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AFRO-PESSIMISM AND FRIENDSHIP
IN SOUTH AFRICA: AN INTERVIEW
WITH FRANK B. WILDERSON III

SHANNON WALSH

Frank B. Wilderson III is considered one of the key theorists in developing the theoretical tradition that has come to be understood as Afro-pessimism. Afro-pessimism connects the work of scholars such as Saidiya Hartman, Jared Sexton, David Marriott, Hortense Spillers and others, building on certain readings of Franz Fanon, Orlando Patterson, and Joy James. The decisive critical move made by Afro-pessimists is to take the Black¹ out of the space of the subjective or cultural identity, and into the realm of accumulation and fungibility (Hartman 1997), defined by the three constituent components of slavery: social death, natal alienation, and general dishonour (Patterson 1982).

Afro-pessimists draw into question the historic development of the Human, and what that development has meant for the creation of the Black as non-Human. Wilderson (2010, 12) argues that Blackness is, 'an ontological position, that is, as a grammar of suffering, the Slave is not a labourer but an anti-Human, a positionality against which Humanity establishes, maintains, and renews its coherence, its corporeal integrity'. In this way, the socially dead, fungible Slave is a necessary *relationality* for the construction of the Human. That this relationship is both fundamentally destructive and *necessary*

for the construction of liberated (mainly White) subjects is a fascinating and disturbing backdrop for a discussion of race and friendship. As Wilderson (2010, 22) writes, ‘the circulation of Blackness as metaphor and image at the most politically volatile and progressive moments in history (as in the French, English, and American revolutions), produces dreams of liberation which are more inessential to and more parasitic on the Black, and more emphatic in their guarantee of Black suffering, than any dream of human liberation in any era heretofore’. Afro-pessimism is not a politics, but it does point to the need for a new kind of politics beyond Fanon’s ‘end of the world’: a complete revolution of what currently exists.

An African American, Wilderson lived in South Africa during the 1990s, where he was elected to the African National Congress, and became a member of Umkhonto we Sizwe. He taught at the University of Witwatersrand, and also at Khanya College during that period. His memoir *Incognegro: A Memoir of Exile & Apartheid* (2008) recounts his time in South Africa. It was followed by the explosive Afro-pessimist work *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of US Antagonisms* (2010), which explores anti-Blackness through multiple modes and readings, from cinema to sexuality, popular culture, and libidinal economies. He is currently professor of Drama and African American Studies at the University of California, Irvine.

Wilderson’s work on Afro-pessimism has been circulating in South Africa as questions in relation to anti-Blackness emerge from a new generation of African intellectuals. Given his history in South Africa, and his provocative critical framework that disrupts ideas of civil society and the universal Human subject, we were excited that he agreed to think about the question of friendship and Afro-pessimism specifically in relation to South Africa. As Afro-pessimism gains critical traction, I took the opportunity to ask Wilderson to clarify how the concept is being used, as well as how these ideas might translate in the African, and South African context.

SHANNON WALSH (SW) I was interested in the section in your book *Red, White & Black* where you quote James Baldwin talking about the breakdown of his friendship with the white writer, Norman Mailer. As Baldwin (quoted in Wilderson 2010, 172) writes: ‘There is a difference between Norman and myself in that I think he still imagines that he has something to save, whereas I have never had anything to lose.’ Can you speak to how you understand

this dynamic between Baldwin and Mailer, and the relationship between friendship and race?

FRANK WILDERSON (FW) [My white friend] Heinrich and [white partner] Anita are my conduits for all this. That's because I never speak honestly to white people—it's too dangerous; it's too debilitating. White people are the most violent and naïve people on the planet; especially liberals, the ones who think they're for social justice and all of that. Get too close, or remain around them for too long and what you find is that they are really no better than the loyal opposition of the murderous juggernaut that openly and unabashedly enslaves you. This is true whether you're dealing with Bernie Sanders Democrats or even socialists in the U.S. or whether you're dealing with British people in South Africa. So one must perform: because in your rage they will see only a threat to their own persons or to their way of life; they won't see that their very existence, their capacity to *be*, as where the threat to life is really located, where it all began. So, I'm always performing. I'm trying not to now, with you, because it is important that my words are as raw and unvarnished in print as they would be if I was talking to another Black with the understanding that what is said stays Black-to-Black. But Heinrich and Anita are two White people to whom I have spoken, openly, honestly and over a long period of time. But they had to earn their roles as auditors—and it's not a two way street. There's no reciprocity in the Master-Slave dynamic. As an urban guerilla and, technically, my commander, Heinrich had earned that role long before I met him. That does *not* mean that all, or even most of the Whites in MK were like that. I can recall some really disturbing conversations that I had with Derek Andre Hanekom and things I heard at a meeting with Ronnie Kasrils—my god! You turn your head sideways and listen to these two and you would hardly know that they were high ranking guerillas. So, I think what I'm saying is that Anita (as a one-time White progressive who threw her labors into the project of Black liberation) and Heinrich (as an MK operative and later as an above ground politico) sought ways and means through which they could be authorized by Black revolutionary ensembles of questions. What do I mean by that? Well, I know what I don't mean. For a long time Heinrich, like most of us in the ANC in general and MK in particular, were fixated on the idea that if you destroy capitalism you destroy civil society. And, Anita thought that the essential

antagonism was between men and women. Neither one of them had *raced* their paradigmatic views; much less Blackened those views (and, I want to say that, in Afro-pessimism we might use the word ‘race’ as a kind of shorthand, but it is inexact: because oppressed non-Blacks are secured in their coherence by a necessary anti-Blackness; so in a very real sense, Blacks are not only outside of Whiteness but we are beyond, or excluded from, race). But both of them, by becoming *predisposed* to be authorized by the most abject subject (or non-subject) in the room, evolved to where they are today.

