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AFROPESSIMISM'S RADICAL ABDICATION

Some Sociological Notes

THE TERM AFROPESSIMISM was first used in print in 1987 by the French Minister of Cooperation (that is, African affairs), Michel Aurillac, in an editorial published in *Le Monde* cautioning against the view that economic development and political democratization in sub-Saharan Africa had permanently stalled.¹ The word was used and abused in subsequent decades by African economists and Africanist commentators who refused to see colonialism as the root cause of the continent's predicament and stressed instead postcolonial corruption, ethnic dissension and the patrimonialization of the state as sources of societal stasis. 'Afropessimism' was later evoked in discussion of the prospects and pitfalls of foreign investment in Africa.²

The term, but not its original referent, was then appropriated in the 2010s by a new generation of black academics in American departments of ethnic studies and humanities. In the words of Frank Wilderson, who has positioned himself as one of its leading exponents, Afropessimism refers to the notion that 'Blackness is coterminous with Slaveness'. 'Blacks', Wilderson writes in his landmark book *Afropessimism* (2020), 'are not Human subjects, but are instead structurally inert props, implements for the execution of White and non-Black fantasies and sadomasochistic pleasures.'³ To the narrative of racial progress, Afropessimism counterposes an anti-humanist vision in which the denial of black humanity is everywhere built into the very makeup of civil society: 'Afropessimism gives us the freedom to say out loud what we would otherwise whisper or deny: that no Blacks are in the world, but, by the same token, there is no world without Blacks. The violence perpetrated against us is not a form of

discrimination; it is a necessary violence; a health tonic for everyone who is not Black.⁴ It is, moreover, perpetual and without recourse: workers can oppose and yearn to overthrow capitalism, women patriarchy, LGBT people heterosexism, colonial subjects imperialism. For blacks, however, there is no politics of liberation; they are excluded forever from ‘a narrative of redemption’ because the world finds ‘its nourishment in Black flesh.’ All nonblack people, however progressive their politics, are ‘junior partners’ of whites and objectively complicit in totalized and totalizing antiblackness. The plight of ‘people of colour’—the term Wilderson uses to refer to people who are neither white nor black—cannot be compared to and should not be conflated with the predicament of black people: ‘Analogy *mystifies*, rather than clarifies, Black suffering. Analogy *mystifies* Black peoples’ relationship to other people of colour.’⁵

I

What are we to make of these claims? Opening with a vivid depiction of a mental breakdown, Wilderson’s book is a disconcerting memoir and a provocative travelogue about being black in America from the vantage point of the cultural bourgeoisie of the early 21st century. Educated at Dartmouth, Columbia and Berkeley, Wilderson has had varied life

¹ The notion is developed by Aurillac in *L’Afrique à Coeur*, Paris 1987.

² David Rieff, ‘In Defence of Afropessimism’, *World Policy Journal*, vol. 15, no. 4, 1998; Gareth Austin, ‘Markets, Democracy and African Economic Growth: Liberalism and Afropessimism Reconsidered’, *The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 89, no. 357, 2000. The term continues to be used in this sense by economists. It sparked a counteroffensive, led by the Nigerian political scientist Eberé Onwudiwe, under the banner of ‘Afro-Optimism’: Eberé Onwudiwe and Minabere Ibelema, eds, *Afro-Optimism: Perspectives on Africa’s Advances*, London 2002.

³ Frank Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, New York 2020, p. 15, original italics. Other prominent thinkers of Afropessimism include the writer and literary scholar Saidiya Hartman (*Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, Oxford 1997), the poet and critic David Marriott (*Lacan Noir: Lacan and Afropessimism*, London 2021), and the film and media scholar Jared Sexton (*Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism*, Minneapolis 2008). The same sombre ontological mood is captured by the varied contributions to Carl Grant, Ashley Woodson and Michael Dumas, eds, *The Future Is Black: Afropessimism, Fugitivity and Radical Hope in Education*, Oxford 2020, and in Moon-Kie Jung and João Costa Vargas, eds, *Antiblackness*, Durham NC 2021.

⁴ Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, p. 40.

