

For the theorists of Afro-pessimism, black non-existence forms a negativity against which white liveliness and freedom defines itself positively. Surveying this theoretical tendency against a backdrop of post-crisis struggles, R.L. stresses the irreconcilable antagonism of both.

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WANDERINGS OF THE SLAVE



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Wanderings of the Slave:
Black Life and Social Death

by R.L.

against humanity. This antagonism can only be resolved by the cathartic purge of violence. It is the use of violence that must first be expropriated, both materially and symbolically. Various automatons of public opinion have increasingly remarked on the nihilistic nature of such destructive acts, stinking of paternalism and moralistic authority: ‘why not be more selective?’ or ‘why do you destroy your own neighborhoods?’ or ‘how does this achieve anything?’ It is always the same series of questions that are posed, the impoverished ethicality of a white world in crisis. The disorder perpetuated by the black subject does not assert an emphatic statement of ‘I exist’. It appears to destroy every apparatus that prohibits the ‘I’ of black existence from coming fully into being. To drown out the daily sorrows of violence that subjectivises black existence. And to unmake the world that posits black existence as socially dead:

“in allowing the notion of freedom to attain the ethical purity of its ontological status, one would have to lose one’s Human coordinates and become Black. Which is to say one would have to die.”²⁶

²⁶ Frank B. Wilderson, III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*, Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2010.

the socio-spatial reconfiguration of the ghetto. Consequently such a spatial determination of this disconnection was also a process of *re-racialisation*. In light of the restructuring, the Fordist ghetto came under crisis as black existence faced a situation of utter social abandonment. Capital investment fled the cities where industrial manufacturing had previously provided employment opportunities for blacks. The State increasingly withdrew its social support, leaving behind deteriorating public infrastructure. Reproduction of black existence was found in precarious forms of work, primarily through the opaque channels of the informal and black economy producing a *desocialisation of wage labour*. It became increasingly hard for blacks to leave the confines of the ghetto; all internal social supports that had been built during its heyday were almost completely liquidated. Loic Wacquant names this situation faced by blacks in the post-Fordist ghetto (and also ghettos across the world) as one of *advanced marginality*:

“Advanced marginality is increasingly disconnected from cyclical fluctuations and global trends in the economy, so that expansionary phases in aggregate employment and income have little beneficial effect upon it [...] advanced marginality tends to be concentrated in isolated and bounded territories increasingly perceived by both outsiders and insiders as social purgatories, leprous badlands at the heart of the postindustrial metropolis.”²⁵

Of course such dereliction cannot be left unmanaged. Desocialisation of the wage relation means the intensification of black subjection, either through police control, imprisonment or death. Racial segregation, despite the so-called ‘diversity’, in the American metropolis remains at an all time high and shows no sign of letting up. Contemporary post-crisis struggles against anti-blackness therefore have two principle features in common: confrontation with the police and the socio-spatial closure that entails in its material and symbolic forms. Whether it is the police as such, or the confinements of the ghetto and the possibility of escaping it through education, or even the free movement of black bodies through space, struggles against anti-blackness orient themselves toward the disorganisation of this controlled space. In relation to riots in particular, calls for ‘social justice’, ‘rights’, ‘police accountability and transparency’ obscure the essence of these movements, whose meaning resides entirely on the surface. They are fundamentally demandless and intentionally destructive. There is no ‘point’ except for utter dissolution of the current state of affairs. As viewed by the Afro-pessimists, the demandlessness of these struggles cannot be reduced to any single empirical aspect – freedom here and now must be absolute not relative. An irreconcilable antagonism produces black existence positioning it

²⁵ Loic Wacquant, *Urban Outcasts: A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality*, UK & US: Polity Press, 2008.

“And until the American Negro lets the white man know that we are really ready and willing to pay the price that is necessary for freedom our people will always be walking around here second-class citizens or what you call 20th century slaves. The price of freedom is death.”

