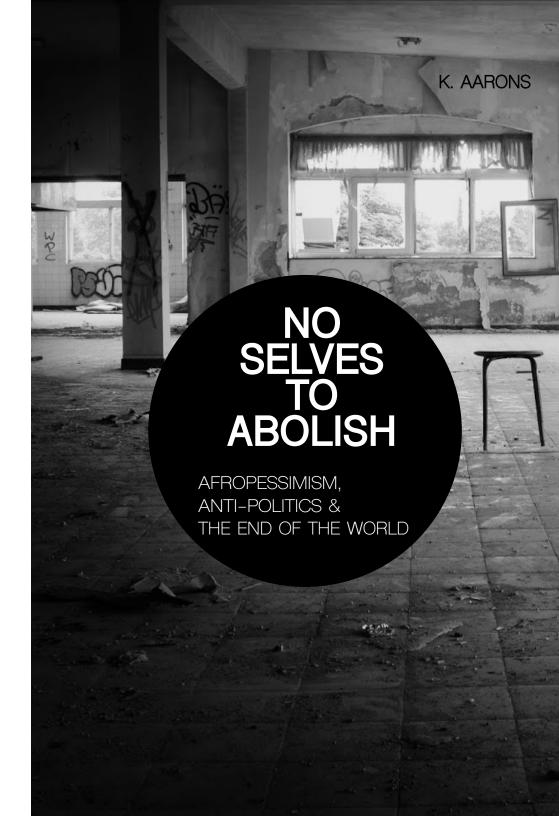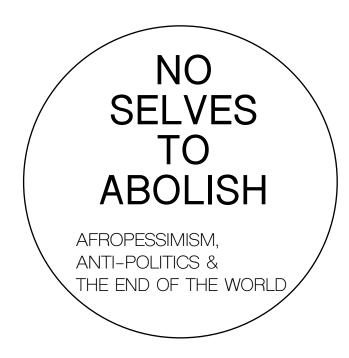K. AARONS

Afropessimist theory is not simply at odds with, but in fact hostile to identity and privilege politics, both Black and non-Black. Having extracted the afropessimist position from the politics of symbolic valorization or integration, this article argues that its deeper affinity is with those tendencies of anarchist, communist, and queer thought in which revolutionary practice tends to be understood as the immediate self-abolition of the existing conditions that produce our identities. It concludes with a series of preliminary practical proposals placing what has so far gone by the name "solidarity" on a different footing.

NO SELVES TO ABOLISH

AFROPESSIMISM,
ANTI–POLITICS &
THE END OF THE WORLD

NO
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K. AARONS

5. This nonlinear thought of self-abolition is not a re-centring of white or non-Black identity, but rather decentring and multiplication of the fronts from which the material and symbolic apparatus of Humanity can be destituted.

To orient our struggles around such a paradigmatic geometry in no way denies the importance of insurrectional moments such as the revolts in Ferguson, Oakland, Baltimore, etc. in which the aleatory power of events led parallel lines to cross momentarily, producing explosive and fugitive moments in which distinct grammars of suffering pushed folks together into the same streets, elaborating shared gestures and complicities – rags, gasoline, knowing looks – that they might together attack the forms of social mediation through which Humanity and anti-Black capitalism as a whole is reproduced. The fires started in these moments still burn in the hearts of those who lived and witnessed them. Yet while their light may serve as a passional orientation for an uncertain future, we need paradigmatic cartographies to pursue it.

'nothingness' of blackness consists in its '(negative) relation to the substance of subjectivity-as-nonblackness (enacted in antiblackness)', then there is indeed no emancipation conceivable in the form of an affirmative *black* subjectivity. However, for Moten this is an insight that remains to be fulfilled: what is needful is not the recovery of, but practical and theoretical 'refusal of standpoint', refusal that clears the way for the elaboration of an 'existence without standing', a thinking 'outside the desire for a standpoint'. Black folks, he argues, 'must free [themselves] from ontological expectation', cease being entranced by the denial of their own subjectivity, and refuse the allure of Blackness as a 'property that belongs to Blacks'. What is necessary is to 'find the self, and kill it', by which he means 'the self that [black folks] cannot have and cannot be, but against which [they] are posed as the occupant of no position'. It is in abandoning the desire for legible subjectivity that we open the possibility of elaboration of an undercommons, whose modern day 'maroons' wage a 'war of apposition' grounded on an ethics of 'dispossessive intimacy'. See Fred Moten, 'Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)', in *South Atlantic Quarterly,* 112:4, Fall 2013, and Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (New York: Autonomedia, 2013). Moten's work will form the basis of a forthcoming follow-up article.

