

## Ontology, Experience, and Social Death: On Frank Wilderson’s Afropessimism

Patrick O’Donnell  
OAKTON COMMUNITY COLLEGE

This is a critical discussion of Frank B. Wilderson III’s memoir-cum-manifesto *Afropessimism*. The central claim of Wilderson’s book is that Black people occupy the structural position of Slaves, and are thus subject to social death. I reconstruct and evaluate Wilderson’s argument for this claim, as well as the general methodology that underlies the argument. I also consider some of *Afropessimism*’s political upshots. Along the way I consider some complications endemic to the project of evaluating a text that is first and foremost addressed to Black audiences from the standpoint of a non-Black reader.

Section 1 outlines Afropessimism’s philosophy of Black suffering, while Section 2 focuses on the strengths of Wilderson’s book. Section 3 suggests that *Afropessimism*’s narrative and theoretical goals are sometimes at odds. Section 4 offers an extended reconstruction and criticism of Wilderson’s claim that Blackness is equivalent to Slaveness, while acknowledging the limitations of a non-Black perspective on this issue. Section 5 considers some possible political upshots of *Afropessimism* and suggests that the book’s political imagination has serious limitations. Section 6 concludes the essay by suggesting that while *Afropessimism* often falters in its arguments, it may succeed in articulating what many Black people need no argument to understand.

### 1. THE PHILOSOPHY OF BLACK SUFFERING

There is a perennial question at the heart of much Black philosophy, art, and literature: Why are Black people so persistently not recognized as human? We cannot banish this question by demonstrating what is beyond doubt, namely, that Black people belong to the same *biological* or *psychological* class as non-Black people. Rather, the question requires us to ask about the *metaphysics* of humanity, or what *ethical* status Black people hold in the community of persons. Proponents of the humanistic liberal tradition hold that Black people are indeed human, but that racist social orders have consistently failed to recognize this fact. More radical traditions, such as postcolonialism, often hold that racial domination defines more than the relations of power in a society—it defines the ontological conditions for being human at all. Following Thrasymachus, who contends in Plato’s *Republic* that justice *just is* the will of the strong over the weak, humanity *just is* whatever the powers-that-be decide it is. And since the powers-that-be at all manner of times and places have never seen fit to recognize Black people as human, there is a strict sense in which Black people are not human.

Afropessimism starts from the Thrasymachean view of humanity, pairs it with Frantz Fanon’s view of the totalizing violence that anti-Blackness visits upon Black bodies and consciousness, and pushes the consequences of this potent combination to its limits. According to Afropessimism,

Black people are not Human, but Slaves—the sentient beings in opposition to which Humanity defines itself. While slavery is a historically existing relationship, Slaveness is an ontological structural position. Black people need not be enslaved in order to be Slaves. Drawing on the seminal work of sociologist Orlando Patterson, Afropessimists contend that, as Slaves, Black people exist in the condition of *social death*. In social death, sentient beings are unable to achieve recognition as “subjects” within social and civic relations. At best, Black people are unequal *participants* in the projects of Humans, or *mere tools* for the furtherance of Human ends. At worst, Black people are *objects* or *targets* for sadistic anti-Black violence.

Social death triangulates the Black Slave via three vectors. Slaves are subjected to *gratuitous violence* divorced from actual or perceived transgression, *natal alienation* from the coherence of family structure, and *dishonor*, or a perennial state of social abjection and contempt. And since Humanity is essentially defined by its *not* being Slaveness, the very coherence of the social domain is built upon a foundation of Black suffering. Social life cannot exist without social death.

Afropessimism presents an uncompromising metaphysics even by the standards of philosophies of pessimism and nihilism. The idea that suffering without reason is the *sine qua non* of Blackness, that (anti-)Blackness is the *sine qua non* of the world itself, and that there can therefore be no possible way to compensate and redeem Black suffering fundamentally reorients the “problem” of race. The problem of race is no longer one we can satisfactorily address through *political* means. The problem is one of *ontology*. The liberation of Black people would take place in a liminal space that would be literally impossible for any politics to achieve. Black people becoming Human would signify the end of social coherence, of time, of Humanity. The desire for true Black liberation is a desire for the apocalypse.

The starkness of this philosophy has not prevented it from having a bit of a moment, from grassroots to ivory towers. Beyond its cache in the academy, Afropessimistic themes appear in the work of critically acclaimed bestselling authors such as Claudia Rankine and Ta-Nehisi Coates. The internet is replete with Afropessimistic analyses of high-profile pop culture such as Ryan Coogler’s *Black Panther* and Childish Gambino’s “This is America.” There are indications that the worldview has captured the minds of inquisitive young people in the form of self-published social media. If you happen to debate competitively at the high-school or collegiate level, a working knowledge of Afropessimism is rapidly becoming a requirement for success. In a time in which the problem of Black suffering has truly hit the non-Black mainstream, Afropessimism promises to reveal the horrific and irresolvable depths of that suffering.

