**AT: Afropess**

**Framework**

**Change in the debate space can only emerge from collective movements that are centered around intersectionality and relationships. Afro-pess works against movements to change the space – its nihilistic and individualized approach forecloses the possibility for change.**

Thuli **Gamedze and** Asher **Gamedze 19**, MA in Education, Gender, and International Development from Michaelis, member of iQhiya(art collective); MA in African studies from University of Cape Town, 1-1-2019, "Anxiety, Afropessimism, and the University Shutdown," South Atlantic Quarterly, 118 (1), pp. 215-225, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-7281732>, kav

gamEdze: Just to clarify, “shutdown,” as we refer to it, was (or is) a tactic used by Black students at **South African universities** that emerged mainly during #feesmustfall in October 2015 and has been used since then in 2016 and 2017. The plan was to stop the university from operating and make it impossible for it to continue with business as usual. Arrest its academic program, hold it ransom, and pressure the management to agree to certain demands that were part of a much larger call for decolonization, which I suppose is what we are dealing with in this collection of texts. The end of outsourced labor and the call for free education have been the main material demands that somewhat unify the national shutdown periods, but the nature of the campaign and the broader demands depended a lot on students’ educational and political processes at the various campuses.

gamedZe: Of course “shutdown” is not a **new revolutionary strategy**; it has been used all over the world in different ways in different spaces. In our context we might see it as an extension, transplantation, and a micro-referencing of the anti-apartheid strategy of “ungovernability” that proliferated in the townships in 1980s South Africa. After 1994 there have been instances of Black students adopting a similar strategy, but until “mustfall,” the notion of shutdown had not taken on a “national” character.

In recent years, different campuses adopted different **strategic approaches** to shutting down. Some movements embarked on a **live shut-down**, moving class by class, rendering lectures and tutorials that were in operation impossible, triggering fire alarms, and mobilizing other students as they went. Others embarked on more **preventative shutdowns**, attempting to make it impossible for university to even begin, by barricading campus entrances with bins, bodies, and burning tires. These barricades and protest lines, the frontiers of “shutdown,” were met with extreme physical violence from the state police and hired private security forces. This violence— unimaginative masculinist aggression—provoked a response from students, which generally took on the mirrored form of masculinist resistance. Or at least, this was the newsworthy narrative, because, as disturbing as it is, we know that mainstream media has an unending masochistic capacity to absorb images of Black people being brutalized.

The image of the violated black body has strong ties to the politics of the Afropessimist. We feel that through the cycle of protest and violent repression, which continually produces and reproduces black people as “socially dead,” Afropessimism has fed deeply into the ways we think about protest.

gamEdze: I want to get a bit deeper into what you’re saying here, because I think it’s **really important** to consider the **complex and somewhat contradictory** role of Afropessimism **in student movements**. I’m interested in how these politics have been instrumentalized in the service of “shutdown” protests, as well as the ways that the ideology which informs political strategy plays into and is given life in the internal world of the movement. Before I get into the Afropessimism thing, though, let me set it up with an initial statement or belief that I hold.

We are all externally vulnerable to the violence of capital-driven time-space, and so it is the politics through which we live that can potentially offer us healing or, on the other hand, can **exacerbate the problem**.

A therapist once explained to me that anxiety and anger are place-holder emotions, and what she meant is that in order to explore the causes of our anxiety and anger and potentially soothe them, we must seek a place that is more internal, and perhaps less easy to understand and manage. This internal place is often one of deep sadness, and fear can render us reluctant to explore it. Thus anxiety and anger function to express our incapacity to manage the depth of ourselves in a given situation—they are ways the body defends and manages circumstances that hurt and can possibly damage us. Sadness, on the other hand, is a kind of giving up of the body to its own incapability to be okay—an abandonment of reactive behaviors to violent parameters, and an acceptance of a boundless present of despair. It is raw and difficult, but the experience of pain or sadness is often what allows us to come to terms with pervasive dissonances between our own spirit and the ways we are vulnerable to, and complicit in, the mismanagement of people in the world. My interest is in how our politics can contribute to, hinder, or interact with our emotional life, and how this has played out in the bits and pieces of the shutdown processes we know about.

gamedZe: That’s really interesting, thinking about the notion of a “**place-holder politics**” and their emotional corollaries. I wonder if it’s useful here to get into Afropessimism, or at least how we saw, understood, and experienced it **within student movement spaces**?

gamEdze: For sure, go ahead.

gamedZe: As I see it, briefly, Afropessimism is one **political lens**, set of ideas, or a vocabulary that has found **significant traction** in certain **student movement spaces**. This traction has brought with it a particularly **nihilistic approach** to protest. It could be interesting to think through this tendency toward protest along with some of the ideas you have set up.

gamEdze: Yes, so Afropessimism defines itself through understanding the world’s fundamental structure as “antiblack,” and thus sees black people as perpetually negated or “socially dead” and so absent from any conception of humanity.

gamedZe: Uh huh. And it seems to **flatten out and homogenize** Black people, **reducing and owning** the interpretation of **Black peoples’ experiences** by subordinating them to one supposedly absolute and totalizing logic.

gamEdze: It goes further by articulating that the maintenance of antiblackness is crucial in sustaining the psychic health of white people. In other words, the binary created through the construction of blackness versus whiteness is the logic through which white people are able to recognize themselves as human, and through which black people, too, see white peo¬ple as human, and negate themselves. While Afropessimism can be useful in identifying systems of power—for instance, the mutual relationship of the racist construct of “black people as criminals” with the legal system and the capitalist prison-industrial complex—it falls short itself by asserting that there exists no other state for the black body except perpetual death, so con-sistently caving in on itself.

gamedZe: So, in that, it fails on many levels to make sense of the nuanced ways in which people, despite their supposed nonexistence, exist in and navigate through the world. How does Afropessimism understand its social death in relation to queerness or disability—forms of otherness that also generate gratuitous violence, exclusion, and oppression? But also, this particular transplantation of the American thing (the origin of the school of thought) to the continent is pretty wack. Even as the Black radical tradition has largely been formulated and theorized in and from America, and even as it often falls prey to American exceptionalisms in its quest for forms of Black universalism, I think it holds radical potential for us on the continent. As many theorists and thinkers of the Black radical tradition have shown, African cultural practices have formed the basis of Black revolt across time and space. I see Afropessimism as a departure from that tradition’s dynamic foundations in African culture.

Afropessimism, through its fixation on natal alienation, tends to ignore the living connections to the continent, seeming to take the severance of African people from the continent through the middle passage as utter and complete. It therefore seems to understand Black people not as cultural subjects who brought entire cosmological worlds and practices with them but as hopeless, utterly dislocated beings only existing as the sum total of their position in white supremacy. While I think that this can be challenged even in a diasporic context, this contradiction is even more pronounced here on the continent, because although many of us are alienated from African cultural practices and contexts, those traditions persist and are more or less proximate whether or not one is immersed in them.

gamEdze: In this way, it can be difficult to move with the Afropessimist, whose American-specific engagement with a particular history defines the functioning of antiblackness, seen as a mechanism that forms the foundational reality of every scenario of oppression.

Afropessimism’s refusal to engage its own internal world, to abandon its reactive and defensive nature, leads me to imagine it as a “placeholder politics,” similar to the ways that anxiety and anger hold and protect us from entering the place existing beyond them. This is not to offer a clean critique on Afropessimism but to situate it as a politics that perhaps exists as external to something more effective in exploring and acknowledging the internal— the power and the pain.

Afropessimism finds no way to its own sadness.

gamedZe: The idea of “holding” the “place” is quite a nice one. And interesting to think about how, in relation to the continent, it is perhaps the anxiety or the anger of Afropessimism that holds the place that prevents or protects the descent into the deep sadness. Perhaps this is what Fred Moten (2003: 94), through Amiri Baraka, might refer to as “the tragic,” which “is always in relation to a quite particular and material loss,” in this case being “the impossibility of a return to an African, the impossibility of an arrival at an American, home.” The sadness of the tragic is too great.

gamEdze: Heavy ...

Let’s move back, or forward to the **student movement**, where we have seen Afropessimism function in a **number of different ways.** Because of the diverse and chaotic mixture of political ideologies under the “mustfall” umbrella, Afropessimism, like other politics, has been a collaborator, mixing sometimes productively, but often aggressively, with other political **schools in the space**, such as **Black feminism, Marxism, and Charterism**.

No one ever decided that “mustfall” would adhere to a single way of navigating, and thus we could find ourselves having to hold a number of contradictions, jumping between politics as we navigated the trauma of the external, and the ways we chose to deal with emotions of the internal. In this way, sometimes the reactive nature, the **anxiety and anger** of the placeholder politic of Afropessimism, functioned to hold the outsides, as different political ideas played out on the inside of the shutdown. I know that this thought experiment seems far neater than the muddiness of any reality of shutdown and occupation could possibly be. But we are using it because as far as we both critique Afropessimism, the way it has catalyzed in the mix of mustfall politics seems to have opened it up to something beyond its own imagination. On the outside, Afropessimism leads to a style of protest, to a **style of retaliation**, to a mode of policing, to a **steering away of movements** from initial strategy, to individualized acts of **embodied resistance** to the law.

gamedZe: On the barricades, forced into the **form of protest** that the **state and security** is **prepared and equipped** for—**violent confrontation**—there is no possibility of Afropessimism evolving into anything else because we run into the **militarized trap** set for us, with no possible escape.

gamEdze: On the inside, in the temporary “safety” offered by a successful shutdown, is the place where we can create.

gamedZe: That kinda comes back to what I think of as a classic revolutionary dialectic, of reaction and creation. It raises the question: was it necessary to react in that way in order to create? Did we have to adopt this **nihilistic politics** and **dangerous bodily mode of protest** to shut down the space such that we can then explore other possibilities?

gamEdze: This is such a fundamental question, and I personally don’t necessarily think so. Afropessimism to a large extent really **upset the growth** of Black feminist thought, at least in the shutdowns I have been involved in. Instead of providing an entry point into various political schools, black feminism—particularly intersectionality—seemed optional, forming just one of several political collaborators within the shutdown space. This approach was often read by Afropessimism and even black consciousness as an aggressor, or a **“distracting” force** within the movement. But intersectionality makes **collective work** possible.

Audre Lorde, much in keeping with intersectionality, is insistent on conscientizing difference, so that it escapes its usual trap of exploitation by the status quo. This approach to making activism is a depthy internal process of instrumentalizing and weaponizing one’s pain and power toward collective struggle (Audre Lorde 2012). It is in direct conflict with Afropessimism, which begins and ends through the arrest of blackness in singular form: a circular anxious reasoning that cannot explore its particularities and intersections, and so finds its imagination short-circuited by the binary understanding of power only through white supremacy.

If Afropessimism went to therapy, it might find, beneath its repeated anxious mantra of social death, a network of connected histories that have created layers and layers of power and oppression. This painful conscientization is the beginning of a process of shaping tools that can be used to transcend the defensive limitations of placeholder politics and can, rather, soothe the internal while launching a fiery attack on the oppressor. Lorde’s tool was poetry. And ours right now is this.

gamedZe: I’m thinking now of some of Toni Morrison’s work and how one gets a real sense from her stories, that, despite the horror, violence, and the trauma of racism, Black people have, and have always had, stories outside white terrorism. Not that the terror is ever fully absent, but she makes a political decision in her writing to center Black people rather than white supremacy, opening up different creative and political potentialities. Although one of her starting points might be a critique of racism, it is not her endpoint. And I think what we are interested in thinking about in relation to shutdown is the possibilities that open up when the campus is claimed and the spaces, under new management, have not yet been purposed. When you occupy a house successfully, what do you do in the house? If we are able to arrest the university, what kinds of potentialities emerge?

gamEdze: And further, to extend your question, if a particular mode of protest that is **exclusionary** is used in “shutting down” or securing the space, does this mean that the inevitable political landscape within that space is limited to this political tendency? Considering that the act of barricading requires a certain kind of bodily intervention which is often masculinist and exclusionary, can an Afropessimistic-led shutdown secure and open the space for an intersectional collectivity and loving place of study?

gamEdze: The connection is that a masculinist, exclusionary, body-based rupturing of space will easily lead to an exclusionary group consciousness that occupies spaces using the same guiding principles it did to secure that space, unless tasks are explicitly divided using an intersectional approach to plan for the people involved. It is well documented, although poorly publicized, that “mustfall” in most instances failed to challenge institutionalized ableism and built-in inaccessibility at South African universities, as much as it did racism, classism, and patriarchy.

gamedZe: Where the work happened well, it seemed to temporarily allow for a **reconfiguring of relationships** and roles insisted on by the university. For instance, the mobilization, organizing, and study that happened around the “OutsourcingMustFall” opened up new ways of relating between **“workers” and “students.”** These relationships were shifted, through **organizing together** and resisting white institutional order, from the rigid and distinct categories of the university, to being resituated within the framework of the Black family. In certain instances Black students spoke about workers as “our mothers and fathers” and workers related to students as “our children.” This was a **radical departure** from the way that the institution was intentionally curated, where to be a student means to have gained access to a world of more privilege than that rewarded for physical labor (for a further discussion, see Motimele, in this issue).

Following on from the Black family, what I think shutdown allowed for in its most generative expression was the possibility of a different way of being together. And interestingly, it was the possibility of a different way of being together and being at the university. The university was what was being shut down. Its normative mode of functioning was arrested. So in certain senses it was about not being at the university, because the university represents a space of not-being-together, or at least only being together in particular ways that are shaped and governed by notions of difference and hierarchy—ways that operate to preclude or prohibit collectivity.2 In that sense shutdown ruptured the university, using it as a site for anticapitalist experiments with/in time and space.

Some might say that that rupture forms a prefigurative moment—a prophetic enactment of a utopian future that is still, yet, or perhaps to come. Perhaps shutdown forms opposition to the obstacles blocking us from our true social nature?

Shutdown and the space of occupation didn’t, in any definitive or over-bearing way, stop the university being what it is. Even when these spaces were alive, while they might have been able to arrest and repurpose certain functions or buildings, they were only pockets or time-space capsules casting fleeting shadows on the hegemon’s place in the sun. But what we know to be true is that spaces of study and planning have always, at every historical moment, been casting shadow.

gamEdze: Yes, and I think that this is important, too, with our conversation around Afropessimism, which seems to assume that validity only exists in the hegemonic, where the nuances, characters, and textures of everyday social moments are seen to hold no radical value in resistance politics. Can Afropessimism make sense of the reality that no matter how you look at it, we are here, we are working, and we are of value to one another?!

gamedZe: Since its conception of the world seems so thoroughly and hopelessly centered on whiteness, Afropessimism seems unable to value the spaces between us as Black people and what we are able to create together. These collective spaces are only considered important within a “prefigurative frame,” as if they are enactments of the future we imagine in the present. Afropessimism seems to imply that the only possible way for it to value Black life would be following an absolute rupture, the moment of the end of the world, in other words, supposedly the cataclysmic end of whiteness. Afterward, everything is assumed to be different.

gamEdze: Yes. The potential for imagination in Afropessimism is dire. I’m also not very invested in the notion of prefigurative politics, but my main uncomfortability with it is concerned primarily with the “figure” in “prefigurative” because this presence seems to allude to the “endpoint,” or the future as existing in resolved and recognizable form. I find that concept to be itchy because this preoccupation with a figure and with a Western time constraint (implied in pre-) limits imagination to a linearity involved in making a finished thing. What we know is that radical work unapologetically occupies the present, and that “presents” are always in the process of realizing and shifting themselves, reluctant to stay seated or be neatened up as finished figures or symbols attesting to the triumph of an era. This image, or “figure,” sounds oddly like “democracy” and its various symbolic manifestations in post-1994 South Africa—the very era that has led us to these shutdowns in the first place. We should not shut down the possibility that if the “figure” of prefiguration exists, she should operate in motion, without certainty, and always be too present to capture.

gamedZe: I mean, where do you get your bars from? Damn. But beyond your bars, if I think about revolutionary movements on the continent, the historical imagination always suggests that a radical act in the present, even if it is a prefiguration of a desired future, it is also a postfiguration of a sometimes romanticized but nonetheless remembered, recollected past. I recall Cabral’s concept of the “return to the source”—the cultural/political movement of an alienated people away from the values and practices of the colonizer in the search and pursuit of those of their people, historically, the basis of the future society. We see this Cabralian impulse in God’s Bits of Wood, where Ousmane Sembène (1960) talks about what railway workers and their families did when they arrested capitalist time during the great 1947–48 Dakar-Niger railway workers’ strike. Sembène (1960: 75): “Ceremonies that went back to time immemorial were revived, and pageants that had long been forgotten. Men armed with staffs or cudgels performed the saber duels whose ritual dated back from the reign of El Mami Samori Touré. Women dyed their hands and their feet with henna enriched with the black of burnt rubber and coloured their lips with antimony.” There was a return to the source and a reinvigoration of the imperative to be in historically rooted motion, and it was the impossible time-space pocket wrought open by the strike’s initiation that made the cultural movements possible even as they existed in a broader context of colonial domination.