⁵ Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, pp. 16–17, 228.

experiences as an activist, a stockbroker and, now, an author and academic at the University of California, Irvine, where he is a professor of drama and African American studies. He is the son of a university dean father and a school administrator mother who also had a private practice as psychologists. He grew up mainly in an upscale district of Minneapolis, and his childhood was stamped by the cultural capital and racial bridging endeavours of his parents on and off campus. Wilderson presents *Afropessimism* as ‘storytelling when the narrator is a slave’.⁶ Combining passages of genuine lyric power and beauty with heavy didacticism, it is perhaps best read as an exercise in ‘auto-theory’, the ‘commingling of theory and philosophy with autobiography’, which Lauren Fournier describes, in her book on the subject, as a ‘critical artistic practice indebted to feminist writing activism’.⁷

Afropessimism is difficult to assess and critique because, when it takes leave from the gripping immediacy of its memoirist voice, it situates itself at a ‘meta-theoretical’ level so abstract that no historical reality can be brought to bear on it; and when the time comes for conceptual explication, it retreats back into narration.⁸ The book proceeds by postulation rather than demonstration, by allegory instead of argument. It weaves a tapestry of childhood memories, family anecdotes, professional and romantic experiences, political sorties, academic encounters, allusions to novels, movies and philosophical texts, conceptual disquisitions and historical accounts, all of which it places on a plane of epistemic equality. How to evaluate this intellectual position from the standpoint of an agonistic sociology of ethno-racial domination?⁹ Note that a principled defence might be that *Afropessimism* is a (or the) *poetics* of blackness, written by a dramatist; and so its claims should not be taken too literally, nor held up to social scientific standards. But Wilderson insists his approach is a ‘theoretical apparatus’ and an ‘analytic lens’, one that

⁶ Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, p. xiii.

⁷ Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing and Criticism*, Cambridge MA 2021.

⁸ ‘Afropessimism, then, is less of a theory and more of a *metatheory*: a critical project that, by deploying Blackness as a lens of interpretation, interrogates the unspoken, assumptive logic of Marxism, postcolonialism, psychoanalysis and feminism’: Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, p. 14. A missed opportunity here: to engage the long strand of pessimistic social theorizing running from Hobbes’s state of nature to Weber’s iron cage to Freud’s death wish.

⁹ The principles of this approach are set out in Loïc Wacquant, ‘Resolving the Trouble with “Race”’, NLR 133/134 January–April 2022, and deployed in my forthcoming book, *Racial Domination*.

'labours as a corrective to Humanist assumptive logics', and this analytic is being used by sociologists to develop and reorient empirical arguments or to deny their very possibility.¹⁰

Afropessimism is an exclusivist brand of race primordialism. It is *primordialist* in that it sees race—or, rather, blackness as uniquely institutionalized in the United States and then universalized with a stroke of the pen—as foundational to being, knowledge and power; as permanent, pervasive and impossible to dislodge from its role as structural mooring and existential pivot.¹¹ It is *exclusivist* in that it reserves this ontological burden for blacks and for blacks alone. As the entry in *Oxford Bibliographies*, which Wilderson co-authored, explains:

Afropessimism is a lens of interpretation that accounts for civil society's dependence on antiblack violence—a regime of violence that positions black people as internal enemies of civil society, and cannot be analogized with the regimes of violence that disciplines the Marxist subaltern, the postcolonial subaltern, the coloured but nonblack Western immigrant, the nonblack queer, or the nonblack woman.¹²

Afropessimism asserts the uniqueness of the black plight, not through methodical genealogy and comparison, but on the authority of the author's identity, experiences and meta-theoretical virtuosity.

The notion at the heart of Afropessimism is that of 'slaveness': 'Afropessimism is premised on a comprehensive and iconoclastic claim: that Blackness is coterminous with Slaveness: Blackness *is* social death:

¹⁰ See, for instance, Victor Ray et al., 'Critical Race Theory, Afropessimism and Racial Progress Narratives', *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2017; George Weddington, 'Political Ontology and Race Research: A Response to "Critical Race Theory, Afropessimism and Racial Progress Narratives"', *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2018; Sirma Bilge, 'The Fungibility of Intersectionality: An Afropessimist Reading', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 43, no. 13, 2020; Anthony Hatch, 'The Data Will Not Save Us: Afropessimism and Racial Antimatter in the Covid-19 Pandemic', *Big Data & Society*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2022.

