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Abstract: In this interview, Frank Wilderson talks about the current state of the discipline of Black Studies in the United States of America and beyond and the ways in which Afro-pessimism takes part in shaping this discipline. He also discusses their stakes in current social justice movements such as Black Lives Matter and the relevance he ascribes to Black lived experience and structural positionalities. Commenting on the role that gratuitous violence and the concept of social death play in his work, Wilderson also addresses the challenges Afro-pessimism poses especially to non-Black scholars who want to think through and with this theoretical stream of thought.

Keywords: social death, Afro-pessimism, anti-blackness, Black Studies, social justice movements

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“The Inside-Outside of Civil Society”: An Interview with Frank B. Wilderson, III

Conducted by Samira Spatzek and Paula von Gleich

Frank B. Wilderson, III, is Professor of Drama and African American Studies at the University of California, Irvine, and the author of two books: the memoir *Incognegro* (2008) and the monograph *Red, White and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (2010). Samira Spatzek and Paula von Gleich, Ph.D. candidates in American Studies at the University of Bremen, first met Frank Wilderson when he was a senior research fellow of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation on a research stay in Bremen in 2013 and 2014. In this interview, Wilderson talks about the current state of the discipline of Black Studies in the U.S. and beyond and the ways in which Afro-pessimism takes part in shaping this discipline. He also discusses its stakes in current social justice movements such as Black Lives Matter and the relevance he ascribes to Black lived experience and structural positionalities. Commenting on the role that gratuitous violence and the concept of social death play in his work, Wilderson also addresses the challenges Afro-pessimism poses especially to non-Black scholars who want to think through and with this theoretical school of thought. The interview was conducted and taped on July 20, 2015. It has been edited for content, length, and readability.¹

Paula: To lay the ground for our conversation, **Frank:** What is Black Studies to you? What do you understand when you refer to the word? And what are its primary tasks and aims in your opinion?

Frank: For me, Black Studies is a discipline that seeks to offer the best historical and theoretical framework for questions confronting the Black diaspora. Even though it started in the United States, I consider this to be for all continents. There’s a way in which Black Studies is the unacknowledged center of the Humanities and the Social Sciences. Because Black

Studies is the place where one must, whether one wants to or not, confront and interrogate the un- and/or under-interrogated assumptions on which the Humanities rest: that all sentient beings are subjects; that empathy can be extended to all sentient beings; that all sentient beings are precarious in the same way, structurally (as, for example, exploited and alienated subjects of capital, sexism, homophobia and/or settler domination). Black Studies confronts disciplines of the Humanities and the social sciences with a question regarding the universal applicability of those rather basic 'truth' claims.

So, perhaps the most besetting hobble of the disciplines that fall under the banner of the Humanities and Social Sciences is the lack of a robust comparative lens. Here in the United States, most of the other disciplines have what I would call an inadequate comparative lens. And by inadequate comparative lens I mean that there is a way in which, say, traditional Ethnic Studies in the United States tends to lump Black people with other people of color as well as with the white working class and Native Americans, for example. And one of the reasons why this happens is because, traditionally speaking, for something like Ethnic Studies, you have a situation in which capitalism, rather than the machinations of libidinal economy, is all-essential to their critique, and I think there is a problem with capital being central to the critique of oppression, especially with respect to Black people. And I think this centrality of capitalism blinds these other disciplines to the ways in which Black people's suffering cannot be analogized with anyone else's—which is not to say that capitalism is not a global problem—I'll have more to say about that later. So what I think is Black Studies really should be aiming to explain the condition of suffering for Black people without being hobbled by the ruse of analogy. I don't want to prescribe the "primary tasks and aims" of Black Studies, so much as I want to point out two problems that need to be—and are being—addressed as Black Studies moves forward in the 21st century. The first one we've just been discussing; and, in *Red, White, & Black* I call that "the ruse of analogy" (35). The problem with developing a Black Studies which *does not* radically differentiate between Blacks and all others, is that one theorizes the structural violence that subsumes Black people as being homologous with the structural violence that subjugates Native Americans, the working class or post-colonials. This leads one down a blind alley in which one forgets, or fails to understand, how the violence of settler occupation or labor subsumption has a utility that anti-Black violence does not have. One begins to think *rationaly* about violence. And then violence appears as a punishing response, contingent upon a Black person's transgression of codes, mores, laws, or policies etc. That's not how or why the violence of social death operates. Black Studies is a field which recalibrates our understanding of anti-Black violence and, in so doing,

makes the Humanities more rigorous and gives the disciplines of the Humanities greater explanatory power.