Similarly, if we think about shutdown as a parallel strategy, **Black students** shut the university down, and then we didn’t have to just be students. In that time-space we could be artists, intellectuals, African people, friends, comedians, musicians, writers, dancers, actresses, and we could be together. People were able to collectively create, learn, tell stories, teach, rap, laugh, cry, and sing in occupation in ways that I had never seen or even imagined in my almost ten years at and on the fringes of the university. It’s as if that arrested space allowed us to return to our true (following Marx to our social)3 nature; it allowed us to return to ourselves, to be with our internal world, and that means singing (being) together as a people.

**Rejecting the white society requires agential capacity through the imagining of futures. Impositions of power – like the 1AC – erase agency and political power. Only debate – through discourse – can generate power to challenge the system.**

Lewis **Gordon 20**, Editor of the American Philosophical Association Blog series Black Issues in Philosophy, American philosopher at the University of Connecticut, 2-6-2020, "The Sartrean Mind," Routledge, pp. 510-511, <https://doi-org.10.4324/9781315100500>, kav

To belong to the future, however, entails a rejection of an **isomorphic relationship** between European/white and modern. Where this is so, it means the construction of other forms of temporal belonging. For blacks, this would mean a **paradoxical transformation** from black to Blacks. The first accepts the impasse; the latter, as transcending it, regards the **future as a commitment** to be made. In effect, that requires being **agents of history**, which means, then, that within blacks would become the possibility of Blacks. This argument is thus a demand for Black modernity. As any group who makes such moves effectively constitute its possibility, modernity would be decoupled from Europeanness and whiteness through an appeal to modernities. That would make Euromodernity one among many possibilities for the human condition. It would also mean identifying the extent to which, in making itself isomorphic with modernity, Euromodernity is a theodicy and, ultimately, a historic expression of la mauvaise foi. This understanding of taking on the responsibility for building a future can also be read as **practices of liberation**. It is an important feature of Black existential philosophy as offered by such philosophers as Biko, Birt, Fanon, Henry, Jones, Manganyi, and More, among others, as well as those in the literary existential traditions, including James Baldwin, Paula Marshall, Toni Morrison, and more. There are many elements of these thinkers’ writings pertaining to existential phenomenology; for example, each offers meditations on embodiment and the social impact on comportment. There are, as well, their detailed interrogations of oppression. What I offer here is just a hint. To close, there is one in particular on which I would like to offer some consideration. None of what I have argued makes sense without power. Unfortunately, the contemporary circumstance is one in which political discussions of power are dominated by two opposing views, both of which are premised on a reductive idea based primarily on the Anglo line of Euromodernity. It comes down to this: the right exercise it, while the left shun, at times even seem allergic to, it. This is because of the focus on coercive power in contemporary political life. The reasons for doing so aren’t entirely misguided. After all, what are colonialism, enslavement, and racism but abuses of power? Enrique Dussel observed that the effort to articulate the underlying grammar of Euromodernity as the Cartesian triumph of epistemology veils its underlying history of conquest. Instead of “I think, therefore I am,” the truth was actually “I conquer, therefore I am.”22 Sartre’s influence in Black existentialism This is patently the triumph of Hobbesianism, where in the hypothesized war of all against all, order is restored through the emergence of peace-establishing might. In this model, power is what is imposed, and its expansion in studies of class, engenderment, race, and sexual orientation includes ideas on interpellation. Naming becomes a sovereign beneath which suffer the named. Yet, as we have seen, what is imposed and what is lived are not identical. As with other phenomena, power could collapse into a theodicy, which reeks of la mauvaise foi. Where ill defined, power becomes a form of closure. It erases options, and in so doing becomes so claustrophobic that choice seems to disappear. We should, however, remember the insight on la mauvaise foi, which is that its intelligibility depends on freedom. Where **power** is read **exclusively as an imposition** **erases the agency** of those upon whom it is imposed. Whether the gods, language, or the sovereign, the point remains that agency somewhere raises the question of how it is to be understood elsewhere. Masking this requires avoiding resources of **communication, critique, evidence, and meaning**. The **communicability of power** raises the question of its transcendence of efforts at **unilateral meaning**. Despite attempts to make reality what one may say it is, what it could be is always more. Power is the **ability to make things happen** with access to the means of doing so. Where locked in the reach of the physical, it offers no difference from force. **Human reality**, however, **offers resources** of transcending physical location through communication, meaning, and the **ongoing production of social reality**. This could be reformulated as the proliferation of options. A human being need not be where the effects of her or his actions take place. The ability to make things happen with the means of doing so also includes, then, the ability not only to increase access to the means but also the cultivation of other means. We could call this positive power. Coercive power, which we could also call negative power, involves decreasing such access. This amounts to power’s relationality. The error is to think about what power “is” instead of what power is about, which is what at least human beings do. The human world is to some extent what Freud called a prosthetic god.23 Living in a world of limited material options, human beings have managed to produce a world of prosthetic materiality. We could call this form of materiality “options.”24

**Having prepared debates where we imagine and compare the advantages of different futures is key to progress in society. Questioning underlying assumptions and conclusions provides skills for activism and furthering society. Empirics prove – black debate caused social change.**

Brittney **Cooper 16**, Ph.D. in American Studies from Emory, B.A. in English and Political Science from Howard University, co-editor of The Crunk Feminist Collection, author,6-19-2016, "Take No Prisoners: The Role of Debate in a Liberatory Education," Using Debate in the Classroom, pp. 11-21, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315707808, kav

In October 2015, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement petitioned the Democratic National Committee (DNC) to sponsor a presidential debate with candidates for the 2016 election, focused solely on the concerns of the BLM. The DNC declined the request for debate but did offer to help the BLM host a presidential candidate forum or townhall. This led to a series of conversations about the structure and format of public debates and townhalls, and about which form of activity would allow Black publics to interact substantively with those politicians seeking to lead the country. The BLM’s request for a presidential debate came just weeks after news of a group of prison inmates in a maximum-security prison in upstate New York defeated a group of Harvard University debaters. The incarcerated debaters were students in the Bard Prison Initiative, a program housed at Bard College, that offers college coursework to inmates.

More than 60 years ago, Malcolm X honed his oratorical talents on a prison debate team. Today communities of color have been ravaged by the far-reaching effects of the prison industrial complex, and its role in the enforcement of tough-on-crime policies that have led to the mass incarceration of Black and Latino/a men and women. Far too many of our youth have a better chance of encountering debate training in prison than in the classroom. This is unacceptable. Bringing debate into prisons offers us a clear picture of the kind of intellectual talents that continue to languish behind bars. And the issue of mass incarceration and over-policing of Black communities is one of the critical issues that the BLM has placed on the agenda as a critical topic for public debate and liberation.

Together these examples demonstrate that **participating in and understanding** how debates work are a critical part of active participation in a democracy. Moreover, having access to **good debating skills** is a **critical literacy** to which all students should have access. The ability to **understand and evaluate** the relative **merits of competing positions** is not merely an intellectual exercise. These skills materially **impact the quality of life** of American citizens and all people. Moreover, when **matters of rights and freedoms** are involved, these skills become **increasingly important**. If students do not know how to both **ascertain and evaluate** the **key premises and ideas** behind the range of arguments that emerge in American politics, arguments that inevitably shape **their own quality of life**, then our students have not been well educated and they have not been adequately prepared to be engaged and thoughtful citizens.

In the first few decades immediately following the end of slavery, Black communities placed an extremely high value not only on access to a good-quality public education, but also on access to a robust public sphere in which Black communities, including women, men and children, could come and debate issues that mattered. They wanted access to spaces in which they could litigate qualities of leadership, strategies and plans for racial advancement, and general ideas about what it meant to be Black in the slowly receding shadow of enslavement. For communities deeply invested in the quest for freedom, the right to have opinions and to publicly share and deliberate about those opinions served as a mark of freedom. Similarly, in the contemporary moment, the burgeoning Black Lives Matter movement acknowledges that our movements are made clearer and sharper through robust and vigorous debate, disagreement, and consensus-building. But in order for leaders to use those skills as adults, they must first learn them in the classroom.

This chapter offers a brief history of debate within Black communities in the period between Emancipation and the Civil Rights Movement, with a particular focus on debate activities from the 1920s through the 1960s. Community debate programs and the emergence of collegiate debate in this period fit on the one hand with the **importance of debate** in the **creation and cementation** of a Black public sphere, but it also sets the stage for the **cultures of debate** that emerge during the Civil Rights Movement. The range of questions and issues with which these earlier communities concerned themselves are instructive for **how educators might use debate** in classrooms today. Therefore, I interrogate the manner in which local communities in the first half of the 20th century thought about the importance of debate as a form of political education for citizens. Then I turn briefly to a few of the iconic debates that took place during the Civil Rights Movement. These stories offer a vital and necessary reminder that the expansion of American democracy always requires a commitment to vigorous and sustained debate. In light of that history, we should consider **debate** a **vital part of a good education**.

In May of 1892, Ida B. Wells, a journalist and newspaper owner in Memphis, Tennessee, launched a career as a public intellectual and advocate after three of her friends were lynched. After she wrote a blistering editorial in her paper, the Memphis Free Speech & Headlight, townspeople burned down the newspaper’s office and banished Wells from town. She fled to Brooklyn, New York, where she stayed with the famous African American poet and writer Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. In New York, Wells ensconced herself in a vibrant social scene that included the weekly meetings of many African American literary societies, where participants would perform musical selections, give talks about prepared papers and engage in formal debates.

Copyright 0 2016. Taylor & Francis Group. All rights reserved. One popular outlet for such debates was the Bethel Literary Association in New York. There debates which pitted pairs of debaters against each other covered a wide range of topics including “Resolved, that we need wealth more than we do education”; “Resolved, that we should encourage western emigration”; “Labor is a greater power than capital”; “That we owe no party a debt of gratitude”; and “That we need industrial more than academical education” (Peterson, 2011, pp. 346–347). Carla Peterson (2011) notes that the Bethel Literary Association was remarkable for its inclusion of female debaters: “Not only did women now share a public venue with men, but they argued with them over policy on equal terms” (pp. 347–348).

The leading Black lyceum in the city, the Brooklyn Literary Union, known for its debates, was less welcoming to women. The Union had strict debating guidelines. Four debaters gave ten-minute presentations. Then there was a 45-minute discussion, followed by a vote from the audience (Giddings, 2008, p. 234). Women were rarely among those featured as lecturers or debaters. However, during the late summer or early fall of 1892, Wells participated in a debate at the Brooklyn Literary Union, against, among others, Maritcha Lyons, a well-respected school principal from an old New York family. Though Wells had been gaining a local reputation as a **compelling speaker**, Lyons bested her in the debate. Wells took defeat in her stride, adopting Lyons as her mentor.

Lyons, together with Victoria Earle Matthews, another active member of the Brooklyn Black literati, put together the event that launched Wells’s formal career as a public lecturer. In their mentor–mentee relationships, Lyons imparted to Wells two main lessons. “‘Be so familiar with your discussion that you are literally saturated with it; think, meditate, and reflect, to develop all the points in a logical sequence.’ Lyons also told Wells to learn how to ‘manage the voice; if thought is prolific, expression of ideas will become automatic’” (Giddings, 2008, p. 235). In the ensuing months and years after her encounter with Lyons, Wells went on to become the most **visible and vocal** **anti-lynching advocate** of her generation, helping for the next 30 years to bring visibility to the **epidemic of lynchings** of African American men, women and children. By the early 1910s, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) made anti-lynching one of its key political issues, largely **because of the public foundation** **laid by Ida B. Wells**.

In the mid 1920s, Pauli Murray, a famous Civil Rights attorney, writer, professor, and the first Black woman to be ordained an Episcopal priest, joined the debate team of the Hillside High School, the newly built “colored” high school for students in Durham, North Carolina. “We had a debating team, a glee club, organized baseball, boys’ and girls’ basketball teams, a school newspaper, and a yearbook,” she wrote (Murray, 1987, pp. 59–60). All of these were “innovations utterly new to colored high school students in our town” (Murray, 1987, pp. 59– 60). Moreover, she wrote, “our sports teams and debating team competed with those of other high schools in the state, and it was the first time that colored students in Durham had an opportunity to travel to other cities and expand our horizons. These modest advances were important milestones for us. They sustained our hope and gave us a sense of achievement at a time when the prevailing view that Negroes were inherently inferior remained unchallenged” (Murray, 1987, pp. 59–60). Murray suggests that access to a **debate team and other modern forms of extracurricular activity** increased the rigor of her educational experience and chipped away at the **sense of inferiority** that a separate and **unequal system of public education** had produced in Black children, an argument that would be critical to the overturning of the Plessy decision in 1954. Moreover, debate and other activities marked the modernization of the American high school. Among many firsts, Pauli Murray graduated at the top of her class at Howard University Law School in 1944, producing a senior thesis that formed the basis for the legal strategy in the Brown desegregation decision. In addition to her work on the inclusion of the word “sex” in the 1964 Civil Rights Act, Murray also played a role in the dismantling of the **all-white, all-male jury system**. The first seeds of her **voluminous career** as a writer, thinker, academic, and poet undoubtedly had some of their genesis in the years she spent “preparing for **inter-high school debates** on the debating team.”

This abbreviated history of Black debaters is a critical part of the **intellectual and political history** of African American people. To trace that history offers us a picture of the intellectual environs in which African American people **honed and refined** the arguments and strategies that shaped Black political discourse in the period between the end of Reconstruction and the Civil Rights Movement. This history of Blacks in debate also gives us a picture of the kind of training that it took to shape an African American leadership class in the post-slavery period. The robust cultures of debating that Black people created in the antebellum North and then throughout the country after Emancipation were critical in building a Black public or counterpublic sphere, a place where Black people could debate together about the collective fate of African Americans. In these nascent iterations of a Black public sphere, gender politics, and more specifically the participation of women, constituted a site of battle; thus, I began with the women because it is important to make visible the variety of ways that women participated in and helped to fundamentally shape the inter-workings of these spaces.

Several years ago, while I was conducting research for a project on the African American Club Women’s Movement in Shreveport, Louisiana, in the pages of the Shreveport Sun, the state’s oldest Black weekly, I unexpectedly began to see prominent front-page headlines advertising the debates of Black colleges near and far. For instance, the front page of the May 28, 1927 issue of the Sun proudly proclaims “Wiley College Debating Team Defeats Howard Univ, 3 Points.” The famed Wiley College debate team was frequently the focus of the Sun’s coverage, in part because Marshall, Texas, home of Wiley College, is located only 30 miles from Shreveport, just across the Texas state line.

Debate and forensic activities were so popular in Shreveport that Black women who participated in the club movement also staged debates about particular issues. In one such debate, the town’s Mary Church Terrell Club debated the topic “Resolved: That the South offers greater inducements and better advantages to our people than any other part of the country” (“Negative win in Debate”, 1927). Mrs. Z. E. Baker and Mrs. R. E. Brown argued the affirmative; the club’s president Cora M. Allen and Mrs. Alice Davis argued the negative. In 1927, African Americans were exiting the South in droves as part of the Great Migration to the North in search of better jobs and more reasonable racial conditions. As fairly well-to-do club women with stable middle-class existences, women like Cora Allen, wife of the Rev. Luke Allen who pastored the largest Black church in town, were part of cadre of Black people who opted not to migrate. But the team of Allen and Davis prevailed in the debate, effectively **defending the advantages** of leaving the South. The debate is **important**, however, because it **makes clear** that the choice of whether to migrate or not, was in fact a debate, **rather than a foregone conclusion.**

The Sun covered a range of forensic activities, including those of Black colleges and universities throughout the country, and also debates at local churches and high schools. For instance, in 1928 the paper highlighted a story of a woman who had beaten a man in debate at the Galilee Baptist Church on the topic “Resolved: That woman has done more for humanity than man.” The article noted that “it was fairly proven by Miss Shelton that woman had done more for humanity than man. Mr. Bounds made some strong points but came out ten points. The Sun’s coverage of community forensic activities was commensurate with coverage from other newspapers throughout the country. In the early 1920s, the Chicago Defender also covered college and community debate activities. In 1923, the Grace Lyceum in Chicago had a debate on the topic “Slavery has been more of a help than a hindrance to the American Negro” (“Young Women Win Debate”, 1928). An event sponsored by the “Older Girls and Young Woman’s Conferences” and the young men’s council, the teams were split on the basis of gender. The young men argued the affirmative position and the girls argued the negative position. The young women won. In 1924, another Chicago paper, the Broad Ax, covered the annual Elbridge L. Adams Prize Debates held at Hampton Institute (“Douglass Society Wins Adams Debate”, 1924). That year the Douglass Literary Society beat the Dunbar Literary Society debating the topic, “Resolved: That compulsory military training should be abolished in secondary schools.” The Douglass Society team argued the negative.