¹¹ 'What is essential is neither the interpersonal nor institutional orientation toward blackness, but the fact that blackness is the essence of that which orients. Put differently, the coherence of reality (be it institutional or interpersonal coherence) is secured by anxiety over both the idea and the presence of blacks': Patrice Douglass, Selamawit Terrefe and Frank Wilderson, 'Afropessimism', *Oxford Bibliographies*, 2018.

¹² Douglass et al., 'Afropessimism'; 'Black suffering is of a different order than the suffering of other oppressed people' and 'Black suffering is the life force of the world': *Afropessimism*, p. 200.

which is to say that there was never a prior metamoment of plenitude, never equilibrium: never a moment of social life.¹³ Afropessimists claim that their use of slavery is not metaphorical but tautegorical, grounded in Orlando Patterson's sociology of slavery: 'The black is positioned, a priori, as slave. The definition of slave', the *Oxford Bibliographies* entry explains, 'is taken from Orlando Patterson who theorizes slavery as a relational dynamic between "social death" (the slave) and "social life" (the human).'¹⁴ For Patterson, however, slavery is not a racial institution but an organization of extreme domination that may or may not be racialized. It is, moreover, an institution that not only varies immensely across the span of human history, from the familial to the genocidal, but also everywhere fails to quash the slave's humanity. Indeed, slavery, in Patterson's telling, is haunted by the slave's refusal of the denial of their humanity. This is why it needs brute force to sustain itself. This is why an analysis of the internal relations of slavery must be articulated with an analysis of enslavement (entry) and manumission (exit): 'Enslavement, slavery and manumission are not merely related events: they are one and the same process in different phases.'¹⁵ Thus the master dangles the possibility of manumission before the eyes of the slaves precisely because they remain human under bondage: 'The slave desires nothing more passionately than dignity, belonging and release. By holding out the promise of redemption, the master provides himself with a motivating force more powerful than any whip. Slavery in this way was a self-correcting institution: what it denied the slave it utilized as the major means of motivating him.'

Slavery, in other words, contains its own negation, and so 'slaveness', for Patterson, marks a liminal state, not an ontological one. Again, this is because human bondage curtails but fails to annihilate the humanity of the slave: 'Everywhere the slave's zest for life and fellowship confounded the slaveholder class; and in all slaveholding societies the existential dignity of the slave belied the slaveholder's denial of its existence.'¹⁶ To conceive of 'the Black' as 'the Slave' in the singular also elides the fact

¹³ Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, p. 102; passage repeated almost verbatim on p. 226.

¹⁴ Douglas et al., 'Afropessimism'. The notion of 'social death' was coined by French anthropologist Michel Izard, as duly noted by Orlando Patterson in *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, Cambridge MA 1982, p. 38. A formulation of Afropessimism reading slavery through Heideggerian lenses is Calvin Warren, *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism and Emancipation*, Durham NC 2018.

¹⁵ Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, p. 296.

¹⁶ Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, pp. 337–38.

that slaves are not alone; they live in a community of slaves which is the crucible sustaining their humanness, as Patterson demonstrates in his ground-breaking 1967 study of the distinctive social relations and communal values of slaves on the plantations of Jamaica in the 18th and 19th centuries.¹⁷

It follows that the violence of slavery is not ‘gratuitous’, indiscriminate and Pavlovian, as Wilderson and his followers would have it.¹⁸ Patterson is clear that ‘it was necessary continually to repeat the original, violent act of transforming free man into slave’ because enslavement was never accepted. ‘The continuous violence in the slave order was also made necessary by the low motivation of the slave to work.’¹⁹ Far from being needless and wanton, then, the brute force of the master was strategic and calibrated, and thus highly variable in both form and frequency across societies and epochs. It was needed to reduce a human to a living thing (*res*) which existed only as an extension of the master, but remained human all the same.

