman, and Stephanie Camp (among others) reveals how slaves fused African retention and New World invention to forge a culture that affirmed their humanity and the humanity of others.7 They recognized this common humanity through multicultural, multiracial alliances with poor whites and others in maroon communities. 8 In colonial Louisiana, Blacks reached out to Native Americans for help in resisting slavery.9 Slave owners, however, were less successful in preserving their own humanity. In order to maintain the illusion of complete control, they tortured, whipped, hanged, burned, and dismembered their "property" when it displayed signs of having human will.10 Black people witnessed white people's inhumanity and pitied them. As early as the 1820s, David Walker argued that while whites lost the moral capacity to perceive the evil they enacted, they nonetheless knew "in their hearts" that Blacks were human. He argued that it was precisely this recognition that propelled their cruelty and brutality: they presumed that Blacks resented them and, if given the opportunity, would do to whites what whites had done to Blacks.11 In his history of the New Orleans slave market, Walter Johnson notes a similar loss of humanity among slave owners. Whites invested more than money in the slave system; they looked to it to elevate them beyond the status of ordinary mortals and became outraged when their chattel refused to conform to the roles they had been assigned. Johnson notes: The greater the transformative hopes slaveholders took with them to the slave market, the more violent their reactions to the inevitable disappointment of their efforts to get real slaves to act like imagined ones ... If they had to, they would use brutality to close the distance between the roles they imagined for themselves and the failings of the slaves they bought as props for their performance. 12 [END PAGE 110]

#### Their ontological and libidinal readings of blackness are inaccurate and undermine liberation---a history of black resistance disproves the rigidity of it as a metaphysical category.

Stephens 17. (R. L. Stephens is the A. Philip Randolph Fellow at Jacobin. Between the Black Body and Me. May 31, 2015. https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/05/ta-nehisi-coates-racism-afro-pessimism-reparations-class-struggle)

Liza Bramlett was a slave. She lived on a cotton plantation in the Mississippi Delta during the nineteenth century. White men raped her repeatedly throughout her life. They traded her body amongst themselves in exchange for calves and piglets. In the end, Liza gave birth to twenty-three children, twenty of whom were conceived by rape. One of Liza’s daughters, Ella Townsend, was born after emancipation, but remained in the bondage of sharecropping in rural Mississippi. As an adult, she carried a pistol with her in the fields, determined to protect herself and the surrounding children. One day, a white man on horseback rode into the fields. He had come to abduct a young black girl. Ella, carrying her pistol in a lunch pail, intervened. “You don’t have no black children and you’re not going to beat no black children,” she told the intruder. “If you step down off that horse, I’ll go to Hell and back with you before Hell can scorch a feather.” “I do not believe that we can stop them … because they must ultimately stop themselves,” Ta-Nehisi Coates says of white racists in the final paragraph of his bestseller Between the World and Me, written as an open letter to his son. Coates describes racism as galactic, a physical law of the universe, “a tenacious gravity” and a “cosmic injustice.” When a cop kills a black man, the police officer is “a force of nature, the helpless agent of our world’s physical laws.” Society is equally helpless against the natural order. “The earthquake cannot be subpoenaed,” says Coates. In a widely replicated gesture, Coates locates the experience of racism in the body, in a racism that “dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth.” In the slim volume, fewer than two hundred pages, the word “body” or “bodies” appears more than three hundred times. “In America,” he writes, “it is traditional to destroy the black body.” Another brooding passage dwells on the inevitability of this violence. It had to be blood. It had to be nails driven through a tongue and ears pruned away. It had to be the thrashing of a kitchen maid for the crime of churning the butter at a leisurely clip. It could only be the employment of carriage whips, tongs, iron pokers, handsaws, stones, paperweights or whatever might be handy to break the black body. Yet Coates’s descriptive language and haunting narrative are not mere metaphors. They act as a kind of ontological pivot, mystifying racism even as it is anchored in its physical effects. Metaphor has long been used to capture racism’s almost unimaginable brutality. Lynching became “strange fruit” in Abel Meerpool’s song, made famous by Billie Holiday. In a wry, tragic innuendo, rape was referred to in Black communities as “nighttime integration.” The use of metaphor is not in itself an obfuscation. But Coates wields metaphor to obscure rather than illuminate the reality of racism. What we find all too often in Coates’s narrative universe are bodies without life and a racism without people. To give race an ontological meaning, to make it a reality all its own, is to drain it of its place in history and its roots in discrete human action. To deny the role of life and people — of politics — as Coates does is to also foreclose the possibility of liberation. No Helpless Agent Ella knew her mother Liza’s unimaginable suffering, but her memory was not a yoke on her shoulders. It provoked something in Ella. As an adult, she did not see the white predator stalking the fields as some helpless agent. She took matters into her own hands. There was no gravity strong enough to break her will or loosen her grip on her pistol. Her efforts rippled beyond those cotton fields. Ella taught her own daughter, Fannie Lou Hamer, not only to struggle, but to resist. Fannie Lou was born into a sharecropping family in rural Mississippi but would go on to become a beacon of the Civil Rights movement. She is best known for her work registering black voters in Mississippi, most famously during 1964’s Freedom Summer, at great personal risk. Police arrested and beat her. White racists shot at her. Lyndon Johnson dismissed her as an illiterate. In 1973, an interviewer asked her, “Do you have faith that the system will ever work properly?” By then, Fannie Lou had seen a decade of setbacks and false dawns since first walking off her plantation in 1962 to fight for Civil Rights. She responded, We have to make it work. Ain’t nothing going to be handed to you on a silver platter. That’s not just black people, that’s people in general, masses. See, I’m with the masses… You’ve got to fight. Every step of the way you’ve got to fight**.** She marched. She sang freedom songs. She testified. She co-founded the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. For her, the logical solution was political: uniting a powerless many against a powerful few. White racists could be stopped. Black people could resist, and Fannie Lou and so many others did just that. Fannie Lou knew that the wages of racism were measured on the body. “A black woman’s body was never hers alone,” she once remarked. White doctors sterilized her without her consent during a minor surgery, a barbaric intrusion so common she called it a “Mississippi appendectomy.” However, though she knew racism’s physical toll, she drew inspiration from stories of black resistance passed down orally across the generations. Hamer recalled her grandmother’s will to survive and her mother’s weapon of protection. These intergenerational resistance narratives, according to Charles Cobb in his book This Nonviolent Stuff’ll Get You Killed, “underlay a deep and powerful collective memory that was invisible to whites but greatly affected the shape and course of the modern Freedom Movement.” As a result, Fannie Lou and so many others possessed an intimate knowledge not only of their own human dignity, despite the racist brutality they endured, but also of the human frailty of their racial oppressors. In the years before Fannie Lou’s political struggle began, whole communities, black women and men, rose up against the violence that was forced on black women’s bodies. Feminist historian Danielle McGuire argues this anti-rape community organizing in Alabama laid the foundation for what eventually became the Montgomery Bus Boycott. She observes, “The majority of leaders active in the Montgomery Improvement Association in 1955 cut their political teeth demanding justice for black women who were raped in the 1940s and early 1950s.” Despite being a poor, black sharecropper drowning in the poverty and racial terror endemic to rural Mississippi, Fannie Lou held fast to her forbearers’ stories of resistance. She did not resign herself to fatalism, as Coates does. The "Birthmark of Damnation" Coates too takes a multigenerational view. Between the World and Me is framed as a letter to his son. However, rather than seeing a legacy of resistance, he finds a lineage of blackness defined by fear and dysfunction. “When I was your age the only people I knew were black, and all of them were powerfully, adamantly, dangerously afraid,” he writes. “I felt the fear in the visits to my Nana’s home in Philadelphia,” Coates continues. “And I saw it in my own father.” My father was so very afraid. I felt it in the sting of his black leather belt, which he applied with more anxiety than anger, my father who beat me as if someone might steal me away, because that is exactly what was happening all around us. Coates describes his condition, and that of all black people, as a “birthmark of damnation.” The resistance stories passed down to Fannie Lou and so many others spurred them to march. Coates’s narrative, riddled with fear and futility, begs us to retreat. Though Coates has never explicitly cited it as his theoretical framework, the dour outlook of his work evokes the themes of Afro-Pessimism. The pivot to the ontological that is apparent in Coates’s rhetoric is a hallmark of Afro-Pessimism. “Ontology by definition is the study of being, and to speak of Blackness as an ontological condition means analyzing the state of Black bodies through the lens of slavery,” Afro-Pessimist scholar Michael Barlow, Jr., writes in the academic journal Inquiries. However, for Barlow, the relation of slavery that ontologically defines blackness is not a matter of political economy, but rather a “libidinal economy.” In this telling, labor and ownership — that is, political economy — are merely incidental to racial slavery. Instead, it’s the white imagination and its depraved “metaphysical desires for Black flesh” that both predated and catalyzed racialized chattel slavery. Racism is reduced to the spiritual, more a matter of a sinful nature than a political struggle. Coates has echoed this retreat to interiority, to the spiritual, to consciousness. It’s the ontological pivot that leads Frank Wilderson, perhaps the world’s foremost Afro-Pessimist, to declare in his foundational text “Gramsci’s Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?” that black people are no more than cows in a slaughterhouse. Wilderson posits that “death of the black body is foundational to the life of American civil society,” just as a cow’s death is essential to the slaughterhouse. Flippantly, Wilderson asks, “how would the cows fare under a dictatorship of the proletariat?” Coates adopts a similar sense of impotence. He characterizes struggle as aimless toil — an apolitical end in itself. “The struggle is really all I have for you,” he tells his son, “because it is the only portion of this world under your control.” Yet how are we to struggle against earthquakes and physical laws? How can we fight gravity? Both Coates and Wilderson speak of power in terms of dreams. Coates writes of monolithic white “Dreamers,” those whose investment in the American Dream requires a faith in their own whiteness. Similarly, Wilderson sees America as enacting two distinct dreams. For Wilderson, “the dream of black accumulation and death” is separate from “the dream of worker exploitation.” Ultimately, in both Coates’s and Wilderson’s respective frameworks, solidarity is unimaginable and class struggle is rendered futile. Though Coates does not go to the lengths Wilderson does to position himself in opposition to materialist politics, the result is effectively equivalent: a separation of race and class combined with a deep skepticism of class-based solidarity, reforms, or even revolution. This is a turn away from the Freedom Tradition embodied by Fannie Lou Hamer. For her, the problem of racism wasn’t cosmology or ontology — it was an expression of politics implicated in class antagonism. Fannie Lou Hamer stood “with the masses,” both white and black. Solidarity through struggle from below, including class struggle, formed her path to victory. Coates’s ontological pivot is more muddled than Wilderson’s. Fleetingly peppered throughout his work are allusions to material reality, betraying the imposition of metaphysical abstraction that ultimately drives his perspective. “We did not choose our fences,” he writes. “They were imposed on us by Virginia planters obsessed with enslaving as many Americans as possible.” Coates knows that Virginia planters did not invent gravity or earthquakes. Yet this historicizing impulse does not prevent him from essentializing racism when he confronts it head on. In string of tweets from December 2016, Coates conceded that racism is not transcendental, noting that “at its very root it was always economic.” But acknowledging racism’s economic impact has not led him to embrace class struggle. Even Frank Wilderson can acknowledge that racism has an economic impact, but he still believes that class struggle and racism exist on distinct planes. Coates holds a similar belief; that racism is wholly different in kind from class. In the same series of tweets, he concluded that “in America, ‘class’ isn’t the only kind of class.” Just as he mystifies racism, even while locating its impact in the bodies of black people, here he again pivots. Coates cannot address material politics on its own terms, preferring instead to retreat to a contrived mystification. He replaces action with interiority. As he recently told an auditorium of eager Northwestern students, “The process should not be… people looking out at the world and saying, ‘I would like for there to be change in the world, how do I do that?’” Instead, he implored the crowd to engage from the “inside-out, not outside-in… because if you are in the business of justice, and making this society more democratic, you might get a lot of disappointment.” Consciousness matters, of course. “Baby you just got to love ’em,” Fannie Lou Hamer would say of the white segregationists who routinely threatened her life. “Hating just makes you sick and weak.” This was Hamer in a reflexive moment, but it was no retreat. In the very next breath, she warned, “I keep a shotgun in every corner of my bedroom and the first cracker even look like he wants to throw some dynamite on my porch won’t write his mama again.” Fannie Lou truly was her mother’s daughter. Reflection, whether through intergenerational story or her own thoughts, enhanced her resistance. The same cannot be said of Coates. Instead of finding relief in political action, Coates finds it in a cookout at Howard University’s homecoming, surrounded by black people. He fantasizes that he is “disappearing into all of their bodies,” as the music and dancing, the black cultural zeitgeist of the moment, cure him of the “birthmark of damnation.” The curse is lifted. Blackness is transfigured, becoming a space “beyond the Dream.” It’s another ontological pivot, this time allowing Coates to conclude that The Mecca’s” — his term for Howard — cookout has a “power more gorgeous than any voting rights bill.” It’s a fantasy of retreat, as if black culture were beyond the machinations of capitalism, as though black cultural expression existed in the world but was not of it and were enough to take us to a new one. Between the World and Me concludes with Coates considering climate change. He sees climate change as a manifestation of a polluted white consciousness, rather than the unfettered excess of industrial capitalism. It is a “noose around the neck of the earth,” allegedly resulting in large part from white flight, the mid-century exodus of negrophobic white families to the suburbs and the pollution caused by the cars that took them there. Coates’s words here are poetic but grossly inaccurate. They mimic Afro-Pessimism’s emphasis on the white libido, relegating his rhetoric to the realm of interior life, the souls of white folks, and stopping well short of the politicaldomain. For Coates, the Civil Rights movement was not a struggle to alter a material world; rather the “hope of the movement” was merely to “awaken the Dreamers.” Black politics is only relevant as far as it can arouse white consciousness, which he sees as a largely futile exercise, due to “the small chance of the Dreamers coming into consciousness.” Coates sees common interest between the black elite and the black poor, as he marvels at “the entire diaspora,” from lawyers to street hustlers, present at Howard’s homecoming. Yet he cannot conceive of anti-capitalist class solidarity across racial identity. He has a darker vision, of a kind that Corey Robin has described as “apocalypticism.” Coates’s ultimate hope is not in collective human action, but rather the total annihilation of the world and all those living in it— another feature that unites him with Afro-Pessimism, which calls explicitly for the “end of the world.” As he says of the Dreamers, “the field for their Dream, the stage where they have painted themselves white, is the deathbed of us all.” Paradoxically, though he can see a collective fate in apocalypse, he rejects shared struggle for liberation. “The Dreamers will have to learn to struggle themselves,” he declares. The problem is, the whole of capitalist enterprise, both past and present, cannot be reduced to race as Original Sin. Left out of Coates’s mythology is the fact that colonial enterprise, in what would become the United States, relied first on European indentured servants, most of whom died within a handful of years after arriving on the continent. It’s Coates’s reading of race as sin that pushes him to imagine a perverted form of salvation in the fantasy of apocalypse. In this racial fatalism, reparations for slavery emerges as the anticipation of the inevitable Judgement Day. It is therefore no surprise that Coates has taken up racial reparations as his cross to bear — not to change the world, but to condemn it.

#### Their ontological and libidinal readings of blackness are inaccurate and undermine liberation---a history of black resistance disproves the rigidity of it as a metaphysical category.

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In a widely replicated gesture, Coates locates the experience of racism in the body, in a racism that “dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth.” In the slim volume, fewer than two hundred pages, the word “body” or “bodies” appears more than three hundred times. “In America,” he writes, “it is traditional to destroy the black body.” Another brooding passage dwells on the inevitability of this violence. It had to be blood. It had to be nails driven through a tongue and ears pruned away. It had to be the thrashing of a kitchen maid for the crime of churning the butter at a leisurely clip. It could only be the employment of carriage whips, tongs, iron pokers, handsaws, stones, paperweights or whatever might be handy to break the black body. Yet Coates’s descriptive language and haunting narrative are not mere metaphors. They act as a kind of ontological pivot, mystifying racism even as it is anchored in its physical effects. 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#### Refuse ontology frames---Black isn’t coterminous with Slave but is an agent of a shared history of humanity---ceding democratic ideals to slaves is inaccurate, racially paternalistic, and zeroes pragmatic harms reduction

McCarthy 20 (Jesse McCarthy is an assistant professor in the departments of English and of African and African American Studies at Harvard University. “On Afropessimism.” <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/on-afropessimism/> //shree)

Nonetheless, the fact that the main current of Afropessimist thinking runs counter to all of Black political history and tradition thus far; the fact that the foundational thinker for this perspective, Frantz Fanon, came to completely opposing conclusions with respect to the nature of politics and solidarity in struggle; the fact that the theory often appears to evade scrutiny or contestation by proclaiming itself “meta-theoretical” and “ontological”; the fact that it asserts a “mandate” for which no empirical evidence is provided and in the face of overwhelming evidence that it constitutes at best a minoritarian and class-specific position — all of this has to be reckoned with by those who want to take Afropessimism to heart.

Perhaps it’s worth reminding ourselves that when he was murdered, Fred Hampton was encouraging poor whites to analogize their position to that of poor Blacks. At the time of his assassination, Malcolm X was embracing and actively seeking to incorporate a cross-racial coalition into his new organization. Ella Baker actively encouraged the deepening of organizational ties and activist links across different communities by emphasizing common struggle and common oppression. What evidence do we have, on the other hand, that the power behind the status quo is quaking at the thought of Black folk gathering in isolation to mourn the end of the world?

If the challenge is more narrowly intellectual and what is needed are correctives to white Marxist hubris, Cedric Robinson’s Black Marxism (1983) already exists. Black feminist thought offers its own counternarratives. Of course, Wilderson doesn’t have to agree with Robinson or the Combahee River Collective. But isn’t it a problem that they aren’t cited even once in his books? Are we to jettison our entire tradition? Were all those who came before us so hopelessly naïve? Are we going to cast aside Vincent Harding’s There Is a River and read nothing but Fanon, Lacan, and Heidegger? Is Bantu philosophy overdetermined by social death even if its worldview was constructed in the absence of the white gaze? Afropessimism has yet to tackle these questions, to take its opponent’s counterarguments and positions seriously.

