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As Free As Blackness Will Make Them

AN INTERVIEW WITH FRANK B. WILDERSON III

conducted by Gerardo Munoz and Ángel Octavio

The following interview was conducted August 20, 2020 by Gerardo Munoz and Ángel Octavio Álvarez Solis on Radio Ibero in Mexico City. Transcribed by Ill Will Editions, with light edits for readability.

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Introduction

Unlike other books released during the coronavirus crisis, *Afropessimism* was not written for the present conjuncture. Its prose and critical intervention is untimely; it escapes the world. It was certainly the result of a long meditation and critical intervention, a fact visible in the unique craft of its autographic texture, which pulls away from university discourse.

There is much one could say about Afropessimism as a metacritical intervention, but perhaps we can begin by outlining three central claims. First, Afropessimism is an attempt to renounce identity politics, which many of us consider the predominant tool of domestication in our late liberal regime. Second, Afropessimism breaks with the dominant progressive Left conception of politics, which has mostly been associated with the concept of hegemony, and which has been quite successful globally until recently, particularly in Latin America and Spain—a case that shows the limits of the concept of hegemony, and the importance of the Afropessimist insight. Finally, Afropessimism makes a strong case for an anti-humanist position, since, on Wilderson's view, "Humanity"—as the very equilibrium of our factical world—is predicated on the fantasy of anti-Blackness and inhumanity that sustains the regime of slavery even after its formal legal disappearance. Slavery, Wilderson argues, continues to exist within the apparatuses of our civil society. In this way, Afropessimism moves away from an understanding of race and anti-Blackness as merely one social conflict among others, positioning it instead as a central antagonism in virtue of which Humanity is able to exist only thanks to the fantasmatic destruction of Black existence. To conclude this opening, allow me to quote a few lines from the new book that serve to indicate some of the vortices it holds in store:

> *Afropessimism isn't a church to pray at, or a party to be voted in and out of office. Afropessimism is Black people at their best. 'Mad at the world' is Black folks at their best. Afropessimism gives us the freedom to say out loud what we would otherwise whisper or deny: that no Blacks are in the world, but, by the same token, there is no world without Blacks. The violence perpetrated against us is not a form of discrimination; it is a necessary violence; a health tonic for everyone who is not Black; an ensemble of sadistic rituals and captivity that could only happen to people who are not Black if they broke this or that 'law.' This kind of violence can happen to a sentient being in one of two circumstances: a person has broken the law, which is to say, cracked out of turn given the rules that govern; or the person is a slave, which is to say, no prerequisites are required for an act of brutality to be incurred. There is no antagonism like the antagonism between Black people and the world. This antagonism is the essence of what Orlando Patterson calls 'social death', or 'deathliness' in the words of David Marriott. It is the knowledge and experience of day-to-day events in which the world tells you you are needed, needed as the destination for its aggressivity and renewal.*

Gerardo Munoz: *You say that Afropessimism as a method or critical intervention thematizes Black people "at their best." Can you say more about the genesis of this critical strategy?*

Frank B. Wilderson, III: When we consider something "new" at the level of epistemological discoveries, like the theory of relativity or the splitting of the atom, we like to point to a person. For instance, we point to Einstein as developing or discovering the theory of relativity, or to Marx as unpacking what 'value' really means. What we would like to say about Afropessimism is that, although there are some key figures who made it into a discourse and a discipline by giving it a name and a series of methodological first principles, it really begins in 625 A.D. when the first Africans are enslaved by the Arabs in Gulf States by people who will later become Iranians, Iraqis, East Indians, Chinese, and by Moraccan Jews. For these Africans, a kind of vortex or vice grip comes down on them from all sides. In my view, they are the first theorists of Afropessimism, because they begin to understand that there's a symbiosis between the *destruction of our capacity to make world*—the destruction of our capacity to change endless duration into the event (like time and genealogy), to change limitless space into place (like place-names of countries and towns)—there's a direct correlation between the destruction of our capacity to do these things and be recognized as sentient beings who can do them, and the creation of worlds for all other people. In their own symptomatic and shard-like, broken-up ways, these Africans begin to theorize that there would be no Arab family without the creation of the Black eunuch, or without the Black female character who can take on the points of attention of licentious sexual desire that are not permitted inside of the development of filiation. In other words, we are not Afropessimism's discoverers, there is no discoverer. But there is this sense, Black people have been saying, that there is something about the suffering of what we call the "subaltern" that cannot account for the essential nature of our suffering. What makes Afropessimism important in the twenty-first century is that, for the first time in history, I believe, there is a theory that attempts to pinpoint those constituent elements of suffering that are not analogous to the constituent elements of class suffering, of gender suffering, of colonial native suffering.

