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White Histories of Antiblack Violence: an Investigation between Black Studies and Critical Theory

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Abstract

The main goal of this thesis is to evaluate both how antiblack violence functions and the way in which white people have, historically, perpetuated this violence. Although this thesis consults various areas within Black Studies, its main theoretical foundation is Afropessimism. The first chapter is mainly concerned with white ignorance; with an analysis of how various prominent white critical theorists have often been antiblack while attempting to theorize antiblackness. These theorists include Hannah Arendt, Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, and Lee Edelman. The second chapter investigates the violent history of the concept of Black animality and how this idea is a present throughline in much of Frantz Fanon's work. Finally, the last chapter analyzes Afropessimism, its understanding of the world, and how its authors use auto-theory to examine antiblack violence. This chapter breaks down the work of Frank B. Wilderson III, as well as that of historian Saidiya Hartman, demonstrating how their work thoughtfully engages with both memoir and critical theory.

KEYWORDS: Black Studies, Critical Theory, Antiblackness, Afropessimism, Black Animality, Psychoanalysis, Marxism, Frank B. Wilderson III, Saidiya Hartman, Frantz Fanon, Hannah Arendt, Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, Lee Edelman.

Summary for Lay Audience

The main goal of this thesis is to think about how antiblack violence functions and the way in which white people have tended to perpetuate this violence. Although this thesis consults various areas within Black Studies, its main theoretical foundation is Afropessimism. The first chapter is mainly concerned with the first idea; with an analysis of how various prominent white critical theorists have often been antiblack while attempting to theorize antiblackness. These theorists include Hannah Arendt, Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, and Lee Edelman. The second chapter investigates the violent history behind the concept of Black animality and how this idea is present in much of Frantz Fanon's work. Finally, the last chapter analyzes Afropessimism, its understanding of the world, and how its authors use auto-theory to examine antiblack violence. This chapter breaks down the work of Frank B. Wilderson III, as well as that of historian Saidiya Hartman, demonstrating how their work moves between memoir and critical theory.

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Introduction

Although there are various themes that are present within this thesis, investigating antiblack violence and how it is perpetuated by whiteness are the two ideas which form the foundation of my research here. My first chapter deconstructs the image of the ever-progressive critical theorist and demonstrates how antiblackness has functioned within the work of multiple white critical theorists over time. This chapter highlights the differences between 'critical theory' and 'Black Studies' and how the latter tends to provide a more precise analysis of antiblackness and its violent effects. My second chapter investigates the history of white supremacy that is responsible for the creation of the concept of Black animality and how Frantz Fanon often commented on this across his body of work. This chapter grapples more with Blackness in a colonial context and the complicated nature of the decolonial struggle for African communities. The third and final chapter is an overview of Afropessimism and two of its most influential authors, Frank B. Wilderson III and Saidiya Hartman. Although Afropessimism is part of all three chapters, the third is dedicated to mapping the nuances of the Afropessimist framework.

Throughout my years as a graduate student, people have often wondered why I, a white person, came to be engaged in a field that was entirely separate from my background. I am going to do my best in this introduction to attempt to answer that question, as I believe my experiences are important to contextualize this thesis. I grew up in a mainly white suburb in West Michigan and when it came time to go to college, my conservative Christian parents made it clear that the only option they would financially support was the nearby conservative Christian liberal arts college. Although at that point I was quite disillusioned when it came to religion and had no real interest in attending that university, it seemed that it was my only option to further my education, and so I went.

By my last year of college, I was majoring in history and minoring in philosophy and one of the courses I needed to fulfill my philosophy minor included a trip to South Africa in the winter. The summer beforehand I worked 50 hours a week for four months in a factory in order to afford the extra expense, so when the time came, I was quite excited to go. I had my own reservations, as I was a Marxist who cared about decolonialism and did not want to be going on any sort of missionary trip. But our philosophy professor assured us that our main reason for being there was an educational one and that we would be reading about globalization along the way. This alleviated my anxiety at the time about it possibly being any sort of religious colonial venture.

The trip was not to one location within South Africa, rather we started in Johannesburg, drove to a small northern village where we spent most of our time, toured a wildlife reserve, and then went back to Johannesburg to fly to Cape Town. The first element of the journey that made me apprehensive was that our guides for the entire trip were two Afrikaners who were associated with a Christian mission's organization. I did not know this at first, but later my friend told me that our main guide would often go around to different villages to preach about how god could lift them out of poverty, which made me quite uncomfortable given that he was a rich white Afrikaner from Cape Town, spreading this message to poor Africans. It was also hard to hear this because for the entire duration of our stay in the country, Black Africans occupied every single service or low-wage occupation that we came across. It quickly became apparent to me that even if apartheid had been abolished in name, it definitely continued in an economic form at the very least.

The event that shocked me the most occurred when we were driving back from the wildlife preserve to Johannesburg; our guide suggested that we visit a small cafe on a coffee

bean farm for breakfast. The coffee and the food were wonderful and we were able to enjoy the scenery as we had our meal, which included a pond that stretched out and met the farmland on the rest of the property. Although the experience seemed relaxing, I could not help but think about the centerfold in the cafe's menu that showed the family that owned the property, all of them white as snow. This was also the period in which conservative commentators in the US were claiming that Africans in South Africa were reclaiming their land from white settlers, a notion that excited me (unfortunately when I asked our guide about this, he dismissed it as untrue). All of the cafe staff who had made our coffee and our meal were Black, which made me wonder who actually harvested the coffee itself.

Things started to go south in the cafe when the owners of the farm showed up to drop something off. I assumed that they would just make light conversation with the group and leave, or at least I hoped so because I had no interest in talking with them. But things took a turn when our guide introduced us as "missionaries from America," something that was untrue yet made the white farm owners very excited. They said that they were honored to have a group from abroad that had come to South Africa to do the "lord's work." At this point, I was very uncomfortable and just wanted to leave, something I sensed in others from the group as well. We were done with our meal anyway, so most of us got up and were getting ready to go when the white farm owners said, "Oh wait! We have a gift for you before you go."

We were already standing in a semi-circle and they called the all-Black cafe staff out to where we were gathered. My discomfort increased, but I did not realize how bad things were going to get. The white woman who owned the farm (who reminded me a lot of Hillary Clinton) commanded the all-Black staff to sing us a song that was about praising Jesus. Their eyes cast to the ground, they glumly sang as I sat there shocked and dismayed, and things only got worse

when the white woman commanded them to sing it again in Zulu, "because you know these people want the authentic experience." I sat there, horrified and dumbstruck, as for the first time in my life I witnessed something that felt completely outside of the given time and place. What was the difference, I asked myself, between the racial power dynamics in this situation, and those in the antebellum south? I felt as if I was a white guest at a southern plantation in the 1840s and the owner had just commanded their slaves to sing and dance.

My friend and I rushed out of the cafe, distraught. I scrambled to think of some way to apologize to the kitchen staff for having to do that to us, to make them know that we did not approve of what just happened. Maybe I could give them the couple hundred Rand that I had in my purse? But then they might just think of it as a tip for their performance. As my friend and I discussed what we could possibly do, the rest of the group (all white) slowly emerged from the cafe and were all glowing with delight. They were raving about how great the food was and stating that it was simply an amazing experience. At first, I wondered if this was a means to mask their discomfort, but as everyone got in the van and continued to gush about the cafe, I began to realize that they were all genuine. I had come to South Africa with a philosophy cohort that wanted to witness another culture, yet almost nobody in my group recognized the terrible event that had just occurred right in front of us. Even worse, my friend and I could not come up with any meaningful way to apologize to the all-Black kitchen staff. Nothing we said or gave them would make up for what they had to do in front of us, for the coercive antiblack violence. We could've given them everything we had and it would not have changed the racial dynamics of South Africa.

For the rest of the trip, I contemplated this one experience. I also had to be honest with myself about certain things, like the fact that I was also complicit in what happened at that cafe; I

did not do anything to change it and I wasn't a better person for simply recognizing that it was deeply violent. I was a white American tourist in South Africa and I had to acknowledge that there was also a kind of colonial violence in me being there in the first place. Initially, I thought that if I approached the journey with my eyes open and ready to analyze what was around me, that I was better than a missionary or an ignorant tourist, but I was wrong. Ironically, more than anything, I learned how whiteness functions and just how violent and ignorant it can be. Even when we ended our tour in Cape Town, I remember feeling sick when we went to an all-white Afrikaner church service and everyone sang in Afrikaans, it felt like the most vicious colonialism. I did not participate, but I was starting to realize how hostile white spaces must feel to Black people.

My academic work up until that point had to do with Marxism and feminism, but during the last part of the trip I was curious if anyone had theorized on what I had just gone through. I asked a few of my friends and they sent me a couple of articles by Frank B. Wilderson III, who was immediately compelling to me both because of his experiences in South Africa and his detailed prose. I spent a lot of time in the bunker we stayed in at Cape Town, reading about his thoughts and experiences, which helped me further analyze and understand my own. I started to realize that Wilderson had a point when it came to Afropessimism, that even though there are different methods of oppression (classism, patriarchy, homophobia, transphobia, etc.) that antiblackness is rooted in needing the Black subject to be the foil to the modern "Human." I had seen it myself and I had also seen the white need for it.

So that is ultimately how this project began. Throughout working on this thesis, I have discouraged myself from thinking that I'm a "good white person" for doing this kind of scholarship. I have done my best to practice humility and listen, especially when it was

uncomfortable. I have also kept in mind what Wilderson says to white people who are attempting this kind of work, "Go after your own people," because wallowing in Black suffering is both violent and inappropriate for a white scholar to do. This is why my first and second chapters are about both the failings of white scholars when it comes to analyzing antiblackness, and how white scientists and settlers perpetuated the idea of Black animality. My third chapter is simply an overview of Afropessimism and how it functions, as I wanted to dedicate a chapter to the scholarship that has informed my thinking (and my life) for the past few years.

I think the best thing that white scholars can do when it comes to working in and around Black Studies is to be open minded and aware of how our own whiteness impacts what we do and how we perceive the world. I also believe that the more white people are aware of the topics I talk about in this thesis, the more we can try to mitigate certain violent behaviors and try to hurt Black people less. Even if we know that it is impossible to replace an antiblack unconscious, we can do our best to make sure that our conscious words and actions do not perpetuate harm. Unfortunately, white supremacy is a very complex, multifaceted phenomenon and it is not going to go away anytime soon, even if some of us are more socially aware than others; though in this case I do believe that reading key works within Black Studies and analyzing our experiences can be constructive. This is why, at the very least, white people should face the realities of our past and how we have created this racial hierarchy that still benefits us to this day. It is not a comfortable thing to work through, but it is not much compared to how we and our ancestors have treated Black people. Antiblackness is a worldwide phenomenon, but it is ultimately driven by whiteness and the white subconscious. This is what I have tried to tackle within this thesis: the thing that Black people have always known about white people and what white people almost never recognize about ourselves.

Chapter 1: Misunderstanding Antiblack Violence: A Tendency within Critical Theory

> Unfortunately, in spite of her insight and influence, Arendt's writings about antiblack racial oppression (or the Negro question) in particular often reflect poor judgment and profound misunderstandings. In her sincere attempts to critique, confront, and even save the Western philosophical tradition, she too becomes entangled within it. In that regard, Hannah Arendt might be seen as a case study for the limitations of the Western philosophical tradition.
>
> — Kathryn Sophia Belle, *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question*

In her 1959 essay, "Reflections on Little Rock," Hannah Arendt had the following to say about the history of antiblackness in America,

> The color question was created by the one great crime in America's history and is soluble only within the political and historical framework of the Republic. The fact that this question has also become a major issue in world affairs is sheer coincidence as far as American history and politics are concerned; for the color problem in world politics grew out of the colonialism and imperialism of European nations—that is, the one great crime in which America was never involved.[1]

Although she liked to characterize herself as a historian rather than a philosopher, here Arendt displays a stunning lack of knowledge about American colonization, imperialism, and racism. But more importantly, this is just one instance in a long history of white critical theorists misunderstanding how violence functions in relation to race, especially concerning antiblackness. There are those who will likely disagree with me labeling Arendt as a "critical theorist," though I include her in this category because the boundary between continental philosophy and critical theory is often quite tenuous and those who do work within critical theory itself often reference both. As evidenced by Arendt's quote, those who work within this

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[1] Hannah Arendt, "Reflections on Little Rock," *Dissent* (1959): 46.

tradition also tend to regard the tradition itself with reverence (with Arendt herself being infatuated with the idea of an ideal republic via Plato) while that same tradition primarily consists of white wealthy male philosophers. This is true even today, as Arendt herself is one of the only women who has been accepted into the western philosophical canon. As she is widely viewed as an integral part of the canon, many within critical theory often attempt to make excuses for her racism, but as scholar Kathryn Sophia Belle (formerly Kathryn T. Gines) has pointed out,[2] often her antiblackness is inexcusable.

The purpose of this first chapter is twofold: to outline how key figures in critical theory have failed to accurately theorize antiblack violence in the past as well as how this trend continues today through critical theorists co-opting Afropessimism for their own projects. The first section will break down the works of Hannah Arendt, someone who often wrote about political violence and the Black community (both together and separately), and will demonstrate how her racism and loyalty to the western philosophical canon cloud her commentary on the topic. The second section will move forward to analyze Foucault's idea of biopolitics and Agamben's notion of bare life, particularly the way in which neither situate race or Blackness within their theoretical frameworks. The final section will comment on a more modern phenomenon—white critical theorists incorporating contemporary Black philosophy (in this case, Afropessimism) into their own frameworks that have nothing to do with antiblackness. These scholars often do so both to remain relevant and to appear as if they are enlightened when it comes to issues with race, but more often than not they fail to meaningfully understand or engage with Afropessimism itself. Overall, this chapter attempts to chronicle a pervasive theme

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[2] I must give credit to Kathryn Sophia Belle, as she offers a thorough analysis and critique of Arendt's antiblackness across her work in *Hannah Arendt and the Negro Question* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), which was a critical work in constructing my analysis.

within critical theory that is demonstrative over time—that critical theorists either misunderstand antiblackness, fail to address it when it is relevant to their work, or co-opt important work done on antiblackness and use it for their own unrelated scholarship.

When one goes through and analyzes Arendt's work, there are many troubling parts about her political project that are historically inaccurate yet necessary in order for Arendt to feel that her paradigm's 'solution' is sound. Said solution is largely outlined in the last section of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, wherein she discusses the 'totalitarian' traits that made up both Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia and comes to the conclusion that only a country with a structure like the United States (which, to Arendt, embodies a "republic") would be able to fight against adopting these traits.[3] It is quite curious that she would choose the United States as the symbolic arbiter of political freedom, but the reason she does so lies in the way that she (mis)understands imperialism, racial discrimination, and the nature of the public vs. the private. All of these coalesce in her blatant antiblack racism. But her antiblackness does not stop in her earliest work, it continues when she contrasts the public and private in *The Human Condition* (the analysis of which is applied in "Reflections on Little Rock" and "Reflections on Violence").

In order to understand why Arendt's virulent antiblackness appears so often in her work, first it is necessary to understand that Arendt had a habit of criticizing marginalized groups, even those that she herself was a part of. In both her academic writing and interviews, Arendt is quite cool concerning her own identity as a Jew, stating as much in a 1964 letter, "I am not moved by any 'love' of this sort [that of the Jewish people], and for two reasons: I have never in my life 'loved' any people or collective – neither the German people, nor the French, nor the American,

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[3] This is particularly noticeable in her positive comments on America on page 316 and 507 in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, especially compared to the other nations that she is talking about in the same context. It is also noticeable in how she dismisses the evil parts of American history (especially slavery, which is mentioned later in this chapter when analyzing how Arendt talks about race in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*).

nor the working class or anything of that sort. I indeed love 'only' my friends and the only kind

of love I know of and believe in is the love of persons."[4] Arendt maintains this distance from her

Jewish identity in her most popular work, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, and goes as far as to

denounce the actions of European Jews during the Holocaust, blaming them for their own

oppression.

      Throughout *The Origins of Totalitarianism* Arendt links the decline of the nation-state to

the various factors that led to the Second World War (antisemitism, imperial decline, and the rise

of totalitarianism), so in her first section on antisemitism she does a great deal of work outlining

the financial role that European Jews had in various nations and how that role broke down after

World War I. It is strange to see her do so much work to trace this Jewish role from the Middle

Ages up to modernity and then to end the section by claiming that the Jews should have done

more to protect themselves from potential persecution. Arendt makes it clear that the Jewish

people have always been 'othered' in one way or another in Europe, so it is surprising to see

statements like the following, "The Jews' political ignorance, which fitted them so well for their

special role and for taking roots in the state's sphere of business, and their prejudices against the

people and in favor of authority, which blinded them to the political dangers of antisemitism,

caused them to be oversensitive toward all forms of discrimination."[5] This tactic of blaming the

Jews for "falling into the hands" of the Nazis is not one which has gone unnoticed by those who

study antisemitism. In his book, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition*, historian David Nirenberg

has this to say about Arendt's analysis of antisemitism,

> It is therefore remarkable that Arendt clung to the views on Jewish reality and co-
> responsibility that she elaborated in the late 1930s, even after the full extent and
> fantastic projective power of Nazi anti-Semitism (including its vast exaggeration

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[4] From "Eichmann in Jerusalem" (an exchange of letters between Gershom Scholem and Hannah Arendt), *Encounter,* (1964): 51-56.

[5] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1951), 54.

of the Jews' economic importance) became clear...Moreover she had little patience for those who questioned the relationship between anti-Semitism and the real. She scorned the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre's understanding of Judaism as a category of fantasy and projection in the thought of non-Jew (as she put it, "the Jew as someone who is regarded and defined as a Jew by others"). And her pithy mockery of approaches that looked to the long history of ideas about Judaism in order to understand modern ideologies—she dubbed these approaches "Eternal Anti-Semitism".[6]

So not only does Arendt outline a faulty historical reading (furthering the stereotype of the powerful Jewish banker) but because she does not believe systemic oppression exists, she looks down on those who articulate a more accurate characterization of antisemitism. Arendt would have wholeheartedly disagreed with scholars such as Moishe Postone, who broke down the many tropes that were at the heart of modern antisemitism,

It is not only the degree, but also the quality of power attributed Jews which distinguishes anti-Semitism from other forms of racism. Probably all forms of racism attribute potential power to the other. This power, however, is usually concrete—material or sexual—the power of the oppressed (as repressed), of the "Untermenschen." The power attributed to the Jews is not only much greater and "real," as opposed to potential, it is different. In *modern* anti-Semitism it intangible, abstract and universal. This power does not usually appear as such, but must find a concrete vessel, a carrier, a mode of expression. Because this power is not bound concretely, is not "rooted," it is of staggering immensity and is extremely difficult to check. It stands behind phenomena, but is not identical with them. Its source is therefore hidden—conspiratorial. The Jews represent an immensely powerful, intangible, international conspiracy.[7]

Not only does Arendt have an inaccurate analysis of oppression when it comes to Jewish people, but she is also consistent in her virulent antiblackness. At the very least, when it came to the Jewish community, Arendt was active in writing about the various issues that it faced throughout her life[8] and often attempted to engage with the nuances of these problems. It should

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[6] David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013), 464.