In 1932, the Sun reported that there had been “a revival of intercollegiate debating activities among the schools of the South Central Association of Colleges for Negro Youth.” Among those schools were Southern University, Straight College, Alcorn State University, Leland College, and the University of New Orleans. The subject under consideration during the spring 1932 debating season was “Resolved: That Great Britain should give India complete and immediate independence” (“Southern Debaters Win”, 1932). These young Black students were engaged in debates over British imperialism and the ethics and value of anti-colonialism in the 1930s. The broad national coverage of community and college debate activities in the Black Press suggests that locally and nationally Black communities valued vigorous debate and discussion and also that they took great pride in seeing young African Americans engage in these activities. The topics also suggest that conversations in Black public culture attended to more general questions of history and social relationships between the sexes as well as debates about contemporary political issues like mandatory military training and the ethics of colonialism. The debates themselves, audience participation, and coverage in the Black Press all participated in raising community literacies and consciousness around these important political issues that certainly had implications for Black communities living in the thick of Southern Jim Crow regimes.

Interracial debates constituted another major aspect of the Black Press’s coverage of Black participation in debate. In May 1923, Lewis Burrell, a debater and team captain at Pleasantville High School in Pleasantville, New Jersey, led his white teammates to victory debating Haddonfield High School on the question “Resolved: That the Merchant Marine of the United States should be subsidized by the federal government” (“Leads White Team Mates”, 1923). In the 1930s, these interracial exchanges became even more common, particularly among college debaters. In 1932 the Wiley College debaters embarked on a 10,000-mile Goodwill Tour, doing exhibition debates throughout the country. The Sun reported that “As a means of promoting better understanding between the races, Wiley has sought to make contacts with some of the white colleges thru [sic] their debating teams.” The paper reported that their interactions with teams in Oklahoma, Michigan and Chicago were gratifying, pleasant and profitable.

In 1933, teams from Wiley and the University of Kansas debated the topic “Resolved: That Socialism would be preferable to Capitalism in the United States.” Wiley argued the affirmative while Kansas argued the negative. The Sun ran this as the lead story in their March 4th issue, with the headline “Interracial Debate Gets Big Ovation.” Above the masthead, another headline proclaimed, “Inauguration of a New United States President Today” (“Interracial Debate Gets Big Ovation”, 1933). Franklin D. Roosevelt began his first term in office this same day. That an interracial gathering of student competitors from the Midwest and South came together in the early 1930s in the wake of the Great Depression and on the verge of Roosevelt’s New Deal to debate the merits of socialism versus capitalism suggests that debates were ideal spaces for capturing the political zeitgeist. Moreover they created opportunities for students from different racial, geographical and cultural backgrounds to come together in a meeting of minds over big ideas. In 1939, the University of Chicago Debate Union traveled to historically Black Lincoln University in Missouri to debate the topic, “Why go to college: To learn how to live or to learn how to make a living” (“Hold Round-Table Discussions”, 1939). A picture of the interracial group of debaters sitting and dialoguing ran with the article in the Shreveport Sun providing a powerful visual demonstration to the Black readership of the Sun about the importance of debate to the work of racial advancement.

The broad swath of issues covered in these debates and the fact that local audiences flocked to see them suggests that local communities were politically engaged and that this engagement was intergenerational, encompassing the political ideas of both the young people who primarily participated in these debates and those adults and elders who served as judges and audience members for such debates. The editorial board of the Sun believed that space for discussion and debate was critical to the public life of the city. A 1938 editorial argued that “a city with a colored population as large as ours should have” among other things “a Forum where current questions could be discussed and debated” and “a debating society which might engage in forensic contests with neighboring colleges on important questions of the day” (“More Cultural Organizations Needed”, 1938). The clear attention to debate in the press coverage of cities as disparate as Shreveport, Louisiana, and Chicago, Illinois in the 1920s and 1930s suggests that forensic activity was a critical building block not only of African American educational settings but also of African American public culture in the two decades before the formal inauguration of the modern Civil Rights Movement.

As the Civil Rights Movement came to full articulation, beginning with desegregation in 1954 and the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955, the importance of formal debate and discussion took on a different meaning. Now Black communities needed to think both ideologically and tactically about what the goals of this latest iteration of the Black freedom struggle were and how to go about achieving them. Many of these debates played out formally among Black male leaders who advocated a liberal integrationist view of the Civil Rights Struggle and those who advocated a radical Black nationalist view. Chief among the Black nationalists was Malcolm X, leader of the Nation of Islam, and a staunch opponent of the philosophy of non-violence that undergirded the public face of the Civil Rights Movement.

As is well documented, Malcolm X honed his oratorical skill as part of the Norfolk Penal Colony Debating Program, during his stint as a prisoner there in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Robert James Branham writes that “Malcolm X was a brilliant debater, adept at dismantling the positions of his opponents, converting their arguments to his own advantage, and most importantly casting the issues of dispute in utter and compelling clarity” (Branham, 1995, p. 117). Malcolm X valued debating as a form of political speech, because, as he famously said in his autobiography:

Standing up there, the faces looking at me, the things in my head coming out of my mouth, while my brain searched for the next best thing to follow what I was saying, and if I could sway them to my side by handling it right, then I had won the debate – once my feet got wet, I was gone on debating.

(As cited in Branham, 1995, p. 121)

Despite the fact that Malcolm X became a debater and formidable political thinker while in prison, the presence of the prison debate program represented a moment where prisons were viewed as social apparatuses that could appropriately redirect and prepare inmates for productive lives as citizens upon their release (Branham, 1995, p. 118). In an earlier era, even prisons recognized that teaching people to debate was nothing less than preparing them for a critical and engaged form of participation in democracy.

When Malcolm X was released from prison in the 1950s, now a convert to Islam, he moved to Harlem where he refined his thinking as a street preacher and minister of the Nation of Islam. As the Civil Rights Movement matured, Malcolm X emerged as the most formidable intraracial adversary of Martin Luther King and those proponents of a liberal Civil Rights Tradition. He engaged in a number of debates both throughout the United States and famously in England at the Oxford Union a few months before his death (see also Ambar, 2014; Tuck, 2014). Within the U.S. on more than one occasion he debated Civil Rights figures like James Farmer and Bayard Rustin. Martin Luther King refused to debate Malcolm X, and most Civil Rights leaders were afraid to take him on in public as well, because of his history of fiercely routing his opponents (Ogbar, 2004).

In October 1961, Malcolm X debated Bayard Rustin, one of the key tacticians of the nonviolent direct action strategy, on the campus of Howard University. The topic was “Integration or Separation.” Each man “spoke for about thirty minutes followed by a ten-minute rebuttal for each.” E. Franklin Frazier, the famous sociologist and author of The Black Bourgeoisie, moderated the event. In the audience on the front row that night sat a young, spellbound Stokely Carmichael. Before this night, Carmichael had been a devotee of Rustin’s non-violent teachings. Freshly back on campus after a summer spent in Nashville organizing with the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and participating in the Freedom Rides organized by James Farmer and the Congress of Racial Equality, Stokely was jubilant when he heard that Malcolm X was planning to visit the campus (Joseph, 2014). Carmichael biographer Peniel Joseph argues that Malcolm’s lecture “galvanized racial pride at Howard. He planted seeds of political conversion that would turn many in the audience, over time, into ardent Black nationalists, committed Pan-Africanists, and lifelong political radicals.” Carmichael, who would go on to be a key architect of the Black Power Movement, was one such figure.

Joseph writes that “Malcolm’s physical swagger and intellectual bravado made a lasting impression on Carmichael” (Joseph, 2014, p. 42; see also Ogbar, 2004, p. 54).

James Farmer, national director of the Congress of Racial Equality, proved that when it came to formal debates, swagger and bravado weren’t everything. From 1934 to 1938 Farmer served as member and eventually captain of the famous Wiley College debate team. Thus, unlike his fellow Civil Rights counterparts, he was unafraid to debate Malcolm. And he proved to be X’s most formidable opponent. On March 7, 1962, the two debated each other at Cornell University also on the topic “Integration or Segregation.” This debate represented a convergence of the intellectual, rhetorical and political traditions that brought African Americans into the realms of formal debate, Farmer emerging through Black collegiate debate channels and X emerging from the environs of the prison debate and street preaching.

By all accounts, Farmer bested Malcolm in the first showdown in 1962. Tactically, because Farmer had the first speech in the debate, he laid the historical groundwork for the evils of Jim Crow and segregation. Because X was known to recite a litany of these evils in order to make the case against segregation, by covering that ground first, Farmer claimed the prerogative to reframe the terms. The evils of segregation that instilled a sense of inferiority in Black children, distorted the perceptions of white people about their own supposed superiority, and hurt American business through boycotts, were all reasons, in Farmer’s estimation, to support a robust program of integration. Where X frequently cast integrationists as passive recipients of white supremacist treatment, Farmer argued that it was prior generations of Black people, people in his father’s generation, who had thought “that the way things always had to be and they always would be, so we put up with it, took part in it, decided to exist and stay alive” (as cited in Bosmajian, 1969). In recounting this story with his father, James Farmer Sr., who on his deathbed gave the younger James his blessing to participate in the 1961 Freedom Rides, Farmer situates those actively involved in the desegregation struggle as those who are committed to racial progress. He casts X’s desire, vis-à-vis the Nation of Islam, for a separate Black nation-state as the politically retrograde position, one that moved Black people from “forced ghettoism” to “voluntary ghettoism” (as cited in Bosmajian, 1969).

Farmer also pre-empted X’s attempts to discredit him as a race man because he had married a white woman. He argued simply that he believed enough in the “virtue of Negroes that I do not even think those virtues are so frail that they will be corrupted by contact with other people” (as cited in Bosmajian, 1969). Finally, and most compellingly, Farmer took on Malcolm’s claim that the desire for integration was a bourgeois desire. He argued that historically members of the Black middle class were often against integration because it would hurt Black businesses through competition with white business owners. By the time Malcolm attempted to refute this argument by saying that Farmer still only spoke for a minority of Blacks rather than the majority, the rhetorical heft of his claim has been sufficiently mitigated.

In a subsequent debate with James Baldwin in September 1963, he and Malcolm X tangled masterfully over which accounts of identity, and which accounts of history, Black people should accept as a guide for moving forward. Baldwin challenged Malcolm’s desire to identify solely with the African or Black part of his heritage and not with the American and white parts of his heritage, particularly the histories of violence, rape and enslavement with which such histories would demand we all grapple. Malcolm simply replied that no other group was asked to give up its cultural and racial identifications in service of identifying with American history. Malcolm challenged the continuing investment of Civil Rights leaders in non-violent strategies, saying to Baldwin, “never do you find white people encouraging other whites to be non¬violent.” In other words, such tactics in Malcolm’s estimation followed a set of rules about non-violence to which white Americans themselves did not even subscribe. In this debate, there were no clear winners and losers. But what emerges is a picture of a robust culture of public debate among African Americans about the proper ends, aims and goals of the Black freedom project. The Civil Rights Movement and the subsequent Black Power Movement were conceived in a culture of rigorous and powerful debates, the most public of which occurred among Black men, about the ways that history, notions of identity, religion and the politics of power should inform the quest for African American freedom.

Whether we are talking about the life of anti-lynching crusader Ida B. Wells in the post-Reconstruction era or Malcolm X during the Civil Rights Movement, it is simply impossible to understand the **rich ideological terrain** upon which the quest for **African American freedom** grew without talking about the importance of formal debates and forensic activity. In the nineteenth century, such activities were critical to the **formation of a Black public sphere**, as Black people were actively involved in **imagining and reimagining** their relationship to the larger American body politic in the decades leading up to and following Emancipation. After true emancipation, followed by a century of Jim Crow segregation, proved elusive, the necessity of African American oratical skill and rhetorical prowess became even more important to Black communities throughout the country. Parents wanted their children to have debate training, local communities tried to create debating societies, and the Black Press invested in coverage of high school and collegiate debates both to foster pride in African American achievement and to creatively highlight how issues important to Black people were being engaged publicly. The many debates that took place over the course of the Civil Rights Movement then emerge not as tangential but rather as central and fundamental to steering the course of the movement. As the most vocal proponent of a Black nationalist framework, Malcolm X forced the Civil Rights Movement and its leaders to refine its message, even as his status as the more radical foil to King made King’s arguments about inclusion seem imminently more reasonable and attractive to liberal white Americans.

Teaching students to debate means teaching students to **invest deeply** in the **power and possibilities of ideas**. Teaching students to debate means teaching them to **question more fully and more deeply**. Teaching them to debate means that we **foster dissatisfaction** with **easy answers**. Debate training emerges as a kind of boot camp for those students who really want to know what it means to grapple with and **solve problems** that do not have **easy or absolute answers**. Each of the major leaders profiled here used debate training to push America to be a more inclusive democracy. Ida B. Wells, Pauli Murray, Malcolm X, James Baldwin and James Farmer stood on the frontlines of public discourse, challenging our country to tell ugly truths and to change. Debate helped to teach them how to be the courageous leaders that they were. In a moment when a whole new generation of activists, leaders, thinkers and movers are taking to the street as part of the Black Lives Matter movement, the resonances of these earlier movements insinuate themselves. These earlier movements and the debates on which they stood remind us that the **quest for freedom demands our best thinking**, and that our best thinking is frequently a **product of work in community** and contestation with others who are as deeply invested as we are. At the same time, these debates remind us of the importance of **civility and respect** and a mutual appreciation for the importance of ideas. For no great movement for social justice has ever been achieved without debate.

**Essentialism DA**

**Afropess oversimplifies history into a struggle between Humans versus Slaves – that forecloses any possibility for change and ignores all other oppression.**

José **Sanchez 22**, PhD student in history at Duke University, 6-13-2022, "Against Afro-Pessimism," Jacobin, <https://jacobin.com/2022/06/afro-pessimism-frank-wilderson-socialism-flattening-racism>, kav

But the rise of “**Afro-pessimism**” as a philosophy in academic and intellectual spaces threatens to undermine a politics rooted in such a sense of solidarity, in favor of one that essentializes black identity and exceptionalizes black suffering as **intrinsically unanalogous** to the oppression of other people. **Afro-pessimism** argues that “anti-blackness” trumps **all other systems of oppression and exploitation**, whether the racism that faces nonblack people of color such as Palestinians or indigenous Americans, antisemitism, capitalism, sexism, or transphobia.

At the core of this philosophy is the belief that the **world’s basic breakdown** of humans is between **Humans and Slaves**, with the latter being the cross that all black people of every distinction are born to bear to their grave regardless of status or class. The essence of blackness is to be a slave, at every level and in every sense.

By grouping together all blacks today as slaves — from striking black Starbucks baristas to black presidents, millionaires, and landlords — Afro-pessimism’s proponents render a **socialist anti-racist politics** **null and void**. After all, if you cannot solve the problem of racism because to be black means to be essentially and eternally enslaved, then you cannot change it. By placing race and blackness outside of history, Afro-pessimism makes white supremacy unsolvable. Furthermore, by dividing the world in all of its **mind-boggling complexity** into a battle **between blacks and nonblacks** or **between Humans and Slaves** renders solidarity amongst blacks and others impossible and the presence of a **black ruling-class invisible**.

