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A Stethoscope to the World: The Fault Lines Between Marxism and Afropessimism

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In *Capital*, Karl Marx provides an immanent critique of capitalism. The text offers a rendering of a political economy that is at times “synchronic” as it describes how capital works irrespective of any given moment in history, but also “diachronic” when it accounts for the historical development of capitalism as Marx knew it. These affordances equip Marx with a language essential to characterizing an “antagonism” between the worker and the capitalist. This antagonism subtends capitalism’s demise since the proletariat possesses the numbers to overthrow the bourgeoisie. However, Marxism’s assumptive logic only holds water when considering the structural position of the worker. The structural position of the slave entails no such denouement. In his 1983 book *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, Cedric Robinson notes that “slave labor” helped scaffold “what Marx termed ‘primitive accumulation,’ [but] it would be an error to arrest the relationship there, assigning slave labor to some ‘pre-capitalist’ stage of history . . . this meant that the interpretation of history in terms of the dialectic of capitalist class struggles would prove inadequate”—inadequate, that is, to the task of understanding forms of racial alienation, exploitation, and suffering that lose visibility in class-reductionist discourses.¹ In a critical divergence from Robinson’s Black radical tradition, Frank Wilderson’s contributions to the framework of Afropessimism pose a different yet nonetheless crucial intervention to Marxism. Importantly, Robinson throws into relief the concomitance of slavery and racialization with the logic of capitalism, proclaiming that “the Atlantic slave trade and the slavery of the New World were integral to the modern world economy. Their relationship to capitalism was historical and organic rather than adventitious or synthetic.”² Wilderson argues, however, that the concomitance of slavery and racialization (particularly for Blackness) *circumscribes capitalism* on the level of paradigm.

In his 2003 article “Gramsci’s Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?” Wilderson suggests that “the emergence of the slave, the subject-effect of an ensemble of direct relations of force, marks the emergence of capitalism *itself*.” That is, “violence towards the black body is the precondition for the existence of Gramsci’s single entity ‘the modern bourgeois-state’ with its divided apparatus, political society and civil society. This is to say violence against black people is ontological and gratuitous as opposed to merely ideological and contingent.”³ Wilderson’s characterization of anti-Black violence thus necessitates a reevaluation of racial slavery, as such violence

exceeds the boundaries of what the vocabulary of labor and political economy can describe. For Wilderson, Black slavery not only entails a forced laboring status, but also forced exposure to a regime of violence for which capital accumulation and land expansion may be important, but not essential. What is essential, instead, is the imposed inhumanity, deprivation of dignity and teleological value, and removal from participation in civil society as a legible interlocutor, that all seem to befall the Black slave. Importantly, Wilderson takes white supremacy to task in the aforementioned article, but as Afropessimism evolves, he develops a critique of anti-Blackness that holds it as more essential to the ontological composition of the human than white supremacy. The “ontological and gratuitous” quality of anti-Black violence versus the “ideological and contingent” violence against other minoritized groups eventually leads Wilderson to broach Afropessimism as a *meta-theory* upon other frameworks.

The beginnings of Wilderson’s insights are found in the aforementioned “Gramsci’s Black Marx,” but he also expands the reach of his contributions to wider audiences in his 2020 book, *Afropessimism*. Therein, Wilderson hybridizes theoretical treatise, memoir, and film analysis to posit that most historical conflicts remain predicated on a mutually recognized coherence: what is indeed “ideological and contingent” as opposed to “ontological and gratuitous.” The worker and the capitalist, for example, quarrel over the working day—a concept that both agree exists—while the colonized and the colonizer quarrel over territorial sovereignty. Political redemption remains an affordance, however fraught by conflict and violence, for such historical subjects. Between the white/non-Black “master” and the Black “slave,” however, no mutual coherence occurs—not even a dialectic moment in which the master consciously admits to the autonomy of the slave, or the slave gains ontological surety from observing the master’s dependence on their labor. With this understanding, it becomes even clearer where Robinson and Wilderson differ on Black suffering, however much both happen to critique Marxism. As Sara-Maria Sorrentino corroborates in her article, “The Abstract Slave: Anti-Blackness and Marx’s method,” Robinson “characterizes ‘racial capitalism’ as a problem of the appropriation and extraction of black labor power and . . . reduces race to an ‘epistemology’ for the ‘rational and cultural relationships of domination,’” such that “his rejection of Marx’s abstractions all too easily translates into their redemption.”⁴ In his contributions, Wilderson does not avail for the possibility of Blackness’ *redemption*, as Robinson does. Whereas Robinson construes Black subjects as indeed dispossessed *subjects* mutually coherent with their oppressors, Wilderson attends to the imposed *incoherence* of Blackness by an anti-Black world. The expropriation of Black labor that Robinson explores is contingent violence, while the insistence of social death upon Blackness is *ontological*. From this, Wilderson contends that the master of a Black slave construes Blackness as an ontological negation—one whose otherness nourishes the psychic integrity of the human subject.

Under Afropessimism, determining who “the human subject” is becomes crucial to distinguishing a “conflict” from an “antagonism”: as mutually recognized human subjects, the worker and the capitalist wage war on each other while respecting their opposite’s agential capacities. This holds true even though the coercive violence that the capitalist dispenses to suppress workers’ rights is considerably one-sided. For the

plantation slave, however, the white master neglects to offer a similar acknowledgment. Wilderson thus addresses the particularities of Black suffering that an analysis of proletarian suffering cannot, such that the European factory and the Transatlantic slave ship are incomparable domains. Furthermore, in “The Epistemology of Pessimism,” R. Radhakrishnan observes that “the claim [Afropessimism] *wills* to make is that the case of the slave in human history is like no other. This situation is non-fungible and not open to the logic of analogy. The slave has no other human genesis than the historiography and the temporality offered by the Master/Slave regime/episteme.”⁵ Likewise, this situation motivates Sorentino’s claim that “Marx’s method expresses the political ontology of the human (only) ... Slavery, as a real abstraction, goes behind Marx and Marxists’ backs.”⁶ Afropessimism likewise “*wills*” that the “political ontology of the human” is not the political ontology of the Black slave, who is structurally deprived of the same affordances as the suffering proletarian. This ontological idiosyncrasy is even effaced by Robinson’s commitment to rendering a suffering *Black* proletarian, who is equipped with “the political ontology of the human,”⁷ such that they are beholden to “historiograph[ies]” and “temporal[ities]” *beyond* “the Master/Slave regime/episteme.”⁸ To elaborate the Afropessimist intervention, I will thus delineate the historical particularities of the worker and the slave from within each framework, and how these respectively clarify the ways Marxism and Afropessimism *think*. Though Wilderson and Sorentino’s contributions challenge pivotal assumptions of Marxism, I strive not to reveal a fatal flaw in Marxism, which remains invaluable in the era of late-state capitalism. Rather, I intend to illuminate Afropessimism’s affordances: how this framework can enrich readers’ engagement with critical theory and coalition politics. In disclaiming a foreseeable denouement, Afropessimism is not anticipatory or aspirational. Rather, Afropessimism’s paradigmatic analysis offers a “stethoscope” to the world: to a global symbolic order constituted not by white supremacy, but by anti-Blackness.

To begin, an appraisal of *Capital’s* merits is important to deconstructing Marxism’s assumptive logic by way of Afropessimism—to discerning the fault lines, or fundamental differences in assumptive logics, between the two frameworks. For much of *Capital*, Marx engages in a demystifying project: His work exposes the layers of mystification that the worker consents to, the latter having been led to believe that the status quo of capitalism is naturally occurring and an innate social good. In offering a synchronic analysis of commodities and circulation as well as a diachronic repudiation of the working day, Marx conjures a paradigm of suffering that the proletariat must apprehend to dismantle. A focal point of Marx’s analysis is the demystification of the commodity, around whose value the workings of capital revolve:

In order . . . to find an analogy [for the commodity], we must have recourse to the mist-enveloped regions of the religious world. In that world the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men’s hands. This I call the Fetishism which attaches itself to the product of labour, so soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities.⁹

Commodified objects are imputed with value by both the worker and the capitalist, but both parties are blind to the artificiality of that imputation. Whether or not the capitalist exercises a willful blindness is irrelevant to Marx's account, which focuses on the structural effects of such a blindness on the worker. What makes an object a commodity seems inextricable from the object itself, as if its exchange value is always already a natural feature, but Marx reveals there to be nothing natural about it. By evoking "the religious world" to characterize the supposed ontological independence of commodities, Marx allows capitalism to be understood as a belief system. Ideally, the worker begins to understand that capitalism is a set of values they can either consent to or resist. In a diachronic account of conflicts over the working day, for example, Marx observes that "In some branches of the woolen manufacture in England the deployment of children has during recent years been considerably diminished, and in some cases has been entirely abolished." Then, he explains that "the Factory Acts made two sets of children necessary, one working six hours, the other four, or each working five hours. But the parents refused to sell the 'half-timers' cheaper than the 'full-timers.'"¹⁰ Crucially, the proletariat parents in this scenario have the capacity to "refuse," though this leaves them open to the retaliations of the capitalist class. Nonetheless, it is within their means to negotiate with capitalists, set limits, and exercise autonomy—however arduous the effort—against societal ordinances. The worker might be locked in conflict with the capitalist, but they are not "locked" in the fullest sense of the word. Over matters such as the length of the working day and who among the proletariat participates in it, the worker is nonetheless an *actor* in a conflict surrounding their structural position. The working day remains a matter of debate—a legible *conflict* that can be won or lost—between the worker and the capitalist. Because of his own examples, Marx could not have disagreed with this, himself having outlined both the affordances of the worker and the terms of their subjection in the same breath.