[7] Moishe Postone, "Anti-Semitism and National Socialism: Notes on the German Reaction to "Holocaust," *New German Critique*, (1980): 106.

[8] Hannah Arendt, eds. Jerome Kohn and Ron H. Feldman, *The Jewish Writings* (New York: Schocken Books, 2007).

also be noted that Arendt did not shy away from critiquing Israel and its oppressive policies. Yet, when writing about the Black community (both in America and abroad) there is a persistent tone of disdain and irritation. This is present in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* when she is describing the colonization of Africa and in both her essays "Reflections on Little Rock" and "Reflections on Violence," which specifically target the Black community.

The entire second section of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* has to do with how imperialism is related to the collapse of the nation-state; so here Arendt goes into great detail about the mechanics of colonialism. She focuses on the colonization of Africa, which she views in line with the rest of western "progress," "In other words, no matter how close to us this past is, we are perfectly aware that our experience of concentration camps and death factories is as remote from its general atmosphere as it is from any other period in Western history."[9] Rather than comparing the numerous atrocities that were carried out in the colonization of Africa to the horrors of the Holocaust, she chooses to only focus on the violence of the latter. This is because Arendt does not really have any ethical qualms with colonization, she denounces it because she believed it was ineffective and weakened the nation-state[10]. The way she characterizes South African tribes makes this doubly apparent, "Race was the Boers' answer to the overwhelming monstrosity of Africa--a whole continent populated and overpopulated by savages,"[11] and despite Arendt's ironic prose in this line, she never demonstrates any sympathy for those who were colonized. She also claims that the "scramble for Africa" was started because various European

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[9] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1951), 123.
[10] Ibid, 128.
[11] Ibid, 185.

countries had *excess* capital that they needed to get rid of,[12] contrary to the common

understanding that colonization equips countries with various resources, and therefore capital.

As Arendt recounts her version of the development of the idea of race, it rapidly becomes

clear that this may be the weakest part of both *The Origins of Totalitarianism* and her theoretical

corpus. She believes that racism is an ideology, one that "emerged simultaneously in all Western

countries during the nineteenth century,"[13] and that its origins can be traced to France.[14] Arendt's

articulation of racism is one that is closely tied to nationalist sentiments, which makes sense

when talking about antisemitism in Nazi Germany, but not when one is attempting to theorize

antiblackness. In reading the chapter "Race-Thinking Before Racism," one wonders if at any

point Arendt will mention American chattel slavery and its effect on the idea of race, and it is

mentioned near the end of the chapter, but only for Arendt to say the following, "But even

slavery, though actually established on a strict racial basis, did not make the slave-holding

peoples race-conscious before the nineteenth century. Throughout the eighteenth century,

American slave-holders themselves considered it a temporary institution and wanted to abolish it

gradually"[15] Arendt also characterizes slave owners as follows, "Most of them probably would

have said with Jefferson: "I tremble when I think that God is just."[16] From all of this, one can

safely say that Arendt misunderstands (and at times is willfully ignorant of) the way antiblack

racism truly functions, and often perpetuates it herself.

Arendt clearly had a European understanding of colonialism both because of the

historians she chose to consult and the fact that she uses Hobbes to understand power in this

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[12] Ibid, 136.
[13] Ibid, 158.
[14] Ibid, 162.
[15] Ibid, 177.
[16] Ibid, 177.

context. She believes that she can understand colonial power structures (both in and away from the colony) by using a 17th century political philosopher who was commenting on power relations between the people and the state within a European context. This is telling because later in her life when she read thinkers who had an accurate analysis of colonialism, she chose to lambast them, such as with Fanon in "Reflections on Violence." In fact, Arendt lived in a period when she could have consulted a myriad of Black thinkers about the issues she would go on to write about. Later in life, she corresponded with James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, and Richard Wright and it seemed to make no difference in her thoughts and opinions concerning the plight of Black people.[17] She would go on to write letters to Baldwin concerning some of his famous essays and was bold enough to state the following in 1962,

> All the characteristics you stress in the Negro people: their beauty, their capacity for joy, their warmth, and their humanity, are well-known characteristics of all oppressed people. They grow out of suffering and they are the proudest possession of all pariahs. Unfortunately, they have never survived the hour of liberation by even five minutes. Hatred and love belong together, and they are both destructive; you can afford them only in the private and, as a people, only so long as you are not free.[18]

Here, Arendt not only misunderstands the violence that the Black community faced on a day-to-day basis, but she also uses this opportunity to attempt to "educate" Baldwin on her ideas about the nature of the public and the private.

Besides feeling the need to protect the reputation of the United States, Arendt's other persistent complaint concerning the Black community was the idea that they were airing their private grievances in public. She directly argues against doing so in *The Human Condition*,

> The distinction between a private and a public sphere of life corresponds to the household and the political realms, which have existed as distinct, separate entities at least since the rise of the ancient city-state; but the emergence of the social

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[17] Kathryn T. Gines, *Hannah Arendt and The Negro Question* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 3.

[18] Letter from Hannah Arendt to James Baldwin, November 21, 1962.

realm, which is neither private nor public, strictly speaking, is a relatively new phenomenon whose origin coincided with the emergence of the modern age and which found its political form in the nation-state.[19]

In both "Reflections on Little Rock" and "Reflections on Violence," Arendt aired her grievances with the Black community for not following her philosophical distinctions outlined in *The Human Condition*. Part of this is because Arendt viewed the United States as a reborn republic that should strive to embody the ancient Greek polis.[20] Arendt believed that the private and public realms collapsing into the "social realm" had ill-effects for all involved and specifically linked Black Americans fighting against segregation and antiblackness with this new realm of the social. She maintained that this struggle was unnecessary because every person encountered some form of discrimination within society, "What equality is to the body politic—its innermost principle—discrimination is to society…At any rate, without discrimination of some sort, society would simply cease to exist and very important possibilities of free association and group formation would disappear." [21]

It is overwhelmingly clear that Arendt simply had next to no understanding about what the Black community had to face at the time, as evidenced by the fact that she thought a system rooted in ancient Greek philosophy would somehow be relevant to interrogate modern-day antiblackness. But part of the reason that Arendt's writings on the subject are so incoherent is because she is attempting to use her knowledge base to defend the United States,[22] which then

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[19] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 38.

[20] Greek philosophy remains Arendt's first love throughout her life; even her last book *The Life of the Mind*, she essentially claimed that real "thought" only occurred within the context of ancient Greece, "However, while the mighty inventive to philosophize disappeared, the topics of metaphysics remained the same and continued to prejudge throughout the centuries which things are worthy of being thought about and which are not. What for Plato was a matter of course—that "pure knowledge is concerned with the things that are always the same without change or mixture, or with what is most akin to them," remained in manifold variations the chief assumption of philosophy up to the last stages of the modern age." Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1978), 139.

[21] Hannah Arendt, "Reflections on Little Rock," *Dissent* (1959): 51.

[22] Ibid, 47, "The point at stake, therefore, is not the well-being of the Negro population alone, but, at least in the long run, the survival of the Republic."

just perpetuates her own racism and antiblackness. An obvious example of this is how in "Reflections on Little Rock," she denounces the parents of the Little Rock Nine and claims that they were using their children to further their own political goals. Goals which, according to Arendt, did not even need to be met in the first place, as discrimination is a fundamental part of society and everyone experiences it in some way. Yet, ten years later, in "Reflections on Violence," Arendt praised the civil rights movement because she viewed it as the "peaceful" alternative to the "violent" demands of the Black power movement and the thinkers like Fanon who emboldened it,

> The first reaction was a revulsion against violence in all its forms, an almost matter-of-course espousal of a politics of nonviolence. The successes of this movement, especially with respect to civil rights, were very great, and they were followed by the resistance movement against the war in Vietnam which again determined to a considerable degree the climate of opinion in this country. But it is no secret that things have changed since then, and it would be futile to say that only "extremists" are yielding to a glorification of violence, and believe, with Fanon, that "only violence pays."

Here, Arendt is arguing in bad faith, because in previous writings she had no qualms with being in favor of having a Jewish army that would fight for equal rights.[23] Yet, when those in the Black community advocated for the same thing, Arendt claimed that this is excessively violent, refusing to acknowledge the violence that is being done to the Black community.

Although there is nearly a twenty-year gap in between the publication of *Origins of Totalitarianism* and "Reflections on Violence," it is clear that Arendt also learned nothing about the violent history of colonialism during this period. For the entire essay, Arendt characterizes Fanon as a crazed Marxist with a glutton for violence, whose only aim is to destroy every facet of modern society.

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[23] Kathryn T. Gines, *Hannah Arendt and The Negro Question* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 93.

There are not many authors of rank who glorified violence for violence's sake; but these few—Sorel, Pareto, Fanon—were motivated by a much deeper hatred for bourgeois society and were led to a much more radical break with its moral standards than the conventional Left, which was chiefly inspired by compassion and a burning desire for justice.[24]

As Arendt does not believe that antiblackness exists, she also characterizes students involved in the Black power movement as dictators who force guilty white people to succumb to their "demands." Here, Arendt seems to espouse a belief in what we would label today as "reverse-racism,"

We all know, for example, that it has become rather fashionable among white liberals to react against "black rage" with the cry, We are all guilty, and black militants have proved only too happy to accept this "confession" and to base on it some of their more fantastic demands…The real rift between black and white is not healed when it is being translated into an even less reconcilable conflict between collective innocence and collective guilt. It is racism in disguise and it serves quite effectively to give the very real grievances and rational emotions of the Negro population an outlet into irrationality, an escape from reality.[25]

The above passage is not too dissimilar from modern conservative commentary about the same topic, making it clear that Arendt was completely divorced from the reality of racial dynamics at the time. Although the essay itself is allegedly concerned with "violence," more than anything else it reflects Arendt's subconscious fear of a changing world. At her core, Arendt does not like seeing the romantic European world she understands vanishing in place of one that she does not. She is also unable to realize that her idealized notion of a modern republic is also built on colonialism, racism, and white supremacy. By arguing for it in favor of civil rights and equality for the Black community, she unknowingly shows her hand.

The next section of this chapter will analyze two critical theorists whose work both came after much of Arendt's: Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben. While Arendt often was

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[24] Hannah Arendt, "Reflections on Violence," *The New York Review of Books*, (1969).
[25] Ibid.

blatantly antiblack in much of her work, Foucault and Agamben's errors lie in the omission of an

analysis of antiblackness in some of their scholarship. One of the most popular subfields in

critical theory today is biopolitics, a term which originates with Foucault. What started out as a

series of lectures that Foucault gave in the 1970s has now become a source of interest for a

plethora of critical theorists and philosophers who study the mechanics of social and political

power. In terms of a definition of "biopolitics," Foucault states the following in his lectures on

the subject,

> The theme [of the course] was to have been "biopolitics," by which I meant the
> attempt, starting from the eighteenth century, to rationalize the problems posed to
> governmental practice by phenomena characteristic of a set of living beings
> forming a population: health, hygiene, birth rate, life expectancy, race …We
> know the increasing importance of these problems since the nineteenth century,
> and the political and economic issues they have raised up to the present.[26]

This is a much more straightforward definition of biopolitics compared to others that Foucault

elaborated on elsewhere.[27] This definition stresses the "biological" elements of the concept and

how they are related to any given population; though the contemporary idea of biopolitics mainly

stresses the fact that these measurements relate to a certain amount of political and economic

power. Within the context of his lectures, Foucault mainly focuses on different forms of

liberalism and how they changed over the centuries, yet this transformation was accompanied by

biopolitical modifications as well. Governments that focused on providing healthcare for their

populations, for example, would have a different effect on the realm of biopolitics compared to

those that did not. Although Foucault was more interested in the power dynamics that

surrounded various health measurements of populations (hygiene, birth rate, life expectancy,

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[26] Michel Foucault, Edited by Michel Senellart, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collége de France* (London: Palgrave Macmillian, 2008), 317.

[27] Such as in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 139.

etc.) contemporary scholarship in biopolitics tends to operate from a point of view that is concerned with the level of power most governments have when it comes to the biological.

In his text, *Habeas Viscus*, Alexander Weheliye has a brilliant critique of both Foucault and Agamben when it comes to this very topic, therefore his argument is foundational for this section. Weheliye approaches both thinkers from the field of Black Studies, and in doing so interrogates the gaps in their respective frameworks, as both had plenty of room to include examples from Black history and theory. At the very least, in Foucault's case, he does mention race and colonialism within the context of biopolitics,

> In contrast to Agamben's disavowal of racialization, racism plays a crucial role in Foucault's genealogy of biopolitics. At least it does so in the lectures that compose *Society Must Be Defended* (1975 – 76), since racism and colonialism do not figure prominently in the remainder of Foucault's extensive oeuvre, neither in the works published during his lifetime nor in the eight volumes of posthumously issued lectures that were given at the Collège de France from 1973 – 84.[28]

That being said, there are not many examples that one can pull from in Foucault's work that demonstrate this. Weheliye points out that Foucault does label "ethnic racism" as an issue related to biopolitics in lectures that were published posthumously,[29] though the only extended analysis that Foucault provides on the topic is in his lectures entitled *Society Must Be Defended* (1975-76). Here, Foucault provides a more developed definition of biopolitics, which includes more of an acknowledgement of how state power interacts with the biological. Biopolitics within these lectures is the ability of the European state to "make live and let die," instead of merely acknowledging that the state has the ability to track certain statistics relating to the health and well-being of a given population. Foucault also connects this idea of the state having power over the biological to racism itself, stating that, "This is the internal racism of permanent purification,

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[28] Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 56.

[29] Within *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collége de France 1974-1975* (New York: Macmillan, 2004).

and it will become one of the basic dimensions of social normalization."[30] Here, a connection is

made to the idea that biopolitics includes racist attempts to "cleanse" a population of certain

ethnicities and later in the lectures he does, in fact, cite the Third Reich as the ultimate example

of biopower.

As Foucault moves on with his analysis, however, Weheliye begins to see flaws within

his argument. For example, Foucault believes that modern racism, especially within Europe, is a

byproduct of colonization and colonial genocide, essentially something that was "brought home"

when colonizers returned to their home countries. Weheliye also has an issue with Foucault

labeling the Third Reich specifically as the ultimate example of biopolitics in action.

> Moreover, given Foucault's principal point about the overall pervasiveness of
> biopolitics in Europe, why must its most severe incarnation bear the heavy burden
> of paradigmatic exemplariness, just as it does in Agamben? Why not simply
> examine the biopolitics of Nazi racism qua Nazi racism? Why must this form of
> racism necessarily figure as the apex in the telos of modern racializing
> assemblages?[31]

In a way, these two flaws go hand-in-hand, as a shaky understanding of racism begets a specific

example being acknowledged as the "one major instance" in which it has been enveloped within

the biopolitical. This is, by and large, the extent of Foucault's analysis of racism in relation to

biopolitics, which Weheliye labels as insufficient and misunderstood at best. In fact, Weheliye

actually compares Foucault's understanding of colonialism and race to Arendt, which (especially

given the last section) is a damning statement itself.

> As a result, colonization unavoidably reflects the racializing assemblages interior
> to Europe, while techniques that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite-
> humans, and nonhumans developed in the colonies inflect those at home, and

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[30] Michel Foucault, *Society Must be Defended: Lectures at the Collége de France 1975-1976* (New York: Macmillian, 2003), 60.

[31] Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 59.

which Foucault, following Hannah Arendt, terms the *boomerang-effect* of colonialism.[32]

Foucault at least mentions race and colonialism in relation to biopolitics, whereas Agamben refuses to reference either topic at all. This is especially strange, given that his notion of bare life is one that is particularly relevant when it comes to many of the experiences the Black community has endured. Agamben's work concerning bare life starts with his text *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, which further develops Foucault's notion of biopolitics. Agamben explains this progression in the following passage,

> Foucault's death kept him from showing how he would have developed the concept and study of biopolitics. In any case, however, the entry of *zoē* into the sphere of the *polis*—the politicization of bare life as such—constitutes the decisive event of modernity and signals a radical transformation of the political-philosophical categories of classical thought. It is even likely that if politics today seems to be passing through a lasting eclipse, this is because politics has failed to reckon with this foundational event of modernity. The "enigmas" (Furet, L'Allemagne nazi, p. 7) that our century has proposed to historical reason and that remain with us (Nazism is only the most disquieting among them) will be solved only on the terrain—biopolitics—on which they were formed.[33]

For Agamben, *zoē* is "liveness" itself and when it is brought into the fold of the political, then it has the capacity to embody the furthest extent of bare life (meaning those who are on the outermost margins of society and are struggling to survive). The state has the biopower necessary to relegate certain individuals and groups of people to this category. Agamben contrasts bare life and *zoē* with *bios*—those who are deemed politically important and worthy of recognition. Here, Agamben is combining ancient Greek philosophy with Foucault, which on the surface may not seem as if it warrants a conversation about antiblackness, but the examples that

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[32] Ibid, 62.

[33] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 4.

Agamben chooses to illustrate his framework demonstrate that his work does have an intimate connection with race, as well as the fact that he does have a certain bias.

