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ALSO BY FRANK B. WILDERSON III

Incognegro: A Memoir of Exile and Apartheid

Red, White & Black:

Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms

Afropessimism



FRANK B. WILDERSON III



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Names and other potentially identifying characteristics of some people in this book have been changed. Some people depicted are composites.

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To Anita Wilkins, for your love.

*To Drs. Ida-Lorraine and Frank B. Wilderson, Jr.,
for molding my mind.*

To Assata Shakur and Winnie Mandela, for everything.

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CHAPTER FIVE

The Trouble with Humans

1

In her meditation on slave women who had been raped, Saidiya Hartman impugned a thesis of the Marxist I held most dear, Antonio Gramsci, the father of cultural studies. She interrogated his theory of consent and, by extension, hegemony.* She argued, by way of case studies on the rape of Black women who had tried to prosecute their rapists (their masters) in a court of law, that the collective unconscious, *as well as the conscious discourse of nineteenth century legal statutes*, did not recognize consent as a possession of the slave. *Rape*, as a mode of injury, simply had no way of being translated when sexual violence against Black women was being adjudicated: there was no crime because there was no violation of consent. There was no violation of consent because consent was not a possession of a slave but an “extension of the master’s prerogative.” To be absurdist but no less correct, one would never say to an individual seen crushing an empty water

* *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America.*

bottle, "Did that water bottle consent to the way you are treating it?" What happens to the bottle of water is an extension of the prerogative of its owner. I read that book in the way that Hartman wanted it to be read: not as an account of history but as an allegory of the present. "I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world," Fanon writes, "and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects." In other words, Fanon tries to see himself as a subject, one imbued with the capacities of other subjects (consent being a key endowment). But Fanon is slapped upside the head with Hartman's lesson: he is not imbued with Human capacities. He would not be quite as shocked to learn that, as a worker, he lacked the capacity of a capitalist. All he need do is look at his bank account and his lack of ownership vis-à-vis the means of economic production. In other words, to face the realization that one is a worker and not a capitalist is far less traumatic than the realization that one is Black, a Slave, and not a Human. The former revelation is not nearly as traumatic as one in which the sentient being wakes up to find that she has no capacities for Human production; and, furthermore, comes to understand that just as economic production is parasitic on the labor power of the working class, the production of Human capacity is parasitic on the flesh of the Slave, the Black. As one must have capital (or natural resources) to be a capitalist, one must have a variety of *capacities* to be a Human being: consent is one of them. And this is vouchsafed by one's relationship to violence. The point that must be constantly repeated is that the Slave's/Black's relationship to violence bears no *essential* analogy to the Human's relationship to violence, even when those Human subjects represent extremely abused and degraded members of the Human family.

There's a television series that (unwittingly) drives this point home. It's called *Homeland*, and it's about the trials and tribulations

of a mentally ill, bipolar CIA officer named Carrie Mathison. In one episode her cover is that of an investigative journalist who convinces the nephew of an Afghan Taliban leader that she can get him out of Islamabad and help him find safe haven in England. She convinces him that the two of them must stay holed up in a secret apartment for three days as transport is being arranged for his safe passage. It's all a lie. She's really using him as bait to lure his uncle into a trap, that she might assassinate his uncle. In point of fact, the apartment is a CIA safe house in which Carrie holds this young man captive. She then proceeds to seduce him; he thinks they are in the throes of some sort of love affair that is overdetermined by mutual consent.

In other words, he doesn't know that he is being raped . . . repeatedly raped . . . that his consent to this sex has been abrogated by the very structure of the conditions in which the sex takes place. It is a rape scenario because the sex that he mistakes for mutual attraction is really a series of multiple acts of aggression in which his consent has been eviscerated completely. The gun the White woman holds to his head needn't be in her hand. In fact, the gun she holds to his head is not one weapon but the weapons of three million soldiers in uniform and their arsenal of drones and technologies of death. She forces sex upon him through her capacity; the capacity that her white skin embodies. Another way of saying this is to say that White desire is always already weaponized. She forces sex on him through the capacity that White bodies have to weaponize White desire. The young Afghan man is fucked! He is fucked at every level of abstraction. The guns are in the bedroom (Carrie Mathison's hidden pistol). The guns are also pointed at his head from outside in the street: the CIA operatives who watch the house. And the guns are held to his head from high above, in the nine thousand drones that saturate the sky and track him as he makes his way back to Carrie's genuine objective—his uncle, whom she hopes to murder at long range with a drone strike.

Here we have a pristine example of the ways in which White femininity *and* White masculinity occupy the same *structural* position vis-à-vis a man or a woman of color. To paraphrase Frantz Fanon: the White family is a cutout of the state. Jared Sexton puts a finer point on this dynamic. We encountered his assessment in our discussion of *Punishment Park*, the Peter Watkins film in which Richard Nixon has declared martial law and sent young dissidents to the desert tribunal. In that film, we observed that though Nancy Jane Smith, on the one hand, and Charles Robbins and the unnamed Black woman in the desert, on the other hand, are all ideologically committed to the overthrow of the United States, to the end of the war in Vietnam, and to the establishment of a socialist or communist state, Nancy Jane Smith is their antagonist at the level of species, structure, and capacity. They are her slaves regardless of the fact that her conscious mind would recoil at the thought that she exists as a member of the same species as the people on the Punishment Park tribunal who are about to execute her. Let's hit the high points of Sexton's assessment of White femininity vis-à-vis the Black man (and, by extension the Black woman and/or Black transgender person).

- *She has a limited capacity to marshal state violence or state-sanctioned paramilitary violence against Black people of all genders and ages.*
- *She can have Black people of all genders and ages brutalized for transgressions real or imagined.*
- *She can also rape a Black man (as the CIA agent raped the Afghan boy), thereby reversing the polarity of a rape fantasy pervasive in the anti-Black world; regardless of his size and strength, his prowess and his pride, he is structurally vulnerable to her.*

In other words, the capacity for anti-Black violence is embedded in the ontology of the White woman's being; it is part and parcel of

her Human inheritance. Sexton is careful *not* to include the young Afghan man being raped by a White woman, as I have (and which I will correct momentarily). Instead, he homes in on the specificity of the Black male in relation to the woman who is White.

Saidiya Hartman's historical explanation of the paradigm of anti-Black sexual violation concurs with Sexton's synchronic explanation of the paradigm: "[E]nslaved men were no less vulnerable to the wanton abuses of their owners, although the extent of their sexual exploitation will probably never be known, and because of the elusiveness or instability of gender in relation to the slave as property and the erotics of terror in the racist imaginary."

Geopolitical agendas of the White nation cannot be disentangled from the sex life of White femininity (and White masculinity). In other words, White sexuality is always weaponized. To put it differently, but no less to the point, the United States of America is a big, bad rapist; a big, bad rapist that *projects* the fantasy of *its* vulnerability onto Muslims, Mexicans, Native Americans, and Blacks. Fanon discusses the rape fantasy of the White woman in great detail in *Black Skin, White Masks*. I won't rehearse it here. For our purposes we should note that the rapist projects the fantasy of vulnerability by suggesting that she or he is the victim of Islamic jihadism or the victim of Black agitation and civil disobedience against killings by cops.