I want to say that it’s great, what has happened between me and Anita, and me and Heinrich; but, I also want to say I don’t offer that as any kind of vision of the future. Because I love Anita and Heinrich and they love me, doesn’t mean that anything essential has changed in the calculus of life. In fact, I think that both those encounters bring up more problems than possibilities. And you recalling my quote from Baldwin points to where the problems lie: my sentiments run the risk of blinding me to the unalterable *structure* of our ‘relationship’; and, as Hortense Spillers would say, *yes, the scare quotes matter*. As is most often the case, Baldwin has already said it: ‘Norman [Mailer] still imagines that he has something to save, whereas I have never had anything to lose.’ If you take economic dispossession out of a bedrock translation of this sentence, then you can begin to understand why it is so many people are so anxiety-ridden when confronted with the specter of Black suffering and their relationship to it; why there are so many Derek Hanekoms and Ronnie Kasrils and so few Heinrichs and Anitas. This is why I say that my ‘relationship’ with my wife and my former commander present more problems than possibilities—if one is of a mind to hold them up as spectacles for a kind of nauseous we-are-the-world hope for the future. Future is what happens to people who aren’t Black.

This reminds me of day in early June, the day Heinrich got out of torture [by the apartheid regime for being part of an underground MK cell]. He was one of my graduate students in Comparative Literature—his cover was that of a White nerd who liked to party. He and Tefu (an undergraduate at Wits, in the social sciences: both Heinrich and Tefu were trained operatives) and Bushy (Tefu’s cousin and the MK commander of the West Rand) had bombed the Conservative Party headquarters in retaliation for the assassination of Chris Hani (allegedly orchestrated by Gaye Derby-Lewis, the Evita Peron of the Conservative Party). (One thing that should not be dismissed, even though

Heinrich plays it down, is that Bushy needed for militant MK operatives to emerge and add their voices to the aboveground radicals who were voicing discontent at Mandela's sell-out of all that we had fought for. The only way two really secret people could become public and gain legitimacy was for them to be captured by the police and tortured; and this is important because they had gotten away with it, but Mandela had immediately called in as many leaders as he could and threatened them with expulsion or not having a place in the new South Africa if they joined the over 600 000 lumpen and youth who were rising up to foment revolution after Hani was assassinated. And the attack on the CP headquarters was to have been a catalyst or at least an accompaniment for that uprising. This is why, in my book, I write about how they went back to the rubble and left their identity documents there so that the police would burst into their dorm rooms and arrest them.)

So, Heinrich had just been released from six weeks of brutal torture. And now, the Whites in Comparative Literature wanted to throw a party for him. The grad students and faculty in the Comparative Literature department lived in a world in which they had no connection to the most pressing struggle on the continent and perhaps in the world, at that time; except for Dr Ulrike Kistner, who had also operated clandestinely, and the two Black graduate students (one who had been a political commissar for the PAC in one of its guerilla training camps). If memory serves me right, the Black students didn't come to the party—and no one seemed to miss them. White students drank too much and then began to chastise Heinrich for what he had done—it was subtle, lit crit chastisement; nothing so crass as to say, 'we don't believe in violence, and we thought you were one of us'. They would do things like quote someone like Deleuze, someone they just read who said capital was going to burn itself out, so, Heinrich, your efforts were wasted. The party turned out to be a really bizarre affair—I couldn't tell if they felt betrayed, embarrassed, or in envy of Heinrich. Now, it's hard enough being a White revolutionary and having this lot as your colleagues. Imagine what it's like to be Black and have to smile in these peoples' face all day long. It's either your job or your sanity; and you end up choosing your job. The world is a ghetto.

But, that afternoon, before the party, Heinrich and I were standing in Yeoville. I was holding his wrists. I had genuine sadness about the marks of torture on his wrists, and I wondered if he was telling me the truth about

everything that happened or if he was holding back some things. At the same time, the narrative of his torture was so different than Tefu's. Heinrich was tortured at the same time as Tefu, who is Black. Some people would say the important thing was that Tefu suffered more violence because the torturers jumped on his stomach, and poured hot liquid down his ears, and that kind of thing, and Heinrich got less violence. But that's not what interests me. What interests me is the fact that the torturers assumed that Heinrich had a mother and a father. They worked that into the narrative of his torture. 'Your father's dying. Your mother's going to be all alone' etc. There was this empathetic relationship that was happening intuitively between torture victim and torturer. There was none of that with Tefu. In other words, they imagined themselves to be torturing *someone* with Heinrich, and with Tefu they imagined themselves to be torturing *something*. That's the most important dynamic that I don't think that can be broken through political intervention. Afro-pessimism, had we had it as a lens of interpretation at the time, would have allowed us to understand this antagonism between Heinrich and Tefu, who were good friends and comrades, and who went up against the state together and in the same; so the antagonism is not in how they felt about each other. Of course not. It is in the something to salvage which Heinrich, (like Mailer), had and the nothing to lose that went with Tefu to his torture chamber.