As most philosophers who are included within the canon of critical theory are European, it is not surprising that many of them reference the Holocaust when theorizing violence. Where this often becomes an issue (especially from a historian's perspective) is when the Holocaust is invoked as the ultimate example of violence and genocide. This is not to say that the Holocaust was not incredibly violent and deeply traumatic for the Jewish people, but rather that labeling it as the main example of violence in modernity is shortsighted, especially as it is not even the only example of genocide that has occurred within Europe in the last century. Scholar Parisa Vaziri puts it much more eloquently,

> I conclude that the example of the Holocaust in postwar philosophy, read against contemporary interrogations of its protected status, shows the regressive, yet modern, character of the differend's exemplarity. Exemplarity under the differend's framework, I suggest, is regressive, on the one hand, because there is always another example more prior and more exemplary than the last, a trail of invisible, inarticulable "situations," without the means at their disposal to become historical events, to become facts—but even, perhaps, to provoke or involve feeling, that is, even to provoke pain or denial.[34]

Vaziri rightly points out that labeling one historical event as an outlier or "the origin of modern violence," is violent in and of itself because it often excludes the experiences of others. There is no one historical event that can account for how all violence functions, as world history is diverse and nuanced, but critical theorists tend to utilize historical examples from their own personal knowledge and experiences. Critical theorists also do not typically witness how the archive limits what we do and do not consider to be "historical events," something that Vaziri

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[34] Parisa Vaziri, "False Differends: Racial Slavery and the Genocidal Example," *Philosophy Today*, (2022): 3.

notes within her article. Weheliye himself explains how one can analyze American chattel

slavery in relation to bare life, allowing for a new analysis of bare life itself,

> Racial slavery, by virtue of spanning a much greater historical period than the
> Shoah, and, more importantly, by not seeming as great an abnormality both in its
> historical context and in the way it is retroactively narrativized, reveals the
> manifold modes in which extreme brutality and directed killing frequently and
> peacefully coexist with other forms of coercion and noncoercion within the scope
> of the normal juridico-political order. This is what invents the homo sacer as
> homo sacer, for bare life must be measured against something, otherwise it just
> appears as life; life stripped of its bareness, as it were. Though murdering slaves
> was punishable by law in many U.S. states, usually these edicts were not
> enforced, and the master could kill slaves with impunity since they were
> categorized as property. Consequently, slavery conjures a different form of bare
> life than the concentration camp, since the more prevalent version of finitude in
> this context was what Orlando Patterson has referred to as "social death," the
> purging of all citizenship rights from slaves save their mere life.[35]

Therefore, a key part of Weheliye's critique rests on the fact that Agamben both refuses to

acknowledge that race could play a part in his framework and that his most prominent example

of bare life—the Muselmann—very much has to do with race.

Within *The Remnants of Auschwitz*, Agamben labels the Muselmann as the most

prominent example of *zoē*. The Muselmanner were a group of people within the Nazi

concentration camps that were so malnourished and psychologically crippled that they appeared

to be living corpses. Weheliye describes them as such,

> Due to extreme emaciation, often accompanied by the disappearance of muscle
> tissue and brittle bones, the Muselmänner could no longer control basic human
> functions such as the discharge of feces and urine and the mechanics of walking,
> which they did by lifting their legs with their arms, or they performed
> "mechanical movements without purpose," leading the other inmates and later
> commentators to view becoming-Muselmann as a state of extreme passivity.
> Observers portray Muselmänner as apathetic, withdrawn, animal like, not-quite-
> human, unintelligible.[36]

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[35] Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 37-38.
[36] Ibid, 53.

Weheliye notes that the term "Muselmann" is derived from the Arabic word for someone who follows Islam: *Muslim*. The reason for this is because those who were Muselmann within the camps often wore blankets around their heads and bodies to keep warm, as they suffered from being severely malnourished. The fact that the label itself is rooted in a certain racial stereotype is not mentioned by Agamben.

Weheliye is especially critical of Agamben's comment that the Muselmann is located in such an extreme position in relation to bare life that they transcend race. This is puzzling for two reasons: the first is that the precedent for the Muselmann existing within Nazi concentration camps is by and large a racial one, the second being that even the term *Muselmann* comes from a racial term. Given this, one would think that Agamben's framework could be enhanced by a number of historical examples that have to do with racism, including the Middle Passage and Indigenous genocide in the Americas. But Weheliye argues that these facts are overlooked by Agamben because he wanted to use the example of the Muselmann to push for the acknowledgement of a radical post-Holocaust ethics. Like many theorists, although Agamben is utilizing an example with a very specific historical context, he attempts to make it into a purely theoretical illustration so that it can be universalized. This is ultimately why Agamben eschews incorporating a discussion of race into his framework, even though it would be more than appropriate to do so.

Where Foucault and Agamben ignore the way that an analysis of race and antiblack violence could be incorporated into their theoretical frameworks, this next section will detail how contemporary critical theorists often have the opposite problem: they include an analysis of antiblackness within a framework that has nothing to do with it. For the sake of brevity, this section will specifically look at how authors within critical theory misuse Afropessimism, a

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Black framework which specifically has no interest being co-opted by other theories of oppression. Afropessimism is a meta-theory that interrogates the logic behind Marxism, feminism, postcolonialism, and queer theory, and it does so in a way that prioritizes the Black experience and perspective.[37] The main authors within Afropessimism (Frank B. Wilderson III and Jared Sexton) have no interest in their work being co-opted by non-Black authors that work within these other frameworks. Wilderson has stated as much in interviews,

> I grieve over it. Sometimes, I try not to know to get my own work done. As a general rule, it is difficult for Black people to make anything and to hold onto it for more than thirty seconds before the world takes it for its own purposes. Afropessimism is going the way of jazz, where it will be for everyone else. Or hip-hop. Patrice Douglass asked me, how do we keep Afropessimism for Blacks? And I said, it's like our bodies, we can't. What it becomes is something to animate someone else's projects, and then we'll be dispossessed of Being. That doesn't mean I'm not writing, but I don't know what to do about it. It's akin to lynching as David Marriott describes. The lynched body becomes something through which community can build because it is the not quite human thing to which Humans can ultimately compare themselves.[38]

Here, Wilderson was answering a question specifically about how non-Black scholars engage with Black death and Afropessimism within their work, though this section will be more focused on the co-optation of Afropessimism itself.

This section will analyze three articles, all of which fall into different categories. The first, "The Ontology of the Couple, or, What Queer Theory Knows about Numbers," correctly names scholars working within Afropessimism, but equates the framework with an analysis of negativity within queer theory. The second article, Lee Edelman's, "Queerness, Afro-Pessimism, and the Return of the Aesthetic," references Afropessimism in the title, scarcely references it in the paper, and then analogizes queerness and Blackness in the conclusion. The last paper, "Afro-

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[37] For a more detailed definition and explanation of Afropessimism, please refer to chapter three.

[38] Tiffany Lethabo King, Jenell Navarro, and Andrea Smith, *Otherwise Worlds: Against Settler-Colonialism and Anti-Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 56.

Pessimism with Žižek," represents the way in which most non-Black critical theorists interact with Afropessimism: interrogating it alongside another framework that they are more invested in in the first place.

What all three of these articles share (besides their mishandling of Afropessimism) is the common assumption in the humanities that all theoretical frameworks are on equal footing and can easily be compared. This is not to condemn interdisciplinary work, rather, it is to recognize that one must have a thorough understanding of each given framework if one is attempting to compare any two. This is not a problem unique to Afropessimism, though the fact that several of these articles scarcely mention (or incorrectly mention) the logic of Afropessimism is a particular issue with antiblackness. That Afropessimism seems "popular" enough to use within these articles, yet for the most part no effort has been made to understand it in the first place, is telling.

The first article, "The Ontology of the Couple, or, What Queer Theory Knows about Numbers," asks what role numbers play within queer theory. This is a perfectly fair topic to theorize within the realm of queer theory, but the issue arises when (after their introduction where they introduce Lee Edelman's work involving the subject) the authors attempt to evaluate the queer position ontologically, lifting their understanding of ontology directly from Afropessimism,

> Recent Afro-pessimist scholarship has likewise turned to the ontological in order to reveal the violent ways that nonbeing is projected onto the Other in order for relationality itself to cohere…Wilderson, along with Jared Sexton and various other scholars working at the intersection of African American and queer studies, have demonstrated how blackness is fundamentally excluded from relational frameworks that presume the fundamental humanity of their terms.[39]

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[39] S. Pearl Brilmyer, Filippo Trentin, and Zairong Xiang, "The Ontology of the Couple, or, What Queer Theory Knows about Numbers," *GLQ* 25, no. 2, (2019): 224.

The first issue with the above passage is that it takes the framework of Afropessimism and generalizes it; Afropessimism does not investigate how "nonbeing is projected onto the Other," rather it maps how the Black subject in particular is relegated to a non-human status in the eyes of non-Black people. Also, Wilderson and Sexton do not work "at the intersection of African American and queer studies," as their work has little to do with queer studies at all. Wilderson would easily say that queer theory is simply one of the many frameworks that Afropessimism interrogates because of its biased assumptions. This is, essentially, all the authors have to say about Afropessimism within their article, even though they use an understanding of ontology that is formulated by Afropessimism.

What the authors of this article do is overlap Edelman's work on queer negativity with Afropessimism, two frameworks and modes of thought which are similar only in that they focus on the "negative." Furthermore, these authors also attest that the queer position, like Blackness within Afropessimism, is a "(non)ontological position," an analogy that Wilderson directly disagrees with in his own work. Fellow Afropessimist Calvin Warren has astutely commented on this comparison,

> The "Black Queer" does not and cannot exist. This is an ethical statement about the tension between what Frank Wilderson would call "an experience of unfreedom" (Queerness) and a structural position of non-ontology (Blackness). This term "non-ontology" suggests a negative axis of being—being not predicated on mere appearance in the phenomenal real (Fanon)—ontology's necessary exclusion. The "black queer" throws into sharper relief a deep problem between ontology, freedom, and ethics.[40]

Warren correctly identifies the fact that the Black queer subject will always be treated Black first, as queerness is simply another axis of oppression that is on top of that ontological foundation. This is part of the reason why there has not been extensive work done on

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[40] Calvin Warren, "Onticide: Afropessimism, Queer Theory, and Ethics," *Ill Will Editions*, (2014): 6.

Afropessimism and queerness (outside of the Warren article quoted above). More recent

Afropessimist scholarship tends to be interested in psychoanalysis and the unconscious (as

evidenced by David Mariott's most recent book[41] and the work of Selamawit D. Terrefe[42]),

rather than queerness.

The second article, Lee Edelman's, "Queerness, Afropessimism, and the Return of the

Aesthetic," incorporates Afropessimism even less than the first. Although Edelman's article

references Afropessimism directly in the title (whereas the first article does not), ironically the

first article makes more of an attempt to combine Edelman's previous work on "queer

negativity" and Afropessimism. The bulk of Edelman's article summarizes the various thoughts

of critical theorists who have written about aesthetics and critiques how they overlook negative

potentials. Early on in the article, Edelman references Fred Moten, a scholar who has done great

work within Black Studies on aesthetics, poetry, and literature, but Moten is not an

Afropessimist. It is true that Moten's work is occasionally referenced by those who work within

Afropessimism, but his scholarship is notably different from Afropessimism itself. Later on in

the article, Edelman even states as much, "Fred Moten, who places himself "in apposition" to

Afropessimism…,"[43] yet Moten is the theorist who is used the most when Edelman mentions

Black Studies. Wilderson and Sexton are mentioned briefly, but only to compare their statements

on "Blackness as slaveness" and social death to queerness and the queer social position; this

being the fundamental issue with the article. Edelman is critiquing a certain understanding of

aesthetics for who it leaves out, but positions women, queer people, and the Black subject as if

they are all on the same footing,

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[41] David S. Marriott, *Lacan Noir: Lacan and Afro-pessimism* (London: Palgrave Macmillian, 2021).

[42] Selamawit D. Terrefe, *Impossible Blackness: Violence and the Psychic Life of Slavery* (Forthcoming).

[43] Lee Edelman, "Queerness, Afro-Pessimism, and the Return of the Aesthetic," *Real* 35, (2019): 20.

The element of irredeemability inseparable from the category of obscenity—
which never generates an aesthetic since any ascription of aesthetic value
automatically disqualifies it as obscene—aligns it with the social death imposed
on those made to figure the nothingness of ontological negation that inheres in
queerness, blackness, ab-sens, or any of the myriad names for the void that
disturbs the ethics, which is always also an aesthetics, of collectivity…Queerness,
blackness, sex, and ab-sens, as names for the primal subtraction that renders
totality not-all, oppose to the aesthetic's ethics of desire (which is the desire for
aesthetic unity).[44]

If Edelman were to make this argument using a different framework from Black Studies (and

actually engaged with its scholars), then this claim might not be so much of an issue. But

Edelman is utilizing the one framework that explicitly says that there is no way to analogize

antiblackness with any other form of oppression (including queerness). It is also short-sighted to

attempt to utilize a body of thought just because it positions things negatively or is theorizing a

lack, especially when one does not want to engage with the specifics of how both are analyzed. It

is also insulting to the scholars within Afropessimism to use their work openly and have such a

limited understanding of it.

The last article that will be analyzed is entitled, "Afro-Pessimism with Žižek," which,

from the title alone, makes one think that this will be another work that compares Afropessimism

to unrelated work within critical theory. Although this article easily shows the greatest

understanding of Afropessimism out of all three, it still falls into that category. Unlike the

previous two articles, author Zahi Zalloua spends the first four and a half pages accurately

outlining what Afropessimism is, the scholars involved, and the main claims that it makes.

Where Zalloua falters coincides with the introduction of Žižek into his argument, specifically

Žižek's comments on hopelessness and negativity, and his subsequent introduction of the central

question of the article,

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[44] Ibid, 20-21.

A global anti-racist struggle cannot do away with solidarity; it cannot glibly dismiss coalition-building endeavors as "an anti-Black configuration, social formation," as Wilderson does (Wilderson, "Irreconcilable"). If Afro-Pessimism is fully justified in resisting all-too-convenient cross-racial coalitions, it must also open a space for different forms of solidarity beyond the politics of recognition and identarian coalitional movements…Still, does this mean that, for Afro-Pessimists, blacks are beyond solidarity with non-blacks, let alone whites? This article pursues this question, asking whether we need to shift the very foundations on which we conceive and build solidarity and anti-racist politics.[45]

To be fair to Zalloua, this very question is the one that is asked the most in response to Afropessimism, especially by non-Black minority groups. At the same time, this is a question that Wilderson has addressed multiple times himself, especially within his latest book,

The important things we need to understand are the ways non-Black people of color can crowd out discussions of a Black grammar of suffering by insisting that the coalition needs to focus on what we all have in common. It is true that we all suffer from police aggression; that we all suffer from capitalist domination. But 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.'*[46]

Wilderson in particular is someone who has engaged in activism and coalition-building for the majority of his life and he has never claimed that this is something that people need to stop doing, rather (as evidenced by the above passage) he urges activists to be more aware of how multiracial coalitions often look past the particular concerns of their Black members, as well as the position of those Black members within society. What Wilderson also analyzes though, is the tendency of academics from other minority groups to quickly become incensed when this is brought up, which is telling. In *Afropessimism*, Wilderson recounts how well activists within Denmark thought through this very issue and contrasts it with the hostile reception of it in an

[45] Zahi Zalloua, "Afro-Pessimism with Žižek," *Intertexts* 23, (2019): 49.
[46] Frank B. Wilderson III, *Afropessimism* (New York, NY: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2020), 171.

academic conference in Berlin, where both white and non-white academics immediately felt

threatened by Wilderson's claims,

> Professor Li-ling Chen took issue with Asians being cast as the junior partners of
> White civil society. She did not take issue, however, in the form of an
> engagement with and/or critique of my analysis. She simply said how "mad" it all
> made her; as though the most important thing to consider was how non-Blacks
> felt when critiqued rather than the material impact on Black lives that necessitated
> the critique to begin with. (Mobs might ask you if you really raped that woman or
> robbed that man as they string you up but rarely do they quiet down and wait for
> an answer.) I felt like I'd been cast as the facilitator of a group therapy session
> and I had asked the wrong question (or the right question), which sparked a chain
> reaction. I had, however, both unleashed this chain reaction and become the
> repository of its smoldering transference.[47]

This is not to say that there is simply no room to critique the claims of Afropessimism,

but rather that it is telling that in an academic context, the critiques that so often get levied at it

are born out of the personal discomfort of the author. Within Zalloua's article, this appears to be

exactly what is taking place. Rather than comparing and contrasting Žižek's work with

Afropessimism (two frameworks that have little to do with one another anyway), the majority of

Zalloua's article is actually a defense of how the Palestinian people in particular are not, as

Wilderson states, "junior members of civil society," and that they share the same struggle as the

Black subject.

> Needless to say, Wilderson simplifies a great deal here. On one hand, there is an
> imputation of Palestinian motives that veers on Orientalism (Palestinians are
> figured as the embodiment of "Arab psychic life") and pure speculation (he
> assumes an impending Palestinian betrayal whereas the long history of black–
> Palestinian solidarity belies that belief), and, on the other, there is the unwarranted
> assumption that what Palestinians want is a return to the same by way of the
> ideological path of the nation-state.[48]

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[47] Ibid, 177.

[48] Zahi Zalloua, "Afro-Pessimism with Žižek," *Intertexts* 23, (2019): 54.

What Zalloua really misses is that Afropessimism is, and never was, about Palestinians in the first place, yet academics consistently miss that Afropessimism is about centering Black suffering and the Black experience. It has no interest in the comparison or critique that Zalloua is making, but other minority academics consistently have an issue with not being included in it. At the end of the day, this immediate need for inclusion signals that Wilderson is correct in his analysis, where Black people (and their scholarship) quickly becomes a catalyst for non-Black academics to air their personal grievances, when it has nothing to do with them in the first place. Wilderson has previously stated that he believes Palestinians suffer an enormous amount of violence at the hands of the Israeli state and that he agrees that they should be liberated, but Zalloua feels that Wilderson needs to go a step further and include Palestinians in a framework that is not about them. This also proves Wilderson's assertion correct, that it is almost impossible for scholarship which is made by Black scholars for Black people to stay within that circle. It is frightening how quickly non-Black academics seek to co-opt and include themselves within Black scholarship.

In conclusion, this chapter sought to trace the ways in which non-Black critical theorists have consistently missed the mark when it comes to theorizing antiblack violence. Across Hannah Arendt's work, one can see how her own antiblackness blinded her from being able to accurately discuss the mechanics of antiblack violence, both within the context of the United States as well as the African colony. In Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben's scholarship concerning biopolitics, both consistently ignore the way in which referencing antiblackness could provide relevant examples and be a helpful addition to their theoretical work. Finally, examining a more contemporary phenomenon, the last section of this chapter was dedicated to how modern critical theorists often misunderstand Afropessimism and attempt to compare it with

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other theoretical frameworks which have nothing to do with it. Overall, this chapter has recorded

a tendency of critical theorists to both misunderstand antiblackness over time as well as

perpetuate antiblackness themselves in various ways.