Afropessimism emerges, then, to offer a paradigm of suffering that lacks the ontological reciprocity found in the workers' struggle against capitalists. No similar reciprocity is required for the prolongation of slavery, which is ensured by the master's gratuitous violence against the slave. Wilderson finds that Marxism's (rightful) preoccupation with proletarian suffering "assumes a subaltern structured by capital, not by white supremacy," such that neither race nor a structural position imputed onto race are immediate concerns within a Marxist schema.¹¹ Rather, "race is read off the base" by Marxism "as being derivative of political economy." "This," Wilderson argues, "is not an adequate subalternity from which to think the elaboration of antagonistic identity formation," as the struggle between the worker and the capitalist is also not an "antagonism" in the fullest sense of the word.¹² Wilderson's intervention, then, attends not only to a dearth in Marxist thought on the status of the Black slave, but specifically to "the strategy and structure of the black subject's absence in Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*." This leads Wilderson to propound:

The black American subject imposes a radical incoherence upon the assumptive logic of Gramscian discourse . . . the black subject reveals marxism's inability to think white supremacy as the base, and in so doing, calls into question marxism's claim to elaborate a comprehensive, or in the words of Antonio

Gramsci, 'decisive' antagonism . . . [and] we begin to see how marxism suffers from a kind of conceptual anxiety: a desire for socialism on the other side of crisis – a society which does away not with the category of the worker, but with the imposition workers suffer under the approach of variable capital: in other words, the mark of its conceptual anxiety is in its desire to democratize work and thus keep in place, ensure the coherence of, the Reformation and Enlightenment 'foundational' values of productivity and progress.¹³

While these claims resemble Robinson's critique of what Marxism assumes about slavery and Black suffering (precisely by Marxism not engaging with such topics), Wilderson takes such a critique in a different direction. Marxism locates "socialism on the other side of crisis," such as the capitalist instability that would give rise to a proletarian revolution, in order to eventually "democratize work" and maintain the "'foundational' values of productivity and progress. This orientation not only leaves untroubled the assumption that slavery exists before primitive accumulation in a bygone past, but also effaces the Afropessimist insight that slavery is utterly *generative* to the supposed "antagonism" between worker and capitalist. For me to explain why this is the case, I turn to an interview of Wilderson by C.S. Soong titled "Blacks and the Master/Slave Relation." In it, Wilderson crucially unpacks the structural idiosyncrasies of the Black slave. He first characterizes the gratuitous violence that befalls the Black slave as meaning "that the body of the slave is open to the violence of all others. Whether they receive that violence or not, they exist in a state of structural or open vulnerability. This vulnerability is not contingent upon their transgressing some type of law, as in going on strike with the worker."¹⁴ The "open vulnerability" in question cannot be mitigated by debate or reform, for unlike the worker, the slave is not considered an interlocutor by their oppressor. It is precisely this understanding of *gratuitous violence* that I will return to throughout this paper. Likewise, the definition of an *antagonism* takes on a different tenor. From an Afropessimist perspective, the master's failure to recognize the slave as a human subject—a failure essential to maintaining the coherence of a human subject at all—forms an *antagonism*. Under this framework, then, what Marx would call an antagonism is reduced to a conflict (without, of course, belittling class oppression and the contingent violence that sustains it). This is only to say that reconciliation is possible in class conflict, whereas reconciliation is impossible for the antagonism between master and slave. Afropessimism thus points out a global ontological void—that of Blackness—which allows the actors on any side of a given conflict to possess ontological stability and coherence. Thus, the Black person, regardless of whether or not they are a *literal* slave, remains locked in a position entailed by slavery: that of social death. In his book *Slavery and Social Death*, Orlando Patterson reflects on the condition of the slave, who is indeed "recruited . . . as a socially dead person." Alienated from all "rights or claims of birth," the slave suffers from what Patterson identifies as "natal alienation." That is, from this manner of subjection, the slave "ceased to belong in his own right to any legitimate social order."¹⁵ Though Patterson's analysis provides a grammar with which to understand social death, he only posits slavery as a "conditional commutation" maintained "as long as the slave acquiesced in his powerlessness."¹⁶ To Patterson, then, slavery and social

death form a contingent structural position: one predicated on the consent of the enslaved, socially dead being. This makes Patterson's account of slavery comparable to Marx's encapsulation of the proletariat condition, which presents workers as beings whose consent to subjection is not inevitable—for them, there remains an ability to withdraw their consent. The same can even be said of conflicts revolving around colonialism (“colonial rule can be dismantled”) and gender inequality (“the patriarchy can be challenged”), as two other prominent examples.

None of these are in keeping, however, with an Afropessimist understanding of slavery and social death. Under Afropessimism, after all, these two things are not terminable conditions and cannot be glamorized as such. Indeed, as Wilderson argues, “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.” Furthermore, Wilderson claims that “Slavery is a relational dynamic—not an event and certainly not a place in a 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.”¹⁷ Wilderson therefore suggests that after the rise of the Arab slave trade (ca. 625 AD), slavery as a relational dynamic became thoroughly synchronic, owing no allegiance to a particular point in time moving forward.¹⁸ The tableau of gratuitous violence that festered in the plantation can profligate elsewhere and at any other time in the world, well past the extinction of the Arab slave trade, the transatlantic slave trade, or the Confederacy. And while slavery can certainly be understood as diachronic the way Patterson puts it, Wilderson's intervention lies in understanding slavery as a paradigmatic condition: as a factor of Black suffering always already imputed onto Black people by an anti-Black world. More specifically, the social death entailed by Black slavery forecloses any contrary notion of Blackness prior to it, whereas the enslavement of other groups is contingent on the circumstances of conflict. More broadly, Black social death and the very concept of human subjectivity are coterminous. One who searches for the origin of Western humanism will also find its antithesis: Black social death. Wilderson claims that the “global consensus that Africa is the location of sentient beings who are outside of global community, who are socially dead,” started with “the Arabs in 625” before reaching “the Europeans in 1452. Prior to that global consensus,” Wilderson continues, “you can't think Black. You can think Uganda, Ashanti, Ndebele, you can think many different cultural identities, but Blackness cannot be dis-imbricated from the global consensus” that has inaugurated Blackness as synonymous with social death.¹⁹ Despite Wilderson's elaboration as such, I find it fair to caution against taking for granted the claim that 625 AD represents the immutable beginning of Black social death. However, an examination of how ideas of anti-Blackness proliferated across history—entering modernity to catalyze the unique ontological violence Black people are beholden to—exceeds the scope of this paper. The ensemble of questions raised by Afropessimism that such a violence motivates, however, appears to remain unanswerable by other frameworks. This understanding is why Wilderson claims that “Afropessimism offers an analytic lens that labors as a corrective to Humanist assumptive logics,” such as Marxism's. Afropessimism “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.”²⁰ From this, a clear fault line emerges between the modus operandi of Afropessimism versus the modus operandi of Marxism, postcolonialism, feminism, and other “egalitarian movements,” as Jared Sexton calls them in his treatise, “Affirmation in the Dark: Racial Slavery and Philosophical Pessimism.”²¹ The latter groups that Sexton addresses remain premised on “Humanist assumptive logics” that bestow subjectivity to both parties of a given conflict, with each actor in mutual agreement on a shared concept. This shared concept, known as the third-term mediator, is often the source of conflict for the oppressed subject of a given egalitarian struggle, such as the restoration of native lands for the postcolonial subject’s conflict with the colonizer, and the reform of the working day for the proletarian subject’s conflict with the capitalist. For the antagonism between the white or non-Black master and the Black slave, however, there is no third-term mediator to speak of. The Black slave obviously remains a thinking, willful being despite the imputations of the master, but the Black slave goes unrecognized for their interpretive capacities. They are not recognized as having the ability to interpret a third-term mediator, so endeavors such as Black emancipatory politics lack intelligible grounds to oppressors who equate the Black with the socially dead.