### 2. FRANK WILDERSON’S AFROPESSIMISM

Wilderson’s *Afropessimism* takes bold strides into this moment. Alongside scholars such as Hortense Spillers, Saidiyah Hartman, and Jared Sexton, Wilderson can lay claim to developing the philosophy of Afropessimism—he is even credited with coining the term.<sup>1</sup> *Afropessimism*, a manifesto within a memoir, is an impressive yet flawed experiment that attempts to anchor the theoretical edifice of

Afropessimism within the narrative of a remarkable life. As a memoir, the book charts Wilderson's gradual intellectual journey from Catholic boy to Marxist radical to resigned Afropessimist, and how that journey has been formed by his own lived experience. As a manifesto, the book aims to establish Afropessimism as a "meta-theory" of the politics of liberation. It also aims to explain how the "assumptive logics" of "Marxism, postcolonialism, psychoanalysis, and feminism" are rooted in an inability or refusal to grasp the depth and uniqueness of Black suffering (14).

According to Wilderson, these discourses fail to understand the fundamental relationship between Black suffering and social order. If Blackness is the condition of social death, then Black existence is rooted in "a condition of suffering for which there is no imaginable strategy for redress—no narrative of social, political, or national redemption" (15). Insofar as Black people are not "subjects" within these narratives, their role is to serve as "structurally inert props, implements for the execution of white and non-Black fantasies and sadomasochistic pleasures" (15). Black bodies are simultaenously sites for the fulfillment of non-Blacks' political and erotic desires and the mass of flesh upon which ghastly spectacles of violence are enacted. Within this by turns "Negrophilic" and "Negrophobic" libidinal economy, Black suffering is the lifeblood of the social order.

*Afropessimism* is an engrossing, well-told story. Among other things, the narrative spans Wilderson's childhood in an affluent, practically all-white neighborhood of Minneapolis in the 1960s, being suspended from and subsequently reinstated to Dartmouth, being in a relationship with a revolutionary lover who changed his life, getting schooled on racial politics in South Africa in the 1990s while waiting tables at an Italian restaurant, engaging in aboveground and guerilla political struggle in Johannesburg, finding revolutionary clarity during Edward Said's office hours, experiencing a nervous breakdown during a conversion experience from Marxism to Afropessimism, and culminating in a wrenching epilogue in which Wilderson watches his mother—an accomplished psychologist, and no pessimist—succumb to dementia.

Wilderson's expertise in film reveals itself here in the form of careful pacing and directorial *savoir faire*. He knows just when to switch scenes, when to drop and pick up a narrative thread, and when to reintroduce a leitmotif. He is also a writer with a deeply poetic sensibility and an attentive observer capable of crafting descriptions of remarkable clarity. More than once I was stopped in my tracks by a phrase or paragraph that I needed to read again, say aloud, and ponder in silence. And while no one may *experience* Black suffering quite like Black people, Wilderson's talents allow him to render a painfully sharp phenomenological account of what it is like to recognize oneself as Black in a thoroughly anti-Black world, to realize that one is, as Fanon puts it, "an object in the midst of other objects."

On a theoretical level, the chief value of *Afropessimism* lies in its interpretation of Black suffering and social vulnerability as first and foremost a problem of *ontology*. Wilderson's admirable clarity on this point is a welcome

perspective in a debate which often frames the problem of Black suffering as fundamentally cultural, political, or economic while shuffling unstated ontological assumptions into the background. *Afropessimism* is also worth reading for its unforgiving questioning of humanist, liberal, and progressive orthodoxies about the causes and remedies of racial oppression. Optimists should test their views against Wilderson's perspective, and the book should serve to temper the complacency and self-satisfaction one often finds in these quarters. If "civil society is a murderous juggernaut of murderous vengeance void of contingency, trial, or debate" for Black people, and "violence without sanctuary is the *sine qua non* of Blackness" (161), Black suffering presents an existential problem that can never be reconciled by the strategies of humanist meliorism.

To this extent, *Afropessimism* is a welcome addition to philosophies of pessimism more generally. Admirers of pessimism know it to be a philosophy in which depth of thought is often inseparable from depth of feeling. The great pessimists tend to feel the weight of the world more acutely than most, and it is this melancholic depth which allows them to push ever more deeply into those thoughts that would offend, depress, or terrify those less sensitive to the world's horror. Pessimists are always "glad" to meet a fellow sufferer (more accurately, a fellow sufferer who *knows* they are a fellow sufferer), and they should find one in Wilderson, a writer with both the hard head and the tragic heart of a pessimist.

Yet from a pessimistic point of view, it is perhaps fitting that a book of such depth and power should also have correspondingly serious flaws. The back cover of *Afropessimism* features encomia from a number of well-respected authors, and each blurb reflects a common challenge: "you may not agree with this book, but it's important to read it and articulate where you think it goes wrong." Here goes. *Afropessimism* falters in two major places. First, the narrative and the theory don't always mix together well. Second, the book's central theoretical claims are undermotivated, oversold, and almost certainly false.