– Malcolm X

“There is a type-persona for whom a movement fights and there is corresponding loss that a movement seeks to regain for this type-persona. A movement cannot be built, let alone sustained on behalf of ‘nothing, absolutely nothing’ – a nonentity. What would the politics of a dead relation, a slave, look like?”

– Frank B. Wilderson, III¹

In America, the history of capital is the history of black subjection. And the history of black subjection has its origin within racial slavery. The transformation of slaves into black persons was more of an ambiguous continuum rather than a clearly defined break. Whilst slavery developed alongside a burgeoning capitalism, the structural position of the slave paved the way for the genesis of the white bourgeois subject.² To be white was to not be a slave. To be a slave was to define and guarantee white livelihood. The slave was set outside the delimited boundaries of humanity, which by definition was white, and effectively posited as the negative foundation of the bourgeois subject. Where the enslaved was, the white subject came into being.

From slavery to the present, ‘a black man is being beaten’ summarises the archetypal scene that haunts American life.³ It is a structural necessity, the persistence of which is necessary for the continuation of white livelihood. The relegation of black existence is in inverse proportion to the propagation of white life. It is at this historical moment, in the shadow of the 2008 economic crisis, that the value of black existence is put into question. Plagued by historically high rates of unemployment, incarceration and police violence, blacks have consistently lived in a permanent state of emergency. The consequences of the economic crisis bring these facts into sharp relief. Thus one could perhaps say that the crisis is not simply economic but properly anthropological.

¹ Frank B. Wilderson, III, ‘Biko and the Problematic of Presence’ in Andile Mngxitama, Amanda Alexander & Nigel C. Gibson (Eds.), *Biko Lives!: Contesting the Legacies of Steve Biko*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

² ‘The slave is the object or the ground that makes possible the existence of the bourgeois subject and, by negation or contradistinction, defines liberty, citizenship, and the enclosures of the social body.’ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, p.62.

³ A reference to Sigmund Freud’s 1919 paper entitled ‘A Child is Being Beaten’, on the connection between pleasure and suffering.

In the face of continual black relegation, a line of thinking loosely assembled under the label ‘Afro-pessimism’ has emerged in the past decade as a theoretico-political intervention. The term ‘Afro-pessimism’ addresses a period throughout the duration of which questions of ‘race’ were either sidelined by the ‘postracial society’ or made ambiguous by multiracialist perspectives. Theorists adhering to the name have sought to discuss the reconfigurations of white supremacy and reorient its critique towards its essential foundation, the specificity of *anti-black racism*. For the Afro-pessimists, it is the continual perpetuation of anti-blackness that forms the ground of white supremacy, all other racial identities being formulated through this essential polarisation.⁴ For it is the question of black existence and the abolition of the condition of its existence that brings to light the precise meaning of what a struggle for absolute freedom would have to entail.

Afro-Pessimism and the Wandering of the Slave⁵

Afro-pessimism is not a positive theory of black identity. Nor is it an affirmative philosophical movement of black subjectivity. Neither does it constitute a conscious and programmatic political position. And it does not attempt to grapple with anything resembling a single unified theory of white supremacy. Afro-pessimism is rather an informal tendency that could be designated as a constellation of theorists, ideas and artistic works ruminating upon the structural condition of black existence as indelibly marked by the residual echoes of the *slave relation*. For the Afro-pessimists, the advent of emancipation did not signal any substantial break with the content of slavery. Instead the passage from slavery to freedom marked the transition from one mode of racialised domination to another. Following the abolition of slavery, the formal determinations of slavery were subsumed under the racial category of blackness (synonymous with the construction of ‘race’), naturalising and thereby ontologising the slave relation as the essential principle of black existence.⁶ The status of the slave devolved

4 ‘Every analysis that attempts to account for the vicissitudes of racial rule and the machinations of the racial state without centering black existence within its framework – which does not mean simply listing it among a chain of equivalents – is doomed to miss what is essential about the situation, because what happens to blacks indicates the truth (rather than the totality) of the system, its social symptom, and all other positions can (only) be understood from this angle of vision.’ Jared Sexton, ‘Racial Profiling and the Societies of Control’ in Joy James (Ed.), *Warfare in the Homeland: Policing and Prison in a Penal Democracy*, Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2007.