In my mind, nothing exposes the crucial lack of a third-term mediator for Black suffering more than Wilderson’s account of his interactions with a Palestinian coworker. Sameer, who laments being frisked by Israeli soldiers, remarks to Wilderson that “the shame of humiliation runs even deeper if the Israeli soldier is an Ethiopian Jew.”²² At this, Wilderson concludes the following:

. . . in the collective unconscious, Palestinian insurgents have more in common with the Israeli state and civil society than they do with Black people. What they share is a largely unconscious consensus that Blackness is a locus of abjection to be instrumentalized on a whim. . . . There I sat, yearning, in solidarity with my Palestinian friend’s yearning, for the full restoration of Palestinian sovereignty . . . for the historical and political *redemption* of what I thought was a violated commons to which *we both belonged*. . . not only was I barred, ab initio, from the denouement of historical and political redemption, but that the borders of redemption are policed by Whites and non-Whites alike, *even as they kill each other*.²³

One of the most sobering epiphanies of Afropessimism is the utter pervasiveness of global anti-Blackness. The framework pivots away from an emphasis on white supremacy, which is a positive affirmation of whiteness against supposedly lesser others, and toward anti-Blackness, which imposes a perpetual negation: a global consensus about the social death of Black people from which the positive affirmation of any white or non-Black identity can blossom. As much as a Palestinian like Sameer may consciously contend with white supremacy in other aspects of his daily life, it is precisely by not being Black that he maintains psychic coherence, or the assurance of his own humanity—even as he and other Palestinians are oppressed by Israelis on a harrowing scale. From this, it becomes clear that the Palestinian and the Israeli see themselves and each other as actors in a narrative: the protracted struggle for sovereignty

over Palestinian land as a third-term mediator. The violence they perform on each other, no matter how one-sided, remains contingent on this tripartite symbolic order. The narrative arc, for the Palestinian, ideally ends in political *redemption*. “The narrative arc for the slave who is *Black*,” however, “*is not an arc at all*, but a flat line, what Hortense Spillers calls ‘historical stillness’: a flat line that moves from disequilibrium, to a moment in the narrative of faux-equilibrium, to disequilibrium restored and/or rearticulated.”²⁴ As a “metatheory,” then, Afropessimism “interrogates the unspoken, assumptive logic of Marxism, postcolonialism, psychoanalysis, and feminism. . . on a higher level of abstraction than the discourse and methods of the theories it interrogates.”²⁵ Speaking from a place of “historical stillness,” Afropessimism cannot be considered a disavowal or contradiction of these other theories and their corresponding egalitarian movements that lend themselves to ontologically navigable narrative arcs. Rather, it is a means of articulating what these theories take for granted, even as they rightfully provide grammars with which to combat various oppressions. The theories Afropessimism interrogates remain vulnerable to seduction by a foreseeable denouement. These conflicts all have imaginable conclusions, whether it is a proletariat revolution for Marxism, a decolonial revolution for postcolonialism, or a gender revolution for feminism. Afropessimism posits, however, that there is no articulable denouement for Black suffering—no reconcilable denouement that would not entail the end of the world and its structures of power. Unlike its theoretical contemporaries, Afropessimism fundamentally lacks the promise of *narrative closure*.

However, it is this very lack that provides the only conceivable benefit of Black suffering’s missing denouement: an immunity to the temptations of construing oneself in a classical narrative. In *Theorising Video Practice*, author Mike Wayne explains that “The defining feature of the classical narrative is that it is underpinned by an aesthetic devoted to unifying all its elements into a tightly woven whole,” eliding the contradictions that emerge from whatever the narrative represents.²⁶ Though Wayne adds that the classical narrative is a relatively modern invention, its ubiquity via the culture industry means media with classical narratives carries an undeniable influence on the masses. With this scope in mind, Wayne uses the example of *Trading Places*, a film in which an affluent white man and a poor Black man swap roles to see how each would respond to living in the other’s situation. To illustrate the mystifying power of the classical narrative, Wayne analyzes the film’s ending as follows:

. . . the newly enriched protagonists at the end of the film must be withdrawn from the urban context and isolated from their fellow human beings in an island paradise so the film can suggest wealth without the negative connotations it has attached to that condition in the course of the film. We have here then a closure which tries to mask an ideological contradiction in the heart of the film.²⁷

Trading Places maintains that wealth is desirable and attainable, and by ultimately separating the protagonists from society, the film offers a “clean” resolution to mask the iniquities necessary to amass wealth in the first place. This ending does not tell audiences that wealth is only ethical if it is enjoyed outside of society, but that the pursuit of wealth is *not* the fraught enterprise the movie initially made it

out to be. Because of its enduring power, then, the classical narrative—in its ability to deliver closure by sidestepping the contradictions it raises—manages to cast a pervasive shadow over the struggles against oppression that Afropessimism critiques. Examining each framework's obeisance to a classical narrative reveals what that framework overlooks: who it takes to be the agents competing in a given historical struggle, and thus who it neglects to mention as *non*-agents. There remains, for the worker, a possibility for closure—closure, that is, on a *paradigmatic* level—as they resist the conditions of capitalism; there remains, for the colonized subject, a possibility for closure by regaining sovereignty over colonized land. The Black slave, on the other hand, has no paradigmatic closure to anticipate; no “point of return” or new conception of subjectivity that a global consensus would find legible. Upon considering this affordance of the otherwise oppressed, Wilderson reflects on the possibility for paradigmatic closure missing from Black suffering. “What I found,” says Wilderson, “was that redemption, *as a narrative mode*, was a parasite that fed upon me for its coherence. . . . The parasites had been capital, colonialism, patriarchy, homophobia,” but his experiences reveal that “My parasites were Humans, all Humans—the haves as well as the have-nots.”²⁸ Even while the capitalist preys on the worker parasitically, as in Marx's *Capital*, Wilderson's observations suggest that both the capitalist and the worker prey parasitically on Black existence. Both parties require an abject other with which to compare themselves, an ontological void that succors them with ontological substance, so that both can consider themselves *human*. For this void to be a void, then, it must be deprived of a classical narrative that promises a denouement. A denouement, it seems, is a privilege owed solely to ontologically substantial beings—to “humans.” Thus, Sexton remarks:

The principal contradictions organizing the whole range of egalitarian movements against capitalism, colonialism, hetero-patriarchy. . . are subtended by the material and symbolic antagonism produced by slavery. The slave. . . is the anoriginal figure of difference in the articulation of human being, the pivot or hinge or fulcrum of its machinations, associated with all that is abjected by the collective organization in order to lend coherence to its internal conflicts (e.g. race, class, gender, sexuality) and definition to its external boundaries (e.g. animal, machine, object, spirit).²⁹

For a denouement to materialize within an Afropessimist framework, any sense of a “world” that is legible to the white or non-Black human subject would have to fall apart, alongside notions of the “human.” The struggles comprising these egalitarian movements undoubtedly deserve solidarity, but many of these movements advocate for the *recognition* of their marginalized subjects' *humanity*. The material humanity of each oppressed group is not under dispute; it is, in fact, presupposed. What is truly under dispute is the oppressing class's willingness to *recognize* that humanity in legislation, normative behavior, or any other societal domain. What Afropessimism highlights, then, is how difficult it is for Black suffering to be recognized in a similar way, even where Blackness enters these other struggles. It is as if Blackness's *lack* of material humanity is presupposed instead, even by the actors within egalitarian movements.

This understanding only crystallizes Afropessimism's resistance to the analogizing of other oppressions with Black suffering. It is important to note that, in Marx's example, a proletarian denouement is predicated on apprehending the mystifications of capital and *no longer consenting* to the status quo ordained by the capitalists. "For 'protection' against 'the serpent of their agonies,'" Marx remarks, "the labourers must put their heads together, and, as a class, compel the passing of a law, an all-powerful social barrier that shall prevent the very workers from selling, by voluntary contract with capital, themselves and their families into slavery and death."³⁰ Here, Marxism points to proletariat solidarity and reforms on the working day as steps toward a conceivable denouement. There is faith in "an all-powerful social barrier," which positions the proletariat and the bourgeoisie in the same symbolic order—that is, they would both assent to the concept of a social barrier, and the parameters of this social barrier would become a matter of contestation between both sides. Marx, who likens the abject conditions of the proletariat to the abject conditions of slavery, unintentionally belittles the latter as a result. After all, in her own Afropessimist intervention vis-à-vis Marxism—"The Abstract Slave" cited previously—Sorentino argues that the capacity to consent or not to consent is foreclosed to Black slaves, as slaves "do not confront their phantasmatic objective conditions (form) as in the case of commodity fetishism, and instead remain in a unity with those conditions (force)."³¹ Unlike the difference between the worker as a being and the worker as a conditional source of labor for the capitalist, there is no separation between the slave as a being and the slave as an *unconditional* source of labor for the master. Because the slave is ontologically destined to serve the master, the "explanation of racist difference" and the "justification for the continuation of anti-black violence"—those which are features of "the *ontological* figuration of black fungibility" that Sorentino brings to bear—emerge from the same source: the ontological designs of the white or non-Black human subject.³² Fungibility, in this case, forms the inextricable nature of the slave, who is a victim of gratuitous violence so that others are victims of *contingent* violence—violence with meaning, violence that can be challenged on conceptual grounds. "Even the Native American is not as forelorn," Radhakrishnan observes. "The Native American was genocided for land: there was so to speak, a reason for the genocide. But in the case of Blackness, oppression is pure, unreasonable."³³ Because slaves cannot legibly reason against the unreasonable violence of anti-Blackness, they remain tethered to their structural position, even if they personally take themselves to be free. Sorentino attends to the resulting *illegibility* of Blackness when she meditates on W.E.B. Du Bois' observation that "southern slaveholders 'died as a class' in the Civil War":