David Marriott, who is cited by Wilderson as a fellow Afropessimist, asks in his own work: whither Fanon? I wonder this, too. Wilderson says he is the figure he modeled himself on as a young man. Clearly Fanon is central to all of his thinking; indeed, all Afropessimist theorists consider Black Skin, White Masks (1952) a cornerstone text. It is an extraordinary philosophical work, and they are right that it is too often underappreciated. But it is also an extremely complicated intellectual experiment. The third sentence of that book is: “I’m not the bearer of absolute truths.” Fanon proposes to work through the problem of the abjection of Blackness, and that process extends beyond the book into the engaged existentialist revolt and the analysis of colonial relations that he explicitly argues involves the colonized subject, regardless of their race, in The Wretched of the Earth (1961). But even if one were to read only Black Skin, White Masks, it is impossible to miss the humanist assumptions that it opens onto in its conclusion. What else can one make of Fanon stating that “I am not a slave to slavery that dehumanized my ancestors,” and that “the density of History determines none of my acts. I am my own foundation”? How can one miss the assumption of a shareable humanity when he insists that “at the end of this book we would like the reader to feel with us the open dimension of every consciousness.” How can Fanon’s trajectory into the Algerian War of Independence be reconciled with the null trajectories that Afropessimism proposes?

If Afropessimism pushes us to pose harder and sharper questions as Fanon prayed his Black body always would, if it serves to break the shallow cant of the media class and its operatives — then certainly it will have done some good. But on the terms of its own presiding genius it needs to be understood as a waystation and not a terminus on the road to disalienation that Fanon argued is the only path to freedom for Black people in the modern world. That path, which he described in terms of building a “new man,” required him to first understand the depth of abjection that Blackness had been cast into, and then to undo that abjection by mobilizing its ejection from the political order of the West in a grand historical struggle to reconstruct that civilization from the side of the oppressed, an embrace that clearly involves a radical solidarity with non-Black people. This was the mission Fanon was on when he died, and it was a mission he believed Black peoples would have a special, indeed, foundational role in ultimately seeing through.

Realizing these goals does not mean adhering to a formulaic principle or that Black people need to think, act, or speak as a monolith. Fanon and Wilderson are both fond of citing Aimé Césaire’s phrase about “the end of the world” from his poem Notebook of a Return to the Native Land:

One must begin somewhere.

Begin what?

The only thing in the world worth beginning:

The End of the world of course.

These lines do not appear at the end of the poem, however, but roughly halfway through it. The interjection, “of course,” stands in here for the French word “parbleu,” which, even in the late 1930s when Césaire was composing his poem in Paris, carried a folksy and bathetic ring that is only dimly captured in the English but is easier to hear if you imagine these lines as having strayed from a play by Samuel Beckett. Wilderson intones this phrase repeatedly in his book, wielding it like a totemic hammer portending world-destroying events that, in light of the commitments of his own theory, seem to suggest, and possibly wish for, a zero-sum war between the races. But Césaire’s usage is far more ambivalent and ironic, the cry of a man whose revolutionary action must first and foremost be directed inwardly toward a poetic reconstruction of the self, a liberation that requires a self-determined and self-realizing pursuit of truth.

Fanon admired and respected no other intellectual more than Césaire. We know from his letters to his French publisher François Maspero that he imagined his writings as adressed, in no small part, to and for him. The idiosyncratic prose style of Black Skin, White Masks is Fanon’s way of signifying upon a correspondence with Césaire’s poetics. Both writers are acutely aware that the Black thinker is poised precariously between the poles of reflection and action. But both are committed to a humanistic pursuit of truth and both believe in the promise of a radiant Blackness whose time is not yet come. This is why, even as the Algerian War raged around him, Fanon continued his psychiatric research, convinced that understanding the traumas of war and torture would be necessary for healing the postrevolutionary body politic. He wrote for the present and for the future in pursuit of an understanding of himself and of human nature, and for the cause of a political independence and freedom that he hoped would set the entire African continent on a new course. Had he lived, he would have persevered until every colonialist regime from Algiers to Cape Town (the title he had in mind for his last book was Alger-Le Cap) had been driven off the continent. Fanon was no pessimist: true revolutionaries never are.

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But must we revolve around Fanon in the first place? Today many activists are more inspired by Fannie Lou Hamer. The US context has its own problems that Fanon only barely understood and addressed. Why not return instead, in this hour of national contestation, to a figure like David Walker and his Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World; But in Particular and Very Expressly to those of the United States of America from 1829? We still underappreciate the importance of this text, one of the seminal documents that captures the first great Black intellectual debate in the United States, which was an argument over whether or not we ought to stay in the country at all. Walker believed we should, and he was the first to define and defend the monumental implications of that choice. He attacked the mighty lobby of the American Colonization Society, which included the powerful senator Henry Clay, Abraham Lincoln, and many leading Black intellectuals of the day, who were convinced full equality for Blacks in America was neither possible nor desirable and advocated emigration. Their plans revolved around evacuating the Black population to the Pepper Coast, now the country of Liberia, which emerged from colonial schemes like “Mississippi-in-Africa” that the American Colonization Society founded in the 1830s.

We could have abandoned the country. History could have taken a very different course. American slaves could have returned to Africa and the United States could have become a white ethno-state, a second Europe. The 1820s and ’30s were the last possible moment of undoing or preventing the existence of a Black America. But Black American intellectuals made the choice to stay — to hold this ground and make something new here that the world had never seen. As the political scientist Melvin Rogers points out, Walker’s Appeal not only staked this argument in terms of a principled Black nationalist claim based on the enormous sacrifice of “blood and tears” in slavery; the rhetorical address of the text was also intended to awaken Black Americans to their own potential as a nationally self-consciously political community with a global outlook. “[F]or [Walker],” Rogers writes, “African Americans did not need a prophet to whom they should blindly defer. Rather they needed a community willing to confront practices of domination, capable of responding to their grievances, and susceptible to transcending America’s narrow ethical and political horizon.”

Wilderson’s Afropessimism insists that we are still slaves. Walker insisted in 1829 that the slaves are (and were even then) “colored citizens” of the United States and of the world. That if we are oppressed it is only because we are ignorant of our true strength, because we have been taught to disbelieve and disavow our worth to the world, to the nation, and to each other. Which of these two views is the correct one? I think the historical record and the present state of our politics tells us all we need to know on that score. For it is no coincidence that today it is Black Americans who are once again trying to save the country, to invest in finishing the work of making this place a home that we can live in. In what is a long-standing pattern, the “coloured citizens” of this country are at the forefront of practicing civics. Indeed, what could be more republican than risking one’s health to restore the health of the body politic? To ensure that one of the most basic promises of the state is properly fulfilled: that it apply its law enforcement equally, humanely, and in a manner accountable to the people it serves.

As in past struggles, our principled defense of an ethical civil code has attracted others with its moral force. We have seen a massive response, including from sources traditionally opposed to these concerns, who recognize the profoundly dysfunctional culture of US policing, prisons, and courts. Even many of those who do not agree that these are the result of actively racist policies and attitudes no longer deny that our exceptionally poor record cannot plausibly be unrelated to a long history of antiblack violence and antagonism. For this same reason, likeminded people around the world are hoping for a decisive break with the past‚ taking to the streets across the globe to demand that state actors acknowledge that there really is a history of injury that needs to stop being denied, and that we can and should work together to design a new social contract that will restore the perceived legitimacy of law enforcement and criminal justice in the eyes of all citizens and not just some.

The generation undertaking these endeavors does not seem to require a narrative of optimism in order to take the great risks they have incurred. They have a healthy indifference to both optimism and pessimism alike. Perhaps it results from the demands of carrying out politics in the real world. The incredibly difficult task of organizing and strategizing in order to elevate and amplify the best responses and to rein in and temper the counterproductive ones that delay and diminish a good cause. That’s hard to do in the best of cases: in a turbulent, paranoid, and instantly videotaped public sphere, it’s a Sisyphean task that bad-faith commentators take advantage of.

None of this diminishes the fundamental need for greater self-capacity of the kind Walker called for 200 years ago. Much of the work ahead will necessarily involve a growing capacity for self-reflection, self-criticism, irony, and joy in our politics. It will require acknowledging that struggles against white oppression will never be successful without deepened self-healing in our communities: repairing the relations in families, between men and women; ending the violence directed at trans, queer, and otherwise non-conforming people in our neighborhoods; ending the heinous blood feuds between rival gangs and sets; restoring education and communal trust as our highest priorities and most cherished aspirations. These will always remain preconditional to the realization of freedom and autonomy. It is pursuing these aims as an ongoing collective activity that will make unavoidable the realization as Walker said, that this country is “more ours” than anyone else’s — that we are a historic people with a world-historical destiny that understands our suffering as endowing us with both the right and the responsibility of civilizing the United States in such a way that it reflects the values that our historical experiences bring to it, the freedoms, equalities, and cultural pluralisms that we have made vital and central to its identity.

One doesn’t need to hang on desperately to a mirage of hope. If we look to history, we can see more than enough concrete evidence and example to support the conclusion that a racially defined caste system is unlikely to ever again prevail. Of course, that doesn’t mean history is a smoothly upward-trending curve. We have known terrible setbacks. Yes, the violent defeat of Reconstruction was successful. But the building of Black institutions and the Niagara Movement proceeded anyway. Tulsa was burned to the ground. But its Black citizens turned right around and rebuilt it out of the ashes. The Civil Rights movement was checked by the forces of reaction and the assassin’s bullet; but the world of unquestioned white superiority and authority that George Wallace hoped to preserve is reduced now to a twinkle in David Duke’s blue eye. Yes, creepy white supremacists still crawl out from under mossy stones at opportune moments to wail about their Nordic fantasies in their over-sized khaki pants. Yes, like the militants of the Islamic State, they are capable of carrying out horrific acts of terror and violence. But like that barbaric and fanatical sect, white supremacy is permanently confined to such rear-guard actions because it has already lost — it is trying to reverse a clock going forward — which explains the virulence and incoherence of its outbursts of spastic violence.

We are not at the end, but near the beginning of something new. The pandemic and the multiple underlying crises and fractures it has revealed make vivid that one need not wait so very long for “the end of the world.” The problem, as generations of millenarians have discovered, is that it turns out there’s a morning after the end of the world. And one after that too. The hardest truth is that all the uncertainties that govern the question of what can be done, what will be done, and the difference between the two, remain in our hands. What would Frantz Fanon, or David Walker, or Ella Baker tell us if they saw the streets today? Surely, not that we are at an impasse against an implacable enemy. They would insist that we lift each other and rise together with the spirit of history at our backs. We have done it before. Every time we do it’s a new day.

#### Afro pessimism is wrong---ignores history, demobilizes anti-racist action, totalizes black experience, and is coopted by the neoliberal university

AP™ = Afropessimism

Okoth 20 MPhil in Political Theory at University of Oxford Kevin Ochieng Okoth, "The Flatness of Blackness: Afro-Pessimism and the Erasure of Anti-Colonial Thought by Kevin Ochieng Okoth," Salvage, 1-16-2020, https://salvage.zone/the-flatness-of-blackness-afro-pessimism-and-the-erasure-of-anti-colonial-thought/, accessed 7-15-2022 WMK

II. The Flatness of Blackness

Afro-pessimism in this original sense has reflected a disastrous approach to, and had disastrous consequences for Africa and its inhabitants. So how can we understand the bizarre use of this historically loaded term (complete with its own history of colonial and imperialist exploitation) by numerous African-American intellectuals and activists? The use of the term ‘Afro-pessimism’ is symptomatic of the historical ignorance of the Afro-pessimist™ (or what Greg Thomas has recently called Afro-pessimism 2.0), whose grasp of African history is about as solid as that of Hegel. In its initial iteration, Afro-pessimism 2.0 (from now on AP™) is a product of middle-class academia; a framework either consciously or subconsciously created to allow relatively well-off academics to view themselves as the most discriminated and oppressed people in the world. Characterised by misinterpretations and clever appropriations of Black radicals like Frantz Fanon and Silvia Wynter, the theories of the AP™ have spilled over into activist circles, contaminating the global political discourse on race.

The central premise of the AP™ is that anti-Black violence is the structuring regime of the modern world. Drawing on Orlando Patterson’s concept of ‘social death’, Frank Wilderson, arguably the most prominent and controversial AP™ intellectual, asserts that the Black condition is not characterised by oppression or exploitation, like that of the Marxist proletariat or the (neo)colonial subject, but rather by the distinction between the Human and the Slave. For Wilderson, the Black is a priori a slave and therefore we cannot speak of Blackness without reference to the Slaveness that constitutes it on an ontological level. In his essay ‘Ante-Anti-Blackness: Afterthoughts’, fellow University of California professor Jared Sexton argues that the condition of the Black/Slave is a state of total powerlessness, natal alienation (‘the loss of ties of birth in both ascending and descending generations’) and generalised dishonour. In short, Black existence is an ontological absence of sorts, and the Black/Slave is a living dead (non-entity) in the modern world.

In ‘The Black Liberation Army and the Paradox of Political Engagement’, Wilderson offers some further meditations on the concept of ‘social death’, explaining that ‘the point of social death is a condition, void, not of land, but of a capacity to secure relational status through transindividual objects – be those objects elaborated by land, labour or love’. Unlike colonial racisms perpetuated by the rational systems of white supremacy, neo-colonialism or imperialism, or women’s oppression and exploitation driven by patriarchy and capitalism’s need for reproductive labour, anti-Black violence is humanity’s irrational desire for violence against Black people. As Wilderson declares in an interview with C. S. Soong, ‘violence against Black people is a mechanism for the usurpation of subjectivity, of life of being’. What settlers wanted from Indians is land, so they killed Indians ‘in the main’ to get it, whereas what non-Blacks want from Blacks is not land but ‘being’. Anti-Blackness is thus qualitatively different from the regimes of violence that affect the Marxist proletariat; or the non-Black person of colour; or the non-Black woman; or the non-Black woman of colour; or (as Wilderson has famously claimed) Palestinians. Black suffering is incomparable and unique: to speak of any experience of oppression without reference to the ontological disparities between Black/non-Black people is ultimately an act of ‘anti-Blackness’.

But what exactly is it about the makeup of modern society that displaces the Black/Slave from the realm of politics and precludes the articulation of concrete political demands? For Wilderson and Sexton, the very foundations of political discourse are inherently anti-Black. Or, to put it in terms of Giorgio Agamben’s political ontology (of which the AP™ are rather fond), the political – i.e. the ontological character of a political situation that separates it from other social actions – or what he calls ‘the Symbolic Order’, is skewed against the Black/Slave. The Symbolic Order is based on the recognition of the ‘other’s’ humanity, which then enables this ‘other’ to challenge the order on the grounds of, for instance, political economy. Since the Black is a priori a Slave, and Blackness and Slaveness are coterminous, the Black/Slave cannot participate in the Symbolic Order as her status is not that of the Human. And because the category of humanity is founded and relies on the existence of the slave, there is no way the Black/Slave can ever gain the recognition required to assert political demands and identities in the realm of the Symbolic Order. It is for this reason that, as Sexton points out in his essay ‘The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism’, we must posit a ‘political ontology dividing the Slave from the world of the Human in a constitutive way’ and take this as our analytical starting point.

Wilderson’s and Sexton’s work contributes to a wider debate on the nature of Black studies in the United States, which is frequently tied into discussions on Black performance art, evidenced by the titles of Wilderson’s Red, White and Black: Cinema and the Structure of US Antagonisms, Kara Keeling’s The Witch’s Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense or Fred Moten’s essays on Black Operations/Black Optimism in musical performance. Despite various disagreements and differences among these scholars, they are united by the common interest in ‘the afterlife of slavery’ – first described by Saidiya Hartman in her 2006 memoir Lose Your Mother. For Hartman – whose project is not that of AP™ and should not be mistaken for this essay’s target – official abolition in the United States did not engender a decisive break with the racialised violence of slavery; in contemporary society, we can see traces of such violence in the ‘skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment’ of African-Americans. The ‘afterlife of slavery’ she describes constitutes Black studies’ object, and loosely ties a range of scholars together into a coherent discourse.

It is worth briefly considering Fred Moten’s work to understand the AP™’s ability to co-opt or usurp other approaches to Black Studies and activism. Moten attempted to counter the AP™ conception of social death by foregrounding Black agency and asserting that it is ontologically prior to the all-encompassing anti-Blackness of the modern world. In the unpublished paper ‘Black Optimism/Black Operation’, Moten attempts to counter the ‘anti-essentialism’ of radical discourses that disavow Black studies’ own object i.e. Blackness. For Moten, this Blackness exists in what he (along with his frequent collaborator Stefano Harney) has famously called ‘the undercommons’ – a space outside of official social structures, where Black people can assert their ‘right to refuse’.

But as Annie Olaloku-Teriba points out in her excellent critique ‘Afro-Pessimism and the (Un)Logic of Anti-Blackness’, the AP™ finds a ‘comfortable antagonist’ in Moten, whose Black Ops can be neatly reintegrated into the concept of social death. It is also telling that Sexton, in ‘Ante-Anti-Blackness’, rather successfully merges the AP™ conception of social death with Moten’s Black Ops by arguing that:

A living death is as much a death as it is living. Nothing in Afro-pessimism suggests that there is no black (social) life, only that black life is not social life in the universe formed by the codes of state and civil society, of citizen and subject, of nation and culture, of people and place, of history and heritage, of all the things that colonial society has in common with the colonised, of all the things that capital has in common with labour – the modern world system.

Sexton shows that Moten’s Black Ops is nothing other than what he instead calls ‘the social life of social death’. There is no either/or distinction between social life and social death: we can think both together by positing that Black life is lived in the underground. Moten even acknowledges, in ‘Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)’, that the AP™ and Black Ops are engaged in the same theoretical project:

In the end, though life and optimism are the terms under which I speak, I agree with Sexton – by way of the slightest most immeasurable reversal of emphasis – that Afro-pessimism and black optimism are not but nothing other than one another. I will continue to prefer the black optimism of his work just as, I am sure, he will continue to prefer the Afro-pessimism of mine.