### 3. NARRATIVE AND THEORY

*Afropessimism* suffers from frequent dissociation between the narrational and theoretical goals of the book. First, in contrast to the flowing, pensive narrative, much of the theoretical meat of *Afropessimism* is doled out within the boxy steel cubes of post-structuralist jargon. It is simply jarring to find the same writer dropping the remarkable phrase "Birds strafed the sun like a fist of pepper in the last good eye of God" (51) at just the right place in a tense moment, and later artlessly explaining that "my writing must be indexical of that which exceeds narration, while being ever mindful of the incomprehension that the writing would foster, the failure, that is, of interpretation were the indices ever to escape the narrative" (246). When he switches into theory mode, Wilderson often gives into the all-too-academic temptation to use a \$25 word for a \$5 concept. This is all the more puzzling when we remember that the former were supposed to make the latter *more* precise, and that Wilderson's lyrical style would have been more than adequate to the task of conceptual explication in any case.

Second, and more seriously, there are times when the *logic* of the narrative clashes with the logic of the theory. For instance, Wilderson argues that humanist politics presupposes an optimistic narrative structure that leads from dispossession to struggle to eventual redemption, but this narrative coherence is not available to Black people. Drawing on a seminal essay by Hortense Spillers, Wilderson argues: "The narrative arc of the slave who is *Black* (unlike the generic slave who may be of any race) is *not a narrative arc at all*, but a flat line of 'historical stillness': a flat line that 'moves' from disequilibrium to a moment in the narrative of faux-equilibrium, to disequilibrium restored and/or rearticulated" (226).

Note that from a pessimistic point of view, it is not clear that the pseudo-progression from "disequilibrium to a moment in the narrative of faux-equilibrium, to disequilibrium restored" is unique to slave narratives. After all, such is life (squalid birth, meager satisfaction, boundless disappointment, annihilating death). Nevertheless, this claim about the uniqueness of Black slave narratives allows Wilderson to unite three core claims: 1) that Black people lie "outside" the narrative framework that humanistic optimism presupposes, 2) that Black people are subject to an eternal recurrence in which the same forms of violence and dispossession ("disequilibrium") accrue to Black people over time, and 3) that no moment of "equilibrium" will ever redeem or compensate Black suffering.

Yet, the appearance of this claim is strange in what is ultimately a memoir. Curiously, Wilderson describes this dynamic disequilibrium-faux-equilibrium-disequilibrium structure as a "flat line of historical stillness." And while the story that Wilderson tells in the narrative is not quite one of redemption, it is also not a "flat line." Stuff happens in a coherent narrative order, with the resolutions and denouements which characterize any story with a point. The theoretical conception of Slave time thus seems to undermine the logic of a memoir told from the perspective of a Slave (as Wilderson identifies himself in the acknowledgments.) Wilderson might claim that this performative contradiction between theory and narrative is one of the work's many irresolvable "paradoxes" that we must "sit with," but it really is not. Here are some options: 1) Wilderson is a Slave and therefore can have no narrative arc; 2) Wilderson is not a Slave and therefore does have a narrative arc; 3) Wilderson's claims about the Black Slave having no narrative arc are false, true in some trivial sense, or inapplicable to the current narrative. The first claim seems flatly false (after all, we can *read* the narrative!), but for reasons we will discuss in the next section, I'd bet that claims 2 and/or 3 are true.

The point here is not that this theory of Slave time is false or uninteresting. Rather, it is that the tension that claim generates in *Afropessimism* is less a symptom of an irresolvable paradox at the heart of Black experience, and more a symptom of Wilderson overplaying his hand in an attempt to bridge theory and memoir. Another indication of the tenuous coherence of that experiment is Wilderson's propensity to repeat certain phrases and paragraphs nearly verbatim throughout the book. This might be an intentional meta-comment on the recurring narrative flatness of Slave time, but it just as easily might not.

#### 4. ARE BLACK PEOPLE SLAVES?

Let's turn our attention to the metaphysical theory of Blackness that *Afropessimism* presents. Is that theory defensible on its own terms? It's hard to tell from the book itself. Despite the provocative nature of its central claims, *Afropessimism* does not attempt to *argue* for many of those claims at all. In Wilderson's hands, they take on the status of *a priori* truths, or of axiomatic constraints on what an acceptable theory of Black suffering would be. Yet, it is precisely because so much rides on the truth of those claims that one would hope to see arguments for them, and not only reflections on what implications their *possible* truth would have for Black liberation, Marxism, post-colonialism, feminism, etc.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, readers (especially non-Black readers) might ask themselves whether it is fair to expect an *argument* from Wilderson. As in Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, many of Wilderson's theoretical claims are rooted in direct experience of being Black in an anti-Black world. If Wilderson is correct that Black suffering and susceptibility to anti-Black violence are phenomenologically unique, at least some of the evidence for the truth of *Afropessimism* is only accessible and appreciable from a Black perspective. This in itself does not mean that there are no arguments that can be marshalled against this philosophy, but non-Black readers in particular would do well to treat some of Wilderson's phenomenological claims with an appropriate degree of moral deference.