. . . the violence of Reconstruction would reveal not only the fallen status of planters thrust into the degraded position of workers, but the inversion of expectation in which slaves could potentially upend abstract slavery and undermine the non-black union of political, economic, and libidinal capacity. The paramilitary violence of Reconstruction, "its lynching and mob law, its murders and cruelty, its insensibility to the finer things of civilization," was an exercise in and reassertion of such capacity.³⁴

Even if the aggressors of the “paramilitary violence of Reconstruction” stood to gain nothing from the gratuitous murder of Black people (no upward mobility or restoration of Southern prosperity was foreseeable for these former slaveholders), the catharsis of violence became solely adequate to justifying that violence. These former slaveholders did not compete in a struggle for a lost third-term mediator, but sought ontological nourishment from Black suffering that the institution of slavery once assured them. To constitute a sense of worldly coherence, no matter how “low” they have fallen, these former slaveholders committed acts of anti-Black violence, as anti-Black violence was always already what gave these men their ontological stability. This violence is precisely what guaranteed their “humanity.” Thus, though the worker in a Marxist schema may fall victim to state violence, violence remains important but not *essential* for the capitalist to remind themselves that *they* are the capitalist and the worker is the worker. For the slave, however, a vulnerability to gratuitous violence is what makes them a slave: a violence so ubiquitously understood that the slave, traumatically, is not even a legible recipient of violence. Thus, Sorentino’s analysis of gratuitous violence against the Black slave not only corroborates my account of no foreseeable denouement, but also Wilderson’s reflections on what continues to separate Black suffering from the suffering of other groups:

... 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.³⁵

That is, under the global consensus of anti-Blackness, gratuitous violence against the slave is not considered violence to begin with. The very concept of violence entails an agent who can be victimized, and whose victimization can be recognized by other parties. Violence against the Black slave is therefore “gratuitous” because the Black slave goes unrecognized as a victimized agent in their own society, and the violence enacted is not predicated on third-term mediators such as the working day or ancestral land.

My reception of Sorentino’s analysis would be remiss to stray from her foremost intervention, however: the contradiction posed by the abstracted slave in Marx’s *Capital*. To further contrast the assumptive logics of Marxism and Afropessimism, I point to an oversight of Marx’s that Sorentino identifies. Namely, that “Marx has wage labor arising ‘out of the dissolution of slavery and serfdom,’ implying that any continuation of slavery into capitalism would be the result of a stubborn persistence on slavery’s part.”³⁶ This is in keeping with Marxism’s obeisance to the narrative closure Wayne would later articulate, as the idea of slavery’s outmodedness denotes an intelligible *telos* for the wishful proletariat; capitalism emerges after slavery as another status quo to be defeated by the narrative agent. For Marx, the advent of mechanization is a manifestation of the capitalistic status quo and the challenge it poses for the worker protagonist. In his demystifying summation of machinery as a

phenomenon, Marx explains how “machinery, considered alone, shortens the hours of labour, but when in the service of capital, lengthens them; since in itself it lightens labour, but when employed by capital, heightens the intensity of labour; since in itself it is a victory of man over the forces of Nature, but in the hands of capital, makes man the slave of those forces.”³⁷ Here, Marx conflates the worker with the slave, analogizing the two structural positions to convey the horrific conditions the worker faces. This, however, would not be his last conflation. In “The Proximate Effects of Machinery on the Workman,” Marx continues to reckon with the growth of a proletariat surplus population, rendered a surplus by machinery’s displacement of proletarian labor. “Previously,” Marx observes, “the workman sold his own labour power, which he disposed of nominally as a free agent. Now he sells wife and child. He has become a slave-dealer. The demand for children’s labour often resembles in form the inquiries for negro slaves.”³⁸ This is another attempt to convey the horrors of the workman’s situation—and it is undeniably horrific—but once more, Marx unintentionally belittles the structural position of the slave by using it as a parallel for the worker’s dilemma. After all, what is under Marx’s scrutiny here is a surplus population of workers displaced from their capacity to *be* workers. The proletariat gains the allowance to protest their displacement, to lament their condition even as capital coerces them into selling their children’s labor. To compare such a practice to slavery, however, is to mystify the particularities of slavery—both as a structural position and a synchronic relational dynamic—and to thus mystify what is required to produce a surplus population of *slaves*. Marx even proves my point, albeit unwittingly, as follows:

... there is not the least doubt that the rapid strides of cotton spinning, not only pushed on with tropical luxuriance the growth of cotton in the United States, and with it the African slave trade, but also made the breeding of slaves the chief business of the border slave-states. When, in 1790, the first census of slaves was taken in the United States, their number was 697,000; in 1861 it had nearly reached four millions.³⁹

Undeniably, mechanization is detrimental to the welfare of worker and slave alike. Whereas the worker displaced by a machine is precluded from a continued wage—the very thing that makes them a worker, but also sustains their survival under capitalist domination—the slave is only made more of a slave by the rise of machinery. The astronomical leap from 697,000 slaves to almost four million is no coincidence. Whereas machinery renders many workers obsolete—capitalism once again creating the conditions for its own demise at the hands of the proletariat—machinery gives no such allowance to slaves. Under Marxism’s assumptive logic, after all, the rise of machinery is an opportunity for the worker to achieve class-consciousness. For the slave, the rise of machinery is but slavery’s second wind: America’s Black slave population experiences a profound increase just as slavery increases in efficiency and scale. There is no denouement in sight, no foreseeable resolution free of ideological contradictions. Afropessimism confronts this absence, whereas Marxism does not.

In my delineation of Marxism and Afropessimism’s investments and interventions, violence emerges as one of the most constitutive elements of any fault line

between the two frameworks. The abject conditions that factory workers are subjected to under capitalism constitute a systemic violence in itself. Take, for example, the “report of the Commission” Marx refers to in Chapter 10 of *Capital*, “The Working Day.” The report propounds that “a manufacture which has assumed so prominent a place in the whole world, will not long be subject to the remark that its great success is accompanied with the physical deterioration, widespread bodily suffering and early death of the workpeople. . . by whose labour and skill such great results have been achieved.”⁴⁰ To reiterate my earlier point on the recognition of violence and who can be considered a recipient of it, these horrific factory conditions comprise legible violence: coercions ostensibly justified by the consent of the proletariat to the prerogatives of the ruling capitalist class. Thus, when these conditions buttress proletarian efforts to reform the working day, the bourgeoisie clearly understand the proletariat to be active recipients of their violence, even if such violence nourishes capitalism. For the Black slave, however, the concept of “consent” does not exist to be sustained or withdrawn amidst historical movement. The dismal factory conditions that Marx enumerated cannot be compared to the degradations aboard the slave ship, to which no conscripted slave had consent to withdraw from in the first place. “The physical condition in which many of the Africans [that] entered the marketplace,” reports Stephanie Smallwood, “betrayed both the usual sufferings of the middle passage and the violence meted out to those who had tried to change their course in the Atlantic. . . . The bodies of some appeared swollen with dropsy when they were put up for sale.”⁴¹ While this account resonates with the “physical deterioration, widespread bodily suffering and early death” that Marx describes on the behalf of the proletariat, this should not invite any analogizing between the sufferings of the proletariat and the enslaved. Rather, I am bringing into focus the matter of consent availed for the worker that simply does not exist for the slave. The conditions of the factory, while deplorable, can be lessened through strikes and reforms engineered by the proletariat to make the capitalist mode of production more palatable. Even as mechanisms of slavery become “more palatable” through reforms and slavery’s outright abolition as an institution, the sustained violence upon and violation of enslaved bodies avail slavery’s prolongation as a *relational dynamic* in forms well beyond literal enslavement.