The big, bad rapist would have us believe that *America* is the victim; and underneath that phantasmagoric projection, underneath the fantasy of vulnerability, is a set of assumptions that America is indeed an ethical social and political formation; that the problems that America has are *not* structural, but rather that they are performative (that is, to be found in acts of discrimination or in the use of excessive levels of force). None of this would be a problem if not for the structure of violence that subtends this fantasy, the institutional violence that gives these fantasies what David Marriott calls "objective value."

Jared Sexton gives a concrete explanation of David Marriott's phrase "objective value" when he says, "You better understand White people's fantasies because tomorrow they'll be legislation." That's what the law is: White fantasies as objective value.

The White family and the White state have the firepower and the institutional infrastructure to enforce their projections. What people of color get to do when they go to the polls is decide what flavor of this rape fantasy they are going to support. In the words of George Jackson, "An electoral choice of ten different fascists is like choosing which way one wishes to die."

Voting is an important *performance* of dispossession for people of color who are *not* Black. But for Black people, voting is not just a performance of dispossession. We have to dig deeper and see how the very bedrock, the structure, the very paradigm of electoral politics is predicated on sexualized violence against Black people. Sexualized violence against Black people is electoral politics' *condition of possibility!*

From Willie Horton to gerrymandering to the auction block, anti-Blackness is the genome of electoral politics. In short, anti-Blackness is the genetic material of this organism called the United States of America. The fantasy projections that had been weaponized to rape the young Afghan man would not be possible if the paradigm of the weaponization were not already in place prior to the conflict between Muslims and the U.S.; and that weaponized paradigm is overdetermined by anti-Blackness. The U.S. government *could* become a democracy for people of color who are not Black (it's not likely, but it is entirely possible); but if it ever rid itself of the central ingredient that overdetermines its condition of possibility—that is to say, if the United States of America were to somehow not be anti-Black—then we would no longer have a country; the United States of America would cease to exist. Just as tomatoes overdetermine gazpacho soup! No tomatoes, no gazpacho. No anti-Blackness, no nation.

I've explained how the U.S. is an anti-Black polity by using a synchronic analysis of domesticity. Let me now point to how it is also *historically* unethical: how the U.S. is diachronically anti-Black. A recent history book does this job of diachronic explanation brilliantly. It's called *The American Slave Coast: A History of the Slave-Breeding Industry*, by Ned and Constance Sublette. A small portion of the book focuses on the Electoral College.

The Electoral College is a prime example of a so-called "democratic" institution that owes its *condition of possibility* to the sexualized violence against, and captivity of, Black people. Without the sexualized violence against and mass incarceration of hundreds of thousands of Black captives, Americans would not be able to elect a U.S. president. Thomas Jefferson would never have become president. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, "389,000 [that's less than a half million] . . . African slaves, bred like horses or sheep, became four-million enslaved African-Americans . . . [T]he forced mating of slaves . . . gave slave states more voting power based on the number of slaves they held captive." Virginia was the largest slave-breeding state. As a result it gained twenty-five percent of the forty-six Electoral College votes, more than enough to send Jefferson to the White House.

Think about that. The kind of captivity needed to breed slaves dwarfs the kind of captivity Muslims are subjected to in Guantánamo or in the "love nest" where the female CIA agent raped the young Afghan. How else can 389,000 people be made to procreate, under pain of torture or death, into 4 million people if they are not incarcerated and forced into sex? Slave-breeding is a kind of forced sex that makes words like *rape* and *incarceration* puny and inadequate. The young Afghan man had a prior moment of freedom, and a prior space of consent, before the White woman held him captive and raped him. For Blacks there is no prior space and time of freedom and consent: the freedom of all others—in the form of electoral politics—owes its

condition of possibility to the unfreedom (lack of consent) of and sexualized violence against Black people. People of color *experience this madness from time to time*; but the forced procreation of Blackness is the bedrock of this madness.

The young Afghan's rights were violated by the White woman; but the *concept* of rights that can be violated, or respected, rises up out of the breeding of Blacks like cattle. You can speak of prisoners' rights, but the term *slave rights* is an oxymoron.

A historical analysis of the Electoral College illustrates how Black people are political *currency*, not political *subjects*. And that is the paradigm of Black people's existence today. Black people are political currency or objects, not political actors or subjects. Subjects have homes, or at least the capacity for some sort of sanctuary. Objects exist as implements, tools, in the psychic life of Human subjects.

Hartman's analysis of the paradox that the idea of rape presents for the woman who is Black, who is a slave, alerted me to the fact that this universal possession of the oppressed and the oppressor—*consent*—wasn't universal at all. Consent was *not* an inherent, organic capacity, an element of political ontology that belonged to everyone, high and low. My mind abstracted in ever-widening concentric circles: if the Black woman cannot be raped because she had no consent to give or withhold, and if this absence of consent is both particular and general—in other words, if it applies broadly to the status of Blackness, and not only to the status of Black women who come before the court as plaintiffs in nineteenth century courts, and if, qua Sexton, the Black man can be raped by the White woman, and if (the culminating and most devastating *if*) "rape" is too feeble a concept to explain the violation* of Black flesh—then all of us who are marked as Black are of a different species than all of those who are not. We

* Here, words fail us again! For how can an object be violated?

are a species of sentient beings that cannot be injured or murdered, for that matter, because we are dead to the world. No narrative arc of dispossession can accrue to us. What do I mean by that? Just this: for there to be a narrative arc the persona in the narrative must move from possession to dispossession to (the denouement) the prospect of repossession. Another way of earmarking the points on the narrative arc would be: Equilibrium to disequilibrium to equilibrium (restored, renewed, and/or reimaged). Rape can be seen on this arc: consent as an ontological and social possession: followed by rape, which would be dispossession of consent: followed by consent restored via the trial of the perp, or his/her murder, or the narrative could explain how the victim regained their self-esteem and self-worth even if justice was not done. But even here, when the denouement does not include justice, there is an *assumption* that the victim had a "self" to be violated. In other words, no matter how you slice it, no matter the details of the arc, the narrative arc *itself* is possible because there exists within the ontology of the subject the Human capacity of consent that could be restored just as it was taken away.

This kind of logic makes no sense when thinking of the slave. Nor is the argument that all of this changed in 1865 in the slightest way convincing—it is not an argument, it is a sentimental assertion, mobilized by the interlocutor's fear of thinking slavery as a relational dynamic; the interlocutor insists that slavery is a historical event, a thing of the past. Such assertions are exemplary of the anxiety of antagonism. My breakdown in graduate school was of a piece with this anxiety. As a creative writer and as a critical theorist I could not fathom thoughts of myself as a sentient being exiled from the arc of narrative. And, to further complicate matters, I was in love with a White woman; and this meant that though we were partners in important ways, I was her slave at the level of what was essential about our relationship. I had fled the hell of the war in South Africa, and

landed in the war in my mind. I was left with nothing—no enemies and no allies. Enemies and allies, war and solidarity, require Human capacity; a possession that had never been mine. Uppers and downers were my two best friends.

