

# “To Address Black Suffering is to Destroy the World”

## An Interview with Frank B. Wilderson, III on *Afropessimism*<sup>1</sup>

SIDDHANT ISSAR

JAMES PADILIONI, JR

Culminating much of his critical theoretical interventions of the last twenty years, *Afropessimism* chronicles Frank Wilderson, III's coming-of-age narrative and intellectual development. From his integrated Midwestern childhood, to his youthful journey across radical political movements and intimate relationships in the United States and South Africa, and extending through his theoretical work in the academy, Wilderson arrives at this iconoclastic premise: “Blackness is coterminous with Slaveness...[and] social death” (102). In this interview, Wilderson further draws out the allegorical, theoretical, and political implications of his afropessimist biography, connecting the longstanding pattern of anti-Blackness and social death to the contemporary context, encompassing uprisings under the banner of Black Lives Matter, all while the Covid-19 pandemic disproportionately ravages the Black American community.

Siddhant Issar: Frank, in what ways does *Afropessimism* depart from your earlier books, and in what ways does it carry on a conversation that I could trace back to *Incognegro*, and journal articles such as *Gramsci's Black Marx* and then, of course, *Red, White & Black*?<sup>2</sup>

Frank Wilderson, III: There's something bolder about *Afropessimism* as a book than my other books. I'll say what I mean by that. Paul Taylor who is a philosopher at Vanderbilt wrote a review of the book in *The Washington Post* a few weeks ago.<sup>3</sup> Even if he's not an Afropessimist, he understood what I was trying to do.<sup>4</sup> At one point, he says, “This is a prequel and a sequel to *Incognegro*.” I thought that was pretty cool. So *Incognegro* basically has a kind of time in the early 60's, for the American chapters, which are the

even-numbered chapters, and it jumps to the 1990's, so early-60's in Minneapolis, 1990's in California. The odd-numbered chapters are about the last few years of apartheid in South Africa. I had never written about this other period, basically ages 11 to 24, and that's here. I hadn't ever written about what's in the "Hattie McDaniel is dead" chapter.

Also, a couple things at the level of theory. I had always been intellectually steadfast in my conviction about two things, but queasy emotionally about them. One, I've been steadfast in my conviction that the Native American grammar of suffering was not the Black grammar of suffering. But I think that the middle 88 pages of *Red, White & Black* were not. I think I did a really great job of analyzing that, but I also just kept hoping for some kind of bridge between the structure of Native American suffering and the structure of Black suffering. Part of it had to do with the queasiness of critiquing the project of a group of people who had been genocided to the magnitude they had been genocided. That's one thing. And it really took Jared Sexton having written *The Vel of Slavery: Tracking the Figure of the Unsovereign* for me to realize how gingerly I had been in that middle set of chapters.<sup>5</sup>

The second thing has to do with *Gramsci's Black Marx*, published in 2003. The period from '96 to 2002 is a weird period in which, emotionally, I can't let go of Gramsci and Negri. Rather than thinking boldly that capitalist exploitation is important but inessential to Black suffering, I wanted to feel a halfway point called "racial capitalism." In *Afropessimism*, there is such a groundswell — it's not me doing something bolder on my own initiative — of Black discontent around the world, that I no longer have to say in workshops across the world, "By the way, I think that Native American genocide is really horrific and needs to be addressed. By the way, I think that capitalist exploitation and alienation is really horrific and needs to be addressed. By the way, I think that homophobia, transphobia, and misogyny are really horrible and need to be addressed at the core, like the Lacanian core, at the kinship structure." I've always felt that I needed to make those kinds of apologetic introductory remarks so that the haters don't say, "He's playing oppression politics." I didn't need to do that in this book because *Afropessimism* is in the room. If you think—you, the reader out there—that I am not alive to other people's suffering by saying that to address Black suffering is to destroy the world (unlike Marx, who said to address the suffering of the exploited is to destroy the world, or unlike the Lacanian feminists who say to address the guise or the coding of kinship by Oedipus is to destroy the world), I am saying no, all that will destroy important paradigms *within* the world, but if you want to destroy the world, you destroy anti-Blackness.

SI: There's a lot that you've laid out for us right there, and we're definitely going to get back to a more in-depth discussion of some of the themes that you just raised. But before getting there, I have a more basic question, and that's about audience. Given that *Afropessimism* is a trade book, at some level it seems to be much more accessible, especially to a non-academic audience. My question then is who would you want to read this book? How does the political work, the destruction of anti-Blackness, whatever that might be (and that's something that we want to come back to), differ in relation to the audience? How do you address white liberals?

FW: A student once said to me at the seminar table, she's an Afropessimist theorist now at Duke, Patrice Douglass, "So how do we keep Afropessimism Black?"

SI: That's a good question!

FW: I've been to Europe and I hobnob with a lot of francophone white graduate students who come to Germany, and German graduate students and professors who are basically like, "This is hot. Let us see how we can make it ours." They were trying to do juxtapositions between Wilderson and all kinds of stuff. At the seminar table, I had to say [to Patrice Douglass's question], it was a very embarrassing kind of thing but very alive just because it was mixed racially and I would've preferred to have had this conversation privately. I said, "Well, we can't." We are not in possession of our psyches, as David Marriott has shown in his first two books at the very least, there's always an intrusion at the lowest level of abstraction in our unconscious, which means that we are always fighting the Black imago, and desiring the white ideal to be a part of ourselves.<sup>6</sup> We are not in possession of our cultural production; white boys in the suburbs listen to more hardcore rap than anybody else, and that money goes elsewhere. We've never been, we've not been able to get anyone to say that Jazz is a Black-American musical formation. So, like the way of a being who's totally an object of property rights and never a subject of property rights — which is a very key moment of social death in Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death* — like that, we are producing something that will be captured, harnessed, and repackaged for the general white world, to help them address their issues, just like the unconscious in Fanon's "The Negro and Psychopathology" harnesses the black imago to work through any of the issues that are happening within the white nuclear family.<sup>7</sup> The Black imago becomes the point of destination for aggressivity that should ethically be turned on the father in the family. We are implements — psychically, as well as our production, as well as our physical bodies — for everyone else's needs, and Afropessimism will probably go that way as well.

However, there is one little glimmer of hope. Because where we are and who we are is not ordained by God, it is constructed through violence first, and then the semiotic move after that. It's not a game by God, but I would also argue that it cannot be redressed through the lens of Marxism or kinship structure of feminism precisely because all oppression for all other groups of people has a narrative moment of plenitude before the oppression. Our argument is that this entity called "Black" is a formation of the paradigm, just like the entity called "worker" is a formation of the paradigm of capitalism. There's no worker prior to capitalism. There's no Black prior to social death. What's prior to social death is not Black but Buganda, Shona, etc. So what I'm saying is that it can be undone, number one. Because it's not organic. Number two, the undoing and redressing cannot be imagined through the episteme precisely because the opposite of Black is Human. But number three, there are two populations that are poised to run with Afropessimism and turn it into something on the ground that I could never imagine, that Sexton could never imagine, that Marriott could never imagine, that Spillers and Hartman could never imagine... Those two populations are Black youth and the Black elderly. That's an argument that I make in a chapter "Juice from a Neck Bone" in *Afropessimism*.