Besides the fact that Heinrich and I were so close that people thought of us as one entity from time to time (when we taught in the English Department at Vista University in Soweto) and despite the fact that I'm sure that I come from more money than Heinrich comes from for example—there was this situation where our relationship to violence could not be reconciled. I was only transposed into someone who was *someone* in those moments when a White South African would hear my accent. Before that, I was just a kaffir. And then they would hear my accent, and they would do this about faced apology. In other words, to the degree that I could have the accoutrement of Whiteness is the degree that I could be an exceptional Black in South Africa. But in silently saying nothing and trying to get into a restaurant, that wasn't going to happen—even after 1991 or 1992, when several apartheid laws were rescinded. Tefu couldn't actually put on the garment of White America. He was just Black. Which meant he could never put on the garment of affiliation, or relationality. That matters because friendship is a kind of relation. So

you're dealing with two people who have friendship attitudes towards each other, but one person has no capacity for relationality. And another person has all the capacity for relationality. You know?

SHANNON WALSH (SW) Absolutely. This deeply complicates what is possible for any easy understanding of friendship; the complete capacity for relationality means that there is no relationality possible. I think that leads us towards the question of Afro-pessimism, and what it offers as an optic to describe the world. Can you describe Afro-pessimism, and how you use the term?

FRANK WILDERSON (FW) One of the things I want to stress is that the phrase Afro-pessimism as a moniker or analytic lens really comes from Saidiya Hartman. In an interview I did with her I was telling her about how I was teaching Ayi Kwei Armah's West African novel *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1968) at Khanya College in South Africa in the early 1990s. Some call it a dystopic novel. I was trying to describe to Hartman the kind of visceral reaction there was to that book. The students had come to Khanya College after having been stopped in their high school or college trajectory because they were either part of unions or went to prison for whatever reason because of apartheid. So, Khanya College was a liberation school. Many of the students were active in the South African Communist Party, the radical civics, the ANC etc. If they completed a year at Khanya successfully, they could go on to a White, English medium university like UCT or Wits. Most of them went to university and became radical student leaders on campus. They were activist-oriented students and so they had a fundamental sense of possibility, which was very different from what was going on in that west African novel. They were steadfast in their conviction that South Africa was not Ghana. The stalled revolution that Fanon writes about wasn't going to happen in South Africa—of course, we now know that with Mandela and Thabo Mbeki and company, it *did* happen.

So, I was explaining to Saidiya Hartman that the pessimism about the condition of Black leadership in a neocolonial situation was something that the South African students at Khanya College, in 1992, couldn't countenance when thinking about the future of South Africa. It was something that happened in west Africa, but it wasn't going to happen in South Africa. It was as if they were

saying we're different; not just that 'our struggle is different or more advanced, but *we're* different; the world won't pull us down into (Black) abjection'.

Saidiya said to me that in the U.S. we are familiar with that same gesture from Caribbean people who may accept that there is abjection of Black Americans, but coming from Trinidad, they think they have cultural heritage and accoutrement that will help them avoid the taint of abjection. She said that if we look deeper into that claim it doesn't hold; the specific claim of South African students, and the general claim of African and Caribbean immigrants in the United States, that they actually have a cosmology and a language and so they are not pure abjection; that, unlike Black Americans, they are imbued with relationality. She said it doesn't ring true. If you scratch the surface, you will find more commonality than not. That was one way in which I adopted that word 'Afro-pessimism': it provides us with an analytic lens through which we can comprehend the manifestation of social death lodged throughout the diaspora at a structural level, even though, at the level of performance (conscious interests) all sorts of contradictory things are going on.

I began to use the word Afro-pessimism to describe the pursuit of what Jared Sexton calls 'unbearable Blackness'; but Saidiya gave me the term and pointed me in the right direction. It was also, of course, used by western journalists and policy wonks to describe the impossibility of African development socially and economically. We don't mean it in that sense, of course. The way we use Afro-pessimism has no relationship to that use of the term ...

If you talk to me, Jared Sexton, Saidiya Hartman or David Marriott, you're going to get a different answer based upon on how we enter the debate, but I like to think of Afro-pessimism as a paradigmatic lens. Which really comes into tension with some of the questions you are asking us to consider for this book. It is an interesting tension.