Yet, *Afropessimism* is clearly not only a reflection on how the world "seems" from a Black perspective. Wilderson also tries to paint an accurate picture of the social world, and he argues that the accuracy of this picture makes pessimism a rational attitude. To that extent, the book is partially aimed at rational persuasion, and not only at a rhetorical appeal to common experience. This section attempts to reconstruct an argument for Wilderson's central claims and suggests that the argument fails. I then turn to some more general concerns about Wilderson's methodology in the book.

Let's start with the basic claim that Black people are Slaves. Wilderson goes so far as to say that "Blackness cannot exist as other than Slaveness" (229). One way of putting that claim is that all Black people (necessarily) occupy the same structural position in the social order, and that position is (necessarily) characterized by vulnerability to the experiences characteristic of social death. Note that this is much stronger than saying that Black people are especially *vulnerable* to certain harmful experiences. That much is uncontroversial. Wilderson's controversial claim is this: the harmful experiences to which Black people are vulnerable share an *essential property* in common that no other form of experience shares. It is not simply that Black people's diverse experiences of suffering have a "family resemblance" with one another. Rather, these experiences constitute a *kind* which shares a common underlying "grammar of violence."

In evaluating this claim, it is worth considering in more detail the nature of the connection between structural position, lived experience, and social death. First, does sharing the same structural position entail having

“essentially the same” sorts of experiences? Second, does a purported “essential similarity” in experiences across Black people provide *evidence* that Black people occupy the same structural position? Third, do Black people’s experiences necessarily take place in the context of social death? Wilderson presupposes that the answer to all three of these is “yes.” Yet, there are reasons to be skeptical.

First, consider the idea that structural position entails essential similarity in lived experience. It is already controversial to assert that Black people *qua* Black people occupy the same structural position in the social order, not least because there are multiple social orders and multiple ways that Black people are embedded within them. But let’s set that aside. Even *if* all Black people occupy the same structural position, it does not follow that the individuals who occupy that position will have much *else* in common at the level of lived experience. For example, Marxists sometimes contend that everyone who must work for a living is technically part of the “working class.” It may even be the case that to occupy this position is to suffer *exploitation*. Yet, a comfortably upper-middle class tenured philosophy professor fifteen years shy of their retirement goals is not embedded within the dynamics of capitalism in precisely the same way as a quasi-homeless door-to-door salesman. The professor is largely spared the debilitating experiences and life trajectories that accompany exploitation, and their comfortable position is even *made possible* by exploited labor. The salesman is far less sheltered from these experiences, and largely *is* exploited labor. Occupying a structural position, even one that has a generalizable connection to oppression, often tells us little about the texture of individual lives that labor under that oppression. This diversity is not surprising. After all, structural positions don’t have lived experiences; people occupying those positions do, and their experiences are affected by much more than their structural position. Similarly, even if every Black person occupies the “Slave” position, it doesn’t follow that all Blacks necessarily have much in common at the level of experience. To take an extreme example, Barack Obama and Mumia Abu-Jamal are both targeted by anti-Blackness, but the two men’s life experiences are not readily comparable.

Of course, Wilderson is aware that Black people have diverse experiences. Yet, Wilderson contends that the surface diversity in Black peoples’ experiences has an underlying “logic” or “grammar” of violence that makes these experiences essentially similar on a deeper level. Readers may be surprised to discover that the experiences that share in this grammar of violence include not only slavery, lynching, incarceration, genocide, and rape, but also microaggressions, inquisitive white people, dirty looks, religion, leftist politics, and skepticism about Afropessimism. What entitles Wilderson to the claim that these diverse experiences have an essential similarity?

Wilderson’s response is that all these experiences have a similar *functional role* within a broader economy of pleasure and power that allows non-Black people to achieve “confirmation of Human existence” (219). These experiences are products of Humans’ projects to define their identity in contrast to Slaves. The question then

becomes whether these diverse experiences play the “same role” in this project.

Here is where the authority of Black experience comes in. In chapter 5, Wilderson finds himself in a breakout session at an academic conference on race in which Black attendees discussed their experiences out of the earshot of non-Black attendees. Freed from the burden of analogizing Black suffering to that of other people of color, “I was able to see and feel how comforting it was for a room full of Black people to move between the spectacle of police violence, to the banality of microaggressions at work in the classroom, to experiences of chattel slavery as if the time and intensity of all three were the same” (205). Wilderson maintains that, while no one in the room presumes these to be literally equivalent, the discussion reflected “a collective recognition that the time and space of chattel slavery shares essential aspects with the time and space, the violence, of our modern lives” (205).