Afropessimism began as a kind of anger towards the radical multiracial coalitions that we were a part of in the San Francisco and Berkeley area, and at their inability to be expansive enough to hear the voices of Black suffering inside of those coalition politics. We happened to be activists, Jared Sexton and myself and others, but we are also graduate students, and so we were studying. I had studied Gramsci with Edward Said in the late 80's, some years before I went to South Africa, and Jared was into psychoanalysis, and so we were renewing these interests. We were studying hegemony in the *Prison Notebooks* from Gramsci, we were studying the work of Antonio Negri, Freud and Lacan, the feminism of Kaja Silverman and Judith Butler, all of whom taught at our university, as well as Saidiya Hartman, who was also there. Ninety miles down the road there was David Marriott, who taught at UC Santa Cruz. As graduate students, we combined all these works with our own points of attention. I went into graduate school having been a communist political educator in an underground cell

of insurgents in South Africa. I was also an above ground communist political educator at the Workers Library, and in the A.N.C., and I was very invested in Antonio Negri and Antonio Gramsci. Yet in South Africa (and later in the United States) I could also see that there's this word, "violence," that the Left had not really theorized. The Left had assumed it understood what violence is and what it means. But when you listen to the way it talks about violence, and you turn your head the way you do to look at a solar eclipse, what you find is that the Left does not have a structural analysis of violence. It actually substitutes reportage on the performance of violence for a structural analysis. So, we borrowed elements from the work of David Marriott (we were his students) and his book, *On Black Men*, along with pieces from Saidiya Hartman (we were her students too) and her book, *Scenes of Subjection*, both of which were very helpful. And then there was Orlando Patterson's grand tome, *Slavery and Social Death*, which we hijacked for our own purposes. Patterson would say that every group of people in the world has been enslaved; by contrast, what we said is that there is a group of people called "Black" who have no temporal existence prior to slavery, and that this is unique. All the people in Orlando Patterson's book have a temporal existence prior to slavery, by which I mean, in accordance with narrative progression, they were at one time or another *enslaved*. But there is a word called "Black" which is not a cultural identity in its essence. It is a paradigmatic position; you cannot find the word "Black" as a social formation prior to social death. So we made ourselves its ear trumpet, and we listened to those scandalous voices of Black peoples' suffering that could not be accommodated within leftwing radical circles, and we began to make that into a theory. At first it was just a metatheory, i.e., a critique of Marxism, of psychoanalysis, for what they could not accommodate. Later, forces on the ground—first in the United States, then in Canada, in Europe, in South Africa, Venezuela and Brazil—began to come to our work and translate it into their political activism. We did not plan on that happening. We thought this was going to be a little group of texts, for the academy, forever; yet the work blew up, and so here we are today.