2

So much for slavery and violence. What of blackness now? In his critique of *Afropessimism*, the *New Yorker* writer Vinson Cunningham wryly describes Wilderson’s book as ‘the story of an American who thinks of his Blackness as normative and therefore as characteristic of Blackness around the world.’²⁰ Indeed, mired in the racial doxa of his home country, Wilderson takes blackness as a self-evident, fixed and

¹⁷ Orlando Patterson, *The Sociology of Slavery: Black Society in Jamaica 1655–1838*, Cambridge 1967. This bold thesis was validated a few years later by the classic studies of Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, New York 1974, and John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Ante-Bellum South*, Oxford 1972.

¹⁸ ‘The Slave’s relationship to violence is open-ended, gratuitous, without reason or constraint, triggered by prelogical catalysts that are unmoored from her transgressions and unaccountable to historical shifts’: Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, pp. 216–17; see also pp. 93–94 and 248–49. This claim is repeated by Ray et al., ‘Critical Race Theory, *Afropessimism* and Racial Progress Narratives’, p. 150.

¹⁹ Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, pp. 2–3.

²⁰ Vinson Cunningham, ‘The Argument of “*Afropessimism*”’, *New Yorker*, 13 July 2020.

homogeneous category. He never stops to ponder the question posed by the sociologist F. James Davis in his classic book *Who Is Black?* (1991), which establishes that the US definition of blackness through strict hypodescent (the ‘one-drop rule’), disregarding phenotype, social status and non-African ancestry, is a global outlier.²¹ Even within the United States, a rival system of ethno-racial classification built on gradations of colour that recognizes intermediate categories between blacks and whites (mulatto, quadroon, octoroon, sambo, mango, etc.) was operative in southern states such as South Carolina and Louisiana until the mid-19th century under the influence of Caribbean migration and imports from Catholic French and Spanish culture.²²

So the clearcut black–white or black–other dichotomy is neither universal nor transhistorical: the racial classification of ‘blacks’ varies across societies and eras and so does their racial stratification. In his little-known yet cardinal essay, ‘Four Modes of Ethno-Somatic Stratification’, Orlando Patterson—Wilderson’s favourite sociologist—shows how the same root population, the descendants of African slaves, were differentially defined and incorporated in the United States (‘binary mobilization’), Latin America (‘hegemonic whitening’), the Caribbean (‘pluralistic underdevelopment’) and northern Europe (‘proletarian incorporation’). ‘Each mode refers to a unique configuration of ethno-racial ideology, ethno-demographic mix, ethno-class stratification, and level of societal racialization.’²³ This historical variation in modes of racial domination is just what the rhetoric of *Afropessimism* unknowingly denies and magically disappears.

But there is more when it comes to blackness in the United States specifically. The notion that it is a compact construct is a social fiction and thus a literary facility that ignores the long, ongoing history of skin tone differentiation and discrimination among both blacks and nonblacks. It is

²¹ F. James Davis, *Who Is Black? One Nation’s Definition*, University Park PA 1991.

²² Joel Williamson, *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States*, New York 1980; Arnold Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon, eds, *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, Baton Rouge LA 1992.

²³ Orlando Patterson, ‘Four Modes of Ethno-Somatic Stratification: The Experience of Blacks in Europe and the Americas’, in G. Loury, T. Modood and S. Teles, eds, *Ethnicity, Social Mobility and Public Policy: Comparing the USA and UK*, Cambridge 2005, p. 67.

well established that since the days of Emancipation, African Americans have been ‘colour struck’, establishing invidious distinctions among themselves based on complexion along a gradient nested inside descent-based categorization that has operated to diffract life chances and inflect social strategies such as marriage, social club membership and political allegiance.²⁴ Whites also distinguish African Americans, native and immigrant, by phenotype, including complexion, facial features, body size and corpulence. In a string of innovative papers, the Harvard sociologist Ellis Monk has, moreover, revealed that the disparity between light-skin and dark-skin blacks is greater than the white–black disparity for a range of critical life outcomes, including education, household income, health and ageing, police contact and incarceration.²⁵ This suggests that, at a minimum, Wilderson’s proposition that ‘Blackness is a locus of abjection to be instrumentalized on a whim’ needs to be qualified to connect with historical reality.²⁶