The problems with this approach are many: **Afro-pessimists** take the flattened **definitions of blackness** preached by **white supremacists** — a state of universal and transhistorical abjection — seemingly at their word and warp it into a **badge of pride**, as black people become a race of eternal victims. But what is particularly troubling about this schema is the fact that Afro-pessimists reserve much of their ire not for the overwhelmingly white bourgeoisie who lord over Western societies, and they **remain largely silent** around the sexism as well as the **homo-/transphobia** facing **black women and queers**, because anti-blackness is believed to be uniquely worse than **other forms of identity-based discrimination.**

By placing **race and blackness** outside of history, **Afro-pessimism** makes **white supremacy** unsolvable.

The **ire of Afro-pessimists** is rather reserved for **other people of color**. Asians, indigenous Americans, and other nonblack people of color, such as even Palestinians, are categorized as the **“junior partners” of white supremacy and racial capitalism.** The Afro-pessimist argument is that whites and nonblack people of color are so psychologically invested in not being burdened with the enslaving essence of blackness that solidarity with blacks in any sort of political struggle is ultimately a fool’s errand.

Beset on all sides by enemies or false friends, the only logical conclusion to this worldview would be black separatist politics — a tired and exhausted politics, if there ever was one. Afro-pessimism is the old wine of black nationalism and separatism in the new bottle of an alienated black middle-class intelligentsia.

At a certain level, one can understand why Afro-pessimism appears to be on the rise in certain academic quarters: despite the ascendancy of a select few black people into US politics and business, American racism still rages on, most gruesomely sensationalized in police killing after police killing of innocent black people. Racism is everywhere. Yet the racism faced by a black single mother in a housing project in Jamaica, Queens is evidently different from the experiences of tenured black academics and graduate students at predominantly white Ivy League universities.

This is the classic history of ethno-racial nationalist and separatist ideologies. Claiming to speak on behalf of an ideologically constructed “nation” or “race,” the educated, bourgeois sections of an ethnicity or racial group suppress class and other divisions within the group in order to amass power. By propagating the idea of universal injury, an elite within such a community can deflect attention from the enactment of their power either against the social lessers or in brokering power with existing, traditional elites outside of the so-called race or nation.

This dynamic is also the story of another flavor of diasporic ethno-nationalism: Zionism. Afro-pessimism and Zionism rip **identity-based oppressions** out of their historical contexts, **conjure up essential identities** in their place, and **mock multiracial coexistence** and integration as mere fantasies.

For **Afro-pessimists**, nonblacks will forever **leech and feast** off of **black suffering**, all of history reduced to an **unrelenting anti-blackness**. As for Zionists, antisemitism is everywhere, in every time. Such pessimistic and nationalistic worldviews halt the ability to extend solidarity across different forms of oppression. They are thus the opposite of the socialist project’s goal of building a coalition of the vast majority of the working class across lines of race, ethnicity, and other divisions. By **mystifying and flattening** black identity, **Afro-pessimism** robs its followers of the **ability to discern class and other divisions** among black people themselves — eerily similar to how Zionists cannot recognize the world-historic irony of an oppressed minority, Jews, donning the role of oppressor in another context, the settler-colonial state of Israel.

**Essentializing blackness erases intersectional antiblackness– those are key to mitigating antiblackness.**

Greg **Thomas 18**, teaches global Black Studies texts out of the English Department at Tufts University, founding editor of PROUD FLESH, January 2018, "Afro-Blue Notes:The Death of Afro-pessimism (2.0)?" Theory & Event, 21(1), p. 293-295, muse.jhu.edu/article/685979, kav

This tradition is not a tradition in Wilderson who **regularly critiques** the **analogical arrogance** of Marxism, feminism, and an **academic paradigm of "post-colonialism"** with less common reference to **"queer" or "gay and lesbian"** categories of analysis as well—all in the name of pessimism. For him, none of these **political frameworks** with their **privileged identarian subjects** can capture the condition of **"Blackness" and "slavery"** (or "the Black/Slave"). While that perspective can allow for some insights—ones certainly seen before around the Black world and ones certainly avoided by so much institutional scholarship—it leaves the **general categorical grid** of established **Western political epistemologies** intact. The familiar **academic terrain** of "race, gender, class, and sexuality" frames the critique for "Blackness" of "gender, class, and sexuality" in addition to "**post-coloniality**" or "**post-colonialism**." The most **conventional US academic categories** of **identity and analysis** are still rendered in full as discrete, **monolithic, and monological** categories and referents (e.g., workers, women, etc.), like the respective political ideologies based upon them in the traditional ideological history of the white West (e.g., Marxism, feminism, etc.). There are "workers" and then there are "women," generically, and then sometimes there are "gays" by whatever name, not to mention "natives" or the colonized in this **culturally specific epistemology** of a **specific culture of colonialism** itself. The upshot is quite conservative, even anachronistically so. This critique is an internal if damning critique embodying and encouraging [End Page 293] pessimism largely from within the established order of knowledge that it analytically engages and categorically replenishes and preserves.

The grid politics of Wilderson's critique of "**the ruse of analogy**" leaves all manner of "Blackness" in a wasteland. The routine **categorical contrast** with "**Native Americans**" reduces all that and **any colonial condition** to a **startlingly oversimplified matter** of "land" (or "land restoration"); and it occludes **"Afro-Indian" history** as well as "Red-Black" maroonage all across the Americas. The **constant generic contrast** with "feminism" or "non-Black women" eclipses the more **mammoth criticism of "gender"** writ large in Diop and Amadiume's Black-African studies of Europe or "Western Civilization" as a "racial patriarchy" of **pessimism and "anti-Black" imperialism**. The contrast with Marxism and its "workers" never resurrects **any issues of "class"** or economics from any other perspective to recognize or to resist, for example, the **white invention of Black elites** as **vital instruments of racism**, anti-Blackness, and white-supremacism. There never appears a trace of any critique of Black "social class' (or political class) elitism in "Afro-pessimism" (2.0), which is a tell-tale sign of petty-bourgeois or "lumpen-bourgeois" articulations. Lastly, Wilderson's occasional categorical contrast of "Blackness" with Palestinians or al-Nakba (which aligns in Arabic with the Swahili substitution for the term "Middle Passage"—Maafa, the "Catastrophe") comprehends no Blackness in Palestine or among Palestinians. His Afro-pessimism can envision no Afro-Palestinianism, unlike a **great tradition of Pan-African discourses** that also do not dislocate Palestine from an **anti-colonialist mapping** of the African continent or the Afro-Asian landmass of a Pan-Africanist and "Bandung" imagination, one powerfully shared by Malcolm X and Fayez A. Sayegh. For "Black Power" internationally, Kwame Ture would refer to Palestine as the "tip of Africa" and uphold Fatima Bernawi, the iconic Black woman who's been named the "first Palestinian female political prisoner," as the paragon of "Black and Palestinian Revolutions."30 She is likewise canonized by other Afro-Palestinian icons themselves, such as Ali Jiddeh and Mahmoud Jiddeh of the African community of the Old City of Jerusalem, for example—or, say, Ahmad and Jumaa Takrouri of Occupied Jericho—who are each among the greatest of all icons across Historic Palestine, a country which has produced multiple Black Panther formations in Hebrew as well as Arabic in the 1970s and the 1980s. Again, Wilderson tacitly "nationalizes" his category of "Blackness" although this is scarcely in the **interests of Black people** in or outside of the US colonized **mainland of Americanism**; and so none of the above "Blackness" survives the **critical grid** of a **very Anglo-American** (and white racist state-bound) critique of "analogy," regardless of the "Afro-pessimist" text at hand.

Do not the vulgar colonial-nativist politics of Incognegro's strangely overlooked comment on "West Indians" go full blown then in Red, White & Black and elsewhere?31 [End Page 294]

There is here a **general critical erasure** of the massive tradition of **Black anti-colonialism**—or **anti-colonial Black resistance** to "anti-Blackness" and anti-Black colonialism, which transcends nationalization. Wilderson's "Afro-pessimist" rejects **the anti-colonialist paradigms** of **supposedly "other" peoples**, and yet in a manner that reinstates **US or Western coloniality** nonetheless—a white colonialism that oppresses "the Black" inside and outside the United States's official geopolitical limits. This position can thus make a virtue out of automatic and absolute anti-alliance postures with no further, actual political action then required for Black people, "the Black critic," or any Black liberation struggle on this view. Such chauvinism without **political commitment or engagement** beyond critique is logically consistent, for pessimism, where mere resentment or ressentiment can masquerade as resistance or "pro-Black" "radicalism." After all, Afro-pessimism (2.0) begins with a proud suspicion of Black liberation or Black liberation movement, itself, no less than of its potentially "anti-racist" or "anti-Black" political alliances. This provincial "American" pessimism reveals more affinities with Créolite in the Caribbean than Césaire's anti-colonialist eruption of Pan-African Négritude, in reality, its narrowly and negatively delimited rhetoric of the "Blackness" of "the Black" (as "Slave," of course) notwithstanding. As if this too is a virtue, pessimism is not just suspicious of power but possibility—while, upholding dystopia, it is casually dismissive of all **historical actuality** that does not support a pessimist paradigm, orientation or sensibility. Analytically, moreover, there is somehow **no white colonialism** for Blacks to fight in Africa or Black countries of Black people anywhere and no terrible landlessness that afflicts the African diasporas of Blackness captive within white settler and/or imperial state formations, for Wilderson and Afro-pessimism (2.0).

**Cap K**

**Afropess is anti-capitalist – it homogenizes those who want to change the world and leaves them as vulnerable. Anti-capitalist politics include the struggle of afropess. Alone, afropess becomes a tool for the neoliberal state.**

Nino **Brown 21**, assistant professor of education studies at DePauw University – where he teaches and researches at the nexus of pedagogy and political movements, author of six books, lead editor of Liberation School’s podcast series, 9-29-2021, "Teaching Politically and the Problem of Afropessimism — Hampton Institute," Hampton Institute, <https://www.hamptonthink.org/read/teaching-politically-and-the-problem-of-afropessimism>, kav

THE HAPPY MARRIAGE OF CAPITALISM, AFROPESSIMISM, AND LIBERAL IDENTITY POLITICS

We and our students want radical transformation, and so many often jump to the latest and seemingly most radical sounding phrases, slogans, and theories. In education, as in so many other disciplines, one of the increasingly dominant phrases is “anti-Blackness” and the theory of Afropessimism. The two foundational theorists here are Frank Wilderson and Jared Sexton. For Wilderson, Afro-pessimism contends that “Blackness cannot be separated from slavery,” and that “the Slave’s relationship to violence is open-ended, gratuitous, without reason or constraint,” whereas “the human’s relationship to violence is always contingent.”[3]

There are crucial problems with this framework that make it perfectly acceptable to capitalism and perfectly antithetical to those who want to change the world. For one, they are completely Eurocentric in that Africa and the African diaspora are flattened into “Blackness” as a condition of the “human.” As Greg Thomas notes, this is “the [B]lackness and humanism of white Americanism, specifically and restrictively, an isolationist or exceptionalist Americanism.”[4] In other words, Afropessimism takes aim at a civil society and takes refuge in a Blackness that are both uniquely American. The U.S. historical and political experience is transformed into a transcendent, static, and universal ontological status or structure. More specifically, the theories of academics in highly prestigious and exclusive institutions in the U.S. are presented as ahistorical and global realities.

As identities, Black and Blackness are, in the U.S., fairly recent developments. The earliest recorded appearances are in Richard Wright’s 1954, Black Power and in 1966 as the first words spoken by Black Panther Stokely Carmichael when he left his jail cell after imprisonment for registering voters. White and whiteness are older but still relatively recent. Theodore Allen writes that he “found no instance of the official use of the word ‘white’ as a token of social status before its appearance in a Virginia law passed in 1691, referring to ‘English or other white women.’”[5] The point here, as Eugene Puryear observes, “is that the ideology of white supremacy emerged not because of timeless antagonisms based on phenotype differences, but in a precise historical context related to the development of racial slavery.”[6] This is precisely the historical context that Afropessimism erases and precisely the phenotypes they use to define Blackness.

Afropessimism addresses an apparent radical omission in the primary theory that oppressed people have utilized for liberation: Marxism. Wilderson’s work, however, is based on a fundamental misreading of Marxism, such as his contention that in “Marxist discourse” (whatever that is) “racism is read off the base, as it were, as being derivative of political economy.”[7] To be sure, there’s an unfortunate history of some Marxist groupings asserting “class first” politics, but Marx and Engels, and Lenin, together with the history of the international communist movement, always asserted the primacy of race. Marx’s theory of class was a theory of race and colonialism, as was his communist organizing. As a historical-materialist, Marx understood that the base and superstructure of society change over time and are context-dependent. Neither the base nor superstructure are unified, static, or ahistorical. The relations of production in the U.S. are neither unified nor even strictly economic in the sense that they’re structured and divided by hierarchies of race, nationality, gender, dis/ability, sexuality, and other divisions.In an 1894 letter, Engels clarifies yet again the base-superstructure model, what it entails, how it works, and exactly what it’s supposed to do. First, he says that “economic conditions… ultimately determines historical development. But race itself is an economic factor.”[8]

Marx not only supported anti-colonial uprisings in India and China but even said that they might ignite the revolution in Britain. “It may seem a very strange, and very paradoxical assertion,” Marx wrote about the 1850-53 Taiping Rebellion in China, “that the next uprising of the people of Europe, and their next movement for republican freedom and economy of government, may depend more probably on what is now passing in the Celestial Empire.”[9]

Marx fought ruthlessly against racism and national chauvinism, particularly as he experienced the deep-seated racism of English workers against the Irish. He “argued that an English workers' party, representing workers from an oppressor nation, had the duty to support an oppressed nation’s self-determination and independence” and that “English workers could never attain liberation as long as the Irish continued to be oppressed.”[10] He recognized that the fate of Black slaves, Black workers, and white workers were bound together when he wrote in Capital that “Labour cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the [B]lack it is branded.”[11] Marx even organized workers to support the abolitionist struggle by galvanizing them to oppose a British intervention in the U.S. Civil War on behalf of the slaveocracy, an intervention that, because the British had the largest Navy in the world, could have altered the war drastically.[12]

Perhaps the real problem is that Marx treats race as a dynamic and contingent social production rather than a fixed and abstract ontological category. Black people face particular forms of oppression in the U.S. and elsewhere, as do other oppressed and exploited peoples. These change over time and are in a dialectical relationship with the overal social totality. Iyko Day got it right by equating economic reductionism to Afro-pessimism, insofar as it “frames racial slavery as a base for a colonial superstructure” and “fails to take into account the dialectics of settler colonial capitalism.”[13]

WHY THE NEOLIBERAL UNIVERSITY LOVES AFROPESSIMISM

The reason anti-Blackness critique is welcome in schools is because it is devoid of praxis and politics, or, to be more precise, because it celebrates its lack of politics. The impossibility of praxis and the rejection of organizing are fundamental tenets for two reasons. The first is that there is no answer to the question “what is to be done?” and the second is that the mass movements necessary for transformation are “from the jump, an anti-black formation,” as Wilderson told IMIXWHATILIKE.[14] Of course, the only thing to do is to condemn every attempt at fighting oppression and improving material conditions. For example, when a student group at one of our schools staged a protest when Condoleeza Rice came to speak, they were denounced as “anti-Black.” There was no political criteria for such a denouncement, no defense of Rice, and likely no knowledge of the reasons behind the protest. It didn’t matter that Rice was a key figure of the white supremacist imperialist power structure, or that she played a major role in the murder of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, the torture of thousands of Arab and African people.

Examples of “anti-Blackness” that often come up in organizing are that non-Black people of color are to be met with suspicion when organizing on issues that sharply affect Black people. One such issue is immigration. In the struggle for immigrant rights, which is often overcoded as a “Latinx” issue, some Black activists and organizers point to the fact that 44% of those caged by ICE, for example, are Haitians. Instead of directing their ire towards the racist state that holds many Black immigrants in horrendous conditions, the focus then becomes the irrevocable anti-Blackness that exists in Latinx communities. Ideologies like Afro Pessimism have working class people of color (Black people included) fighting amongst each other, with the same framework as liberal identity politics. They both reduce solidarity to checking one’s privilege and fashioning oneself as the consummate ally of Black people and their liberation. So, instead of building a united front against the racist state, the lack of corporate/mainstream media focus on the fact that there are many Black immigrants, and immigration is a “Black issue” unnecessarily shifts attention to other workers who are subjected to the same “anti-Black” ideology of the ruling class and it’s media apparatuses. Instead of calling out the “Latinx community” for their “anti-Blackness” a revolutionary perspective frames the issue as not one stemming from any said community, but from the ruling class which oppresses the vast majority of immigrants in this country.