AN INFERNAL COUPLE: PRIVILEGE THEORY & INSURRECTIONALISM

My title adapts a formulation from Miriame Kaba's recent photo exhibition in Chicago, *No Selves to Defend,* which documents the legal disqualification in the US of Black women's bodies from the right of self-defence, from the case of Celia the slave in the mid-19th century to Marissa Alexander in the present. Kaba shows how the anti-Black legal construction of the right of self-defence circumscribed this right exclusively within the symbolic framework of the Human being. To have a right of self-defence first implied having a 'self' or a personhood possessing sufficient social value as to be capable of violation in the first place. Yet, as Kaba points out, 'For a Black woman, mere flesh is not a self. And for centuries, black women have had no selves to defend'.[1]

While I think we ought to worry about Kaba's limitation of this history to cases of 'legitimate self-defence', which risks an implicit attachment to the liberal framework of innocence – even as it demonstrates the inaccessibility of this same category to Black women – her claim that Black women have 'no selves to defend' serves as a useful opportunity to reflect on another trope in anarchist, communist and militant queer thought in recent years, namely that of 'self-abolition'.

What follows is but one tiny part of an enormous conversation presently taking place around the preponderant role that anti-Black violence plays in social and interpersonal conflict and antagonism in the US, and with increasing intensity in the wake of the recent events in Ferguson, Oakland, and Baltimore.

For over a decade, anti-racist discourse in North American and Northern European radical left and anarchist move-

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1   Miriame Kaba, *No Selves To Defend*, Booklet, Chicago, 2014.

ments has been dominated by what has come to be called 'privilege theory'.[2]

Privilege theory's emphasis on liberal forms of conscious-ness-raising activism, often bound up in the largely-symbol-ic disavowal of accrued social benefits, presents a vision of anti-racist struggle that inadvertently centres the agency of benevolent white people, while tending to treat questions of racism as issuing above all from psychological sources. Too-often subscribing to idealist theories of power, these approaches prioritise practices aimed at increasing cultural hegemony or positive symbolic representation of marginal groups, rather than seeing race as reproduced through dif-ferential regimes of ballistic and carceral material violence like police and prisons and strategising on this basis. Where they do acknowledge the central role of material violence and the consequent inevitability of anti-State revolt, they are often lead into embarrassing efforts to 'shelter' homoge-neously-understood 'communities of colour' from State vi-olence, erasing the ongoing histories of Black autonomous revolt and replacing it with a vision of struggle that looks more like a voluntary disavowal of privilege by White left-ists and 'people-of-colour-allies'. Finally, in addition to its being burdened by either unstrategic and/or simply liberal 'nonviolent' leftist tendencies, privilege theory also grossly underestimates the depth and scale of racism in the US.

At the same time, an otherwise understandable dissatisfac-tion with privilege theory seems to have pushed some folks back either into a simplistic class-first Marxism (which I won't waste time critiquing here), or else into seeking a ref-erence point for struggle exclusively in their own *immediate* experience. The latter idea, more common in certain insur-rectional anarchist approaches to social conflict, emphasis-

be stripped of a certain paradigmatic incoherence, if it means anything at all it must be premised not on an attempt to identify, recognise, or render visible Black suffering, but on a *disidentification with ourselves*. That self-abolition is a regulative Idea means that it is inex-istent in the present. If my struggles can be said to align themselves with Black struggle, this is not in the mo-ment I declare my 'support' for it, or my willingness to be 'authorised' by whatever initiative the nearest Black person is calling for.[27] Rather, it is when we collectively clear the path for an assault on the conditions that en-force those identities which paradigmatically constitute a 'self' that we contribute to making things easier for others.

4. At what Wilderson refers to as the 'paradigmatic' level, the geometry of self-abolitionist solidarity is therefore one of parallel rather than convergent lines. My own struggles and those of the friends I'm closest to proceed as if along a parallel line with the Black body's struggle against objecthood or enslavedness, a struggle which we must make every effort to avoid obstructing as we continue to dismantle the conditions reproducing our own identities. Perhaps we can put things this way: the meeting point between Blackness's war on enslavedness and those who might envision themselves as its 'allies' is not in a paradigmatic commonality to affirm between us; it lies, rather, in what we wish to negate in ourselves that might free the way for us all to find something more powerful than the selves presently available to us and denied to them.[28]

2 For a useful selection of texts from the recent debates on privilege theory, identity and revolution, see the special issue of the journal *Dys-ophia,* Issue 4, 'Anarchist Debates On Privilege', available at Dysophia. org.uk.