Yet, it is unclear what evidence this exchange is supposed to provide for the claim “Black people are Slaves.” Let’s first bracket the complication that no one alive today has ever had a firsthand experience of American chattel slavery, and so even an experientially informed Black perspective can render no authoritative judgment on what “essential aspect” it might share with casual disrespect in the workplace. More important is that this exchange demonstrates that the assertion of an underlying sameness in Black people’s diverse experiences over time is not actually *evidence* for the claim that Black people occupy the position of Slaves. Why not? Because it only makes sense to think of Black experiences of the brutality of chattel slavery and Black experiences of microaggressive social contempt as sharing “essential aspects” if you are *already* prepared to treat Black people’s structural position in 1852 as “essentially the same” as Black people’s structural position in 2020.

To throw this underlying circularity into relief, let’s summarize: Wilderson claims that all Black people have the same structural position (Slaveness.) Occupying this position makes it the case that Black people are vulnerable to the same harms, and the harms to which they are vulnerable share an “essential similarity.” If the considerable variation among Black people’s experiences or vulnerabilities to those harms is pointed out, Wilderson can claim that this indicates mere “surface” diversity that masks an underlying essential “grammar of violence” that unites those experiences.

When we ask why we would think that all these experiences (from chattel slavery to microaggressions) share in this selfsame grammar of violence, Wilderson has two answers: 1) Black people just *know* that these experiences share in this grammar through direct experience of anti-Black racism, and 2) Black people always have the same structural position, and this structural position entails essential similarity in experience. I’ve suggested that 1) may be true in a qualified or metaphorical sense. Yet, 2) renders Wilderson’s defense of “Black people are Slaves” explicitly circular, because the assertion of “essential sameness” among Black peoples’ diverse experiences is



both evidence for and implication of the claim that Black people share the same structural position.

Perhaps this circularity is nonvicious. If Wilderson is correct that Black people always occupy the condition of social death, and are forever alienated from counting as full “subjects of relations,” then the idea that Black people’s suffering constitutes a common grammar is on stronger grounds. Yet again, the claim that Black people are socially dead is too strong. This is not to deny what every person who is not in willful denial should see: Black people are demonstrably and especially vulnerable to state violence without sanction, mass incarceration, social contempt, interpersonal racism, economic dispossession, and political silencing. This calls out for social explanation and diverse strategies for redress. Yet, it is one thing to say that being Black at a certain time and place makes one *especially vulnerable* to these harms. It is another to say that the harms to which Black people are made vulnerable are, in all times and places, and in every case, harms which arise from the condition of social death.

Wilderson’s account simply ignores this distinction. And despite the horrific and consistent institutional failure to understand and address Black oppression in the twenty-first century, there’s little reason to think that Black people occupy the condition of social death. For one thing, it discounts the investment that many modern social orders have in recognizing Black people as subjects. Representation of Black people in politics, the creative arts, academia, sports, the police, military, and so on all give the lie to the notion that Black people are socially dead. For these reasons, Orlando Patterson, who originally coined the concept of social death, unequivocally denies that unenslaved Black people still occupy that condition. Again, we can recognize that Black people are full subjects while also acknowledging the depth and ubiquity of anti-Black racism.

This brings us to the matter of *Afropessimism’s* troubling methodology. Wilderson often fails to recognize a distinction between *inferiorizing representations* of Black people in the “collective unconscious” and *actual facts* about the Black people represented. This is a consequence of the radically conventionalist or Thrasymachean view of humanity we described at the outset. In the hands of the powerful, the myths about Black people become the truth about Black people. Yet, the conventionalist perspective is not forced upon us. Universal belief in a fairy tale doesn’t make the tale true, and the same goes for the tenets of anti-Black racism.

To this extent, *Afropessimism* is a paradigmatic example of what Barbara and Karen Fields have identified as *racecraft*.<sup>3</sup> For Fields and Fields, “race,” like “witch,” is a concept without extension. While both these concepts can fuel oppressive practices from sham trials to lynchings, the existence of those practices does not manage to “construct” race as something real. Fields and Fields thus part ways with the standard social constructionist line in philosophy of race, according to which social practices involving race lend race a social rather than biological reality. Racism and race are both “social constructions” in some sense, but they belong

to different classes. While racism is a “social construction” in the same way religions, murder, and genocide are, race is a “social construction” in the way witches and the causal power of the evil eye are. The former are concrete human social practices, but the latter’s “existence” is a mirage sustained by the widespread acceptance of particularly destructive myths.

For Fields and Fields, it is the failure to recognize this distinction, and the assumption that race is in any sense *real* that generates racecraft: the various sleights-of-hand by which the causal power of something real (racism, power, violence) is taken as *evidence* for the causal power of something which is in no sense real (race, the objects of myth.) In *Afropessimism*, this sleight-of-hand appears in Wilderson’s confidence that the historical contingency of what was and is *done* to Black people becomes something that *essentially defines* Black people. Forever entrapped within social death, Black people become “structurally inert props,” “implements,” “slaves,” “objects,” beings with no “self to be violated.”