As Afropessimism construes it, slaves simply cannot be recognized as legible recipients of reform, even as reforms seem to happen. Reforms, in and of themselves, prove gestural at best in their historical inability to undo the structural entrenchments of anti-Black violence. For instance, in Saidiya Hartman’s article, “The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Woman’s Labors,” she describes how, “as free workers in the North and South, black women continued to labor as poorly paid workers for white households.” There, “black women experienced great isolation and were vulnerable to sexual abuse and exploitation by the men of the household. While social reformers and Progressive intellectuals encouraged domestic work as a form of moral tutelage and training, black women knew first-hand they were safer in the streets and tenements of the ghetto than in white homes.”⁴² A central issue, here, is the desire of “social reformers and Progressive intellectuals” to graft a teleological sense of narrative closure to Black women’s oppression through the supposed affordances of domestic work. Historical redemption seems to be available to Black

women, in this example, now that the asymmetrical dynamics of power entailed by slavery are supposedly behind them. Such views, invested as they are in reforms intended for the better treatment of Black Americans, only extend the “interlocutory life of Western civil society,”⁴³ and thus slavery.

The anti-Black antagonism persists both despite and because of such reformist attitudes, because the changes for Black women in Hartman’s example only address slavery on the level of conflict (a foreseeable sense of historical redemption) and not on the level of paradigm (where ontological coherence of one necessarily relies on the ontological incoherence of another). Therefore, in “The Burdened Individuality of Freedom,” Hartman problematizes the very concept of freedom as far as it can only offer ostensible resolutions on the level of *conflict*, pairing “the abolition of slavery” with what she calls “the nonevent of emancipation.”⁴⁴ What Hartman calls “burdened individuality,” here, is “the double bind of emancipation—the onerous responsibilities of freedom with the enjoyment of few of its entitlements, the collusion of the disembodied quality of liberal individuality with the dominated, regulated, and disciplined embodiment of blackness, the entanglements of sovereignty and subjection, and the transformation of involuntary servitude effected under the aegis of free labor.”⁴⁵ Despite seemingly receiving access to the affordances of the liberal individual post-emancipation, Black people remained subject to a regime of anti-Black violence that spoke a different language from the institution of slavery. The language, instead, is of a liberal humanism that deigns to grant rights of American citizenship to Black former slaves, but only as a reminder that these rights needed to be *granted to them* in the first place. Whether it is the paternalistic attitudes of reformers or more explicit racism of white employers in Hartman’s previous example, the ontological status of the Black person remains voided of a *presupposed* humanity, instead bearing what is *conferred* in consolation. The consolation, in this case, matters more than the conferral of rights proper, because it labors to resolve a Black narrative arc where one does not exist. The violence that generates Black suffering therefore cannot be resolved by the mechanisms of freedom that necessarily entail slavery. If freedom is untenable without the sustainment of Black unfreedom, freedom cannot cut the Gordian knot of Afropessimism’s problematic.

To illustrate yet more of how slavery behaves as a relational dynamic, Wilderson’s reflections on the film *12 Years a Slave* travel well beyond the tableau of the slave ship or the slave auction. His analysis reveals the continued foreclosure to consent for the Black slave:

... the master, Edwin Epps, bursts into the slaves’ cabin when they’re in bed. He dances in the middle of their sleeping quarters and commands them to rise and make “merriment” in the big house with him. It has taken me forty years to understand how neither he nor Josephine had violated anyone’s space. The cabin where they slept belonged to him as much as their flesh belonged to him. The regime of violence that made them his property and prosthetics of his desire made it impossible to see what he did as a violation.⁴⁶

In a memoir segment of *Afropessimism*, Wilderson juxtaposes this situation with the abuses of a rogue neighbor, Josephine (markedly a white woman) toward his former

lover, Stella (a Black woman). Josephine, who always felt entitled to invade Stella's apartment at a moment's notice, had actually not "violated anyone's space." Like Epps' example, it was as if Josephine held ownership over Stella and her dwelling-place. Frank's observations divine another affordance of Afropessimism, then: the recognition of the tableau of plantation life that exists well beyond the extinction of Confederate slavery. This tableau is otherwise known as *libidinal economy*. Wilderson's definition of libidinal economy, as follows, usefully characterizes the unconscious psychic life of anti-Blackness that predates and transcends the plantation:

Jared Sexton describes libidinal economy as "the economy, or distribution and arrangement, of desire and identification (their condensation and displacement), and the complex relationship between sexuality and the unconscious." Needless to say, libidinal economy functions variously across scales and is as "objective" as political economy. Importantly, it is linked not only to forms of attraction, affection, and alliance, but also to aggression, destruction, and the violence of lethal consumption.⁴⁷

Psychically, Josephine dwells as much in the tableau of libidinal economy as Epps does, and neither see any of their intrusions upon Black spaces as transgressions. Even as these white subjects exhibit such things as "attraction" and "aggression" toward their Black slaves, the latter are not considered legible recipients of such affects. After all, there is no agent in the former's midst who can be transgressed—no affirmative white or non-Black human subject to speak of. In comparison, the conflict in Marxism—that of the worker versus the capitalist—features agents who can be legibly transgressed by the other. From what both Sexton and Wilderson have established, libidinal economy effectively mystifies the violence imposed on the slave.

Because the slave is not a legible victim of transgression, violence takes a different shape under an Afropessimist insight: there are acts of gratuitous violence in this antagonism, but the mutual recognition of violence and its relationality are crucially missing. For an example of this lack, Wilderson's article "Reciprocity and Rape: Blackness and the Paradox of Sexual Violence" appraises Marxist feminist Leopoldina Fortunati's rightly identified account of the "patriarchal disavowal of feminine labor found in Marx's writing."⁴⁸ Wilderson claims that the "White woman worker" of Fortunati's study can fight for recognition as a historical agent through "the withdrawal of consent – in praxis (the refusal of housework and/or sex) and in meta-criticism (the interrogation of redactions within Marxist theory)." However, Wilderson adds that "the withdrawal of consent is never an option for Black women."⁴⁹ Wilderson does not explicitly cite the following in his critique of Fortunati, but his words strike a similar chord to these particular observations of Saidiya Hartman's from her book, *Scenes of Subjection*:

In nineteenth-century common law, rape was defined as the forcible carnal knowledge of a female against her will and without her consent. Yet the actual attempted rape of an enslaved woman was an offense neither recognized nor punished by law. Not only was rape simply unimaginable because of purported black lasciviousness, but also its repression was essential to the displacement of white culpability that characterized both the recognition of black humanity in slave law and the designation of the black subject as the originary locus of transgression and offense.⁵⁰

Here, Hartman insinuates that the female slave only possessed agency in so far as she could possess a “purported black lasciviousness.” This is an example of “general dishonor,” the Afropessimist claim that—as Wilderson puts it—to be Black is to be “dishonored prior to [one’s] performance of dishonored actions.”⁵¹ Beholden to general dishonor concomitant with the “lasciviousness” attributed to her, the Black female slave was not a legally recognizable agent under common law, and thus not a legible recipient of a rapist’s transgression. As a result, it was essentially as if a transgression never took place to begin with, utterly effaced by the abject status—the general dishonor—of the female slave’s structural position. She is thus not sexualized in a way that would suggest general dishonor can be *gendered*, but instead to suggest that criminality or malicious intent is ascribed to her a priori, in a manner symptomatic of her structural position under libidinal economy.

To elaborate the a priori nature of this imputation, I turn to Hortense Spillers’s term “ungendering” in her article, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe.” Spillers characterizes the “ungendering” of the “African female subject,” who “is not only the target of rape—in one sense, an interiorized violation of body and mind—but also the topic of specifically *externalized* acts of torture and prostration that we imagine as the peculiar province of *male* brutality and torture inflicted by other males.”⁵² Here, Spillers throws into relief the “materialized scene of unprotected female flesh—of female flesh ‘ungendered,’” such that enslaved Black women are structurally fungible with their male counterparts. Both are essentially beholden to the regimes of general dishonor, gratuitous violence, and natal alienation symptomatic of their social death. Natal alienation, in Spillers’s analysis, arrives as the “enforced state of breach” representing a “vestibular cultural formation where ‘kinship’ loses meaning, *since it can be invaded at any given and arbitrary moment by the property relations,*” such that kinship ties among Black slaves are “not customarily recognized by the code of slavery.”⁵³ Spillers’s analysis resonates with Hartman’s indictment of “nineteenth-century common law” that also refused to recognize enslaved Black women as beings whose rights and bodies could be violated. Patrice Douglass thus meditates on the implications of gender for Afropessimism (and likewise, Afropessimism for gender) in her article, “Black Feminist Theory for the Dead and Dying,” in which she understands Afropessimism to “employ the concept of ‘ungendering’ presented by [Hortense] Spillers.”⁵⁴ More specifically, Douglass claims:

Existence for the gendered female is a degraded status constituted by patriarchy. The invasion/raiding of the ungendered female exposes the logic of patriarchy as conceptually inept at balancing the weight of being possessed by all genders *and* the term gender itself. . . . Just as it is within reason to ask Afro-pessimism to locate gender, the reverse, I argue, demands greater theoretical concern.⁵⁵