27 One occasionally finds Frank Wilderson falling back on such a logic of 'proximate authorisation'. However, this should be regarded as a deviation from his more fundamental insight, which militates against the sort of surreptitious reintroduction of recognitional ethics that this would entail.

28 Taking up Wilderson and Sexton's insights regarding the absence of black subjectivity or 'standpoint', Fred Moten concedes that if the

lines, yet whose miserable separation must resume as soon as order is restored on the ground, and the situation becomes once again governable.

<div align="center">★★</div>

I will close with some tentative theses:

1. That we find ourselves fighting a common enemy does not mean that we have a common *experience* of that enemy, nor does it preclude the possibility that we may actually stand in antagonistic relations to one another at another level. We must therefore reject any model of solidarity premised on reciprocal recognition, on empathy, sympathy or charity, or on the assumption of common interests.

2. The only consistent and honest fight is one we engage in for our own reasons, oriented immanently around our own *idea of happiness*. By the latter is meant not an individual psychological state, but rather the affective complicity and feeling of increased power that arises between people who, based on a shared perception of the lines of force surrounding them, act together to polarise situational conflicts in pursuit of ungovernable forms of life, in whatever experimental forms this might take in the present.

3. If we[26] fight because our own lives compel us to, and it is our own idea of happiness that orients us in these struggles, what is left of 'anti-racist solidarity'? While the notion of a 'solidarity' with Black suffering cannot

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26   This 'we' aims to take seriously the paradigmatic differences positioning us, and yet at the same time wishes to be cautious about implying any unnecessary exclusiveness that would not in fact reflect the situation on the ground, in the streets, and our lives. It may be that this tension does not lend itself to any easy resolution.

es the positive intensive social bonds forged through street confrontation, and the consequent need for everyday forms of attack on police and prison apparatuses. We overcome the *whatness* of our constructed identities, the socio-institutional categories designed to reinforce our separation, by becoming a *how* together in the streets, when our bodies interact by means of a shared gesture of conflictuality (e.g. acting together while rioting, building barricades, looting, fighting the police, defending neighbourhoods, etc.). Yet what doesn't always accompany this is an attentiveness to the different *orders* and *registers* of dissatisfaction that animate these conflicts[3] (never mind the uncritical way in which values such as 'individuality' and 'freedom' are sometimes framed in these discourses). What is forgotten is the fact that being willing to throw down alongside others in the streets doesn't mean that the characteristic or paradigmatic form of suffering that pushed one to do so is *analogous* to that of others next to you. And this matters so much more if one seeks to locate the means of antiracist struggle nowhere else than within these clashes themselves and the bonds forged through them.

In short, what we have seen in the past few years is a regrettable oscillation between a vicarious *acting on behalf of others' reasons* (i.e. a gesture of self-parenthesis) and *an acting out of one's own immediate reasons and assuming or hoping they are compatible or compossible with everyone else's* (i.e. uncritical

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3   'More recent attempts to come to terms with this split between anti-oppression and anticapitalist politics, in insurrectionary anarchism for example, typically rely on simplistic forms of race and gender critique which…begin and end with the police. According to this political current, the street is a place where deep and entrenched social differences can be momentarily overcome. We think this analysis deeply underestimates the qualitative differences between specific forms and sites of oppression and the variety of tactics needed to address these different situations.' Croatoan Collective, 'Who Is Oakland: Anti-Oppression Activism, the Politics of Safety, and State Co-optation' (2012); accessible here: https://escalatingidentity.wordpress.com/2012/04/30/who-is-oakland-anti-oppression-politics-decolonization-and-the-state/

self-assumption). What has so far gone largely unnoticed is the way in which afropessimist anti-politics renders both of these positions untenable. And while many who struggle today and are currently unfamiliar with this body of thought might find a lot to sympathise with in the final analysis, it is important to note that the path afropessimists take to reach these conclusions is in many respects diametrically opposed to core assumptions of the anarchist, queer, de-colonial and communist traditions.