James Padlioni, Jr.: *Afropessimism*, and your work broadly, sustains a conversation with the slave narrative literary genre. You've previously described slave narratives as "oxymorons," because, for the Slave, there is no moment "before" that initiates a causal chain of narrative coherence.<sup>8</sup> And there are sentences in *Afropessimism* where you quip: "If this were a novel, I would write it in such a way..."<sup>9</sup> So readers get a sort of "wink and nod" acknowledgement that *Afropessimism* performs a theoretical intervention at the point of your actual narration. So, I want to ask you, with all due respect, but tongue planted firmly in cheek: are you, Frank, still a Slave? And if so, is *Afropessimism* your Slave narrative? And if this is your Slave narrative, how should we read in anticipation of *narrative aporia*, which is an important concept in your thoughts?<sup>10</sup>

FW: Yes, well, those are very good questions. Yes, I'm still a Slave. And I think part of the argument of the book is I, we, were never *not* Slaves. And that is the main theoretical insight I derive from my read of Patterson, what Patterson might call [a] "departure" from his relational schematization. But I might call it a corrective. The reason I might call it a corrective, while at the same time — you can't see me but I'm taking a deep bow at this very moment to Patterson and his book — precisely because he posed the question in the way that Marx posed the question of exploitation in Volume One of *Capital*.<sup>11</sup> Which is to say, "wait a minute, people. I'm gonna write a book, Volume One of *Capital*, or *Slavery and Social Death*, with which I'm going to show that everyone — if I'm Marx — who's talked about political economy up to this point, or — if I'm Patterson — everyone who's talked about slavery up to this point and defined and wrote a book that is a definition of those two things, has not done their job. They have not written a definition. What they have done is, in typical Anglo-American fashion, written books which are exposés on the experience of being a slave, or the experience of being a capitalist or a worker, you know." So what we need to do is stop and take a Polaroid snapshot which says, "All things being equal, what are the laws of this paradigm? And what are the capacities of the two entities that are in mortal combat in this paradigm? What are the laws of the paradigm, and what are the capacities?"

This is a very interesting thing because what we have argued, learning from Marx and borrowing from Patterson, is that the capacity for life can only be known (so a very simple semiotic intervention) by its other, which is the ensemble of anti- or non-capacities. There is no such thing as an organic concept. As I tell my undergrads: if I say "What is a table?" and you point to this thing that we're sitting at, then you have not shown me that you can cross the bar of metaphor. That means that if I then say to you "Let's table this conversation" having not shown me that you can cross the bar of metaphor, you might pick up the table and throw it at me. So the thing that theorists have to understand — and this is very difficult for American and British theorists because of the way we're trained always through the hobble of empiricism and observation — is that a relational dynamic is motivated or founded on structural violence, and it is not something that you can knock on wood and see. I think that this is where the Italian commies have really helped us think through Marxism.

So the other point — to circle right back to your question — is that I don't think that anyone can show me Blackness as a formation prior to the global consensus by the Arabs, the Iranians, the Chinese, the Jews

of Morocco, prior to the global consensus that Africa is a place of slaves. This goes against one of his main points because what Patterson says is that social death happens through recruitment. So he's got a narrative arc going there. He says that the slave, however recruited, is socially dead. What we see is that prior to recruitment the slave was not an entity of social death. And we're saying, "Aha! Very interesting how you explain social death through its three constituent elements: natal alienation, general dishonor, and gratuitous violence. We buy that but we do not see the narrative mode of recruitment in Blackness." Therefore, I say in my book here and in the articles that I've written about the Black Liberation Army, and as it's come out in scattered soundbites here and there, that what happens is that a Black person sits down to write a story and the structure of story comes with this theoretical formation already. It already comes ideologically laden. It assumes that people in a story experience violence contingent upon transgression and the first thing that Marriott has shown, that Hartman has shown, that Sexton has shown, that I believe I have shown, as Zakiyyah Iman Jackson and others, is that there is no such thing as contingency to the violence of Blackness. You can never say, "Here's how you can act to not receive the violence," or, "Here's why the violence happened."

Because the violence is not a form of discrimination; it's a necessary ensemble of rituals, or just empty structures, like we see in the death of Black people in Covid-19, that allow for the rest of *the world* to sit down and say, "Oh my God, I might be a person of color, heavily-degraded by white supremacy. I might be a non-Black woman, heavily degraded by misogyny. I might be the working class, heavily degraded by exploitation, alienation. But damn it, if I get lynched..." The lynch mob is going to present a reason. I'm not saying the reason is accurate, ethical or for real. I'm saying there's going to be the word "if" or "whether." I can live in my soul because there are a group of people walking around on two legs with a similar kind of psychic infrastructure that I have for whom violence will come without the moment of transgression. It's that little thing there that opens up a chasm that allows for the word "human" to actually develop positive attributes because the one thing that it doesn't have is openness to gratuitous violence. I think that what I'm seeing, what I've seen in people who write slave narratives is: "this is what I'm experiencing, this violence without reason. But my editor, number one, and the structure of narrative, number two, do not allow for writing in which violence happens without reason. How do I do that?" And so what you find is that it comes out, but symptomatically. What I'm trying to do is to write, acknowledge the roadblocks that people like Solomon Northup and others have had in the past, and then to not make that symptomatic but to actually lance the boil and let the pus just fester on the page.

JP: There are these narrative tropes in Black literary traditions that recount the youthful "moment" in which someone discovers their Black social perception — we have W. E. B. Du Bois's recollection about the White girl at school who "refused...peremptorily" to accept his visiting-card.<sup>12</sup> There's Zora Neale Hurston's *How It Feels to Be Colored Me* wherein she describes realizing she was "a little colored girl" for the first time after leaving the idylls of Eatonville, FL for Jacksonville.<sup>13</sup> Can you talk more about your experience with your White friend's mother, Mrs. Davenport, detailed in *Juice From a Neck Bone* when she interpolated you as [a] Black? I found it uncomfortable to read this account, because it manifests

both Master-Slave power dynamics as well as Mrs. Davenport's manipulation of the *in loco parentis* role she wielded over you.