For both Afro-pessimists and Black Optimists, the afterlife of slavery is characterised by the social death of the Black/Slave and a heavily distorted version of Fanon’s concept of the ‘fact of blackness’. This assumption, however, precludes the participation of Black Ops in radical politics and confines resistance to spaces of Black performance art.

By confining Black resistance to spaces outside of the anti-Black structures of civil society, and by undercutting the possibility for anti-imperialist solidarity between racialised people across the world, the AP™ theories have opened up a space for the corporate capture of Blackness. We need only recall last year’s Nike campaign, prominently featuring the face of former NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick, who has been blackballed by the league for kneeling during the national anthem. Since the incident, he has taken on the role of radical Black activist, complete with Panther-esque leather jackets, an afro and Afrocentric jewellery. While Kaepernick’s struggle against the racist and exploitative NFL owners and executives is, of course, legitimate and necessary, the co-optation of his struggle by a large corporation is certainly a cause for concern. Nike is notorious for its use of sweatshop labour (including both forced and child labour), and its history of exploitative labour practices has been well-documented throughout the years. By detaching the struggles of African-Americans from those of racialised workers in the Global South, Nike can present itself as a progressive vehicle for Black emancipatory politics, while completely sidelining the plight of non-white workers outside of the US. Here we might recall a powerful statement by Fred Hampton to illustrate just how far from revolutionary Black politics we find ourselves:

We don’t think you fight fire with fire best; we think you fight fire with water best. We’re going to fight racism not with racism, but we’re going to fight with solidarity. We say we’re not going to fight capitalism with black capitalism, but we’re going to fight it with socialism […] We’re going to fight […] with all of us people getting together and having an international proletarian revolution.

Wilderson and Sexton have been captured by corporate interests in much the same way. In their case, however, it is not a large corporation that co-opts Blackness, but rather the neoliberal university. Is it at all surprising that two professors working within the prestigious University of California system promote a theoretical framework that requires no political action from Black writers and activists other than simply being Black? Not only is AP™ a product of the neoliberal university, it also promotes its authors survival and flourishing within the corporate structures of higher education. When asked about his framework for psychological and physical resistance by the hosts of iMiXWHATiLiKE, Wilderson neatly dodges any commitment to radical politics with the excuse that it could cost him his academic job.

This is so much a part of what it means to be a professor. I feel like cussing people out all the time. But if I do, I violate University of California’s civility laws, tenure or not I’m out the door, right? And that tempers my speech. So, I think that what I have to offer is not a way out. What I have to offer is an analysis of the problem. And I don’t trust me as much as I trust Black people on the ground.

Wilderson is aware that the AP™ rely on their activist supporters and social media following to maintain their privileged position within the university – without the activists and organisers on the ground, the AP™ could not prove the market value of its work to the neoliberal institution. By creating a framework for the analysis of race that lends itself to co-optation by corporate interests, the AP™ has certainly demonstrated that it can convert Blackness into profit. All the while, these theorists delude themselves that they are spearheading a truly radical Black movement. In the introduction to a collection of essays on AP™, the editors (who presumably include Sexton and Wilderson) even have the audacity to claim that they are ‘motivated by a desire to contribute to […] bringing these writings out of the ivory towers of the academy’ and that they wish to ‘remove the materials from this sitting place and see them proliferate among those in the streets and prisons’. True, they have succeeded in disseminating a watered-down version of their musings to activists and organisers; but what they have passed on is nothing short of anti-Black, in the sense that it works against the true liberation of Black people of all classes.

Today, such Blackness (and the pseudo-politics that is attached to it) is more useful for academic promotions, Instagram hashtags, and Nike adverts than for any revolutionary or emancipatory politics worthy of the name. The people who truly benefit – or rather profit – from the AP™ brand are the academics and the various university presses and journals who jump at every opportunity to unleash a plethora of AP™ books and articles onto the academic book market. While the AP™ may seem like a niche theoretical discourse, its influence extends far beyond the university: as Olaloku-Teriba argues, the AP™’s theoretical framework provides ‘the structuring logic of various political formations in the era of #BlackLivesMatter’. What is at stake in the debate, therefore, is nothing less than the possibility of a revolutionary Black politics. Maybe African-Americans on the streets or in prison would do well to reach for George Jackson’s Soledad Brother and steer clear of the AP™ and Black Ops.

III. The Afterlives of Slavery

The retreat of the AP™ and Black Ops from politics poses a problem for activists and scholars looking to engage in struggles that take seriously the political economy of race and the need for cross-racial solidarity. But how have these key themes of radical Black movements from the 1960s and 70s – from the Black Panthers to African anti-colonial struggles – disappeared in the AP™’s theories? The erasure of radical Black and anti-colonial struggles rests almost entirely on misreading – or in some cases not reading – Marxist contributions to the study of race, colonialism and slavery. And this unfounded dismissal of the entire Marxist tradition allows the AP™ to kill two birds with one stone: on the one hand, it can position itself as a radical critique of Eurocentric left discourses. On the other hand, it allows the AP™ to disregard a vast body of Marxist scholarship that has ‘raced’ the history of capitalism and developed a nuanced analysis of the relationship between New World Slavery and capitalist accumulation on a global scale. Thus, the AP™ can ignore the specificities of how different Black populations are racialised and displace the study of political economy (and particularly of imperialism) in favour of ontological questions.

In the interview ‘We’re trying to destroy the world: Anti-Blackness & Police Violence after Ferguson’ Wilderson makes the bizarre claim that ‘slaveness is something that has consumed Blackness and Africanness, making it impossible to divide slavery from Blackness’. If this assumption sounds familiar, look no further than the Afro-pessimism of old, with its conflation of Africanness and Blackness and its disregard for the African continent and its inhabitants. But how has an approach that attempts to grapple with the complexities of Black being ended up rehashing the same assumptions and prejudices of Eurocentric discourse designed to dehumanise Black people on the African continent in the first place? The AP™’s theoretical position is riddled with contradictions: how can Blackness be separated from white supremacy, neocolonialism or imperialism and women’s reproductive labour, when these are the mechanisms that structure the quotidien experience of most people racialised as Black on a global scale? Moreover, if the Black/Slave exists in a state of powerlessness and natal alienation – characterised by the loss of ties of birth in ascending and descending generations – how do we theorise the Blackness of those whose ancestors remained in Africa throughout the translatlantic slave trade?

#### Anti-Blackness isn’t historically calcified and their reading runs counter to the Black radical tradition.

Kelley 17 Gary B. Nash Professor of American History at UCLA (Robin D.G., “Robin D.G. Kelley & Fred Moten In Conversation,” transcribed from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fP-2F9MXjRE, 1:57:36-2:02:56, dml)

KELLEY: Um, Fred—Fred will take most of these questions. So that's why I'm going to begin first because he's gonna, he's gonna—he's gonna end it because he, he, he has the answer to all these questions ‘cause I turn to him for these questions. On the specific, on the first question, I just want to make sure I understand it because I'm, you know, I don't always recognize, uh, it may be because I'm just old, but I don't always recognize, uh, that black politics, black [unclear—maybe “guys”] work politics have been structured or defined by white supremacy. I mean, white supremacy is there. And I guess maybe because I'm such a student of Cedric Robinson, you know, not everything is about, or in response to, white supremacy. And in fact, one of the critiques coming out of doing Southern history was this idea that race relations framework, that race relations defines, uh, African-American history or Black history. And it's simply not true because much of what people do in terms of, of social formation, community building, um, is, is, is what Raymond Williams might call alternative cultures. In other words, it may be structured in dominance in some ways, but not defined by it. And Cedric's Black Marxism, you know, really made this point. He talks about the ontological totality, you know, the, this sense of being and making ourselves whole, in that we come out of an experience, again, structured by white supremacy, structured by violence, structured by enslavement and dispossession, but, but one in which western hegemony didn't work, you know, that modes of thinking wasn't defined by Enlightenment modes of thinking. In other words, that, that part of the Black radical tradition is a refusal to be property, to even admit that human beings could be property. You know, so we sometimes give white supremacy way too much credit, and maybe I misunderstood the question. And so I think that there's lots of things that happen outside of joy and survival, and survival is important, but survival is not the end all, you know. So I think, and I'll give you one very, very specific example, and now I'm not gonna say anything else after this. The way we have tended to more recently treat slavery, Jim Crow and mass incarceration as a piece, as the reinstantiation of the same thing, the continuation, that denies the fact that these systems are actually distinct, that they are historically specific, and in fact they’re responses to, in many ways, to the weakness of this as a racial regime. So if you think of like the whole idea of the new Jim Crow to me is very, very problematic. Um, although that book by Michelle Alexander is very, very powerful and very useful in terms of educating people about prisons. Jim Crow was not the continuation of slavery. It was not. Jim Crow was a response to the Black Democratic, uh, upsurge after slavery. It was a revolution of Reconstruction. It was a way to try to suppress that. The fact that, that, you know, there was this incredible response. That's why there's a, there's a huge gap between 1877 at the official end of Reconstruction and the rise of Jim Crow, which is the 1890s, disfranchisement, lynching. That's because you've had 13, 14, 15, 20, 25 years of a democratic possibility and struggle. The same thing with mass incarceration—yes, we've had incarceration, but it's, but that, that, that, that upward swing has a lot to do with, again, responses to the struggles in the 1960s, the assault on the Keynesian welfare-warfare state, the fact that you know the, the war on political, the formation of political prisoners, those struggles in fact was the state's response to opposition. And so if we don't acknowledge that, then what we end up doing is thinking that somehow there's a structure of white supremacy that's unchanging, fixed, and so powerful we can't do anything about it when in fact it's the opposite. White supremacy is fragile. White supremacy is weak. Racial regimes actually are always having to shore themselves up precisely because they're unstable. We can see that. We can't see it because the whole system of hegemony is to give us the impression that it is so powerful, there's no space out. And yet it’s working overtime to, to respond to our opposition. Right. That may not answer your question, but that's sort of a way I think about it. Maybe it’s not satisfactory, but yeah.

## Libidinal

#### Socialization better explains their libidinal thesis

Hudis 15 [Peter, Professor of English and History @ Queens College, 2015, “Frantz Fanon: Philosopher of the Barricades,” p. 35-37]

Fanon’s vantage point upon the world is his situated experience. He is trying to understand the inner psychic life of racism, not provide an account of the structure of human existence as a whole. Racism is not, of course, an integral part of the human psyche; it is a Social construct that has a psychic impact. Any effort to comprehend social distress that accompanies racism by reference to some a priori structure- be it the Oedipal Complex or the Collective Unconscious- is doomed to failure. Carl Jung sought to deepen and go beyond Freud's approach by arguing that the subconscious is grounded in a universal layer of the psyche- which he called "the collective unconscious:' This refers to inherited patterns of thought that exist in all human minds, regardless of specific culture or upbringing, and which manifest themselves in dreams, fairy tales, and myths. Jung referred to these universal patterns as "archetypes:' It may seem, on a superficial reading, that 1 Fanon is drawing from Jung, since he discusses how white people tend to unconsciously assimilate views of blacks that are based on negative stereotypes. Even the most "progressive" white tends to think of blacks a certain way (such as "emotional;' "physical," or / "aggressive"), even as they disavow any racist animus on their part. However, Fanon denies that such collective delusions are part of a psychic structure; they are not permanent features of the mind. They are habits acquired from a series of social and cultural impositions. While they constitute a kind a collective unconscious on the part of many white people, they are not grounded in any universal "archetype." The unconscious prejudices of whites do not derive from genes or nature, nor do they derive from some form independent of culture or upbringing. Fanon contends that Jung "confuses habit with instinct." Fanon objects to Jung's "collective unconscious" for the same reason that he rejects the notion of a black ontology. His phenomenological approach brackets out ontological claims on both a social and psychological level insofar as the examination of race and racism is concerned. He writes, "Neither Freud nor Adler nor even the cosmic Jung took the black man into consideration in the course of his research.” This does not mean that Fanon rejects their contributions tout court. He does not deny the existence of the unconscious. He only denies that the inferiority complex of blacks operates on an unconscious level. He does not reject the Oedipal Complex. He only denies that it explains (especially in the West Indies) the proclivity of the black "slave" to mimic the values of the white "master." And as seen from his positive remarks on Lacan's theory of the mirror stage, he does not reject the idea of psychic structure. He only denies that it can substitute for an historical understanding of the origin of neuroses .23 Fanon adopts a socio-genetic approach to a study of the psyche because that is what is adequate for the object of his analysis. For Fanon, it is the relationship between the socio-economic and psychological that is of critical import. He makes it clear, insofar as the subject matter of his study is concerned, that the socio-economic is first of all responsible for affective disorders: "First, economic. Then, internalization or rather epidermalization of this inferiority."24 Fanon never misses an opportunity to remind us that racism owes its origin to specific economic relations of domination- such as slavery, colonialism, and the effort to coopt sections of the working class into serving the needs of capital. It is hard to mistake the Marxist influence here. It does not follow, however, that what comes first in the order of time has conceptual or strategic priority. The inferiority complex is originally born from economic subjugation, but it takes on a life of its own and expresses itself in terms that surpass the economic. Both sides of the problem-the socio-economic and psychological-must be combatted in tandem: "The black man must wage the struggle on two levels; whereas historically these levels are mutually dependent, any unilateral liberation is flawed, and the worst mistake would be to believe their mutual dependence automatic:''5 On these grounds he argues that the problem of racism cannot be solved on a psychological level. It is not an "individual" problem; it is a social one. But neither can it be solved on a social level that ores the psychological. It is small wonder that although his name never appears in the book, Fanon was enamored of the work of Wilhelm Reich. This important Freudian-Marxist would no doubt feel affinity with Fanon's comment, "Genuine disalienation will have been achieved only when things, in the most materialist sense, have resumed their rightful place:'27

#### Neurological, racial bias is flexible and determined by coalitional habit forming in the brain---orienting groups around institutional change best breaks down bias. This is offense because their theory rejects these solutions.

Cikara and Van Bavel 15. (Mina Cikara is an Assistant Professor of Psychology and Director of the Intergroup Neuroscience Lab at Harvard University. Her research examines the conditions under which groups and individuals are denied social value, agency, and empathy. Jay Van Bavel is an Assistant Professor of Psychology and Director of the Social Perception and Evaluation Laboratory at New York University. The Flexibility of Racial Bias: Research suggests that racism is not hard wired, offering hope on one of America’s enduring problems. June 2, 2015. https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-flexibility-of-racial-bias/)