My mental breakdown didn't break me, not on the outside anyway. Perhaps, if I had really barked like a puppy at the nurse at the UC Berkeley psych clinic who looked at me as though I were a puppy, they would have held me for "observation." And who knows when or if I would have been released back into the graduate school population? But I did not bark, nor ask for a doggy biscuit. I went on with my Ph.D. studies in critical theory in the Rhetoric Department at the University of California, Berkeley, writing papers, attending classes and conferences, getting straight A's along the way. No one but my partner (and later my wife) Alice knew that I was on two highly dissonant forms of medication. And she did not understand the bomb that splayed so much shrapnel in my brain. We were lovers and antagonists; and the antagonism was constantly erupting to sabotage our naïve and quintessentially American view that "love conquers all." I knew, if only intuitively, that love had already been conquered by violence. But I refused to believe that anti-Black violence was a healing balm for the Human mind.

The realization that Black suffering is of a different order than the suffering of other oppressed people, and that Black suffering is the life force of the world, was waiting for the two of us eighty miles down the road.

Six months before the Twin Towers fell, I drove with Alice, a White woman I first dated, upon my return from living in South Africa for five years, then lived with, and finally married, down the rugged coast to a conference in Santa Cruz called the Race Rave.

Alice and I met in South Africa, when I was still married to a South African woman named Khanya. One of my assignments

as an underground insurgent was to spy on Americans who came to South Africa; to sidle up to them and find out why they were there; to then write dossiers for my handlers. This included attending American expatriate functions to suss out who might be tied to the U.S. military or intelligence communities. I developed a knack for making people I met *want* to tell me about themselves and why they were there.

When someone found out that I was an American who was also an elected official in Mandela's party, they would sometimes reveal their agendas to me *not* by directly divulging their agenda, but indirectly, by the *questions they asked me (which suggested how much they already knew) about the inner workings of the ANC*. Afterward, I went home and stayed up until the wee hours of the morning typing out my reports. This was low-grade intelligence, more dust and gossip than gold, that I passed up the food chain. I only knew what was made of it on rare occasions, as when I found out an American "businessman" posing as an affirmative action consultant had, at one time, been an agent for the Department of the Treasury, and had worked in the Congo for the U.S. puppet Mobutu Sese Seko. Alice Wilson was the subject of one of my reports. She arrived, on sabbatical, at the end of 1992 to do research for world literature courses she taught at a college in Northern California. Nadine Gordimer and I had been friends and literary events collaborators for a year when Alice arrived. I introduced her to Nadine Gordimer, right after Gordimer won the Nobel Prize in Literature.

In February 2001, Alice and I attended the Race Rave conference at the University of Santa Cruz. Between two hundred and three hundred activists, scholars, students, and people who were non-academic workers or precariously employed met "to explore racism and the intersections of oppression, to promote reparations and healing, and to develop the framework for a truth and reconciliation process in the

United States." It was billed as the first of a series of such gatherings on college campuses across the country.

At the end of the day, we gathered in a large room. The two organizers told us to break into groups that reflected how we were seen by the police. This meant that there would be a White group, a Black group, a Brown group, a Red or Native American group, and a Yellow group.

I remember thinking, *At last, now we'll move from a politics of culture to a culture of politics.* The whispers sent out by a few of the Black people seated near me confirmed my feeling. A sister near me sighed as though she had been holding her breath for the past day and a half and said, "Now *we* get to talk." A brother seated in front of her chuckled. "Didn't know *Black* was in their vocabulary."

The resistance started before the exercise started; and it didn't come from the Whites. It came from the non-Black people of color—the Yellows, the Browns, and the Reds who didn't want to be known by their color, not even for two hours. They insisted that they were not simply colors but cultural identities.

In contrast, the Blacks, spurred by our joy at the opportunity to speak about the way state violence functions in our lives, were already at the door. But the commotion in the center of the room made us turn and look back. It felt as though a seismic tremor had cracked the parquet floor, split the room in half, leaving a small group of slaves adrift by the door, while the Humans argued about their cultural identities in the middle of the room.

The non-Black people of color were angry, in a scene not unlike my presentation in Berlin. They demanded a say in how they were categorized. The organizers did their best to speak over those in the crowd who wouldn't listen. They said that being pigeonholed was the whole point; that the police *treated* you as a color and ignored your cultural and ethnic singularities; and the point of the exercise was to

assume that formation and see what came of the discussion. That's the exercise! Let's get to it! Right on! roared up from the Blacks waiting in the wings.

And it might have gone down like that. But something unexpected happened. One group of people who had formed part of this scrum of discontent became more vocal than the rest. But they didn't voice their objections on the basis of cultural integrity. In fact, they mobilized the same term as the organizers, *race*; but they mobilized race in service to the aims and objectives of the non-Black people of color who insisted on a *politics of culture* (versus the *culture of politics* that had animated the Black folks). It was weird, but it "worked." They were biracial (one Black parent and one White parent) and they didn't want to be "pigeonholed" as Black (though they didn't say that they would be just as irate to be "pigeonholed" as White).

As I watched the so-called biracial, half-Black/half-White people make their case for why they did not want to be grouped as Black, I was struck by how their argument in no way resembled the logic of the people of color; and by how little that mattered—meaning *no one checked them on this contradiction.* Rather than assert the specificity of their cultural heritage and ethnic origins—and why the catchall colors assigned to them would be an erasure of those cultural markers—the biracial people argued that the four colors (Red, White, Brown, and Black) did not account for them. They were neither Black nor White. They were both; and as amalgamations, they deserved their own room.

The two organizers were stunned. Strymied. But not by the argument—a child could have countered by simply saying, None of y'all look like zebras; and no pig would put you in a lineup of White perps, or blast you in the shoulder instead of the heart because he could tell your momma was White. Y'all *read* as Black, so go to the Black room and stop wasting our time! Perhaps the child would have

said it without the clarity and rancor I've imposed, but nonetheless, it's not a difficult objection to handle, especially given the fact that the biracial people did not interrogate the assumptive logic, as was the case with the others; they simply said, "You haven't given us the right color room."

Why did the organizers look like deer in headlights; and, more importantly, what made them cave in?

It was the affect, the verve, the energy, the bodily performance of the biracial contingent. They postured and gesticulated in a manner more stereotypically "Black" than biracial. In other words, their loud talk, their indignation, their runaway slave rage made the organizers quake.

It was a different affect than the affect of the people of color. The non-Blacks had pleaded, whined, cajoled. The biracial contingent, to quote Queen Latifah, *Got buck with the muthafuckas!* They pressed a hyperbolic, N.W.A. performance of Blackness into service of their desire to be as far away from Blackness as they could. It worked like a charm. The organizers, confronted with the sound and fury of Black rage (cynically divorced from Black desire), gave the biracial people a room of their own. And, by necessity, they caved in to the other people who wanted to be grouped by culture, *not* color. Black affect (or the Blaxploitation of Black affect) had been weaponized for the death of Black desire.

Each group was given the same sheet of paper with the same instructions and discussion topics. The sheet of paper also included a charge: we were to come up with ways to talk about what happened in our groups with our "allies," when we returned to plenary ninety minutes later.

The first thing the Blacks did when we were alone and the door was closed was to tear the sheet up and throw it away. We realized that the regime of violence through which we were subjugated could not be

reconciled with the regime of violence that subjugated our so-called allies; and what had happened in the auditorium confirmed this. In other words, what the organizers had unleashed was a realization that oppression has two, not one, regimes of violence: the violence that subjugates the subaltern and the violence that subjugates the Slave, or the Black.