How do you plot your childhood alongside these other narratives and their departures? Is Hurston's conclusion, "I am not tragically colored," a result of her formative experiences taking place in an all-Black Southern town, whereas Du Bois's childhood confrontations took place within integrated New England settings before he was old enough to have developed an affirmative sense of Blackness? Did the seeming-intimacy of your acceptance into the Davenport household make her Black interpolation of you sting more. And would an older Frank have answered her shakedown more shrewdly? While my questions obviously cannot alter the ontological structure of the relation, might majority-minority age difference amplify how one perceives and experiences racial trauma?

FW: Yes. So, I want to say that I don't necessarily always believe Zora Neale Hurston when she says, "I didn't experience this until I left." Which is not to say that I think she's lying. I think that the mind-body knows itself as absolutely other even prior to speech in the Black community. I think that perhaps her needing to say that is symptomatic of wanting it to be true. Just like there is a point when Du Bois is a professor in Atlanta and he's walking down the street and he passes a pharmacy – you know, he's this northern New Englander – and in the pharmacy window he sees pickled genitals for sale. That's a kind of catalytic moment. But I actually think he saw that long before, in his childhood, and didn't necessarily realize it. So I think that what we have here — Du Bois, Hurston, myself as a little boy — are people who are positioned in the same place, in the same paradigm, the place of social death, from embryo onwards. But what is different is their kind of *lived experience*. So what I'm trying to say is that if I did more investigation or a deeper exegesis on Hurston's work or on Du Bois's work, I'd be going at it the same way I went at the exegesis on Solomon Northup's work — by not believing or giving all the credit to the voice of the free conscious, and instead looking at the symptomatic enunciations or eruptions that point to a deeper knowledge.

JP: Hurston mentioned that when White people visited Eatonville, they mostly just “passed through the town.”<sup>14</sup> Perhaps there are repressions of stories not told in order to lend her story the narrative coherence she desired. But you present us an interesting provocation because one must always wonder while reading Slave narrative conventions *what is true?*, *what is sayable?* and *what is true and sayable at the same time?*

FW: Hurston's scene about White people coming through the town is precisely what I was thinking about. I think there's a hydraulics that presses down upon the frontal lobes of every Black person who sits down to write. These devils are on your shoulder; they're future editors, if you're an academic they're people on your committee, if you're a grad student they're all kinds of things, there's the review process... Part of the besetting hobble of this is that when Black people write, we tend to be shackled by this dual need that comes out of Anglo-American pedagogy, which is the articulation or the description of problems and a rhetorical gesture towards or outright elaboration of a prescriptive cure.

A lot of what [Jared Sexton] and I have done in *Afropessimism* has come out of organizing for prison industrial complex abolitionism in the Bay Area. People would say, "Well, what do you do if there are no prisons?" In response, Sexton would say, "Oh, hold on, hold on. I will talk to you about crime. Or I will talk to you about punishment. But I will not talk to you about crime and punishment together." So what *Afropessimism* says is, "We will talk to you about Black suffering. But we will not talk to you about the alleviation of that. Can you stay in the hold of the ship through this book? We will not have a conversation about redress." I think that what I find in a lot of Black letters is what Fanon calls "cultural imposition", the violence of the demand that comes into the psyche. OK, I've written about this problem. People want to know: "well, how do we get out of this? They've got to write something about that, you know?" And if I say, "The end of the world?", they retort, "Woah, hyperbolic, do you mean that?" What we're trying to do is give a middle finger to all those voices.

JP: *Afropessimism* mixes genres of narrative and theory to reveal the premises of *Afropessimism* that lodge within the abstracted realm of political ontology and the unconscious libido. But persons that show up and move through the world as Black receive flashes and disclosures of *Afropessimist* structures through their experience of life -- maybe "experience" is not the perfect word here. But, Blacks might distill or intuit *Afropessimist* premises *a priori* without need them to awaken to full consciousness. For yourself, Frank, your political consciousness awoke within Marxist and liberationist radical movements and coalitions of solidarity during the 1970s and 80s.

FW: Yes.

JP: I state this emphatically to frame my next question, which may come across as loaded. *Afropessimism* states: "Eastern Seaboard slaves had grown to believe in the elasticity of accumulation and fungibility. In other words, slaves on the Eastern Seaboard were *not* *Afropessimists*, and that they did not see themselves primarily as the objects of captivity. Rather, they saw themselves as the subjects of hyper-exploitation."<sup>15</sup> Is there a simple question of history here in that juridically-enslaved peoples lived during a different historical moment than yours, which positioned them to pursue political anti- "hyper-exploitation" projects relative to your 1970s and 80s witness to the falling apart of integrated left radical movements? To state this more plainly: would it have been better for juridical slaves to have been avowed *Afropessimists* in the 18th and 19th centuries?

FW: I see what you're saying. Thank you for that. Nowhere in any of my work do I want to criticize the behavior of Black people at any point in history. So I'm glad I have a chance to talk about that, because that quote is more diagnostic than finger-wagging. It's not like, "You should have thought better." In the 60's and 70's, I thought of myself as a hyper-exploited worker, not as the antithesis of all humans – whether they are degraded or exalted. The problem with that was not in my lack of understanding, in the 60's and 70's and even the 80's. The problem is not in the lack of understanding in the slaves on the Eastern Seaboard. It's just that everyone is born into their time. Like people living from 1776 through

1800, I lived in a time of great optimism about global revolution. I still am emotionally cathected to that time. I'm still an old head from the 20th-century. I'm not a new head from the 21st-century. What I mean by that is that I went to the Soviet Union for about two and a half weeks in 1973, when I was 17 years old, and there was a lot that I experienced there. The Soviets were financing the revolutions in South Africa and other places of the world. When I think back on that trip — it was a Russian language trip for high school, I was a junior — the emotion of that trip is positive even though a major anti-Black episode happened.

For example, the positive: At the checkpoint at the borders of the Soviet Union in Finland, the Border Patrol treated me in an exalted way. In Moscow, and like any other high school jock at the time, I was homophobic. I'm walking into a movie theater, and a guy comes up and he says "*Tovarishch*" which is "comrade," and he grabs my hand. I'm thinking, "What's this dude trying to hit on me?" But we walk and I just relax. Something told me, "just relax," you know? And we walked hand-in-hand into the movie theater. I saw other men holding hands walking down the street. We sat down and we watched this movie in Russian. He didn't speak any English. I was in intermediate Russian so I could hardly communicate with him. We just held hands, and watched the movie, and walked out, and talked as best we could as comrades. A woman physicist saw me at 3:00 in the morning walking down the Nevsky Prospekt in Leningrad – and you know, you think when a white woman walks up to you in the middle of the night on the street that she's trying to hit on you, or there's going to be something that you've got to get out of or whatever. But we just start talking about why there is no God and why communism will take over the world. [On a different occasion], a taxi driver won't start the car because I'm sitting in the back seat. I forgot you're supposed to sit in the front seat, there's no back seat. Then we get on and he's talking about "horrible Nixon" and the Vietnam War. So that's where my emotional memories are.