Ángel Octavio Álvarez Solis: *In your book, there is a tension between Blackness as an epistemological problem and Blackness as a political problem. Which would you say are the reasons to think Afropessimism as a metatheory, like some lens of interpretation? Is Afropessimism only a theory, only a lens of interpretation?*

FW: When we embarked on this—myself, Jared Sexton, Saidiya Hartman, and David Marriott—we thought of it as a lens of interpretation. Recall that we were graduate students in the 1990's. In 1999, I was not the Frank Wilderson you see today, who speaks to radio stations in Mexico and the Czech Republic; I was a forty-something-year-old graduate student who had just been purged by Nelson Mandela from the African Congress for being an ultra-leftist, and I'm simply trying to find a way to live in the world so I don't have to go back to being a garbage man, or go back to being a corporate stockbroker. All we wanted to do at that moment is to direct a form of reading. We wanted to show that the suffering of people who are not Black is a suffering of *contingent* violence, i.e., a violence that is triggered by their breaking or transgressing the codes of their oppression. In other words, they suffer because they

believe (rightfully) that the state of California belongs to Mexico, whereas the racist white people believe that the state of California belongs to white people; so they cross the border, and they suffer. We wanted to say that Blackness and enslavement suffers violence for no logical reason—it's called pre-logical. That's how it started.

But then, as I said before, I traveled to Cuba in 1998 and what I saw was very disheartening. I still believe Cuba is the best country in the world, and yet it is a deeply anti-Black country. I saw in Cuba that, although it is constitutionally illegal to be a racist, and to be an anti-Black racist, at the core of what it means to be Cuban is an anxiety over *where* the Black is. If someone is dark and they marry a daughter who draws her line from Spain, they say in Spanish, "does this person have the hair of the dog in them?" I was seeing that everywhere you go, even with respect to the first president of Mexico in 1829. There's an anxiety: *is this person Black? Or Spanish?* Everywhere you go in the world, this anxiety overdetermines the libidinal economy. Now, I don't purport to solve the problem. But this becomes a political project when Black people in revolt around the world begin picking up Afropessimist texts and reading them both as a way of defining their suffering in a deeper way than Marxism can define their suffering, and also—and this is something I would never have predicted—as a way for Black people around the world to give themselves comfort, as in the passage that Gerardo just read. Comfort to be angry at the capacity of everyone else to *make world*. Not angry at discrimination, but angry at the capacity of everyone else to exist as subjects. It has become a very liberating political intervention, but that was wholly unintentional.

GM: *You mentioned Cuba, and it brought to mind a story from a few years ago about Afro-Cubans. Picking up on this experience at the end of the world that you mention a few times in the book, I remember a few years back when Roberto Zurbano, the first Afro-Cuban cultural director of the large publishing house Casa de las Américas, published an article in the New York Times with the acerbic title, "For Blacks in Cuba, the Revolution Hasn't Begun." For this, he was fired from his position. I want to link this to something that also produces a lot of anxiety about Afropessimism and about your book, especially for people who are still thinking about integration into civil society. Afropessimism, in its radical gesture, is not committed to a solution. To seek solutions today is precisely part of the problem, since it entails giving up on what it means to be 'at the end of the world'. I wonder if you think that Afropessimism, contrary to what its critics assert, has in fact not abandoned the revolutionary horizon, but is rather engaged in reinventing a type of outside that the modern concept of revolution is no longer capable of giving us.*

FW: Exactly. It's saying that the revolutionary horizon that we thought was the horizon is really just a hill.

My second book, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*, is where I lay out the term Afropessimism. It is a word that Saidiya Hartman had given to us. When she read the book (as my dissertation advisor), she told me two things. First, she said: "in the first section you critique the Black American's need to

become a part of civil society as being a delusion; in the second section, you critique the constitutive elements of indigeneity for being anti-Black; and in the third section, you critique the inability of Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt to think through Black suffering. This book will leave us with no allies in the world." [*Laughter*] She was not saying "don't write it." She was saying, "do you understand the kind of hatred that you are going to catch from people who profess to be our allies?" And then she said, "the reason is that no one in the world who suffers—and here we're not talking about the capitalist, or the white male cis-gender person with money—*no one in the world who suffers and who says they want to be free, wants to be as free as Blackness will make them.*" If they were to become as free as Blackness will make them, they will become free of their culture, free of their sovereignty, free of dominion. They will become free of cartographic integrity. They will exist as we exist, in a state of absence far more profound than loss. All political projects are based on resurgence and recuperation. To face this fact, they would have to face the fact that their political project is not based upon the total disaggregation of who they are, so that they could *become* Black, but is, ultimately based upon their need to *distinguish* themselves from Blackness—and that is a frightening form of freedom. And that is the kind of freedom that we have had (against our will) since 625 A.D.