Once we had liberated ourselves from the constraints of having to make our suffering analogous to the suffering of the people of color, something truly profound occurred. For me, someone who was beginning to move from Marxism to what would a year later be called Afropessimism, the session was instructive because 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 and in the classroom, to the experiences of chattel slavery as if the time and intensity of all three were the same. No one, absolutely *no one*, said, "Hey hold on," for example, when a young woman said she was forced to breast-feed all the White people at her job like she'd done on the plantation. No one said, "You're speaking metaphorically, right?" The room simply said amen and right on. The time of chattel slavery was the time of our lives. And this was not a problem, as some psychoanalysts would have it, of neurotic conflation between the imaginary and the symbolic. In other words, this was not a failure of our collective psyches to restore state violence to relational logic, to separate, that is, the time of chattel slavery from the time of discrimination, or to separate the space of the whipping posts from the cartography of the office. It was 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.

Folks cried and laughed and hugged each other and called out loud for the end of the world. No one poured cold water on this by asking, What does that mean—the end of the world? How can you

say that? Where's that going to leave us? Or, How will we make sense of *the end of the world* when we go back to speak with our "allies"? The dangerous fuse of the Black imagination had been lit by nothing more than the magic of an intramural conversation. No one wanted it to end.

With thirty minutes left in the session a sense of dread set in: the organizers would soon be calling us back into *that* dreaded auditorium. Someone floated the idea of not returning; of just going home. But someone else came up with a better idea: we would go back in and refuse to speak with them. Not a protest, just a silent acknowledgment of the fact that we would not corrupt what we experienced with their demand for articulation between their grammar of suffering and ours.

Now there was movement outside our door. We looked up, thinking that the organizers had recalled us early. But when we opened the door we found that it wasn't the organizers but the entire group of biracial people, people whose hyperbolic "Blackness" had rescued them from our room. They were greeted with grunts and cold stares. One of them asked if they could come in. Silence.

I broke the silence by saying, "You never left." They entered and sat down, cautiously. We made room for them, just as cautiously. We asked them why they decided to join us.

Their discussion had centered on the presumptuous notion that they could access the social capital of civil society. Their talk had been vertically integrated from discussions about what a special place on the U.S. Census could mean for their mobility and their quest for recognition on what they had described as their "own terms," to the gut-wrenching conflicts they experienced in the tussle of allegiance in their individual family lives. In other words, how do we honor both parents, both of our White and Black cultural heritages? But this discussion didn't have the gravitas needed for ninety minutes; so, eventually, they turned to the topic they had been given—their rela-

tionship to and experience with police violence. It wasn't long before they realized that to meditate on this through their biracialism wasn't going to get them anywhere. No cop had ever said, Look here, I'm going to shoot you in the shoulder and not the heart because you're only half Black.

When we returned to plenary, the room took note of us—all of us.

Someone said, "I want some of what that group has!"

We hadn't spoken a word.

Another person said, "Look at all that love!"

We still had not spoken.

A third person said, "So, what's up with y'all, every one of you is glowing!"

The organizers asked us who had been designated as the spokesperson for our group. I raised my hand. They asked me for our report.

"We have decided to remain silent," I said. They wanted to know why.

"We have decided to remain silent," I repeated.

Can you say *anything*? they asked.

I said all that I had been mandated to say: "We had a good session."

Well, we can *see* that! they said. Then they asked the biracial group to speak. One of them simply said, "We ended up joining the Black group."

The room was even more puzzled. But no explanations were forthcoming.

It went south from there. The Whites reported on their bric-a-brac dialogue. Alice had had her head handed to her. No one in her room was willing to think of themselves as *White in relation to policing*. The White women said it was important to divide the room along gender lines and have a discussion about how women fare under patriarchy. Several people said they were Jewish and perhaps they should have

pressed the organizers for their own room, as the biracial people had done. One White man actually said that it was important for them to do a round-robin in which each person should say what state they lived in before they came to California. To Alice's horror, damn near everyone in the room thought this was a good idea. One by one they began to shout the names of states where they were born and raised, and they would have descended into personal narratives about how and when they came to California, and what brought them there, had my wife, Alice, not exploded.

"This doesn't have a damn thing to do with our relationship to the institution of policing! Let's get back on track."

But no one was willing to get back on track. The interesting thing about the trajectory of the conversation in the White room was the way it uncannily mirrored the absolute refusal of the exercise that was going on in the Black room—albeit for different reasons. Alice was shut down because the exercise threatened the most constitutive element of Whiteness: White people *are* the police. This includes those White people who, like Alice, at the level of consciousness, do not want this birthright deputation. At a deep unconscious level they all intuited the fact that the police were not *out there* but *in here*, that policing was woven into the fabric of their subjectivity. No wonder the discussion veered in myriad directions away from a conscious encounter with this horrifying aspect of their structural position into a chorus of declarations about gendered identities and stories about their individual sojourns to California. And, conversely, the Black people, in their room at the other end of the hall, understood that no kind of psychic or material immigration would ever be expansive enough to open such doors to them—to Alice and her people. But for the non-Black people of color the question of access remained an open one.

The Asians and Latinos and Native Americans' discussions had

begun with questions of violence and ended with questions of access: immigration policy, Spanish in the schools, the question of Indigenous gambling casinos, and the question of land and sovereignty. It was clear: the articulation was between the Whites, whose access to civil society was so unquestioned that they had no reason to complain about it or question the regime of violence that fortified and extended it; and their junior partners, who were anxious for expanded access. None of these groups embodied an antagonism to civil society itself. What they embodied were gradations of marginalization. The antagonism was not between them and the police, but between all of them and all of us, even the ones who wanted their own room.

Even the two organizers were wrong, which is to say the exercise was right, if only accidentally right. The organizers had divided people up based on their color; on how the gaze of the police perceives them. But only one group of people is *essentially* elaborated and subjugated by this kind of gratuitous violence. The Blacks. The Slaves. For all the other groups of people there is a certain contingency that interrupts, as well as makes legible, the violence of the state. These people must transgress, or be perceived to transgress the Law before the anvil of state violence falls on their heads. For the Blacks, the Slaves, no notion of transgression is necessary. The pleasure of maiming Black bodies is its own reward. It is this pleasure that divided the conference *not into five colors, but into two species: Blacks and Humans*.

But the cognitive maps of the people at the Race Rave conference could not comprehend or explain this a priori species division between the Human and the Slave. The Black people and, ultimately, the biracial (Black) people knew this, if only, for most part, intuitively. But the terrain wasn't fertile enough for that knowledge to flourish. The Black people were shackled to the cognitive maps of their well-meaning masters.

Two months after the attack on the World Trade Center, and nine months after the Race Rave, an airport shuttle picked me up at my apartment in Berkeley. It was winter, just shy of five in the morning. The air was clear and frosty, as Bay Area winter mornings often are. The sun had yet to rise. Winter doesn't deserve its name in Northern California when set against the blizzards of my Minnesota youth. Now, in the early gloaming, broken knees of lightning kindled the blood-orange sky above the San Francisco Bay. It was going to rain.