Afro-pessimism is interesting because it is doing nothing but critique. That doesn't mean it doesn't have a relationship to political praxis, but once you pick it up for a political project then certain things start to become complicated and entangled. It's a critique of the assumptive logic of other forms of revolutionary thought, without offering revolutionary prescriptions. Which is also a little confusing. I like that because I actually think that the revolutionary thought of Black people, if it were allowed to proliferate would

be so comprehensive as to terrify me, you, and anyone who would actually think about it. So, I think that Black thought always has to be ratcheted down in polite circles: That's what James Baldwin meant when he said: '[T] he really ghastly thing about trying to convey to a white man the reality of the Negro experience has nothing whatever to do with the fact of color, but has to do with this man's relationship to his own life. He will face in your life only what he is willing to face in his.' [Laughs] A piece of it taken apart, and the rest left. This is why there are so few non-Black Afro-pessimists, and almost no White ones. They're just too goddamn happy. And to even consider the argument would fuck with that. And, most of all, they don't want to meditate on how their happiness, or just their plain ole capacity for psychic integration is inextricably bound to Black suffering. Few theorists are willing to be consumed by the *real* extent of Black suffering, of the violence of social death. The kind of tool, or instrument or means of approach that I used to leverage or to pry apart the difference between Afro-pessimism and say, Marxism, non-Black feminism, Indigeneism, can be found in the way in which Afro-pessimism thinks about violence. The way in which Afro-pessimism thinks about violence cannot be reconciled with the way violence is understood by those other revolutionary discourses: Marxism, indigeneism, non-Black feminism. (Though, it should be clear to those who read this literature that Afro-pessimism is made possible by the critical labors of a particular strand of *Black* feminism, a la Hartman and Spillers.)

SW The question of violence constantly emerges when talking about Afro-pessimism, and is a key point both in practice, and also in comprehending the world. Can you explain further what you mean when you talk about violence?

FW I would like someone to come along and prove Afro-pessimism to be wrong. I find it too debilitating to take in on a daily basis, myself. But what I find is that people who want to prove it wrong are either dealing with a piece of it, or they are responding in a sentimental way, not in an analytic way. That's why I still hang onto it. The reason why I'd love to have someone prove it wrong is because of the way violence is thought through. I've poached a lot off of Orlando Patterson here, and I'm not sure he's entirely happy with that.

One of the interesting things that he says when he's talking about capitalism

in his book *Slavery and Social Death*, is that the violence of capitalism has a pre-history. What he means by that is that it takes an ocean of violence to transpose people who are not workers into workers. It takes an ocean of violence over a couple of hundred years to discipline them into temporalities that are new and more constricting—and to have them imagine their lives within those constraints: urbanization, mechanization and certain types of labour practices. But, Patterson argues, once the system is set up, then that violence recedes and it goes into remission. The violence comes back at times when capitalism needs to regenerate itself or, when the workers transgress against the rules and push back. Patterson says the violence of the slave estate can't be thought of like that. It takes an ocean of violence to produce a slave, singular or plural, but that violence never goes into remission. The prehistory of violence that establishes slavery is also the *concurrent history* of slavery. This is very hard for politicians to adjust to because it actually takes the problem outside of politics. Politics is a very rational endeavor, and so you can work out models that predict the structural violence of capitalism in its performative manifestation. But you can't create models that predict the structural violence of slavery in its performative manifestations. What the Marxists do with slavery is that they try to show how violence is connected to production, and that means that they are not really thinking about the violence of slavery comprehensively. The violence of social death (slavery) is actually connected with the production of the psychic health of those who are not slaves. That's the more intangible, libidinal aspect to it. It's even difficult for me to accept.

In what we're going through now with Ferguson, and Eric Garner in Staten Island, and Sandra Bland in Texas² —all this stuff that's coming to the light ... what's happening is people are wanting to make sense of the violence, rather than trying to theorize its *nonsense*. Black death does have a certain utility; but it's not connected to the extraction of surplus value, not in any fundamental way. And it's certainly not connected to the usurpation of land. These deaths are integral to the psychic integration of everyone who is not Black. They function as national therapy; even though the rhetoric that explains and laments the deaths expresses this psychic dependence not directly, but symptomatically. It is complex, but it is simple too. Blacks are not going to be genocided like Native Americans. We *are* being genocided, but genocided *and* regenerated. And the spectacle of Black death is essential to

the mental health of the world—we can't be wiped out completely, our deaths must be repeated, *visually*. The bodily mutilation of Blackness is necessary, so it has to keep repeating itself. It's not a function of clearing people to get the land. It's a function of stabilizing the anxiety that other people feel in their daily lives. It's the anxiety that people have walking around. It can be stabilized by a lot of different things: marijuana, cocaine, alcohol, affairs, but the ultimate stabilization is the spectacle of violence against Blacks. This is why online video posts of police murdering Black people contribute more to the psychic wellbeing 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.

SW This is a painful and difficult way of thinking about violence. It disrupts so much of what we think we understand. At its core, it leads us directly to the question of the relationality of 'civil society' and how that space functions for Black people. In the way you conceptualize the spectacle of violence, it begs the question whether civil society exists at all as a space for political action.