But also, something else happened where a bunch of Russians turned almost violent against four Africans and one Egyptian/North African I was with in a bar because [we] wanted to play James Brown on the record player and they had Russian songs going. They had a big old bear, a real-life bear. So, this kind of unconscious anti-Blackness just erupted at this bar. I carry with me this kind of sensibility that the Eastern Seaboard slaves had because I came out of this moment when the Panthers were going to liberate us, and AIM [American Indian Movement] was going to liberate the plantation, and the Puerto Ricans were going to get Puerto Rico back for their country, the SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] and the Weather Underground were going to blow up capitalism. At the same time, I realize that the structure of violence that subjects me is not like the structure of violence that subjects other oppressed people, and that is deep in the unconscious. The unconscious, as Marriott has written, is subtended — anti-Blackness is subtended by a capacity for violence that dwarfs anything that Black people could resist. It is a structural violence. I don't mean to criticize saying, "Y'all should've thought better in 1800, because this big whammy was coming, and y'all should've thought better in the 1970's because this big whammy called the Prison Industrial Complex where they're going to enslave 1.5 million Black people, incarcerated just like they did from 1800 to 1830, is coming." I'm saying that we are of our time, but we

are also underneath this huge dome that is not of our making, just like capitalism for the working class. Is that getting to what you're asking me?

JP: It is, yes. I do have a follow up to this though. You use "Slave" (with a capital-S) and historians of slavery often defer to "enslaved person" or "enslaved people" when talking about the 18th and 19th century Black community. Are you making an intervention at the level of locution where "enslaved person" speaks to the category of the human?

FW: Thank you. Well, this brings us back to Patterson because I don't think that the world of the academy has fully inculcated what Patterson has said, or historians have raised such a ruckus over the lack of empiricism that our minds are clouded. One or the other. But the point is that it is our hope that people do not pooh-pooh the lived experience of what it means to be chattel, while at the same time not confusing what it means to be chattel with what it means to be Slave.

Let me repeat that. It is our hope that we do not pooh-pooh what it means to be chattel. I don't know what I would do if I were literally in shackles, with a horsebit in my mouth, having my back opened and being seasoned like Solomon Northup and others were seasoned. I don't know how I could survive that. At all. I make so-called good money as a professor. I've got my own crib on campus. I get on a plane when I want to. At the same time, that is not the essence of what's essential here. In other words, all these people who are coming back against Afropessimism are making a faulty theoretical mistake at the level of the intervention. It would be like saying, "There is an essential difference between a sweatshop worker who's dying of Covid-19, working in crowded conditions and living on a starvation wage, and a professor at the University of Stockholm." That is the flat-footed Anglo-American way of thinking through Marxism. There is no essential difference between those two entities because both are confronted by capital through the same laws of alienation and exploitation. However, we'd be foolish to say that the lived experience of those two are different.

Circling back to your question, we really have to stop thinking slavery definitionally through the lived experience of it. Until we can stop doing that, we really can't understand – which is not to say *agree* with – the Afropessimist argument because the essence – I got a whole book here about lived experience, so don't get me wrong – is not in the lived experience. The Marxists had to learn from the Gramscians and from the Negrians how to think at a level of abstraction that does not need the factory floor to theorize the laws of capitalist oppression. You've got to be able to think at a level of abstraction where there's not any whips and chains and fields of cotton, to theorize the laws of slavery at the level of abstraction of the relation. For that, you've really got to, for a moment, put aside historical (so-called) fact and empiricism. I think there's such an emotional, knee-jerk response to that kind of thinking that I don't find in places like South Africa and Germany. But I do find in London, New York, Minneapolis, California....

SI: Thank you for that, Frank. Going off what you were talking about: your work in *Gramsci's Black Marx* and your work in *Afropessimism* was extremely important for a lot of us, including myself, in clarifying

some of the major limitations in Gramscian accounts of civil society and limitations around the figure of the worker – particularly in accounting for Black suffering and the gratuitous anti-Black violence that structures the Human. I have a few questions that I want to pose based on your critique of Marxism, particularly Gramscian Marxism. Do you find anything useful in Marxist analyses in accounting for anti-Blackness? Second, you talk about the *libidinal economy*. I want you to elucidate the concept for us especially since there are various renderings of the libidinal economy from Lacan to Lyotard. Finally, as a closing question on this theme, you draw a sharp dichotomy between the libidinal economy and political economy. In *Gramsci's Black Marx*, there's this line where you sort of invert the vulgar base-superstructure conceptualisation that we find in certain strands of Marxism, and position the libidinal economy of anti-Blackness at the base. You ask what it would mean to think about anti-Blackness as the base which we then read political economy off. My question, then, is: Is there a way to conceptualize the libidinal economy and the political economy in a dialectical way, rather than through this sharp dichotomy? I'm not thinking strictly about a traditional Hegelian dialectic, but a more open-ended, Adorno-inspired negative dialectics.

FW: Thank you for that. I've never really had an opportunity to express what I was thinking there more fully. Every fall I teach a grad course on Volume One of *Capital*. That's a hell of a thing to do in ten weeks. I learned it over 50 weeks from one of the best teachers of that book who was Ruth Wilson Gilmore, when I was her student at UC Berkeley. If I had all 150,000 words back and this book grew a third head which would make it unreadable, I would like to say Gramsci makes this point in the first translation of *The Prison Notebooks* from 1978 saying something to the effect of, "There is no such thing as a dividing line between civil society and political society. I, Gramsci, am going to divide that for methodological reasons." So I would say that it's been a while since I've read the Lyotard book on libidinal economy. Jared Sexton gave it to me in grad school for my exams so that's how long it's been. But when I'm talking about libidinal economy, I'm basically talking about the economy that comes out of Lacan and, by extension, Freud.