Wilderson’s critique of Fortunati’s white Marxist feminism and Hartman’s interrogation of Black women’s a priori “debauchery” share a commitment to the “ungendering” of the Black slave that Douglass unpacks above. For all the turmoil that can befall “the gendered female” due to her “degraded status,” the possession and recognition of one’s gender is an ontological affordance of the human subject, oppressed for such aspects though they may be. “Ungendering” is thus not an *effacement* that would

afflict Fortunati's "White woman worker," despite the latter's respective exploitation and suffering under the patriarchy. "It is not just that the injury of rape does not translate for Black women in the same way it does for White women," Wilderson claims, "but that *injury* itself is the categorical inheritance of non-Black women: injury has no representational supports within Blackness."⁵⁶ "For Hartman," then, Wilderson notes "there is no reciprocal modality in slavery and its afterlives. It would be, however, imprecise to say that the paradigm usurps Black women's consent. [Hartman] argues that it would be more precise to say that consent is not constitutive of Black subjugation; ergo, the sexual violence against Black women cannot even be theorized as violation."⁵⁷ The fact that "consent is not constitutive of Black subjugation" is synonymous with Spillers and Douglass's meditations on "ungendering," as well as my remarks on *effacement*: how transgressions are not recognized as such when rendered upon an illegible being such as the Black female slave. To return to Wilderson's critique of Fortunati one last time, the capacity to withdraw consent that is availed to the white female proletarian is not available to the Black female slave, whose capacity to withdraw consent remains as foreclosed as her capacity to consent. The general dishonor that allows for this effacement to take place only compounds an Afropessimist account of Black suffering, such that an anti-Black subject cannot recognize it as *suffering* to begin with.

Altogether, do these fundamental differences between Marxism and Afropessimism point to a deficiency in Marxism? Not necessarily—Marxism still accomplishes what it sets out to do, even as Afropessimism calls attention to what it takes for granted. Though Cedric Robinson makes this argument while specifically discussing Black radicalism (which predates the conception of Afropessimism), his introductory observations on Marxism still apply:

Marxism is a Western construction—a conceptualization of human affairs and historical development that is emergent from the historical experiences of European peoples mediated, in turn, through their civilization, their social orders, and their cultures... the same must be said of [Marxism's] analytical presumptions, its historical perspectives, its points of view. This most natural consequence though has assumed a rather ominous significance since European Marxists have presumed more frequently than not that their project is identical with world-historical development.⁵⁸

Although the conflict rendered by Marxism is one worth attending to and addressing, and all working-class people stand to benefit from the demystification of capital, I believe it is fair to address Marxism's Western origins. By doing so, one can isolate the epistemic gaps found within *Capital*, such that Marx's account of slavery proves not to be as robust as his account of the European proletariat. Furthermore, it is dangerous to hold the Marxist project as "identical with world-historical development," as a Western-focalized account of proletarian suffering forecloses insight into the struggles and movements of non-Western populations. Even if, per Wilderson's examples, Palestinians are as capable of anti-Blackness as any Western Marxist, their respective oppressions are less visible—but not *illegible*—under a Western Marxist gaze. At a higher level of abstraction than this dichotomizing of Marxism's

hemispheric reach, however, Black suffering has proven to be illegible to Palestinian and Israeli alike, thereby necessitating Afropessimism's intervention. This is also what compels Wilderson to draw the distinction between *objective vertigo* (experienced by Black people) and *subjective vertigo* (experienced by non-Black oppressed subjects) in his article, "The Vengeance of Vertigo: Aphasia and Abjection in the Political Trials of Black Insurgents." Specifically, Wilderson propounds:

Subjective vertigo is the vertigo of the event. But the sensation is that one is not simply spinning in an otherwise stable environment, that one's environment is perpetually unhinged stems from a relationship to violence that cannot be analogized. This is called objective vertigo, a life constituted by disorientation rather than a life interrupted by disorientation. This is structural as opposed to performative violence. Black subjectivity is a crossroads where vertigoes meet, the intersection of performative and structural violence.⁵⁹

From what I have established, Marxism vitally attends to the *performative violence* befalling proletarian populations. This subjects the latter to "subjective vertigo," which entails a moment of destabilization in "an otherwise stable environment." Following what Wilderson has previously expounded on a classical narrative arc, "subjective vertigo" is a period of disequilibrium that comes after a period of equilibrium—and the liberatory character of Marxism points toward the restoration of that equilibrium, a foreseeable denouement concurrent with the removal of "subjective vertigo." "Objective vertigo," however, is synonymous with "historical stillness." Black suffering is not catalyzed by a moment of destabilization, but instead represents "a life constituted by disorientation." What is stable, here, is the instability experienced by the Black being, who is always already beholden to regimes of gratuitous violence, natal alienation, and general dishonor. Wilderson's differentiation between subjective and objective vertigo importantly distinguishes Black suffering from that of proletarian and subaltern suffering without *belittling* the latter. Simultaneously, Wilderson's resulting distinctions between oppressions represent a call to recognize those distinctions as such.

Though Wilderson's framework is of a different orientation and scope than Robinson's, both nonetheless challenge assumptions taken for granted not only among Marxists, but also in egalitarian struggles writ large. In her treatise "Against Innocence: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Safety," Jackie Wang provides a salient example of this epistemic gap manifesting in modern leftist movements. Wang explains that in the "1992 LA riots, leftist commentators opted to define the event as a *rebellion* rather than a *riot* as a way to highlight the political nature of people's actions."⁶⁰ Although "This attempt to reframe the public discourse" was "born of 'good intentions' . . . it also reflects the impulse to contain, consolidate, appropriate, and accommodate events that do not fit political models grounded in white, Euro-American traditions."⁶¹ Such an "attempt to reframe the public discourse" censors the ways in which riots—and not merely rebellions—emerged as direct culminations of *Black suffering*. In order to justify the riots as they were happening, the leftists in Wang's example felt the need to make events more palatable and legible so that they could conform to a more "classical" narrative, Wilderson's aforementioned

model of “Equilibrium to disequilibrium to equilibrium (restored, renewed, and/or reimaged).”⁶² Commentators tried to talk around what they saw as these riots’ primarily Black actors fomenting disequilibrium, when in reality these riots represented their fight for equilibrium *proper*. Given Afropessimism’s account for the structural entailments of Blackness and Black suffering, the status quo preceding the riots was *already* a period of disequilibrium, thus disqualifying the riots from being a legible component of a classical narrative. This is why Wang goes on to claim the following:

*White anarchists, ultra-leftists, post-Marxists, and insurrectionists who adhere to and fetishize the position of being ‘for nothing and against everything’ are equally eager to appropriate events like the 2011 London riots for their (non)agenda. They insist on an analysis focused on the crisis of capitalism, which downplays anti-Blackness and ignores forms of gratuitous violence that cannot be attributed solely to economic forces.*⁶³

In this case, the anti-Black gratuitous violence Wang refers to is indeed catalyzed by libidinal economy, which is not an essential catalyst for capitalist violence, if at all. Whichever ways these leftists ignore anti-Black gratuitous violence, there remains a shared lack of interest in making such violence legible to both themselves and the spectators of their appropriations. Afropessimism thus arrives to make this illegibility *legible*.

What Afropessimism does not do, however, is reverse or undo the illegibility of Black suffering in question. But that is only because, as an unearthing of Black people’s structural position, Afropessimism confronts a subjectivity that is *necessarily* effaced by an anti-Black world for its own sustainment. Therefore, in his 2010 book *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*, Wilderson claims the following:

Afro-pessimism explores the meaning of Blackness not . . . as a variously and unconsciously interpellated identity or as a conscious social actor, but as a structural position of noncommunicability in the face of all other positions; this meaning is noncommunicable because . . . as a position, Blackness is predicated on modalities of accumulation and fungibility, not exploitation and alienation.⁶⁴

Wilderson maintains that the “meaning of Blackness” is not only illegible, but “non-communicable,” as “the modalities of accumulation and fungibility” uniquely characterize Black suffering. Rather than be construed as subjects vulnerable to “exploitation and alienation,” Black people are “*themselves* consumed,” and “not their labor power. Slaves are implements, not workers,” such that they are not consenting to an oppressor’s prerogative (and thus, like a proletarian, capable of withdrawing that consent, come what may). Rather, they are indeed the “implements” of a given master’s or—more accurately—*human’s* prerogative. While asserting this does not bestow Black people with a legible subjectivity as Robinson’s claims might, Afropessimism explains how Black revolutionary actors and Black recipients of violence are invariably erased by the efforts of the leftists critiqued by Wang. Regardless of intent,

such leftists demonstrate an obeisance to a classical narrative—a narrative in which they rightfully label capitalism an antagonist—even as they adhere to the global consensus of anti-Blackness by foreclosing Black subjects from the role of “protagonist,” of a political actor who is seen as more than just an implement.