Standing beside his idling van, the South Asian driver asked me twice if I was the person going to the airport—as though the wrong person had somehow come out of the right complex; as though I'd called him under false pretenses, not to go to the airport at all but simply to come out at that ungodly hour of 4:55 a.m. to annoy him, if not to rob him. I felt a chill of chastisement in his gaze.

I tossed my bags in the back and walked around and slid the door open. In the nugget of light that shone from the ceiling I found myself face-to-face with a middle-aged White woman and a hesitant middle-aged and bearded White man who peered at me from her left side. Their excess luggage took up the seat behind them; and we looked at each with that momentary, familiar, but all-too-mutual dread as we realized that I was going to sit next to her. I took more than ample care not to touch her thigh as I fished for my seat belt in the dark.

The van nosed down the road through the last seeds of night. The only light on Martin Luther King Jr. Drive came from the intermittent streetlamps. We were as quiet as death itself: the driver, the woman, her husband, and me. I felt angry; I had the sense that before I arrived they had all been engaged in spirited conversation, and that it had stopped when I got in. Was I the reason they had stopped talking?

Could I be sure that they had *been* talking? Was this Black paranoia kicking in where a little common sense might be in order?

The face of the Pakistani driver when I came out of my apartment was still branded in my brain. Now this quiet discomfort; this silence on my behalf; this churning of my gray matter to make sense of it; this doubt that it was anything at all. *Not that I want to speak with these ofays and their junior partner*, I thought. But I wanted them to want to speak with me.

"George here works at Cal," she finally said, stammering. "Are you at Cal? I mean, are you a professor or a grad student?"

No, lady, I'm a crackhead, just out on the prowl this morning.

"That's wonderful!" she said, "Do you know Judith Butler?"

I told them a bit about my research, but rather than couch my research project in the language that animated me most (a synopsis of the structure of U.S. antagonisms between the triangulated positions of the Immigrant/Settler/Master, the Red/"Savage," and the Black/Slave) I couched the synopsis of my research project in the language that animated me the least—questions of film theory and film historiography. I kept it simple and free of politics. When I finished speaking, everyone seemed to be relieved. Even the driver smiled at me through his rearview mirror and seemed to be at ease. I had accomplished the main objective of international Negro diplomacy: make them feel safe.

Now the taciturn professor ventured forth.

"Before you got in," he said, "we were discussing this new law, the Patriot Act. Ghastly business. Is this still America? This man here"—he motioned to the driver, who smiled again and nodded at us in the rearview mirror—"shouldn't have to come to this country and encounter xenophobia and persecution—what are we coming to?"

The Pakistani driver then weighed in with anecdotes dramatizing the injustices he and members of his community had been subjected

to since the passage of the law. The Patriot Act was 400 pages long and neither the professor nor his wife nor the driver had read a word of it. I had read 170-odd pages of it and had written a synopsis of what I'd read for some Black folks in a retirement home in Oakland. They too had thought the law to be draconian and unjust—but, unlike the people in the shuttle to the airport, they did not think there was anything particularly new or un-American about the “new” law. A woman at the home, who was eighty, had looked at me, shaking her head. “And they keep going to the polls, these Caucasians. They go back to the polls like it matters.”

But the memory of these Black folks' response to my findings was lost on me as I traveled to the airport because the people in the van had taken a renewed interest in me. I had advanced from being feared to being tolerated to being valued. I was no longer a stimulus to anxiety. *Tonight, I thought, I will be someone of whom the Pakistani driver speaks highly of to his wife or compatriots, the professor and his wife will talk about me and what I've said, on the plane and perhaps at their conference when they reach their destination.* My desire was to be the object of their desire. There was no more Black or White or Brown in that shuttle. Through my words, a common sense of joy and a sense of a common purpose bloomed inside that small shuttle, where before there had been dread and division. We were all people. Just people. People who demanded the same basic form of fairness and accountability from our government. The thought of sneak-and-peak searches, the thought of unlawful wiretaps, the thought of expanded prohibitions on our freedom of assembly, the thought of the government sniffing around in our libraries and bookstores—well, that does it, we all agreed, that's taking things just a bit too far. And I was not only part of and party to this multiracial consensus, but it was the miracle of *my* efforts, *my* research, *my* erudition, *my* labor, and *my* fifty-two-teeth charm that had sutured this vigorous populism, this

fire-and-brimstone accord in the wee hours of the morning. Not only were they taking me seriously—which is to say they truly thought that they thought that I could think—but I was now essential to them: I kindled the fire of their nostalgia for a democratic past; and they seemed to need, at the very same time, for me to somehow castigate them, beat them, as though only I could fulfill their masochistic urge to hear how bad their future would be. To this end, the woman turned to me and said something like, *Sambo, now, don't you spare me, Sambo, you hear, don't you hold back, Sambo. Tell me just how bad it's going to be.*

Miss Anne, dey dun taken aw ciba lubbaties and sen' 'um waaaay up yonda.

The professor sat there shaking his head. Way up yonder. He gazed at the ceiling. Way up yonder.

Now the terrain of conversation was cleared, once again, for the driver.

“Let me tell you about my community, let me tell the story of the wrongful arrests, the detentions without trial.”

We listened to him from within the folds of our renewed faith in redemption. We were more than a mere collection of common interests; we were an intrepid coalition of affect. Our mood and our will meshed into a warm cloth of *amen* and *ain't it a shame*.

The driver said, “I don't know why I ever brought my family to this country.”

And before I could disentangle the structure of my unassimilable Blackness from the mesh and mush of multiracial affect, I said, “Me neither.”

But these words shredded our mood.

The earth flipped. We all fell off.

The driver had said, “I don't know why I ever brought my family here.”

And I had responded, "Me neither."

The van was again uncommonly silent. It was as though a period had been placed in the middle of a sentence. The driver's eyes flashed at me in the rearview mirror. The White woman beside me shifted the way she had shifted when I first got in. My "Me neither" was not being addressed. My "Me neither" hung in the air like a faint but unquestionably foul odor—an unexpected but not unattributable fart. To be sure, my odor had been emitted, but it had not been emitted in bad faith. I thought we were one—surely they could live with my smell if I could live with theirs. So robustly had I been hailed by the South Asian's dilemmas of access *to* civil society and the good White folks' dilemmas of the relative elasticity or rigidity *within* civil society that I had forgotten the first rule of international Negro diplomacy: make them feel safe. My presumed embodiment of the tenet of immigration (the presumption that moving from the plantation to the city was a form of immigration)—the presumption that I possessed the constituent elements of filiation ("*my family*" moved from the plantation to the city) rather than the ruse of borrowed institutionality, and that I furthermore possessed the constituent elements of volition and agency ("I brought my family from the plantation to the city"), all this, spoken in my "Me neither," had somehow tampered with the safety upon which the triangulated goodwill and warm feelings between what Jared Sexton calls citizen, non-citizen, and anti-citizen depended: the White professor and his White wife being the citizens, the Pakistani a non-citizen, and me being the anti-citizen. I had sutured the equilibrium of the universe through my recitation of the dreaded Patriot Act and then, with the same ease and unthinking intuition, I had dared to threaten the equilibrium of that fragile universe by thinking a Black thought out loud. In their thirty seconds of silence, I felt my flesh peel away. With two words, *Me neither*, I had fallen from grace. I went from warm and fuzzy Sambo to W. E. B. Du *Blac*.