The city of Baltimore was rocked by protests and riots over the death of Freddie Gray, a 25-year-old African American man who died in police custody. Tragically, Gray’s death was only one of a recent in a series of racially-charged, often violent, incidents. On April 4th, Walter Scott was fatally shot by a police officer after fleeing from a routine traffic stop. On March 8th, Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity members were caught on camera gleefully chanting, “There Will Never Be A N\*\*\*\*\* In SAE.” On March 1st, a homeless Black man was shot in broad daylight by a Los Angeles police officer. And these are not isolated incidents, of course. Institutional and systemic racism reinforce discrimination in countless situations, including hiring, sentencing, housing, and even mortgage lending. It would be easy to see in all this powerful evidence that racism is a permanent fixture in America’s social fabric and even, perhaps, an inevitable aspect of human nature. Indeed, the mere act of labeling others according to their age, gender, or race is a reflexive habit of the human mind. Social categories, like race, impact our thinking quickly, often outside of our awareness. Extensive research has found that these implicit racial biases—negative thoughts and feelings about people from other races—are automatic, pervasive, and difficult to suppress. Neuroscientists have also explored racial prejudice by exposing people to images of faces while scanning their brains in fMRI machines. Early studies found that when people viewed faces of another race, the amount of activity in the amygdala—a small brain structure associated with experiencing emotions, including fear—was associated with individual differences on implicit measures of racial bias. This work has led many to conclude that racial biases might be part of a primitive—and possibly hard-wired—neural fear response to racial out-groups. There is little question that categories such as race, gender, and age play a major role in shaping the biases and stereotypes that people bring to bear in their judgments of others. However, research has shown that how people categorize themselves may be just as fundamental to understanding prejudice as how they categorize others. When people categorize themselves as part of a group, their self-concept shifts from the individual (“I”) to the collective level (“us”). People form groups rapidly and favor members of their own group even when groups are formed on arbitrary grounds, such as the simple flip of a coin. These findings highlight the remarkable ease with which humans form coalitions. Recent research confirms that coalition-based preferences trump race-based preferences. For example, both Democrats and Republicans favor the resumes of those affiliated with their political party much more than they favor those who share their race. These coalition-based preferences remain powerful even in the absence of the animosity present in electoral politics. Our research has shown that the simple act of placing people on a mixed-race team can diminish their automatic racial bias. In a series of experiments, White participants who were randomly placed on a mixed-race team—the Tigers or Lions—showed little evidence of implicit racial bias. Merely belonging to a mixed-race team trigged positive automatic associations with all of the members of their own group, irrespective of race. Being a part of one of these seemingly trivial mixed-race groups produced similar effects on brain activity—the amygdala responded to team membership rather than race. Taken together, these studies indicate that momentary changes in group membership can override the influence of race on the way we see, think about, and feel toward people who are different from ourselves. Although these coalition-based distinctions might be the most basic building block of bias, they say little about the other factors that cause group conflict. Why do some groups get ignored while others get attacked? Whenever we encounter a new person or group we are motivated to answer two questions as quickly as possible: “is this person a friend or foe?” and “are they capable of enacting their intentions toward me?” In other words, once we have determined that someone is a member of an out-group, we need to determine what kind? The nature of the relations between groups—are we cooperative, competitive, or neither?—and their relative status—do you have access to resources?—largely determine the course of intergroup interactions. Groups that are seen as competitive with one’s interests, and capable of enacting their nasty intentions, are much more likely to be targets of hostility than more benevolent (e.g., elderly) or powerless (e.g., homeless) groups. This is one reason why sports rivalries have such psychological potency. For instance, fans of the Boston Red Sox are more likely to feel pleasure, and exhibit reward-related neural responses, at the misfortunes of the archrival New York Yankees than other baseball teams (and vice versa)—especially in the midst of a tight playoff race. (How much fans take pleasure in the misfortunes of their rivals is also linked to how likely they would be to harm fans from the other team.) Just as a particular person’s group membership can be flexible, so too are the relations between groups. Groups that have previously had cordial relations may become rivals (and vice versa). Indeed, psychological and biological responses to out-group members can change, depending on whether or not that out-group is perceived as threatening. For example, people exhibit greater pleasure—they smile—in response to the misfortunes of stereotypically competitive groups (e.g., investment bankers); however, this malicious pleasure is reduced when you provide participants with counter-stereotypic information (e.g., “investment bankers are working with small companies to help them weather the economic downturn). Competition between “us” and “them” can even distort our judgments of distance, making threatening out-groups seem much closer than they really are. These distorted perceptions can serve to amplify intergroup discrimination: the more different and distant “they” are, the easier it is to disrespect and harm them. Thus, not all out-groups are treated the same: some elicit indifference whereas others become targets of antipathy. Stereotypically threatening groups are especially likely to be targeted with violence, but those stereotypes can be tempered with other information. If perceptions of intergroup relations can be changed, individuals may overcome hostility toward perceived foes and become more responsive to one another’s grievances. The flexible nature of both group membership and intergroup relations offers reason to be cautiously optimistic about the potential for greater cooperation among groups in conflict (be they black versus white or citizens versus police). One strategy is to bring multiple groups together around a common goal. For example, during the fiercely contested 2008 Democratic presidential primary process, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama supporters gave more money to strangers who supported the same primary candidate (compared to the rival candidate). Two months later, after the Democratic National Convention, the supporters of both candidates coalesced around the party nominee—Barack Obama—and this bias disappeared. In fact, merely creating a sense of cohesion between two competitive groups can increase empathy for the suffering of our rivals. These sorts of strategies can help reduce aggression toward hostile out-groups, which is critical for creating more opportunities for constructive dialogue addressing greater social injustices. Of course, instilling a sense of common identity and cooperation is extremely difficult in entrenched intergroup conflicts, but when it happens, the benefits are obvious. Consider how the community leaders in New York City and Ferguson responded differently to protests against police brutality—in NYC political leaders expressed grief and concern over police brutality and moved quickly to make policy changes in policing, whereas the leaders and police in Ferguson responded with high-tech military vehicles and riot gear. In the first case, multiple groups came together with a common goal—to increase the safety of everyone in the community; in the latter case, the actions of the police likely reinforced the “us” and “them” distinctions. Tragically, these types of conflicts continue to roil the country. Understanding the psychology and neuroscience of social identity and intergroup relations cannot undo the effects of systemic racism and discriminatory practices; however, it can offer insights into the psychological processes responsible for escalating the tension between, for example, civilians and police officers. Even in cases where it isn’t possible to create a common identity among groups in conflict, it may be possible to blur the boundaries between groups. In one recent experiment, we sorted participants into groups—red versus blue team—competing for a cash prize. Half of the participants were randomly assigned to see a picture of a segregated social network of all the players, in which red dots clustered together, blue dots clustered together, and the two clusters were separated by white space. The other half of the participants saw an integrated social network in which the red and blue dots were mixed together in one large cluster. Participants who thought the two teams were interconnected with one another reported greater empathy for the out-group players compared to those who had seen the segregated network. Thus, reminding people that individuals could be connected to one another despite being from different groups may be another way to build trust and understanding among them. A mere month before Freddie Gray died in police custody, President Obama addressed the nation on the 50th anniversary of Bloody Sunday in Selma: “We do a disservice to the cause of justice by intimating that bias and discrimination are immutable, or that racial division is inherent to America. To deny…progress – our progress – would be to rob us of our own agency; our responsibility to do what we can to make America better." The president was saying that we, as a society, have a responsibility to reduce prejudice and discrimination. These recent findings from psychology and neuroscience indicate that we, as individuals, possess this capacity. Of course this capacity is not sufficient to usher in racial equality or peace. Even when the level of prejudice against particular out-groups decreases, it does not imply that the level of institutional discrimination against these or other groups will necessarily improve. Ultimately, only collective action and institutional evolution can address systemic racism. The science is clear on one thing, though: individual bias and discrimination are changeable. Race-based prejudice and discrimination, in particular, are created and reinforced by many social factors, but they are not inevitable consequences of our biology. Perhaps understanding how coalitional thinking impacts intergroup relations will make it easier for us to affect real social change going forward.

## Pessimism Bad

#### Their account of hope overgeneralizes – they are right about the problem with absolute faith in the government, but that’s not our argument – a pragmatic understanding of hope as inseparable from political life is necessary to mobilize activism and prefigurative politics

Stitzlein 18. Sarah M. Stitzlein is a Professor at the University of Cincinnati School of Education. "Hoping and Democracy." Contemporary Pragmatism 15: 228-250. Emory Libraries.

What ought I hope for? This question guides our pursuit of the good life and its answer is often shaped by our social, political, and educational experiences. We aren’t born with ready-made hopes; rather, we shape them through our interactions with others, our growing sense of what is possible as we learn about our environment, and our experiments with the world to see what we can do within it and to change it. Other people play an important role in this process, especially through institutions like schools, social arrangements like families, and political practices like democracy. They shape the traditions and expectations we inherit, as well as the ways in which we test, challenge, and revise what has been passed on to us. Despite this, hope is too often described in individualist terms that **fail to encapsulate** the full **process** of hoping and its potential impact on shared living. Many **theologians** link hope with an individual’s faith in a deity who will act on his or her behalf, 1 some philosophers employ a **narrow understanding** of hope as an individual’s desire for an outcome in the face of uncertainty, 2 while many more psychologists describe hope as an individual’s use of willpower and “waypower” to achieve clear goals. 3 Instead, I will offer a **pragmatist account** of hope, which is firmly rooted in the experiences of individuals and grows out of real life circumstances, yet cannot be disconnected from social and political life. 4 I extend my account to show how a pragmatist view of hope is necessarily connected to other people and can be used to enrich our experiences in communities. Moreover, such hope can help us to **better face current political struggles and social problems**, all the while building a democratic identity together. 5 In this article, I will explain how pragmatism offers an enhanced understanding of hope and its role in our lives together. To examine the ways in which shared hoping and the shared content of our hopes shape our identity and our work together in democracy, I consider both how and what we hope. Unlike other accounts of hope that are **largely divorced from life’s circumstances**, such as **theological accounts** that direct our attention to deities and psychological accounts that tell us we must hope for our goals regardless of real world constraints, pragmatist hope is noteworthy because it is firmly rooted in reality. 6 Moreover, a pragmatist account addresses some of the current obstacles we face in American democracy and is **capable of transforming or improving** them. Perhaps more importantly, such hope can be directly and indirectly cultivated within citizens, thereby offering a feasible way that democratic life can be strengthened. 1 Present Context Before looking at hope in detail, let’s briefly first take stock of current conditions that relate to hopelessness in personal and political life. In pragmatist spirit, the account I offer here must attend to real conditions. Unfortunately, these are conditions where hope is struggling, where democracy may be in jeopardy, and where the dominant form of hope that we do see is largely privatized. To begin, a recent study using the World Values Survey and other polling sources finds that democratic citizens have “become more cynical about the value of democracy as a political system, less hopeful that anything they do might influence public policy, and more willing to express **support for authoritarian alternatives**.” 7 Those citizens have increasingly **withdrawn** from democratic participation, whether that be through formal institutions or alternatives in the public or civic spheres, such as joining in movements or protests. There has been a dramatic shift in how the wealthy view democracy, with 16 percent of them now believing that military rule is a better way of living and an astounding 35 percent of rich young Americans holding such a view. 8 There are likely many factors impacting this current state of affairs and I will touch on a few here. 9 First, in terms of hope most overtly, Alan Mittleman rightly notes that “the legitimacy of politics is damaged in proportion to its failure to fulfil the hopes it has engendered.” 10 Indeed, several recent American candidates ran on messages of hope and yet the visions evoked have often failed to be fulfilled in reality, crushing the heightened expectations of citizens. Politicians often use the rhetoric of hope, but they tend to distort what hope really is and what it requires of citizens, as I will explain later. Instead, they make reference to the supposed destiny of the nation with God as its backer. Or, as in the cases of Barack Obama and Donald Trump, some citizens place their hope in the leader himself, invoking a messianic figure. These forms of hope entail no more citizen action than, perhaps, donating to a campaign or wearing an iconic t-shirt proclaiming “hope.” Instead, I will argue that, rather than passively relying on the hope promised by politicians, citizens must participate in shaping and fulfilling hope, making such hope more genuine and robust. Second, structural violence and inequality, common amongst poor and racial minority communities in America, has wreaked havoc on hope. In some cases, it has eroded hope. 11 In others it has rendered hope exhausting, 12 \*\*\*footnote 12 begins\*\*\* **Calvin Warren**, “Black Nihilism and the Politics of Hope,” cr: The New Centennial Review, 15 (2015), pp. 215–248. Shannon Sullivan, “Setting aside hope: A pragmatist approach to racial justice,” in Pragmatism and Justice, ed. by Susan Dielman, David Rondel, and Christopher Voparil (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).\*\*\*footnote 12 ends\*\*\* with marginalized citizens told that they must never give up hope and that they must keep trying to earn a better life for themselves, in part through improving their own character regardless of the stagnant harmful practices of others. Many of those citizens are left either **nihilistically without hope** or perpetually chasing a vision of justice that is (perhaps sometimes intentionally kept) out of reach. 13 \*\*\*footnote 13 begins\*\*\* **Calvin Warren**, “Black Nihilism and the Politics of Hope,” cr: The New Centennial Review, 15 (2015): 215–248. \*\*\*footnote 13 ends\*\*\* I intend to describe a form of hope that is more **sustainable** and more **attuned** to the real conditions of life that we can control and others where we have limited control. Third, citizenship in America has increasingly become centered on individuals, personal responsibility, entrepreneurship, and private success. Historical accounts of rugged individualism have now joined forces with calls to educate children in grit and expectations that one will fight to earn one’s position and goods in a competitive marketplace. 14 This environment lacks trust in others and discourages collaborative effort. Often those who have not been successful in the past, or do not see viable avenues for being so in the future, **fatalistically accept** these conditions and become passive about countering or changing them. While others who have enough resources and power to be comfortable with the present conditions, indulge in the privilege of being cynical or apathetic. Some spread these states of hopelessness or jaded negativity through memes and messages on social media, especially about the role and effectiveness of government, **rendering cynicism a collective practice**. 15 Cynics, left believing that their political efforts are useless or ineffective and perhaps that everyone acts on self-interest, are left to look out merely for themselves, without a sense of responsibility to act on behalf of themselves and others. Indeed, cynics may mock others who do not hold such views as naïve and out of touch with reality. Cynicism functions as a **distancing maneuver**, separating citizens from each other, from formal democratic institutions, and from civic organizations, where visions of an improved world and action to achieve it tend to occur. My notion of hope aims to span those divides. Finally, what is left of hope has become **privatized**. 16 This is exacerbated as neoliberalism continues to assert Margaret Thatcher’s claims, “There is no such thing as society, only individuals and families,” and “there is no alternative to the market.” Hope is reduced to a mere drive to achieve one’s own limited dreams, or those of one’s children, typically only through financial terms and material goods. When citizens are rendered isolated competitors, they lose the **ability to detect social problems** and the **motivation to ameliorate them**, especially if the effects on one’s self or family are not immediate. Economist Tyler Cowen describes these citizens as the new “complacent class,” who are content with the way things are as long as they are not directly harmed and as long as they can stay surrounded by people and things that confirm their experience of the world. In their complacency, the members of the complacent class are unable to “inspire an electorate with any kind of strong positive visions, other than some marginal adjustments.” 17 I aim to show how hope is better understand as a social and political endeavor that brings us into contact with others as we craft visions of the future. In sum, these changes in citizens’ lives and views **debilitate individual citizens and democracy as a whole**. They keep us from recognizing and solving collective problems and from leading better lives together. Citizens sit around waiting for reasons to hope, sometimes becoming swept up in campaign rhetoric when election cycles come around, rather than acknowledging that hope is generated through action as subjects working together, as I will argue. I will turn now to depict a pragmatist account of hope that can be formally cultivated in schools and informally in our lives together—a way of hoping together that may better support democratic life in these challenging times. 2 Pragmatist Hope I offer here a pragmatist account of hope, largely based in the philosophy of John Dewey. Notably, Dewey himself does not provide such an account, even though hope underlies much of his work and was evident in his own personal life as he encountered considerable despair at the loss of two of his children and his wife, while also facing two world wars. I construct a view of hope from Dewey’s well-articulated elements of inquiry, growth, truth, meliorism, and habits. Pragmatism begins with the real and complicated conditions of our world. It brings together intelligent reflection with inquiry, habits, and action so that we can understand and change our environments to better align with our needs and desires. Hope plays an important role in that process. Inquiry, Growth, and Truth For Dewey, hope often arises within the midst of despair, when we have lost our way and are struggling to move forward. Dewey describes these moments as “indeterminate situations.” He turns to the process of inquiry via the empirical method to help us explore those situations, consider possible courses of action, and test out various solutions. It is inquiry that helps us to understand, act upon, and reconstruct our environments and our experiences so that we are able to move forward out of the indeterminate situation. In a richly cognitive and often social practice, inquiry invokes curiosity and problem solving to move us out of ruts. Indeed, this method **combats the stagnation of fatalism** by urging us to **formulate and try out solutions**. Growth describes how reconstructions of our experiences through inquiry develops physical, intellectual, and moral capacities, actualizing them and helping them inform one another so that they continue in a chain that enables one to **live satisfactorily**. We **grow** when we learn from inquiry into indeterminate situations and **create ways to re-establish smooth living** that carries us from one activity to the next. Many people **wrongly assume** that growth necessarily has an **end**—as if it were “movement toward a fixed goal.” 18 We tend to think of growth as only progression toward some specific outcome, such as mastering bicycle riding or graduating from high school. But this way of thinking tends to place the emphasis on the static terminus, **rather** than focusing on the **process** of growing as **itself educative and worthwhile**. Dewey’s alternative view of growth does not neatly and linearly move toward a fixed goal. Instead, he describes trajectories that are more complicated, often shifting with the environment. Moreover, holding onto a fixed goal may be undesirable because doing so employs a limited or possibly foreclosed vision of the future. Instead, as changes occur in one’s environment, Dewey asserts that people must continually inquire into moments of uncertainty and changing circumstances, develop new hypotheses about those situations, and revise their aims. Dewey works with what he calls “ends-in-view,” which are relatively close and feasible, even if difficult to achieve, rather than overarching goals at some final endpoint in the future. Those ends-in-view guide our decisions and hypotheses along the way, keeping us resourceful in the present. In Dewey’s words, the discovery of how things do occur makes it possible to conceive of their happening at will, and gives us a start on selecting and combining the conditions, the means, to command their happening…there must be a realistic study of actual conditions and the mode or law of natural event, in order to give the imagined or ideal object definite form and solid substance—to give it, in short, practicality and constitute it as a working end. 19 For Dewey, ends and means are intelligently considered in **light of each other**, with both being **revisable**, and neither **abstracted** from the other. Each fulfilled end-in-view sustains our hope by highlighting meaningful headway and directing our further action. Ends-in-view later become means to future ends, working in an ongoing continuum. This **sustenance of hope** differs from theological accounts which are **difficult to sustain** on faith alone and may leave believers **frustrated** at an apparent lack of action or improvement. It also differs from positive psychology and grit literature which tends to focus on large, far-off, and challenging goals that one holds tenaciously. Many people think of hope as goal-directed and future-oriented. While objects of hope for pragmatists may temporarily serve as ends-in-view, the practice of hope moves us forward through inquiry and experimentation as we pursue our complicated trajectory. It helps to unify our past, present, and future. Hope, then, is not just about a vision of the future, but rather a way of living in the present that is informed by the past and what is anticipated to come. Whereas utopian views of what could be may actually immobilize one and may exhaust one in the present, **pragmatist hope is always tied to what one is doing and feasibly can do in the present**, especially when equipped with knowledge of the past. Central to pragmatist philosophy, ideas become true insofar as they “work” for us, fruitfully combine our experiences, and lead us to further experiences that satisfy our needs. Pragmatists are concerned with the concrete differences in our lived experiences that an idea’s being true will make. Pragmatic truth expresses “the successful completing of a worthwhile leading.” 20 Unlike truth as a corresponding match between proposition and reality, pragmatist truth is something that occurs when the goals of human flourishing are satisfied, at least temporarily. Built into these criteria is consideration of the well-being of others, for successful leading through experiences almost always necessarily requires working and communicating with others. Additionally, the differences an idea will make are quite limited, and therefore less truthful, if relevant only to one person. While not a comprehensive vision of the good life, certain norms including equality and just communication are entailed both in these deliberations and the determination of truth. 21 We must consider how to flourish alongside others as we craft our ends-in-view. This differs considerably from other philosophical and psychological accounts of hope based on the desire of objects or states of affairs regardless of whether they are good for us or other people. Meliorism Pragmatists like Dewey recognize the difficulty of present circumstances, yet approach them practically, rather than idealistically, with thoughtful action, believing that circumstances can be improved. 22 Unlike simple optimists, however, they do not hold that the situation will necessarily work out for the best, but rather they believe people should make efforts to contribute to better outcomes. Such efforts are rarely undertaken alone, instead they are tied to others who are working together to solve problems. In the words of contemporary pragmatist Cornel West, “Optimism adopts the role of the spectator who surveys the evidence in order to infer that things are going to get better. Yet when we know that the evidence does not look good…Hope enacts the stance of the participant who actively struggles against the evidence.” 23 Meliorism entails action in the face of difficulties. Dewey sees hope as a way of living aligned with meliorism, “the idea that at least there is a sufficient basis of goodness in life and its conditions so that by thought and earnest effort we may constantly make better things.” 24 Meliorism is **not a belief in inevitable progress**, but rather a call to human action, especially in the midst of struggle and uncertainty. Dewey firmly argued that it would be foolish to believe that there is “an automatic and wholesale progress in human affairs,” insisting instead that betterment “depends upon **deliberative human foresight** and **socially constructive work**.” 25 Martin Luther King, a champion and practitioner of hope, was enshrined on the floor of Obama’s oval office with his phrase: “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” Importantly, given how many hopes fell flat under the messianic figure of Obama, King later explained in a pragmatist spirit of meliorism, “Human progress never rolls on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the **tireless efforts** of men willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must **use time creatively**, in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right.” 26 We cannot wait until we have a clear picture of our final future goals; rather, we must act now in intelligent ways and through inquiry to bring about better conditions and, thereby, truth. 27 And we must be flexible to change and redirect our efforts as they unfold. Meliorism is an **alternative to both pessimism and optimism**. It cultivates **hope**, **growth**, and **better worlds**. For some pragmatists, like Colin Koopman, this meliorism-based hope is “the pragmatist affect par excellence: ‘hope is the **mood of meliorism**’ (27), ‘the characteristic attitude of pragmatism is hope’ (17).” 28