Capital in these instances are let off the hook. The problem is no longer that the ruling class owns the means of production and thus the means of ideological production that reinforce anti-working class ideologies such as racism. The problem is the “anti-Blackness”--and the often posited “inherent” anti-Blackness--of non-Black communities. It’s a structural feature of society, but apparently one that can’t be changed. As a result, there’s no need to do anything except critique.

No wonder, then, that Afropessimism is so welcome in the neoliberal university and the increasingly corporatized public school system in the U.S. It’s incredibly easy to call something anti-Black, to condemn anti-Blackness, and to play more-radical-than-thou. It’s more than easy, it’s what academia is about. Moreover, and this is related to the Rice protest mentioned earlier, when “Black faces” do appear in “high places,” they’re immunized from any possible critique from any group that isn’t Black (enough). It doesn’t matter if the head of a school, corporation, or any other entity has the same politics as the imperialist and racist power structure, because they’re black and so to critique or challenge them would be an act of anti-Blackness.

This last reason is why white people love Afropessimism so much. The vague calls to “follow Black people'' not only fulfill racist tropes that all Black people are the same (in, for example, their unruliness and “threat” to society) but moreover let white people off the hook for doing any real political investigation and work. The real response to “Follow Black people'' is: “Which Black people?” Should Derek follow his comrade Nino or John McWhorter? Should he go to the police protest organized by the local Black Lives Matter group or the one organized by the local Congress of Racial Equality? Should he get his racial politics from Barack Obama or Glen Ford? He certainly shouldn’t get his politics--or take his lessons in class struggle--from today’s Afropessimists.

None of this is to devalue Black leadership in the Black liberation movement, to be clear. Black people have and will lead the Black struggle and the broader class struggle. Nor is it to claim that random white people should show up to a Black Lives Matter protest and grab the microphone. Then again, how much of a problem is that really? Shouldn’t we forget the myth that we can learn all the proper rules before we struggle and instead just go out and struggle? And as we struggle, be conscientious of our actions and how they could be perceived; know that we’ll make mistakes and own up to them; and most importantly build with those whom this racist society has segregated us from so we can unite against a common enemy. Black people will lead the Black struggle and the class struggle. So too will Asian Americans, Indigenous people, and Latino/a/xs. So too will the child of an African immigrant and a Filipino domestic worker. So too will some white people. The key ingredients are unity, political clarity, and strategic proficiency.

**The Black Intelligentsia has become the ruling-class – they exploit the claims of Afro-pess without experiencing its harms – that includes their scholarship.**

José **Sanchez 22**, PhD student in history at Duke University, 6-13-2022, "Against Afro-Pessimism," Jacobin, <https://jacobin.com/2022/06/afro-pessimism-frank-wilderson-socialism-flattening-racism>, kav

Perhaps we can see a similar dynamic at play with Afro-pessimism.

Both of these nationalist ideologies, Afro-pessimism and Zionism, are tied to a particular social base. Michael Berkowitz notes in Zionist Culture and West European Jewry before the First World War that Zionism’s early reception, similar to Afro-pessimism’s today, was strongest amongst **middle-class** Western and Central European Jews with a “**high degree of assimilation** . . . a completed secondary school degree, and a strong likelihood of university or professional education.”

Integrated into the **US power structure** yet still racialized, an **anxious black intelligentsia** gazes into the navel of some **black ‘essence’** to solidify a **fragile sense of identity**.

As for Afro-pessimism, Wilderson, Sexton, Hartman, Hortense Spillers, and other **Afro-pessimist luminaries** are professors, most tenured, at **renowned American universities**, occupying positions **far out of reach** of an overwhelming majority of **black people** and **other people of color** (or white people, for that matter). They have integrated quite comfortably into **ruling-class institutions** whose donors and administrators are still predominantly **white and thoroughly bourgeois**.

Thoroughly integrated into US power structures due to their class position and education, this **black intelligentsia** takes on an **identity of eternal victims.** The **black bourgeoisie and literati**, comfortable yet conflicted, usurp the struggle of the **present-day black poor** and the **latter-day enslaved**, enabling them to masquerade as victims while **enjoying the fruits of past struggles** — and not lifting a finger to aid in the struggle of working people of all colors in the present.

This is a toxic, tragic brew of anxious, middle-class in-betweenness inflected by a racial double consciousness of a sort particular to integrated black elites. Integrated into the US power structure yet still racialized, this **anxious black intelligentsia** gazes into the navel of some **black “essence”** to solidify **a fragile sense of identity**, turning to the rupture of the Middle Passage as the birth of this race of Eternal Victims or Slaves. Uneasy with being integrated as a diasporic population, Afro-pessimists don an identity as slaves in their quest for authenticity as the solution to their anxious in-betweeness.

We are in an age of more **black mayors and millionaires** than ever before. And we are witness to **black police chiefs** siccing **black cops on white and Asian BLM protesters**, as well as a **neoliberal black president** using drones to attack **brown refugees** in distant lands. The US ruling class is becoming increasingly black. Latin American, Caribbean, and African **migrants** as well as increasing numbers of **multiracial children** of partial black ancestry are making the **idea of blackness** ever more **unstable**. After all, Nigerian Americans are the most highly educated of any ethnicity in the United States. And as any Ghanaian or Dominican immigrant could tell you, “blackness” outside of the United States can possess quite a different meaning in different contexts.

Blackness itself is undergoing a **historic phase of instability**. In this context, the idea that to be black means to be **universally, essentially, and forever oppressed** is an increasingly absurd one that does more mystifying than clarifying.

**AT: Social Death**

**Social death is disproven by thousands of Black-African revolts – prefer empirics that contest the thesis of the K.**

Greg **Thomas 18**, teaches global Black Studies texts out of the English Department at Tufts University, founding editor of PROUD FLESH, January 2018, "Afro-Blue Notes:The Death of Afro-pessimism (2.0)?" Theory & Event, 21(1), p. 303-306, muse.jhu.edu/article/685979, kav

The Death of "Social Death" and Its Death?

With Wynter nowhere in sight, without any scenario of resistance or revolt ever in the vicinity of slavery's consideration, Wilderson would facilitate a revival of the writing of Orlando Patterson thanks to a cherry-picked reference to Slavery and Social Death (1982). An anonymous introduction to a recent "Afro-pessimism" reader describes the conservative sociologist as "erudite," simple and plain, customarily bracketing a host of controversial issues central to any intellectual analysis of "Blackness" and "humanity."60 Vincent Brown pointed out a decided misreading of the juridical notion of "social death" before the rise of the death cult of Afro-pessimism (2.0), which fetishizes it without understanding evidently or critical interrogation.61 But there is much more to note on this matter. Patterson is a historical sociologist of Occidentalism. His career promotion of a **meta-narrative of "Western freedom"** is inseparable from his **academic narrative of slavery** and his **sociological promotion of sexual integration** via intermarriage of Black women with white men in Rituals of Blood: The Consequences of Slavery in Two American Centuries (1999). How is this not a neo-slavery of concubinage made conjugal and synonymous with "life" itself? His sociology of slavery is one of **Western socio-cultural assimilation** and **US-American political accommodation**. What a contrast with the Diop and Amadiume perspective on "racial patriarchy" and European empire. The reincarnation of Afro-pessimism avoids examination of [End Page 303] Patterson's Occidentalism and its resultant investment in Black "social death" as a fetish and a phantasm. But Wynter would not by any means. She ordinarily writes of "master codes" of "symbolic life and death" as the central organizing principles of all human social orders of existence, not merely the "master codes" of plantation so-called "slavemasters" whose antebellum legal statutes could be mistaken for an uncontested reflection of actual historical reality by a subsequent school of scholars. The "death" discourse of Patterson is a vector of **white disciplinary power** that was so frontally challenged by Black Studies in the 1960s. Regarding history, Sterling Stuckey wrote in Amistad, symbolically: "white historians as a group are about as popular among Black people as white policemen."62 Regarding sociology, Joyce A. Ladner edited The Death of White Sociology (1973) **in a sort of homocidal death** wish for **Western "knowledge production"** and "**white middle-class values**"—not a death cult, a death drive, a death fetish or an acceptance of **"social death" propaganda** for Black people or Black social history. But these beasts die hard. Decades ago, Wynter could identify a crude Western narrative of unfreedom from Patterson's earliest writings on slavery: "Dr. Patterson purports to discover in Cudjoe [the legendary leader of the Leeward Maroons in Jamaica] an almost cowardly desire to avoid battle and to escape detection. Such criticism suggests a lack of understanding of the now well recognized tactics of successful guerilla warfare, tactics which Cudjoe had brilliantly developed centuries before their use by the Chinese and Cuban revolutionaries of modern times!"63 This was her in Black Metamorphosis: New Natives in a New World, the massive 900-plus page manuscript that she wrote in the 1970s for the Institute of the Black World and which Derrick White describes as a prelude to her … work on humanism or her "Theory of the Human."64

The tacit, presumed history of slavery inked by Wilderson's "Afro-pessimism" cannot break free of the infamous Stanley Elkins school of historiography. Both Elkins and Wilderson share the same geopolitical contours of Anglo-American nationalism—"slavery" is the US **settler state** of slavery delinked from the **rest of the world**—if one inscribes "happiness" in supposed "docility" during slavery, the other re-inscribes that "docility" with "suffering." Black or African revolt never rocks **Afro-pessimism's slavery**, or its whiteness, nor Elkins's "Sambo" national fantasy and related "Sambo" historiography. For him, as for Wilderson, Africans could only emerge from the "Middle Passage" as **tabulae rasae**—negro, or "black," but "no longer" African of any sort or in any way. This Maafa or "Middle Passage" depiction is a **white mythology** passed on yet long **debunked elsewhere**. Okun Edet Uya even showed in "The Middle Passage and Personality Change among Diaspora Africans" (1993) how **new African-based modes of kinship** were developed on the "slave ships" that **supposedly eliminated** [End Page 304] **Africanity and kinship** among the enslaved. Much later, Eric Robert Taylor made a study of hundreds of **officially documented** and often successful **anti-slavery revolts** aboard in If We Must Die: Shipboard Insurrections in the Era of the Atlantic Slave Trade (2006), **subverting or sabotaging** some of the most beloved **academic folklore** at the base. But **white nationalism** needs this phantasmagoria; it needs the "negro" rhetorically **de-Africanized** before it is semantically recoded as "black" or, in Wilderson, "Black." On a smaller scale, this white settler mythology also ignores the falsely framed "Herskovits-Frazier" debate; the essence of the very concept of "diaspora" widely commercialized in academia now; and the once popular if passing historiographical trend focusing on "small" or "day-to-day" resistance to slavery without threatening the fundamental politics of US national history as a professional discipline in the West.65 More stunning still in its demystification of the tabula rasa dogma of Elkins's "Sambo" (and hence Wilderson's "Black/Slave") is the heretical and exhaustive historical work of Gerald Horne: The Counter Revolution of 1776: Slave Resistance and the Origins of the United States of the America (2014) flies infinitely beyond the prior research of Herbert Aptheker's American Negro Slave Revolts (1943) and "Maroons within the Present Limits of the United States" (1939). Horne meticulously chronicles how maroonage determine the outlines of the US state merely assumed by Wilderson. The **white power discourse** sacralized in critique by Afro-pessimism (2.0) is revealed not to be total or absolute at all but **delirious, addicted, and desperate** in the face of **chronic, raucous, and hemispheric** Black-African resistance and revolt. The anti-pessimist James Baldwin's account of white nationalist histories that represent the enslavement of Africans as "nothing more than a record of humiliations gladly endured"66 can help explain Elkins and Wilderson's "histories" as ideological pieces of a sado-masochist historiographical whole. There is little to nothing but "docile" humiliation in either case—with or without the overtly **nationalist narrative** of "happiness," with or without the covertly **white nationalist narrative** of "suffering."

In the end, it is also telling that this "Afro-pessimist" **embrace of "social death"** has never thought to ask what or whose conception of the "social" and whose or what conception of "death" is **assumed by the notion**, not to mention how African people would respond to it accordingly over time and in various theaters of struggle. This is a Western cosmology of "death" not lived by Black people who do more than just die passively on white Western terms. One might only recall the many African Studies discussions of John Mbiti's African Religion and Philosophy (1969) with its multiplying categories of the long, recently, soon-to-be and living "dead." The **entire history of modern slavery** is rife with live conflicts in conceptions of life and death between Africa and Europe in or en route to the Americas and [End Page 305] back. This topic is a rich one in Wynter's Black Metamorphosis where many a rebel against slavery mounts the execution platform singing and laughing in communal glee at the prospect of returning home in valor via a spiritual escape from Western conceptions of "life" as well as Western conceptions of "death." Audre Lorde encodes as much in Our Dead Behind Us (1986), its ancestral call animating an ongoing life of revolt in the flesh. Another poet of the Black Arts Movement, Jayne Cortez celebrates Black defiance of death and a Black murder of white life which her Black life sees as no kind of life of at all: "Death, you are ugly. You are white. Death, you are death no more. … Liberation in my head. Liberation in my eye. … I've killed fear and my soul's on fire. I confess I am armed and prepared to reproduce the love that made me live."67 A slate of revolutionary figures of the iconic Black Panther Party also brilliantly re-theorized life, death and existence under colonial slavery and neo-slavery. Huey P. Newton's To Die for the People (1972) and Revolutionary Suicide (1973) cast the ruling oppressor's "life" as a "reactionary suicide" leading to a sorry death without significance. Alprentice "Bunchy" Carter exceeded the Western bourgeois conceit of biological life in "Black Mother," a poem where he achieves his humanity and his mother's freedom in the daring disdain for "natural death" driving his outlaw rebellion: "for a slave of natural death who dies / can't balance out to two dead flies."68 Like a Panther archetype himself, George Jackson found immortal life in revolutionary praxis and maintains in Blood in My Eye (1972) that the "social" in Western "society" is not truly "social" at all since this colonial-fascist formation does not produce "society" in fact but "hierarchy" whose aim is to fabricate the illusion of a "society above society" to rule.69 He could have been speaking of prison or pessimism when he wrote in Soledad Brother (1970): "They've been 'killing all the niggers' for nearly half a millennium now, but I am still alive. I might be the most resilient dead man in the universe. The upsetting thing is that they never take into consideration the fact that I am going to resist."70

**African culture disproves the thesis of social death. Afropess is anxiety and anger that covers the sadness at its own core.**

Thuli **Gamedze and** Asher **Gamedze 19**, MA in Education, Gender, and International Development from Michaelis, member of iQhiya(art collective); MA in African studies from University of Cape Town, 1-1-2019, "Anxiety, Afropessimism, and the University Shutdown," South Atlantic Quarterly, 118 (1), pp. 215-225, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-7281732>, kav

gamedZe: Uh huh. And it seems to flatten out and **homogenize Black people**, reducing and owning the interpretation of **Black peoples’ experiences** by subordinating them to one supposedly absolute and **totalizing logic**.

gamEdze: It goes further by articulating that the maintenance of antiblackness is crucial in sustaining the psychic health of white people. In other words, the binary created through the construction of blackness versus whiteness is the logic through which white people are able to recognize themselves as human, and through which black people, too, see white peo¬ple as human, and negate themselves. While Afropessimism can be useful in identifying systems of power—for instance, the mutual relationship of the racist construct of “black people as criminals” with the legal system and the capitalist prison-industrial complex—it falls short itself by asserting that there exists no other state for the **black body** except **perpetual death**, so con-sistently caving in on itself.

gamedZe: So, in that, it fails on **many levels** to make sense of the nuanced ways in which people, despite their **supposed nonexistence**, **exist in and navigate** through the world. How does Afropessimism understand its social death in relation to queerness or disability—forms of otherness that also generate gratuitous violence, exclusion, and oppression? But also, this particular transplantation of the American thing (the origin of the school of thought) to the continent is pretty wack. Even as the Black radical tradition has largely been formulated and theorized in and from America, and even as it often falls prey to American exceptionalisms in its quest for forms of Black universalism, I think it holds radical potential for us on the continent. As many theorists and thinkers of the Black radical tradition have shown, **African cultural practices** have formed the **basis of Black revolt** across time and space. I see Afropessimism as a departure from that **tradition’s dynamic foundations** in African culture.