The professor and his wife were ready for this ride to the airport to end. But the Pakistani driver had the same kind of new-arrival fight in him that the couple had possessed two hundred years ago when their people were immigrants. He looked at me unsympathetically in his rearview mirror, as if to say, Did you make a mistake, an honest, innocent mistake, the kind of mistake anyone can make in the joy and euphoria of the moment; or were you fucking with us—being a smart-ass whose sole intent was to shit on the inspiration of the personal pronoun *we*?

His eyes flicked from the street ahead to my image in his mirror. Slowly and deliberately he said, "Sometimes I want to pack my bags and go back home."

No one spoke. No one even breathed. The engine groaned uneasily as we turned onto the exit ramp.

I threw down the gauntlet, sat up straight, and cleared my throat. "Yeah," I said, "me too." This time, the smell was unmistakable. It was the stench of something burning; a field of cotton up in flames.

Into this fire the professor's wife rushed with the only water she could find. "Being homesick," she said, "now, there's a universal phenomenon. We've been going to this conference for years and we still miss the kids when we're gone."

"Which is more than we can say for the kids," her husband chimed uneasily.

I felt something pressing itself into the palm of my hand as it lay at my side—insisting I take hold. To this day I don't know if it was the cold hard door handle or the handle of a blade.

The shuttle that I took to the airport in the wake of 9/11 was a microcosm of a captive scenario where Blackness exists inside and beneath the specter of policing, thinly disguised as the work of social movements dedicated to the expansion and democratization of civil society.

It shows how the libidinal economy of values (access to institutional-ity, universal suffrage, unfettered mobility, etc.), when set in motion by social justice initiatives, is predicated on the intensification of Black suffering and death. Four people rode in that van that morning. But one of those four was subjugated by a regime of violence that bore no resemblance to the regimes of violence that subjugated the others. The people in the van policed my pain, my bearing witness to the singular structure of anti-Black violence.

3

As with the Native Americans, the violence that subjugates the Pakistani driver has temporal limits (the time of, for example, the War on Terror), as well as spatial limits (the occupation of Iraq and the gulag at Guantánamo Bay). Not only is there no punctuation or time limit on the violence that subsumes Black people, but, furthermore, no cartography of violence can be mapped, for that would imply the prospect for a map of nonviolent space: the possibility of Black sanctuary, which is, by definition, an oxymoron. Instead, Black people exist in the throes of what historian David Eltis calls “violence beyond the limits,” by which he means: (a) in the *libidinal* economy there are no forms of violence so excessive that they would be considered too cruel to inflict upon Blacks; and (b) in *political* economy there are no rational explanations for this limitless theater of cruelty, no explanations that would make *political or economic* sense of the violence that positions and punishes Blackness. Whereas the Human’s relationship to violence is always contingent, triggered by her transgressions against the regulatory prohibitions of the symbolic order or by macro-economic shifts in her social context, the Slave’s relationship to violence is open-ended, gratuitous, without reason or constraint.

triggered by prelogical catalysts that are unmoored from her transgressions and unaccountable to historical shifts. In short, the violence inflicted upon Black people is not the effect of symbolic transgressions, nor is it the result (as Allen Feldman would have it) of a new, global shift in political economy—it is an “extension of the master’s prerogative.” Orlando Patterson clarifies this distinction between violence that positions and punishes the Human (worker, postcolonial subject, woman, or queer, for example) 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.

The worker who is fired remains a worker, to be hired elsewhere. The slave who was freed was no longer a slave. Thus, it was necessary continually to repeat the original, violent act of transforming free person into slave. This act of violence constitutes the prehistory of all stratified societies . . . but it determines both the prehistory and (concurrent) history of slavery.

To put it bluntly, Blackness cannot be separated from slavery. Blackness is often misconstrued as an identity (cultural, economic, gendered) of the Human community; however, there is no Black time that precedes the time of the Slave. Africa’s spatial coherence is temporally coterminous with the Arab, and then European, slave trade. The time of Blackness is the time of the paradigm; it is not a temporality that can be grasped with the epistemological tools at our disposal. The time of Blackness is no time at all, because one cannot know a plenitude of Blackness distinct from Slaveness. The prior references of the worker, a time before the Enclosures, for example, or of the postcolonial subject, *a time before the settler*, are simply not available to Black people. From my book *Red, White & Black*:

Historical time is the time of the worker [the time of the Pakistani driver], the time of analysis. But whereas historical time marks stasis and change within a paradigm, it does not mark the time of the paradigm, the time of time itself, the time by which the Slave's dramatic clock is set. For the Slave, historical time is no more viable a temporality of emancipation than biographical time—the time of empathy. Thus, neither the analytic aesthetic [the demystifying cure of ethical assessment] nor the empathetic aesthetic [the mystifying “cure” of moral judgment] can accompany a theory of change that restores Black people to relationality. The social and political time of emancipation proclamations should not be confused with the [time of the paradigm itself, a temporality] in which Blackness and Slaveness are imbricated *ab initio*, which is to say, from the beginning.*

Blacks are constituted by a violence that separates the time of the paradigm (ontological time) from time *within* the paradigm (historical time).

At every scale of abstraction, violence saturates Black life. To put it differently, for Black people there is no time and space of consent, no relative respite from force and coercion: violence spreads its tendrils across the body, chokes the community, and expands, intensifies, and mutates into new and ever more grotesque forms in the collective unconscious through literature and film.

Working-class *ideas* are contaminants: threats to capitalist economy, to a capitalist conception of the world. Black *bodies* are a differ-

* Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2010), 339–340.

ent kind of contaminant: they are threats to the Human body ideal, and to the psychic coherence of Human life.

This schema is even different from the one that attends Native American genocide. The Native American was and is genocided for her land. There are pre-logical or libidinal elements to the murder of eighteen million people—to be sure. But land acquisition and usurpation give the genocide a kind of coherence and reasonableness similar to a massacre of workers who have gone on strike—who have withdrawn their consent.

You can't make an analogy between the violence immigrants, Native Americans, and workers are subjected to and the violence that attends to Black people.

It is absolutely necessary for Blacks to be castrated, raped, genitally mutilated and violated, beaten, shot, and maimed. And it is necessary for this to take place in the streets as well as in popular culture—as on TV and in the cinema. Blacks can even be genocided, but only up to a point! Because, unlike Indians, Blacks are not in possession of something exterior to themselves that civil society wants. Civil society does not want Black land as it wants Indian land, that it might distinguish the Nation from Turtle Island; it does not want Black consent, as it wants working-class consent, that it might distinguish a capitalist economic system from a socialist one, that it might extract surplus value and turn that value into profit. What civil society wants/needs from Black people is far more essential, far more fundamental than land and profits. What civil society needs from Black people is confirmation of Human existence.

Of course, the Human being can say, I know I am alive at the level of identity because I speak Spanish, or French, or English, because I am straight or gay; or because I am rich or middle-class. This is a kind of life at the level of identity, or culture, or sexual orientation. But to be able say, I am alive at a paradigmatic level, that I am really and truly

a Human being and not the other thing . . . this can only be guaranteed to the extent to which one can say, I am not Black.