The second problem is related to the first but it is an effect of the conservative hydraulics that has pressed against all forms of revolutionary thought and action since the late 1970s, if not before. Amanda Lashaw called this problem the difference between a politics of culture and a culture of politics (when I knew her in grad school at UC Berkeley—and I borrowed her idea). Right now—really, since the 1980s—scholarship has been more invested in a politics of culture than in a culture of politics. This has meant that the Humanities and the Social Sciences have become more interested in exploring the preconscious interests of subjects in various social formations than in the structural positionality of those subjects. Preconscious interest is all about how someone speaks about or performs their cultural or gender oriented *identity*. Invariably the scholarship is tainted by a desire to access civil society and/or expand its parameters that it might be inclusive of marginalized identities. This is not the kind of scholarship that can be harnessed as a kind of explanatory accompaniment for revolutionary activity; even though the hubris of the scholarship often presents itself (if only to itself) as earth shattering. It's not. Believe me, it's not. Black Studies, on the other hand, was born in flames. Just look at what it took to get it at Cornell University and San Francisco State. Just look at how under siege Black Studies programs and departments are all over the United States. Black Studies was, in its early iterations (and in its most dynamic iterations today) never *unconcerned* with the cultural contributions of Black people across the diaspora, but, and this is key, Black Studies at its best explores and explains how and why the cultural offerings of Black people can never be recognized and incorporated as cultural offerings coming from *a people*. Those offerings invariably transposed in the collective unconscious of civil society as being, a priori, *extensions of the master's prerogative* (to paraphrase Hartman).

Samira: Talking about Black Studies as a field and as a discipline as you've just outlined, how would you assess the state of the field in the United States at the moment and could you perhaps also comment on its current developments particularly within a U.S.-American context? In what ways might Afro-pessimism be the future—or 'un-future'—of Black Studies?

F: I think that Black Studies in the United States is at a crossroads. For the first time in a long time, Black Studies has had to contend with the question, What is a Black? It can no longer be assumed that we can answer to that fundamental question by saying a Black is a Human being, oppressed and subjugated but Human nonetheless. Afro-pessimism has a lot to do

with bringing us to that crossroads. As I alluded to a minute ago, the Humanities assume the corporeal and psychic integrity of all sentient beings. Afro-pessimism argues that that integrity is vouchsafed by its absence in the figure of the Black; and that violence is key to this—in the words of Fanon—“species divide” (“Concerning Violence,” *The Wretched of the Earth*) Afro-Pessimism demands the subordination (not, however, the elimination) of a politics of culture to a culture of politics. One example of an analytic payoff from this inversion—or, if you prefer, corrective—is a change in the way we think about and theorize the constituent elements of diaspora. There’s a way in which up until this point (when Afro-pessimism started to make interventions in the field of Black Studies), everyone kind of assumed that they understood what the word ‘diaspora’ meant. But this meant that we had considered Africa to have the same kind of conceptual integrity and to be the same kind of territorial and imaginary plenitude as other groups who also use that word (diaspora) to think about their respective dispersals across the globe.

But the key to all of this is that if one tilts the analytic lens of Afro-pessimism *properly* one will be engaged not in a project which pathologizes Black people for being *inhuman*, but a project which pathologizes *Humanity* for its violent consumption of Blackness; similarly to the way if one tilts the analytic lens of Marxism *properly* one champions shoplifting and sees blood dripping from the racks of the most elegant garments. By *describing* the ways in which Blacks are barred, *ab initio*, from Human recognition and incorporation, Afro-pessimism argues that the Human would lose all coherence were it to jettison the violence and libidinal investments of anti-Blackness against which it is able to define its constituent elements. By untangling snarl presented by, what I believe to be an oxymoron—the phrase Black diaspora—Afro-pessimism allows one to see not only dispersal at work in a context void of both sanctuary and redemption but, *in addition*, one is primed to embark upon a critical (and dare I say condemnatory) evaluation of “sanctuary” and “redemption” as being inherently anti-Black conceptual frameworks.

Afro-pessimism says, “yes, when we think diaspora for non-Black people, it is perfectly legitimate to think of a territorial integrity and of a temporal of equilibrium prior to the dispersal—a prior plenitude”; but what Afro-pessimism insists upon is that for Blacks, diaspora only (or I should say, *essentially*) has the meaning of dispersal, which is to say that it does not rest upon some plenitude in the past. It is not a dispersal akin to the Palestinian dispersal, and for very good reasons. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines diaspora as “[a]ny group of people who have spread or become dispersed beyond their traditional homeland or point of origin.” But the word ‘homeland’ cannot be reconciled with ‘Africa.’ This is a major intervention made by Afro-pessimism. And this may signal the ‘un-

future' of Black Studies ... perhaps. I really think it signals a 'new' future, based upon a wisdom that Black people have been coerced (by the governability of the Humanities' disciplines and by raw police violence on the street) into *not* acknowledging, *not* discussing. Black speech is always coerced speech, speech under house arrest. And the jailers insist that you don't bring them any bad news unless it has a solution embedded in it. There is no epistemological way to think 'solution' and 'Blackness' together—unless you call for the end of the world. And the snarl that entangles one when one tries to think 'diaspora' and 'Blackness.' 'Homeland' cannot be reconciled with 'Africa,' in part, because Africa is a continent, and the word homeland implies a cartographic scale smaller and more intimate than a continent. The 1948 Palestinian exodus, also known as the Nakba, dispersed a people from a homeland, not a continent. This is very different than the dispersal of Africans along Arab and, later, European slave routs. But what is even more problematic about the word diaspora, when applied to Blacks, is its grammatical coupling with a possessive pronoun 'their'—'their homeland,' or 'their original homeland.'