#### Racial pessimism is the political view of Clarence Thomas – their strategy reinforces a nihilistic, pull yourself up by your bootstraps view that can never embrace social progress

Illing and Robin, 19 [Corey Robin is an American political theorist, journalist and professor of political science at Brooklyn College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Sean Illing is the Interviews Writer for Vox. Before publishing things on the Internet, he taught politics and philosophy at a university. Before that, he served in the United States Air Force. The racial pessimism of Clarence Thomas]

* The way this kind of goes beyond cede the political is in the idea that – if you go far enough left, you end up back on the right – and so, Clarence Thomas can oppose school integration, prison reform etc. all because of his foundational nihilism

Sean Illing One of the strangest parts of all this is the fact that Thomas has managed to preserve his core black nationalist beliefs on the court while at the same time, as you put it, “remaining a hero to some of the most racist elements of the American polity.” Is this just a case of his supporters not bothering to understand what he actually thinks and why he thinks it? Or do many of them understand it and just don’t care? Corey Robin I think they haven’t bothered to understand what he thinks. It’s clear that most white conservatives just don’t see it. Even the best scholarship on the right just doesn’t touch this dimension of Thomas’s thought, at least not as far as I can tell. And this continues to be part of the paradox of Clarence Thomas. He’s probably the most well-known member of the court, everybody knows who he is, and yet no one really knows who he is. Sean Illing I think this is true on the left as well, but we’ll get to that. First I’d like to ask you how these background assumptions structure Thomas’s judicial philosophy. One of the contradictions you explore in the book is the fact that Thomas is an avowed originalist, someone committed to applying the Constitution as it was adopted in 1789, and yet he acknowledges that that Constitution was written by and for slaveholders. Corey Robin Well, the first thing I’d say is that Thomas’s originalism is pretty inconsistent, but let’s not get into the weeds on that. Here’s why I think originalism is important to Thomas and it’s partly for the reason you just mentioned: He sees it as a kind of permanent reminder of the constraints written into the Constitution under which African Americans have labored for over three centuries. Thomas sees value in this, and he’s very upfront about it. It would be too strong to say that he would like to rewrite the Constitution as if it were a Jim Crow Constitution, but he really does believe in his heart of hearts that black people, particularly black men, flourished under the heavy yoke of subjugation that was Jim Crow. And this is where his ideology is pretty straightforwardly conservative: he believes that under the conditions of extreme hardship, the strongest wills have a way of bashing their way through those constraints in order to overcome them, and he thinks this is what the African American community did when it was oppressed by the white majority. Sean Illing You say that “the story of Clarence Thomas is the story of the last half century of American politics and the long shadow of defeat that hangs over it.” This gets at the sense of racial despair a lot of people — on the left and right — feel right now. As the gains of the civil rights movement are eroding, as white nationalism subsumes the White House, it’s hard not to sympathize with Thomas’s pessimism about the possibilities of political progress. Is that how you feel after writing this book?Corey Robin I didn’t need Clarence Thomas to convince me that the gains of the civil rights movement and the black freedom struggle had been cut back in a big way — that movement has been in reverse motion for quite some time. But engaging with Thomas did clarify for me how strong this ambient mood of racial despair is right now, and I think many people on the left think that that signifies the mark of progressive values. But I don’t think that’s true at all. The beginning of the left tradition — and I say this as someone on the left — is the recognition that oppression can be undone and transformed. Oppression is the product of politics and it can be dismantled through politics — we risk forgetting this when we become overly pessimistic. I hope wrestling with Thomas’s conservatism opens up a discussion across the country about where we think racial pessimism leads necessarily. Identifying the structures of oppression is critical, but it’s only constructive if we also identify the vulnerabilities of those structures. This is the job of the left and we’ll lose if we cease to do it.

#### Reject fatalism – devaluing political engagement reinforces self-hatred and precludes positive coalitional politics, collapsing into white divide and conquer.

Massa ’14 (Andre; 12/16/14; Undergraduate student of philosophy at George Mason University, citing historians and Professors of Philosophy Carter Woodson, Mellville Herskovits, Jared Sexton, Vincent Brown, literary critique and Professor at Columbia University, Gayatri Spivak, Professor of Humanities, David Marriot, and the historiography of Orlando Patterson; The Historical Nerds, “Implications of Wilderson’s Afro-Pessimism,” [https://thehistoricalnerds.com/2014/12/16/implications-of-wildersons-afro-pessimism/; RP)](https://thehistoricalnerds.com/2014/12/16/implications-of-wildersons-afro-pessimism/))

By disproving Wilderson’s claim that the Black Body is in a perpetual state of ontological death because of the violence of the Middle Passage and showing that the Black Body is not socially dead, then the possibilities of legal **reform** and **coalitional politics** become possible and desirable. For Wilderson, coalitional politics are just attempts to feign the ontological capacity of Blacks to shape their own future. He refers to white people and colored immigrants specifically who try to engage in coalitional politics with the Black Body as “the junior and senior partners of civil society” who pretend as if the Black is coherent and human. (Wilderson, Red, White and Black, pg. 39). It is this kind of ontological absolutism that Wilderson adheres to that David Marriott criticizes when he writes, “Wilderson is prepared to say that black suffering is not only beyond analogy, it also refigures the whole of being. It is not hard when reading such sentences to suspect a kind of absolutism at work here, and one that manages to be peculiarly and **dispiritingly dogmatic**: throughout Red, White, and Black, despite variations in tone and emphasis, there is always the desire to have **black lived experience** named as the worst, and the politics of such a desire inevitably collapses into a kind of **sentimental moralism**: for the claim that ‘Blackness is incapacity in its most pure and unadulterated form’ means merely that the black has to embody this abjection without reserve (p. 38). This logic—and the denial of any kind of ‘ontological integrity’ to the Black/Slave due to its endless traversal by force does seem to **reduce ontology** to logic, namely, a logic of non-recuperability.” (Mariott, Black Cultural Studies, pg. 37-66). Wilderson’s insistence of **absolute negativity** destroys the possibility for coalitional politics because it will always frame the Black Body as something that will always stand in an **antagonistic position** to the world. In engaging in this form of ontological absolutism, Wilderson effectively creates an "us against the world” logic whereby its best to either **succumb to** the **negativity** surrounding the Black Body or destroy the world to free the Black Body. Furthermore, as Mariott points out, this dogmatic ontological absolutism **essentializes the Black experience** to its most negative point, a kind of negativity that reproduces a form of **self-hatred** that contributes to the destruction of positive coalitional politics. When one comes to believe that they themselves are ontologically dead, this encourages the logic of **political apathy** where one refuses to attempt to engage with **agents of change** because they curse their own identity and believe that there is nothing they can do about their situation because Blackness is an ontological condition. To put it in Lehman’s term, “why go vote if I’m socially dead?”. This form of **disengagement** from the political **is problematic** when racism is entrenched in our law, as Ian Haney Lopez points out in his book White By Law when he writes, “law is implicated in the construction of the contingent social systems of meaning that attach in our society to morphology and ancestry, the meaning system we commonly refer to as race. The legal system influences what we look like, the meanings ascribed to our looks, and the material reality that confirms the meanings of our appearances. **Law constructs race.”** (Lopez, White By Law, pg. 16). If the precedent set by court cases, as Lopez points out, were responsible for creating the precedents that shaped how we see race as a social construction, then the need to challenge racism **through legal reform** becomes more apparent. Wilderson’s ontological absolutism destroys the possibility to form the kind of coalitions that are necessary to engaging with the legal systems that use the law to shape our social perceptions of race. The kind of **self-hatred** that Wilderson perpetuates through his ontological construction of Blackness will only **re-entrench racism** because the Black Body will refuse to engage in the forms of legal reform necessary to change the law and they way it shapes how we view race as a social construction. If the law is what truly shapes the social construction of race and if the Black Body is truly capable of engaging with these institutions, then Wilderson’s Afro-pessimism must be firmly rejected to usher in a politics of hope that is necessary to **mobilize coalitions** against dominant power structures. The idea of embracing a politics of hope and solidarity is a concept that would seem absolutely foreign to Wilderson. Indeed, with the recent events surrounding the likes of Eric Garner and Michael Brown, the credibility surrounding the Afro-pessimist school of thought is increasing. Yet it is precisely these events that necessitate a politics of hope and solidarity that Gloria Jean Watkins, better known by her pen name Bell Hooks, advocates for in her 1996 book Killing Rage: Ending Racism when she writes, “Black Americans are succumbing to and internalizing the racist assumption that there can be no meaningful bonds of intimacy between blacks and whites. It is fascinating to explore why it is that black people trapped in the worst situation of racial oppression—enslavement—had the foresight to see that it would be disempowering for them to lose sight of the capacity of white people to transform themselves and divest of white supremacy, even as many black folks today who in no way suffer such extreme racist oppression and exploitation are convinced that white people will not repudiate racism. Contemporary black folks, like their white counterparts, have passively accepted the internalization of white supremacist assumptions. Organized white supremacists have always taught that there can never be trust and intimacy between the superior white race and the inferior black race. When black people **internalize these sentiments**, no resistance to white supremacy is taking place, rather we **become complicit** in spreading racist notions. It does not matter that so many black people feel white people will never repudiate racism because of being daily assaulted by white denial and refusal of accountability. We must not allow the actions of white folks who blindly endorse racism to determine the direction of our resistance. Like our white allies in struggle we must consistently keep the faith, by always sharing the truth that white people can be anti-racist, that racism is not some immutable character flaw.” (Bell Hooks, Killing Rage: Ending Racism, pg. 269-270). Bell Hooks avoids falling into the colonial trap of Wilderson by speaking for herself and her own experiences. By acknowledging that there are many anti-racist whites, she has created a space where Black folk who believe that they have a future can speak of their own experiences and contribute to meaningful dialogue about how Black folk should take steps forward in the context of legal reform. Unlike Wilderson who **universalizes the Black experience**, Bell Hooks acknowledges that internalizing racist assumptions of the Black Body, or in the context of Wilderson, their own ontological construction, will only give into White supremacy because the cycle of self-hatred creates a **sense of powerlessness** that prevents the Black Body from ever getting out in the first place. Furthermore, Wilderson’s ontological absolutism is a **tactic of White supremacy**, because, as pointed out by Bell Hooks, it creates a sense of distrust that plays into the **divide and conquer** mentality that is crucial to White supremacy’s grip on society. For Bell Hooks, when the Black community gives into its own pessimism, White supremacists win because there is no motivation for resistance. In the wake of recent events, embracing a **politics of** hope and **solidarity** is more important than ever as racism begins to become more apparent. Hope offers the crucial first step towards encouraging the first steps towards resistance, a step that Wilderson’s extreme negativity prevents from ever been taken. Instead of imagining the end of the world, we must imagine a world with a better future.

# Perm

#### Permutation do both---saving the Earth from its excesses is *in line* with Black radical scholarship

Moten and Kelley, 17—professor of Performance Studies at New York University AND Gary B. Nash Professor of American History at UCLA (Fred and Robin D.G., “Robin D.G. Kelley & Fred Moten In Conversation,” transcribed from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fP-2F9MXjRE>, 31:49-55:57, dml)