I would say, like Gramsci did, civil society is this ensemble of institutions that produce hegemony and you capture those in a counter-hegemonic war of position, and then you can move to a war of maneuver that destroys political society and the structure, meaning the economy. But he says, how do we actually do this? You can say that the police, the army, the prisons, are all institutions of political economy. You can say that the megachurch, guild societies, schools, the family, are all institutions of civil society. So he says, "But, you know, what do you do with a courtroom?" A courtroom is a prime example of this institutionality that bleeds over from political society into civil society. His point is that it's just society but I'm going to have to write a book to divide these two things so I can talk about violence and hegemony. I would say it's just economy but I'm going to have to articulate the first principles of Marxism to talk about political economy and then build from Jared Sexton on what I mean by libidinal economy. Sexton writes that libidinal economy is the economy of distribution and arrangement of desire, identification, condensation, displacement, all that.<sup>16</sup> Why do I do that? I do that because in this country in particular, and I'm writing from and to this country but also to the world, that I'm dealing

with the essential nature of the hobbles of the Anglo-American training and mind. What I'm trying to say is that when you think of structural violence, the State, as an American or a Brit, you're constantly thinking about these forces that are vamping when the subaltern threatens the arrangement of tangible power, like money and factories and resources. That is only one aspect of this word called institutionality and it may not be even the most essential aspect. One of the things that Marriott, for example, says is that everybody – and I'm making it simple – everybody is a bigot, right? Everybody has all kinds of horrific fantasies about other people, but only non-Black people can make their fantasies have what's called objective value which is to say that those fantasies then become the real stuff; the fabric that changes, subjugates, and makes for other lives. I think that what we need to do is understand why that is the case, and why it can never be the case for Black people. Not because Black people are good, or not bigoted, but it's because the fantasy space that comes out of Blackness can never be subtended, like right angles in a triangle can never be subtended with structural violence. That's really important. What you have in California in 1988 is that the state legislature of California says, "Hoo, there's this big drug problem," and they begin to imagine, not based on facts or statistics because based on facts or statistics, "Wow, the big drug problem is in Beverly Hills." "Wow, the big drug problem is in Marin County, the Napa Valley." They say, "Hoo, it's in Compton, in South Central." Then they develop the law which you have read about in this second book called the *Street Terrorism Enforcement and Protection Act*. What that law does is that it takes the fantasy of Blackness as always already criminal, and the fantasy of every place a Black person lives whether they're paying rent or mortgage or whatever as being a slave hovel. They make that fantasy have objective value by making those sites cartographically crime sites even if the crime took place in West Hollywood and making all the people in the family supplemental perps to any so-called crime that one member could produce. That is amazing. That law is not a function of political economy. That law is a function of libidinal economy where a group of people – they don't have to be logical but just start to fantasize the black threat – recompose it as the slave. Then they say, "We are in the seventh-largest economy in the world, we have 21 different kinds of police officers, and we're just going to make this real," in the way that Edwin Epps would make it real in 1853.

SI: Thank you for that. That's super helpful in sort of clarifying the libidinal economy and the political economy aspects of your argument. As a follow-up, I would love to hear about the relationship that you envision, or whatever actual relationship exists, between Afropessimism as the meta-theory that you lay out but also in terms of your own thinking, and the Black radical tradition broadly conceived. I'm thinking particularly about what we might call Black Marxisms, Black feminisms, and the project of abolition. I am specifically interested in how different strands of Black radicalism—from Cedric Robinson's framework of racial capitalism and its renewed uptake, to the work of the Combahee River Collective and their analyses of interlocking oppressions, to the abolitionist work of scholars like Ruth Wilson Gilmore whom you just mentioned, and Critical Resistance—sit with or relate to Afropessimism?<sup>17</sup> I want to frame this question within the context of the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM), particularly the ways their policy platform redeploys these specific traditions of thought.<sup>18</sup> I'm especially interested in how the notion of racial capitalism might be a way to move beyond the exploitation framework which, as you've pointed out, is limited.<sup>19</sup>

FW: Yes. The theorists that you've mentioned have been very instrumental in my own development. I only met Cedric Robinson once, but I read his work and was highly motivated by it. Of course, I've also done many courses with Ruth Wilson Gilmore. What I don't want to say is that those theorists and what they've said in the Black radical tradition are wrong. I believe that the kind of racial interventions that Ruthie has made in Marxism and Robinson are extremely productive, and nurtured and taught me. I want to say that in the final instance I do not believe that we, Black people, essentially suffer like other people. We suffer in important ways like other people. Most of us are workers. Most Black women experience the most horrific forms of sexism and misogynistic violence. The deaths that happen to Black trans people are deepened, exponentialized, and increased. So there's a way in which transphobia operates internal to the black community. There's a way in which, with people like Oprah Winfrey and others, John Johnson of *Ebony* magazine, all these people, capitalist oppression operates internal to the Black community.

I think that the haters have said that Afropessimism has turned their backs on all this, and what they haven't really seen, or bothered to read, is the way in which we went through all this stuff to get to where we are. It wasn't like an Afro-centric thing, "Oh, that's a white man's theory, you know?" No. I'm still an anti-capitalist, and I still believe that the Oedipal mapping of kinship destroys the lives of women and makes for a triangulation in the libidinal economy of mommy-daddy-me that just spells death to LGBT people. However, at the base of all those discourses is this assumption that every sentient being in the world has access to a kinship structure, number one. So that would be feminism. There is a sense that every sentient being in the world has some kind of role as a subject in an economy. However, when you start to interrogate those claims, through violence as a paradigm and the libidinal economy, what you find out is that even when you get to a point where we might have a liberated kinship structure that allows for the end of these false constructs called man-woman, and the end of the false constructs called hetero or gay, you'll still have anti-Blackness. This is because kinship as a structure, whether ethical in this new world or unethical under Oedipus, is not available to social death. Number one. Further, as Patterson points out, somewhere early on between pages 28 to 30, you could be, as a slave, an object of property relations, but you can never be a subject of property relations. That is the key difference. He says that athletes and husbands and wives are both objects of property relations – in other words, they have the talons of possession dug into them – but you turn around to the next context and they are also subjects of property relations. What we're arguing is that a Black person can never be a subject of property relations. See there are persons who say, "I got money in the bank and I own a house. What are you talking about?" I would just point them back to the law that I spoke of before, the *Street Terrorism Enforcement and Protection Act*, and say, "Yeah, it's really important that you act like a subject of property relations. But it's really essential that you can never be incorporated and inculcated as one." What we find in all of these theories is something that cannot account for anti-Blackness, and that is a semiotic move that the post-structuralists think is universal, and it is not. The semiotic move goes like this: The emancipatory joy in semiotics is the fact that every word has what's called endless commutability. That means that no word, as I said early in this conversation, is attached to an organic phenomenon. If no

word is attached to an organic phenomenon, then at some point – this is both Gramscian and Lacanian – at some point through struggle the word can take on a new perspective, a new meaning. So that the most horrific types of words that are used for gay people can be changed, internal to the gay community, and take on a certain valence. But what we would argue is that there is one word, and that's the N-word, that can never be transformed. It's not because there's something lacking in the word. It's because the semioticians to the post-structuralists have never thought of a sentient being who is subjugated by violence first, and not discourse. Lacan says, you come into subjectivity through discourse. Marx is saying the same thing, in his own way. There's a symbolic set of impositions that make for this thing called exchange-value. You break those symbolic impositions, and you get the violence. But you have one being. In order for that to be existent, that whole world of sentient beings who are elaborated by what's called discursive capacity were elaborated by symbolic intervention. There's got to be another world over here of sentient beings who cannot have access to discursive capacity. You know why? Because just like cat needs dog to make sense, you've got to have another a netherworld to make sense of the world. So what the Marxists and the feminists built upon Marx, and built upon Lacan and Levi-Strauss respectively, are trying to do is to end this kind of world and produce another. What we're saying is that the capacity for transformation is what's lacking, and we have to destroy the capacity for transformation before we can be on another world, which is different than saying, "I need to destroy the capacity for capitalist capacity. I need to destroy the structure for patriarchal capacity." We are at the core of attacking capacity and its laws, not a certain kind. What this does is it makes for a kind of energy that comes out of Black music, that comes out of Black screens, that comes out of Black protests, that everyone wants to harness, but no one wants to get so close that they have to deal with, "Why did that come here, and where did it come from?"