Despite these observations, I have established that Marxism is not the only theory whose limitations can be appraised from an Afropessimist lens, nor do I suggest that Afropessimism is immune to an immanent critique of its own. To better understand what Afropessimism is doing, then, I find it worthwhile to appraise potential criticisms of the framework. If solely considered from the 2020 book *Afropessimism*, Wilderson labors to illuminate the mechanisms of anti-Blackness sustained by state violence and mass incarceration, yet his most vivid claims—including the encounter with his Palestinian coworker—remain scaffolded by anecdotal evidence. However, much of Wilderson’s prior scholarship, such as “The Vengeance of Vertigo,” “Gramsci’s Black Marx,” and “Reciprocity and Rape,” as well as the contributions of Sexton and Spillers (among others), meditate on Afropessimism without a turn to memoir. What is uniquely generative about Wilderson’s 2020 book, then, is the animation of Afropessimism’s paradigmatic claims within the interpersonal dynamics and structural encounters manifest across Wilderson’s life. The structural nature of Black suffering is given a narrative form, albeit only *ostensibly* so. What Wilderson labors to reveal in this process is how an ontological paradigm of anti-Blackness *defies* narration. “As a Black Scholar,” Wilderson claims, “I am tasked with making sense of this violence without being overwhelmed and disoriented by it. In other words, the writing must somehow be indexical of that which exceeds narration, while being ever mindful of the incomprehension the writing would foster, the failure, that is, of interpretation were the indices to actually escape the narrative.”⁶⁵ The difficulty, here, is in expressing a legible telos on par with subjects who possess access to narrative capacity and historical movement in civil society: minoritized groups whose suffering is contingent on transgressing the prerogatives of those in power (women against the patriarchy, colonized subjects against colonialism, proletarians against the bourgeoisie). The latter groups are not as vulnerable as Black people to the “failure . . . of interpretation” Wilderson describes. Blackness is necessarily absented from participation *in* a humanist narrative arc because any denouement it can give cannot resolve violence without contingency. Under any telos that human subjects can narrate about themselves and others, the circumstances of their oppression are mutable. But what Wilderson speaks of, regarding Blackness, are the circumstances of a *position*: an ontological elsewhere from any telos that is only mutable when the very concept of the human becomes mutable, too. That, as part of Afropessimism’s metatheoretical challenge, is why it seems so disarming to humanistic discourses, why Jared Sexton observes that “this emergent research has . . . generated more heat than light.”⁶⁶

Perhaps a more salient critique of Afropessimism, then, is that in its proffering a paradigmatic and synchronic analysis of Black suffering, Afropessimism risks putting *itself* in temporal stasis. Critically, Radhakrishnan notes that “In its very attempt to avoid the pitfalls of double-consciousness, the Afro-Pessimist subject, in its own anti-nomian mode, is in fact testifying to the legitimacy of double-consciousness.”⁶⁷ In Afropessimism’s critique of the inextricable link between structural power and

anti-Blackness, Radhakrishnan contends that the framework unavoidably reaffirms that link. When Radhakrishnan examines the “genesis of Afro-Pessimist exceptionalism,” that which “lies in the history of Slavery,” he argues that the type of exceptionalism generally “thrust upon us” is, for “the Black subject,” instead “an imposed negative legacy.”⁶⁸ The “exceptionalism,” in this case, applies to the Afropessimist argument that Black suffering cannot be analogized with other struggles. The “imposed negative legacy” is the ontological void imputed onto the Black subject by a global consensus of anti-Blackness, as previously established in my analysis. While thinking through these two concepts, Radhakrishnan wonders what “any subject owe[s] to a negative legacy” and what “the reason for living and dying by an imposed legacy” must be, but ultimately he posits that “the reason is nothing but the chronically inextinguishable desire to hoist the master/the colonizer on his own petard.” As a result, Radhakrishnan claims that “Afro-Pessimist exceptionalism is a reaction formation to the dehumanizing brutality of Slavery,” and the consequence “of never letting white Racism off the hook is the critical prolongation of the Master/Slave paradigm.”⁶⁹ The affordances of Afropessimism equally serve as its limitations then, and I find it fair to recognize how such a framework reifies the “imposed negative legacy” that Radhakrishnan speaks of. I wonder, however, if this is only as much a *feature* as it is a flaw of Afropessimism. The framework is not circumscribed by its very object of critique—anti-Blackness—to its detriment. Rather, Afropessimism is *necessarily* circumscribed by anti-Blackness in order to describe it in its totality.

A more urgent shortcoming of Afropessimism, then, lies not in what it *reproduces*, but in what it *forecloses*. Wilderson’s ontological claim that “Blackness is coterminous with Slaveness: Blackness *is* social death” has the potential to instill hopelessness in one who is invested in *improving* the world as opposed to *destroying* it—with “the world,” in this case, being an ensemble of concepts that inform how we view ourselves and how we organize difference, including what is entailed by a given humanist telos.⁷⁰ Filtered through Afropessimism, the idea of a more egalitarian world order still cannot be imagined without a symbolic order of humans, “the haves as well as the have-nots,” that remain necessarily predicated on the delegation of the socially dead *non-human*, the Black.⁷¹ The sobering light that Afropessimism sheds upon Black suffering and its near-immeasurable scale also has the potential to demoralize activism, as Wilderson explains the “predication” I have described:

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 other things. . . . but the ultimate stabilization is the spectacle of violence against Blacks. *I know I am 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.⁷²

While Afropessimism offers no clear recourse the same way as a Marxist, decolonial, or feminist call to action, Wilderson's examples elaborate the cyclical nature of structural and ontological anti-Black violence that seems to perpetuate itself, even while the world can be watching in indignation. Implicitly, Wilderson suggests that even the most egalitarian-minded spectator has something to gain, a "sense of ontological presence," from bearing witness to Black suffering and death. For as much as neither he nor any other Afropessimist speaker dismisses the prospect of activism, Wilderson's intervention crucially calls to what can be lost or forgotten in any liberatory struggle: that on a *paradigmatic level*, both "the haves as well as the have-nots" have something to gain from anti-Blackness, whatever their own conflict may be. The dispossessed have something they once possessed and can later regain—that is their foreseeable denouement—but Wilderson argues that Black people experience an abjection for which no reprieve is legible, let alone conceivable.

This inconceivability is precisely the "negative exceptionalism" that Radhakrishnan describes. But despite the caveats raised by Radhakrishnan and myself, Afropessimism cannot be judged for its impact on direct action the same way Marxist or postcolonial thought might be, as the framework is designed to be a *metatheory*, existing as a check upon the theories it circumscribes, while the latter frameworks' articulations are what motivate direct action—such as the mitigation of capitalist exploitation or the restoration of land sovereignty. In yet another example of Wang's, Afropessimism proves crucial to the leftist political imaginary, as its absence compounded what followed "in late 2011," when "riots exploded across London and the UK after Mark Duggan, a Black man, was murdered by police. Many leftist and liberals were unable to grapple with the unruly expression or rage among largely poor and unemployed people of color, and refused to support the passionate outburst they saw as disorderly and delinquent."⁷³ Duggan's murder, emblematic of his own vulnerability to gratuitous violence, elicited a "passionate outburst" that exceeded what "leftist[s] and liberals" at the time would consider direct action against the state. The "riots," it seemed, were a disproportionate response to a killing symptomatic of the police's monopoly on violence, even as this monopoly circumscribes the laws that protect (and more importantly, designate) members of civil society. What such leftists and liberals failed to understand was that no recourse considered "acceptable" within civil society would have been adequate to the task of protesting Duggan's murder, as his killing by police was a function of civil society *itself*. "Even leftists," Wang continues, "fell into the trap of framing the State and property owners (including small business owners) as victims while criticizing rioters for being politically incoherent and opportunistic."⁷⁴ The riots did not seem to correspond to a legible narrative arc, as no denouement has been charted for the accumulation and fungibility of Black death that had befallen Duggan. The leftists who witnessed such events failed to give sympathetic accounts of the riots like Wang because of a deficiency in their theoretical frameworks. But what would an Afropessimist intervention have changed? I am not asking what would change on the level of direct action, however, but on the level of *discourse*. An Afropessimist insight would obviously not undo Duggan's murder, but instead improve how the murder is *read*. Hence Sexton's characterization of Afropessimism as follows:

. . . Afro-pessimism is a theory, or a theoretical orientation or sensibility, that is fundamentally, and for some frustratingly or even frighteningly, non-prescriptive—it refuses to proffer any guidance, much less any guarantees; there are within its ambit no rules of engagement, no method or technique, no strategy or tactics.⁷⁵

In what I have proposed thus far to differentiate Afropessimism from other frameworks, perhaps this realization is unsurprising. Without a conceivable denouement or *telos* for the Afropessimist imagination, the path to direct action—including change both within and beyond the academy—remains obscured, at best. Yet somehow, the way Afropessimism *thinks*—and more specifically, the kind of thinking *instills* in those who engage with it—continues to occur to me as essential. When it comes to praxis, Afropessimism can forestall the reductive attitudes that, as Wang highlights, have prevented some leftists from being better allies to those with less legible struggles, such as the “poor and unemployed people of color” who protested Duggan’s murder.