The viability of such phrases falters in the face of Africa because the word 'Africa' is a shorthand for technologies of force that rob possessive pronouns and place names of their integrity. We're not trying to say that all Black people have the same culture and speak the same language—that would be foolish. But what we are trying to say is that at every scale of abstraction, whether it's the continental scale with the concept of 'Africa,' ratcheting down to the territory of the nation, ratcheting down to the territory of the community, the city, the filial territory of the domestic sphere, or even, as Hortense Spillers would say, ratcheting all the way down to the body, there is no scale of cartographic abstraction in which you could say that this cartography, this terrain, belongs to the person who inhabits it: even if the scale of abstraction is the body (Spillers) or the unconscious (Marriott). Blacks, in other words, cannot claim their bodies, cannot claim their families, cannot claim their cities, cannot claim their countries, they cannot lay claim to a personal pronoun. It is (or was, sticking with diaspora) no more 'their continent' than the slave cabin was 'their home.' Few on the Left would consider pathologizing the subject (or object, or abject) of chattel slavery for having no power beyond the master's prerogative—they would go straight for the jugular of the master class. But that is not what happens today, now that most folks think slavery is a thing of the past. But Africa is a slave dwelling as well; it's just that it is a slave dwelling at a higher level of abstraction than the cabin.

As Achille Mbembe would say, every Black person in Africa had to negotiate captivity: in the late 1400s, 1500s, 1600s, 1700s, 1800s. Some negotiated captivity by becoming agents of European and Arab slave traders; some negotiated captivity by trying to go further into the interior; some

negotiated captivity *as* captives, who may or may not have thrown themselves overboard. But the fact of the matter is that captivity and social death are the essential dynamics which everyone in this place called Africa stands in relation to.

So if we come full circle, what Afro-pessimism is saying is that a Black African diaspora is fundamentally different from any other diaspora, because any other diaspora has actually been dispersed from a place that has sovereign integrity. And Africa has never had sovereign integrity; since it has gained conceptual coherence as Africa, it has always existed in what Loïc Wacquant would call a 'carceral continuum': in other words, Africa has always been a big slave estate. That has been and still is the global consensus.

Now that is a very controversial perspective but one that we fundamentally believe [laughter]. At the moment, there are very few people in the United States in Black Studies at the rank of Associate or Full Professor who actually believe this. But there are masses of people at the rank of graduate student and more and more at Assistant Professor who believe this, so in ten years' time, what we're going to see is a very, very visible hegemonic struggle over the meaning of Black Studies as these people who are graduate students get jobs – if they get jobs because most of those colleagues who are actually Full Professors are trying not to hire them [laughter].

I am laughing but it's a really painful struggle because most Afro-pessimists who are going out on the job market are getting hit really hard by these hiring committees. But they're being hit hard at the level of politics, not at the level of analysis. In other words, the old guard needs to protect its turf. The old guard has not been able to prove that Black people exist as subjects. They have simply said that that is true because that's what we've said all along. But an argument, as Jared Sexton writes, cannot be sustained by assertion. And so, where we're at, at this crossroads, and where Afro-pessimism might be the future or the 'un-future,' is that we simply believe that the sovereign integrity of what Judith Butler might call the "body" doesn't exist for Black men or Black women. It is an absence of integrity – called the "flesh" by Hortense Spillers. Every time space is Blackened, what you see is the retreat or the absence of the world's, civil society's libidinal investment in everyone else. In other words, a Black person becomes president, and all of a sudden the president is no longer presidential.

What we're trying to say is that the collective unconscious of the entire world is fundamentally anti-Black. We say this is truer for liberals than for racists. We love racists, because at least they have the integrity of walking around with swastikas and Confederate flags [laughter]. Everyone else

lacks that integrity. And so we can only find that integrity in their unconscious, and their unconscious shows that they cannot relate to Blacks as contemporaries, as subjects imbued with what Fanon calls “ontological resistance” (*Black Skin, White Masks*). That is because if Blackness were to be granted sovereign integrity, then everyone else in the world would lose their psychic bearings.

Now, what’s great is that on the ground, the most radical people on the streets are becoming more and more interested in Afro-pessimism because it cathects with the absolute hatred for civil society and the world that Black people in the streets have here. And so, I think that the old guard who insist that Black people actually exist with subjective presence, they’re going to have to find a way to make themselves relevant to the emerging political antagonisms that you see in the streets of Baltimore, New York, and Los Angeles. Afro-pessimists in the academy are becoming more and more relevant to people on the ground.