Chapter 2: The Hordes, the Stink, the Swarming, the Seething, and the Gesticulations: Tracing the Violent Legacy of Black Animality

> Sometimes this Manichaeanism reaches its logical conclusion and dehumanizes the colonized subject. In plain talk, he is reduced to the state of an animal. And consequently, when the colonist speaks of the colonized he uses zoological terms. Allusion is made to the slithery movements of the yellow race, the odors from the 'native' quarters, to the hordes, the stink, the swarming, the seething, and the gesticulations. In his endeavors at description and finding the right word, the colonist refers constantly to the bestiary.
>
> — Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*

Some of the most productive and fascinating scholarship that has emerged out of contemporary Black Studies has wrestled with the question of what constitutes the human and how the concept itself can be either reshaped or deconstructed. Examples include the formative work of Sylvia Wynter, the Afropessimist analysis offered by Frank B. Wilderson III, and the scholarship within animal studies that is concerned with antiblackness[49]. This paper will be taking up ideas from the third group and focusing on the connections between the violence that was enacted on Africans through colonization and the justification for that violence in the minds of colonizers by overlapping Blackness with animality. As Africa is an entire continent that is made up of various countries and cultures, while there are coinciding processes within the history of African colonization as a whole, for the sake of the argument this chapter will be outlining how Zimbabwe (formerly known as Rhodesia) specifically endured the material effects of colonization. The first section of this chapter will contextualize the analysis that will be used regarding the idea of Black animality and outline the intellectual history of Black animality in

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[49] Including the work from authors such as Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, Claire Jean Kim, Breeze Harper, and Che Gossett.

European and American circles. The second section will investigate the way that the colonizers of Zimbabwe thought about Black animality and evaluate how Frantz Fanon deconstructs the idea of Black animality across his body of work, as well as scrutinize where there is room to critique his humanism.

As it is clear from the introduction, there is a lot of ground that is being covered through this chapter, so it is important that the concept of Black animality itself is properly defined. Here, it is essential to consult the work of Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, whose essay "Animality and Blackness" provides clarity,

> Within the structure of much thought on race there is an implicit assumption that the recognition of one as a human being will protect one from (or acts as an insurance policy against) ontologizing violence. Departing from a melancholic attachment to such an ideal, I argue that the violence and terror scholars describe is endemic to the recognition of humanity itself—when that humanity is cast as black. A recognition of black humanity, demonstrated across these pages, is not denied or excluded but weaponized by a conception of 'the human' foundationally organized by the idea of a racial telos. For Wynter, the Negro is not so much excluded from the category Man and its overrepresentation of humanity but foundational to it as its antipodal figure, as the nadir of Man.[50]

Jackson (rightly) stresses that there is not simply a dichotomy between the human and the animal when it comes to Black animality, rather the two are entangled, with animality being projected onto the humanity of the Black subject. Although the history of violence that has been endured by the Black subject may lead one to think that they have been viewed simply as an animal by the white subject/colonizer, the libidinal work at play here is much more complicated. This is true both in terms of the European colonist who was working to expand their settlement in Rhodesia in the early 20th century, as well as the European intellectual[51] who had never set foot in Africa who automatically placed the Black subject at the bottom of their "hierarchy of the

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[50] Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, "Animality and Blackness," *Posthumanism in Art and Science: A Reader*, (2021): 57.

[51] Such as Immanuel Kant, see David Baumeister, "Black Animality from Kant to Fanon," *Theory & Event* 24, no. 4 (2021).

races". The two contexts are wildly different, yet there is truth to the universality of the white subject/colonizer believing that, "The Black mind is a human-animal mind, the Black body a human-animal body—living but not yet living and at the same time rational."[52] That last part is key because in a colonial context this was the justification for having Africans perform labor as servants and maids within the colonizer's household. The Black subject was more "rational" than the animal, but allegedly not rational enough to be viewed as an equal with the white subject/colonizer, so they could "handle" the labor that nobody else in the colony wanted to do. At the same time, their perceived animality meant that they could "withstand" a massive workload or terrible labor conditions (often both). Any African who resisted colonization (through guerilla warfare tactics or otherwise) was viewed by the white subject/colonizer as "succumbing" to the baser, more animal side of their "nature".

This demonstrates the unconscious logic of Black animality in the white subject/colonizer, but one cannot trace the legacy of Black animality in a colonial context without understanding its intellectual history outside of the colony. The colonization of Africa directly led to the creation of the racist stereotype of the Black subject being compared to a "monkey" or "gorilla" in both Europe and the United States. As certain apes (such as gorillas) were first encountered by Europeans during the colonization of Africa, European biologists who were eager to catalog the "hierarchy of the races" rushed to posit that Black people were only a half-step above these apes, evolutionarily speaking.[53]

One cannot begin to trace the intellectual history of Black animality in these philosophical and scientific circles without acknowledging the effect of Enlightenment thinking.

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[52] Ibid, 959.

[53] Sujit Sivasundaram, "Imperial Transgressions: The Animal and Human in the Idea of Race," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 35, no. 1 (2015): 160.

Although it is often not directly acknowledged, the ultimate goal (and success) of the Western

Enlightenment project was to define the human. The effect of this was to degrade those

categorized as less than human because, "Even as it proposes inclusivity, liberal universalism

effects principles of inclusion and exclusion; in the very claim to define humanity, as a species or

as a condition, its gestures of definition divide the human and the nonhuman, to classify the

normative and pathologize deviance."[54] European empire itself progressed through declaring

what was "normative,"[55] and this is what led to the meticulous hobby of skull collecting among

scientists.

It is important to acknowledge that the idea of the "hierarchy of the races" originates with

one of the foremost thinkers of the Enlightenment, Immanuel Kant.[56] Although Kant wrote about

a wide variety of philosophical topics (and is most commonly known for his work on moral

universalism) his interest in anthropology led him to write his 1775 essay, "Of the Different

Races of Human Beings," which is one of the earliest known attempts to categorize humans on

the basis of race. Unsurprisingly, Kant finds fault with the "American Indian" and "Negro" races

because both seem to be beholden to the more "irrational" animal side of their nature.[57] Typical

for Enlightenment philosophy, Kant believed that human nature was made up of both a rational,

aspirational side and an irrational animalistic part, and that in order to "perfect" humanity, the

goal should be to "do violence" to the animal part of human nature.[58] Although Kant was writing

almost 50 years before skull collecting became a hobby within the European-American scientific

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[54] Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 6.

[55] Sujit Sivasundaram, "Imperial Transgressions: The Animal and Human in the Idea of Race," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 35, no. 1 (2015): 156.

[56] David Baumeister, "Black Animality from Kant to Fanon," *Theory & Event* 24, no. 4 (2021), 953-954.

[57] Ibid, 955.

[58] Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology Friedländer*, trans. G. Felicitas Munzel, in *Lectures on Anthropology*, eds. Allen W. Wood and Robert B. Louden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 217–18.

community, the basic outline of his argument is present within nearly all of the accounts of the major figures who attempted to categorize humanity based on skull measurements. This speaks to his impact on European thought; the often cyclical nature of racist logics, and the obsessive drive of Enlightenment scholars to position themselves at the top of their self-imposed human hierarchy.[59]

The legacy of Black animality and its tropes rest not only on Enlightenment philosophy, but also the history of scientific racism. Although the majority of modern scientists have discredited this popular field of study from the 19th century, the ideas and stereotypes that originated within it still exist within the minds of white supremacists and the white imaginary at large. This author understands that the following section has deeply unsettling examples and racist images, though here they are being deconstructed in order to trace the origins of both Black animality and patterns within the white unconscious. Neither are being used lightly. The historical examples that are referenced here are being used to ground the theoretical idea of Black animality and how it has changed over time.

Skull collectors and those who advocated for a polygenist theory of evolution worked to position the Black subject as completely separate from the rational enlightened human. Tracing this will help clarify how the colonization of Africa was an event that occurred simultaneously to the Black subject being placed at the bottom of the "hierarchy of the races" (and therefore was subjected to comparisons with apes). Although not all of the diagrams on the hierarchy of the "races" one finds from the 19th century have the Black subject at the *very* bottom (occasionally it is an indigenous person), it is clear from the writings that go along with these diagrams that the

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[59] For this author, Kant's thought is used as a prominent epistemological model in this particular context (i.e. European philosophical and scientific circles), though one could also refer to Carl Linneas and Georges-Louis Leclerc as naturalists in the 1750s who were making similar claims.

authors tend to regard both similarly. Skull collecting was a hobby of both European and

American men who were involved in the scientific community in the 19th century; two examples

of men with the largest collections include James De Ville of London (who in 1830 had around

1800 human skulls)[60] and American proslavery advocate Samuel George Morton, who had

around 1000 skulls at the time of his death in 1851.[61]

Men who had human skull collections also often collected the skulls and skeletons of

animals across the world in order to compare the two. As this was the golden age of imperialism,

collectors were not limited in terms of where they could obtain more skulls for their collection,

though the means of how they acquired them often paralleled the deeply violent antiblack

narratives that they themselves spread,

> In the 1840s, a herpetologist working in Liberia sent Morton heads of African
> tribal leaders who led a bloody resistance to settlement on their lands by former
> American slaves. He had removed the rotting heads from the stakes where they
> had been posted to frighten others and had sent them to Philadelphia, where
> Morton cataloged them as specimens of their tribes.[62]

This specific instance highlights the overlapping of colonization and antiblackness that this

section looks to investigate, as white supremacy gave rise to the notion that the Black subject is

the same no matter the context. This is why during this time period, even the legendary signer of

the Emancipation Proclamation, Abraham Lincoln, believed that Black Americans should

"return" to Africa so they would not be an issue for white colonizers in America. In fact, the day

before he signed that document, he signed a contract to use federal funds to relocate 5000 former

slaves to a small island off the coast of Haiti (an experiment which was a resounding failure).

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[60] Sujit Sivasundaram, "Imperial Transgressions: The Animal and Human in the Idea of Race," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 35, no. 1 (2015): 158.

[61] Ann Fabian, *The Skull Collectors: Race, Science, and America's Unburied Dead* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 1.

[62] Ibid, 4.

Yet the white supremacist notion that all Black people were a monolith completely ignored the inherent differences between Black Americans who were suffering from slavery and Africans who were suffering from colonization (an idea that lives on to this very day)[63], but in this case a white man was still able to profit in the end through obtaining the skulls of Black people.

In terms of these collectors attempting to categorize the races based on phrenology, it is best to start in the American context with Samuel George Morton himself. Although skull collecting was also a hobby in Europe, the most passionate collectors were often either white colonizers themselves[64] or Americans who were looking to further their claims about the "inherent" differences between the races (often to justify slavery). Morton did not become a recognized figure in the scientific community simply because of his large collection, instead his fame came about through his 1839 book, *Crania Americana. Crania Americana* is known today as being a foundational text within the history of scientific racism, but at the time it was largely popular because of the detailed lithographic drawings of the skulls in Morton's collection. But Morton's scientific methods reveal his prejudices,

> He sorted his skulls into racial groups and then measured them. Morton's skulls launched American work in craniology and mapped out the contours of a distinctive American inquiry that involved thinking about race, particularly the racial characteristics of Africans, and collecting dead bodies, particularly the bodies of Native Americans. He subscribed to the widely held belief that there were five races—the Caucasian, the Mongolian, the American, the Malay, and the Ethiopian—but then concluded that each race represented a different species created for one of the earth's continents, an idea that set him at odds with clergymen and believers who were certain that all men were the children of Adam.[65]

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[63] Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).

[64] Such as Major General Horatio Gordon Robley, who, after fighting in the New Zealand wars, collected tattooed Māori skulls, as seen in Sujit Sivasundaram, "Imperial Transgressions: The Animal and Human in the Idea of Race," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 35, no. 1 (2015): 163-164.

[65] Ann Fabian, *The Skull Collectors: Race, Science, and America's Unburied Dead* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 1.

Morton's research on the skull size of each race came to the unsurprising conclusion that

Caucasian skulls were the largest, and therefore, represented the most intelligent out of all the

races.[66]

Within *Crania Americana*, Morton states that the Black subject's intelligence is "the

lowest grade of humanity", and describes them as such,

> Characterized by a black complexion, and black, wooly hair; the eyes are large
> and prominent, the nose broad and flat, the lips thick, and the mouth wide: the
> head is long and narrow, the forehead low, the cheek-bones prominent, the jaws
> protruding, and the chin small. In disposition the negro is joyous and indolent.[67]

This description is fairly standard for these accounts which attempt to evaluate racial differences,

but is also reminiscent of the "Sambo" archetype[68], which was used to defend slavery. This

description also conjures the same dynamics inherent in the slave auction; one can imagine

Morton examining a slave through this passage and proclaiming that their features were more

animal than human. There is also a connection to this scenario that is embedded within the last

line of the passage, that being the fraught notion that the Black subject had a unique capacity for

joy in terrible circumstances, while also needing to be disciplined harshly because of their

inherent laziness. This dynamic, which was and still is a key part of the white fantasy regarding

slavery, renders the slave an object devoid of agency, an important point made by Saidiya

Hartman in her brilliant work, *Scenes of Subjection*,

> I contend that these scenes of enjoyment provide an opportunity for white self-
> reflection, or, more broadly speaking, the elasticity of blackness enables its
> deployment as a vehicle for exploring the human condition, although, ironically,

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[66] Ibid, 2.

[67] Samuel George Morton, *Crania Americana* (John Pennington, 1839), 3.

[68] "(Uncle) Tom's chained and beaten body proclaimed his saintliness; Zoe's self-immolation conveyed her great love and humility. Meanwhile, black characters bearing a striking resemblance to Zip Coon, Jim Crow, and Coal Black Rose, the bumbling, loyal, and childish Sambos and wenches of minstrel fare, provided the comic b(l)ackdrop of virtue's triumph." Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 28.

these musings are utterly indifferent to the violated condition of the vessel of song.[69]

Unsurprisingly, *Crania Americana* was a very popular book not just abroad in Europe, but also with American slave owners and abolitionists alike. While southern plantation owners would use the text to justify the institution of slavery, abolitionists applauded it because proving the "Sambo" archetype to be true meant that slaves would not pose a threat to white society if set free.[70] This is reiterated in other accounts of scientific racism in this period,

> We must first recognize the cultural milieu of a society whose leaders and intellectuals did not doubt the propriety of racial ranking—with Indians below whites, and blacks below everybody else. Under this universal umbrella, arguments did not contrast equality with inequality. One group—we might call them "hard-liners"—held that blacks were inferior and that their biological status justified enslavement and colonization. Another group—the "soft-liners," if you will—agreed that blacks were inferior, but held that a people's right to freedom did not depend on their level of intelligence. "Whatever be their degree of talents," wrote Thomas Jefferson, "it is no measure of their rights."[71]

This cultural setting was a backdrop for many within the American scientific community (Morton included) to develop a pre-evolutionary theory known as polygenism. Polygenism was the idea that instead of sharing one common ancestor, different human beings evolved simultaneously, which then accounted for all of the different races of mankind. Darwin himself did not believe in polygenism and dismissed the work of Morton and his contemporaries, but not all European scientists shared his opinion. For example, Louis Agassiz, a Swiss naturalist with a famous reputation in Europe, moved to the United States in the 1840s and swiftly confessed a newfound belief in polygenism after his first encounter with a Black person. Agassiz's personal letter to his mother about the incident reads as such,

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[69] Ibid, 34.

[70] James Poskett, "Crania Americana—the most important book in the history of scientific racism," *Cambridge University*, YouTube, accessed March 25, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mMVzPCOut1w

[71] Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 63.

It was in Philadelphia that I first found myself in prolonged contact with negroes; all the domestics in my hotel were men of color. I can scarcely express to you the painful impression that I received, especially since the feeling that they inspired in me is contrary to all our ideas about the confraternity of the human type and the unique origin of our species. But truth before all. Nevertheless, I experienced pity at the sight of this degraded and degenerate race, and their lot inspired compassion in me in thinking that they are really men. Nonetheless, it is impossible for me to reprocess the feeling that they are not of the same blood as us. In seeing their black faces with their thick lips and grimacing teeth, the wool on their head, their bent knees, their elongated hands, their large curved nails, and especially the livid color of the palms of their hands, I could not take my eyes off their face in order to tell them to stay far away.[72]

During this period, when white northerners would encounter mistreated or enslaved Black people, often they expressed sympathy for them when writing to family members of the encounter, yet Agassiz only expresses horror and disdain.[73] It is telling that the single motivating factor that caused Agassiz to endorse polygenism was the existence of overworked Black men at his hotel. Once again, like Morton before him, one sees Agassiz provide a horrifically racist description of the Black people in his vicinity and unconsciously places himself in the position of power over them, similar to a potential white buyer examining a slave on the auction block.

After Morton's death, those who went on to replace him in the American scientific community—surgeon Josiah Nott and self-styled Egyptologist George Gliddon—also advocated for polygenism. In 1854 they published *Types of Mankind*, which was a continuation of Morton's work (although it was much longer and disorganized than *Crania Americana*, it was a popular book at the time).[74] Figure 1, which is an illustration from *Types of Mankind*, depicts how polygenism was conceived within the minds of these two authors. It is clear that there is an

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[72] Louis Agassiz to his mother, December 1846, quoted in Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 76-77.