It might be possible to tell a plausible story about how historically contingent anti-Black practices manage to construct an ahistorically subsisting abject structural position for Black people. Yet, Wilderson nowhere succeeds in doing so in the book. Consider one attempt. As his “mind abstracted in ever-widening concentric circles,” Wilderson concludes that, since nineteenth-century courts often did not recognize Black slaves’ right to bodily and personal property, Black people *everywhere* “are a species of sentient beings that cannot be injured or murdered, for that matter, for we are dead to the world” (198-99). Between premise and conclusion is a dizzying series of nonsequiturs. Of course, we shouldn’t expect this argument to work. What a nineteenth-century court *thought* about Black slaves couldn’t be less relevant to whether or not enslaved humans are actually injured when they are tortured or actually murdered when they are unjustly killed. What a nineteenth-century court thought is even more obviously irrelevant to whether or not Black people could be injured or murdered in the fourteenth century, or can be in the twenty-first. Wilderson’s racecraft often transforms historical contingencies of racism into the ontological necessity of race.

Finally, even if you are antecedently convinced of Wilderson’s uncompromising claims, the narrative structure of *Afropessimism* shows what unfortunate aesthetic consequences you should be prepared to live with. Packaging Black people in all their diversity under the ahistorical rubric of Slaveness gives Wilderson license to draw dramatic analogies between his own experiences and mythic paradigms of anti-Blackness. A moment when young Frank accidentally draws blood from a chubby, unpopular white playmate in an affluent Minneapolis neighborhood becomes the Fanonian moment in which the denigrated Black colonized subject shatters the illusion of the white colonizer’s omnipotence. A presentation poorly received by a room full of non-Black academics becomes akin to a lynching, in which Wilderson is expected to suffer horribly while absolving his tormentors. A contentious relationship between Frank, his lover, and a cloying, unstable white

neighbor becomes an extended meditation on how Frank and his lover bear essentially the same relationship to the neighbor as did Black slaves' constant vulnerability to the violent pleasures of their masters. (In fairness, while the analogy still strikes me as fraught, this last episode is the catalyst for a nightmarish cycle of anti-Black racism, conspiracy, and fugitivity which Wilderson relates at length across some of the book's most compelling pages.)

In light of the aforementioned moral deference non-Blacks often owe to Black people, these are especially tricky criticisms to make. Perhaps I morally err simply in making them. Yet, sometimes a philosophical view fails to add up not because it is logically incoherent, but because it bends under the weight of its unreasonable implications. If being Black itself necessitates the lived experiences characteristic of social death, practically every moment of suffering, as long as it is experienced by a Black person, can license a comparison to horror in extremis. Early on, I took Wilderson's frequent comparisons between comparatively mundane experience and paradigmatic anti-Blackness to be a bit of wry irony, the kind of self-consciously hyperbolic gallows humor that is the sweetness around the bitter pill of pessimist wisdom. The gradual revelation that Wilderson is a narrator too earnest for such small pleasures represents, at least to this reader, another shortcoming of the book.

## 5. THE POLITICS OF AFROPESSIMISM

Finally, it is worth discussing the political upshots of *Afropessimism*, and how the book "reads" within our current political moment. Wilderson's own political stance is clear enough in its broad outlines: Black liberation requires the total destruction of the existing relation between Slaves and Humans. In one of the book's more hopeful moments, Wilderson grants that "social death," like class and gender, can be overcome, since it is ultimately "constructed by the violence and imagination of other sentient beings." Overcoming social death, however, is necessarily apocalyptic: "The first step toward the destruction is to assume one's position . . . and then burn the ship or the plantation, in its past and present incarnations, from the inside out" (103). *Afropessimism* proposes a political ethic for those *outside* politics, whose engagement with the political would signify the end of politics as we know it.

Wilderson's political vision is a "grenade without a pin" or a "looter's creed" which strives to bring about the Fanonian "end of the world" (174). Yet, if your politics requires you to "burn the ship or the plantation . . . from the inside out" with yourself inside, you should be *extremely* sure that this politics is rooted in a true and comprehensive vision of Black people's situation in the world. Pinless grenades and looter's creeds can fall into anyone's hands. They can harm countless bystanders. Their volatility makes them unpredictable. What if the theoretical conceits of *Afropessimism* not only fail to bring about the end of the world, but give succor to projects dedicated to making an already awful anti-Black world worse? Ironically, those with reactionary anti-Black politics, or those in thrall to the magic of whiteness and convinced of the subhumanity of Blackness, should appreciate the work that Wilderson accomplishes here. In fascist hands, a claim like "it is absolutely necessary for Blacks to be castrated, raped,

genitally mutilated and violated, beaten, shot, and maimed" (219) in order for non-Blacks to achieve "confirmation of Human existence" is just the sort of work a society running on the myth of Black inhumanity and subpersonhood requires.