SI: You've mentioned through this interview that taken to its logical conclusion, the intervention that Afropessimism is making is at the level of political ontology. Taken to its logical conclusion, Afropessimism entails the end of the world, and there's no knowing what comes after. In a certain sense, asking for a prescription misses the point of Afropessimism's intervention. With that in mind, still, would you characterize a certain political horizon for Afropessimism? Relatedly, when you look back on history, are there instances or historical moments where even momentarily the world as we know it "burned down" or "ended"? I'm thinking specifically about events such as the Haitian revolution.

FW: I think the Haitian Revolution is a very good example. I remember Henry Louis Gates did a kind of TV series on that, and one of the comments that he made was that it was unfortunate that they burned everything down on the island. I choked. I said to the TV, "No, it's unfortunate that they just didn't cross over to Miami and start burning northwards." So I thank you for that, because Afropessimism is not a kind of theoretical discovery, like Foucault's discoveries of discipline and punishment. It's actually a big ear which goes back thirteen hundred years.

I think that the first Africans whose genitals are being destroyed so that they can be marched to the sea to become eunuchs in Zanzibar, and the first Black women who are being marched across the Red Sea

to be sex slaves are understanding something more than discriminatory violence is happening here. As they're watching this unfold, hundreds of years go by, and they're seeing that the elaboration of what it means to be an Arab, what it means to have the rules of Arab filiation develop and flower, and what it means to have an Arab family cannot happen without the irreconcilable bond to the destruction of our filial capacity. The destruction of our capacity to be is linked to the capacity for all others to develop into who they are. I think that that's what we're saying, but I think it's been theorized for thirteen hundred years. It's just that the world of other oppressed people says, "Well, what does it mean for me?" as an Asian, or Latinx immigrant, and we've tried to answer that question rather than saying, "No, you have to tell us what your analysis of your suffering, and your analysis of your capacity to be liberated, means for us. We're not going to tell you what ours means for you." So that's one thing.

I think explanatory power is all that Afropessimism has to offer. It does not have to offer tactical suggestions, does not have to offer the vision of a new world. It's just simply an explanation of the structure of pain and suffering. That's all we were trying to do when we were trying to concretize this in the late-1990's. We were just taking seminars on Gramsci, Marx, we were taking seminars on Freud and Lacan, and we were then mobilizing with the very first iteration of Critical Resistance, which happened on-campus when we were grad students; mobilizing with the anti-Prop 21 people that did send 14 year-old kids to San Quentin. We're seeing that every time you're in a coalition, there's something about Black suffering that the coalition develops an anxiety about and cannot address and reverts back to the discourse of universal suffering. Every time we're across the bay, back at home in Berkeley in a classroom, and we raise these issues, we get argued that this is identity politics. We are against identity politics. We're not for that. What we're seeing is that the world on the left – this is why I attack the left – was policing the capacity for Blackness to think its own kind of structure of suffering and policing that in highly anxious, emotional ways. So I think our labors have helped.

This also gets back to people under the age of 25, or over the age of 65. It [Afropessimism] has helped Black people – who would normally go crazy after retirement thinking, "What the hell happened to me?" understand. It's helping Black youth, as Jared Sexton would say, be in a coalition for immigrant rights and fight to death for that, be in a coalition for workers' rights, a coalition against homophobia and work for that, but also realize that you have the right to ridicule the puniness of the demand that comes out of these coalitions while you're fighting for their liberation. We've never given ourselves permission to laugh at struggling people while we are at the same time fighting for their rights. This is a very important emotional dynamic that I think Afropessimism has given permission for. We're saying, "It's a puny thing, because at the end of the day, what you're fighting for is a better world, and at the end of the day, I am without world-making capacity, and I'm fighting to end your oppressor's world-making capacity, and when you get it, I'm fighting to end your world-making capacity. You don't know how free I can make you. Or maybe you do know, and that's why you're a little bit queasy about me."

JP: As a scholar of Black Diaspora spirit ritual, I am personally interested in asking you about your Louisiana Catholic Vodou heritage as it continues this theme of the Haitian Revolution and

revolutionary consciousness broadly. There's a certain moment in Fanon's *On Violence* where he laid out a spirit possession methodology for post-colonial studies – "any study of the colonial world therefore must include an understanding of the phenomena of dance and possession –" and he directly invoked the Vodou *lwa* Papa Legba.<sup>20</sup> In *Afropessimism*, you recall clandestinely observing your mother fabricate *gris-gris* amulets, "sticking needles into little stuffed-cloth dolls, naming them with the names of two of her White coworkers," and you went on to study Trinidadian Rada Vodou rites for a semester at the University of West Indies while still an undergraduate.<sup>21</sup> And we can speculate that, without the August, 1791 Bois Caïman ritual in which enslaved Africans made a spirit oath to fight for their collective liberation, there may never have been such a "world-ending event" as the Haitian Revolution.<sup>22</sup> Does Vodou present its own revolutionary-cosmological horizon for you? A horizon that may or may not be part of an Afropessimist vista but informs your own personal practices nonetheless?

FW: Yes, thank you. Well, that is very true. In the acknowledgements, I actually acknowledge the help that I've received from two *Babalawos*.<sup>23</sup> One is a Babalawo in Oakland trained in Nigeria, and the other is a Babalawo from Cuba who comes from a long line of Babalawos from Angola. He's now living in Minneapolis. So just as a being, I don't do anything without checking in with my Babalawo; my cancer, or my 10 year promotion like twelve years ago or whatever. [But] also being raised Roman Catholic in the most oppressive way possible...I say that, because my mother was a light-skinned New Orleans Roman Catholic who just comes up from that. My dad is worse than that, because he's a Jesuit-trained convert, and really, Catholicism's just another form of paganism. They try to be Christian, but they ain't really made it. [Laughter]

JP: There are too many saints for a truly monotheistic frame, there.