[73] Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

[74] Robert A. Smith, "Types of Mankind: Polygenism and Scientific Racism in the 19th Century United States Scientific Community," *Pittsburgh State University Electronic Theses and Dissertations* (2014): 78-79.

allusion to the idea that the "races" within each category evolved from the corresponding animals that are drawn beneath them. Once again, one will notice the stereotype of the Black subject being compared to the ape in the middle of the diagram, though that ape is walking on its hands, while even the ape depicted underneath the often-belittled Malay race[75] is some kind of upright Neanderthal.
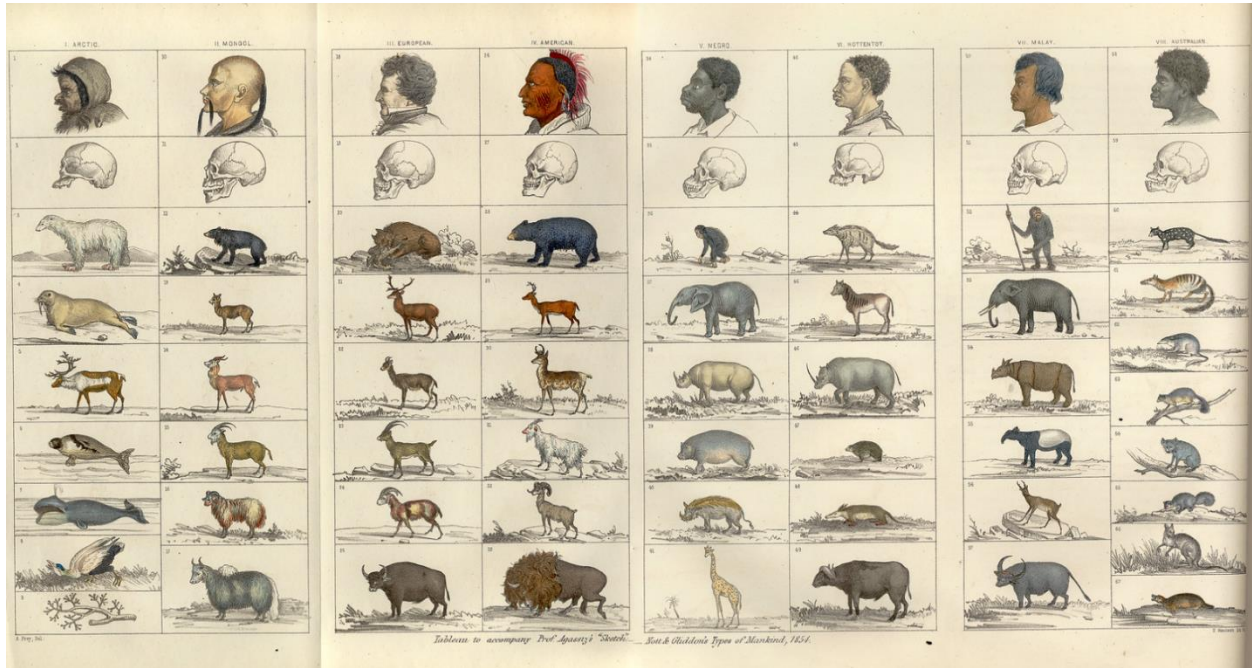

Figure 1. Josiah Nott and George Gliddon. *Types of Mankind,* 1854.

The comparison of the Black subject to the ape is a frequent trope in *Types of Mankind*,

> Although I do not believe in the intellectual equality of the races, and can find no ground in natural or in human history for such popular credence, I belong not to those who are disposed to degrade any type of humanity to the level of the brute-creation. Nevertheless, a man must be blind not to be struck by similitudes between some of the lower races of mankind, viewed as connecting links in the animal kingdom; nor can it be rationally affirmed that the Orang-Outan and Chimpanzee are more widely separated from certain African and Oceanic Negroes.[76]

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[75] Georgy S. Levit and Uwe Hossfeld, "Ernst Haeckel, Nikolai Miklucho-Maclay and the Racial Controversy over the Papuans," *Frontiers in Zoology* (2020).

[76] Josiah Nott and George Gliddon, *Types of Mankind* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co, 1854), 457.

The illustration in figure 2 echoes this sentiment through providing a sort of "evolutionary chain" on the left page (with the white Apollo being positioned as the peak form of humanity) along with violently antiblack caricatures on the right. The right page endeavors to characterize the Black subject as indolent (as seen through smoking the pipe), insipid, and passive.
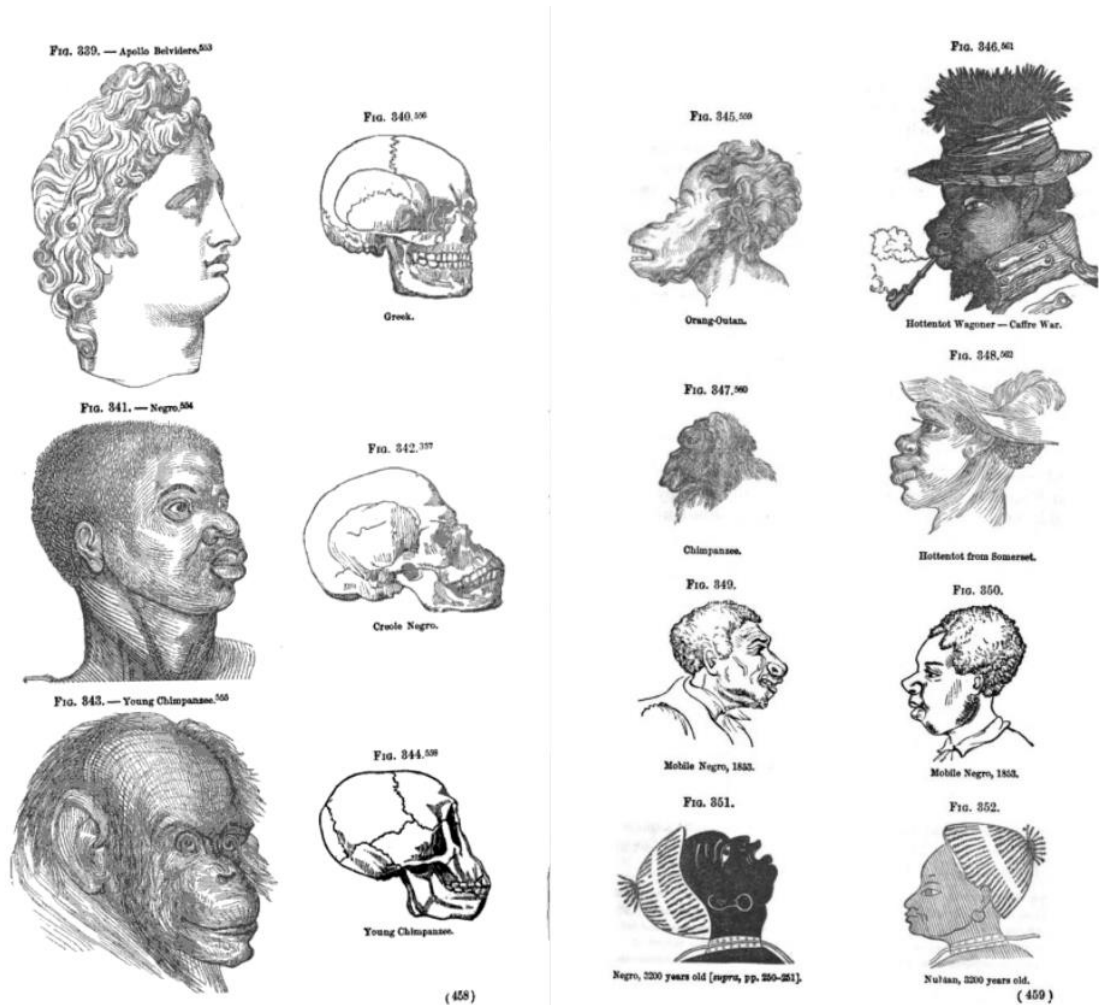

Figure 2. Josiah Nott and George Gliddon. *Types of Mankind,* 1854.

The illustration on the left reminds one again of Zikiyyah Iman Jackson's definition of Black animality, where the Black subject is not simply thought of as an animal, but instead is a human that animality is projected onto because of their Blackness. This is a stark but accurate

representation of how Black animality was conceived across the work of Samuel George Morton and his followers Josiah Nott and George Gliddon.

Even though the theory of polygenism largely went out of style by the time Darwin's work became popular, it still had a lasting effect on the scientific community. For example, almost 30 years after *Types of Mankind* was published, the "German Darwin," Ernst Haeckel, advocated for virtually the same kind of racial hierarchy that Nott and Gliddon had. Haeckel believed that there were 36 human races, which could be divided into "higher" and "lower" forms, with the "Hottentot" (or Black subject) belonging among the lower races.[77] Figure 3 demonstrates Haeckel's theory within his work "The History of Creation," which looks remarkably similar to both previous figures, despite being published long after *Types of Mankind* and in a completely different context.
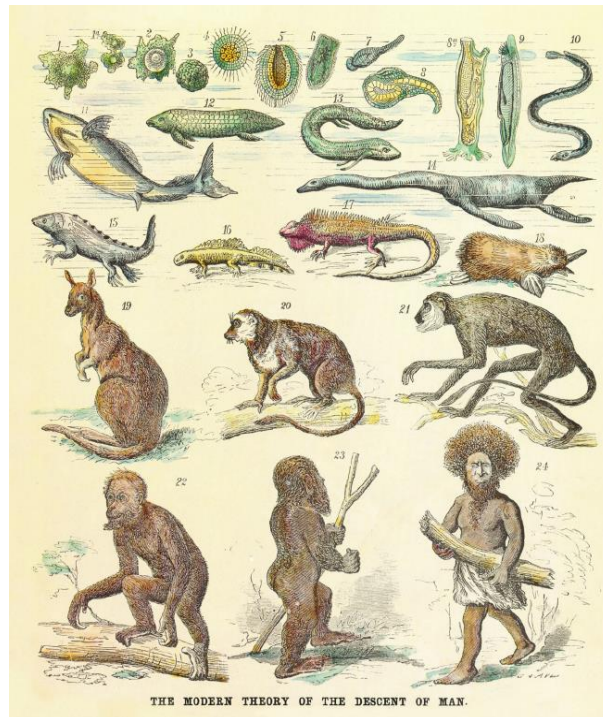
Figure 3. G. Avery's Visualization of Haeckel's "The History of Creation", 1876.

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[77] Georgy S. Levit and Uwe Hossfeld, "Ernst Haeckel, Nikolai Miklucho-Maclay and the Racial Controversy over the Papuans," *Frontiers in Zoology* (2020), 5.

This is just one example of how the theory of evolution did not dissuade racist members of the scientific community from continuing to believe these horrible ideas, as Stephen Jay Gould explains,

> Evolutionary theory swept away the creationist rug that had supported the intense debate between monogenists and polygenists, but it satisfied both sides by presenting an even better rationale for their shared racism. The monogenists continued to construct linear hierarchies of races according to mental and moral worth; the polygenists now admitted a common ancestry in the prehistoric mists, but affirmed that races had been separate long enough to evolve major inherited differences in talent and intelligence.[78]

This next section will establish how these deeply antiblack stereotypes—which were developed through scientific racism—were invoked and spread through the process of African colonization and Frantz Fanon's response to this. One can easily see the Black-animal connection made within the mind of the white subject/colonizer based on the details of the colonization of Rhodesia. Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga's article, "Vermin Beings: On Pestiferous Animals and Human Game," brilliantly analyzes this context through positioning the treatment of animals and Africans side by side. By conceptualizing Africans and animals as "vermin", the white subject/colonizer reduces them both to "things"[79], but more specifically to things that are in the way of their goals (control of the land, an increase in capital, etc.) and treats the elimination of both "vermin" similarly. This can be seen through the fact that the methods that were used to get rid of monkeys, tsetse flies, and elephants in Rhodesia were also used on the guerilla insurgents. As both the animals and the guerilla insurgents could not be effectively eliminated through using guns, beginning in 1920, poison was the colonizer's weapon of choice. At first, poisons like strychnine were given out at cheap prices to white farmers in order to

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[78] Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 105.

[79] Referred to as "thingification" by Aimé Césaire, see Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, Translated by Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review, 2000 [1955]), 42.

control "problem animals," such as baboons, crows, and springhares. The most irritating pest, the tsetse fly, which carried the deadly cattle disease trypanosome, could only be dealt with by establishing certain zones known as the "Tsetse Free Corridors," which were upheld through the use of DDT (now known to have detrimental effects on humans). From 1963 onward, both the Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army (ZAPU) and the African National Liberation Army (ZANLA) used guerilla tactics to fight against the Rhodesian Security Forces (RSF). One of the RSF's main tactics used against the guerilla insurgents was not only to poison them, but to poison them the same way animals were poisoned. For example, the most effective method of killing baboons was to give them a slow acting poison, this way they could not figure out what kind of food was killing them. Similarly, thallium was laced into the guerilla's "canned beef, cold drinks, beer, sweets, medical supplies, mealie meal, biscuits, tinned jam, tinned peas, bottles of brandy, and toothpaste,"[80] which would make the insurgents violently ill, but they would only die days after ingestion, giving other guerillas no clue as to what caused it or who gave them the poisoned material.

This gives us tremendous insight into the mind of the white subject/colonizer because in this instance it is not simply about equating the Black subject and the animal, rather it reflects the insatiable need for both capital and white supremacy to continue *unchallenged*. It did not matter that the RSF was at a tremendous advantage in terms of support and resources, *any* potential threat to future colonization was dealt with as if it could destroy the colonial government in place. This is the unconscious phenomenon that takes place in the mind of the colonizer, where they intrinsically know they are outnumbered and occupying land they have no knowledge of, so any threat that may reveal this reality is dealt with in the harshest manner possible. When it

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[80] Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga, "Vermin Beings: On Pestiferous Animals and Human Game," *Social Text* 106, no. 1 (2011): 167.

comes to the Black subject, the tactic that is used in this instance is accusing them of having a "beastly" nature, "Whites in Rhodesia referred to blacks as "baboons" and "monkeys," and shops in the city centers served blacks only through hatches, since they were not allowed "to rub shoulders with whites inside the shops . . . otherwise, the whites wouldn't buy these clothes."[81]

What the white subject/colonizer does not understand (in the case of both the Black subject and the animal) is that their bigotry blinds them to the possible damage that both can inflict on them. In the case of the animal, those that are thought of as the "lowliest" within the animal kingdom (flies, mosquitos) actually had the capacity to do the most damage to the white subject/colonizer through spreading disease to them and their livestock. Not only was this the case in Rhodesia with the tsetse fly, but also in places such as the sugarcane plantations in the Caribbean, where the mosquito would carry deadly Yellow Fever and Malaria (from which African slaves had natural immunity).[82] Similarly, the Black subject, who is thought of as the lowest form of humanity in the mind of the white subject/colonizer, has nothing to lose in attempting to regain their sovereignty, some would even say that it is a driving force in decolonial movements because, "Without the animalizing logic at the core of colonialism, decolonial struggle might not (perhaps would not?) have the biologically-grounded, instinctual drive that it needs to go all the way."[83] At the very least, part of the reason that guerilla warfare was so effective within this context was because natives were always underestimated.

With this context established, it is now important to consider Fanon's critique of the treatment of the colonized. Although Fanon himself is mainly known for his writings on the libidinal state of blackness in *Black Skin, White Masks* and his revolutionary decolonial project

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[81] Ibid, 161.

[82] John Robert McNeil, *Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean, 1620-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[83] David Baumeister, "Black Animality from Kant to Fanon," *Theory & Event* 24, no. 4 (2021), 969.

in *The Wretched of the Earth*, there is a throughline that connects all of his work: the concept of Black animality. Scholar David Baumeister traces this in his article "Black Animality from Kant to Fanon," which also demonstrates how the often racist history of western philosophy had an effect on Fanon himself. Baumeister starts his investigation with *Black Skin, White Masks*, noting that within the work, Fanon describes how he has often been perceived like an animal. Over the course of his life and work, Fanon's use of the concept of Black animality shifts from deconstructing the racist logic behind it, to weaponizing it as a means to demonstrate how inhumane the process of colonization is for everybody involved. In terms of the former goal, Fanon illustrates it using the famous example in *Black Skin, White Masks*, where a young white boy shouts, "Look, a Negro! Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened." on the train that he and Fanon are sharing. Fanon's immediate reaction to the event is as such,

> My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning in that white winter day. The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly; look, a nigger, it's cold, the nigger is shivering, the nigger is shivering because he is cold, the little boy is trembling because he is afraid of the nigger…the little white boy throws himself into his mother's arms: Mama, the nigger's going to eat me up.[84]

Fanon is aware that through this child's eyes, he is a dangerous animal, capable of unimagined horrors. What is illustrative in this case is the fact that it is a white child that said this to Fanon; although it is obvious that white adults harbored the same feelings (and continue to do so), this child was honest and direct about his unconscious biases in a way that an adult may not be. Baumeister uses this example to show Fanon's rendering of the Black body "from human subject to animal object"[85] and though that element of feeling disembodied is definitely within the passage, the dynamics at play remind one of the earlier definition of Black animality. Fanon here

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[84] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 86.
[85] David Baumeister, "Black Animality from Kant to Fanon," *Theory & Event* 24, no. 4 (2021), 962.

is not looked at by the child as *merely* an object or an animal because both of those things a child would, to some extent, have a familiarity with and understand. Rather, this child views Fanon as something completely unknown, something to be terrified of because he is a human being that animality is *projected* onto, capable of unspeakable terrors. The Black body is not just reduced to a body, but something that has a foreign agency as well, as Baumeister writes, "This is human animality rooted not in the Black body itself (and as a self), but overlaid upon the Black body as seen, as surveilled—seen and surveilled as animal."[86]

This exemplifies one of the main themes within Fanon's work as a whole: how Negrophobia[87] reduces the Black body to something more primal than the non-black body could ever be. This is a phenomenon that has an especially dangerous edge when it comes to the Black male body, as the existence of the Black phallus always changes the dynamics of a space for the non-black subject,

> Describing the experience of reading a dozen times over a particularly sexualized, racist passage from the French filmmaker Michel Cournot's 1948 book Martinique, Fanon explains that "one is no longer aware of the Negro but only of a penis; the Negro is eclipsed. He is turned into a penis. He is a penis." Even if confronted with statistical studies establishing an identical average length for African and European penises, Fanon continues, "[t]he white man is convinced that the Negro is a beast; if it is not the length of the penis, then it is the sexual potency that impresses him."[88]

This white fear has nothing to do with the penis itself (as shown by the fact that the average length for both Black and white penis' are the same) but rather the "beastliness" or animality that is imposed onto the Black phallus. Again, it is rooted in white fantasy, because this does not whatsoever account for what the Black phallus *does* do on a regular basis, but rather what it

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[86] Ibid, 963.

[87] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 124.

[88] David Baumeister, "Black Animality from Kant to Fanon," *Theory & Event* 24, no. 4 (2021), 964.

could do within the white paranoid mind. A pertinent contemporary example of this is the

tendency of white women to become frightened of Black men in public spaces, even though

statistically they have more of a chance of being hurt by white men.[89] The past couple of years

this paranoia has become a public issue, with several incidents involving viral videos, showing

white women calling the police on Black men for no discernable reason.[90] These situations

almost always involve a Black male teenager or adult doing something normal in public, just for

an anxious middle-aged white woman to come along and tell them that they do not belong there

and that they will call the police. Within this scenario, the white woman unconsciously feels

threatened by the mere existence of, what she views as, a Black phallus in proximity to her and

will do whatever she needs to in order to get rid of it in her neighborhood or shared public space.