Afropessimism remains so fundamentally preoccupied with the problem of anti-Blackness, the very object of its critique, that it avails no legible recourse, no conceivable narrative closure short of “the end of the world,” especially when the “world” itself appears to be inaugurated by a foundational anti-Blackness. Afropessimism is not adequate to the task of *changing* the world, then, but to confronting fully its fraught and inequitable construction:

To endure means to remain in existence, of course, but it also means to suffer patiently, a subsidiary prescription that would seem orthogonal to the urgency, and occasionally the haste, that otherwise animates the text. Moreover, the apocalyptic revolutionary forecast seems not only overstated, but also overwrought. Human life is not all life, and the world is not the earth. All of existence is finite, whether it is living or nonliving, human or nonhuman, but imagining it without Being does not require imagining it destroyed. It entails imagining it in and as the ruins of Being, after the end of the world, in an entirely other relation to the nothing from whence it comes.⁷⁶

Sexton, here, addresses a seeming contradiction between “suffer[ing] patiently” and “the urgency” that “animates” and is imposed by the stakes of Afropessimism. But Sexton does not accept any “apocalyptic revolutionary forecast” ascribed to Afropessimism, considering one of its propositions that the world we all know is foundationally anti-Black. Rather, Sexton insinuates that Afropessimism points to an insurgent sense of “world” not only incompatible with the world we all know, but also unreadable or unknowable through the terms of “Being.” So whereas Afropessimism offers no easy answer to changing the world, Afropessimism points to the possibility of an entirely different symbolic order, unencumbered by the ontological constraints of “being”—“being” that consigns Black people to a state of social death, and non-Black people to the guarantee of social life. For the sake of further clarification, it is thus worth considering another of Wilderson’s claims:

Eradication of the generative mechanisms of Black suffering would mean the end of the world and they would find themselves peering into an abyss (or incomprehensible transition) between epistemes . . . the body of ideas that determine that knowledge that is intellectually certain at any particular time. In other words, they would find themselves suspended between worlds. This trajectory is too iconoclastic for working class, postcolonial, and/or radical feminist conceptual frameworks. The Human need to be liberated in the world is not the same as the Black need to be liberated from *the world*.⁷⁷

For all the affordances availed by interventions in Marxism, postcolonialism, and feminism, there remains an investment in the mere *reorganization* of the dispensation of power within the world, as opposed to the *destruction* of these relations writ large. The radical proletarian or anticolonial indigenous subject desires to better the world, for example, but the ensuing struggle for this betterment is subtended by an implicit assumption that this is a world in which they are legible actors. For them to be legible actors, however, there must be illegible *non*-actors whose incoherence—or lack of sense—in turn *gives sense* to their sense of world. This argument leads Afropessimism to posit an unactionable item, “the Black need to be liberated from *the world*” that both Wilderson and Sexton labor to describe—something which other egalitarian frameworks are neither equipped nor intended to prioritize.

However, to identify what these egalitarian frameworks are *not* doing is not the same as assigning blame. I have only strived, as I said at the beginning, to delineate the affordances of an Afropessimist framework from the affordances of others: what Afropessimism enables readers to see in their own reception of critical theory and coalition politics, especially if they are already well-acquainted with other egalitarian frameworks. The “fault lines” between Marxism and Afropessimism that I speak of, for instance, should not be taken to suggest an irreconcilable antagonism between the two. Rather, their divisions should culminate in a theoretically productive enterprise: the incessant interrogation of what the other framework takes for granted, and thus the grounds for yet more interventions. While my appraisal of Afropessimism’s affordances speak to Marxism’s shortcomings in certain avenues, this is only the necessary purchase of the former as metatheory over the latter. Highlighting the deficits of a Marxist analysis of Black suffering is not the same as an indictment of Marxism as an enterprise for understanding the suffering of all workers under capitalism. And after considering what is possible through Marx’s immanent critique of capitalism, we can wonder what *more* is possible through an immanent critique of Marxism, as well as subsequent critiques of those critiques (such as Wilderson’s of Fortunati’s). We can wonder, as well, how the fraught terrain of coalition politics can be mended, however incrementally, by the conscientiousness to the specificity of Black suffering that Afropessimism demands. And much like Robinson and his study of Black radicalism before it, Afropessimism does not signal the deconstruction or obsolescence of Marxism, but the emergence of a framework with an entirely different orientation. Here are the workers of the world (Marxism), and here are its slaves (Afropessimism)—the difference between the two must be reckoned with, including the horrors that separate one from the other. Further examination of what separates performative violence from structural violence, especially through

the metatheoretical engagement availed by Afropessimism, can allow us to question this sense of “world” that necessarily subtends egalitarian struggles. To whom is a place in the world promised, and to whom is such a place foreclosed? Egalitarian movements have the important goal of mitigating the suffering of oppressed groups, but they will find their efforts better informed through engagement with Afropessimism, which carries the essential task of understanding and articulating *Black* suffering.

Notes

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4. Sara-Maria Sorentino, “The Abstract Slave: Anti-Blackness and Marx’s Method,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 96 (2019): 26.
5. R. Radhakrishnan, “The Epistemology of Pessimism,” *The Comparatist* 43 (2019): 46.
6. Sorentino, “The Abstract Slave,” 26.
7. *Ibid.*, 26.
8. Radhakrishnan, “The Epistemology of Pessimism,” 46.
9. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production*, ed. Tom Griffith, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (Hertfordshire, 2013), 47.
10. Marx, *Capital*, 272.
11. Wilderson, “Gramsci’s Black Marx,” 225.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*, 226.
14. Frank B. Wilderson, “Blacks and the Master/Slave Relation,” interview by C.S. Soong, *Afropessimism: An Introduction* (Minneapolis, MN, 2017), 18.
15. Orlando Patterson. *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge, MA, 1982), 5.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Frank B. Wilderson, *Afropessimism* (New York, 2020), 41.
18. Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 302.
19. Wilderson, “Blacks and the Master/Slave Relation,” 21.
20. Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 41.
21. Jared Sexton, “Affirmation in the Dark: Racial Slavery and Philosophical Pessimism,” *The Comparatist* 43 (2019): 99.
22. Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 11.
23. *Ibid.*, 12.
24. *Ibid.*, 102.
25. *Ibid.*, 14.
26. Mike Wayne, “Narrative,” in *Theorising Video Practice* (London, 1999), 155.
27. *Ibid.*, 161.
28. Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 16.
29. Sexton, “Affirmation in the Dark,” 99.
30. Marx, *Capital*, 207.
31. Sorentino, “The Abstract Slave,” 32.
32. *Ibid.*
33. Radhakrishnan, “The Epistemology of Pessimism,” 50.
34. *Ibid.*, 15.
35. Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 209.
36. Sorentino, “The Abstract Slave,” 24.
37. Marx, *Capital*, 304–05.
38. *Ibid.*, 273.

39. Ibid., 306.
40. Ibid., 171.
41. Stephanie E. Smallwood, "Turning Atlantic Commodities into American Slaves," in *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge and London, 2007), 162–63.
42. Saidiya Hartman, "The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women's Labors" in *Afropessimism: An Introduction* (Minneapolis, MN, 2017), 87–88.
43. Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 175.
44. Saidiya Hartman, "The Burdened Individuality of Freedom," in *Afropessimism: An Introduction* (Minneapolis, MN, 2017), 33.
45. Ibid., 43.
46. Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 72.
47. Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 341.
48. Frank B. Wilderson, "Reciprocity and Rape: Blackness and the Paradox of Sexual Violence," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 27 (2017): 106.
49. Ibid., 109.
50. Saidiya Hartman, "Seduction and the Ruses of Power," in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1997), 79–80.
51. Wilderson, "Blacks and the Master/Slave Relation," 18.
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53. Ibid., 109.
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55. Ibid., 118.
56. Wilderson, "Reciprocity and Rape," 107.
57. Ibid.
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59. Frank B. Wilderson, "The Vengeance of Vertigo: Aphasia and Abjection in the Political Trials of Black Insurgents," in *Afropessimism: An Introduction* (Minneapolis, 2017), 125.
60. Jackie Wang, "Against Innocence: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Safety," *LIES: A Journal of Materialist Feminism* 1 (2012): 13.
61. Ibid., 13.
62. Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 199.
63. Wang, "Against Innocence," 14.
64. Frank B. Wilderson, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC, 2010), 58–59.
65. Wilderson, "The Vengeance of Vertigo," 126.
66. Sexton, "Affirmation in the Dark," 99.
67. Radhakrishnan, "The Epistemology of Pessimism," 52.
68. Ibid.
69. Ibid.
70. Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 102.
71. Ibid., 16.
72. Ibid., 225.
73. Wang, "Against Innocence," 12.
74. Ibid., 12.
75. Sexton, "Affirmation in the Dark," 106.
76. Ibid., 105–06.
77. Wilderson, "The Vengeance of Vertigo," 145.