5 As stated, the literature regarded as ‘Afro-pessimist’ largely consists in an ensemble of heterogenous modes of thought, irreducible to one another. Yet as Frank B. Wilderson, III points out, there is a common thread amongst them: ‘The Afro-pessimists are theorists of Black positionality who share Fanon’s insistence that, though Blacks are indeed sentient beings, the structure of the entire world’s semantic field – regardless of cultural and national discrepancies – “leaving” as Fanon would say, “existence by the wayside” – is sutured by anti-Black solidarity.’ Frank B. Wilderson, III, ‘Biko and the Problematic of Presence’, op. cit., p.58.

6 Perhaps through extended elaboration a comparison could be drawn between blackness under capitalism and its relation to Karl Marx’s notion of commodity fetishism and the ‘metaphysical subtleties’ of the commodity form.

as completely random and without any discernible justification.²³ But attempts to rationalise these struggles completely obscures the violent foundation of black subjection, which again, is itself without rationale. Thus, while the crisis has effectively specified the situation of precarious youth in general as its primary target, its consequences have been disproportionately concentrated upon black youth in particular, making this crisis a mechanism of *re-racialisation* through the intensification of anti-blackness *par excellence*. An initial balance sheet of struggles involving the black proletariat in America could be categorised as follows:

‘Lone wolf’ armed attacks against police officers (Lovellette Mixon, Christopher Monfort, Christopher Dorner, etc.)

Flash mobs and riots of youth, directly targeted against policing (the institution itself or against a general environment of surveillance), demandless and focalised upon burning, looting and widespread ‘vandalism’ of symbols of alienation and domination, such as schools, cars and areas of consumption (Oscar Grant rebellion, Trayvon Martin, Philadelphia flash mobs, etc.)

Occupy Wall Street encampments, attempts to initiate an Occupy the Hood contingent to combat the overwhelmingly white and ‘middle-class’ composition of the movement

Protests against education cuts and school closures, primarily within impoverished black and latino neighborhoods (especially the recent spate of school closings in Chicago, the largest in US history)

Since the 1970s, the collapse of Fordism and the consequent economic restructuring deployed a disconnection of the valorisation of capital from the reproduction of the proletariat. This disconnection appeared as a ‘geographical zoning of the capitalist mode of production’, spatially determining a differentiated series of boundaries for social reproduction within the metropolis.²⁴ The most distinct and concentrated form of this disconnection expressed itself within

23 The barrage of flash mobs throughout the States preceded the London riots in August 2011.

24 ‘The first disconnection appears, first of all, as a geographical zoning of the capitalist mode of production – capitalist hypercenters grouping together the higher functions in the hierarchy of business organisation (finance, high technology, research centers, etc.); secondary zones with activities requiring intermediate technologies, encompassing logistics and commercial distribution, ill-defined zones with peripheral areas devoted to assembly activities, often outsourced; last, crisis zones and ‘social dustbins’ in which a whole informal economy involving legal or illegal products prospers. Although the valorisation of capital is unified through this zoning, the same is not true for the reproduction of labour power. Reproduction occurs in different ways in each of these zones.’ Theorie Communiste, ‘The Present Moment’ in *Sic: International Journal for Communisation*, Issue 1, 2012.

population's sexual reproduction. Slavery had institutionally guaranteed the proper conduct between whites and blacks. Emancipation fomented anxieties bordering on a morbid fascination of interracial sexuality and the potential encroachments of blacks across the colour line, not only entering the public sphere but the sacrosanct private sphere as well. The spectre of interracial sexuality indicated the potential permeability of the colour line, threatening the destabilisation of white identity. In the face of such a threat, anti-miscegenation laws provided a renewed guarantee for the coherence of the white subject. Theories such as the principle of hypo-descent and the 'one-drop rule' were intensified and eventually legalised so as to justify the subordinate status of those born of an interracial union, continuing the condemnation of blacks to a generational inheritance.²¹