P: So now you’ve given us an overview of what you see happening in Black Studies in the U.S. at the moment. Could you also say something about what differences or similarities you see comparing Black Studies in the United States to other places in the world, for example, Europe, or more specifically Germany?

F: Though I spent three months in Italy and eleven months in Germany, that’s not enough time to say anything definitive about the state of Black Studies in Europe. I do have something to say about political rhetoric in Europe – rhetoric on the revolutionary Left. There’s a thinking problem in Europe, and this is not to say that in America, people on the left think really well: they don’t. But I’m just talking about Europe. And part of the thinking problem in Europe is that a lot of Europeans on the left were not able or willing to think against the European Union, as opposed to thinking *with* the European Union; to theorize the EU as a murderous juggernaut, as being unethical in its synchronic arrangements, rather than theorizing it as an essentially benign arrangement of power which is simply in need of reform at the level policy and practice. This leads to reformist responses from so-called radicals; revolutionaries acting like the loyal opposition.

And like I said, we have that same problem in the U.S.; since the end of the 1970s, very few people on the left have been able to think against the United States. They normally think in terms of improving or correcting the discriminatory practices of the United States and not in terms of destroying the United States. Now, it seems like the most radical thing you can do is to agitate for immigration reform. It would be ok if there was a certain level of cynicism which accompanied the demand for immigration

reform; but the rhetoric *and* the affect don't suggest this. People are genuinely invested in access and in the expansion of civil society; and genuinely opposed to the notion that civil society is a killing machine. They don't understand that immigration is, innately, a conservative framework and ensemble of desires. It's a block against thinking revolution. Again, to think immigration is to think questions of access, and to think questions of access is to leave unthought the ethical standing of the country or community that you're in. And this was a problem that I found with people on the left in Italy as well as in Germany, which is to say that they were not asking themselves "How do we destroy Italy?" or "How do we destroy Germany?" but they were asking themselves "How do we make our terrain more hospitable to immigrants?" The problems that I felt working with the *Autonomia* comrades in Italy – Antonio Negri's people – are similar to some of the things that I saw in the political discourse in Bremen around the problem of police dealing with African immigrants who were accused of having drugs or selling drugs: it wasn't waterboarding but there was pouring liquid down their throats and one person died.² In Bremen, it seems to me that the rallies and broadsides that were translated for me, showed that the German Left missed a supreme opportunity to fashion a radical anti-police and, by extension, anti-nation discourse. Instead, they dwelt on the illegality of these *practices*. Well, hell, these are the same practices that Germans used in Namibia; and that German immigrants to the USA used on their slaves in America. Why not see, *in the practice* of police violence, something more profound than police brutality?

One of the arguments that I had with the people in *Autonomia* is that if they were to simply give their political authority to the African immigrant as opposed to invite the African immigrant into their political authority, then they might find themselves involved in a much more iconoclastic project, which is the project that sees African immigration as – in the words of Malcolm X – the "chickens coming home to roost;" in other words, the horrors of colonialism coming back to invade the metropole as opposed to the kind of liberal benevolence that they had, which was "How can we help these poor people."

So I think that Europe, just like America, needs to break out of that. Now, in America, it's difficult, I think more difficult than it could be in Europe. I don't know this for sure. What I saw in Europe – and this was before the Greek crisis – was a sense that the distribution of resources that the European community makes possible is a kind of social democratic step in the right direction. And so there's room to think about this project of the EU as being worthwhile. In the United States no one in their right mind could say this because this is just a horrifying dungeon of oppression for everybody. What I think happens in the United States is that the

United States is such a terrorist country that people are simply afraid of espousing any critique of America itself. So I think a lot of people on the left in Europe were celebratory of the social democratic possibilities of the EU, and that's what blinded them to being against the EU essentially. In the United States, I think people are just terrified of the violence that could come down on them any time they espouse any anti-American beliefs. But both inabilities to get out of the mindset of immigration—because the mindset of immigration traps and ameliorates your project with questions of 'access'—and the question of access makes you think that the problem is how to bring more people into civil society as opposed to why civil society has no right to exist.

Finally, I don't think that I met many people in Italy or in Germany who had really thought about the antagonism being between Blacks and Humans. I still think, like the old guard in the United States, that they thought that the antagonism was between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots,' economically.

I would say that the other problem is that I think there is a lot of unproductive guilt about the Jewish Holocaust that taints all scholarship in Germany. And when I say "taints all scholarship," what I mean is that I feel a lot of Germans are so close to the Jewish Holocaust as something bad that they did, and it's hard for them to get outside of that box and realize what Fanon said in *Black Skin, White Masks*, which is that the dustup between Germans and Jews was what he sarcastically called "little family quarrels" (115) [laughter]. And by "little family quarrels" he means that because Germans and Jews have subjective presence, they are both in a family, the Human family; and that the problem of the Jews is the problem of an idea—the idea of a Semitic takeover of banks, the education system, that kind of thing.