AS: *You affirm that Afropessimism is not a symbol of Black liberation, nor an historical intervention on its behalf. Instead, it calls us to think the possibility of a non-compensatory theory of reality. Might Afropessimism be the life of reason in these dark times?*

FW: Yes and no. I am sorry to sound so paradoxical.

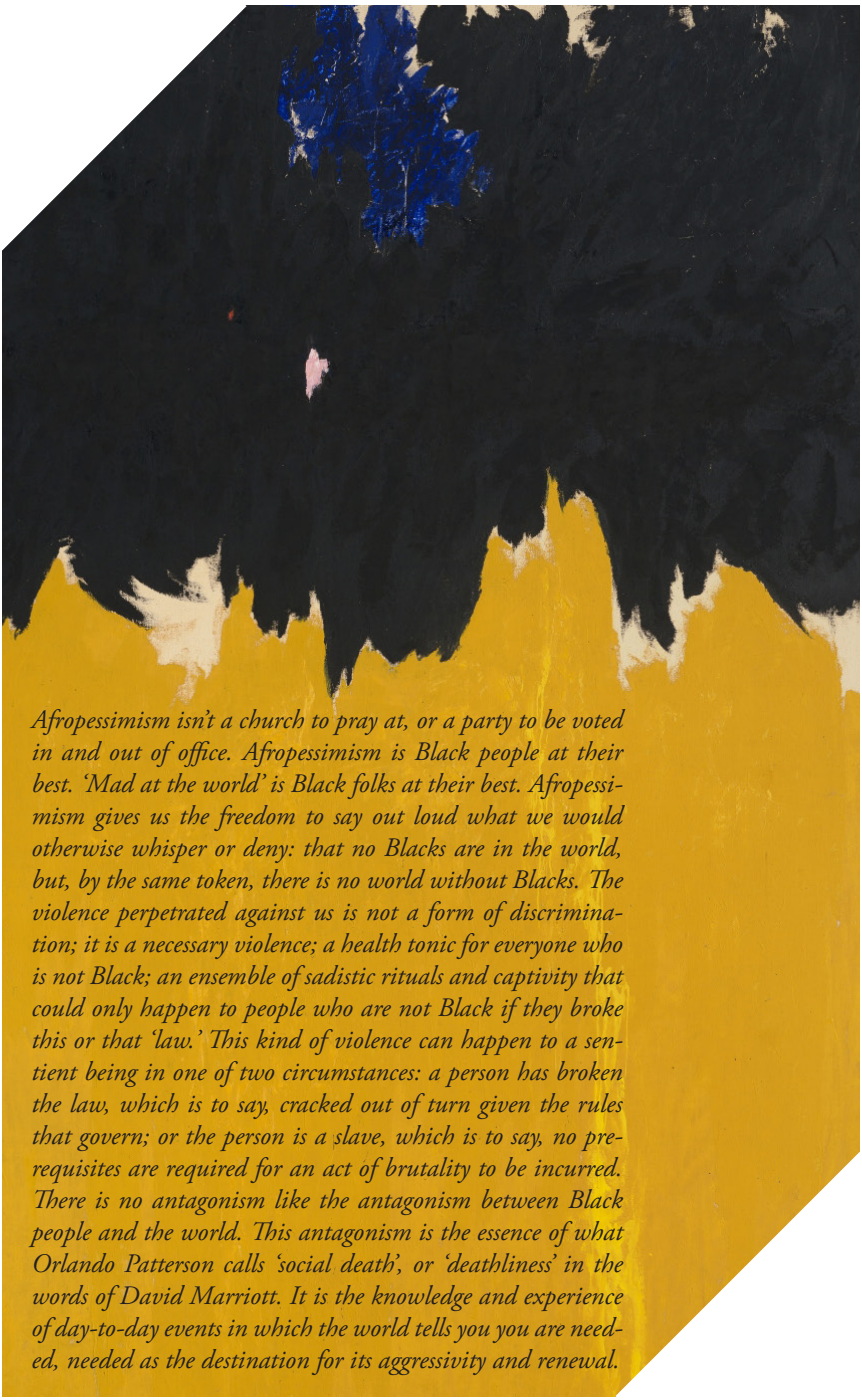
I come from the city of Minneapolis where George Floyd was murdered, and I know that neighborhood very well. It was a neighborhood near where the Native American movement was started in 1968. It was a neighborhood where, at 3 o'clock in the morning, I would steal my father's car and compete in a rather suicidal drag-races on the same street where the 3rd Precinct was located. I know that street very well. And so, at the moment the 3rd Precinct was burned down, in those first few days, I could see a kind of calibration between the action in the streets and the desire for the end of the world that I talk about in my book, with me and my grandmother. However, very quickly throughout the Americas, when the energy that comes from the embodiment of Black people starts something, this energy is quite often captured, harnessed, and redirected into tangible goals by non-Black people on the Left. And that is the case not just with political struggles, but likewise with music.