MOTEN: Well, first of all, I just want to say how much I appreciate having a chance to be here with all of you tonight, and thank you, Rinaldo, and, uh, Alicia, and Afua, of course. Robin, as always, uh, an honor to be, have a chance to hang out with you, and uh, and to learn from you, and um, let me see. Um, well, I tend to think of Black studies not so much as an academic discipline or confluence of disciplines but as the atmosphere in which I grew up, and so, and I love that, that atmosphere. I love the way that it felt, and I love the way that it smelled, and I love the flavors, and I love the sounds, and I love the movements. Um, and so, it is, again, something that I think has a certain place, maybe, in the university, and what it meant, what it has meant for Black studies to take that place in the university has had both, has been both good and bad. I think it’s probably done much more for the university than it has for Black studies, and, and that’s something worth thinking about. And I don’t say that because I’m trying to advocate some withdrawal from the university of Black studies, but I’m thinking that, you know, that at this stage of the game in having done the work of attempting to actually bring, um, the university into some sense of its own, of what ought to be its own intellectual mission, Black studies has the right to look out for itself now, for a little bit, um, and I think it’s worth it to do that. And insofar as Black studies has earned a right to look out for itself, what that really means, I think, is that Black studies has earned the right to try again to take its fundamental responsibility, which is to be, uh, a place where we can look out for the Earth. Um, I think that Black studies has a fundamental and specific, though not necessarily exclusive mission, and that mission is to try to save the Earth, or at least to try to save, not, well, on the most fundamental level to save the Earth, and on a secondary level, to try to save the possibility of human existence on the Earth. Um, and I know that’s a big statement, and I don’t wanna take up all the time, but I’m happy to try to say more about what I think I mean by that later on, but, um, but I think maybe it’s important just to leave that big statement out there for a minute, and just to make sure that you know that I knew that I said it when I said it. KELLEY: Okay, well, actually I wanna echo, uh, Fred’s sentiments, that it’s really an honor to be here, in this space. Um, this is the second time that we’ve had kind of a public conversation, and it’s always packed, you know, and it’s always a lot of people, and expectations are always high, and one of my favorite things on the planet, besides just talking to my daughters, talking to Fred Moten, um, you know, and it’s just really, you know, I learn so much from it, and in fact, let me just begin by saying that one of the pieces that Rinaldo was referring to was an essay I wrote called, uh, “Black Study, Black Struggle,” which was entirely inspired by, uh, Fred Moten and Stefano Harney’s, uh, book, “The Undercommons.” It was a way of the application of the notion of the undercommons to understanding what was happening at that moment, which in, in the fall of 2015, there was like an explosion of, um, Black protests on, on campus, and, you know, I won’t repeat what’s in the article, uh, but it, it’s not an accident that some of those struggles, uh, were products of what was happening in the streets. In other words, what happened in Ferguson, and what happened in Baltimore, what happened all over the country, and what happened in places like here in Toronto, were the catalyst for, um, a kind of explosion on campuses, where, uh, students were trying to figure out their place in the university. They’re dealing with racism, and microaggressions on university campuses, uh, they’re dealing with a, a kind of deracinated, you know, curriculum where ethnic studies wasn’t what it was, in its inception. Um, and, I was also dealing with, or many of us were also dealing with, uh, a culture of, and I hate to put it this way, but a culture of anti-intellectualism in, in a different sort of way. I mean, universities are often anti-intellectual, in that they actually disavow certain forms of knowledge and put other knowledge above that, which is an anti-intellectual position by the way. Um, but then when you’re assaulted by that all the time, uh, sometimes you end up mirroring that culture. And you’re saying “well I’m not gonna read this, I’m not gonna read that, because so-and-so wrote it,” as opposed to saying that there’s nothing off the table, uh, that Black studies, and Fred knows this ‘cause he repeats it more than I do, that our mutual, uh, teacher, Cedric Robinson, who paraphrased C. L. R. James, said you know, Black studies is a critique of Western civilization, and if that is the case, then we both have to dismantle it, recognize the weak edifice upon which it’s built, but also know everything that’s happening within it. But anyway, let me just back up, um, so, I just, so the three points I wanna make in reference to the question, one is that, uh, social movements have always been the catalyst for Black studies. When Fred was talking about, you know, Black studies as, as, uh, kinda, kinda like a way of life, as an atmosphere in which he grew up and which I grew up and many of us grew up, that’s so true. I never thought about it that way, but, you know, that’s so true. And in fact, um, if anything, Black Studies is not a multidiscipline but a project, a project for liberation, whatever that means, and liberation is an ongoing project. Um, Ruthie Gilmore, uh, who was at USC, uh, with me and Fred, had come up with this idea of renaming ethnic studies “liberation studies.” And, you know, we were actually serious about that, we were like, trying to figure out how to do that, and never filled it, but it reminds us that, you know, it’s not about, um, it’s not about a body. It’s not about bodies. It’s about ideas, and about the future, you know. It’s about recognizing the past and the construction of a new future. And so I think, in that respect, in order to understand the future of Black studies, we gotta understand the movements that produced it—that, that the Movement for Black Lives, that, um, uh, We Charge Genocide, that Black Youth Projects 100—all these struggles that erupted have, in fact, uh, pointed the way for Black Studies. The problem is, is that what gets constituted as the institutional space of Black studies, in many cases, isn’t really that. And I hate to bring people down, because we’re supposed to be up, right? But there are a lot of departments that I wouldn't call Black studies departments that have that name, you know, there are a lot of, there's a lot of scholarship that goes on that has no relationship at all to the project of transformation, or to people, to actual people in community. And one of the important things to always remember is that, um, we wouldn't have Black studies if it wasn't—in the United States, that is, I'm talking about the US—if it wasn't for Watts, if it wasn't for Detroit in 67, and if it wasn't for those kinds of urban rebellions, if it wasn't for the struggles in the South, that's where Black studies comes from. Uh, and so it moves into the university as a, as a transformative project. Um, it's not—and that's why I think there was a disconnect between some of the, the protests and what was happening in the academy. Finally, there’s this question of, of ethnic studies versus, or against, or for, or within or bedded in Black studies. And one of the things that, that I think a lot of us are trying to figure out is to deepen the relationship between indigenous studies and Black studies. Um, to understand that this was what I call second wave ethnic studies in the 1990s was itself a project that was, believe it or not, in a, a response to neoliberalism. And I think we don't always see that because we, we tend to read backwards in the 1990s and 1980s as, like, ethnic studies as identity politics in the narrowest sense of the word, that somehow this was about producing a sense of, of pride and a sense of identity devoid of the question of power. But if you actually look at the struggles for ethnic studies in the 80s and 90s, it was all about power. That, that what we think of as comparative or critical ethnic studies was, wasn't about the celebration of difference. It wasn't liberal multiculturalism. It was an assault on a neoliberal turn. And we, we sometimes forget that and, and, and then we write the history. And so I think I want to at some point talk more about that, but I think that's something to remember, because, right now, if we don't have Black studies as a critique in response to the neoliberal neofascist turn, then it's sort of worthless. You know, it's going to continue to exist. Maybe not in the academy though. So I'll just stop there. WALCOTT: So, um, Robin, where you ended, and, and where Fred began, it’s a, is a good segue into getting you, both of you, to talk about the work that you've been doing around questions of Palestinian struggle and freedom. Fred, the work that, the tremendous work that you did in the ASA, um, American Studies Association, for which the Association is still living true, and, and Robin the work that you continue to do with um, um, with faculty for Palestine. But I'm thinking about Fred's provocation here that Black studies about saving the Earth and if Black studies is indeed about saving the Earth, which I'm very willing to fall right into right now, you know, first to kind of maybe think about this relationship between the struggle and, and freedom of Palestine and the relationship between ongoing settler colonialisms globally, because it seems to me that one of the most powerful things that, um, the kind of Black studies that has taken to the streets recently has done is to make those kinds of concerns present, right? BLM visits to Palestine, BLM in Toronto, always making sure that the invocation of the politics of settler colonialism is a part of a political organizing, and, um, their intimate relations with indigenous communities. So maybe this is a way for us to begin to talk about what's really at stake in this contemporary political moment where, um, or, or a radical politics, a politics that wants to think a different kind of future formation, is grappling with, um, settler colonialism in various kinds of ways. But Palestine being central to that, given that we know as we sit in this university is that often, um, what we call our senior administrators have an entirely different relationship with the question of freedom for Palestine. MOTEN: Well, um, first, I mean, the work I did around, um, you know, the ASA’s, um, you know, decision to endorse the academic and cultural boycott of Israel was really minimal and minor compared to a lot of other people who were really out front, um, and, and have been working tirelessly for that for many, many years. Um, and I think, you know, the, my contribution was more, you know, rhetorical in many ways in, in, in, and, and maybe, maybe theoretical only in the most minimal sense, in the sense that what I wanted to do was a couple of things. First, to recognize that, um, you know, let's say that the conditions of what people call modernity, um, in, in, in, in, or global modernity, that the fundamental conditions that make that up are, you know, settler colonialism. And I think we can talk about settler colonialism in ways that are broader than the normal way that we usually think of them as a set of violent and brutal relations between Europe and the rest of the world. Because I think it's really important. And, and, and again, our, our mutual friend and mentor Cedric Robinson, pointed this out emphatically, and in brilliant ways early on, that settler colonialism is also an intra-European affair. Um, and it's important to understand that. It's important to understand this historic relationship between settler colonialism in the enclosure of the commons, um, which is part and, part of the origins of, of what we now know or understand as capitalism. But if we understand that settler colonialism, that the transatlantic slave trade, um, and that, you know, the emergence of a set of philosophical formulations that essentially provide for us some modern conception of self that has as its basis a kind of possessive, heteronormative, patriarchal individuation, right? That's what it is to be yourself on the most fundamental level. You know, and if you ask anybody in the philosophy department, they'll tell you that that's true, you know, and they won’t be joking, right, that, um, that, these, that these constitute the basis of, of our modernity. But for most of the people who live in the world, actually for everybody who lives in the world, although most of the people in live in the world are actually able to both recognize this and say this, that modernity is a social and ecological disaster that we live, that we now attempt to survive. Okay? And if we take that up, then part of what's at stake is that we recognize that feminist and queer interventions against heteronormative patriarchy, that Black interventions against the theory and practice of slavery, which is ongoing, that indigenous interventions against settler colonialism constitute the general both practical and intellectual basis for not only our attempts to survive, but also our attempts to, as I said before, save the Earth. And, and I put it in terms that the great poet Ed Roberson puts it; not just to save the Earth, but to see the Earth before the end of the world. And this is an emergency that we're in now and it's urgent. Um, and I believe that there’s a specific convergence of black thought and indigenous thought that situates itself precisely in relation to, and is articulated through, the interventions of queer thought and feminist thought that we want to take up. And, and it, and it strikes me as, for me at least, it's, it's a way of taking up a kind an—it's, it’s a way of imagining how one might be able to, how we might be able to walk more lightly on the Earth. To honor the Earth as we walk on it, as we stand on it. To not stomp on it, to not stomp all over it, where every step you take is a claim of ownership. And, and this is one way to put it, would be to not so presumptuously imagine that the Earth can be reduced to something so paltry and so viciously understood as what we usually call home. This is part of the reason why the queer and the feminist critique is so important. It's a critique of a general problematic notion of domesticity. It's like another way of being on the Earth that doesn't allow you in some vicious and brutal way to claim that it is yours, right? Um, this is important and this is so, you know, often the methods that we use to claim the Earth as ours involved fences, borders. This manifests itself on a private level from household to household, but it also manifests itself on a national level, and at the level of the nation state, and it's not an accident that settler colonial states take it upon themselves to imagine themselves to be the living embodiment of the legitimacy of the nation state as a political and social form. For me, there's two reasons to be in solidarity with the people of Palestine. One is because they're human beings and they're being treated with absolute brutality, but the other is that there's a specific resistance to Israel as a nation state. And for my money, to be perfectly clear about this, I believe that this nation state of Israel is itself an artifact of antisemitism. If we thought about Israel and Zionism, not just as a form of racism that results in the displacement of Palestinians, but if we also think about them as artifacts of the historic displacement of Jews from Europe, right, in the same way that we might think of, let's say Sierra Leone or Liberia as artifacts of racist displacement, okay. If we think about it that way, okay, and another, and the reason I'm saying this is just to make sure that you know that there's a possible argument against the formulation that criticism of Israel is anti-Semitic when we know that Donald Trump is a staunch supporter, that people like Pat Robertson in the United States are staunch supporters that help us to the fact that you can be deeply anti-Semitic and support the state of Israel. These things go together. They're not antithetical to one another. So that it becomes important for us to be able to suggest that resistance to the state of Israel is also resistance to the idea of the legitimacy of the nation state. It's not an accident that Israel has taken upon itself, that when Israel takes upon itself, when the defense of Israel manifests itself as a defense of its right to exist, this is important. It's a defense, not just of Israel's right to exist, but of the nation state as a political form’s right to exist. And nation states don't have rights. What they're supposed to be are mechanisms to protect the rights of the people who live in them, and that has almost never been the case, and to the extent that they do protect the rights of the people who live in them, it's in the expense, it's at the expense of the people who don't, okay. So part of what's at stake, one of the reasons why it's at, it's important to pay particular attention to this issue, why we ought to resist the ridiculous formulation that singling out Israel at this moment is itself anti-Semitic is because it's important to recognize that Israel is the state. [KELLEY: Right.] MOTEN: For reasons that I think are totally bound up with antisemitism, right? Israel is the state that, insofar as it makes the claim about its right to exist, is also making the claim about the nation state’s right to exist as such. It's this, it's that same kind of argument that, I remembered the—and I'm sorry to keep going on so long, but there's—there's those formulations that people often make about Black people in it or indigenous people as if they were the essence of the human, right, so that every time Black people or indigenous people do something that supposedly we're not supposed to do, it constitutes a violation to the very idea of the human. Right, because somehow as a function of the nobility of our suffering, we constitute the very idea of humanity, right? And there's nothing more brutal, right? Nothing more vicious than having been being consigned to that position. Similarly, Israel as a function of anti-Semitism has now been placed in the position of protecting the very idea of the nation state. So for me, first and foremost, it's important to have solidarity with the Palestinian people, but second of all, it's important to actually have some solidarity with the Jewish people insofar as they can and must be separated from the Israeli state because ultimately the fate of the Jewish people, if it is tied to this, to the nation state of Israel, will be more brutal than anything that has yet been done or can be imagined, and I mean everything that you think I mean when I say that.

# Extinction / death bad

#### Voting for the status quo is anti-black, too – evaluate consequences before ethical alignments

Mathew R. Silliman 3, Professor of Philosophy at the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, 2003, Theory & Research in Education, Vol. 1, No. 3, p. 307-309

This brings me to my second proposal about the source of the problem: it will not I think be possible to validate, understand, and thereby combat the various levels upon which racism operates without finding a place in moral reasoning for outcomes as well as intentions. Blum is attracted, for what I take to be entirely sound reasons, to a non-consequentialist view of morality. On such a view, unintended consequences that are morally undesirable are unfortunate, but not wrong in a strictly moral sense of the term, unless closely connected in some way to actual bad intentions. I share with Blum a preference for this deontological approach to moral analysis, but as the persistence of structural racism shows, we need some way to admit the robust moral significance even of unintended consequences or seriously risk the irrelevance of our moral theory. This is not as difficult to do as it appears, for the idea that these two strains of modern moral thought, consequentialism and deontology, are wholly contradictory is more a product of 18th century intellectual politics than of anything inherent in their moral insights; admitting that consequences matter morally need not involve capitulation to the slippery slope of utilitarian calculation. One fairly inexpensive way to bridge the imaginary gap is just to parse the utilitarian demand as a deontological obligation (and it need not even be the highest of our prima facia duties): one of our moral duties is to live our lives, within the limits of our knowledge and ability, so as to make the world a better and more just place overall. Simple as this seems, and easy to reconcile with principles like the dignity of persons, it is subversive, for it removes a bias in favor of the (oppressive, unjust, racist) social status quo sometimes thought to characterize deontic moral theories. It also revises the relation between individuals and their enabling communities from accidental association to mutual obligation: social structures owe individuals support, (relative) independence, and the best available approximation of justice, whereas individuals in turn owe those same social institutions the impetus for continual moral revitalization.

#### Critique despite certain death reinscribes domination

Murray 8 Rolland Murray, Associate Professor of English @ Brown. Black Crisis Shuffle: Fiction, Race, and Simulation Source: African American Review, Vol. 42, No. 2 (Summer, 2008), pp. 215-233 Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press on behalf of African American Review (St. Louis University) Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/40301207 Accessed: 12-03-2018 15:12 UTC http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/40301207.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Aa229b4c3c0ca72e196ab632b748d88ba

The questions that Blanchot raises with respect to death's possibilities only multiply as one addresses works of literature that equate commodification with death. In Beatty's novel, the difficulties of that risky proposition are nowhere more apparent than in the novel's evocation of suicide as a national poetics. Frustrated simultaneously by the absence of viable political alternatives for black Americans and his own inability to slip the noose of commodification, Gunnar inadvertendy posits black suicide as an option. This prospect comes about at Boston University where Gunnar serves double duty as poet and basketball celebrity. After being asked to give a speech at a divestment rally, Gunnar laments, "today's black leadership isn't worth shit." These "telegenic negroes not willing to die. Back in the old days, if someone spoke up against the white man, he or she was willing to die" (200). Retooling one of Martin Luther King's civil rights era maxims, Gunnar pronounces, "I ain't ready to die for anything, so I guess I'm just not fit to live. In other words, I'm just ready to die" (200). In this articulation Gunnar acknowledges the impossibility of reviving the modes of bodily sacrifice that civil rights activists forged, and begins to articulate suicide as an alternative. Gunnar eventually proposes to consolidate human agency and autonomy by determining his own death. He articulates this logic in a conversation with his friend Psycho Loco who sees suicide as "taking the easy way out" (226). Viewing America's treatment of black men as inevitably lethal, Gunnar retorts, "Might as well kill myself, right? Why give you the satisfaction" (226). To take away the nation's capacity to issue death is thus to reclaim the autonomy of the subject by rendering morbidity a possession that can be reclaimed. It is this very instrumental notion of death that might lead readers to interpret the novel as one that holds a lingering nostalgia for the wholeness of civil rights activism or black nationalism. The text elaborates this interpretive prospect when blacks across the nation become utterly seduced by the idea of national suicide. Gunnar's speech inspires a black nationalist named Dexter Waverly to abandon his superficial rhetoric and kill himself in protest against Boston University's financial support of a corrupt African leader. The fact that this suicide actually forces the university to rescind its financial commitment to the African nation seems to confirm the instrumental use of death and makes Gunnar a national celebrity. Reports "of black people killing themselves indiscriminately across the United States" soon emerge in the national media (201). Additionally, at Gunnar's request, masses of people begin forwarding him their suicide poems. In a world in which all blackness has been thoroughly commodified Gunnar recommends a poetics and politics that seeks to reassert black national agency by rewriting death as a possibility. Or to frame this challenge to commodification somewhat differently, black suicide offers an intriguing twist on Baudrillard's vision of agency within capital. In his formulation, late capital achieves its hegemony through a symbolic substitution of labor for death. The "equivalence of wages and labour power presupposes the death of the worker," for a "man must die to become labour power. He converts this death into a wage" (Symbolic 39). In this sense, then, the wage labor system is always a curious commutation of an execution that capital itself has already performed. Capital's "gift" is the sleight of hand whereby it induces the worker's symbolic death by making him a wage earner and then allows that worker the "gift" of buying his own resurrection through labor. This is the unilateral nature of the gift that sustains capital's dominance. But if "domination comes from the system's retention of the exclusivity of the gift without countergift . . . then the only solution is to turn the principle of its power back against the system itself: the impossibility of responding or retorting. To defy the system with a gift to which it cannot respond save by its own collapse and death" (Symbolic 36-37; original italics). Following a parallel logic, national suicide in Beatty's novel draws its power from its simulation of capital's own unilateral gift, the production of black death as that which refuses exchange.

Despite the allure of death's possibility, the novel ultimately negates this gambit. Gunnar consistently refuses his role as the messianic leader of the masses. His rise to eminence brings increased surveillance by the police and almost constant media scrutiny. After returning to Hillside, the scopophilia becomes so acute that Gunnar and his pregnant wife leave their apartment to take up residence at the La Ciénega Motor Lodge and Laundromat. In his exile, he hopes that he can find a more authentic mode of expression. He subsequently founds the Bacchanalian MiseryFest, an open-mike poetry session that takes place under the "simple but effective" stage lighting provided by orbiting LAPD helicopters (219). While the events do allow for a communal experience of artistic expression - "neighborhood players read poetry, held car shows, sang, danced" - the political and aesthetic integrity of the events seem compromised by their very spectacular nature (219). One night, in commemoration of Nick Scoby's suicide, Gunnar reads a poem and stages an act of self-mutilation that underscores the limits of death as a paradigm of symbolic resistance. The poem articulates the model of suicide as resistance that asserts death as a unilateral gift. The piece submits that the most potent effects of slave rebellion lie not in the effects of infanticide on the "consciousness / of a murderous parent" but "in the slave owner's anguished cries / upon discovering / his property permanently damaged." After the master "calculates his losses / fore casts the impact on this year's crop," he "will notice the textual eyes of murder/ suicide / read 'caveat emptor' / let the buyer beware" (222). In one sense, this seems a perfect allegory for death as that which refuses exchange; the poem thus reads as a Baudrillardian offensive against capitalism. But Gunnar's subsequent mutilation of himself - his cutting off of his own finger - complicates this politics considerably: "I reeled for a moment, then meticulously wrapped the speckled red and-white handkerchief around the severed finger, exactly as I'd seen Robert Mitchum do in some American yakuza movie. Staring at the space where my finger used to be, I held my hand high above my head" (223). His audience of "distraught minions interpreted my masochistic act as sincerity, the media as lunacy. The more I tried to deny my ascendency, the more beloved I became" (223). The spectacle of mutilation must be seen as the enactment of the masochism that underwrites the poem's strategy of resistance. Both depend on a vulgar display of black self-mutilation. Gunnar's cynical response also confirms the ultimate bankruptcy of these strategies. Prisoner of both the police and the media at the moment in which he is most resistant to the system, his rebellion is being recycled as part of the dominant order's simulative strategies. He cannot imagine a form of agency without deriving it from a Hollywood film. In this respect, the reclamation of death as a radical subversion of capital is itself vulnerable to the social order that the strategy seeks to challenge. In short-circuiting the Utopian potential of revolt, the novel foregrounds the absoluteness of the system's dominance, the inescapability of its atomizing effects. The core contradiction of Beatty's novel, then, does not reside in a vexed nostalgia for coherent community, but in the fact that the text draws euphorically on the abstractions of commodification while foregrounding its insinuation into every sphere of contemporary African American life.

By refusing an equation between death and political agency the novel not only works contrary to Baudrillard's Marxism but also in contradistinction to a seminal current in black cultural theory. Influential works by Sharon Holland and Paul Gilroy imagine that dwelling among and even "resurrecting" the dead serves as both a means to confirm the agency of the individual subject and the racial com munity. Holland's reading of Morrison's Beloved construes the novel as a labor to resurrect "the 'ghost' of slavery in order to let the dead speak to the living, in order to allow silence to manifest itself in language" (40). By opening up the possibility of communion between the dead child and the living black subjects in the novel, Beloved brings "about the repair of the psychic damage of slavery and serves as an antidote to the beleaguered status of black women in contemporary America" (52). The dead thus make possible a series of reversals, from silence to speech, from damaged to recovered, and from beleaguered to unburdened. Along the same lines, Gilroy's account of transatlantic performances that commemorate the dead also serve to consolidate at once the subjectivity of the black performer and a racial community as such. As he phrases it, the "turn towards death" also "points to the ways in which black cultural forms have hosted and even cultivated a dynamic rap port with the presence of death and suffering" (198). Gilroy interprets musical forms like the blues and jazz as "mnemonic" devices that "preserve and cultivate . . . the distinctive rapport with the presence of death which derives from slavery ..." (198, 203). Cultural practices thereby facilitate the reproduction of the death and negativity that attended the African's bondage in New World slavery. It is in this remembrance that Gilroy locates the grounds for a black "racial counterculture" and thus political agency (200). By contrast, in Beatty's work death provides no Utopian opposition against late capitalism. Even as Beatty evokes the legacy of death in slavery, he insists that the fantasy of black agency must also be subject to the limits of late capitalist hegemony. The result of the strategy is that it insists on the primacy of the problematic that attends contemporary political economy. This approach contains an implicit charge that insisting on the Utopian possibility of the slave's death is in some sense to evade the quandaries of contemporary political economy.