But the antagonism between Blacks and the world is a problem of vision: the presence of my body, or "flesh" (Spillers). In other words, people don't fear Black people's ideas. We know this because people don't even listen to Black people's ideas. They can't remember what ideas they had. The police don't write up big dossiers for the theoretical framework of Black people. What people fear is the presence of Black bodies. And Fanon is trying to educate us that that is psychically a much more traumatic fear than the fear of the Jewish takeover of the banking system because people are afraid, and fear has a grounding wire in concepts: they are *afraid* of Jews. People are terrorized by Blacks. In other words, no one can actually write a sentence in terms of what it is that they hate or fear about Blacks just like they can't write a sentence about what they love. Negrophilia and Negrophobia are of the same psychic mix.

P: I have a follow-up question on that. You just talked about the position of the Jew and how the Holocaust is perceived in Europe and in Germany specifically. And in your book *Red, White, and Black...* you give a specific position to Native Americans as the “Red” or the “Savage.” Could you say a little more about that? Why do you give that specific position to this group of people and not to any other group?

F: As soon as *Red, White & Black* was published, Jared Sexton critiqued the error of my generosity towards Native peoples in the Americas. My book came out in 2010, and Jared Sexton has been teaching courses since then which have been tweaking that as an error. And I think he’s right. To footnote this, if Germans feel guilty about the Jews, everybody here in the United States feels guilty about American Indians. Part of my guilt coming through – because I was a graduate student when I wrote this book – was that, you know, here are a people who, just in the United States alone, were 12 to 18 million, and now they’re 1.6 million, so they’ve been slaughtered. But what Jared points out is that, in pure genocide numbers, the genocide of Africans dwarfs that, for one. Number two, I was dealing with modernity, the 1600s, and anti-Blackness – and I’m not actually doing this myself, two or three graduate students are working on how anti-Blackness is essential to the ability to say the word ‘Arab family’ – goes back to 625 A.D., it’s a project that the Arabs begin in order to turn Africa into the place of social death, and they hand this project over to the Portuguese in 1452. And if you think of it like that, what you’re able to see is that there is real conflict between Native people in the Americas and Europeans, but it’s a conflict, it’s not so much an antagonism. It looks more like the Jewish Holocaust and less like African slavery, that is, less like the Maafa (or Holocaust of Enslavement).

Since writing *Red, White & Black* at least two or three books have come out which are history books, which do a very good job of explaining how the enslavement of Blacks was central to Native American civil society as it was to white civil society, especially in the Southeast. So it’s a complicated thing: Native Americans stand in what seems to be an antagonistic relationship to whites because the word ‘Indian’ is not a word prior to Columbus. It’s like the word ‘Africa’ with the Arabs. ‘Indian’ is a word that is implicated with genocide: you can’t think ‘Indian’ outside of genocide. And so, ‘Indian’ is a positional nomenclature, positioned in a paradigm, whereas Choctaw or Lakota or Apache marks a cultural name of an identity within the position of ‘Indian.’ And so they stand in what seems to be an antagonistic relationship to Europeans, but they also stand in an antagonistic relationship to Blacks. In my chapter, “Savage Negrophobia,” I went into that and I should have written more about that.

But the laws of the B.I.A., the Bureau of Indian Affairs, seem to work in exactly the opposite way: in other words, there seems to be a blanket *imperative* that American Indians marry whites in order to advance, and that is very interesting, because civil society and its murderous juggernaut polices interracial marriages by making sure that Blacks can't marry whites, but it also encourages interracial marriages by encouraging Indians to marry whites. In the libidinal economy, American Indians are not the kind of absolute contaminant that Blacks are, because in the state of South Dakota, where many American Indians were pushed off their lands, you also have a very large reservation, the Pine Ridge Indian reservation. The government came in, and they said: "If you want to own land on Pine Ridge, you only qualify if you're married to a white person." And they also go into the homes to correct the behavior of Native Americans—how they eat using utensils, forks and knives, how they clean their houses, etc.—to whiten that process to help them get more integrated. The so-called (derogatorily) 'half-breeds,' people who have an American Indian parent and a White parent, have more privileges in terms of land ownership, voting rights, etc. In some ways, American Indians are a liminal category, and in other ways they are more profoundly on the side of "junior partners" and antagonistic to Blacks.

P: In your article "The Prison Slave as Hegemony's (Silent) Scandal" you write: "for Black people, civil society itself—rather than its abuses or shortcomings—is a state of emergency" (24). How does this relate to what you describe as "gratuitous violence" in your work?