AFROPESSIMISM & THE EXISTENTIAL COMMONS

From a practical or historical point of view, the afropessimist story reaches back to Assata Shakur, to the Black Liberation Army, even all the way back to the great Nat Turner, the Dismal Swamp, the Seminole Wars, and so on. But as an explicit body of theoretical work, it begins really with Historian Orlando Patterson (despite his own liberal proclivities). Patterson argued in the early 1980's that, contrary to Marxist assumptions, what historically defines the slave's position in society is ultimately not the phenomena of forced labour. Although frequent, forced labour occurs only contingently or incidentally, and not everywhere slaves are found. The slave relation, Patterson argued, is rather defined by a threefold condition: a) general dishonourment (or social death), b) natal alienation (i.e. the systematic rupture of familial and genealogical continuities), c) gratuitous or limitless violence. This threefold combination gives rise to a being experientially and socially devoid of relationality: the slave relation is a type of social relation whose product is a relationless object.[4]

In the late 1990s Saidiya Hartman, following on the work of cultural theorist Hortense Spillers, added to Patterson's

Since it draws its affective coordinates not from Black suffering (analogy) but from a disidentification with the Human community *emerging from the position in which it occupies*, self-abolition remains a regulative Idea rather than an actionable maxim. The role of it as an Idea is to confer a sort of negative coherency on empirical acts. Again, that this must be ideational rather than empirically empathic is necessitated by the 'ruse of analogy', i.e. the fact that Black suffering cannot *appear* phenomenally to non-Black bodies except on condition of being 'structurally adjusted' to non-Black grammars.[25] Hence there is only an indirect or ideational liaison between these paradigms, i.e. between the self-abolitionism of non-Black life and the anti-political program of the slave that Wilderson (drawing from Césaire) distils into the phrase: 'the end of the world'. As distinct Ideas, self-abolition and the end of the world are not synthetic or integral. Instead, they are perhaps best conceived of as parallel vectors, parallel precisely insofar as their potential crossing constitutes a presently unthinkable vanishing point in socio-historical conjuncture.

Despite this paradigmatic distance, the past year has witnessed moments that defy this schema, moments in which, under the aleatory impetus of an *event*, the social hostility configuring each line leads them to converge. This is what happened during the seventeen-day revolt in the San Francisco Bay Area following the Darren Wilson non-guilty verdict in December of 2014, in which diverse groups of people were led to collectively block freeways, rail lines, roads and ports, to frontally attack the police, as well as to paralyze the quotidian functioning of the metropolis through the widespread looting and destruction of commercial spaces. Such intensely conflictual ruptures enact a kind of larval, potential, and fugitive convergence between paradigmatic

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4   Patterson, Orlando, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Harvard, 1982), 1-17.

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25   On the concept of a 'ruse of analogy', see Frank Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of US Antagonisms*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), Part 1.

Put differently, when read through an afropessimist logic (as I understand it), what is vital in the queer, anarchist or communist tendencies toward self-abolition is generally not their theorisation of race, which often remains unsatisfactory,[23] but their tendency to locate the *means* and *aims* of revolutionary struggle in the immediate self-abolition of *and by* their respectively oppressed group per se. Though this may take its point of departure from a grammar of suffering marked by the exploitation of variable capital, or the marginalisation of one's queer identity, both of which constitute 'human grammars' on Wilderson's reading, by refusing to regard the plenitude of existing subjectivity (labour power, or the marginalised subjectivity of queers[24], etc.) as in need of affirmation, they at least *potentially* avoid recomposing the human community around this same grammar and community, thereby opening up the possibility for an overlap with the struggle against White supremacy from other directions.

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self-adjustment to a non-Black grammar of suffering. Hence the tendency (which forms the program of the Black bourgeoisie) toward what Fanon described as 'hallucinatory whitening' On the latter concept, see Wilderson, *Red White And Black,* 74-76.

23 'The capitalist class can equally centralise its counter-revolutionary action in the State as it can decentralise the confrontation by regionalising it, dividing the classes into social categories, even ethnicising them, because a situation of crisis is also an inter-capitalist conflict.' Bernard Lyon, 'The Suspended Step of Communisation', *Sic* 1. This is one example among many. It is notable that a couple of the texts in *Endnotes* vol. 3 begin to push in the direction of seeing racialisation as a distinctive dynamic. Still, the piece on the London riots, 'A Rising Tide Lifts All Boats', continues to frame this dynamic as a symptom of the generalised precarisation of the wage-form, which is then 'projected' socially onto those who fail economically according to schemas of abjection that have their root in earlier models of racism. Hence it would appear that it is still the class dynamic that determines contemporary racialisation in the last instance.