The immediate impulse to call the police is one of the most violent things that she can do in this

scenario, as the police actively threaten and kill Black people on a regular basis. Even if these

white women face charges for calling the police without just cause, they often quickly get

dropped, such as in the case of Amy Cooper.[91] This objectification and hypersexualization of the

Black phallus (tied to Black maleness) is a key feature within the history of the concept of Black

animality.[92]

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[89] Allen J. Beck, "Race and Ethnicity of Violent Crime Offenders and Arrestees, 2018," *Bureau of Justice Statistics*, (2021).

[90] Cady Lang, "How the 'Karen Meme' Confronts the Violent History of White Womanhood," *Time*, (2020).

[91] Brakkton Booker, "Amy Cooper, White Woman who Called Police on Black Bird-Watcher, has Charge Dismissed," *NPR*, (2021).

[92] This section focuses on the fetishization of the Black phallus because it is working through Fanon's analysis, though it is worth noting that the sex characteristics of Black women (particularly their breasts and buttocks) are fetishized in similar ways. A pertinent example of this is how in the 19th century, the South African woman Sarah Baartman (known as "Hottentot Venus") was paraded around Europe as an oddity because of the size of her buttocks. For more on this topic, see Sabrina Strings, *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

In *The Wretched of the Earth* and Fanon's later writings, one can see how Fanon proceeds to write about Black animality as it applies to the colonized in an African colonial context. The following passage refers directly to this concept,

> Sometimes this Manichaeanism reaches its logical conclusion and dehumanizes the colonized subject. In plain talk, he is reduced to the state of an animal. And consequently, when the colonist speaks of the colonized he uses zoological terms. Allusion is made to the slithery movements of the yellow race, the odors from the "native" quarters, to the hordes, the stink, the swarming, the seething, and the gesticulations. In his endeavors at description and finding the right word, the colonist refers constantly to the bestiary.[93]

This is, once again, an insight into the mind of the white subject/colonizer and how this language betrays their unconscious. In terms of the poor material conditions that colonized Africans are living under, the white subject/colonizer refuses to entertain the notion that they are responsible. They also refuse to understand that indigenous kinship structures tie them to the land and why the health of the environment is crucial. Within this context, western individualism is used to discredit natives, leading the white subject/colonizer to declare that it is the fault of the natives themselves for their conditions. Then, when witnessing the awful circumstances that the natives are subjected to, the blame that's levied on the natives comes with insults that highlight their "animalistic nature". Once again, one sees that the native is viewed, at best, as an ugly nuisance and, at worst, as vermin with insidious motives.

More importantly, because of both this racist, dehumanizing view of the natives and their mistreatment at the hands of the white subject/colonizer, the white subject/colonizer reverts to predatory animalistic behavior themselves. This is a fact that Fanon's mentor, Aimé Césaire, commented upon in *Discourse on Colonialism*, "Colonization, I repeat, dehumanizes even the most civilized man. . . the colonizer, who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of

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[93] Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Cape Town: Kwela Books, 2004), 7.

seeing the other man as an animal, accustoms himself to treating him like an animal, and tends

objectively to transform himself into an animal."[94] This is done mainly through the

unprecedented level of violence that is used to both police and control native populations,

especially when said populations decide to rebel against their colonial governments, as Fanon

describes in an account of the French military's massacre of Algerian civilians,

> Armed to the teeth, equipped with daggers and cutlasses, the French soldiers
> break into the dwellings, torture, slit throats, mutilate. Pillage and rape preside
> over their actions . . . The women, regardless of age, are raped in front of their
> children . . . Magnetos are carried into the houses and children between three and
> eleven do not escape the electric current. The men are led away like beasts to have
> their throats slit in front of their loved ones. Babies are torn from their mother's
> arm and thrown under tanks, whilst children beset with panic and attempting to
> escape are mown down by bursts of machine gun fire.[95]

These were not even the people who were resisting the colonial government in the first place,

they were innocent civilians; but because it was often difficult to target anticolonial resistance

fighters who used guerilla tactics, the wholesale slaughter of civilians was the only available

method of inflicting violence on natives. This indiscriminate hunger for violence demonstrates

how the white subject/colonizer gives in to these dehumanizing urges, while at the same time

points a finger at native Africans and accuses them of similar crimes.

Fanon believed that not only would the movement for decolonization succeed, but also

that it would usher in a new kind of humanism,[96] which would finally bring native Africans into

the fold. Theorist David Marriott describes this humanism as such,

> The time has come, it seems, to talk of Fanonism as a thought whose time has
> come and gone, a thought whose significance must accordingly be grasped and
> seized if the opportunity offered by this thought is not to be missed. And the proof
> of that is given among many other signs (including a flurry of recent

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[94] Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, Translated by Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 41.

[95] Frantz Fanon, *Alienation and Freedom*, eds. Jean Khalfa and Robert J.C. Young, trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 597.

[96] Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Cape Town: Kwela Books, 2004), 178.

pronouncements on the demise of the nationalist-humanist project whose time has come and gone) by the fact of Fanon's humanism, his messianic belief in revolution as a redemptive moment, which could not but invite the reflection that decolonization never was, nor could ever be, simply redemptive, that this is indeed to confuse the moment of revolution with a telos or eschatology.[97]

It is surprising that for a philosopher and theorist who was so accurate in his critical analysis of how blackness functions in a white world, that he would come to the conclusion that native Africans would be brought into the fold of the Human so easily after their liberation. Granted, we now have the benefit of hindsight, especially as Fanon passed away young (at age 36), yet it is fascinating how someone who accurately traced Black animality within the mind of the white subject/colonizer would also believe that the white psyche would change so quickly. This is not to say that efforts in decolonization were (and still are) a waste, simply that the legacy of colonization has left all native Africans vulnerable to white supremacy, both in terms of colonizers still inhabiting their land, as well as white capitalist institutions from the global north (such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund) preying on the existing resources of these small countries. Not to mention that the libidinal dynamics that Fanon outlined are still deeply entrenched in the white unconscious.

This is where David Marriott sees that there is room to critique Fanon, not only because his nationalist-humanist project died long ago, but also because understanding revolutionary struggle through a teleological lens can never be accurate (especially in terms of blackness). A teleological model of thought does not work within this scenario because of the characteristics of antiblackness. As Marriott writes,

> If the most apparently revolutionary subject always might be the least sovereign, then the passage from revolution to sovereignty is no longer so secure. The wretched can become recognized only to the extent that there is at least the suspicion of a non-coincidence between national humanism and those who fall

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[97] David Marriott, "Whither Fanon?," *Textual Practice* 25, no. 1 (2011): 33.

short of it, between the nation as telos and the postcolonial nation as the necessary self-interruption of teleology.[98]

The bulk of Marriott's argument within this specific essay has to do with an evaluation of the two main camps within critical Fanonism: the Marxist-phenomenological camp and the political camp which outlines the limits of Fanon's thought in a modern context. For the purpose of this chapter, Marriott's critique of Fanon's humanism will be the main aspect of this work which is used.[99]

Where this critique is taken further lies within Frank B. Wilderson III's use of David Marriott's work. What Fanon misunderstands and Black Americans already know, is that sovereignty for the Black subject does not mean that human status is subsequently given, as Wilderson writes,

> By way of contrast, the Frantz Fanon of *Black Skin, White Masks* hits upon (but is never quite comfortable with) the idea that the violence Black people face is a violence of a parallel universe. In short, Black people and non-Black people do not exist in the same universe or paradigm of violence, any more than fish and birds exist in the same region of the world…Nor are we dispossessed of land like the Irish or the Native Americans or Said and Nidal's Palestinians; notwithstanding the fact that, save Ethiopia, all of Black Africa has been colonized at one time or another. The antagonist of the worker is the capitalist. The antagonist of the Native is the settler. *But the antagonist of the Black is the Human being.*[100]

Even if Fanon's nationalist-humanist project had been carried out in the manner that he had designed it to, there is still the fact that, across the world, the Black subject endures extreme violence because they are unconsciously viewed as the foil to the human. This takes on different forms in different contexts, yet Wilderson has traveled across the world (notably living in South

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[98] Ibid, 34.

[99] For those interested, Marriott expands on his essay and brings together Fanon's clinical background together with his philosophical work in his book *Whither Fanon: Studies in the Blackness of Being* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018).

[100] Frank B. Wilderson III, *Afropessimism* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2020).

Africa during the end of apartheid)[101] and from Cuba to Copenhagen has found that there is no

inclusion for the Black subject within humanity. Note that this does not inherently create a

dissonance with the definition of Black animality that was given at the beginning of this paper

because within that conception, the non-Black subject sees a Black person as someone who

possesses a human shape with animal qualities grafted onto them, not as someone who has

Human status.

Although the main theme of this chapter has been to trace the violence inherent within

the concept of Black animality, it is worth noting that current scholars within Black studies are

doing valuable theoretical work which deconstructs the potentially positive or revolutionary

aspects of it as well.[102] Taking the idea of Black animality and using it as a foil to traditional

humanism opens up a connection between humans and animals that is especially important when

thinking about environmental issues. There is a potential to see a relatedness there, not in a racist

or violent manner, but rather in the value that humans and animals both hold and the positive

aspects of recognizing that mutual value.

This chapter has endeavored to trace the racist history of the concept of Black animality.

The comparison of the Black subject to an ape, the idea that Black men possess some kind of

predatory sexual prowess (through having an overly large phallus), and the comparison of the

African native to the most "wretched" animals, are all ideas which appear again and again in the

public (usually white) consciousness. There is an insidious sort of violence that is inherent in all

of these stereotypes, yet one can hope that by deconstructing them it is evident how violent and

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[101] Frank B. Wilderson III, *Incognegro: A Memoir of Exile and Apartheid* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

[102] This is particularly prevalent in Joshua Bennett's *Being Property Once Myself* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2020) as well as Zakiyyah Iman Jackson's *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World* (New York: NYU Press, 2020).

insidious all these notions truly are and how the non-black unconscious continually works to reinvigorate them.

Chapter 3: Antiblack Violence as Ontology: the Afropessimist Analysis

> It would be reassuring to say that Europeans rigorously debated the ethical implications of forcing the social death of slavery on Africans before they went ahead with it; but, as Marx, Eltis, and Spillers make abundantly clear, it would be more accurate simply to say that African slavery did not present an ethical dilemma for global civil society. The ethical dilemmas were unthought.
>
> — Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White, and Black*

The first two chapters of this thesis detailed both how critical theorists have misunderstood antiblack violence as well as the violence that's inherent within the concept of Black animality; the goal of this chapter is to analyze the theoretical framework of Afropessimism, which presents a more precise and contemporary understanding of antiblack violence. There are two reasons why Afropessimism is uniquely suited to theorize antiblackness: it is rooted in Black history and its authors are often auto-theoretical in their approaches, utilizing their own experiences to draw theoretical conclusions. In terms of the structure of this chapter, first, Afropessimism will be defined, its origins will be traced, and its academic influences will be outlined accordingly. The majority of this chapter will center around one of Afropessimism's primary authors, Frank B. Wilderson III, and analyze the development of the theoretical trajectory of Afropessimism within his work. The second section of the chapter will evaluate the works of Saidiya Hartman, namely her books *Scenes of Subjection* and *Lose Your Mother*, and investigate how her work as a cultural historian often mirrors the themes and methodology of Afropessimism itself. Wilderson has often used Hartman's work in his texts to further flesh out his framework, so while they work in different fields, their understandings of violence often mirror each other.

First it is necessary to answer the question: what is Afropessimism? Wilderson defines it as such,

> If, as Afropessimism argues, *Blacks are not Human subjects, but are instead structurally inert props, implements for the execution of White and non-Black fantasies and sadomasochistic pleasures,* then this also means that, at a higher level of abstraction, the claims of universal humanity that the above theories all subscribe to are hobbled by a meta-aporia: a contradiction that manifests whenever one looks seriously at the structure of Black suffering in comparison to the presumed universal structure of all sentient beings.[103]

To put it simply, Wilderson is arguing that Black people experience an unprecedented amount of violence because the socio-ontological position they occupy does not mirror that of anyone else. One can tell that this is a more recent definition from Wilderson because he emphasizes that Black suffering is a necessary foil to white humanity; this concept of the human being produced against antiblack violence is adapted from the work of Sylvia Wynter.[104] In Wilderson's earlier work, he focused on how Black suffering is animated by non-Black people treating Black people as if they are a bare canvas to paint their desires and whims onto (resulting in tremendous violence and sexual exploitation). Here, this notion of Black suffering is located within the broader framework of Afropessimism, where this violence is deemed necessary for the non-Black figure in order to assert their own human status. This particular understanding of Afropessimism was first suggested in Wilderson's book, *Red, White, and Black*, but he more fully incorporates Wynter's work into his most recent book, *Afropessimism*.

The central claim that Wilderson makes here is not without context, as he often uses both his own experiences as well as historical scholarship to illustrate his point. Wilderson most frequently references the context of the plantation in the antebellum south in order to

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[103] Frank B. Wilderson III, *Afropessimism* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2020), 15.
[104] Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *Michigan State University Press* 3, no. 3, (2003), 260-270.

demonstrate how the racial dynamics there still animate interactions between Black and non-

Black people today. "Anyone who thinks nineteenth century slave narratives are reports on the

past isn't paying attention. Such a person will experience the analysis of Afropessimism as

though they are being mugged, rather than enlightened; that is because they can't imagine a

plantation in the here and now."[105] A frequent critique of Wilderson (and Afropessimism in

general) is that this historical dynamic is too localized; for example, how can one explain

antiblackness in Africa through a theoretical framework that is so North American? Why does

Wilderson make no attempts to connect his own work to the previous scholarship done on the

older notion of "Afropessimism" which centered around Africa?[106]

Although it is true that Wilderson's background does tend to make him biased in terms of

the historical sources that he draws on, at the same time his work does address the lived

experiences of Black people within other contexts. His first book, *Incognegro*, is mainly about

his experiences in South Africa at the end of apartheid and it provides a detailed account of the

antiblack racism that endured within that context. White Afrikaners often viewed Wilderson as

an oddity—as he was American as well as Black—yet he was still treated as a second-class

citizen, especially when he voiced his opinion about race relations within South Africa. There is

a chapter in *Afropessimism* that also takes place within this period of Wilderson's life, detailing

the time where he worked as a waiter at an Italian restaurant in Johannesburg and was fired for

bringing attention to his boss' antiblackness. Even though the history and the context are

completely different, Wilderson still uses this scenario within his latest work because it

demonstrates how antiblackness has certain elements that are often shared in different parts of

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[105] Frank B. Wilderson III, *Afropessimism* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2020), 101.

[106] Greg Thomas, "Afro-Blue Notes: The Death of Afro-pessimism (*2.0*)?," *Theory & Event* 21, no. 1 (2018).

the world. This is not to say that it does not have its own variations[107] but part of what makes

Afropessimism an effective framework is that its core themes often prove to be true no matter the

context. Wilderson has stated that he has seen this himself, from conducting workshops with

Black people all over the world—from Cuba to Israel—that those involved all tend to relate to

his work on Afropessimism because antiblackness is a worldwide phenomenon. There are other

authors who work alongside Afropessimsim who have also articulated this; the most prevalent

example being Saidiya Hartman, whose text, *Lose Your Mother*,[108] investigates the differences in

the histories and lived experiences of Africans and Black Americans.

Wilderson utilizes various facets of critical theory (namely Marxism, postcolonialism,

psychoanalysis, and feminist theory) in order to construct a specific understanding of

antiblackness and Black suffering,

> 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 through rigorous theoretical consideration of their properties and
> assumptive logic, such as their foundations, methods, form, and utility; and it does
> so, again, on a higher level of abstraction than the discourse and methods of the
> theories it interrogates.[109]

Wilderson's understanding of Marxism usually draws on Gramsci's work, with "Gramsci's

Black Marx" being the main text in which Gramsci is evaluated in relation to Blackness.

Wilderson's development of Afropessimism also involves a general disillusionment with

Marxism over time. In his memoir, *Incognegro*, one sees Wilderson's faith in a far-left

movement in South Africa slowly be crushed as centrist liberals gain firm control of the ANC

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[107] As the author can attest, the antiblack racism in South Africa is often animated by white Afrikaners who are much more comfortable being openly racist than many white liberals would be in a North American context.

[108] Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007)

[109] Frank B. Wilderson III, *Afropessimism* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2020), 14.

under Nelson Mandela. Although Wilderson is still an activist, after becoming a graduate student at UC Berkeley, his work has mainly focused on aiding the Black community and that is also where he roots his activism.

Wilderson's postcolonial influences include Frantz Fanon (as understood by David Marriott)[110] as well as Edward Said.[111] Marriott's reading of Fanon is attractive to Wilderson because of the way it critiques Fanon's end goal: his humanist aspirations. Naturally, *Black Skin, White Masks* is the Fanon text that is drawn on, rather than *The Wretched of the Earth*, as the latter text revolves around Fanon's revolutionary humanism, with which Marriott and Wilderson both disagree. *The Wretched of the Earth* also is a text that is more concerned with the position of the colonized subject, rather than that of the Black subject. Drawing on a reading of *Black Skin, White Masks* makes more sense to Wilderson since its main points often articulate a certain positionality of antiblackness that Wilderson believes is more accurate than that of *The Wretched of the Earth*,

> There is no analogy between the native's guarantee of restoration predicated on her need to put the settler out of the picture— the Fanon of *The Wretched of the Earth*— and the Slave's guarantee of restoration predicated on her need to put the Human out of the picture— the Fanon of *Black Skin, White Masks*. By way of contrast, the Frantz Fanon of *Black Skin, White Masks* hits upon (but is never quite comfortable with) the idea that the violence Black people face is a violence of a parallel universe.[112]

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[110] David Marriott, *Whither Fanon? Studies in the Blackness of Being* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018).

[111] Wilderson's first encounter with critical theory was actually through taking a course at Columbia that was taught by Said himself. Said not only taught about postcolonialism, but he also helped Wilderson thoroughly analyze Fanon's work for the first time. Wilderson goes into more detail about the encounter in *Afropessimism* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2020), 234-242.

[112] Ibid, 241.

That final sentence echoes the criticism that both Wilderson and Marriott have when it comes to Fanon: they believe that he accurately outlines the unconscious dynamics of antiblackness, but his humanism prevents him from taking his analysis a step further.