A Crisis of Humanity

The 2008 crisis was indeed general, but it has taken on an intensified form in relation to particular segments of society, and in particular the precarious youth.²² Struggles around cuts in public education and the Occupy encampments indexed a heterogeneous composition of participants, engendering new forms of self-organisation, gesturing toward the shadow of proletarian unity. Yet other forms of struggle have chiefly concerned the black proletariat alone, most typically riots against police violence and armed attacks against police officers. The summers of 2010 and 2011 witnessed a series of flash mobs composed primarily of black youth, originating in Philadelphia, then spreading to Milwaukee, Chicago, Cleveland and Washington D.C. Organised primarily through mass text messages and social media, black youth gathered together and proceeded to loot various stores, vandalise private property or attack random people (mostly those who appeared to be white). These isolated and so-called 'anti-social' acts were painted

21 Hypodescent is the assignation of a child to a subordinate social status within an interracial sexual relationship. The 'one-drop rule' was the assignation of an individual with any trace of African ancestry, who would then be considered black. Initially the lineage of a newborn individual born of an interracial union would be attributed to the father, but later was attributed to the mother in order to delimit property rights of the slaveholder: 'A law enacted in the colony of Maryland in 1664 established the legal status of slave for life and experimented with assigning slave condition after the condition of the father. That experiment was soon dropped. Paternity is always ambiguous, whereas maternity is not. Slaveholders eventually recognised the advantage of a different and unambiguous rule of descent, one that would guarantee to owners all offspring of slave women, however fathered, at the slight disadvantage of losing to them such offspring as might have been fated to free women by slave men.' in Barbara Jeanne Fields, 'Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America', *New Left Review*, May/June 1990.

22 'If, in the Western capitalist area, the instances of sharper social conflicts are concentrated on the precarious youth [...] it is because "youth" is a social construct... The crisis constructs and then attacks (in the same movement) the category of "entrants" depending on the modalities of their "entrance": educational training, precariousness (and those who are in a similar situation -- the migrants). The main thing here is the labour contract which places this labour power in its relation to capitalist exploitation at the level of the changing needs of the market, the mobility of capital, etc.' in Theorie Communiste, 'The Glass Floor' in Les Emeutes En Grece, Senonevero, 2009. English translation: http://www.riff-raff.se/wiki/en/theorie_communiste/the_glass_floor

into the phenotypic appearance of 'blackness' – the black subject was no longer a slave in relation to a master, but a slave to their appearance. Blackness displaced the form of the slave and the structural determinations of enslavement were 'epidermalised'.⁷

The origin of the term 'Afro-pessimism' can be traced back to the works of Frank B. Wilderson, III. While Wilderson was the initial conscious architect of the expression, one can also follow its theoretical elaboration within the works of Jared Sexton, Saidiya Hartman and Hortense Spillers, to name a few.⁸ Leading Afro-pessimist thinkers such as Wilderson, Sexton and Achille Mbembe seek to draw out a political ontology of black existence vis-à-vis a Left-Heideggerianism influenced by contemporary philosopher Giorgio Agamben. Alongside Agamben's political ontology, Afro-pessimist theorists also heavily draw from the works of Frantz Fanon, the figurehead and consistent reference point for many of the theorists. In this way a genealogy of Afro-pessimism can be traced between all these thinkers who deal with the concept of the human, the existential and affective structures of being, and the ambiguities of vitalism and life. Afro-pessimism poses a critique at the junction of political economy and the libidinal economy of white supremacy.⁹ At this theoretical intersection, black existence emerges as a categorical distortion that gives birth to the classical Humanist subject as a product of Modernity and the Enlightenment. For the Afro-pessimists, the black subject is exiled from the *human relation*, which is predicated on social recognition, volition, subjecthood, and the valuation of life itself. Thus black existence is marked as an ontological *absence*, posited as sentient object and devoid of any positive relationality, in contradistinction to the human subject's presence. How does this negative relationality originate and maintain itself? Through a structural violence, which is the formative relation that positions the slave, making it the central ontological foundation of black existence:

"Structural vulnerability to appropriation, perpetual and involuntary openness, including all the wanton uses of the body [...] should be understood as the paradigmatic conditions of black existence in the Americas, the defining characteristics of New World anti-blackness. In short, the black, whether slave or 'free,' lives under the commandment

7 'Epidermalisation' of blackness as theorised by Frantz Fanon in Black Skin, White Masks.