FW I want to say, for the record, that I have been involved as a political activist since I was at least 12 years old. I don't want to put my activism forward as being exemplary of understanding the problem, for the simple reason that I think that what I've done over the years is struggle for everybody else but Blacks. *Workers, women, Native Americans, Palestinians ...* you name it. It just happened that way. That said, I am thinking of civil society in two ways. One is through [Antonio] Gramsci, and then through [Antonio] Negri and [Michael] Hardt, who say that civil society is now gone. Your readers who have studied Gramsci know that for Gramsci civil society is the methodological terrain, not a real cartography distinct from political society. Gramsci always says that the distinction is made for methodological reasons. There's no such thing as real civil society over here, and the state over there. Civil society is the place where hegemony rules as opposed to force (schools, guild associations, the media etc).

The conceptual problem that I have with thinking of Black people as members of civil society is because the operative modality in civil society is consent. When there is a crisis of consent, a seemingly irrational violence kicks in, from the institutions of political society (the state) until consent

is secured again. This gets back to what I said earlier about the prehistory of capitalist violence—those modes of command, Gramsci argues, need only rear their ugly heads again when consent has been withdrawn by the working class. But when the system of capitalism globalizes and the violence needed to erect and maintain it goes into remission, hegemony replaces it as the primary modality. Consent replaces command, or violence. But you can't think consent and Blackness together. This is major point that one finds in most if not all Afro-pessimist work—however else we might disagree with one another. Sure, the politicians will say they want to hear what Black people say, or hear where they are coming from, and you've even got Black politicians who think that voting or not voting makes a difference (in the way that it might for Latinos or Asians or Whites or even for Native Americans!)

The problem for civil society, the problem for capital, the problem for settler colonialism lies at the nexus of consent or the withdrawal of consent. But the problem of consent or its withdrawal evaporates when and where subjugation of Blackness is concerned. Blacks give spontaneous consent all the time. Just ask the Democratic Party! It doesn't matter. In other words, there is no auditor for the consent of Black voices. It's a useless kind of exercise. What matters is the placement and movement of Black bodies. What are they going to do when they get together? It's not, 'what are they producing discursively, what are they saying, how does their vision conflict with ours?' ... None of that is at play here, because consent is not an essential modality of the Master-Slave relation. Violence is the operative modality—and that violence spans the entire time of the paradigm. It doesn't go into remission; you don't get a reprieve for good behavior. That is never a question. If that were to be a question, then Afro-pessimism's analysis of the political economy would be all wrong: the Black would be another category of worker, or woman, or subaltern, instead of, as we argue, the quintessential slave.

It is my firm conviction that the problem is a lot deeper than I have outlined in *Red, White, & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*. David Marriott (2000) writes about the Black man who is being lynched and forced to eat his own castrated genitals—and then, on top of all of that, forced to tell his lynchers how good it tastes. It's a complicated argument but his point is that this is a kind of analog for the workings of desire; and that desire is anti-Black; that what Lacan missed, and what Fanon was on to, is that desire cannot be dis-imblicated from anti-Black violence. In other words,

one must go through life *knowing* in one's unconscious, that there is only non-Black or iterations of anti-Black desire; that violence has usurped the capacity for one to access and speak a desire that isn't overdetermined by negrophobogenesis. No one escapes this. No one. The man being forced to eat his genitals and express delight is just an extreme example of what goes on in more nuanced, but no less debilitating ways. So, the problem that we, as Black people face, is not simply how to make our suffering legible to a world that would shatter at its seams were it to *read* our grammar of suffering correctly; but, the other problem is the fact that our psyches are *forced* to process our own images as phobic objects that need be destroyed and/or contained for the benefit of a White ideal. This makes it very difficult for us to be worthy of our own suffering. At the end of *Frantz Fanon's War* David Marriott asks the question, 'What do you do with an unconscious that appears to hate you?' This question points to a kind of violence from which there is no spatial or temporal respite, no Gramscian civil society of the mind. This is different than the subjugation or elaboration of an Irish unconscious or of a Palestinian unconscious.

So, what all this is saying is that there is vertical integration of violence that neither Gramscian anti-capitalist theory nor postcolonial theory can grapple with; a violence that saturates and which has no point of origin that can be discerned—because, at the lowest scale of abstraction, in the Black unconscious (which, in many respects, is the highest scale of abstraction) ... there is no temporal plenitude prior to abjection (the arrival of this hatred is a loop, not a chronology) and there is no spatial alternative to it either. The anti-Black hatred that has *arrived* in the Black unconscious, is of a piece with the anti-Black hatred that is openly, and not-so-openly, expressed in civil society. It doesn't have time or place of origination that can be discerned; nor can an endpoint or new, un-usurped locale, be imagined to be regained and made whole.

What David Marriott shows is that it's really quite impossible for the psyche to produce what is needed, what Biko would call disalienation, which is a Black ideal. Fanon goes right up to the edge of it in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Chapter 5, 'The Lived Experience of the Black Man', and pulls away. Understandably. It was 1952 and he started this book so that he and his wife could have a good marriage, not so that he could find out how fucked up everything is. Which is why he's infinitely more lucid and direct in *Wretched of*

the Earth, than he is with *Black Skin, White Masks*. The writing in the *Wretched of the Earth* is less symptomatic of the author's deepest traumas.