Is the protrusive and suffusive tenor of blackness beautifully conveyed by *Afropessimism*’s rhapsodic prose a property of the social world or a projection of the racially obsessed and obsessive gaze that Wilderson trains on that world—that is, the product of a thoroughly racialized habitus?²⁷ The answer is both. There is no question that the United States is a historical formation resting on a deep and enduring caesura relegating the descendants of African slaves to a subordinate position in symbolic, social and physical space, and in which the black/nonblack binary operates in multiple domains, each echoing and reinforcing the others. It is also abundantly evident that, as a properly socialized member of that society, Wilderson has been trained to see, feel and act in racially inflected ways—as vividly demonstrated by all the episodes of his

²⁴ Williamson, *New People*; St Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*, New York 1945; and Kimberly Norwood, ed., *Colour Matters: Skin Tone Bias and the Myth of a Postracial America*, New York 2013.

²⁵ Ellis Monk, ‘Skin Tone Stratification among Black Americans, 2001–2003’, *Social Forces*, vol. 92, no. 4, 2014. See also Ellis Monk, ‘The Cost of Colour: Skin Colour, Discrimination and Health among African-Americans’, *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 121, no. 2, 2015 and ‘The Colour of Punishment: African Americans, Skin Tone and the Criminal Justice System’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 42, no. 10, 2019.

²⁶ Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, p. 12.

²⁷ The same question could be asked of Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*, New York 2015.

childhood recounted in *Afropessimism*.²⁸ The meeting of social structure and mental structure, position and disposition, produces a spontaneous agreement such that racialized world and racialized gaze reinforce and validate each other. The proposition that ‘without Black people, Human existence would be unintelligible’ might, with suitable qualifications, apply in ‘race-divided societies’ such as the United States and South Africa, where Wilderson sojourned to join the fight against apartheid, and where ethno-racial division remains highly salient, suffusive and consequential.²⁹ But it is questionable whether it holds in ‘societies with race’ where ethno-racial division is ancillary to the makeup of social space, the state and subjectivity³⁰—think of China and its one-and-a-half billion citizens, for instance, compared to the roughly 164 million persons of African ancestry, part or whole, residing in Europe and the Americas. Wilderson speaks of the World, capital W, Life, capital L, Slave, capital S and Human, capital H, but these are scholastic archetypes that erase essential distinctions between historical epochs and geographical formations that an adequate theory of racial domination must imperatively capture.

The racial exceptionalism of the United States is reinforced by what might be described as a rhetoric of extremism. At multiple points in his narration, whether recounting scenes from everyday life, political episodes or academic encounters, Wilderson presents extreme cases or extreme interpretations as the baseline against which antiblackness is tallied. Thus, in his account of the violence of slavery in the US South, he draws on the stunning 1853 memoir by the former slave Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, which depicts in vivid detail the sadistic and seemingly gratuitous brutality of Northup’s master. But this account needs to be read alongside those evoking the paternalistic cast of American slavery well

²⁸ This is particularly clear in an episode in which Wilderson, in a taxi en route to the airport, (over)interprets the banal interactions with the Pakistani driver and the white fellow passengers—everything that happens and everything that *doesn’t* happen—in terms of a deep racial logic, ‘predicated on the intensification of Black suffering and death’: *Afropessimism*, pp. 210–17.

²⁹ Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, p. 164. Wilderson recounts his time in South Africa in *Incognegro: A Memoir of Exile and Apartheid*, Boston MA 2008.

³⁰ For an elaboration of this ideal-typical contrast, see Loïc Wacquant, ‘Racial Capitalism Decoupled: A Rejoinder and Reformulation’, *European Journal of Sociology*, vol. 64, no. 2, 2023, and the coda to my forthcoming book, *Racial Domination*.

established by historians of the South's 'peculiar institution'.³¹ To say that American slavery was paternalistic takes nothing away from the horror, violence and immorality of human bondage. It is simply a statement of historical fact born of the comparative study of different regimes of enslavement, both in the Americas and around the world, which ranged from domestic to paternalistic to despotic.³² Contrary to Wilderson's thesis that such violence against blacks is 'beyond the grasp of reason' and 'secures the order of life itself', horrific punishment is perfectly intelligible in the prosaically materialistic—as opposed to ontogenetic—terms of instilling terror into the slaves who witness it in order to enforce discipline and facilitate the extraction of labour on the plantation, as well as in the symbolic logic of affirming caste superiority.³³