It would be misguided, even mendacious, to have said to the people in the van that the Patriot Act did not affect Black people; or to champion an anti-immigration sentiment of any sort. But it would be just as misguided and mendacious to suggest that the Patriot Act's relative corruption of the integrity of the Bill of Rights, or the relative rigidity or elasticity of access to (and within) the institutionality of civil society, can help us think through Black folks's unique grammar of suffering. Put another way, Black thought (and therefore Black liberation) is threatened not only by the state, but by the interests and actions of the loyal opposition in the airport shuttle.

In fact, Black thought is threatened by a three-tiered ensemble of terror. Our intellectual capability to do the work is not what's at issue here. What's at stake is our capacity to work against the constraints of analogy, the terrorism of intra-Human exchange—the hydraulics of my ride to the airport.

First, there is the terrorism of what Gramsci referred to as "political society": the police, the army, the prison-industrial complex.

Second, there is the terror of civil society's hegemonic blocs and its clusters of affilial formations: like the mainstream media, the university, or the megachurch.

But there is also a third tier of terror with which Black thought must contend. *And that is the terror of counter-hegemonic and revolutionary thought: the logic of White feminism, the logic of working-class struggle, the logic of multicultural coalitions, and the logic of immigrant rights. The unrelenting terror elaborated whenever Black people's so-called allies think out loud.*

The stakes of this three-tiered terror are high because of their impact upon Black people's capacity to capture and be captured by our own imaginations. These three tiers scaffold *the death of Black*

desire. And our capacity to imagine and to fantasize while assuming our position is imbricated in our capacity to think theoretically: to give our political desire "objective value."

This third tier of terror that threatens the imagination and the enunciation of Black thought—the terror of left-wing counter-hegemonic alliances—should not be dismissed as incidental or inessential, nor should it be trivialized as an ensemble of bad attitudes that can be overcome through dialogue, as the Race Rave conference in Santa Cruz had assumed. For it is an essential terror; it is as constitutive of an anti-Black world as the military and the megachurch. It doesn't simply kill or warehouse Black thought the way the first tier kills and warehouses the Black body. Nor does it simply crowd out a Black emancipatory ensemble of questions the way traditional organs of hegemony crowd out the performance of the common man or woman's ensemble of questions. This third tier terrorizes through an interdiction *against* Black performance, coupled with a demand *for* Black performance—dance, Johnny, dance. We might say that it demands the performance of Black thought, albeit under erasure. It wants us to sing the blues; but instead of those Ain't Got No Life Worth Living Blues (instead of the social death blues), it wants Black folks singing the:

—Ain't Got No Green Card Blues

—Ain't Got No Abortion Blues

—Ain't Got No Right to Privacy Blues

—Ain't Got No Border-Crossing Blues

—Ain't Got No Same-Sex Weddin' Blues

—Ain't Got No Ciba Lubbaties Blues

Civil society expands and contracts to accommodate or diminish (but never banish *carte blanche*) a multitude of positions and

identities—Jews, Arabs, Asian Immigrants, Latinos, Italians, White women, and Native Americans. The annals of history show nineteenth century transitions from territories to states as being manifest with a great and conflicting diversity of views with respect to all of these groups. These fledgling fifty states even found themselves, on rare occasion (as in the case of California), debating the civic and social membership of Native Americans. But civil society would not know the boundary, the frontier, of such debates, which is to say it would lose all coherence and not be able to draw the line between social life and social death, if not for the presence of Black folks. Black people hold that line for White people and for everyone else. Blacks give even the most degraded position a sense of human possibility because we are the locus of human impossibility. Whatever grace others may fall from, they will never be Black. This is a comforting thought. The flame of human warmth.

There's something organic to Blackness that makes it essential to the construction of civil society. But there's also something organic to Blackness that portends the destruction of civil society. There's nothing willful or speculative in this statement, for one could just as well state the claim the other way around: there's something organic to civil society that makes *it* essential to the destruction of the Black body. Blackness is a positionality of "absolute dereliction," abandonment, in the face of civil society, and therefore cannot be liberated or be made legible through counter-hegemonic interventions. Black suffering is not a function of the performance(s) of civil society, but of the existence of civil society. For the Pakistani driver, the White professor, and his White wife, civil society is an ensemble of constraints and opportunities. But for the Black, civil society is a murderous projection.

In light of this, coalitions and social movements—even radical social movements like the Prison Abolition Movement—bound up

in the solicitation of hegemony, so as to fortify and extend the interlocutory life of civil society, ultimately accommodate only the *satiabile demands and legible conflicts* of civil society's junior partners (such as immigrants, White women, the working class), but foreclose upon the *insatiable demands and illegible antagonisms* of Blacks. In short, whereas such coalitions and social movements cannot be called the outright handmaidens of anti-Blackness, their rhetorical structures, political desire, and their emancipatory horizon are bolstered by a *life-affirming anti-Blackness*; the death of Black desire.

4

What sets the Black apart from the Human? It is the division between social death and social life; a divide between the structural violence of, for example, capitalism, postcolonialism, and patriarchy, and the structural violence of social death.*

The violence of capitalism or any Human paradigm of subjection, for that matter, has a prehistory. In other words, it takes an ocean of violence to transpose serfs into workers. It takes an ocean of violence over a couple of hundred years to discipline them into temporalities that are new and more constricting—and to have them imagine their lives within new constraints: urbanization, mechanization, and certain types of labor practices. Once the system is set up, then violence recedes and goes into remission. The violence comes back at times when capitalism needs to regenerate itself or when the workers transgress the rules and push back (when they withdraw their consent).

* It is worth reiterating that, through the lens of Afropessimism, slavery is, *essentially*, a relational dynamic, rather than a historical era or an ensemble of empirical practices (like whips and chains).

The violence of the slave estate cannot be thought of the way one thinks of the violence of capitalist oppression. It takes an ocean of violence to produce a slave, singular or plural, but that violence *never goes into remission*. Again, the prehistory of violence that establishes slavery is also the *concurrent history* of slavery. This is a difficult cognitive map for most activists to adjust to because it actually takes the problem outside of politics. Politics is a very rational endeavor, which allows activists to work out models that predict the structural violence of capitalism in its performative manifestation. But you can't create models that predict the structural violence of slavery in its performative manifestations. What the Marxists do with slavery is they try to show how violence is connected to production, and that means they are not really thinking about the violence of slavery comprehensively. The violence of social death (slavery) is actually subtended to the production of the psychic health of all those who are not slaves, something that cannot be literally commodified or weighted on an actual balance sheet. That's the more intangible, libidinal aspect to it.

In other words, activists want to make sense of the death of Sandra Bland, and the murders of Michael Brown, and Eric Garner; when what these spectacles require, in order to be adequately explained, is a theory of the *nonsense*; their absence of a tangible or rational utility: Black people are not murdered for transgressions such as illegal immigration or workplace agitation. The essential *utility* of Black death is, paradoxically, the *absence* of utility.

Black death does have a certain utility, but it's not subtended by the extraction of surplus value; not in any fundamental way. And it is certainly not subtended by the usurpation of land. Black death is subtended by the psychic integration of everyone who is not Black. Black death functions as national therapy, even though the rhetoric that explains and laments these deaths expresses this psychic dependence not directly, but symptomatically. It is complex, but it is simple too.