This doesn't mean that all of this plays out in ways which are easy to understand and predictable. For example, when we think about Blackness and the absence of consent, we realize that there are situations in which the absence of consent as a modality of Black subjugation is complicated.

South Africa is a place where it is harder to see the absence of consent because it seems like rulers and ruled are both Black. Yet I don't think that once you actually analyzed it theoretically, you could actually say that South Africa is a place where Black consent or its withdrawal matters. In South Africa, abjection is vertically integrated—as it is in American civil society—but it's operating at different scales of abstraction.

If the offer and/or withdrawal of my consent doesn't matter, doesn't factor into the structure of my subjugation, and if what I offer discursively to the world doesn't matter, then that means that I am in a completely different paradigmatic location than all those people for whom it matters a little, or a lot. That's why the prehistory of violence toward Blacks is the concurrent history of violence towards Blacks in the twenty-first century. That makes it difficult to think about because then, what do you do with allies? We come right back to friendship. I know I have made your problem deeper. You can have all the interpersonal ethics of reciprocity that you want; but when the chips are down—and even when they are not down—we do not exist within the same paradigm of violence: and violence is what makes and/or prevents everything. Everything. You wouldn't be a Canadian and I wouldn't be a slave if it weren't for violence. Violence elaborates us. Violence sustains us. Two friends. Two lovers. With two irreconcilable relationships to violence? How tenable is that? It's completely tenable as long as Black people don't start a riot and wake the fuckwits from their dreams. I think, like Saidiya Hartman, that the sentimental proclivity to make tenable is soothing to non-Black people and feeds the frustration of the slave.

One of the things that Baldwin is upset with Mailer about, is that Mailer didn't surrender his authority to Blackness. I think he could have been more sanguine about their relationship had that happened. It is much more ephemeral, and harder to grasp, and you can't necessarily put a practice to it. Mailer was kind of negrophilic and negrophobic at the same time, which was not an engagement.

I tend to think this through the transformations that Heinrich and, my wife, Anita, and a handful of other [white] people that I've known have made, but that wouldn't be meaningful to the mass of Black people. Even during the most troubling times in our marriage, Anita was grappling earnestly with these theories through her teaching of people like Marriott and Hartman, and then through trying to inform our relationship, as well as the political work she was doing at the time, with a kind of integrity worthy of the material she was teaching. I do remember when Heinrich was very displeased with me after the murder of Chris Hani. He began to think out loud about the kind of theorizing, affect and energy of the Black Consciousness movement as being more valuable than what was being put on lockdown in the ANC (I was holding onto the rationalism of Marxism), and that's what I mean by surrendering to the authority of Blackness. He wasn't saying, let's drop everything and go down the optimistic road of Biko's Fanonian influenced theories of psychic disalienation. He was saying, the ANC is a Black organization that doesn't listen to Black people; let's see what we can learn from politicians who actually listen to Black people and are willing to be led by what they hear. It's that kind of meditative process; it's about from where does authorization flow, not about the flat-footed question of *who* is an authority and who is not, at the level of individuals.

But to be *authorized* by Blackness is to court the end of one's coherence: the end of one's life. And I don't mean one would stop breathing from a bullet wound. That would be too easy. That would make sense. No, I'm talking about living a life for which death is *not* a punctuation mark; that final pause that makes sense of what has come before, as Lacan would have it. And no one wants that. But that's what Black 'life' is, if you read Marriott. So, whether it's at the level of the job (as in faculty meetings or dealings with Black students) or whether it's at the level of outright politics (like Bernie Sanders or Hillary Clinton 'meeting' BlackLivesMatter) the problem is how to contain and surveil what Boers called the *swart gevaar* without having to engage it.

SW In terms of your relationship with South Africa, and your ongoing engagement there, as well as the ways in which Afro-pessimist ideas have been picked up, can you talk about how your ideas have transformed? What are your thoughts on the situation in South Africa right now?

FW I think two things. Positively, I think that Economic Freedom Fighters is an interesting movement ... party ... I'm not sure how to characterize it. I think that what you have is a kind of mixture of a really robust analytic view of South Africa which is moving away from the allegory of colonialism and thinking of slaveness in an abstract way without having to think about chains and whips. At the same time, embedded in this is the need for a kind of populist practice. I'm fascinated, as those two things seem incompatible. I'm really fascinated with where and how it is going to pan out. If I were a voting man in South Africa, I'd vote for them. I hadn't voted since 1974 in the States. I think I voted one of Carter's elections and then I never voted again until the Mandela election in South Africa in April of 1994, and April '95 for the re-elections, I absolutely refused. I realized what a futile exercise voting is—every time I vote (which has been twice since Carter, in the U.S.) I come away with a taste like warm beer in my mouth. It's pure folly. The more liberals talk about how important it is, for example, to make sure someone like Donald Trump doesn't get elected (ergo vote for someone like Bernie Sanders or Obama) the more this lesson hits home to me. It could have been different in South Africa but it wasn't. It isn't. I'll tell you a story: During the first all-race elections in South Africa, April 1994, there was all this hubbub in the White press about what would happen if we (the royal White we) woke up in the morning to find that the ANC had garnered 75% of the vote. That means that the ANC would rule with an outright majority. I, foolishly, was under the impression that that was what we were struggling for. Mandela and his cronies had other ideas. At each voting station there was a cadre of about five revolutionaries who were assigned to stay there 24/7 to watch the voting boxes. We didn't trust the international observers for the simple reason that they went back to their hotels at night. We didn't trust the people running the elections because even though they were part of an independent commission, we realized the hand of the De Klerk state was in there somewhere somehow. And there were also rumors that the police would steal ballots in the night. We had to be ready in case they did this. So, a political commissar from the PAC comes and tells his cadres to go home. And, I'm thinking *what the fuck?!* Then Derek Hanekom comes along and tells the ANC cadres to go home. You dig? The fix was in. I'm like, hell no, I'm not going home. And he's like, that's an order, Frank! So, the other cats leave and I'm standing outside the polling station at around midnight trying to struggle with Hanekom. Right.