24 For a challenging discussion of the relation between black social objecthood and marginal queer subjectivity, see Calvin Warren, 'Onticide: Afropessimism, Queer Theory, and Ethics'. Available here: http://ill-will-editions.tumblr.com/post/115073517549/the-black-queer-does-not-and-cannot-exist

criteria an ontological dimension: the slave, she argues, is one who finds themselves positioned in their very existence, their being-as-such, as a non-Human − a *captured*, *owned*, and *traded* object for another. The ontological abjection of slave existence is not primarily defined by alienation and exploitation (a suffering due to the perceived loss of one's humanity) but by *accumulation* and *fungibility*: the condition of being owned and traded, of having one's being reduced to a *being-for-the-captor*.[5]

Far from disappearing with the 13th amendment, or even in the post-Civil Rights period, afropessimists argue that the formal traits of the slave relation were reproduced and kept alive through the perpetuation of a form of social and civil death[6] that continues to *materially* and *symbolically* locate the Black body 'outside Humanity'.

At a symbolic level, these theorists argue that the racial abjection of the slave was transferred to an 'epidermalised' racial construction of Blackness, which had the effect of inscribing the social death and relationless objecthood at the level of appearance itself: the slave relation now marks itself within the being-as-such of Blackness.[7] Black folk to-

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5 Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, (Oxford, 1997), 7, 21, 26: '[T]he value of blackness resided in its metaphorical aptitude, whether literally understood as the fungibility of the commodity or understood as the imaginative surface upon which the master and the nation came to understand themselves. […] [T]he fungibility of the commodity makes the captive body an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of others' feelings, ideas, desires, and values; and, as property, the dispossessed body of the enslaved is the surrogate for the master's body since it guarantees his disembodied universality and acts as the sign of his power and dominion.'

6 As Loic Wacquant has noted, the prison-slave is subjected to a three-fold civil closure. They are denied: cultural capital (university credentials, Pell grants, education), social redistribution (access to welfare, unemployment, veteran's benefits), and political participation (voting). See Wacquant, 'From Slavery to Mass Incarceration', *New Left Review* 13, January-February 2002.

7 Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of US*

day continue to be constitutively denied symbolic membership within White civil society (both culturally and politically), in such a way that no analogical bridge to White culture exists through which Blacks could conceivably wage a 'war of position' or sue for the sort of junior partner status otherwise accorded to White women, non-Black people of colour, or 'dutiful' immigrants. The symbolic death or exclusion of Blackness from Humanism means that it is not 'Whiteness' or White supremacy but 'Humanity' as an ontologically anti-Black structure as such which stands in antagonism with Black bodies, since its self-understanding of its own subjecthood as value is coherent only so long as it is measured against the killable and warehousable objecthood of Black flesh.

At a corporeal level, the subjection of the Black body to direct relations of force has been institutionally carried forward through institutional paradigms of convict leasing, police impunity and mass incarceration. Throughout, Black bodies continue to be marked by a *constitutive* rather than *contingent* experience of direct material violence. Prior to any transgression, the Black body is subsumed by relations of direct force that do not possess the same sort of logical or instrumental coherence characterising the exploitation of wage labourers by capital, for example. The physical violence marking Black bodies is continuous with the slave relation, in that it remains basically despotic and gratuitous, awaiting no legitimate cause or justification, open to limitless expression, and enjoying institutional impunity.

Modernity is therefore fundamentally organised around a 'double register'[8]. On the one hand, those included with-

We might do well to ask whether, from an afropessimist point of view, insurrectional anarchism, queer theory and communisation theory remain 'humanist negations of the Human'? If so, is this necessarily so?

My hypothesis is this: to the extent that they can escape this, it is in the direction of a thought of self-abolition. That is, to the extent that struggles actively refuse to validate, affirm, or strengthen the forms of subjectivity presently produced under capitalism, white supremacy and cis-sexist patriarchy, these struggles can be *potentially* aligned with – or at least, *less likely to stomp all over* – the Black struggle against its own objecthood.[21] Self-abolition therefore constitutes the only possible horizon for a non-Black struggle that does not reinforce anti-Blackness. This leads to what might be characterised as a *negative identity politics*.[22]

Antagonism, (Duke, 2011), 51: 'The visual field, "my own appearance", is the cut, the mechanism that elaborates the division between the nonniggerness [sic] and slavery, the difference between the living and the dead.'

8   Steve Martinot & Jared Sexton, 'The Avant-Garde of White Supremacy', *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture,* 9:2.

Anarchist Turn, ed. J. Blumenfeld (London: Pluto Press, 2013).