Wilderson's use of psychoanalysis involves utilizing Freud and Lacan through a uniquely Black lens and method of understanding. For example, this is how Wilderson explains the unconscious dynamics between his former girlfriend Stella (who was Black) and her white liberal neighbor Josephine. Wilderson compares the tension between Stella and Josephine to that of the slave Patsey and the slave owner's wife Mary Epps in the film *12 Years a Slave*. For years, Stella had dealt with Josephine coming into her apartment, unannounced, assuming she was entitled to a conversation with Stella. After Stella set a boundary and told Josephine that she was no longer able to do this, Josephine ignored Stella and proceeded to show up unannounced one afternoon. After Stella threw her out of the apartment and declared, "Hattie McDaniel is dead," Josephine (who was a nuclear physics professor) went on to set up a device in her apartment that would project radiation down into Stella's apartment, giving her and Frank radiation poisoning. Once Stella invoked the name "Hattie McDaniel" and stated the true dynamic that was taking place, Josephine became irrationally angry because she viewed herself as an enlightened white woman from the North.

Wilderson relates this story to the relationship between Mary Epps and Patsey through the way white womanhood is weaponized on the plantation. In the film *12 Years a Slave*, the plantation owner's wife, Mary, is jealous of the slave Patsey because her husband is sleeping with her. When her husband will not sell Patsey, Mary flies into a rage and smashes a glass whiskey decanter onto her head, leaving a bloody gash. In this scenario, Patsey is not a subject who has a say in what her owners do, rather she is conceived of as an object, one that white

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fantasies and pleasures can be projected onto. So although the context in which these scenarios

take place can change, this libidinal relationship that originated on the plantation is still part of

the white unconscious. As Wilderson states, "Yet, in some strange way, every single scene in

America is played out on an antebellum stage. It's just that in the North it can take the actors

some time to learn their lines and play their roles."[113] Wilderson then connects this example

directly to traditional psychoanalysis by outlining how jouissance is employed within this

context,

> In other words, the whippings are a life force: like a song, or good sex without a
> procreative aim. "Jouissance" is the word that comes to mind. A French word that means
> enjoyment, in terms both of rights and property, and of sexual orgasm. (The latter has a
> meaning partially lacking in the English word "enjoyment.") Jouissance compels the
> subject to constantly attempt to transgress the prohibitions imposed on his or her
> enjoyment, to go beyond the pleasure principle. Jouissance is an anchor tenant of
> psychoanalysis. But until the work of the critical theorists David Marriott, Jared Sexton,
> and Saidiya Hartman— that is to say, prior to an Afropessimist hijacking of
> psychoanalysis— devotees of Lacan and Freud had not made the link between jouissance
> and the regime of violence known as social death.[114]

This example that Wilderson analyzes—the dynamic between Stella and Josephine—is

also one where Wilderson employs his use of feminist theory. It demonstrates that Wilderson has

a solid understanding of how white womanhood operates, as well as the historical position of

white women within the context of the plantation. Wilderson's examples typically go into detail

about the unique gender differences that go along with antiblackness and he is able to use his

own experiences to articulate the struggles of Black men, while also using Black female theorists

(Saidiya Hartman, Hortense Spillers, Sylvia Wynter, etc.) to draw on the experiences of Black

women as well.[115]

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[113] Ibid, 89.

[114] Ibid, 92.

[115] Besides the recounted example of Stella and Josephine, another relevant instance where Wilderson talks about race and gender is in reference to the show *Homeland* in *Afropessimism* (New York, NY: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2020), 192-196.

The development of Afropessimism itself is rooted in the experiences that Wilderson and

Jared Sexton (often regarded as its co-founders)[116] shared in graduate school. Wilderson has

often recounted how at UC Berkeley, Sexton and other Black members of his graduate cohort

noticed how every minority group was given a theoretical framework to reflect on their own

experiences, yet this did not apply to Black students.[117] It did not matter what the context was,

when a Black person spoke up about their own oppression and the need to address it, this was

subsequently subsumed by non-Black folks expressing the ways that they had been mistreated

(through misogyny, homophobia, xenophobia, etc.).[118] This was true both in activist spaces and

in the classroom. From this experience, he and Jared Sexton decided to formulate a framework

that would specifically address Black suffering as well as its root causes.[119]

Early on in *Afropessimism*, Wilderson includes a relevant example of how antiblackness

often unconsciously overlaps with the suffering of other minority groups. He describes talking

with a Palestinian co-worker and friend about the injustices of the Israeli occupation. When his

friend is describing the humiliating procedure of being patted down at a checkpoint, he remarks

that it is even more humiliating to go through if the Israeli soldier is an Ethiopian Jew.[120] This is

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[116] This chapter focuses on Wilderson's scholarship because his work overall is often more directly related to Afropessimism (at least at the time the author is writing this thesis) and it follows a specific trajectory that develops Afropessimism over time. This is not to say that Sexton's work is lacking, just that he tends to focus on gender and Black male studies specifically (especially within his books). For those interested in relevant articles that Sexton has published that have to do with Afropessimism, see, "People-of-Color-Blindness: Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery," *Social Text* 103, no. 2 (2010), "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism," *InTensions Journal* 5, (2011), "The *Vel* of Slavery: Tracking the Figure of the Unsovereign," *Critical Sociology* 15, (2014), "Unbearable Blackness," *Cultural Critique* 90, (2015), and, "Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear Word," *Rhizomes* 29, (2016).

[117] Frank B. Wilderson III, Interview with Black Praxis, (2022), 33:00-35:40.

[118] Frank B. Wilderson III, *Afropessimism* (New York, NY: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2020), 201-209.

[119] It is important to note that both Wilderson and Sexton actively engage with the Black radical theoretical tradition that came before them, but at the same time there are many differences between it and Afropessimism. Many of Wilderson's early influences (Frantz Fanon, Fred Hampton, Assata Shakur, etc.) all fall within this tradition and he still has a deep respect for them, but the key difference in their modes of thought is that Wilderson has no hope for a promising Black future. Scholars of Afropessimism are not waiting for progress, rather they assess the realities of Black life in the past and present.

[120] Frank B. Wilderson III, *Afropessimism* (New York, NY: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2020), 7-12.

a key instance where Wilderson realizes that there is a noticeable difference in Black suffering, one which is nearly universal. Although the cultural context that his friend referenced was completely different from a North American one, this example proves that the contempt with which the world holds Black people overall does not change.

The central claims of Wilderson's Afropessimism are rooted in the scholarship of Jared Sexton, Orlando Patterson, Sylvia Wynter, and Saidiya Hartman. Out of the four, Patterson is the one who has been included the longest within Wilderson's framework, his social death thesis specifically, which Wilderson describes here in his earliest use of Patterson,

> Furthermore, as Patterson points out, slavery is natal alienation by way of social death, which is to say that a slave has no symbolic currency or material labour power to exchange: a slave does not enter into a transaction of value (however asymmetrical) but is subsumed by direct relations of force, which is to say that a slave is an articulation of a despotic irrationality whereas the worker is an articulation of a symbolic rationality.[121]

In the passage above, Wilderson is specifically highlighting how one cannot understand the slave as analogous to a laborer, as Patterson's social death thesis illustrates how racial slavery has left a "irrational" legacy that still animates the unconscious of non-Black people. Black people carry this state of "social death" in civil society even if they are no longer literally enslaved. The fact that the structures of the world are all antiblack is inherently violent[122] and this dynamic animates the day-to-day interactions between non-Black people who benefit from this and Black people who suffer for it,

> Orlando Patterson clarifies this distinction between violence that positions and punishes the Human (worker, postcolonial subject, woman, or queer, for example)

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[121] Frank B. Wilderson III, "Gramsci's Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?," *Social Identities* 9, no. 2, (2003), 231.

[122] "The modern world owes its very existence to slavery' (Grandin, 2014) What could this impossible debt possibly entail? Not only the infrastructure of its global economy but also the architecture of its theological and philosophical discourses, its legal and political institutions, its scientific and technological practices, indeed, the whole of its semantic field (Wilderson, 2010:58)." Jared Sexton, "The *Vel* of Slavery: Tracking the Figure of the Unsovereign," *Critical Sociology* 15, (2014): 11.

and violence that positions and punishes the Slave (the Black) by emphasizing the difference between the violence that constitutes capitalism and the violence that constitutes slavery.[123]

 Although Patterson's work and political views overall are much more conservative than Wilderson's, his social death thesis is helpful in illustrating the roots of the violent ontological position of the Black subject.

As mentioned previously, another theorist who is an important figure in Wilderson's more recent work is Sylvia Wynter. Although Wilderson and Wynter agree on the violent nature of the birth of modernity within the context of the Enlightenment (specifically in relation to the treatment of enslaved and Indigenous peoples), they both hold different beliefs which are important to mention. The term "Afropessimism" is relevant here because it points to the negative manner in which Wilderson is examining the way "humanity" functions in relation to the Black subject. Even though he conducts activist work, Wilderson ultimately does not believe that any specific sort of political action or ideology will lead to Black liberation (which has been quite controversial in both academic and mainstream circles). For Wilderson, the only manner in which Black suffering can be extinguished is if the world ceased to exist, which is a bleak prospect to many. Wynter, on the other hand, is a humanist whose work seeks to re-define what humanism can be. Even though the historical accounts she uses lead her to be quite critical of how Black and Indigenous peoples were placed in a subhuman category in the past, she believes there is still promise for them to be included in a re-shaped humanism.

> Wynter seeks to restore our conceptualization of human life, the framework of a direction, a *telos*. But she wants to do this while evading a vulgar metaphysical essentialism—which is why the register of the discourse has the significance it has for her. For while she is concerned to anchor the human and its projects in its material (social and bodily) conditions, her concern is to track the "codes" and

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[123] Frank B. Wilderson III, *Afropessimism* (New York, NY: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2020), 217.

"genres" in terms of which understanding (including self-understanding) is constituted.[124]

So while Wynter and Wilderson agree about the roots of their own suffering and the violence of the category of the human, their conclusions differ greatly, with Wynter believing in a more inclusive kind of humanism and Wilderson arguing that the Black subject will never be included in the fold of humanity. For example, in this passage, Wilderson centers the Black perspective and how it is singularly regarded as non-human,

> In other words, I saw myself as a degraded Human, saw my plight as analogous to the plight of the Palestinians, the Native American, and the working class. Now I understood that analogy was a ruse. I was the foil of Humanity. Humanity looked to me when it was unsure of itself. I let Humanity say, with a sigh of existential relief, "At least we're not him."[125]

Here, Wynter's framework is reshaped by Wilderson to both extend her reading of history (where the Black and Indigenous subject are the 'Other' to Man 1 and subsequently Man 2)[126] to the present and also to specifically analyze the othering of the Black subject. Wilderson does not move forward with Wynter's description of Indigenous genocide and oppression because his sole focus is to develop a framework around the Black experience. Wilderson has also argued that having certain land ties still render the Indigenous subject closer to human status than that of their Black counterparts,

> I can say that I had some anxiety about making this critique about this presumptive logic in light of the fact that millions of Native people have been massacred. But in hindsight, I accept [Jared] Sexton's article [in this volume] as a corrective to my work. You have two things running. I have deep anger towards the settler state and sorrow for the millions that were genocided. And at the same

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[124] David Scott, "The Re-Enchantment of Humanism: An Interview with Sylvia Wynter," *Small Axe* 8, (2000), 121.

[125] Frank B. Wilderson III, *Afropessimism* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2020), 13.

[126] Wynter defines these different positions based on her specific historical understanding. The development of certain modes of the human in the West are reliant upon the Christian understanding of Man. Wynter dates the existence of Man 1 from the Renaissance to the 18th century and the existence of Man 2 from the 18th century until today. Neither of these conceptions include the Black or Indigenous subject, both of whom are regarded as "Other," which justifies colonization. See, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *Michigan State University Press* 3, no. 3, (2003), 260-267.

time, I have this critique, which is uncompromising, about Native subject formation. A critique that says one cannot be "Indian" or anything else without being anti-Black. It is a necessary element to being alive.[127]

The Sexton article that Wilderson is referencing is, "The *Vel* of Slavery," which is likely the most direct piece of Afropessimist scholarship that interrogates the antagonistic relationship between the Black and Native subject.[128] Sexton's argument in the article is as follows,

> I attempt to discern several convoluted elements: 1) a folk concept of racial slavery with a truncated account of its historical formation (in which slavery is reduced to a species of coerced migration and forced labor instituted in the 17th century), 2) an elision of slaveholding and the dissemination of anti-blackness among Native peoples throughout the continent (in which Indian slavery is either ignored or marginalized and anti-blackness is conflated with colonial white supremacy), 3) a liberal political narrative of emancipation and enfranchisement immune to the history of black radicalism (in which the post-bellum achievement of black citizenship, or 'civil rights', is both taken for granted and mistaken for the substantive demands of 'freedom, justice and equality'), and 4) a misidentification of black inhabitation with white and other non-black settlement under the colonial heading (in which 'the fact of blackness' is disavowed and the fundamental racism of colonialism is displaced by the land-based contest of nations).[129]

Some of this alludes to a focus within Sexton's work on the inherent issues with multiracialism,[130] but many of the points here do point to a significant antagonism between the Black and Indigenous subject. Regarding the historical position of the slave as analogous to that of a colonist or immigrant is inherently misguided and even violent. The fact that the descendants of American slaves have no land ties is also violent in the way they often cannot trace their cultural roots to anything other than a horrible white supremacist institution that took

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[127] Tiffany Willoghby-Heard, Jenell Navarro, Andrea Smith, *Otherwise Worlds: Against Settler Colonialism and Anti-Blackness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 55.
[128] Wilderson's text, *Red, White, and Black*, also investigates the different positions of the Indigenous and the Black subject, but is not as direct about the conflict between them as Sexton's article.
[129] Jared Sexton, "The *Vel* of Slavery: Tracking the Figure of the Unsovereign," *Critical Sociology* 15, (2014): 2.
[130] Jared Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

everything from their ancestors.[131] Wilderson frames this antagonism in conjunction with his

personal experiences,

> In the tribal meeting hall, the Indians had no use for either of my parents: *Whether*
> *we are White and wealthy or Red and poor, we don't want a nigger telling us*
> *what to do*. The White women expressed their refusal to be authorized by
> Blackness through their unconscious Negrophilia ("Have you ever been a model,
> Professor Wilderson?"), coupled with a need to remove my mother from the scene
> of their fantasy. The Native Americans expressed their refusal through their
> unconscious Negrophobia ("We don't want you, a *nigger man*, telling us what to
> do!"). The force of both White and Indigenous affect spoke with one voice: a
> chorus of libidinal economy. In the collective unconscious of Indigenous
> imagining, the specter of Blackness was a greater threat than the settler institution
> that had dispatched a Black professor to do its dirty work.[132]

This brings up one of the most controversial parts of Wilderson's philosophy: the claim

that Black suffering is unique compared to that of other racialized minority groups. This is also

the point that tends to be misconstrued the most among those who argue against Afropessimism

(who often clumsily argue that class is the main antagonism between minority groups,[133] a notion

that Wilderson and others have thoroughly disproven). What Wilderson's critics often miss in

this context is that Wilderson's aim is not to garner sympathy for being the "most oppressed,"

rather he is building a framework which addresses the realities of Black suffering.

Afropessimism as a whole is not overly concerned with the lived realities of other groups, just as

other frameworks which analyze oppression are not concerned with the Black experience.

The work of Sexton, Patterson, Wynter, and Hartman is integral to Wilderson's main

thesis in *Afropessimism*, which represents the most up-to-date and cohesive version of the theory.

In order to understand its development up to this point, it is necessary to trace the evolution of

Wilderson's thinking from his 2003 article, "Gramsci's Black Marx," to his book, *Red, White,*

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[131] Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York, NY:
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007)

[132] Frank B. Wilderson III, *Afropessimism* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2020), 45.

[133] José Sanchez, "Against Afro-Pessimism," *Jacobin*, (2022).

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and Black. To understand Wilderson's analysis in "Gramsci's Black Marx," first one must grasp Wilderson's ideological development, namely his transition from being a Marxist to being an Afropessimist. This is why it is important to start this section by analyzing his memoir, *Incognegro*.

Incognegro chronicles various stories from Wilderson's childhood, his experiences as a member of the ANC at the end of apartheid, and his subsequent struggle with Marxism after he left South Africa and attended graduate school at UC Berkeley. Wilderson grew up in the white wealthy Minneapolis suburb Kenwood, with his father and mother being upper middle-class academics who were doing their best to integrate their Black family into a hostile white community. Wilderson's mother would often make him memorize long poems like "Gunga Din" to perform at the school talent show to demonstrate to the white parents that their family was just as intelligent as all of the others,

> At eight, memorizing "Gunga Din" was not my idea of a good time. The thought of reciting it to the whole school was even less appealing. Two years back, in 1962, the people of Kenwood had humiliated mom and dad: five hundred households, not families, but households, in the posh enclave on the hill overlooking downtown Minneapolis, had signed a petition to keep us out.[134]

Wilderson did not have friends in Kenwood because he and his sister were the only Black students in their school. When he was older and his father took academic appointments in Chicago and Detroit, he started to connect with other Black kids while also learning about the work that the Black Panthers were doing in those cities. His family would also invite Black radicals to their home in Minneapolis and Wilderson would listen to their conversations and often read the books they left behind, like Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*.

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[134] Frank B. Wilderson III, *Incognegro: A Memoir of Exile and Apartheid* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 59-60.

This led him to become a Marxist as a young teenager, which later prompted him to join the more radical wing of the ANC in his 30s, during the last few years of apartheid. At the time, Wilderson believed that the end of apartheid could potentially bring about a Marxist egalitarian South Africa, which would recognize what native Black South Africans were rightfully due. With the assassination of the ANC's armed left-wing leader Chris Hani, Wilderson's vision for a communist South Africa died with him.

Nelson Mandela ended up shaping the country into a liberal state and urged Black South Africans and Afrikaners to forgive each other, despite the decades of murder and genocide at the hands of the white South Africans. After Wilderson was warned that Mandela considered him a "threat to national security," he left the country and enrolled in a film studies PhD program at Berkeley, supervised by Saidiya Hartman. While reading theorists like Gramsci, Fanon, Freud, and Lacan, he realized that his personal experiences could not be explained merely by class struggle, that a key thread in his life was the virulent antiblackness that he faced wherever he went and that even a Marxist utopia would not solve this issue. Upon abandoning his Marxist ideals, he began to develop his own theory that combined the insights of Black theorists and historians with the critical theorists that were taught in his graduate program.

"Gramsci's Black Marx" is the first example of Wilderson distancing himself from Marxism while pointing out its flaws. Wilderson uses the article to examine how even though Gramsci's analysis of Marx is illuminating in its own right, the issues that the Black subject face are a blind spot.