F: I think this is keyed to some of the other things we've been talking about. I think *the* biggest problem of political thinking on the left has been the problem of gratuitous violence. If you turn your head sideways and listen to people speak indirectly, the way you might look at a solar eclipse, you will hear the symptoms of their speech. Most of the time, when they talk about violence, they are talking about violence as a contingency: in other words, that violence happens because people transgress the unethical rules of civil society. And this is very different than what happens to Black people. As Jared Sexton has written—Sexton, Saidiya Hartman, myself, David Marriott, Hortense Spillers, and Orlando Patterson—what the slave receives is a kind of violence that is necessary not to produce a certain kind of behavior, but to give the other people who are not receiving this gratuitous violence a sense of stability in their own lives.

That's a very difficult thing for people to get their heads around, but what it means is that Black people stand in a different relationship to the police, so even though the homicidal murderous violence of the police can

be meted out to the white working class, white women, immigrants, Native Americans—and they can die from that violence, just as Blacks can die from that violence—the generative mechanism of the same *acts* of violence are not of the same *structure*. The generative mechanism is different. For those people, the generative mechanism is disciplining them back into correct behavior, correct thoughts, and it kicks in when their consent to the hegemony of civil society has been broken; it comes in after they break consent. And as Hartman points out, Black consent is never an issue. The police actually enforce the laws on all these other groups, but the police *make* the laws on Black bodies when they produce violence. They make the laws—and I don't mean law in the literal sense of the word—but what I mean is the law as in 'who is in' and 'who is out' with respect to civil society. It is necessary for this violence to repeat itself against Black people.

And this is a very difficult concept for Black middle class political organizers to accept, understandably. Because the only question is: What do you do about that? Afro-pessimism doesn't offer much help for political organizing. Sorry [laughter]. That's not its job [laughter]. But it hopefully gets to the truth of the matter. Which is to say, lynching, mutilation, or images in movies, or the vicarious circulation, the well-intended circulation of videos of Black people being shot, all that stuff—even the videos that we use to go to court to say “this person shot the Black person” wrongly—provide an important function in attaining justice (even this claim has been contested); but the most essential function is to constantly remind the rest of the world that here's a kind of violence that happens to people that are Black, and “thank God I can see this over and over again because it can't happen to me.” The violence produces the 'inside-outside' of civil society. All those other people, immigrants who get this kind of violence, that's not the purpose to create the inside-outside of civil society. The purpose is to discipline them to be better widgets inside of civil society. The violence against Blacks' lives is gratuitous because it is needed to actually produce the inside-outside, not to discipline those who are on the inside.

S: The next question ties in with the issue of police violence that you've already talked about: in 2014 and 2015, several cases of fatal police violence in the United States and the (mis)handling of the outbreak of Ebola in West Africa have met with predominately problematic responses by media and public institutions on an international level. Border control at the Mediterranean Sea border to Europe and migration restrictions to the European Union have caused, and willfully accepted, the deaths of thousands of (undocumented) African migrants in

the last few years. How would you assess these realities, particularly against the backdrop of your concept of, borrowing from Orlando Patterson, Black 'social death'?

F: Social death has three components: natal alienation, general dishonor, and naked or gratuitous violence. It is the violence that we just spoke about in the last question which allows for the other two. It allows for natal alienation and general dishonor. What we have in the African body, or "flesh" as Spillers would say, is a sentient being for whom there is no form of violence which is psychically beyond the limit. In other words, there is just nothing you can do to this body that the unconscious of the world would say, "well that's outrageous." As a result of that, that sentient being cannot be conceived of as part of the human family because, as the historian David Eltis has pointed out, one of the reasons why, in the 1500s, 1600s, and 1700s, the Europeans simply didn't go to rivers in Europe where there were a lot of vagabonds and just picked up 50,000 vagabonds per year and turn them into slaves on an industrial scale, was because the *scale* of violence needed to carry this out was something they could not imagine subjecting their poor to. He said it would have been much cheaper: the insurance costs on the ships would have been lower, the ships could have been smaller and less sturdy, and the people that you pressgang into capturers to go to Africa could actually just be the slaves themselves. He suggests that the so-called New World would have modernized at an exponential rate, and he said that in most places you could take about 50,000 people a year who were considered vagrants and turn them into white slaves and not risk heavy-duty civic unrest in Europe that the monarchies could not handle. So he asks: why didn't that happen?

And it didn't happen because every time the aristocracy or the emerging parliaments in Europe debated slavery of people that they hated—meaning the peasants—every time they debated this, they ran up against *psychological* obstacles, and he says that these psychological obstacles were such that they could not enslave other Europeans in an industrial capacity. They would have to enslave white people based on their transgressions. "This person didn't want to work, they can become a slave." "This person stole some of the livestock from the sovereign power, they can become a slave." That's just too tedious. And the reason that they could not industrialize the enslavement of whites was because they feared that that would be what they called a "violence beyond the limit." *A violence beyond the limit.*

Some people did make slaves out of whites. The further north you go in Europe, the less it happened [laughter]. It almost never happened in Holland, but it happened in Portugal and in Spain from time to time, but they

would not enslave the *baby* of a woman, and that kind of logic where these people are socially dead before they transgress, could never be applied in Europe in enough numbers to make it industrially viable. They applied that logic to Africa without even considering it as being wrong. Coming full circle to your question, that means that the place where Ebola breaks out and the communities in the United States where the police shoot people are really not communities in the collective unconscious, which is why the media response is so problematic.