21   'Potentially' because for all its emphatic insistence that we can at present only figure communist or non-trans/queerphobic social relations negatively, there is a tendency all the same to frame the revolutionary process as a recomposition of Humanity around 'immediate' social relations. As the journal *Sic* describes it, it would be 'a community immediate to its elements…[with] immediate relations between individuals – between singular individuals that are no longer the embodiment of a social category, including the supposedly natural categories of social sexes of woman and man'. A similar move permeates the queer nihilist journal *Baedan,* which emphasises a practice of destroying 'mediations' absent of any positive foundation other than the 'immediacy of joy and chaos', etc. These are clearly *negative* definitions, as promised: the negation of the *mediations* giving rise to the reproduction of the class relation or 'civilisation' is *im*-mediacy, i.e. the subtraction of mediation, without further qualification. *Baedan*'s website is here: http://baedan. noblogs.org.

22   As should by now be clear, it would seem to be an unavoidable conclusion of afropessimist theory that this bar on positive identity politics apply to Black bodies as much as anyone else. However, this is so less as a strategic constraint (as with other Subjects) than as a *historically a priori* impossibility for bodies positioned as killable *objects*. It is black *objecthood* that creates a situation wherein every positive Black identity politics struggling to secure visibility within the political (or the space of civil society) must be purchased through a gesture of structural

any actual supersession of the capitalist class relation we ourselves must be overcome; 'we' have no 'position' apart from the capitalist class relation…[I]t is a rupture with the reproduction of what we are that will necessarily form the horizon of our struggles.

Endnotes[19]

Despite tremendous and certainly irreconcilable differences between these groups, what these theoretical camps share is the assumption that an overcoming of the existing conditions of suffering and exploitation will ultimately require not a valorisation, empowerment, or even autonomisation of presently existing oppressed subject positions, but rather the simultaneous abolition of the conditions of oppression and the social relations and the identities they produce: the liquidation rather than the consolidation and empowerment of identity.

This emphasis on the liquidation of present forms of desire, self-identification, and subjectification is arguably something relatively 'new'. For example, it very clearly runs counter to classical anarchism's emphasis on individual self-expression, freedom and the like. As some friends recently pointed out,

> For more than a century, the figure of the anarchist indicate[d] the most extreme point of western civilization. The anarchist is the point where the most hard-lined affirmation of all western fictions – the individual, freedom, free will, justice, the death of god – coincides with the most declamatory negation. The anarchist is a western negation of the west.[20]

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19 Endnotes Collective, 'What Are We To Do?', in *Communization & Its Discontents,* (New York: Autonomedia, 2011), 26, 31.

20 Invisible Committee, 'Spread Anarchy, Live Communism', in *The*

in civil society are subjected to a 'contingent, ideological exploitation by variable capital' (a regime of hegemony or exploitation). Yet this hegemonic exploitation nonetheless tends to preserve for the non-Black worker an *existential commons* that places symbolic limits on their degradation. For example, even where they may be criminalised, as in the 'bloody legislation against vagabondage' described by Marx in the first volume of *Capital*, still a transgression is always logically necessary for this criminalisation to take place, and hence the violence never seeps into the *being* of the criminal per se, i.e. it never becomes ontological. In this way, a symbolic space of belonging is safeguarded within White civil society through the social reinforcement of a racialised pathos of distance, whose axiomatic was distilled by Fanon into a simple phrase: 'simple enough one has only not to be a n_____ [epithet]'. This horizon below which non-Blacks cannot sink without scandal is marked off by despotic direct force relations, which function as the existential border separating those who live in a *de jure* perpetual vulnerability to terroristic violence, and those for whom such violence could only be experienced under a *de facto* state of exception or subsequent to a transgression.

These two distinct modalities of power do not simply emerge at the same time; rather, one conditions the other. What Martinot and Sexton describe as the 'ignorability' of Black death and the impunity of police murder of Black bodies provides the constitutive background for the symbolic rationality of White democracy, and the symbolic currency of social capital within it. The incoherence of Black death is the condition for the coherence of White common sense and hegemonic discourse. For this reason, the entire liberal discourse of 'ethics' – inasmuch as it takes place within the White discourses framed by the 'ignorability' of police and carceral terror – renders it totally irrelevant to Black existence.[9]

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9   Ibid.

What Wilderson calls the 'crisis of the existential commons' therefore describes the constitutive gulf across which any attempt to analogise and tether White visions of emancipation to Black life are bound to stumble. The product of asymmetrical regimes of force, it renders the project of what we could call an 'affirmative identity politics' untenable for Black flesh.