I'm like, you know the pigs are going to sweep in here and steal ANC ballots the minute we leave and we won't have an outright majority in the morning (which, by the way, is what happened). And he's coming at me sideways, with a lot of non-sequiturs but I know exactly what he's saying. The closest he got to telling me that this was an orchestrated sell-out was some line he fed me about how if, in the morning, we had an outright majority there could be civil war; more assassinations like the murder of Chris Hani. This, right, from a former political prisoner. So, I'm telling him how, if we *don't* get an outright majority, we won't be able to take over the central bank, we won't be able to nationalize the mines, we won't be able to institute free tertiary-level education for Africans and so-call 'coloreds', we won't be able to give the United States of America the middle finger! We'll be locked in a coalition government with the people who had murdered 14 000 of us in the past four years, and murdered 1.5 million Africans in the frontline states over the past 40 years; people who supported Israel and the rightwing in Central America. So, he sighs, right ... he sighs and shakes his head and lays it at my door. He says that the problem with *me*, is that in the time he'd worked with me politically (he was not only in MK but he was the president of my ANC branch in Yeoville), that in the time that he'd worked with me politically, I had never seemed to inculcate the fact that the ANC was not a communist organization but it is, 'Frank, a very broad church, in which not everyone is committed to a communist or even a socialist dispensation'. Alright, so, we know what an accommodationist he became as minister of Land Affairs when the ANC came to power. But part of the thing that reawakened in me was how sutured the act of voting was to liberal humanist reform. The people who promote voting are people who have no interest in *using* voting as an instrument to heighten the contradictions and promote crisis.

Coming back to where we started: my hope is that EFF can blend voting with Fanon's 'the end of the world'. But for that to happen the rank and file in EFF are going to have to support the radical elements in EFF, especially those elements who come out of the large groups of radical intellectuals and activists who are melding U.S. Afro-pessimism with a renewed encounter with the politics of Steven Bantu Biko. If they don't do that, they are going to be a group of people who are talking loud and saying nothing and who are not genuinely committed to taking resources out of the hands of White people and redistributing them to the masses. I would like to see EFF get

into the parliament, not for what they could do, but for what they could destroy. Bringing an analytic framework that suggests that participation in civil society is a dead end *into* a political party *into* civil society, that's fascinating! I'm interested to see where it goes and completely supportive of that trend. But the party's predilection for populism could be a big problem.

SW Yes. It does also seem quite different than the Black Consciousness movement, which was still looking to the possibility of a civil society. Does Black Consciousness play a role in your thinking at all?

FW What has become EFF comes through the anthology on Biko that Andile Mngxitama, Amanda Alexander, Nigel Gibson edited; and to which I contributed a chapter. Our conversations reintegrated me, at a distance, to what was going on in South Africa. There's no diplomatic way to say this, so I'm going to say it. I think that EFF is more dangerous than the Black Consciousness movement. That doesn't mean that it will harness that iconoclastic potential. The more seats they get, the more they tamp down what I see as really dangerous iconoclasm that I'm supporting. What we had in BC was Biko's reading of one Fanon: the Fanon of disalienation. The Fanon who wanted to heal himself and other Blacks of 'lactification' or hallucinatory whiteness, and who wanted to cure his wife and other Whites of their superiority complex. This is where Biko spends most of his discursive time when he meditates on Fanon. There are at least two other Fanons. There is the Fanon of postcolonial resistance (as in *The Wretched of the Earth*), and there is the third Fanon, the Fanon of social death, the Fanon of the slave, the Fanon of the end of the world. I think that the comrades that have come through BC that are now in EFF are still engaging with Fanon, but they are engaging the Fanon of the end of the world. And this is a really powerful thing because it comes about as a result of their reading of Sexton, Hartman, Marriott, and myself; and as a result of our responding to their interventions. It comes about as a result of a pan-African movement of the twenty-first century that is really exciting. Dr. Omar Ricks, a leading Afro-pessimist in Oakland/Berkeley recently returned from a tour of South Africa, during which time he gave two or three public presentations, sharing the stage with major people associated with the new revolutionary movement in South Africa—Andile was one

of those people. I think that Andile Mngxitama³ and people around him can infuse EFF with the critical discourse that supports the radical agenda people in EFF and in the townships seem to want.