> The scandal with which the black subject position threatens Gramscian discourse is manifest in the subject's ontological disarticulation of Gramscian categories: work, progress, production, exploitation, hegemony, and historical self-awareness. By examining the strategy and structure of the black subject's absence in Antonio Gramsci's Prison Notebooks and by contemplating the black subject's incommensurability with the key categories of Gramscian theory, we

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come face to face with three unsettling consequences.[135]

These three consequences are as follows: the position of the Black American subject is a blind spot in a Gramscian framework, Marxism has an issue with accurately theorizing white supremacy, and the end-goal of Marxism (socialism) is built upon assumptions about progress that are inherited from the Enlightenment. The rest of the article works to unpack these three points.

The article both highlights the adeptness with which Wilderson synthesizes the work of Gramsci as well as the issues that arise when the question of Blackness is posed in relation to the structuring of civil society, "Black death is the modern bourgeois-state's recreational pastime, but the hunting season is not confined to the time (and place) of political society; blacks are fair game as a result of a progressively expanding civil society as well."[136] The main issue here for Wilderson is that the subject formation that goes into designating someone of a certain class (i.e. the manner in which humanity is understood by Marxists) does not apply to someone who is Black. Although Black people can occupy different classes, their ontological and social (and later developed in his theory: libidinal) position designates they be placed outside the Gramscian understanding of a subject within civil society. Wilderson demonstrates this by using the example of how slavery as both labor and a social position is unaccounted for in the Marxist framework,

> The absence of black subjectivity from the crux of Marxist discourse is
> symptomatic of the discourse's inability to cope with the possibility that the
> generative subject of capitalism, the black body of the fifteenth and sixteenth
> centuries, and the generative subject that resolves late-capital's over-accumulation
> crisis, the black (incarcerated) body of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, do
> not reify the basic categories which structure Marxist conflict: the categories of

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[135] Frank B. Wilderson III, "Gramsci's Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?," *Social Identities* 9, no. 2, (2003), 225.
[136] Ibid, 229.

work, production, exploitation, historical self-awareness and, above all, hegemony.[137]

This is not to say that one cannot analyze the class position of the Black subject, but rather that an accurate analysis of the Black subject's position—especially in relation to civil society—cannot be fully accounted for with a Marxist analysis. The historical overview of the Black subject within the quote above and their relation to capital is a more popular talking point among socialists now than it was when the article was written in 2003, yet Wilderson's assertion that categories such as work, exploitation, and hegemony do not exist for the Black slave and prisoner remains true.

Where "Gramsci's Black Marx" hints at Wilderson's development of an alternative framework that prioritizes both the Black experience and Black suffering specifically, *Red, White, and Black* is Wilderson's first endeavor to flesh out said framework. The text is an edited version of Wilderson's dissertation from the Rhetoric department in the Film Studies program at UC Berkeley. *Red, White, and Black* primarily relies on the aforementioned scholars that Wilderson incorporates into his main argument: namely Hortense Spillers, David Marriott, Jared Sexton, and Saidiya Hartman. As the text is technically a work in film studies, Wilderson utilizes his chosen films as examples in order to elaborate on his main thesis; this being the idea that the Black subject is the slave (or non-human), the Indigenous subject is the savage (or half-human), and the white subject is the master/settler (or Human). The introduction and first chapter are used to argue that the ontological dynamics between these three subjects is the basis for the United States, and that without them it would surely crumble,

> Give Turtle Island back to the "Savage." Give life itself back to the Slave. Two simple sentences, fourteen simple words, and the structure of U.S. (and perhaps global) antagonisms would be dismantled. An "ethical modernity" would no

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[137] Ibid, 230.

longer sound like an oxymoron. From there we could busy ourselves with
important conflicts that have been promoted to the level of antagonisms, such as
class struggle, gender conflict, and immigrants' rights.[138]

This is the first instance in which Wilderson prioritizes the ontological aspects of antiblackness,

as opposed to equating it with the other forms of oppression that are mentioned at the end of the

last sentence. Here, the majority of the theoretical foundation is laid for Wilderson's main

argument in *Afropessimism*. The main difference is that *Red, White, and Black* is much more

meticulous about describing the ontological roles that the "savage" and "master/settler" occupy

and the dynamic between the two. *Afropessimism* is only concerned with the role of the Black

subject and their specific form of suffering.

In the introduction of *Red, White, and Black*, Wilderson uses the work of historian David

Eltis to investigate why Africans were chosen to be slaves in the Transatlantic slave trade.

Wilderson is interested in this question because much of the introduction is devoted to

demonstrating the flaws in a Marxist analysis of the Transatlantic slave trade, a system that

defies the normal logic of capitalism. Eltis' book, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas*,

details how the statistics show that it would have been much more lucrative for Europeans to

choose slaves from their own prisons and poorhouses given their own population numbers

(compared to Africa).

David Eltis is emphatic in his assertion that European civil society's decision not
to hunt for slaves along the banks of the Thames or other rivers in the lands of
White people or in prisons or poor houses was a bad business decision that slowed
the pace of economic development in both Europe and the "New World." Eltis
writes: "No Western European power after the Middle Ages crosses the basic
divide separating European workers from full chattel slavery. And while serfdom
fell and rose in different parts of early modern Europe and shared characteristics
with slavery, serfs were not outsiders either before or after enserfment. The phrase
'long distance serf trade' is an oxymoron."[139]

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[138] Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 3.
[139] Ibid, 13.

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It is telling that Europeans decided to use Africans as slaves because it was both a poor economic decision as well as one that defied simple logic, as Europe had a much larger population at the time. Slavery not only was genocidal in terms of the impact it had on the African population, but it was also much more costly and inefficient.

Although Wilderson does not mention it, Bacon's Rebellion is an important example of why African slaves became the preferred choice. When American colonist Nathaniel Bacon rebelled against the colonial governor of Virginia in 1675, he took up arms with former indentured servants and Africans. This incident frightened the colonial upper class to the extent that they later passed the Virginia slave codes of 1705, which meant that slavery was the primary source of labor in the colony, therefore the poor white settlers in the area had no reason to unite with Africans for a common cause. Although poor white settlers struggled, they could take comfort in the fact that they would never be relegated to the status of a slave. To Europeans, the symbolic value of slavery was worth much more than the extra costs they had to spend on the slave trade itself. Wilderson therefore contends that it is a gross misunderstanding to assume that labor and profit motive are the foundational elements of American chattel slavery.

> I raise Eltis's counterposing of the symbolic value of slavery to the economic value of slavery in order to debunk two gross misunderstandings: One is that work—or alienation and exploitation—is a constituent element of slavery. Slavery, writes Orlando Patterson, "*is the permanent, violent domination of natally alienated and generally dishonored persons*."...The other misunderstanding I am attempting to correct is the notion that the profit motive is the consideration in the slaveocracy that trumps all others. David Marriott, Saidiya Hartman, Ronald Judy, Hortense Spillers, Orlando Patterson, and Achille Mbembe have gone to considerable lengths to show that, in point of fact, slavery is and connotes an ontological status for Blackness; and that the constituent elements of slavery are not exploitation and alienation but accumulation and fungibility (as Hartman puts it): the condition of being owned and traded.[140]

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[140] Ibid, 14.

Here, one can see that Wilderson's argument in "Gramsci's Black Marx" is extended through both incorporating historical scholarship as well as the works of other important scholars within Black Studies. The use of Eltis' work in this introduction is simply one example of how Wilderson is able to effectively weave history into his theoretical framework—one which has developed considerably over time.

The rest of this chapter will be used to analyze Saidiya Hartman's books, *Lose Your Mother* and *Scenes of Subjection*, as Hartman is one of the most important authors in the Afropessimist canon and her work has had a great impact on Wilderson. While Wilderson utilizes history in his work which is based in critical theory, Hartman employs theoretical tools within her historical scholarship. Hartman's work is novel because she is trained primarily as a historian, but because her work is highly theoretical, she uses archival sources in creative ways. The main method in which she does this is through "critical fabulation," where she takes a historical source and examines it through critical theory, while also adding in fictional elements to explore the human-made gaps in the archive. This is also done through the use of auto-theory—a technique which Wilderson has utilized as well—combining theoretical insights with memoir. Critical fabulation is used within both texts as a means to combat the violence of the archive leaving out Black voices and their experiences. In *Scenes of Subjection*, it is used in order to contextualize the sources Hartman uses, reminding the author that the interviews which were done with former slaves decades after emancipation were mostly conducted by white men, which was likely a large reason why the answers that were given were so vague. In *Lose Your Mother*, critical fabulation is used to flesh out the scant details from sources on the Transatlantic slave trade in the archives in Ghana. Auto-theory is employed primarily within *Lose Your*

Mother, as Hartman shares the painful experience of being in Ghana doing research while feeling a disconnect between Black American and African experiences.

First, *Scenes of Subjection* will be analyzed, both because it is Hartman's first text and because it lays the groundwork for the way in which Wilderson conceptualizes slavery and the dynamics on the plantation. Hartman's main goal in *Scenes of Subjection* involves using various historical accounts of slavery which are peaceful at first glance and deconstructing how their underlying dynamics still retain a certain violence.

> By defamiliarizing the familiar, I hope to illuminate the terror of the mundane and quotidian rather than exploit the shocking spectacle. What concerns me here is the diffusion of terror and the violence perpetrated under the rubrics of pleasure, paternalism, and property. Consequently, the scenes of subjection examined here focus on the enactment of subjection and the constitution of the subject and include the blows delivered to Topsy and Zip Coon on the popular stage, slaves coerced to dance in the marketplace, the simulation of will in slave law, the fashioning of identity, and the processes of individuation and normalization.[141]

Much of Hartman's text is devoted to how these various scenes illustrate that the slave in particular, and the Black subject in general, are conceived of as objects which white pleasures are projected onto. This is demonstrated by slave owners often demanding that slaves dance and appear joyful in spite of their own subjugation. This demand served two purposes: it both assured the slave owner of the complete control they had over slaves, as well as pacified any guilt they had at owning a human being in the first place. If one's slave could quickly dance on command, then surely being enslaved was not that terrible?

Hartman also uses examples from those who were sympathetic toward the enslaved, but unpacks how their sympathy often did not extend to the slave as the Black subject in particular. For example, in the first chapter she describes a letter from an abolitionist named John Rankin,

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[141] Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1997), 4.

who was writing to his slaveholding brother about the evils of slavery he had witnessed at the slave auction. In doing so, he asks his brother how people could have so little empathy for others and begins to imagine his own suffering if he and his family were put in the position of the slave. While Hartman acknowledges that Rankin was attempting to be empathetic and kind in this gesture, she uses this example to unpack how the connection between "Blackness" and "slaveness" is an ontological one, as she states,

> Yet empathy in important respects confounds Rankin's efforts to identify with the enslaved because in making the slave's suffering his own, Rankin begins to feel for himself rather than for those who this exercise in imagination is presumably supposed to reach...Can the white witness of the spectacle of suffering affirm the materiality of black sentience only by feeling for himself? Does this not only exacerbate the idea that black sentience is inconceivable and unimaginable but, in the very ease of possessing the abased and enslaved body, ultimately elide an understanding and acknowledgement of the slave's pain?[142]

In this seemingly compassionate gesture, Rankin places himself and his family in the place of real slaves who were suffering, because fundamentally he cannot feel sympathy for those who are viewed as objects. To an extent, he is also appropriating the suffering of others and imagining how empathetic he would feel if he had to endure the same treatment. Rankin has compassion for himself and his family because of their human status, something which is not bestowed upon the Black enslaved subject, as any sort of compassion for them has to pass through the lens of white humanity first. Therefore, Rankin's empathy can only go so far in this scenario and does extend to the slaves as individuals.

Unsurprisingly, *Scenes of Subjection* is the text that Wilderson most frequently draws from, especially in *Red, White, and Black*. Here is the way in which Wilderson characterizes Hartman's thesis of the text,

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[142] Ibid, 19.

In examining the spectacles of the slave coffle, the plantation slave parties, the musical performances of slaves for masters, and the scenes of "intimacy" and "seduction" between Black women and White men, Saidiya Hartman illustrates how no discursive act by Blacks toward Whites or by Whites toward Blacks, from the mundane and quotidian, to the horrifying and outlandish can be disentangled from the gratuitousness of violence that structures Black suffering. This structural suffering, which undergirds the spectrum of Black life, from tender words of "love" spoken between slave women and White men to screaming at the whipping post, is imbricated in the "fungibility of the captive body." Black "fungibility" is a violence-effect that marks the difference between Black positionality and White positionality, and, as Hartman makes clear, this difference in positionality marks a difference between capacities of speech.[143]

What really intrigues Wilderson is that Hartman unveils how the dynamics between Black and white people in the antebellum period are merely more forthright examples of those same dynamics today. There is also an inherent pessimism to *Scenes of Subjection*, as it does not agree with the idea that some positive takeaway can be found in looking back at this time period and comparing it with our own.

But I think there's a certain integrationist rights agenda that subjects who are variously positioned on the color line can take up. And that project is something I consider obscene: the attempt to make the narrative of defeat into an opportunity for celebration, the desire to look at the ravages and brutality of the last few centuries, but to still find a way to feel good about ourselves…Unfortunately the kind of social revisionist history undertaken by many leftists in the 1970s, who were trying to locate the agency of dominated groups, resulted in celebratory narratives of the oppressed.[144]

The interview that that excerpt is taken from is one which also reveals how influential *Scenes of Subjection* was on Wilderson's early thinking. The idea of the Black subject being the foil for the human, Patterson's social death thesis, and the unique hardships that the Black subject has to face are all brought up within the interview.[145] Both Wilderson and Hartman are frank about how

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[143] Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 89.

[144] Frank B. Wilderson III and Saidiya Hartman, "The Position of the Unthought: An Interview with Saidiya V. Hartman, Conducted by Frank B. Wilderson III," *Qui Parle* 13, no. 2, (2003).

[145] Some have argued that this interview is the birthplace of Afropessimism itself, see Aaron Robinson, "The Year Afropessimism Hit the Streets?: A Conversation at the Edge of the World," *Literary Hub*, (2020).

the white subject's fantasies and pleasures on the plantation are forcibly animated by the Black

subject and how this is still something that happens to this day.

The last text that will be analyzed is Hartman's second book, *Lose Your Mother*. The

academic purpose of *Lose Your Mother* is to grapple with the lack of archival resources on the

Transatlantic slave trade, while knowing that millions of Africans were sold into slavery and

their voices will never be heard in the ways that they should be. While dealing with the intrinsic

violence of this, the more personal part of the book for Hartman is attempting to find some

kinship with other Africans in Ghana and finding that there is none. In fact, because of the

poverty Africans in Ghana face, they often resented her for being a "rich" American. When

talking with other Black Americans who had moved to Ghana to get away from the white

supremacy in America, Hartman finds that there is little difference there either, as she states,

> I found myself, like most members of the small community of nearly one
> thousand African-American expatriates, living on the periphery of Ghanaian
> society. It was a lonely existence even after I had grown accustomed to living *in
> country*. "When you really realize you are not African," one expatriate admitted,
> "it's the loneliest moment of your life, and if you can withstand that, you can
> make it here. It goes on being lonely, and it's how you adjust yourself to that
> loneliness that matters, not how you adjust to Africa."[146]

Although there had been attempts in the past to make Ghana a safe-haven for Black Americans,

many who stayed there long-term found that they were either resented or looked upon as

oddities. Africans also did not perceive any shared history with Black Americans, or think about

the fact that their ancestors were either able to flee from the slave trade or profit off of it. The

main reaction that Hartman received from Africans was usually bitterness at her perceived

wealth and privileged status.

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[146] Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 40.

Hartman also takes the time to analyze how the violence that was wrought in the slave trade also came at a large price for the Africans who were involved in buying and selling slaves. The families who gained great wealth in the slave trade often had little to show for in subsequent generations. This is due to multiple factors.

> In West Africa, the Atlantic slave trade intensified inequality and fueled war. Public roads were unsafe. Commoners became impoverished and endangered. The merchant princes and traders became fat. The wealth accumulated by wars and plunder and theft created aristocratic and merchant societies in which the economy was divided between subsistence and luxury. The predatory state fed upon the communities within its reach, and then the British, French, and Germans took over, carved up the territory, and made themselves the new masters. Being a "native" wasn't all that different from being a Negro. This was the terrible history with which the chief was already familiar. Ours was the mystery.[147]

Hartman also points out that cowrie shells were often used as currency in West Africa and that the Europeans viewed them as worthless, so once the trade actually ended there was no currency they had attained that had any trading value outside of the region. This too left Africans impoverished in the eyes of European settlers, which was another reason that colonization took place in Africa.

The most famous example of Hartman's theoretical tool, critical fabulation, is found in *Lose Your Mother*, where she takes a short vague note of a female slave who was murdered in the Atlantic crossing and ponders what may have happened to her in multiple scenes. Did she refuse to dance naked on the deck for the captain? Did she snub the captain and turn down his offer to share his bed? Or did she have the pox and was subsequently flogged in order to "cure" her? Hartman reconstructs these various scenarios from the female slave's point of view, forcing the reader to interact with a living person that was scarcely mentioned in the archive. There is a

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[147] Ibid, 144.

certain sort of violence in so many people suffering under the institution of slavery and yet there being so little in the archives that reflects their experiences and perspectives.

What Hartman does in this chapter is give a voice to one of the many slaves that crossed the Atlantic who never had the chance to tell their story. This is both a liberatory move and a pessimistic one, as it forces the reader to confront the antiblack structures in place at the time. Those same structures (white supremacy, patriarchy, antiblackness) all still live on in different forms today, which is the main point that Hartman's work reiterates and why her work relates so much to Afropessimism. This is the reason why Wilderson utilizes Hartman so much in his theoretical framework, as she is a cultural historian who writes about the historical realities of the Black experience and she does not come away from it with a falsely positive message or a smugness at the difference in contemporary life.

To conclude, one should not assume that every aspect of the Afropessimist canon has been thoroughly analyzed within this chapter. Wilderson and Hartman have plenty of contemporaries who do work which often parallels their own; these scholars include but are not limited to Jared Sexton, Patrice D. Douglass, Selamawit D. Terrefe, Christina Sharpe, and Tiffany Lethabo King. All have done wonderful work which analyzes different elements of the Black experience and how one can theorize it. This chapter has endeavored to thoroughly account for the main authors and ideas within Afropessimism itself, as well as demonstrate how it makes a compelling argument about how antiblack violence functions.

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