It is on the basis of this orienting problematic of social death that afropessimists attempt to demonstrate the one-sided, regional, and limited character of Marxist, anarchist, feminist, and post-colonial visions of emancipation. Each of these traditions remains external to the paradigm of Blackness because of the way in which their *grammar of suffering* frames the subject of revolutionary practice – the working class, the subaltern, non-Black women – on the basis of 'mediating objects' that allow it to analogise itself with White civil society, and which in each case are absent and unavailable to those positioned by social death. Such mediating objects can include 'land, labour-power, and cultural artefacts (such as language and customs)'.[10] As Wilderson writes, 'social death is a condition, void, not of land, but of a capacity to secure relational status through transindividual objects – be those objects elaborated by land, labour, or love'.[11]

Since the ability to analogise or humanise oneself is the condition of a struggle in which the social coordinates of identity can serve as an orienting axis for struggle – i.e. it is the condition of any positive identity politics, wherein one seeks the valorise and augment the social standing and/or symbolic caché of one's group either by recognition from the State, or by constituting a community bound together by common values, cultural and familial ties, etc. – those

sary. And yet, even as we do this, we want to be freed of the social relations that make us *into* women, queers, women of colour, trans★, et cetera. We want to be liberated from these categories themselves, but experience teaches us that the only way out is through.

LIES: A Journal of Materialist Feminism[17]

Identity Politics are fundamentally reformist and seek to find a more favourable relationship between different subject positions rather than to abolish the structures that produce those positions from the beginning. Identity politicians oppose 'classism' while being content to leave class society intact. Any resistance to society must foreground the destruction of the subjectifying processes that reproduce society daily, and must destroy the institutions and practices that racialise and engender bodies within the social order. […] With the revolution complete and the black flag burned, the category of queer must too be destroyed. […] [Bash Back] isn't about sustaining identities, it's about destroying them.

Queer Ultraviolence: A Bash Back! Anthology[18]

[I]t is no longer possible to imagine a transition to communism on the basis of a prior victory of the working class as working class. […] There is nothing to affirm in the capitalist class relation; no autonomy, no alternative, no outside, no secession. […] [I]n

10   Wilderson, Frank, 'The Prison Slave as Hegemony's (Silent) Scandal', *Social Justice*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (92), 2003, 18.

11   Wilderson, 'The Black Liberation Army & the Paradox of Political Engagement'. Forthcoming. A draft version has been circulated online here: ill-will-editions.tumblr.com

17 Sky Palace, 'To be liberated from them or through them - a call for a new approach', in *LIES: A Journal of Materialist Feminism,* Vol. 1. http://liesjournal.net

18   *Queer Ultraviolence, a Bash Back! Anthology,* (San Francisco: Ardent Press), 2012, 285.

4. We must call into question the entire framework of *expropriation* in the widest sense of the term: the expropriation of once-possessed land, of culture, of relational capacity and of labour from the hands of the State and the capitalist, patriarchal class. We must no longer envision the remedy for suffering as entailing the *recovery* of a lost wholeness, entitlement or plenitude of which one is presently deprived. This is undoubtedly a more difficult conversation (particularly in the case of indigenous struggles), but one which I think is worth having.

In the past 15 years of radical feminist, anarchist, queer and left-communist theory, we can see a widespread tendency to gravitate in the direction of thoughts such as these. What cuts across these tendencies and links them to one another beyond their otherwise significant differences is the way folks have begun to wrestle seriously with a fundamental tension that will animate any future revolutionary or insurrectional practice to come, namely, the tension between autonomy and self-abolition.

Though with very different emphases, this tension between autonomist organisation and identity abolitionism can be found in *Tiqqun,* in US insurrectionary queer anarchism of the late 2000's (e.g. the informal *Bash Back!* network), recent currents in materialist and nihilist feminism, as well as in communisation theory (journals like *Théorie Communiste, Troploin, Meeting, Riff Raff, Endnotes, Blaumachen, Sic,* etc.).

A few quotes might serve to illustrate this tension:

> Autonomy is a means by which we develop shared affinities as a basis for abolishing the relations of domination that make that self-organization neces-

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ration of a divergent mode of living itself, one shot through with an *anomic* [i.e. law-less] *idea of happiness.* On anomic fulfilment, see Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies* (forthcoming in English).

who struggle against oppression therefore need to consider the difference between those groups accorded a sufficient quanta of social capital to become 'junior partners' of White civil society and Black subjects who remain shut out of this economy of symbolic recognition.