More predictably, *Afropessimism* takes aim at leftist coalitional, solidarity-based, and intersectional politics. It is not just that historically existing forms of socialism, feminism, and multiculturalism have left Black people out (which they often have). Rather, in Wilderson's mind, these forms of politics *terrorize* Black people simply by positing analogies and similarities among diverse forms of Black and non-Black oppression (220). The monolithic view of Blackness *Afropessimism* presents seems to have little room for the idea that Black people are lots of things *besides* Black, and that their interests and concerns are often formed in ways similar to non-Blacks' interests. To be sure, we should mark a distinction between Wilderson's politics and misappropriations of his vision. Yet, if Black people are literally *terrorized* by working-class struggle, multicultural coalitions, immigration rights, feminism, and other forms of counter-hegemonic politics, one might wonder why Black liberation strategies should bother accommodate the stated interests of people who are, in addition to Black, queer, religious, anti-capitalist, female, poor, immigrant, working class, indigenous, and/or incarcerated.

Those sympathetic to Wilderson might suggest that Black people have little to lose by abandoning solidarity-based politics. Yet, not-so-ancient history suggests that there may be higher stakes here. As Paul Ortiz has recently demonstrated, many of the material, political, social, and symbolic gains for Black and Latinx people throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were generated by an emancipatory internationalism that drew explicit analogies between Black and non-Black freedom struggles.<sup>4</sup> The United States' interest in slavery, of course, first and foremost oppressed Black people. Yet, because slavery was so deeply interwoven with the oppression of non-Black people as well (in the form of Indian removal and extermination, violent expropriation of Mexican land in a war to expand slavery, etc.), Black and non-Black abolitionists were able to engage the problem of Black oppression not in isolation, but with a view to how it undergirded a more generally unacceptable social order. Of course, just because solidarity was a useful tool for achieving *those* political goals doesn't mean it will work *now*. Nevertheless, in a time when Black oppression has once again become one of the clearest symptoms of a more broadly unacceptable social order, perhaps it is wise to remember this emancipatory spirit.

Finally, one wouldn't think that a political imaginary that at first seems so radical would be so amenable to the status quo. Wilderson suggests that his view of the fundamental distinctiveness of Black suffering extends "the critique of neoliberalism," and registers surprise that leftists do not welcome his perspective (182). Yet, it is just as easy to see *Afropessimism's* performative transcendence of the political as *embracing* a neoliberal class politics. The book's simplistic social ontology and monolithic conception of violence makes each Black person into All Black People, thus aiding a crucial neoliberal elision: even

if Wilderson draws no essential distinction in station and suffering among Black people, the market certainly does and will continue to do so. *Afropessimism's Sturm und Drang* is often a pleasure to explore, but it fits right in with a masochistic cultural moment that cedes the floor to public proclamations of suffering and rituals of deference to it while simultaneously cordoning off these performances from any political will to eradicate the causes of such suffering in the first place. Performing catharsis itself may be a political act, but it is increasingly one whose relation to subversive strategies is not always clear. Whether had by feminists, anti-racists, anti-capitalists, or *Afropessimists*, the small pleasures of lamentation do not threaten. One imagines the dominant social order quoting Nietzsche to itself: "What are my parasites to me?, it might say, 'may they live and prosper: I am strong enough for that!'"<sup>5</sup>

In a final irony, perhaps *Afropessimism* is not pessimistic enough. We occupy a stultifying political moment whose routines have been so corporatized that even avowed anti-racists must negotiate racism roughly the same way a human resources department must negotiate an unruly employee: correct, cancel, or cash in, depending on what the cost-benefit analysis says. As a result, self-congratulatory anti-bias training, identification with the "right side of history" (on which side of course can be found the most "socially conscious" brand-name corporations), underclass tourism, performative wokeness, cyclical rituals of call out and contrition, and perhaps a "diversity initiative" here and there seem to be the only intellectual and practical tools current institutions are willing to raise against the nexus of racial and socioeconomic oppression. Wilderson of course recognizes that racism is a deep feature of the social order, and so is rightly pessimistic about the efficacy of the usual "anti-racist" tools. But he may be right for the wrong reason: pessimism about the end of racism isn't warranted because Black suffering necessarily anchors the world; it's warranted because it is nigh-impossible to imagine a future world so thoroughly reorganized around the well-being of the dispossessed that racism and anti-racism themselves have ceased to be useful strategies for consolidating and protecting elite power and wealth. Perhaps this is the source of the unsettling feeling that Wilderson's tools might simply be retrofitted to the neoliberal apparatus. The content of Wilderson's version of *Afropessimism* makes it a stranger cousin than most, but its uptake in the mainstream may signal neoliberal politics as usual: a lucrative but politically impotent brokerage relationship between elites willing to monetize Black suffering and its supposed antidote, and the audiences happy to consume both.<sup>6</sup>