Africa, in the collective unconscious of the world, is a place of crisis and catastrophe. Even people on the left say “well if we don’t have sound environmental practices, or if we don’t have proper police accountability in our cities, this can become a place just like Africa.” People just say that. Africa becomes a kind of automatic metaphor for disasters beyond what can be thought of. This, for us in the United States, goes way back, but it’s concretized in 1857 with the Dred Scott decision, where Justice Taney says that Dred Scott must be returned to slavery—not because the master didn’t free him, as one of the lower courts ruled—but because Dred Scott is not a person. He writes it in his 250-page majority opinion: unlike the American Indians, who are a kind of lower class of people, Dred Scott comes from Africa, and Africa is a place of non-community—it’s a non-place. And so he says to the lower courts, to the court that said Dred Scott should go free because he went to Minnesota, next to Canada, that it is wrong. The court that said that Dred Scott should be enslaved, because his master should have never given him the freedom, is also wrong. Both courts are wrong because they have not been thinking ontologically. Dred Scott is not a jurisprudential subject, he’s not a subject of the law because he’s not a subject of humanity. Both courts were wrong because they heard his case.

That is a kind of thinking that infuses everyone, so that no one can think about Ebola as being a problem that is tied up in neo-colonial oppression. They simply think of it as another catastrophe that happens in a catastrophic terrain called Africa. That’s what it means to be generally dishonored in social death, to be dishonored *before* you transgress, and that’s what it means to be natively alienated, which is to say, to have relations—whether it’s national relations or family relations—that the collective unconscious cannot recognize as relations.

S: In the light of what you just laid out to us about Black social death, and also gratuitous violence, how do you make sense of the protests and social justice movements against such realities, for example, as you’ve already mentioned, in Ferguson, New York City, and Baltimore, but also in Europe and Africa?

F: Right now Black political organizing is in a crisis situation. The reason for that is because between 1970 and the early 1980s there is such a police crackdown on revolutionary forces that we're now in a situation in which the election of Barack Obama has lit a fuse in the collective unconscious of the entire country. The people eight years ago or so thought: "Oh we're going to elect a Black president and that's going to show how we're evolving in terms of our race relations." Yeah, it showed that [laughter]. And what the election of Barack Obama has done is, it has liberated the unconscious anti-Blackness throughout the country that we are, thankfully, in a more fascistic mode than we have ever been in the past, and I thank him for that [laughter].

The question is, can Black political organizing in Ferguson and Baltimore and these places catch up with that, because unfortunately, we have a problem in that the country is so much more of a police state than it has ever been and you know that just by watching television. When I was in school, if you liked the American flag, if you liked the police, you didn't have any friends. Now, I find young college students are very slow to say that they hate America, very slow to say that they hate the police. What we're trying to do now is to infuse an antagonistic orientation in Black people who are white-collar people in college so that their intellectual skills can be enhanced by the orientation that is felt by Black people in the ghetto. If this doesn't happen they run risk of being anointed and appointed (by the power structure) to manage the anger of Black people in the street, rather than relate to that anger. So that's a hurdle that we have to overcome. You know, I've been doing political education workshops for Black Lives Matter in New York and Los Angeles, and probably will do more in Chicago. And what I hope to have people do workshop exercises around is this concept that I have called "Two Trains Running (Side by Side)." By that I mean, you can do your political organizing that will help us get relief from police brutality right now. We need that. We need that. But that work that we do should be seen as puny in terms of its philosophical and theoretical orientation so that we can educate ourselves politically to be against the police as an institution and against the United States as a country, even while we are working to reform police practices, because we do not have the strength right now that we had in the 1960s and 1970s to act in the way the Black Liberation Army did, or Baader-Meinhof, we do not have the strength to act in the revolutionary mode, but that lack of strength, that lack of capacity, should not contaminate our orientation. We should not feel that we have to accept the existence of police even if we're working in reformist measures politically.

Hopefully this idea of two trains running will pick up. Black Lives Matter has done a great job in opening up a new Black political organizing space. That's great. Now let's use that space for an educational project

that is soundly anti-American, and soundly anti-police even if tactically, we have to work for police reforms.

S: Let's shift our discussion a bit more to the time that you spent in Bremen, which is also where we met. You were in Bremen as a research fellow of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation in 2013/14, and you said you were here for 11 months. What have you been working on during your stay as a research fellow in Bremen? How did working and living in Bremen, if at all, influence your work and the questions that you were engaging with?