FW: Exactly, exactly. Now, politically, I'm against Christianity. Politically, I'm against it.

JP: Tell us what you really think!

FW: Yeah, I mean, I don't think there's any room for it. Or Islam, or Judaism. But...because I'm politically against monotheism doesn't mean that I want to work that into my work, because my work is not about how Black people live their lives. I choose to live my life through Buddhist meditation, although the discourse has been so hijacked by white Californians that it's nauseating.

I choose to live my spiritual life through my contact and the connection with the ancestors through the *Babalawo*. It's my belief. But I also feel motivated, when I put words to the page, in the analytic work at least, to think back to what Malcolm X said, "Leave your religion at home in the closet." What I don't want to do is – how can I put this? For a long time, I didn't say anything about the way that Vodou had influenced me and my belief structure. I just wanted it purely analytic. Now I just admit that and say that that's where I'm at. But what I don't want to do....there are certain people who practice Vodou and they say, "Well, if Black people could only leave Mohammed and Christ, and come back to their original

African *lwa*, then we'd be OK." That's the bridge I don't want to cross. I don't want to be over there, because that then gets me into this kind of moralizing finger-wagging, and it then gets me to point at Black people as being part of the problem. I never want to make a corrective move on Black people, and I don't believe that what *you* believe spiritually impacts upon how you suffer through your Blackness. That's part of why the epilogue [of *Afropessimism*] is a kind of homage to the conversations between Jared Sexton and Fred Moten about the social life inside of social death. You know, where the epilogue is about [how] my mother and I could never agree on much. But at a certain point in time, she saw the value of what I was doing, and I saw the way that she suffered regardless of the fact that she loves this country and never misses confession.

SI: Thank you! This has been super generative. We just have one more serious question for you. The question is about your reflections and thoughts about the world, about Blackness, about anti-Blackness, about *Afropessimism* in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, and, relatedly, in the backdrop of Covid-19, the horrific vigilante murder of Ahmaud Arbery in the state of Georgia. We're all at a loss for words about these things, especially what's happening in Georgia, but also across the US and the world.

FW: I know what you mean, yeah. Well, I think those two things go hand-in-hand. People didn't like what I said that Donald Trump was, since Andrew Jackson, perhaps the first true American president. That's kind of a shorthand for saying that most presidents of the 20th century, at least for the most part, tried to publicly not express and unleash the truth of the libidinal economy. Whereas he's done the exact opposite. It's very interesting to me that the protests to open up America, end social distancing, are people with swastikas and nooses and all that kind of thing. It's very interesting to me. It's very interesting to me that this lynching can occur within the same period of Ahmaud, and there's just what – just a grand jury hearing? That happens weeks afterwards?

SI: Yeah, it's absurd. It's absurd.

FW: It's absurd! What I would say, kind of in closing, in a nutshell, is that we're really back to a formulation that Hartman makes in *Scenes of Subjection* in which she makes two moves: she says that empathy is a reciprocal dynamic that, in order for it to happen, in order to be empathetic towards Black suffering, the scene of empathy, and the narrative, has to insert a white body into that suffering in order for that to happen. Then she says, in order for there to be redress in the courts for a Black woman who's raped, the courts have to think of Black female embodiment as coming with consent that has been violated. The ultimate endgame of that argument is that it's really impossible to imagine Black suffering, to imagine that Black people can be injured, and it's this absence of injury, an absence of injury within the libidinal economy, that makes for what would normally be moments of global outrage. So, it'd just be kind of silence when it happens to Black people. A medical person was on the other day saying that Black people are dying at a rate of 67 percent higher in Covid-19 than all groups put together.

Consider this: a few years ago, William Maxwell wrote a book, *F.B. Eyes*, in which he said that from 1919, the FBI has had the most sophisticated and largest African-American literature department in the world.<sup>24</sup> The FBI, where they have been collecting unpublished manuscripts as well as published manuscripts of poets, creative nonfiction writers, and they have been sifting through that stuff, creating false flags, meaning journals, to capture these things. Writing in blackface and creating preventative detention lists that have roving members on it to round up certain Black writers if things happen. I mean, this book would've... If it had been about any other group, everything would have broken. News media, everything, you know? But it's not even whispered about. So I think that what we're seeing is a kind of hydraulics of absence – a word from David Marriott – and, yes, you can say Black people are dying at a rate of 67 percent higher; yes, you can say that there's an organic integration between anti-Black symbols and anti-Black organizations and the easing of restrictions protests; yes, you can say that there's all this horrific on-camera violence in the murder of Ahmaud Arbery that should be just a slam-dunk, open-and-shut case. At the same time, it's not a conspiracy theory. This is what Afropessimists understand. It's not a conspiracy theory, it's the way the brain needs a human other which cannot be injured in order for a human-ness to be coherent and go on. The only difference, it's back to what I said earlier, is that it is not ordained by God. It was constructed, and now we have a discourse called Afropessimism that can explain this to the victim in ways that are unapologetic, and we'll get some movement from that. That's not how we started. I don't know what the movement will be. We just wanted to answer the universal claims of psychoanalysis and Marxism without throwing them out. We just wanted to answer those universal claims when we were in grad school, and now it's become something else precisely because we were lucky that Black people were on the move when the discourse came out.