Afropessimism, through its fixation on natal alienation, tends to ignore the living connections to the continent, seeming to take the severance of African people from the continent through the middle passage as utter and complete. It therefore seems to understand **Black people** not as **cultural subjects** who brought entire cosmological worlds and practices with them but as hopeless, utterly dislocated beings only existing as the sum total of their position in white supremacy. While I think that this can be challenged even in a diasporic context, this contradiction is **even more pronounced** here on the continent, because although many of us are alienated from African cultural practices and contexts, those traditions persist and are more or less proximate whether or not one is immersed in them.

gamEdze: In this way, it can be difficult to move with the Afropessimist, whose American-specific engagement with a particular history defines the functioning of antiblackness, seen as a mechanism that forms the foundational reality of every scenario of oppression.

Afropessimism’s refusal to engage its own **internal world**, to abandon its reactive and defensive nature, leads me to imagine it as a “placeholder politics,” similar to the ways that **anxiety and anger** hold and protect us from entering the place **existing beyond them**. This is not to offer a clean critique on Afropessimism but to situate it as a politics that perhaps exists as external to something more effective in exploring and acknowledging the internal— the power and the pain.

Afropessimism finds no way to its own sadness.

gamedZe: The idea of **“holding” the “place”** is quite a nice one. And interesting to think about how, in relation to the continent, it is perhaps the **anxiety or the anger** of Afropessimism that holds the place that prevents or protects the descent into the **deep sadness**. Perhaps this is what Fred Moten (2003: 94), through Amiri Baraka, might refer to as “the tragic,” which “is always in relation to a quite particular and material loss,” in this case being “the impossibility of a return to an African, the impossibility of an arrival at an American, home.” The sadness of the tragic is too great.

gamEdze: Heavy ...

**Wilderson Indicts**

**Wilderson equates everything to antiblackness – homogenizing millions off of personal encounters.**

José **Sanchez 22**, PhD student in history at Duke University, 6-13-2022, "Against Afro-Pessimism," Jacobin, <https://jacobin.com/2022/06/afro-pessimism-frank-wilderson-socialism-flattening-racism>, kav

The exact meaning of Afro-pessimism as a philosophy is still being teased out in academia and on social media. At its center is Frank Wilderson III, especially after the 2020 publication of his half-memoir, half-treatise work of what he calls “auto-theory,” Afropessimism. In it, Wilderson narrates stories from his life, especially episodes between him and his coworkers, partners, friends, and others, in which his blackness is made to be painfully visible and repelled. His conclusion is that “at every scale of abstraction, violence saturates black life,” consigning blacks to **perpetual enslavement**.

This argument lies at the core of Afro-pessimism as a philosophy: the belief that the **world’s basic breakdown** of humans is between **Humans and Slaves**, and all black people are the latter, regardless of status or class. The essence of blackness is to be a slave.

Though beautifully told at times, the psychodrama of this relatively blue-blooded, tenured University of California professor morphs into an ideology that comes to some **unsavory conclusions.**

Illustrative of the black exceptionalism that characterizes Wilderson’s thinking and Afro-pessimism as a philosophy is an episode in the memory of an interaction between a younger Wilderson and a Palestinian friend. Sameer, Wilderson’s friend, recounts life in the Occupied Territories, lamenting the “shameful and humiliating way the soldiers run their hands up and down your body” at checkpoints — but then slips that “the shame and humiliation runs even deeper if the Israeli soldier is an Ethiopian Jew.”

For Wilderson, this statement made the “earth [give] way,” causing him to spiral to a shocking conclusion: “I was faced with the realization that in the collective unconscious, Palestinian insurgents have more in common with the Israeli state and civil society than they do with Black people.”

The irrationality of assigning an **implacable anti-blackness** to an **entire people of millions** based on a **singular encounter** ought to be clear enough. It also ignores the existence of, say, Fatima Barnawi, a Nigerian Palestianian detained in 1967 who, according to residents of the **Afro-Palestinian Jerusalem enclave** was called “Little Harlem,” was the first Palestinian woman to be imprisoned for a paramilitary operation against Israel.

Another indicative episode concerns when his father, an official at the University of Minnesota, jointly runs a program with a tribal government on a reservation outside of Minneapolis. Conflict ensues over rules and funding, Native Americans and others gather into a room, and a Native American man near a young Wilderson shouts, “We don’t want you, a nigger man, telling us what to do!” to applause.

Wilderson argues that the **central struggle of the world** is one of **whites and their non-white ‘junior partners’** against all black people, no matter their position. This is an **incredibly flattened** worldview.

This prompts Wilderson to conclude that the “wealthy White housewives” that his parents, middle-class figures of the ivory tower, knew and worked with “shared the same psychic space as the Indians in the underserved neighborhoods of South Minneapolis.” And that within the “collective unconscious” of indigenous Americans, “the specter of Blackness was a greater threat than the settler institution that had dispatched a Black professor to do its dirty work.”

Over and over, these snapshots of **Wilderson’s life** scaffold into a bleak assessment rendering the **central struggle of the world** to be one of whites and their non-white “junior partners” against all black people, no matter their position.

This is an **incredibly flattened worldview**, allowing Wilderson to mask the **actual class differences** that splinter the “races.” One chief example is the fact that his parents are **middle-class intellectuals** who gave him an **upbringing of socioeconomic advantages** far out of the reach of most working people of all colors, whites included. Wilderson spent his youth hopping from Ann Arbor to Berkeley to Chicago as his parents’ faculty positions changed. In Minneapolis, they **lived in the tony neighborhood of Kenwood**, with the mansion of local hero and future vice president Walter Mondale nearby — a man who cavorted with Wilderson’s father so much that Mondale tried to convince him to run for Congress. Afro-pessimism, according to Wilderson’s telling, makes the existence of black members of an elite or bourgeoisie illegible, and solidarity among other racially oppressed peoples impossible.

**Wilderson has made Afropess Americanized, paradoxical, and further colonized.**

Greg **Thomas 18**, teaches global Black Studies texts out of the English Department at Tufts University, founding editor of PROUD FLESH, January 2018, "Afro-Blue Notes:The Death of Afro-pessimism (2.0)?" Theory & Event, 21(1), p. 289-293, muse.jhu.edu/article/685979, kav

Recently, putative foundations get presented or re-presented: Frank Wilderson publishes "Afro-Pessimism & the End of Redemption" (2016) in The Occupied Times after Incognegro: A Memoir of and Apartheid (2008) and Red, White and Black: Cinema and the Structures of US Antagonism (2010). The history of the vexing concept mocked by countless African scholars and politicos will go either unknown or unrecognized or both somehow in this latest articulation nonetheless. Some incubation period seems to have given this "Afro-pessimism" a very odd new breed of life. Intellectually, it is presented as a "new" brand, still, somehow—in an academic discourse on slavery, but a brand that can't possibly be "new" at all of course. Copyright issues of capitalism notwithstanding, this is a kind of "Afro-pessimism (2.0)"—kind of. It is very much of the old while effecting some great and deliberate ignorance of that which shapes and informs it. The global-conservative racist colonial-imperialist matrix of the "old" is simply disregarded by the "new" in its re-branding for the contemporary academic marketplace. Hence, Wilderson writes, "**Afro-pessimism** argues that the regime of violence that subsumes **Black bodies** is different from the **regime of violence** that subsumes **hyper-exploited colonial subalterns**, **exploited workers** and other **oppressed peoples**."21 He reprises, "Let me state the proposition differently: **Human Life** is dependent on **Black death** for its existence and for its **conceptual coherence**. There is no World without Blacks, yet there are no Blacks who are in the World. The Black is indeed a **sentient being**, but the **constriction of Humanist thought** is a constitutive disavowal of **Blackness as social death**; a disavowal that theorises [sic] the Black as **degraded human entity**: i.e., as an oppressed worker, a vanquished postcolonial subaltern, or a non-Black woman suffering under the disciplinary regime of patiarchy."22 What can be said of these "foundations," as it were, conventionally or unconventionally speaking?

First of all, how is it that "Afro-pessimism argues," in point of fact? How does it become such a personified abstraction bestowed with such a rhetorical aura of authority, begging so many questions as to the perverse circumstances of its hypothetical birth, or rebirth? Furthermore, how does this arguing "Afro-pessimism" get to have such authoritative "life"—as a "field"; to be a living, speaking thing, not a theory even but an oracular "Theorist"—when Black people as a people (or "sentient beings") are rendered as nothing but "dead" by this **Afropessimism**'s **absolute commitment** to the **concept of "social death"** for Black people on the **white plantations of African enslavement** and after the formal demise of those plantations still?

It's imperative to analyze this specific discourse (or notion) of "slavery" embedded here along with the conception of history or the geopolitics [End Page 289] of history inscribed by a "Black" discourse that could so casually dub itself "Afro-pessimism." The **entire discourse** operates in the flow of an **exceptionally provincial time and place**. The "First Worldism" noted in Afro-pessimism (1.0) by Emeagwali is matched here by what Malcolm X marvelously defied as "Americanism." A "new," "pessimist" critique of "anti-Black racism" is made in the age and academic context of **liberal identity conflicts and competitions**—"after the revolution has failed," to recall George L. Jackson, after counter-revolution has receded an array of revolutionary movements of praxis from hegemonic and certainly academic view. Wilderson adds in his writing against redemption: "We need to apprehend the profound and irreconcilable difference between White supremacy (the colonial utility of the Sand Creek massacre) and anti-Blackness (the human race's necessity for violence against Black people). The antagonism between the **post-colonial subject and the settler** (the Sand Creek massacre, or the Palestinian Nakba) cannot—and should not be—analogized with the **violence of social death**: that is the violence of slavery, which did not end in 1865, for the simple reason that slavery did not end in 1865."23 The chronological marker of "1865" is not insignificant or inconsequential. It indexes a specific white settler nationalist project; the USA construct of "Americanism" (or "amerikanism") and slaveocracy; an official, white settler-slave state nationalist history and historiography. Yet **Blackness and slavery** are supposedly being thought at the most **global or worldly** level of **humanity and humanism**. Yet species automatically becomes nation, or the **settler nation-state ideal**, "American" meaning US settler imperialism in North America—both the species of humanity and the species of Blackness, which is cut up, constricted, and undercut from the start by Wilderson's paradigm.

How should 1865 function for the London site of The Occupied Times?24 The powder-keg Haitian Revolution does not pivot around 1865, of course, but 1791–1804. Britain declared a "gradual" abolition of slavery in 1833–34 with a typical "compensation" mandated for the slavers. So, what of the official if spurious "**emancipation" dates** for the **rest of the Black world** of Africa's enslaved diaspora? Spain is said to officially abolish slavery in 1811, for instance, while making exceptions for colonies in Cuba, Santo Domingo, and Puerto Rico. Denmark proclaims abolition in its "West Indies" in 1846–1848, like Sweden for Barthélemy in 1847. France is forced to follow suit, once more, in 1848; and Gabon is "founded" accordingly in Africa as the US would Liberia, etc. "Upper Canada" was said to end slavery with the British and "Lower Canada" (now Québec) with the French, an interesting fact for narrations of the Underground Railroad that often kept moving beyond Canada in the north back to the African continent (often Sierra Leone). The Netherlands is said to do so in 1861 or 1863. The modern slavery founded in the "Hispano-Portuguese slave trade" would thrive [End Page 290] in the Western Hemisphere both before and after formal independence from Spain and Portugal. This is key to debunk the "**Afro-pessimism**" that thinks it can delink **slavery and colonialism** as two separate, even competing **entities or issues**. The criollo settler-colonial slave-states of Cuba and Brazil do not officially abolish slavery for Africans until two decades after 1865 in 1886 and 1888, respectively. Slavery was purportedly abolished in Ecuador in 1851, but it is quite possible to move that pretentious date to 1894, which is well beyond the official "closing" dates widely touted for Brazil after Puerto Rico and Cuba in the Americas. To think of **slavery's pseudo-abolition** in terms of 1865 alone or any one date is not to think on the level of "Blackness" and "Human Life" at all; it is to reinscribe the most imperial white "American" perspective on slavery and Blackness instead.

The conceptual-geopolitical trappings of "1865" fundamentally define the discourse of "Afro-Pessimism and the Ends of Redemption," like assorted neo-pessimist texts: "The expanding field of Afro-pessimism theorises [sic] the structural relation between Blackness and Humanity as an irreconcilable encounter, an antagonism. One cannot know Blackness as distinct from slavery, for there is no Black temporality which is antecedent to the temporality of the Black slave."25 Critically, Wole Soyinka details "pre-colonial" African languages of "black" self-identification from the Yoruba to the Ga to the Hausa peoples on continent, for starters, in "The African World and the Ethnocultural Debate" (1989). But these details do not enter modern **Eurocentric discussions** in the main, be they Marxist or anti-Marxist, etc.26 **There is in Wilderson only the slaver's history of slavery**—one slaver's official "national" or **state history and discourse**. The "expanding field" of "Afro-pessimism" (2.0) further expands anti-Black, anti-African conceptions of historical agency. There is nothing outside of, or before, or countering Wilderson's "slavery" for the African enslaved. There is only Wilderson's "Blackness," which is curious. For what he casts as "Black" rather than "black" is more accurately cast as "negro" (in this specifically English usage, moreover, with no memory of the Spanish or Portuguese etymology) and not even "Negro," quiet as it's kept—since all of Africa is **flatly foreclosed** by this acutely **paradoxical "Afro-pessimism."** Both Africa and diasporas eclipsed, his "Blackness" and "Human Life" turn out to be the blackness and humanism of white Americanism, specifically and restrictively, an isolationist or exceptionalist Americanism despite the past and present hegemony of white Western humanism and its "anti-Black racism" worldwide. What is the "Afro" in "Afro-pessimism," therefore, when this Afro-pessimism (2.0) revivifies in disguise the "negro" concept of **white settler-slave state history** and historiography? It ironically does so in the name of some "Blackness" itself or, rather, the "blackness" of whiteness, of white postulation—not the Blackness of Blackness or the transvaluations [End Page 291] of manifold Black liberation movements themselves, even as it blithely misappropriates the ongoing if now naturalized cultural-political labor of that historic Blackness in the upper case. A dominant **Anglo-American discourse of slavery** is all that there is and ever was now when it comes to the **Black and African**, all **anti-slavery discourses** and **counter-discourses of slavery** as well as Blackness somehow vanished.

A glaring absence of Black radical and revolutionary intellectual history should be expected from any expression of "Afro-pessimism." Indeed, could Afro-pessimism 2.0 take hold as another trend in mainstream academia except in the political void produced after the 1960s and '70s by local as well as global counter-revolution and counter-insurgency? This absence affects the shape and agenda of the critical analysis of "anti-Black racism" in essential ways. Wilderson's critique of the **"ruse of analogy"** in Red, White & Black becomes a refrain that naturalizes academic approaches to politics now institutionalized with the continued reign of **Western bourgeois liberalism**. For older and enduring Black radical perspectives, the existence of "anti-Black racism" among non-Black peoples, organizations, and movements is neither a new nor shocking phenomenon. For many Black revolutionary movement logics of the '60s and '70s, for instance, this did not preclude alliance (or the exhaustion of alliances made) or lead to a doctrinaire rejection of "solidarity" work and its international (or "intercommunal") possibilities.27 "Contradictions" were expected, so to speak, in theory and practice, which might be resolved or not, depending on material interest, circumstance, etc. For them, this work was not about gauging identity, or the perfection of a projected analogy, but mobilization for the political accomplishments of revolution—a revolutionism that could or may not work toward the development of a new humanism not white or racist or anti-Black after all. The reach for potential solidarities was not construed as a gift or an act of good-willed benevolence, wise or unwise given the risks. Even solidarity work with obviously problematic, openly enemy forces could be a strategic or tactical mode of advancing Black collective self-interests that might dispense with any alliance at any given moment in time without seeing the relationship as a statement of some total identity or non-identity of condition and interests. The **notion of solidarity** has nowadays been **superficialized, remaining riveted** on mere **rhetorical proclamation** and **aesthetic or representational identification** in neo-colonial culture industries here and there. An older, praxical approach to alliance, perhaps "analogy," and solidarity is not taken up by current analyses of identity conflicts that prevail with the resurgence of a more academic political-intellectualism and a now much less contested liberalism. This is imperial "multiculturalism" and its malcontents. As much as Afro-pessimism (2.0) may object to certain instances of liberalism, or [End Page 292] regulation white racist liberalism at least, it assumes these **Western epistemic frameworks** of **white academic liberalism** all the same, thereby ensconcing the **colonialism and neo-colonialism** it constantly and symptomatically denegates in text after text.