An ambivalence about the achievement of agency through death surfaces in James's Negrophobia in very different terms. A passage featuring a character named Talking Dreads develops a scenario that parallels James's evocation of Voodoo. Whereas Maid fails to use Voodoo effectively because she does not understand the power of simulation to reproduce every act of resistance as part of itself, Talking Dreads overcomes that liability. This being from another planet appears to Bubbles Brazil at times as a "disembodied, dreadlocked head" and at others as an "empty white linen suit" (123). He recounts the story of how he was used by a Scottish female author as the inspiration for a text with the title Ul' Black Zambo. Of course, the title and authorial biography point to Helen Bannerman's notoriously racist chil dren's story Uttle Black Sambo. Therefore, when readers learn that UV Black Zambo is a text based on its author's inability to see Talking Dreads as anything but the racist caricatures in her imagination, the novel implicates Bannerman's text in the same process of misrecognition. Moreover, as the linguistic blend of "zombie" and "Sambo" in the title suggests, the text of Uly Black Zambo can be read as a represen tation in which James's investment in Voodoo and the commodity converge. That is, the orthographic changes invoking Voodoo zombies also underscore the text's play with the dead signifiers of racial representation. The text recodes the commodified blackness in Bannerman's original text in order to produce a simulation that takes the original to task. The strategy is evident in the first lines of the simulated text.

IiP Black Zambo was a little nigger boy. Or Pickaninny. Or jigaboo. Or any number of names we have for little colored children - shine, smoke, snowball, dinge, dust, inky, egg plant, and chocolate moonpie. And since IiT Black Zambo lived with his mammy in a one room hut made of mud and leaves near a croc-infested swamp in the Jungle, we can call him 'gator bait, too. (124-25)

The incongruity between the dulcet rhetoric of the children's tale and the crude abjection of Zambo in this stockpiling of racial epithets places the concealed vio lence of Bannerman's text at the forefront of its simulation. And in this way occu pying the dead form of the commodity allows Negrophobia to make the kind of instrumental counter to racism that James imagines as "subverting the perversion." Still, despite James's claim regarding Voodoo, it is Bannerman's commodified repre sentation that allows him to make such a maneuver. The invocation of Voodoo mystifies a set of social relations that have more to do with capital than Haitian reli gion as such. Moreover, the rebellion that Talking Dreads engages in is more accu rately described as simulation than Voodoo. This becomes all the more apparent when he shows Bubbles a secret project to defeat white racism. It involves a simu lated town called Garvey's Corner in which all of the citizens appear to be white Americans but are in fact blacks "trained to look, act and think white" (139). These simulated whites are reproduced to "undermine all the rights and freedoms American society has to offer the white race without the slightest detection" (139). In a sense then, the tactic here is to undermine white supremacy by becoming as adept in simulation as the dominant culture.

Ever consistent in its disintegrative aesthetic, however, the novel upsets the utopia that Talking Dreads endorses. In a parallel episode the narrative focuses on the Zombie Master, a self-styled "revolutionary" character. He aims to overthrow white supremacy by building an army of zombies out of the bodies of dead celebrities. JFK and Elvis are among the corpses that he reconstructs in his laboratory. The chief manifestation of the white supremacy that the Zombie Master aims to destroy is Walt Disney. In a brilliant parody of white supremacist ideology, Walt Disney uses all of his mass-culture resources to foment the rage of white Americans and thereby destroy the black race. Giving a speech modeled on the Gettysburg Address, he asks the white Nation to embrace his enduring nativist creed: "Hang the nigger and burn the Jew!" (99). The Zombie Master counters this nationalist plot when he sends hordes of his zombies in to destroy Walt Disney and his theme park, the Disney Magic Mall. As the assault on the park unfolds, the Zombie Master and his favorite Zombie, Elvis, discover Disney asleep in his sub basement casket. Zombie Master begins to drive "the stake into Walt's heart" when he realizes that Disney is literally a robot and therefore "a puppet in his own mad design!" (111). The scene anatomizes a chief problem with investing in the radical insurgency of the dead. A political battle between simulations could turn out to be just that, an empty symbolic endeavor with no consequential stakes. The culture of simulation may have the effect of rendering even symbolic gestures of resistance obsolete; it is this dystopian possibility that the radical visions of Talking Dreads and Baudrillard fail to address.

For both James and Beatty then, the tensions between the aesthetic possibilities of simulated blackness and the fraught prospects of political agency in a world inundated by simulation pose the problem of black postmodernity in terms that exceed the discourse of crisis. One cannot read these texts exclusively as indexes of a crisis in belonging, for they begin with the premise that whatever made older forms of communion possible now only exists as spectral reproduction. And if there is no returning to the past, then these are novels inordinately concerned with the cartography of the present. They probe the possibilities and limits of literature and politics within late capitalism. While they traffic in the recombination made available by simulated blackness, they are also shrewdly aware that these same mechanisms install new forms of racial domination. The timely genius of the novels is that they are neither seduced entirely by the prospect of a radically recoding simulation in the manner of poststructuralists like Baudrillard and Foster, nor held prisoner by Blanchot's suggestion that death makes available only a set of dubious performative operations. Employing the archive of dead signifiers that produce racial difference as mediating terms between death's erasure and possibility, these texts insist on our reconsideration of existing frameworks for reading contemporary black culture. Indeed, the refusal to invest in a politics of authenticity militates against the persistent critical desire to find racial affirmation in black art. It is this longing that shapes the ongoing controversies surrounding not only Darius James but also die visual art of Michael Ray Charles and Kara Walker.10 Critics take issue with this work because in their minds it reproduces the denigrating minstrel representations of the past. What such commentaries have not addressed is how the art itself challenges the very foundations of this critique by undermining the concept of a Utopian black expressive culture that transcends or inverts capital. As I have argued, a useful alternative to indicting the work for its complicity in racist representation is to interpret it as an aesthetic tendency that both grapples with the difficulties posed by late capitalist political economy and formalizes its own ideological implication in the contra dictions produced by that system. To wish that this art were like that of another time is to evade a present not adequately examined and perhaps to refuse the potentially unreal future of race.

# Misc

## voters

#### Black voters make political change—Stacey Abrams mobilized voters that swung Georgia blue in 2020

Fedor 20 - US POLITICAL CORRESPONDENT (Lauren Fedor, “Stacey Abrams credited for mobilising black voters in Georgia,” Financial Times, 12/6/2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/bba74f61-fc1a-47f6-85f6-54bb86e83e7e)//mcu>

Nine months later and Stacey Abrams is earning similar plaudits for her significant efforts in the battle to defeat Donald Trump. Ms **Abrams**, a voting rights activist and former Democratic state legislator in Georgia, is widely **credited as the architect behind grassroots efforts** to **turn “blue” a state that has not voted for a Democratic presidential candidate in nearly 30 years.** Ben Rhodes, a former top adviser to Barack Obama, spoke for many of Mr Biden’s supporters when he said: “As Democrats chart a course forward as a party, the first person they should turn to is Stacey Abrams.” In 2014, Ms Abrams set up a group called the New Georgia Project focused on registering and mobilising black voters. Two years ago, she formed another organisation, Fair Fight Action, to tackle voter suppression after she lost the Georgia governor’s race to Republican Brian Kemp by less than a percentage point. Since then, **some 800,000 new voters** have been registered in the state, many of them African-American. As of Friday afternoon, ballots were still being counted in Georgia. But it looked increasingly likely that Mr Biden would emerge the victor there, after early and mail-in votes from black communities in and around the city of Atlanta were tabulated, allowing him to overtake Mr Trump in the vote count. Voter registration figures, early voting data and county-level election results suggest similar patterns helped Mr Biden edge out Mr Trump in other battleground states, notably Pennsylvania and Michigan. Had we not seen this level of engagement and intensity and enthusiasm, among voters of colour . . . we would be looking at a very **different outcome** Tom Bonier, TargetSmart “We have a really strong data set and pool of evidence that the black vote was crucial, especially as you look at the narrow margins in some of these key states,” said Tom Bonier, chief executive of TargetSmart, a Democratic data company. He added that voter registration figures in Georgia and nationwide showed a surge of black people signing up to cast ballots in the wake of the killing of George Floyd at the start of the summer. “Had we not seen this level of engagement and intensity and enthusiasm, among voters of colour . . . we would be looking at a very different outcome,” he said. Democratic activists have for years recognised that African-Americans were key to their party’s prospects at the ballot box, especially after the 2016 election, when black voter turnout nationwide fell for the first time in two decades. Even though 91 per cent of black voters cast their ballots for Hillary Clinton, compared with just 6 per cent who backed Mr Trump, analysts said the fact black voters stayed at home in Pennsylvania, Wisconsin and Michigan — which Mr Trump won by razor-thin margins of 44,000, 22,700 and 10,700 votes, respectively — probably cost Mrs Clinton victory. “One of the shortcomings of the 2016 election for Democrats was black voter turnout lagged behind 2012, especially among younger black men,” Mr Bonier said. “The evidence we have now in this election is those numbers rebounded, and then some, to historic levels.” LaTosha Brown, right, co-founder of the Black Votes Matter Fund © Dean Anthony ll Ms Abrams wrote on Twitter on Friday that her heart was “full”, adding that “so many deserve credit” for Georgia’s surge towards the Democrats. Georgia voters have not backed a Democratic presidential candidate since 1992. Before that, the last Democrat to be successful in Georgia was Jimmy Carter, a native of the state, back in 1976. One of the groups Ms Abrams cited was the Black Voters Matter Fund, an Atlanta-based grassroots organisation co-founded by LaTosha Brown. Ms Brown, who has spent recent weeks on a multi-state bus tour meeting black community leaders, said the election results were the culmination of years of work in engaging underserved communities that politicians had historically ignored. “Community based organising works. Investing on the ground can make the difference,” she said, explaining that her group’s strategy was to support and fund grassroots organisations rather than take a top-down approach. Ms Brown led a multi-state bus tour to register black voters © Dean Anthony ll “We know our community. It’s going to take the churches, it’s going to take the civic groups, it’s going to take the activists, it’s going to take the organisers, it’s going to take the businesses,” she added. “We’ve shown that when you invest in people on the ground, these are the results that you get.” Antjuan Seawright, a Democratic strategist based in South Carolina and an adviser to Mr Clyburn, agreed. “This is why so many of us, for so long, have been screaming that you have to treat the black vote as an investment, not an expense,” he said. “Black people knew that this election was about survival, and they voted as such. “The truth of the matter is when democracy needed recalibration, it was the most consequential voting bloc in American history.”

## Passive voice

#### Passive voice is key – it boosts minority participation and expands dominant discourse into critical theory

**Dillard-Knox 14** (Tiffany Yvonne Dillard-Knox, Knox is analyzing the History of Black discourse within debate @ U of Louisville, “Against the grain: The Challenge of Black discourse within inter-collegiate policy debate”, <https://ir.library.louisville.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3166&context=etd>, Published December 2014, Accessed 2/5/19, pg 69-70, Lex RM)

Historically, the topics that have been selected have been constructed utilizing the active voice as opposed to a passive voice. An active voice example would be, ―Resolved: The United States Federal Government should substantially increase statutory and/or judicial restrictions on the war powers authority of the President of the United States. A passive voice example would be, ―Resolved: The war powers authority of the President of the United States should be substantially restricted. The active voice topics require debaters to defend that the United States Federal Government―do something in a more limited capacity, whereas a passive voice topic could allow debaters the opportunity to defend a variety of interpretations of ―something being done by or to the United States Federal Government. The active voice topic always gives the agency to act to the United States Government. For students that see themselves as having the possibility to access these positions of power, acquiring these skills become empowering. However, many marginalized students come to Debate from communities that have historically been excluded from these positions of power. Having a passive topic that removes the agency from the United States Federal Government and allows debaters the flexibility to choose who has agency thus becomes more empowering to this population of students. These students would then be more motivated to participate in the process of debate through which they can acquire a variety of skill sets from politician to community activists. Secondly, the literature base used to construct the topic has failed to include perspectives found within the race literature, such as the legal and political scholarship of Derrick Bell (1992), Cornel West (1994), and bell hooks (1995). Very little, if any, attention has been given to Critical Race Theory or Critical Legal Studies within the chosen controversy areas, such as Immigration and Supreme Court Cases. Even when topic papers are submitted that do include this literature, they are rarely, if ever selected in the voting process. This is important to the conversation of debating the topic in that the topic paper sets the definitional guidelines of what is considered topical. If the topic paper is limited to the language and perspective of the dominant, then so too will the debates be limited to the language and perspective of the dominant. Thus, it could be argued that the topic does not account for the discourse strategies of marginalized populations and could be an additional source of exclusion from Debate.

## Policy debates good

#### No broad offense- policy debates are uniquely key to prevent rollback of antiracist gains- we assume your authors

David Gillbor,et al\*, Sean Demack , Nicola Rollocka and Paul Warmington A University of Birmingham, UK; b Sheffield Hallam University, UK; c University of Warwick, UKNo Publication, 10-x-2017 http://www.blackfeministpedagogies.com/uploads/2/5/5/9/25595205/moving\_the\_goalposts-\_education\_policy\_and\_25\_years\_of\_the\_black\_white\_achievement\_gap.pdf//DG

Our analysis begins by looking at how the Black/White achievement gap has featured in the changing landscape of relevant academic and policy debates over the period. We then set out the methods and data sources that provide the material for our analysis. The paper concludes by discussing the wider lessons that can be drawn, especially concerning the role of education policy, the uncertainty of progressive antiracist gains and the speed with which they can be rolled back by apparently technical changes in how ‘standards’ are measured and debated. First, it is useful to be explicit about the parameters for our analysis. Framework and focus: What this paper is, and is not, about This paper charts the inequality of achievement between Black and White students at the end of compulsory schooling over a 25-year period (1988–2013). Our analytic framework is informed by Critical Race Theory (CRT), an approach that views race as a social construction whose definition and deployment (in policy and practice) is highly complex, contingent and fluid (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Taylor et al., 2016). Critical race theorists do not view racism as merely encompassing crude and obvious acts of race hatred. Rather, CRT also focuses on ‘business-as-usual forms of racism’ (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000, p. xvi), i.e. the everyday, mundane and taken-for-granted processes and assumptions that shape society in the interests of people identified as ‘White’ and against the interests of particular minoritised groups.2

## AT: Surrender to Blackness

#### “Surrender to Blackness” is worse for community formation, reifies trauma, and actively strengthens anti-Black structures by marginalizing the Black people who were never here to surrender to in the first place.

Táíwò, 20—assistant professor of philosophy at Georgetown University (Olúfémi, “Being-in-the-Room Privilege: Elite Capture and Epistemic Deference,” The Philosopher, vol. 108, no. 4, dml)

I think it’s less about the core ideas and more about the prevailing norms that convert them into practice. The call to “listen to the most affected” or “centre the most marginalized” is ubiquitous in many academic and activist circles. But it’s never sat well with me. In my experience, when people say they need to “listen to the most affected”, it isn’t because they intend to set up Skype calls to refugee camps or to collaborate with houseless people. Instead, it has more often meant handing conversational authority and attentional goods to those who most snugly fit into the social categories associated with these ills – regardless of what they actually do or do not know, or what they have or have not personally experienced. In the case of my conversation with Helen, my racial category tied me more “authentically” to an experience that neither of us had had. She was called to defer to me by the rules of the game as we understood it. Even where stakes are high – where potential researchers are discussing how to understand a social phenomenon, where activists are deciding what to target – these rules often prevail.

The trap wasn’t that standpoint epistemology was affecting the conversation, but how. Broadly, the norms of putting standpoint epistemology into practice call for practices of deference: giving offerings, passing the mic, believing. These are good ideas in many cases, and the norms that ask us to be ready to do them stem from admirable motivations: a desire to increase the social power of marginalized people identified as sources of knowledge and rightful targets of deferential behaviour. But deferring in this way as a rule or default political orientation can actually work counter to marginalized groups’ interests, especially in elite spaces.

Some rooms have outsize power and influence: the Situation Room, the newsroom, the bargaining table, the conference room. Being in these rooms means being in a position to affect institutions and broader social dynamics by way of deciding what one is to say and do. Access to these rooms is itself a kind of social advantage, and one often gained through some prior social advantage. From a societal standpoint, the “most affected” by the social injustices we associate with politically important identities like gender, class, race, and nationality are disproportionately likely to be incarcerated, underemployed, or part of the 44 percent of the world’s population without internet access – and thus both left out of the rooms of power and largely ignored by the people in the rooms of power. Individuals who make it past the various social selection pressures that filter out those social identities associated with these negative outcomes are most likely to be in the room. That is, they are most likely to be in the room precisely because of ways in which they are systematically different from (and thus potentially unrepresentative of) the very people they are then asked to represent in the room.

I suspected that Helen’s offer was a trap. She was not the one who set it, but it threatened to ensnare us both all the same. Broader cultural norms – the sort set in motion by prefacing statements with “As a Black man…” – cued up a set of standpoint-respecting practices that many of us know consciously or unconsciously by rote. However, the forms of deference that often follow are ultimately self-undermining and only reliably serve “elite capture”: the control over political agendas and resources by a group’s most advantaged people. If we want to use standpoint epistemology to challenge unjust power arrangements, it’s hard to imagine how we could do worse.

To say what’s wrong with the popular, deferential applications of standpoint epistemology, we need to understand what makes it popular. A number of cynical answers present themselves: some (especially the more socially advantaged) don’t genuinely want social change – they just want the appearance of it. Alternatively, deference to figures from oppressed communities is a performance that sanitizes, apologizes for, or simply distracts from the fact that the deferrer has enough “in the room” privilege for their “lifting up” of a perspective to be of consequence.