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## NOTES

1. This is an abridged text version of a full-length audio interview originally aired on the *Always Already Podcast* (<https://alwaysalreadypodcast.wordpress.com/2020/05/11/wilderson-interview/>).
2. Frank B. Wilderson III, *Afropessimism*, (New York: Liveright, 2020); Frank B. Wilderson III, *Incognegro: A Memoir of Exile and Apartheid*, (Reprint edition, Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2015); Frank B. Wilderson III, "Gramsci's Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?," *Social Identities* 9, no. 2 (2003): 225–40; Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).
3. Paul C. Taylor, "What If the Problem of Racism Has No Solution?," *Washington Post*, April 17, 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/what-if-the-problem-of-racism-has-no-solution/2020/04/16/b5f43360-6183-11ea-845d-e35b0234b136\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/what-if-the-problem-of-racism-has-no-solution/2020/04/16/b5f43360-6183-11ea-845d-e35b0234b136_story.html).
4. A note of clarification: we use the word "Afropessimism" to refer to the theory of Afropessimism, while *Afropessimism* refers to Wilderson's (2020) book.
5. Jared Sexton, "The Vel of Slavery: Tracking the Figure of the Unsovereign," *Critical Sociology* 42, no. 4–5 (2016): 583–97, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920514552535>.
6. David Marriott, *Haunted Life: Visual Culture and Black Modernity*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2007; idem., *Whither Fanon? Studies in the Blackness of Being*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2018.
7. Orlando Patterson. *Slavery and Social Death*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1982; Frantz Fanon, "The Black Man and Psychopathology." In *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Richard Philcox. Revised Edition. New York: Grove Press, 2008, 120–184.
8. Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black*, 27; idem., "Social Death and Narrative Aporia in 12 Years a Slave." *Black Camera* 7, no. 1 (2015): 134–149.
9. Idem., *Afropessimism*, 123.
10. Ibid., 226–227.
11. Karl Marx, *Capital, Vol. 1: A Critique of Political Economy*. Translated by Ben Fowkes. Introduction by Ernest Mandel. London: Penguin Books, 1990.
12. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*. Introduction by David Levering Lewis. New York: The Modern Library, 2003, 4.
13. Zora Neale Hurston, "How it Feels to Be Colored Me," *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. Third Edition. Vol. 1. Edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Valerie A. Smith. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014, 1041.
14. Ibid.
15. Wilderson III, *Afropessimism*, 72, emphasis in original.
16. Sexton quoted in Wilderson III, *Red, White, and Black*, 7.
17. Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Combahee River Collective, "The Combahee River Collective Statement," in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, edited by Barbara Smith (New York: Kitchen Table--Women of Color Press, 1983), 264–73; Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*, American Crossroads: 21 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).
18. The Movement for Black Lives, "The Movement for Black Lives Policy Platform, 'A Vision for Black Lives,'" (2016), <https://m4bl.org/policy-platforms/>.
19. Siddhant Issar, "Listening to Black Lives Matter: Racial Capitalism and the Critique of Neoliberalism," *Contemporary Political Theory*, (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-020-00399-0>.

20. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Richard Philcox, foreword by Homi K. Bhabha, preface by Jean-Paul Sartre. New York: Grove Press, 2004, 19. *Lwa* is the Haitian Kreyòl word referring to the spirit divinities that make up Vodou's pantheons.
21. Wilderson III, *Afropessimism*, 30, 57-58.
22. David Geggus. "The Bois Caïman Ceremony." *The Journal of Caribbean History* 25, no. 1 (1991): 41-57.
23. Wilderson III, *Afropessimism*, xi. A *babalawo*, (literally "father of mysteries") is a male priest in Yoruba and Yoruba Diaspora Orisha-Ifá ritual traditions.
24. William J. Maxwell. *F.B. Eyes: How J. Edgar Hoover's Ghostreaders Framed African American Literature*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2015.

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1. <sup>1</sup> This is an abridged text version of a full-length audio interview originally aired on the *Always Already Podcast* (<https://alwaysalreadypodcast.wordpress.com/2020/05/11/wilderson-interview/>).
2. <sup>2</sup> Frank B. Wilderson III, *Afropessimism*, (New York: Liveright, 2020); Frank B. Wilderson III, *Incognegro: A Memoir of Exile and Apartheid*, (Reprint edition, Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2015); Frank B. Wilderson III, "Gramsci's Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?," *Social Identities* 9, no. 2 (2003): 225–40; Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).
3. <sup>3</sup> Paul C. Taylor, "What If the Problem of Racism Has No Solution?," *Washington Post*, April 17, 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/what-if-the-problem-of-racism-has-no-solution/2020/04/16/b5f43360-6183-11ea-845d-c35b0234b136\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/what-if-the-problem-of-racism-has-no-solution/2020/04/16/b5f43360-6183-11ea-845d-c35b0234b136_story.html).
4. <sup>4</sup> A note of clarification: we use the word "Afropessimism" to refer to the theory of Afropessimism, while *Afropessimism* refers to Wilderson's (2020) book.
5. <sup>5</sup> Jared Sexton, "The Vel of Slavery: Tracking the Figure of the Unsovereign," *Critical Sociology* 42, no. 4–5 (2016): 583–97, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920514552535>.
6. <sup>6</sup> David Marriott, *Haunted Life: Visual Culture and Black Modernity*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2007; idem., *Whither Fanon? Studies in the Blackness of Being*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2018.
7. <sup>7</sup> Orlando Patterson. *Slavery and Social Death*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1982; Frantz Fanon, "The Black Man and Psychopathology." In *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Richard Philcox. Revised Edition. New York: Grove Press, 2008, 120-184.
8. <sup>8</sup> Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black*, 27; idem., "Social Death and Narrative Aporia in 12 Years a Slave." *Black Camera* 7, no. 1 (2015): 134-149.
9. <sup>9</sup> Idem., *Afropessimism*, 123.
10. <sup>10</sup> Ibid., 226-227.
11. <sup>11</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital, Vol. 1: A Critique of Political Economy*. Translated by Ben Fowkes. Introduction by Ernest Mandel. London: Penguin Books, 1990.
12. <sup>12</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*. Introduction by David Levering Lewis. New York: The Modern Library, 2003, 4.
13. <sup>13</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, "How it Feels to Be Colored Me," *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. Third Edition. Vol. 1. Edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Valerie A. Smith. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014, 1041.
14. <sup>14</sup> Hurston, 1040.
15. <sup>15</sup> Wilderson III, *Afropessimism*, 72, emphasis in original.
16. <sup>16</sup> Sexton quoted in Wilderson III, *Red, White, and Black*, 7.
17. <sup>17</sup> Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Combahee River Collective, "The Combahee River Collective Statement," in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, edited by Barbara Smith (New York: Kitchen Table--Women of Color Press, 1983), 264–73; Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*, American Crossroads: 21 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).
18. <sup>18</sup> The Movement for Black Lives, "The Movement for Black Lives Policy Platform, 'A Vision for Black Lives,'" (2016), <https://m4bl.org/policy-platforms/>.
19. <sup>19</sup> Siddhant Issar, "Listening to Black Lives Matter: Racial Capitalism and the Critique of Neoliberalism," *Contemporary Political Theory*, (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-020-00399-0>.
20. <sup>20</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Richard Philcox, foreword by Homi K. Bhabha, preface by Jean-Paul Sartre. New York: Grove Press, 2004, 19. *Lwa* is the Haitian Kreyòl word referring to the spirit divinities that make up Vodou's pantheons.
21. <sup>21</sup> Wilderson III, *Afropessimism*, 30, 57-58.
22. <sup>22</sup> David Geggus. "The Bois Caïman Ceremony." *The Journal of Caribbean History* 25, no. 1 (1991): 41-57.
23. <sup>23</sup> Wilderson III, *Afropessimism*, xi. A *babalawo*, (literally "father of mysteries") is a male priest in Yoruba and Yoruba Diaspora Orisha-Ifá ritual traditions.

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24. <sup>24</sup> William J. Maxwell. *F.B. Eyes: How J. Edgar Hoover's Ghostreaders Framed African American Literature*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2015.