Another germane technique Wilderson uses is to resort to analytic hyperbole as though the dramatization of a claim were its own validation because it silences the would-be critic: 'You can't make an analogy between the violence immigrants, Native Americans and workers are subjected to and the violence that attends to Black people. It is *absolutely necessary* for Blacks to be castrated, raped, genitally mutilated and violated, beaten, shot and maimed.'³⁴ Or when he presents 'the logic of White feminism, the logic of working-class struggle, the logic of multicultural coalitions, and the logic of immigrant rights' not as disconnected from, or impediments to, the struggles of blacks (insofar as such a notion makes sense anymore), but as partaking of the 'unrelenting terror' that threatens black thought, 'an essential terror as constitutive of an anti-Black world as the military or the megachurch'. Another example: 'Whoever says "rape" says Black, whoever says "prison" says Black; and whoever says "AIDS" says Black—the *Negro is a phobogenic object*: a past without a heritage, the map of gratuitous violence, and a programme of complete disorder.'³⁵ These associations may be operative in US history and public culture, but everywhere and at all times? Even in the United States, it is highly questionable whether such connotations are

³¹ Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery: 1619–1877*, New York 2003 [1993], pp. 111–32. For a fuller discussion of paternalism as a mode of domination resulting in a reduction in physical violence, see Mary Jackman, *The Velvet Glove: Paternalism and Conflict in Gender, Class and Race Relations*, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1994.

³² Seymour Drescher and Stanley Engerman, eds, *A Historical Guide to World Slavery*, New York 1998.

³³ Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, pp. 90, 92.

³⁴ Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, p. 219, my italics.

³⁵ Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, pp. 220, 221, 249.

transhistorical: the dominant image of the convict in the postwar decades, for example, when the prison population of the country was 70 per cent white, was a bumbling, socially incompetent white male, not a violent black man.

3

Where does this time-stamped Americanocentric ontologization of blackness based on the ‘structural antagonism’ between humans and blacks lead us on the political front? It is hard to see light at the end of an intellectual tunnel dug on the principled negation of black agency, individual and collective. Indeed, the only goal one can meaningfully pursue according to Wilderson is to expedite ‘the end of the world’—real or metaphorical, it is hard to say.³⁶ The Afropessimistic diagnosis of the black predicament yields a conviction in the futility, worse the utter impossibility, of a politics of freedom. For Wilderson, ‘Blackness is a positionality of “absolute dereliction”, abandonment, in the face of civil society and therefore cannot be liberated or be made legible through counter-hegemonic interventions.’ Instead of seeking to liberate blackness, Wilderson urges us to ‘embrace its disorder, its incoherence’.³⁷ This may be a comfortable attitude to adopt for a tenured university professor and kindred specialists in cultural production who trade in symbolic representations, the more captivating the better, but for a black janitor, a black fast-food worker, a black accountant or a black physician in their day-to-day?

At most, the paradoxical quietism of Afropessimism yields an ethic, sustained by those ‘in the know’ about the necessary eternity of black enslavement, that fuels a negative solidarity of eternal exclusion.

³⁶ ‘We should use the space opened up by political organizing which is geared toward reformist objectives—like stopping police brutality and ending racist immigration policies—as an opportunity to explore problems for which there are no coherent solutions. Anti-Black violence is a paradigm of oppression for which there is no coherent form of redress, other than Frantz Fanon’s “the end of the world”’: Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, p. 171. For an inadvertent illustration of the paralysis generated by Afropessimism in the realm of politics, see Jared Sexton, ‘Afropessimism: The Unclear Word’, *Rhizomes*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2016. See also Wilderson’s evasion of the question of Afropessimistic praxis in Linette Park, ‘Afropessimism and Futures of . . . A Conversation with Frank Wilderson’, *Journal of Black Studies and Research*, vol. 50, no. 3, 2020, p. 35.

³⁷ Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, pp. 222, 250.