F: I came to Bremen to write a book called *The Black Position: Civil Death in Civil Society*. It was a really wonderful time because I got to meet – for coffee and in small seminars – graduate students like Samira and Paula but I didn't have to actually work for them [laughter].

I had no teaching and no administrative responsibilities, even though I did two months studying German at the Goethe Institute, that was only enough to order food or talk about the weather or ask directions, it didn't bring me to a research capacity. The University of Bremen had a fantastic library of books in English and what happened was that I was able to think differently about my project, so it took two different trajectories. I became really interested in thinking and reading about the structure of the unconscious, somewhat through Freud but mainly through Lacan – because I've always been interested in how David Marriott bends psychoanalysis towards a consideration of Black social death, and he does that at the level of performance, but it has really profound structural implications. I was able to run my own game by reading more about how Lacan thinks about what the unconscious is, paradigmatically, and meditate on ways in which temporality, time, and the integrity of cartography, of space – meaning the domestic sphere, for example – how they are essential to thinking about what is the unconscious for Lacan and why that's problematic for Black people.

I was always fascinated by Ulrike Meinhof and, in the States I had taught Uli Edel's film "The Baader-Meinhof Complex." So, in the library, I kind of stumbled into reading what I could in English and there was a research assistant who helped me a little with translating some things but, to make a long story short, my thinking about the Baader-Meinhof organization brought me back into things that I hadn't worked out fully about the Black Liberation Army and so I did a lot more writing on the Black Liberation Army, and its resonance and dissonance with the Baader-Meinhof organization. It looks like that book that I came to Germany to write will actually be a different book, it will probably be a book on the

Black Liberation Army, and I published one chapter while I was there through Sabine Broeck and Carsten Junker.³

The other thing is that I wrote more fiction, and it was great to have a quiet headspace to continue writing fiction.

S: In April 2014, there was a conference at the University of Bremen on the 'Futures of Black Studies' and one of the key questions raised was if and how Black Studies can take place at German institutions that are predominantly white. What challenges does Afro-pessimism pose to non-Black scholars?

F: Black Studies in general and Afro-pessimism in particular present non-Black academics with more than an intellectual problem. It presents them with an existential problem. The reason is because there's an aspect of Afro-pessimism that we don't talk about, I don't even talk about it with my wife every day, which is that were you to follow it to its logical conclusion, it's calling for the end of the world, you know, it wants the death of everyone else in the same way that we experience our death, so that one could not liberate Blacks through Afro-pessimism and be who one was on the other side of that. That's the unspoken dynamic of Afro-pessimism. Precisely why it's not spoken is because, as the British would say, "it's not cricket," it's not proper in mixed society because there's a kind of hatred toward the world that simmers under Afro-pessimism that is a hatred of other people's capacity to *be*, whereas, by contrast, other forms of Black resistance simmer with a hatred of other people's racist acts and intentions.

A Black Studies founded on Afro-pessimism presents more than a thinking problem for white people doing Afro-pessimism: it presents a kind of problem of being because ultimately the work is moving towards the destruction of the very academic who's doing the work. And not everyone's down for that [laughter]. As Saidiya Hartman said to me, when she was my mentor on my committee for my dissertation, "you have to find a way to veil, to kind of camouflage this work because no one who's not Black reading this wants to be as free as this work would make them. They'd be free of their cultures, they'd be free of their families, they'd be free of all the coordinates that ground them. They would find themselves in the abyss of nonexistence that you and I are in. That's not exactly what they want. They want to help us while maintaining their own sovereignty."

John Brown went to the gallows [laughter]. This is a gallows feeling that doesn't simply say, "oh, isn't it a shame that Black people are socially dead;" it condemns everybody else for being socially alive, prior to their actions. What happens on the left is that nobody on the left has a problem

making that statement with respect to capitalism. Everybody can say “I don’t give a damn about the personality or the good intentions of individual capitalists. What I want is the end of the capitalist class.” No one would say, “oh show Hitler a little bit of love because he was a vegetarian and didn’t kill any animals” [laughter]. Nobody would say that. They say, “death to all fascists.” What Afro-pessimism says is “death to Humanity.” That’s a harder thing to swallow.

Notes

- ¹ We are very thankful for the generous time and thought Frank Wilderson gave to this interview. We also thank Christopher Eliot Chamberlin for his diligent transcription.
- ² Laye-Alama Condé was arrested on December 26, 2004 on the suspicion of drug dealing and was subjected to the forced administration of emetic by Bremen police. During the treatment, he suffocated from the severe amounts of water that were forcefully pumped into his body in an attempt to induce him to vomit out the drugs that he had allegedly swallowed in order to hide evidence. As a consequence, Condé died on January 7, 2005. For more information, see “Mourning.”
- ³ See Wilderson 2014.

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