## 6. CONCLUSION

The Spanish pessimist Miguel de Unamuno once pointed out that "the baneful consequences of a doctrine may prove, at best, that the doctrine is baneful, but not that it is false."<sup>7</sup> It is indeed an admirable feature of pessimisms the world over that they are bold enough to entertain the notion that the darkest, most alienating, most anti-human possibilities might be true, baneful consequences be damned. *Afropessimism* is no exception, and readers should be grateful for Wilderson's deep, sobering perspective. Yet, in this critical discussion, I have tried to show that the consequences of Wilderson's view are baneful, and that the

view itself is undermotivated and very likely false. Precisely because *Afropessimism's* possibilities are so baneful, the argumentative stakes are high. Extreme claims require considerable substantiation, and *Afropessimism* fails to accomplish that work.

But yet again, perhaps I should be more pessimistic about my own ability to engage these views. As a non-Black reader, I am simply not part of the audience *Afropessimism* is really meant to address. Wilderson claims that the lifeblood of *Afropessimism* is "the imaginations of Black people on the ground, and the intellectual labors of Black people in revolt," and that his own work is merely a theoretical articulation of what "Black people at their best" already know (173). In a cinematic retelling of a poorly received presentation in Berlin, Wilderson tells a room full of non-Black academics: "I'm not talking to anyone in this room. Ever. When I talk, I'm talking to Black people. I'm just a parasite on the resources I need to do work for Black liberation" (187). Toward the end of the book, he listens as a young Black woman tearfully describes how his class has given her a vocabulary to account for the resentment she holds for her white mother and Asian-American boyfriend: "they are all embodiments of capacity, and capacity is an offense" (333). Passages like this effectively establish choir and preacher, and the choir probably didn't get to where they are because someone gave them a convincing *argument*.

The rest of us may console ourselves with Wilderson's often poignant narrative, but otherwise there's no way in. Perhaps it is for people better placed than I to pick up what Wilderson is putting down. Perhaps many of Wilderson's readers will already know something I don't, by virtue of walking a path I could never walk. Perhaps the fact that people like me just don't get it is one of the highest compliments that can be paid to this book. Yet, if you are one of the many readers who does not already experience the truth of *Afropessimism* in your bones, *Afropessimism* simply shouldn't change your mind.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to Mohamed Mehdi, Dwayne Tunstall, and Stephen Ferguson for helpful comments that greatly improved this discussion.

## NOTES

1. Some terminological clarification is in order. The italicized "*Afropessimism*" denotes Wilderson's book. From here forward, the non-italicized "*Afropessimism*" will denote Wilderson's own theoretical commitments. Unless explicitly noted, my summary and criticism of "*Afropessimism*" should be understood to be about Wilderson's particular views as they appear in *Afropessimism*, and not the philosophy of *Afropessimism* as it has been developed by other thinkers.
2. To this extent, readers seeking a more theoretically straightforward introduction to *Afropessimism* would be better off with Wilderson et al., *Afro-pessimism: An Introduction*.
3. Fields and Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life*.
4. Ortiz, *An African American and Latinx History of the United States*.
5. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 72.
6. For more on the problem of elite capture of counter-hegemonic political strategies and goals, and on the political possibilities within this matrix, see Olúfemi O. Táiwò's excellent recent pieces, "Identity Politics and Elite Capture," and "Power over the Police."
7. Quoted in Dienstag, *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit*, x.

## REFERENCES

- Dienstag, Joshua Foa. *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Richard Philcox. Grove Press, 2008.
- Fields, Karen E., and Barbara Jeanne Fields. *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life*. Verso Trade, 2014.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. Vintage, 1967.
- Ortiz, Paul. *An African American and Latinx History of the United States*. Vol. 4. Beacon Press, 2018.
- Patterson, Orlando. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study, With a New Preface*. Harvard University Press, 2018.
- Plato. *The Republic of Plato*. Edited and translated by Allan Bloom. Basic Books, 2016.
- Spillers, Hortense J. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." In *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*, 203–29. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003.
- Táíwò, Olufemi O. "Identity Politics and Elite Capture." *Boston Review*, May 7, 2020. Accessed June 24, 2020, <https://bostonreview.net/race/olufemi-o-taiwo-identity-politics-and-elite-capture>.
- . "Power over the Police." *Dissent*. June 12, 2020. Accessed June 24, 2020, [https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online\\_articles/power-over-the-police](https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/power-over-the-police).
- Wilderson III, Frank B. *Afropessimism*. Liveright Publishing, 2020.
- Wilderson III, Frank B., Saidiya Hartman, Steve Martinot, J. Sexton, and Hortense J. Spillers. *Afro-pessimism: An Introduction*. Minneapolis, MN: Racked & Dispatched, 2017.