8 Other contributors to this line of thought range from contemporary theorists such as Achille Mbembe, Joy James, Lewis Gordon, Achilles Mbembe, Judy Ronald, David Marriott, et al. Even such figures as James Baldwin and Assata Shakur are said to contribute to the growing theorisations of Afro-pessimism. This list is by no means comprehensive, and perhaps neither would some of these theorists self-identify as Afro-pessimists. In this article, I aim to primarily address the works of Wilderson, Sexton and Hartman.

9 After the 1970's there have been many perspectives put forward with a 'pessimistic' outlook upon Africa in particular and the African diaspora in general and their tenuous relation to Western development. Such perspectives see the utter abandonment of the African continent, betrayed by either by global institutional forces or indigenous African leaders in aiding its development and integration into the world economy. Such perspectives see Africa has having been exiled from the future.

of whites.”¹⁰

Contrary to contingent applications of violence in accordance with legitimate cause (transgression of law, as repressive strategy, as reaction, etc.), violence against blacks is *gratuitous*, without any prior reason or justification. It is the direct relation of force as the basis of the slave relation, which essentially structures the dispossession of black existence, an ontological dispossession of being.

This gratuitous violence, on the one hand, subjugates black existence to an irrational *accumulation* of bodies, and subsequently produces a condensed delimitation of blackness in space. Whether it was the owning and trading of slaves or the contemporary phenomena of the ghetto and mass incarceration, black existence is excluded and stockpiled as so many objects within a spatial boundary. In this condition, life is reduced to a statistical quantity, black existence is made exchangeable with any other. Therefore, on the other hand, black existence is also a *fungible* object, infinitely malleable in its content due to the abstraction of its quality and open for use for anyone who can claim subjecthood.¹¹ These structural features come to their fullest expression in the contemporary scenario of police shootings. The endless stream of young black men shot by police borders on excess, demonstrating the pure interchangeability of such names as equivalents, meaning that such seemingly particular empirical cases are in actuality a general condition. Blackness is as devalued as it is susceptible to all aspects of material and social containment, control and debility. Yet, in these instances, even morally indignant liberals are complicit with anti-blackness by focusing on police shootings as a contingent rather than structural feature of black existence. Often such moral indignation emphasises the atrocious nature of such events and spectacularises the use of ‘excessive force’ so as to fundamentally produce a completely inert body. Attention is then focalised on the excess of black suffering, reducing the victim to a *tabula rasa* upon which all manners of empathetic projection obscures the basis of a morbid white enjoyment that garners pleasure through the depiction of excoriated black flesh.¹²

10 Jared Sexton, ‘Racial Profiling and the Societies of Control’ in Joy James (Ed.), *Warfare in the Homeland: Policing and Prison in a Penal Democracy*, Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2007.

11 ‘This violence which turns a body into flesh, ripped apart literally and imaginatively, destroys the possibility of ontology because it positions the Black in an infinite and indeterminately horrifying and open vulnerability, an object made available (which is to say fungible) for any subject. As such, “the black has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man” or, more precisely, in the eyes of Humanity.’ in Frank B. Wilderson, III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*, Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2010.