Occasionally, Wilderson vacillates, perhaps sensing that his radical racial essentialism could be plunging his reader into an abyss of despair, so he gestures in the direction of constructivism: 'Like class and gender, which are also *constructs*, not divine designations, social death can be destroyed. But the first step toward the destruction is to assume one's position (*assume, not celebrate or disavow*), and then burn the ship or the plantation, in its past and present incarnations.' But this concession is quickly withdrawn: blacks are 'often psychically unable and unwilling to assume this position', which 'is as understandable as it is impossible.' And so, Wilderson writes, 'Black people form a mass of indistinguishable flesh in the collective unconscious, not a social formation of interests, agendas or ideas.'³⁸

This raises a conundrum: what is the status of Wilderson's own discourse as the 'narrative' of a 'slave'? Does its author not believe that *Afropessimism* offers a sober, accurate assessment of the quandary of blackness? Would that not mean that there is an 'outside' to the condition of 'slaveness' from which a black author can speak—and possibly 'speak truth to power'?³⁹ An erudite 'slave' writing for an attentive audience of educated readers, black and nonblack, is surely more than a generic Slave capital-s. His very existence points, if not to an outside of slaveness, at least to gradations within the category. Does Wilderson's ability to reflect on his own social position and existential injuries suffered on the sole account of being black in American society, to share his insights, broadcast his view in and outside academia, and enlighten his readers not invalidate his account of blackness as *paralysing* slaveness?⁴⁰ Otherwise what would be the point of propagandizing 'a looter's creed: critique without redemption'?⁴¹

Afropessimism is not a theory so much as a mood coalescing in the hangover from the Obama years and a paradoxical expression of the yearning of the African American cultural bourgeoisie for black solidarity, be it negative, made more tenuous by upward class mobility or inheritance. It

³⁸ Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, pp. 103, 162, original italics.

³⁹ Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, p. 15.

⁴⁰ For a perceptive account of the micro-dynamics of racial injury in contemporary American society, see Elijah Anderson, *Black in White Space: The Enduring Impact of Colour in Everyday Life*, Chicago 2022.

⁴¹ Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, p. 174. 'THERE IS NO INTERRACIAL REDEMPTION. There is no Afrocentric redemption. Redemption is the narrative inheritance of Humans. There is no denouement to social death': Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, p. 325.

offers a rhetorical radicalization of racial nihilism in the face of shifting yet enduring black oppression that leads straight to political abdication. It is ironic and revealing that Afropessimism would thrive in the academy and seduce college-educated black millennials at the very moment when Black Lives Matter, the most significant movement of black mobilization since the Civil Rights Movement, surged in the streets, challenging the premises of white rule across the gamut of American institutions, starting with the university.⁴² Ultimately, Afropessimism flounders because it denies the varieties of blackness and the historicity of racial domination that have been demonstrated time and again—first and foremost by the long string of hard-fought victories of black struggles for dignity in America, Africa and beyond.⁴³

⁴² Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, Chicago 2016, and Christopher Lebron, *The Making of Black Lives Matter: A Brief History of an Idea*, New York 2017. A less sanguine assessment of the movement is Cedric Johnson, *After Black Lives Matter: Policing and Anti-Capitalist Struggle*, London and New York 2023.

⁴³ Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, *American Congo: The African American Freedom Struggle in the Delta*, Cambridge MA 2003; Aldon Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change*, New York 1984; Zebulon Vance Miletsky, *Before Busing: A History of Boston's Long Black Freedom Struggle*, Chapel Hill NC 2022; George Reid Andrews, *Afro-Latin America: Black Lives, 1600–2000*, Cambridge MA 2016; Tianna Paschel, *Becoming Black Political Subjects: Movements and Ethno-Racial Rights in Colombia and Brazil*, Princeton 2016; George Fredrickson, *Black Liberation: A Comparative History of Black Ideologies in the United States and South Africa*, Oxford 1995; Julian Brown, *The Road to Soweto: Resistance and the Uprising of 16 June 1976*, Rochester NY 2016; Marcel Paret, *Fractured Militancy: Precarious Resistance in South Africa after Racial Inclusion*, Ithaca NY 2022; John Munro, *The Anticolonial Front: The African American Freedom Struggle and Global Decolonization, 1945–1960*, Cambridge 2017; Hakim Adi, *Many Struggles: New Histories of African and Caribbean People in Britain*, London 2023.