I suspect there is some truth to these views, but I am unsatisfied. Many of the people who support and enact these deferential norms are rather like Helen: motivated by the right reasons, but trusting people they share such rooms with to help them find the proper practical expression of their joint moral commitments. We don’t need to attribute bad faith to all or even most of those who interpret standpoint epistemology deferentially to explain the phenomenon, and it’s not even clear it would help. Bad “roommates” aren’t the problem for the same reason that Helen being a good roommate wasn’t the solution: the problem emerges from how the rooms themselves are constructed and managed.

To return to the initial example with Helen, the issue wasn’t merely that I hadn’t grown up in the kind of low-income, redlined community she was imagining. The epistemic situation was much worse than this. Many of the facts about me that made my life chances different from those of the people she was imagining were the very same facts that made me likely to be offered things on their behalf. If I had grown up in such a community, we probably wouldn’t have been on the phone together.

Many aspects of our social system serve as filtering mechanisms, determining which interactions happen and between whom, and thus which social patterns people are in a position to observe. For the majority of the 20th century, the U.S. quota system of immigration made legal immigration with a path to citizenship almost exclusively available to Europeans (earning Hitler’s regard as the obvious “leader in developing explicitly racist policies of nationality and immigration”). But the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act opened up immigration possibilities, with a preference for “skilled labour”.

My parents’ qualification as skilled labourers does much to explain their entry into the country and the subsequent class advantages and monetary resources (such as wealth) that I was born into. We are not atypical: the Nigerian-American population is one of the country’s most successful immigrant populations (what no one mentions, of course, is that the 112,000 or so Nigerian-Americans with advanced degrees is utterly dwarfed by the 82 million Nigerians who live on less than a dollar a day, or how the former fact intersects with the latter). The selectivity of immigration law helps explain the rates of educational attainment of the Nigerian diasporic community that raised me, which in turn helps explain my entry into the exclusive Advanced Placement and Honours classes in high school, which in turn helps explain my access to higher education...and so on, and so on.

It is easy, then, to see how this deferential form of standpoint epistemology contributes to elite capture at scale. The rooms of power and influence are at the end of causal chains that have selection effects. As you get higher and higher forms of education, social experiences narrow – some students are pipelined to PhDs and others to prisons. Deferential ways of dealing with identity can inherit the distortions caused by these selection processes.

​But it’s equally easy to see locally – in this room, in this academic literature or field, in this conversation – why this deference seems to make sense. It is often an improvement on the epistemic procedure that preceded it: the person deferred to may well be better epistemically positioned than the others in the room. It may well be the best we can do while holding fixed most of the facts about the rooms themselves: what power resides in them, who is admitted.

But these are the last facts we should want to hold fixed. Doing better than the epistemic norms we’ve inherited from a history of explicit global apartheid is an awfully low bar to set. The facts that explain who ends up in which room shape our world much more powerfully than the squabbles for comparative prestige between people who have already made it into the rooms. And when the conversation is about social justice, the mechanisms of the social system that determine who gets into which room often just are the parts of society we aim to address. For example, the fact that incarcerated people cannot participate in academic discussions about freedom that physically take place on campus is intimately related to the fact that they are locked in cages.

Deference epistemology marks itself as a solution to an epistemic and political problem. But not only does it fail to solve these problems, it adds new ones. One might think questions of justice ought to be primarily concerned with fixing disparities around health care, working conditions, and basic material and interpersonal security. Yet conversations about justice have come to be shaped by people who have ever more specific practical advice about fixing the distribution of attention and conversational power. Deference practices that serve attention-focused campaigns (e.g. we’ve read too many white men, let’s now read some people of colour) can fail on their own highly questionable terms: attention to spokespeople from marginalized groups could, for example, direct attention away from the need to change the social system that marginalizes them.

Elites from marginalized groups can benefit from this arrangement in ways that are compatible with social progress. But treating group elites’ interests as necessarily or even presumptively aligned with full group interests involves a political naiveté we cannot afford. Such treatment of elite interests functions as a racial Reaganomics: a strategy reliant on fantasies about the exchange rate between the attention economy and the material economy.

Perhaps the lucky few who get jobs finding the most culturally authentic and cosmetically radical description of the continuing carnage are really winning one for the culture. Then, after we in the chattering class get the clout we deserve and secure the bag, its contents will eventually trickle down to the workers who clean up after our conferences, to slums of the Global South’s megacities, to its countryside.

But probably not.

A fuller and fairer assessment of what is going on with deference and standpoint epistemology would go beyond technical argument, and contend with the emotional appeals of this strategy of deference. Those in powerful rooms may be “elites” relative to the larger group they represent, but this guarantees nothing about how they are treated in the rooms they are in. After all, a person privileged in an absolute sense (a person belonging to, say, the half of the world that has secure access to “basic needs”) may nevertheless feel themselves to be consistently on the low end of the power dynamics they actually experience. Deference epistemology responds to real, morally weighty experiences of being put down, ignored, sidelined, or silenced. It thus has an important non-epistemic appeal to members of stigmatized or marginalized groups: it intervenes directly in morally consequential practices of giving attention and respect.

The social dynamics we experience have an outsize role in developing and refining our political subjectivity, and our sense of ourselves. But this very strength of standpoint epistemology – its recognition of the importance of perspective – becomes its weakness when combined with deferential practical norms. Emphasis on the ways we are marginalized often matches the world as we have experienced it. But, from a structural perspective, the rooms we never needed to enter (and the explanations of why we can avoid these rooms) might have more to teach us about the world and our place in it. If so, the deferential approach to standpoint epistemology actually prevents “centring” or even hearing from the most marginalized; it focuses us on the interaction of the rooms we occupy, rather than calling us to account for the interactions we don’t experience

. This fact about who is in the room, combined with the fact that speaking for others generates its own set of important problems (particularly when they are not there to advocate for themselves), eliminates pressures that might otherwise trouble the centrality of our own suffering – and of the suffering of the marginalized people that do happen to make it into rooms with us.

The dangers with this feature of deference politics are grave, as are the risks for those outside of the most powerful rooms. For those who are deferred to, it can supercharge group-undermining norms. In Conflict is Not Abuse, Sarah Schulman makes a provocative observation about the psychological effects of both trauma and felt superiority: while these often come about for different reasons and have very different moral statuses, they result in similar behavioural patterns. Chief among these are misrepresenting the stakes of conflict (often by overstating harm) or representing others’ independence as a hostile threat (such as failures to “centre” the right topics or people). These behaviours, whatever their causal history, have corrosive effects on individuals who perform them as well as the groups around them, especially when a community’s norms magnify or multiply these behaviours rather than constraining or metabolizing them.

For those who defer, the habit can supercharge moral cowardice. The norms provide social cover for the abdication of responsibility: it displaces onto individual heroes, a hero class, or a mythicized past the work that is ours to do now in the present. Their perspective may be clearer on this or that specific matter, but their overall point of view isn’t any less particular or constrained by history than ours. More importantly, deference places the accountability that is all of ours to bear onto select people – and, more often than not, a hyper-sanitized and thoroughly fictional caricature of them.

The same tactics of deference that insulate us from criticism also insulate us from connection and transformation. They prevent us from engaging empathetically and authentically with the struggles of other people – prerequisites of coalitional politics. As identities become more and more fine-grained and disagreements sharper, we come to realize that “coalitional politics” (understood as struggle across difference) is, simply, politics. Thus, the deferential orientation, like that fragmentation of political collectivity it enables, is ultimately anti-political.

Deference rather than interdependence may soothe short-term psychological wounds. But it does so at a steep cost: it can undermine the epistemic goals that motivate the project, and it entrenches a politics unbefitting of anyone fighting for freedom rather than for privilege, for collective liberation rather than mere parochial advantage.

How would a constructive approach to putting standpoint epistemology into practice differ from a deferential approach? A constructive approach would focus on the pursuit of specific goals or end results rather than avoiding “complicity” in injustice or adhering to moral principles. It would be concerned primarily with building institutions and cultivating practices of information-gathering rather than helping. It would focus on accountability rather than conformity. It would calibrate itself directly to the task of redistributing social resources and power rather than to intermediary goals cashed out in terms of pedestals or symbolism. It would focus on building and rebuilding rooms, not regulating traffic within and between them – it would be a world-making project: aimed at building and rebuilding actual structures of social connection and movement, rather than mere critique of the ones we already have.

The water crisis in Flint, Michigan presents a clear example of both the possibilities and limitations of refining our epistemic politics in this way. Michigan’s Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ), a government body tasked with the support of “healthy communities”, with a team of fifty trained scientists at its disposal, was complicit in covering up the scale and gravity of the public health crisis from the beginning of the crisis in 2014 until it garnered national attention in 2015.

The MDEQ, speaking from a position of epistemic and political authority, defended the status quo in Flint. They claimed that “Flint water is safe to drink”, and were cited in Flint Mayor Dayne Walling’s statement aiming to “dispel myths and promote the truth about the Flint River” during the April 2014 transition to the Flint River water source. That transition was spearheaded under the tenure of the city’s emergency manager Darnell Earley (an African-American, like many of the city residents he helped to poison). After the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) circulated a leaked internal memo from the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in July of 2014 expressing concern about lead in Flint water, the MDEQ produced a doctored report that put the overall measure of lead levels within federally mandated levels by mysteriously failing to count two contaminated samples.

The reaction from residents was immediate. The month after the switch in water source, residents reported that their tap water was discoloured and gave off an alarming odour. They didn’t need their oppression to be “celebrated”, “centred”, or narrated in the newest academic parlance. They didn’t need someone to understand what it felt like to be poisoned. What they needed was the lead out of their water. So they got to work.

The first step was to develop epistemic authority. To achieve this they built a new room: one that put Flint residents and activists in active collaboration with scientists who had the laboratories that could run the relevant tests and prove the MDEQ’s report to be fraudulent. Flint residents’ outcry recruited scientists to their cause and led a “citizen science” campaign, further raising the alarm about the water quality and distributing sample kits to neighbours to submit for testing. In this stage, the alliance of residents and scientists won, and the poisoning of the children of Flint emerged as a national scandal.

But this was not enough. The second step – cleaning the water – required more than state acknowledgement: it required apportioning labour and resources to fix the water and address the continuing health concerns. What Flint residents received, initially, was a mix of platitudes and mockery from the ruling elite (some of this personally committed by a President that shared a racial identity with many of them). This year, however, it looks as though the tireless activism of Flint residents and their expanding list of teammates has won additional and more meaningful victories: the ongoing campaign is pushing the replacements of the problematic service lines to their final stage and is forcing the state of Michigan to agree to a settlement of $600 million for affected families.

This outcome is in no way a wholesale victory: not only will attorney fees cut a substantial portion of payouts, but the settlement cannot undo the damage that was caused to the residents. A constructive epistemology cannot guarantee full victory over an oppressive system by itself. No epistemic orientation can by itself undo the various power asymmetries between the people and the imperial state system. But it can help make the game a little more competitive – and deference epistemology isn’t even playing.

The biggest threats to social justice attention and informational economies are not the absence of yet more jargon to describe, ever more precisely or incisively, the epistemic, attentional, or interpersonal afflictions of the disempowered. The biggest threats are the erosion of the practical and material bases for popular power over knowledge production and distribution, particularly that which could aid effective political action and constrain or eliminate predation by elites. The capture and corruption of these bases by well-positioned elites, especially tech corporations, goes on unabated and largely unchallenged, including: the corporate monopolization of local news, the ongoing destruction and looting of the journalistic profession, the interference of corporations and governments in key democratic processes, and the domination of elite interests in the production of knowledge by research universities and the circulation of the output of these distorted processes by established media organizations.

Confronting these threats requires leaving some rooms – and building new ones.

The constructive approach to standpoint epistemology is demanding. It asks that we swim upstream: to be accountable and responsive to people who aren’t yet in the room, to build the kinds of rooms we could sit in together, rather than merely judiciously navigating the rooms history has built for us. But this weighty demand is par for the course when it comes to the politics of knowledge: the American philosopher Sandra Harding famously pointed out that standpoint epistemology, properly understood, demands more rigour from science and knowledge production processes generally, not less.

But one important topic stands unaddressed. The deferential approach to standpoint epistemology often comes packaged with concern and attention to the importance of lived experience. Among these, traumatic experiences are especially foregrounded.

At this juncture, scholarly analysis and argument fail me. The remainder of what I have to say skews more towards conviction than contention. But the life of books has taught me that conviction has just as much to teach, however differently posed or processed, and so I press on.

I take concerns about trauma especially seriously. I grew up in the United States, a nation structured by settler colonialism, racial slavery, and their aftermath, with enough collective and historical trauma to go round. I also grew up in a Nigerian diasporic community, populated by many who had genocide in living memory. At the national and community level, I have seen a lot of traits of norms, personality, quirks of habit and action that I’ve suspected were downstream of these facts. At the level of individual experience, I’ve watched and felt myself change in reaction to fearing for my dignity or life, to crushing pain and humiliation. I reflect on these traumatic moments often, and very seldom think: “That was educational”.

These experiences can be, if we are very fortunate, building blocks. What comes of them depends on how the blocks are put together: what standpoint epistemologists call the “achievement thesis”. Briana Toole clarifies that, by itself, one’s social location only puts a person in a position to know. “Epistemic privilege” or advantage is achieved only through deliberate, concerted struggle from that position.

I concede outright that this is certainly one possible result of the experience of oppression: have no doubt that humiliation, deprivation, and suffering can build (especially in the context of the deliberate, structured effort of “consciousness raising”, as Toole specifically highlights). But these same experiences can also destroy, and if I had to bet on which effect would win most often, it would be the latter. As Agnes Callard rightly notes, trauma (and even the righteous, well-deserved anger that often accompanies it) can corrupt as readily as it can ennoble. Perhaps more so.

Contra the old expression, pain – whether borne of oppression or not – is a poor teacher. Suffering is partial, short-sighted, and self-absorbed. We shouldn’t have a politics that expects different: oppression is not a prep school.

When it comes down to it, the thing I believe most deeply about deference epistemology is that it asks something of trauma that it cannot give. Demanding as the constructive approach may be, the deferential approach is far more demanding and in a far more unfair way: it asks the traumatized to shoulder burdens alone that we ought to share collectively. When I think about my trauma, I don’t think about grand lessons. I think about the quiet nobility of survival. The very fact that those chapters weren’t the final ones of my story is powerful enough writing all on its own. It is enough to ask of those experiences that I am still here to remember them.

Deference epistemology asks us to be less than we are – and not even for our own benefit. As Nick Estes explains in the context of Indigenous politics: “The cunning of trauma politics is that it turns actual people and struggles, whether racial or Indigenous citizenship and belonging, into matters of injury. It defines an entire people mostly on their trauma and not by their aspirations or sheer humanity”. This performance is not for the benefit of Indigenous people, but “for white audiences or institutions of power”.

I also think about James Baldwin’s realization that the things that tormented him the most were “the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, who had ever been alive”. That I have survived abuse of various kinds, have faced near-death from both accidental circumstance and violence (different as the particulars of these may be from those around me) is not a card to play in gamified social interaction or a weapon to wield in battles over prestige. It is not what gives me a special right to speak, to evaluate, or to decide for a group. It is a concrete, experiential manifestation of the vulnerability that connects me to most of the people on this Earth. It comes between me and other people not as a wall, but as a bridge.

## Too monolithic

#### There is no monolithic “Blackness” to “center.”

Kennedy, 2-4-21—Michael R. Klein Professor at Harvard Law School (Randall, “On the Authority of Experience in Black Thought,” <https://heterodoxacademy.org/blog/on-the-authority-of-experience-in-black-thought/>, dml)

A distinguished roster of black activist thinkers have adopted an optimistic perspective regarding the possibility of attaining racial justice in America. Optimists include Mary McLeod Bethune, Walter White, A. Philip Randolph, Martin Luther King Jr, Ralph Ellison, John Lewis, and Barack Obama. An impressive cadre of black activist thinkers believe, by contrast, that attaining racial justice in America is a virtual impossibility. Agreeing with Thomas Jefferson and Alexis de Tocqueville, they contend that racial slavery fatally poisoned the possibility of racial harmony in America. They contend that we shall not overcome. Pessimists include Henry McNeal Turner, Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, Derrick Bell, and Randall Robinson.

Fervent debates about scores of subjects – indeed every imaginable subject — have roiled African Americans ideologically: accommodation versus protest; interracial socialism versus black nationalism; Gandhian non-violence versus “by any means necessary,” support for affirmative action versus detestation of “lowered standards,“ “integration” versus “black power,” “respectability politics” versus “I don’t give a fuck” authenticity politics. Black thinkers have even disagreed over the years about the preferred term by which they designate “Blacks,” “blacks,” “African Americans,” “Negroes,” “colored people,” and “people of color.”

There are several implications to be drawn from recognizing the frequently underestimated breadth, complexity, and variety of beliefs and perspectives found amongst African Americans. One is the dubious utility of resorting to “experience” as an explanation for a given way of thinking. It is frequently said, for example, that the egalitarianism manifested in the jurisprudence of Justice Thurgood Marshall is a function of his experience as a black man oppressed by white supremacism. But what about other black men also oppressed by white supremacism who responded very differently, such as Justice Clarence Thomas, who is deeply antagonistic towards the social egalitarianism that Marshall embraced?

A wide variety of thought is discernible amongst people who have undergone a similar experience because experience does not dictate thought. It is undoubtedly influential which is why one can detect notable demographic patterns from which one can chart probabilities. It is probable that an African American will prefer the Democratic as opposed to the Republican candidate for president. But that does not mean that the experience of a particular African American will necessarily determine that person’s preferences. Experience affects thinking in all sorts of subtle, complex, mysterious, and surprising ways. But it does not determine thought. Hence, we ought to be skeptical about claims regarding “the authority of experience” and efforts to make a credential of experience. That a person has suffered impoverishment and marginalization is, alas, no guarantee at all that that person will be attuned to those social vices or immune to them.