There's nothing more fierce than Black embodiment. Black people, when we fight, are not fighting *for* something, we're fighting *against everything*. It's that kind of affect and energy that all revolutions on the Left want. But at the end of the day, a revolution on the Left cannot carry that energy to the end, because it wants to consolidate into something else, like a new state. In the collective unconscious, Black people are not psychically given the authority to move the revolution forward. We start off with it, but then the energy and the authorization taken from us and transposed

into concrete conceptual objectives like 'defunding the police'. What I feel and fear is happening is the same thing that happened with rap and hip-hop. It started off as a fierce expression from a group of people who have nothing to salvage, and then it winds up compacted and transposed for white boys in the suburbs. The same thing happens with music. There's an anxiety over jazz. No one wants to say jazz is Black. They say, "oh, it's an American music." Afropessimism is interested in those symptomatic utterances of anxiety that cannot land authority *in* Blackness, but wants Blackness to share authority with something that is conceptually coherent. Again, we are interested in the anxiety of people who have something to lose, who do not want to be authorized by people who have nothing to salvage. And I think this political moment right now is being transposed in just this same way onto the agenda of people who are not Black.

GM: *I have the impression that, in its suspicions of the shortcomings of modern revolutionary theories in general, the Afropessimist framework of interpretation is ahead of its time. Most of the politics we are seeing today are still premised on the idea of a 'militant collective alliance'. Yet Afropessimism seems to prepare us for something else, beyond political militancy. For instance, in the book, you critique the principle of solidarity. Is Afropessimism something that could prepare a regime of friendship not committed to a kind of principial solidarity, but to another form of friendship with the inhuman?*

FW: I understand what you're saying. I'm open to anything, but I am really cautious about that. Jared Sexton once said to a group of young Latinx and East Asian activists with whom we were in a coalition in San Francisco that they have to understand that captivity and the rise of the prison industrial complex is historical for them, but it is ontological for us. In other words, captivity does not constitute the *being* of Latinx and Asian people. Captivity constitutes the being of Black people. They have to surrender this notion that 'we are all in this together', even as we fight against the prison industrial complex. If they do not surrender it, then we do not want to move forward with this spirit of Black generosity that we tend to show, decade after decade, to non-Black people. Here are the terms of friendship: we will be in coalitions with you, and we will move against draconian immigration laws, and we will move against the discrimination against people for speaking Spanish in schools, etc. But at the same time, while we are in these coalitions, we will ridicule you for the impoverishment of your demands, even while we are fighting against white people on its behalf, and we will do so until you surrender your agency and authority to the end of the world.



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