**Solvency**

**Afropess drains historical perspectives; forecloses alternatives of liberation; and fails without political resistance.**

R.L. **Stephens 17**, organizer in Chicago, founding editor of Orchestrated Pulse, A. Philip Randolph Fellow at Jacobin, 5/17/2017, "The Birthmark of Damnation: Ta-Nehisi Coates and the Black Body," Viewpoint Magazine, <https://viewpointmag.com/2017/05/17/the-birthmark-of-damnation-ta-nehisi-coates-and-the-black-body/>, kav

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.

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.

**Afro-pess** **ignores how its pessimistic approach originated from colonization and slavery – only embracing afro-optimism solves.**

Greg **Thomas 18**, teaches global Black Studies texts out of the English Department at Tufts University, founding editor of PROUD FLESH, January 2018, "Afro-Blue Notes:The Death of Afro-pessimism (2.0)?" Theory & Event, 21(1), p. 284-286, muse.jhu.edu/article/685979, kav

Africa and the Pessimism without History

Reading what some are today calling "**Afro-pessimism**" invites no small amount of **amnesia, myopia, as well as illiteracy**. There is **little if any Africa** to this discourse at all, its nominal **Afro-hyphenation** notwithstanding. Armah sits atop the lengthy bibliography on the "Afro-Pessimism" page at Incognegro.org for alphabetical reasons alone. The selection of The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born is as symptomatic as this list's addition of an Achille Mbembe book in due course. There is Frantz Fanon but only his Black Skin, White Masks (1952) is included to the exclusion of A Dying Colonialism (1959), The Wretched of the Earth (1961), and Toward the African Revolution (1964). The rest of the bibliography tends to dovetail with "race" and "critical theory" canons of US-centered academic classrooms, graduate if not undergraduate, across North America—with key duty-free imports from Western [End Page 284] Europe. In any case, what is the significance of this term as a term, its rather **bizarre adoption** by **Black academic advocates** who have come to promote it today without any **apparent sense of the history** of its ravaging the **African continent** and without any reference whatsoever to the history of **insistent Black political-intellectual resistance** to its application to Africans on the continent and in the diaspora?

Crucially, neither **pessimism nor optimism** is just a word in a dictionary. Fred Moten made a certain call for "optimism" in an earlier, and terribly "friendly," response to this "Afro-pessimism" which could be deflected by Jared Sexton as if optimism and pessimism were now virtually transposable conceptual terminology or as if pessimism could suddenly be posed as a strange mode of optimism itself—something like a philosophical detour to it, after all, when all is said and done.11 That's a specious revision to be sure. Yet what goes ignored here is how this **lexical couplet** makes its meaning in **context, politically, in time and space**, particularly in **European languages** and **colonial-imperial lexicons,** most notably perhaps in English as well as French, just for example. It carries baggage too big to check in current games of academic branding. What's more, **optimism and pessimism** do not ever confront each other on **equal ground** here, any façade of even-handed as opposed to **hierarchical dichotomy** aside. The **pessimist intellectual empire of the West** has **systematically crowded optimism** out of serious contemplation and come to pin pessimist condemnation to **all "things" Black-African** in the interests of **white racist imperialism**, for various and sundry periods of this empire. Who would overlook this issue rather than address it frontally—in and beyond books of all kinds?

A **history or genealogy** of optimism and pessimism as "ideologies" is hardly unavailable to us. The old Black radicalism of Cheikh Anta Diop wrote famously and at length about this subject. The Cultural Unity of Black Africa (1959) concluded in the late 1950s, no less: "the Meridional Cradle, confined to the African continent in particular, is characterized by the matriarchal family, the creation of the territorial state, in contrast to the Aryan city-state, the emancipation of woman in domestic life, xenophilia, cosmopolitanism, a sort of social collectivism having as a corollary a tranquility going as far as unconcern for tomorrow, a material solidarity of right for each individual…." "In the moral domain," he continues, "it shows an ideal of peace, of justice, of goodness and an optimism which eliminates all notion of guilt or original sin in religious and metaphysical institutions."12 Looking at literature in a long world history, Diop analyzed novels, tales, fables, and comedies to advance this **core proposition**, along with the **material and economic** structures of human social development. His Pan-African critique of **European imperialism** indicted not only its culture of **"war, violence, crime, and conquests,"** but also its signature **"metaphysical systems" of pessimism**.13 One could thus combat "anti-Black" racism, "anti-Black" colonialism, and "anti-Black" imperialism, so to speak, [End Page 285] by confronting or challenging the pessimism of Occidentalism—or one could reproduce this "anti-Black" **empire of slavery and colonialism** by **adopting, reifying, and endorsing it**. The final words of The Cultural Unity of Black Africa would proclaim in the spirit of revolutionary decolonization and bona fide independence: "The universe of tomorrow will in all probability be imbued with **African optimism**."14

How then does a current trend in academia proceed to dub itself "**Afro-pessimism**," simultaneously deeming itself a school of **Black radical thinking**, with no awareness of a **critique of this stature**; **no engagement** with it at all; and **no critical explanation** of how "**Afro-pessimism**" could not as a consequence signify an **elemental contradiction** in terms? The late Diop remains the most monumental historian of the Black world. His intellectual biography is as a legendary as his academic and extra-academic scholarship. It is almost cliché now to recall that he was named the most influential thinker of the 20th century—with W.E.B. DuBois—at the First World Festival of Black Arts convened in Dakar of the 1960s. Even if Anglophone political and intellectual circles show little awareness of his radical political practice and related political imprisonment as opposition under Leopold Senghor in neo-colonial Senegal—thinking too exclusively of his counter to Egyptology or his anti-Hellenomania—Diop was and is no less a giant for the historic Black Studies movement of the African diaspora across the Americas.15

**Drawing arbitrary lines to determine if actions are anti-black individualizes afropess. That oversimplifies afropess and creates a theory that doesn’t have any basis.**

George **Weddington 19**, PhD candidate with research interests in social movement studies, Black studies, and organizational sociology, 7-20-2018, “Political Ontology and Race Research: A Response to ‘Critical Race Theory, Afro-Pessimism, and Racial Progress Narratives.’” Sociology of Race and Ethnicity, 5(2), pp. 278–288, doi:10.1177/2332649218785921, kav

My objection is that the authors’ call for sociologists to test whether diversity practices reproduce antiblackness reduces antiblackness to **individual attitudes** and preferences toward African Americans, though the authors stated that the evidence of the afterlife of slavery is the ongoing production of gratuitous violence and natal alienation specifically on black populations. Wacquant’s work has earned Sexton’s praise and a central place in the approach of Afro-pessimism specifically because it allows a guideline to how scholars across disciplines can understand the connections between blackness and slavery across time and social institutions. The works of Stephen Dillon (2012), Michael Dumas (2016), and Connie Wun (2016), though beyond the discipline of sociology, point out a potentially distinct path for the way that the afterlife of slavery implicates sociological research. The importance of the concept should not lead Ray et al.’s readers to a distinction of how individuals might personally relate to African Americans in organizations but instead to ask how the dynamics of slavery structure institutions such as schools, prisons, or even the market.

The four authors falter in their prescription of how sociologists can incorporate Afro-pessimism specifically because of their limited incorporation of political ontology. Essentially, if black populations exist on an **ontological plane** Moten describes as “nothingness,” what is the **role of institutions** such as the prison that very materially and immediately shape the experiences of African Americans?3Moten (2013b) and RAlessandra aengo (2016) provide a way forward. Raengo observes, via Igor Kopytoff’s (1986) chapter in The Social Life of Things, that the political life of black populations is distinctly a result of “the ontological violence of slavery.” Reading Hartman and Raengo, along with help from Sexton and Wacquant, shows how institutions can differentially produce black life across the black diaspora, while also being understood as instances of a longer history that is characterized by the reformulation, as well as lasting effects, of slavery. The afterlife of slavery is not an issue of “testing” how diversity reproduces antiblackness or asking how many black people need to be incarcerated for prison to be considered an antiblack institution. Such approaches reduce the Afro-pessimist **mode of reading histories** of race to the **conditions of black individuals**. Instead, Afro-pessimism’s commitment to the afterlife of slavery means seeking the threads from slavery through the past, to the present and the future using black captivity, racial terror and reformulations of slavery as terrifying signposts.

**Climate turns racial violence — it is the most extreme form of structural oppression. Developing responses to it is key.**

**Williams ‘21** — Jeremy Williams, writer, The Earthbound Report, writer and activist for Environmental Justice, author of the upcoming books, Climate Change is Racist; (July 21st 2021; “The Racial Violence of Climate Change”; *Foreign Policy*; <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/07/21/the-racial-violence-of-climate-change/>; //LFS—JCM) [\*\*\*NOTE\*\*\* — This article is an excerpt from the authors upcoming book, Climate Change is Racist, and paragraphs have been condensed for readability, no text changed, omitted, or altered]

Only the top strata requires intent. Direct violence is a deliberate act whereas structural violence results from “numerous acts of omission.” **Structural violence is better understood as a process than an event**. The suffering it causes can be many times greater than **direct violence**, but it goes unnoticed because it is depersonified and diffused across many people and different acts. It is the **grinding inequality** that holds minorities back year after year. Environmental inequalities are an example of structural violence. They too flow from **deep cultural ideas** about who is entitled to **clean air and water** and who is less “deserving.” Who must be kept safe and who is, to quote a Robert D. Bullard book title, the “[wrong complexion for protection](https://nyupress.org/9780814799932/the-wrong-complexion-for-protection/)”? Consider **Archona** and Priambandhu, who were farmers in Kaya Benia, a village in Bangladesh. In previous years, they had been able to produce two metric tons of rice from their 11 acres of land. After repeated cyclones and floods, their **land has shrunk** to two acres, and what remains is polluted with salt. It is underwater for four months of the year. “We don’t know the future, but we can assume that **we will lose it all**,” Archona said. “We are losing our home. We have lost our livelihood, and we are **fighting to have enough** food and water for each day. If we just had the land beneath our feet, then we could adapt to climate change.” Archona and Priambandhu have suffered an act of violence. Their home and their **livelihood have been destroyed**. Their land has been taken from them. They have contributed almost nothing to the crisis; this is something that has been done to them.

The cause and the effect are **so far apart** from each other that it might not be recognized as violence. There was no malicious intent, yet their experience is all too common. As **greenhouse gases** pollute the **atmosphere** from the world’s most **developed countries**, the **waters rise** or the rains fall in **faraway places**. **Heat waves** claim the weakest. **Crops** are lost. Places and the memories they hold are erased. **Cultural heritage** is eroded. The individual events—the **storms** and **cyclones**—are sometimes described as “violent.” Why not the wider issue? If the cause and effect could be connected, perhaps it would be more obvious that expanding an **airport**, opening a new **coal mine**, or pulling out of an **international treaty** are acts of violence. They are acts of violence perpetrated against **nature** and **biodiversity**—and against **people of color**. One reason **climate change** is not seen as violence is it **happens so gradually**. This is a problem identified by Rob Dixon, a professor at Princeton University’s High Meadows Environmental Institute. He described how environmental harm progresses as “**slow violence**”: “a violence that **occurs gradually** and **out of sight**, a violence of **delayed destruction** that is **dispersed** across **time and space**, an attritional violence that is typically **not viewed as violence** at all.” Climate change is nobody’s fault. Nobody intended it. It has not been designed. It has been “created by **generations** of decisions from **privileged people** who seek to make themselves safe and comfortable, who **contribute disproportionately** to the problem of climate change while tending to avoid its worst effects,” wrote Kevin J. O’Brien in his striking book The Violence of Climate Change: Lessons of Resistance From Nonviolent Activists. “It has no single architect and no direct cause, but it is **nevertheless violence**—a selfish expression of power that harms others.”

There is a **through line** from **George Floyd** in Minneapolis to Archona and Priambandhu in **Bangladesh**. They have **all suffered** from acts of violence that spring from **underlying patterns of inequality**, where some people’s lives have **greater value than others’** lives. The convenience of white consumers—the right to drive or fly or eat beef—takes precedence over the rights of people of color around the world. As demonstrators took to the streets of Minneapolis in May 2020, climate activists from the local branch of [350](https://350.org/about/) served food and provided first aid to protesters. Sam Grant, executive director and environmental justice campaigner, made the connection very clearly: “Police violence is an aspect of a **broader pattern** of structural violence, which the **climate crisis is a manifestation of**.” It is all part of the same struggle, the defiant cry that **Black lives matter**. The British media may have been wrong-footed by the actions of Black Lives Matter U.K. and their assertion that climate change is racist. African activists would have been less surprised. Maangamizi is a Swahili word that means havoc or annihilation. It has become a shorthand term for an “African holocaust” that **stretches from slavery**, through **colonialism**, and **into current oppression** and the threat of **climate change**. It is used by pan-African activists and academics, including a group that runs a [petition](https://www.change.org/p/stop-the-maangamizi-we-charge-genocide-ecocide) called “Stop the Maangamizi: We charge genocide/ ecocide.” “We have our own understanding … of the problem of climate change, within the context of Pan-Afrikan Internationalism,” [write](https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/climate-justice-through-pan-afrikan-reparator/) Kofi Mawuli Klu and Esther Stanford-Xosei from the Pan-Afrikan Reparations Coalition in Europe. The group “sees climate change as one of the results of the **criminal imposition**—by the **ruling classes** of Europe—of a rapacious system **expropriating the resources** of the globe, not only at the expense of the **majority of Humanity**, but also to the detriment of our Mother Earth.”

The term genocide is not an exaggeration. The first genocide of the 20th century was in German-controlled West Africa, a campaign called the Vernichtung that drove out the Herero and Nama tribespeople. The [Times of Israel](https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-germanys-extermination-program-for-black-africans-a-template-for-the-holocaust/) described it as a “template for the Holocaust.” Similar atrocities occurred in the Congo under Belgium, in Libya under Italian rule, and in the French colonies like Algeria. Other crimes may not fit the specific definition of genocide, but what is the right word for systematically obliterating an entire culture, as British imperialist forces did in the sacking of Benin? Although colonialism may have formally ended, pan-Africans argue justice is yet to be done and the damage is ongoing. As rapper [Akala](https://www.musixmatch.com/lyrics/Akala/Maangamizi) put it: “They changed that much? Are you so sure? The world’s darker people still the most poor?”

This history of **genocide and extraction** of value from Africa is now being compounded by the **climate crisis**. It has taken different forms over the centuries, but the same pattern of **cultural violence** underlies slavery, colonization, unfair trade rules, and the **climate crisis**. First, it was the people and their labor. Then, it was the **land and its resources**. Now, it is the atmosphere. The nature of the plunder has changed, but the logic remains the same: White people are entitled to take what they need from Black people.

**AT: African Nation Link**

**Racism and colonialism were recreated by black settlers in Liberia – they carried over violent structures with them. That disproves any link to African nations.**

José **Sanchez 22**, PhD student in history at Duke University, 6-13-2022, "Against Afro-Pessimism," Jacobin, <https://jacobin.com/2022/06/afro-pessimism-frank-wilderson-socialism-flattening-racism>, kav

The histories of Liberia and Israel, like the histories of African and Jewish Americans, are not perfectly analogous. But key similarities are there. Liberia and Israel were founded by the **descendants of oppressed peoples** whose self-conceptions were strongly tied to being an **oppressed and dehumanized people.** These are nation-states conceived as refuges from **ancient and lethal hatreds in faraway lands.**

Ironically, the respective settlers of both countries became a dominating group themselves, building up states and societies that served their interests as a group, particularly a clique of ruling elites among them. Yet in Israel, Jews were able to achieve a demographic majority and maintain it today through an apartheid system; rhetoric and action against Palestinians in everyday Israeli politics smacks of ethnic cleansing or even genocide. Palestinian birth rates are described in apocalyptic terms of “demographic time bombs.”’ In Liberia, the **manumitted slaves, free blacks, and “mulattoes”** who made up the Americo-Liberian and West Indian–Liberian dominant groups were consistently outnumbered by the **masses of indigenous Africans** that they quarreled and traded with.

In 1816, the slaveholder-dominated Virginian statehouse asked the US Congress to find a territory on the African coast to become a refuge for free blacks and emancipated slaves. Both slaveholders and abolitionists gathered at a Washington, DC hotel in December of that year and founded the American Colonization Society (ACS). Colonizationists came to believe that only by exporting blacks to a separate country could their plight find resolution because of the impossibility of racial harmony in the United States.