12 This point is emphasised by Jared Sexton in his works on the paradigm of policing as well as Saidiya Hartman, who focuses more generally on the libidinal economy of white enjoyment of black suffering. Abolitionists during slavery would often depict scenes of horrible violence perpetuated against slaves, seeking to gain sympathy from other whites by attempting to analogise the experience of blacks and whites (‘what if this were you and your family?’), as epitomised with Frederick

In the construction and maintenance of the labour contract, blacks had to be set apart from whites in general, whether rich or poor. Thus the exercise of *police power* performed a differential operation: supplementing the outer limits of the wage relation through enforced integration and control while containing and separating blacks apart from whites. In America, it is well known that the history of policing finds its analogical surrogate with slave patrols. Initially an informal cadre of whites that banded together to enforce the slave codes, slave patrols and the disciplining of disobedient slaves in general aimed to regulate the mobility of blacks, spatially fixing them to the confines of the plantation. Patrolling was a duty and obligation for all whites, whether they owned slaves or not. After slavery, such instances of patrolling were devolved upon the institutionality of the police, a professional body that regulated the movement of blacks according to the spatial configurations of both Jim Crow in the South and the black ghettos of the urbanising North. In both instances, the racialisation of space that was enacted by these institutions defined white life as immune from police violence. In fact, all whites were dutifully bound as the perpetrators of this violence against blacks. The police simply came to embody this violence by excising this aspect of being white and formalising it within its institution. White civilians could now simply disavow the violence necessary for its livelihood and devolve it to the professional police force. By definition, ‘white people are not simply “protected” by the police, they *are* the police.’¹⁹

At the beginning of 20th century Fordism, the American ghetto emerged during a period of rapid urbanisation, providing a cheap pool of labour for industrial manufacturing and personal services. While not formally regulated like the Jim Crow laws in the South, the ghetto was the informal institutional complement to such explicit social practices of black exclusion. As a site that concentrated the black population while also isolating them from the spatial arrangements of white civil society, the ghetto provided a social refuge for blacks from white violence, enabling the construction of black associations and institutions.²⁰

Additionally, police power devolved upon the regulation of the black

19 Frank B. Wilderson, III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*, Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2010, pp. 82.

20 ‘A ghetto is essentially a sociospatial device that enables a dominant status group in an urban setting simultaneously to ostracize and exploit a subordinate group endowed with negative symbolic capital, that is, an incarnate property perceived to make its contact degrading by virtue of what Max Weber calls ‘negative social estimation of honour.’ Put differently, it is a relation of ethnoracial control and closure built out of four elements: (i) stigma; (ii) constraint; (iii) territorial confinement; and (iv) institutional encasement. The resulting formation is a distinct *space*, containing an ethnically homogenous *population*, which finds itself forced to develop within it a set of interlinked *institutions* that duplicates the organizational framework of the broader society from which that group is banished and supplies the scaffoldings for the construction of its specific ‘style of life’ and social strategies. This parallel institutional nexus affords the subordinate group a measure of protection, autonomy and dignity, but at the cost of locking it in a relationship of structural subordination and dependency.’ in Loic Wacquant, ‘From Slavery to Mass Incarceration: Rethinking the ‘race question’ in the US’, *New Left Review*, January/February 2002, pp.50-51.

Freed blacks, situated outside the constraints of wage labour, needed to be integrated economically yet excluded socially. In a way it was a problem of how to ‘humanise’ the sentient object. After all, if the slave was merely a sentient object with no will, how could the freed black engage in the responsibilities of bourgeois individuality and ‘freedom’ requisite of waged labour? What would it mean for a slave to become a free individual? Therefore the central concern after the abolition of slavery for white civil society was managing the transition from the legalised subjection of slaves to the informal and racialised subjection of blacks. The figure of the ‘free’ black from the outset was seen as fundamentally outside the wage relation, purportedly unhabituated to the ethics of work and hence in need of labour discipline. As such, various techniques of coercion were utilised against ex-slaves to ironically enforce the construction of ‘consent’ for the free labour contract:

“the glaring disparities between liberal democratic ideology and the varied forms of compulsion utilized to force free workers to sign labor contracts exceeded the coercion immanent in capital labor relations and instead relied on older forms of extraeconomic coercion. In short, violence remained a significant device in cultivating labor discipline. Undeniably, inequality was the basis of the forms of economic and social relations that developed in the aftermath of emancipation.”¹⁷

During the period of American industrialisation in the 19th century, the construction of the labour contract and a submissive working class necessitated the regulation of unemployment. As industrial capitalism developed with the institution of slavery, there was a transmission of techniques in labour management between industrialists and slaveowners, creating a line of continuity between the plantation system and the factory:

“Not only did the crisis of industrialization – problems of pauperism, underemployment, and labor management – occur in the context of an extensive debate about the fate of slavery, but also slavery informed the premises and principles of labor discipline [...] the forms of compulsion used against the unemployed, vagrants, beggars, and others in the postbellum North mirrored the transition from slavery to freedom. The contradictory aspects of liberty of contract and the reliance on coercion in stimulating free labor modeled in the aftermath of the Civil War were the lessons of emancipation employed against the poor.”¹⁸

17 Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

18 Ibid

In short, the violence of anti-blackness produces black existence; there is no prior positive blackness that could be potentially appropriated. Black existence is simultaneously produced and negated by racial domination, both as presupposition and consequence. Affirmation of blackness proves to be impossible without simultaneously affirming the violence that structures black subjectivity itself. And these conditions that procure black existence consistently repeat the sombre refrain of anti-blackness: there is no black identity, there is no black subject, there is no black life as such. As a consequence, black existence is fundamentally marked by *social death*, materially living as a sentient object but without a stable or guaranteed social subjectivity. And as such, the status of blackness forms the basis upon which white life can subjectivise itself, socially and materially *through* the negation of the black body. White life recognises itself as a positive counterpart to the non-subjecthood of blacks.

However, Afro-pessimists claim that this relation between black death and white life is not merely asymmetrical. The distinction between the two is qualitatively different, and potential for reconciliation between whites and blacks is impossible. This particular distinction instead procures an *antagonism* in relation to the social totality. The inordinate amount of violence perpetuated against blacks – naturalised and thus ontological – means that such a situation is untranslatable to any representable terms of ‘experience’ or ‘identity’. Such a structural feature of blackness mired in violence cannot be related to contingent ‘experiences’ of social, political or economic violence, such as the struggles of workers or immigrants. Black existence forms the bottom line, the condition of possibility, of general social and material integration. It is not necessarily one’s ‘whiteness’ that matters inasmuch as one is *not black* enabling entrance and participation in civil society. Barred from the immanent capacities of living, anti-blackness is the necessary ground for the definition and propagation of life in general.¹³

In this way, Afro-pessimism also enacts a political intervention onto the terrain of identity politics and multiracial coalitions. Perhaps more generally, Afro-pessimism can be seen as a critique of the Left and all forms of activism that participate in representational politics. In the US, the past decades have seen the proliferation of identity-based politics predicated on a politics of recognition. It is this position that was made possible by the legacies of the black struggles of the 1950s to 1970s, epitomised in black liberation and the civil rights movement. However, contemporary anti-racist formations obfuscate and implicitly disavow

Douglass’ depiction of his Aunt Hester’s beating by a slavemaster. This operation resulted in the complicity of pro-slavery discourse reducing the slave to a willless object with no capacity to free him or herself, needing the help of whites, while also making the slave an object of enjoyment, in which the most extreme forms of violence and suffering engendered a perverse form of pleasure.

13 Ibid., pp.45, ‘In short, White (Human) capacity, in advance of the event of discrimination or oppression, is parasitic on Black incapacity: Without the Negro, capacity itself is inherent, uncertain at best.’

such a legacy, while simultaneously utilising their impact to promote reform and integration. The basis of such perspectives is a wider acceptance and visibility of marginalised identities within the stronghold of civil society. Calls for unity by multiracial coalitions mask complicity with the structures of anti-blackness. They proffer an analysis that seeks to go beyond the framework of black and white racial dynamics. Yet in this gesture to ‘go beyond black and white’, the specificity of anti-blackness is obscured. In such instances, these analyses aim to discover common ground through the particularity of non-black racial identities or other oppressed categories. But this common ground is predicated on an underlying humanness, from which black existence is fundamentally barred. Such a perspective presents an atomised individual traversed by a variety of oppressions, yet these oppressions are representable and conditional to a historic instance of violence (as opposed to the *ontological* unconditionality of violence perpetuated against blacks), and could potentially be recognised and addressed. For it is on the basis of (human) recognition and self-representation from which minoritarian identities can wage their struggle. Black existence is barred from such a possibility due to the fact that such recognition is based upon *not being black*. As long as one can distance oneself enough from blackness, then one has the possibility of integrating into civil society generally:

“whereas the suffering of non-black people of color seem[s] conditional to the historic instance (even if long-standing) and, even empirically, functions at a different scope and scale, the oppression of blacks seems to be invariant (which does not mean it is simply unchanging; it mutates constantly).”¹⁴

Whereas redress for grievances can be sought and gained through these minoritarian struggles, ultimately they rely upon the further subjection of blacks in order to achieve such goals. Violence deployed against non-black minoritarian positions is contingent and effectively communicable through shared experiences, and therefore could be formulated into coherent demands that might be met or not. If these demands are recognised and met, they necessitate anti-blackness as a *sine qua non* for further integration. It is inside this ambiguous nature of empirical demands that black existence introduces a categorical antagonism reaching far beyond any empirical enunciation for socio-political recognition. For Afro-pessimists, there is no possible empirical redress for its structural position in relation to civil society, for it is the very condition that enables civil society to cohere in the first place. And this condition is that of an inordinate suffering that is not commensurate to mere experience. For this reason, black existence figures

as an antagonism that transcends any empirical injustice, an antagonism that splits the world between black or human. Consequently this antagonism entails a total disorganisation of what it would mean to exist in the world at all. Black existence is essentially a structural position that positions itself as *demandless*, an antagonism which is irreconcilable, and without any possible future of organic synthesis of black existence and humanity. For the form of freedom that would enable the abolition of black existence is not empirical but ontological in nature. To overcome anti-blackness, there would have to be what Fanon had called a ‘program of complete disorder,’ an expropriation and affirmation of the very violence perpetuated against black existence and a fundamental reorientation of the social coordinates of the Human relation. It would entail a war against the concept of humanity and a war that splits civil society to its core, a civil war that would elaborate itself to the death.

The Historical Reproduction of the Racial Distinction

White supremacy is not some obscure hieroglyphic to be discerned by an attuned eye. White supremacy in itself is not a coherent system. It does not possess a hidden essence that could be interrogated and revealed. It is instead a formal practice without coherent content. White supremacy simply *is* a set of social and material practices. And its formal practice aims to generate the primary distinction between black and white (or more precisely, non-black). Thus the racial distinction was a consequence, and not the cause, of slavery. From its origins in slavery, the racial distinction was reproduced through historically specific institutional arrangements that enabled black subjection to continue. The primary aim of these institutions was ‘the conjoint *extraction of labour* and *social ostracisation* of an outcast group deemed unassimilable’.¹⁵

As a direct relation of force, slavery was the condition of possibility for defining the content of ‘free’ labour of the propertyless proletariat. To be ‘free’ and to be a worker was negatively defined in relation to the slave. In this way, the structural position of the slave was objectively positioned against work, outside and against the wage relation – ‘work is not an organic principle for the slave’.¹⁶

After Emancipation, the Southern economy was decimated by the Civil War, the destruction of fixed capital and land, and the collapse of the Confederate currency. It was particularly the newfound mobility of freed blacks and their refusal to immediately enter into voluntary contractual relations with former slaveholders that prompted extraeconomic means to enforce their compliance.

¹⁵ Loic Wacquant, ‘From Slavery to Mass Incarceration: Rethinking the ‘race question’ in the US’, *New Left Review*, January/February 2002, pp. 44-45

¹⁶ Frank B. Wilderson, III, ‘The Prison Slave as Hegemony’s (Silent) Scandal’, in Joy James (Ed.), *Warfare in the Homeland: Policing and Prison in a Penal Democracy*, Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2007.

¹⁴ Jared Sexton, ‘Racial Profiling and the Societies of Control’ in Joy James (Ed.), *Warfare in the Homeland: Policing and Prison in a Penal Democracy*, Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2007.