Blacks are not going to be genocided like Native Americans. We *are* being genocided, but genocided *and* regenerated, because the *spectacle* of Black death is essential to the mental health of the world—we can't be wiped out completely, because our deaths must be repeated, *visually*.

The bodily mutilation of Blackness is necessary, so it must be repeated. What we are witnessing on YouTube, Instagram, and the nightly news as murders are rituals of healing for civil society. Rituals that stabilize and ease the anxiety that other people feel in their daily lives. It's the anxiety that people have walking around. It can be stabilized by a lot of different things—marijuana, cocaine, alcohol, affairs—but the ultimate stabilization is the spectacle of violence against Blacks. *I know I am a Human because I am not Black. I know I am not Black because when and if I experience the kind of violence Blacks experience there is a reason, some contingent transgression.*

This is why online video posts of police murdering Black people contribute more to the psychic well-being of non-Black people—to their communal pleasures and sense of ontological presence—than they contribute to deterrence, arrests, or even to a general sensitivity to Black pain and suffering.

Afropessimism helps us understand why the violence that saturates Black life isn't threatened with elimination just because it is exposed. For this to be the case, the spectator, interlocutor, auditor would have to come to images such as these with an unconscious that can perceive *injury* in such images. In other words, the mind would have to *see* a person with a heritage of rights and claims, whose rights and claims are being violated. This is not the way Slaves, Blacks, function in the collective unconscious. Slaves function as implements in the collective unconscious. Who ever heard of an injured plow?

Afropessimism is premised on an iconoclastic claim: that Blackness

is coterminous with Slaveness. Blackness *is* social death, which is to say that there was never a prior moment of plenitude, never a moment of equilibrium, never a moment of social life. Blackness, as a paradigmatic position (rather than as an ensemble of identities, cultural practices, or anthropological accoutrements), cannot be disimbricated from slavery. 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.

To put it differently, the violence that both elaborates and saturates Black “life” is totalizing, so much so as to make narrative inaccessible to Blacks. This is not simply a problem for Black people. It is a problem for the organizational calculus of critical theory and radical politics writ large.

Foundational to the cognitive maps of radical politics is the belief that all sentient beings can be protagonists within a (political or personal) narrative; that every sentient being arrives with a history. This belief is underwritten by another idea that constitutes narrative: that all sentient beings can be redeemed. History and redemption are the weave of narrative. As provocative as it may sound, history and redemption (and therefore narrative itself) are inherently anti-Black. Without the presence of a being who is, *ab initio*, barred from redemption (a being that is generally dishonored, natally alienated, and open to naked violence), history and narrative would lack their touchstones of cohesion. Without the Black, one would not be able to know what a world devoid of redemption looks like—and if one could not conceive of the absence of redemption, then redemption would be inconceivable as well.

At the heart of my argument is the assertion that Black employment is a catastrophe for narrative at a metalevel rather than a crisis or

aporia* within a particular narrative. To put it differently, social death is aporetic with respect to narrative writ large (and, by extension, to redemption writ large).

If social death is aporetic with respect to narrative, this is a function of both space and time, or, more precisely, their absence. Narrative time is always historical (imbued with historicity): “It marks stasis and change *within* a [human] paradigm, [but] it does not mark the time *of* the [human] paradigm, the time of time itself, the time by which the Slave’s dramatic clock is set. For the Slave, historical ‘time’ is not possible.” Social death bars the Slave from access to narrative at the level of temporality; but it also does so at the level of spatiality. The other element that constitutes narrative is setting, or *mise-en-scène*, or for a larger conceptualization, we might follow H. Porter Abbott and say “story world.” But just as there is no time for the Slave, there is also no *place* of the Slave. The Slave’s reference to his or her quarters as a “home” does not change the fact that it is a spatial extension of the master’s dominion.

The three constituent elements of slavery—naked (or gratuitous) violence, general dishonor, and natal alienation—make the temporal and spatial logic of the entity (a character or persona in a narrative) and of setting untenable, impossible to conceive (as in birth) and/or conceive of (as in assume any coherence). The violence of slavery is not precipitated as a result of any transgression that can be turned into an event (which is why I have argued that this violence is *gratuitous*, not contingent); the dishonor embodied by the slave is not a function of an event either; his or her dishonor is general, it is best understood as abjection rather than as degradation (the latter implies a transition);

* Aporia: an irresolvable internal contradiction or logical disjunction in a text, argument, or theory.

and since a slave is natally alienated, she is never an entity in the metanarrative genealogy.

Afropessimism is a theoretical lens that clarifies the irreconcilable difference between, on the one hand, the violence of capitalism, gender oppression, and White supremacy (such as the *colonial utility* of the Palestinian Nakba or the Sand Creek massacre*) and, on the other hand, the violence of anti-Blackness (the Human *necessity* for violence against Black people).

The antagonism between the postcolonial subject and the settler cannot—and should not—be analogized with the violence of social death: that is the violence of slavery, which did not end in 1865 for the simple reason that slavery did not end in 1865. Slavery is a relational dynamic—not an event and certainly not a place in space like the South; just as colonialism is a relational dynamic—and that relational dynamic can continue to exist once the settler has left or ceded governmental power. And these two relations are secured by radically different structures of violence. Afropessimism offers an analytic lens that labors as a corrective to Humanist assumptive logic. It provides a theoretical apparatus that allows Black people to *not* have to be burdened by the ruse of analogy—because analogy *mystifies*, rather than clarifies, Black suffering. Analogy mystifies Black peoples' relationship to other people of color. Afropessimism labors to throw this mystification into relief—without fear of the faults and fissures that are revealed in the process.

Let me put it another way: Human Life is dependent on Black

* Nakba: In 1948, "Al-Nakba," "The Catastrophe," was the mass exodus of at least 750,000 Arabs from Palestine in 1948 when the state of Israel was violently established. Its legacy remains one of the most intractable issues in ongoing peace negotiations. Sand Creek Massacre: On November 29, 1864, more than 230 peaceful Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho Indians were massacred by a band of Colonel John Chivington's Colorado volunteers at Sand Creek, Colorado.

death for its existence and for its conceptual coherence. There is no world without Blacks, yet there are no Blacks who are in the world. The Black is indeed a sentient being, but the hobble of Humanist thought is a constitutive disavowal of Blackness as social death, a disavowal that theorizes the Black as a degraded human entity (for example, as an oppressed worker, a vanquished postcolonial subaltern, or a non-Black woman suffering under the disciplinary regime of patriarchy). The Black is *not* a sentient being whose narrative progression has been circumscribed by racism, colonialism, or even slavery, for that matter. Blackness and Slaveness are inextricably bound in such a way that whereas Slaveness can be disimbricated from Blackness, Blackness cannot exist as other than Slaveness.

The essential antagonism, therefore, is not between the workers and the bosses, not between settler and the Native, not between the queer and the straight, but between the living and the dead. If we look closely we also see that gender itself cannot be reconciled with a Slave's genealogical isolation; that, for the Slave, there is no surplus value to be restored to the time of labor; that no treaties between Blacks and Humans are in Washington waiting to be signed and ratified; and that, unlike the settler in the Native American or Palestinian political imagination, there is no place like Europe to which Slaves can send back Human beings.