As Eric Burin writes in Slavery and the Peculiar Solution: A History of the American Colonization Society, the ACS “hoped to rid the United States of both slavery and black people.” Exporting America’s “Negro problem” was initially a political outgrowth of early black nationalists such as Paul Cuffe to address the plight of African Americans in the antebellum republic. Cuffe, a sailor of mixed-race heritage, visited Sierra Leone in 1811 to think through how the United States could establish a similar project.

Sierra Leone was established in the late eighteenth century by black and white British abolitionists as a “homeland,” drawing black Britons, Nova Scotians, and West Indians. Soon enough, British squadrons were intercepting illegal, mostly Havana- and Rio de Janeiro–bound slave ships, “liberating” the enslaved Africans on board and bringing them to Sierra Leone, creating a polyglot and multireligious community. As the nineteenth century progressed, Liberian colonization grew more and more popular, with proponents growing to include US presidents James Monroe and Andrew Jackson. Even Abraham Lincoln would flirt with the idea as president.

Historians have concluded that paternalism and racism motivated the ACS’s actions. For example, many of its Southern slaveholding members believed that **free blacks posed a problem** to their interests and **dreamed of shipping them all off to Liberia**. Yet in his earlier years, the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison promoted the colonization of and the sending off of free blacks to Liberia as the most strategic pathway to furthering slavery’s demise. It was only when Garrison was shown by black allies that the masses of African Americans were not pro-colonization that he became an opponent of the Liberian settler-colonial project.

Against assimilationists like Frederick Douglass, black nationalists such as Martin Delany also looked to Liberia to solve the problems of black America. Delany declared that “only through wielding the national helm could Africans in the Americas achieve their quest for representation and preserve their distinctiveness.” Douglass and the overwhelming majority of African Americans, now generations removed from the Middle Passage and made into a new people born through that rupture, believed that only struggling for their liberation in their new homeland was the path forward.

Yet in Liberia, slaveholders, black nationalists, and do-good white abolitionists pushed on. There, their thinking converged — none of them thinking for a second that the United States could actually be a multiracial democracy.

Like the Afro-pessimists today who fatalistically believe in a **timeless and intractable anti-black racism**, proponents of **Liberian colonization** could not imagine that racism could be **consciously eliminated** by the same human beings that actually gave birth to it. Racial animosity between blacks and whites was imagined to be ingrained and unstoppable. And even if emancipation could be won, peaceful, multiracial coexistence and equality would be an impossible dream. Afro-pessimists today are like the recalcitrant ACS members who kept promoting the fantasies of Liberian colonization and back-to-Africa efforts, even as strong majorities of black folks looked to more practical solutions within their own environments, oftentimes allying with whites themselves.

However, with Reconstruction’s defeat in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, it is understandable why a minority of African Americans looked to emigration and Liberia as a solution to their plight in the United States as the century drew to a close. The Jim Crow counterrevolution began to solidify, pushed by a frightened Northern and Southern ruling class anxious to snuff out the democratic and interracial popular energies unleashed by Reconstruction. This only bolstered the claims of the ACS, in the ears of some. As Burin wrote, “Insisting that African-Americans were unfit for citizenship in the United States and that white people would inevitably crush black aspirations, Society officials eagerly anticipated a postwar upsurge in emigration.”

Any upsurge in post–Civil War back-to-Africa efforts, however broadly unpopular, grew in times wherein racism became so intense that **exasperated African Americans** could not help but seriously doubt that they had a future in the United States. As Kenneth C. Barnes concludes in Journey to Hope: The Back-to-Africa Movement in Arkansas in the Late 1800s, “Interest in African emigration peaked among black southerners in the 1890s, a time when cotton prices hit rock bottom and white racism reached its zenith.”

In this rightward lurch in **US national politics**, **black emigration and racial pessimism** becomes tragically sensible — paralleling the context of **Afro-pessimism’s growing popularity** in our own bleak times of primetime-televised **police killings and growing inequality**.

In the beginning, the Liberian settlements were collaboratively run by black settlers as well as white philanthropists and governors who sincerely wanted to solve the United States’ “Negro problem” through exporting it. With independence in 1847, state affairs were fully in black settler hands, in an effort driven by “well-heeled” elites, in James Ciment’s observations. Through colonization efforts across the United States and even the West Indies, blacks developed a **diasporic identity**, mythologizing Africa as their “homeland” in spite of the **cultural differences and distance** from the continent through the abortive rupture of the Middle Passage.

Yet almost from the very start of this **unique and black settler-colonial experiment**, tensions emerged between the **black settlers and the indigenous Africans** that unraveled meanings of blackness as well as exposed the limits of **black nationalism and separatism**.

In an essay titled, “Black Imperialism: Americo-Liberian Rule over the African Peoples of Liberia, 1841–1964”, M. B. Akpan observes that due to a variety of cultural differences between African American settlers and indigenous Africans in Liberia that, “in spite of their color, they were, as a rule, as foreign, and lacking in sentimental attachment to Africa as were European colonialists elsewhere in Africa like the British, the French, the Portuguese, and the Spaniards.” Americo-Liberian families carved up the tropical land amongst themselves, dressed in the woolens of their respectable white counterparts back in New York and Baltimore despite the oppressive heat and scorning local fare like cassava for familiar tastes like pickled beef.

Americo-Liberians had become, as indigenous Africans would call them, the **“black white people.”** As Caree A. Banton argues in her book More Auspicious Shores: Barbadian Migration to Liberia, Blackness, and the Making of an African Republic, “When black migrants believed they had gotten away from the **dread and terror of white supremacy and colonialism**, different aspects of the ideologies traveled to Liberia through black migrants’ own internalization of them.”

Though indigenous Liberians outnumbered settlers a hundred to one, Liberia’s 1847 constitution didn’t afford natives any rights or privileges. Supported by US funds and arms, the settlers forcibly put Africans into a “protectorate” relationship, requiring subjected peoples to acknowledge the supremacy of the settler state over their own governments in exchange for civilizing goods such as an assimilation policy.

African youths, particularly illegitimate children, would be sired in settler households to work as servants and be educated. Hinterland villages were subjected to an onerous “hut tax” starting in 1916, and such revenue was siphoned into the pockets of corrupt village and settler elites. With later, twentieth-century pushes to centralize settler governance, indigenous rebellions broke out among the ethnic Grebos in 1910, the Krus in 1915, among others — all defeated with the help of US arms, personnel, and training.

Perhaps the most sensational example of Americo-Liberian abuse against indigenous Africans was the scandal and League of Nations investigation into forced **labor recruitment and shipping** of indigenous Liberians by Americo-Liberian elites to **work the plantations** on the Spanish island colony of Fernando Po, the northernmost part of Equatorial Guinea. Americo-Liberians would **turn a profit for this traffic** in a scheme eerily reminiscent of the crimes done to their ancestors. I. K. Sundiata writes in “Prelude to Scandal: Liberia and Fernando Po, 1880-1930” in the Journal of African History, “Thus, the laborer found himself working for the period of the advance, three months, as unpaid labor.” Americo-Liberian settlers ironically recreated the centuries-old tradition of African rulers selling their own subjects to European merchants in exchange for power and wealth over their remaining charges.

When the Jamaican Marcus Garvey’s exploding back-to-Africa movement and his Universal Negro Improvement Association made links with Monrovia envoys, eyeing Liberia as a place to settle masses of followers in the Americas, Americo-Liberian elites eventually responded with coldness because they looked at Garvey as a contender for the power they had over the country. Instead, Americo-Liberian elites looked to a white man named Harvey Firestone, Sr who led the world’s largest tire company and who offered that the government pay off all of their debts in exchange for more control over state affairs. In sidelining Garveyism while putting the Liberian state once again under effective tutelage to white capitalists in exchange for maintaining power over indigenous Africans and others, Liberian settler elites once again found, in **blackness, a useful cover** for justifying **an abusive ruling class.**

**AT: Black Existentialism**

**Black existentialism has too many performative contradictions that disprove the theory.**

* la mauvaise foi = bad faith

Lewis **Gordon 20**, Editor of the American Philosophical Association Blog series Black Issues in Philosophy, American philosopher at the University of Connecticut, 2-6-2020, "The Sartrean Mind," Routledge, pp. 503-504, <https://doi-org.10.4324/9781315100500>, kav

Many **philosophers and scholars** who find Sartre’s thought useful often admit writing under the fire of critics whose impositions are often neurotic and ironic. This is because Sartre, like Beauvoir, Biko, Fanon, and Wright, lived on a scale so grand that he made other intellectuals feel “accused” and, worse, small. Few people could live up to the standards they exemplified. They took on the difficult task of living as truthfully as possible, which, unfortunately, made their lies and moments of self-deception loom proverbially large. Some would call this a problem of their authenticity, but that would not do them justice, since it would ironically collapse them into a formulation they ultimately transcended. Their goal was not “wholeness” or concerns with being genuine or sincere, which is paradoxical since to make authenticity an aim of one’s life is, as Sartre showed in his early writings, a form of inauthenticity. For him, this problem was that of mauvaise foi or bad faith.4 A challenge with addressing a problem in terms of bad faith is that its exemplars would immediately deny such exemplification. As many who have studied the phenomenon know, bad faith is **ashamed of itself** and thus **attempts to hide**, including from itself, often through **shifting the orientation** of critique. Thus, the defense is on the alert for analyses of bad faith to be in bad faith. Much of this has to do with the negative associations of the word “bad” and the legalistic meaning of bad faith in the English language, such as agreeing to do something one doesn’t intend to do. Thus, I will here simply use the French term la mauvaise foi, even though mauvaise has its negative connotations. Its range, however, is broader in usage than in English. La mauvaise foi need not, for instance, be immoral. The reasons why a human being seeks retreat to it as a refuge could be excusable once her or his circumstances are understood. As the focus here is Black existentialism, I will first offer a summary of the argument I made in Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism, as I devoted much time to the discussion of la mauvaise foi there. I will then add some reflection on how I read Sartre today in light of the subsequent work others and I have done on his thought and its continued relevance, at least to Black and Africana phenomenological philosophy. I argued that la mauvaise foi emerged not only at the level of human phenomena in action but also in many of the ways in which they are studied. For instance, the **compartmentalist approach** of separating race away from other dimensions of human reality distorted the subject at hand. It could only be done, ultimately, in la mauvaise foi because of the imposition of non-relationality on a relational subject. The old debate of race versus gender, or race versus class, or gender versus class, and any of these versus sexual orientation is a fine intellectual exercise under laboratory conditions in which the domain of inquiry is staked out and constrained. That, however, is not human reality. The argument actually goes back beyond Sartre to Bishop Berkeley and David Hume, where no exemplar of a concept makes sense without other elements. Prosaically, we don’t see race, gender, class, or sexual orientation walking around; we see people who exemplify all of these, all the time, in different ways. Race, then, should always be studied in relation to **what made it**, among other related phenomena, **a reality of human life** from it’s the onaturalistic form in Iberia from about the tenth century to its secular naturalistic ones since the seventeenth century. Sartre and those of us influenced by Beauvoir’s and his thought at first offer a superbly simple argument. Racism requires denying the humanity of other groups of human beings through imposing racial hierarchies upon them and then denying the ascription of human being to those designated “inferior.” The **performative contradiction** is that they would first have to be identified as human beings in order to deny their being such. It is thus a form of la mauvaise foi. I added, since racism is a form of la mauvaise foi, antiblack racism, as a species of racism, must also be a form of la mauvaise foi. Simple enough. The implications, however, are the proverbial philosophical and social theoretical flesh for such bones. For instance, the initial list of race, gender, class, etc., is also premised on abstractions devoid of flesh. In phenomenology, consciousness must be consciousness of something, but that involves something being somewhere. For something to be somewhere—let us say there—consciousness of it must be from somewhere as well, that is, here. This relationship points to the body, and embodiment requires, at least for human beings, consciousness in the flesh. Disembodiment, then, entails being nowhere, which, then, erases not only the relationship of intentionality but also relationality. It is a form of la mauvaise foi that recurs in many analyses of dehumanized relationships to phenomena.

**Random**

**This card flows for the K: The ontology debate isn’t as simple as proving progress is possible.**

George **Weddington 19**, PhD candidate with research interests in social movement studies, Black studies, and organizational sociology, 7-20-2018, “Political Ontology and Race Research: A Response to ‘Critical Race Theory, Afro-Pessimism, and Racial Progress Narratives.’” Sociology of Race and Ethnicity, 5(2), pp. 278–288, doi:10.1177/2332649218785921, kav

Sabine Broeck (2017) provided an exquisite point to the criticism, such that it is not only that the distancing of the humanity of slavery was permitted by a dispassionate approach to the accounting of the slaves but that such distancing also erases the legacy of slavery as formative to “European thought, as well as on social, political and cultural practices, including academia’s self-sustaining discourses” (p. 139). Indeed, other thinkers, such as Denise Ferreira da Silva (2011), Hartman and Wilderson (2003), and Alexander Weheliye (2014), have argued that the formulation of key themes and concepts central to European thought have often omitted racial difference or occurred against the backdrop of slavery. Essentially, one of Afro-pessimism’s most relevant criticisms for sociology is the need to historically and critically trace seemingly commonplace sociological concepts in their legacy of slavery. Although it is uncontroversial to assume that slavery is of tremendous importance to the contemporary social conditions of black populations, slavery also implicates the epistemological foundations of sociology. Ray et al. provide only a glimpse of the full breadth of this criticism by focusing on Sexton’s arguments against the popular concept of “people of color.” Instead, as Broeck (2016) stated, citing Christina Sharpe (2016), Afro-pessimism demands “a white agonistic practice vis-à-vis the humanist legacy of one’s own training, which needs not the spectacular one-time-jump into disloyalty, but a fidelity to laboring on said protocol of white enslavist power, ongoing” (p. 140). Such a demand points to a wholesale interrogation of sociology’s epistemic relationship to slavery.

Furthermore, in the introduction to Red, White & Black, Wilderson (2010:10) offered an explicit criticism of empirical approaches to studying black populations, stating that tracking the experiential conditions of black populations obscures an ontological research paradigm. He went on to argue that a reliance on “facts” places a false burden on the project of Afro-pessimism, such that the reliance on empirical analysis of black populations exists to inaugurate an ongoing but ultimately futile industry of applying faulty theories and concepts to populations of black slaves. His point raises, perhaps the most explicitly, a criticism that disturbs Ray et al.’s prescription for labor-market studies. I will address this observation in depth shortly, but it is necessary to also briefly review Fred Moten’s (2013a) engagement with Wilderson’s (as well as Sexton’s) points and their implications for sociology. He wrote,

“Political ontology backs away from the experimental declivity that Fanon and Du Bois were at least able to blaze, each in his own way forging a sociological path that would move against the limiting force, held in the ontological traces, of positivism, on the one hand, and phenomenology, on the other, as each would serve as the foundation of a theory of relations posing the nothingness of blackness in its (negative) relation to the substance of subjectivity-as-nonblackness (enacted in antiblack-ness). (p. 749)”

Moten is pointing toward what I would posit is effectively the impasse for sociologists: if and how Afro-pessimism can be reconciled with sociology. He went on to write,

“The paraontological distinction between blackness and blacks allows us no longer to be enthralled by the notion that blackness is a property that belongs to blacks (thereby placing certain formulations regarding non/relationality and non/communicability on a different footing and under a certain pressure) but also because ultimately it allows us to detach blackness from the question of (the meaning of) being. (p. 749)”

What Moten is criticizing is a reflection of Wilderson’s point, that studying blackness, especially while accepting political ontology as a central facet of Afro-pessimism, is actually antithetical to the empirical study of black populations. What I wish to clarify here, as further review of the back and forth between Moten and Sexton would reveal, is that what is at stake is not a wholesale rejection of research on actual black communities, resistance, or culture (Sexton 2011). Instead—and this is where Moten’s engagement with Du Bois and Fanon must be closely read—Afro-pessimism situates political ontology as a reference point for understanding black social life, not as a thesis to be tested by inevitably faulty concepts (Moten 2008). It is on this point that opponents of Afro-pessimism all too often miss the nuance of its approach to the study of blackness as a prior historical and cultural racial construct by pointing out the empirical history of resistance, agency, and life of black peoples (Gordon 2018; Kauanui 2017; Thomas 2018). Indeed, Afro-pessimists would warn against conceptualizing blackness as solely the result of the actions and agency of black people. In positing political ontology as an approach to writing ethnography on black populations, Saucier argues that Afro-pessimism holds implications for the organizing and presentation of black life across disciplines, including sociology but also that there are opportunities for scholars trained as sociologists to engage with the approach.