In short – and this point really cannot be overemphasised – if afropessimism is anything, it is the wreck of affirmative identity politics, both Black and non-Black: whereas Black existence is stripped of the symbolic 'capacity' to lastingly transform dominant structures of signification (at least, through hegemonic means), since its gestures don't register in the symbolic except on condition of being structurally 'whitened', White life cannot effect such shifts 'in the name of Black existence' without reinforcing the latter's nullity at the same time, by speaking in a voice that precisely draws its signifying power from Black nihilation. Black and non-Black identity politicians who nonetheless continue to pursue a symbolic valorisation of Black life (e.g. in certain currents of the 'Black Lives Matter' movement) do so only provided they 'structurally adjust' or whiten the grammar of Black suffering to suit a Human grammar. In this way, rather than seeking a way out of the desert, they in fact only deepen it.

AUTONOMY & SELF-ABOLITION

> [We live in a period in which] the struggle to *defend* one's condition tends to merge with the struggle *against* one's condition.[12]

I take it to be a libertarian axiom of our times that, where it is desired, autonomous organisation around one's own characteristic grammar of suffering is a non-negotiable con-

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12   Leon de Mattis, 'What is Communisation', *Sic,* Vol. 1, 24

dition of struggle.[13] What interests me is how groups can orient themselves in their struggles around the specificity of the suffering they experience, without attempting to lay claim to a positivity for themselves on the basis of transindividual objects unavailable to Black flesh, thereby crowding out a linkage between these other struggles and Blackness. How can non-Black persons who are struggling against the miserable lives they are offered do so in ways that do not, as Wilderson puts it, 'fortify and extend the interlocutory life' of the anti-Black existential commons?

A few preliminary theses can be outlined from outset, which take the form of rhetorical and practical strategies that must be avoided across the board.

1. We must reject any appeal to the register of 'innocence'. To claim that someone deserves freedom or protection because of an absence of transgression – that one is experiencing 'undeserved' oppression – implicitly distances oneself from the *a priori* or gratuitous nature of the violence that the Black body magnetises, the tautological absence of any pretence that occasions it. This would be a baseline: stop defending one's 'innocence'.[14]

2. Should a chain of local revolts spread and intensify to the point where it manages to destitute the *constituted* power structures enveloping us, collapsing their symbolic hold over the hearts and minds of its subjects and exposing the *coup de force* that always underpins them, we must attack any effort to replace it with a newly signifying '*constituent* power'. As some friends stated recently,

    > The legitimacy of 'the people', 'the oppressed', the '99%' is the Trojan horse by which the constituent is smuggled back into insurrectionary destitution. This is the surest method for undoing an insurrection – one that doesn't even require defeating it in the streets. To make the destitution irreversible, therefore, we must begin by abandoning *our own legitimacy*. We have to give up the idea that one makes the revolution in the name of something, that there's a fundamentally just and innocent entity which the revolutionary forces would have the task of representing. One doesn't bring power down to earth in order to raise oneself above the heavens.[15]

3. In other words, the revolutionary process must not be understood as the constitution of a new law or constituent social body, but should rather be measured by our capacity to destitute the governmental and economic mechanisms of labour*,* and of the capture of life more broadly. Beyond the simple destruction of power lies its deactivation.[16]

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13   That said, it is by no means necessary for non-Black organisation to take the form of an autonomous organisation around our identities (worker, queer, woman, etc.). In fact, recent struggles (particularly if one assumes a more global viewpoint) have increasingly taken place outside of identitarian coordinates, organising themselves around perceptions of the intolerable that cut across diverse groups of people, carving out ethical rather than sociological lines of polarisation. However, it must also be acknowledged that these forms haven't always led to a dis-identification, tending at times to instead propagate reconstituted forms of integrative populism and 'citizen-democracy'. Perhaps we can put the point this way: autonomous organisation around identity isn't necessary for non-Blacks, so long as the ethical conflicts around which struggles are oriented tends paradigmatically toward self-abolition. (I am indebted to Matt for this point.)

14   For a longer argument to this effect, the reader is referred to Jackie Wang's useful polemic, 'Against Innocence', in *LIES: A Journal of Materialist Feminism,* Vol. 1. http://liesjournal.net

15   Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*, Trans. R. Hurley, (NY: Semiotext(e), 2015), 76-77.

16   To destitute an order of relations is first of all to deprive it of any relevance, to strip it of any significance. However, far from a strictly negative project, destitution is inseparable from the positive elaboration of a new *evaluation of the important and the interesting, the alluring and the repugnant, the tolerable and the intolerable*. Although such a process must inevitably originate in the frontal negation of an insurrectional sequence deposing the forces of order and immobilising the infrastructure of the economy, it can ultimately be 'fulfilled' only *through* the elabo-