A moment ago, it may have sounded like I was against that part of Fanon's project that calls for psychic healing. I'm not. But, I am against raising that project to the level of politics. It's a really tricky kind of thing because there are trends in disalienation of the Black psyche, you know? In other words, when Black people feel psychically more powerful; those moments occur when there's more of mass Black violence in the streets than less. It's kind of weird because I can't really write a sentence about it (a mass Black uprising—Fanon's 'end of the world') in the way that Biko writes a sentence about 'love yourself' (Fanon's 'disalienation') and that kind of thing. I'll try. There is something unspoken about the intent of Afro-pessimism and it is unspoken partially because we want to keep our jobs. However, this radically unspoken is empowering *to Black people* when they are able to discuss Afro-pessimism away from Whites and non-Blacks. I've seen it happen when I returned to South Africa on a speaking tour in September 2012. I've seen it happen in political education workshops, which I've conducted for BlackLivesMatter organizers in LA and New York. But the critique of the Human (in Afro-pessimism) is as harsh as the critique (in Marxism) of the capitalist. Marx critiques the capitalist for his/her *capacity* to accumulate, not for her/his attitudes, feelings, or even performance (whether benign or tyrannical) of that capacity. Afro-pessimism critiques the Human for his/her capacity to *be*; not for his/her lived activity—that is the second move in the Afro-Pessimist project, not the first move. (The move is descriptive: an analysis of the slave position.) People who are *not* Black and who don't see their capacity to *be* as being parasitic on Black non-being, think *this*, the critique itself, is tyrannical, that the critique somehow abuses them. In other words, they invert the world and cry foul; hoping we can return to the status quo—you eating your own genitals and telling them how good it tastes. Black folks sometimes have a hard time holding the middle finger up to this symptomatic response. But in intra-mural contexts, Afro-pessimism rocks!

When I was in South Africa, and in my political work in the United States, Black people condemning other non-Black people in a political movement was often a very difficult thing to get through. You had to find a reason, and

that reason often was puny in comparison to the rage that we felt. What the danger of Afro-pessimism is for the rest of the world is that it allows for Black people to take it up politically in a way that condemns the rest of Humanity for their existence, for their capacity; their temporal and spatial coherence, the integration of their bodily schemas, the security they inhabit knowing the violence they experience is contingent upon transgressions of codes, whether ethical or unethical. Afro-pessimism removes the burden of having to find a discriminatory action before levying a condemnation. (No one on the Left minds this when we're talking about the capitalist class, by the way.) Now that's a really, really dangerous thing. Baldwin says it, when he says, 'Mailer has something to salvage, I have nothing to lose', but he doesn't say, therefore whatever I do to him is okay. *Fanon* says it, in *The Wretched of the Earth*. But Baldwin is a humanist, he can't get there. As a result of not being able to get there, a lot of his work, not him personally, but the Civil Rights' leadership work goes toward policing Black rage and its proliferation. *Everyone* knows what Cornell West told us a decade ago: Black rage proliferates and it proliferates exponentially. First prize, for civil society, is when civil society can get *other* Blacks to police this rage. Andile lays it out when he says that the ANC is the bodyguard of White Supremacy. But without the mobilization of Black rage you get Marikana. Black police murdering Black workers on behalf of Whites sleeping in their homes miles away.

Afro-pessimism, and the ways in which comrades and sisters and brothers on the ground in South Africa and now, here, in the Black Lives movement are taking it up—not merely as an analytic lens, which is all that I and others had hoped for when we were formulating it, but taken it up as that which can inflect and inform revolutionary politics—is heartening.

For the first time in a long time, social movements are asking, how can we be informed by and authorized by a Black ensemble of questions; asking themselves what does it mean when David Marriott talks about how anti-Blackness creates a kind of generic hatred for Black beings, which is vertically integrated in all our psyches. Why this is *not* a form of discrimination but rather a necessary hatred. Why must global civil society keep reproducing social death so that social life can regenerate its members and prevent them from suffering a catastrophe of subjective coherence; how do we think a semiotics of violence in new ways?

SW So this dualism is fundamental to social life? There always must be a slave necessary?

FW Yes. I know that it is a very controversial point to make. Patterson says, every *socius* has to understand itself. In order to understand itself, it needs a psychological grounding wire. And that psychic grounding wire is a slave in its midst. Patterson sees slavery as kind of a necessary reproduction so that, if you're talking about the Choctaw Indians before Columbus, or people in the Amazon, or the Ashanti before contact with the Portuguese. ... Slavery is necessary to this psychic coherence of a *socius*. What's interesting about this is for me—not for cultural nationalists, not for Afro-centrists, not for integrationists, but for me—Blackness and slaveness cannot be dis-imbricated. This is where Patterson might say I've bastardized his ideas. But I've argued this; I haven't simply asserted it.

You can't know yourself in relation to yourself. You can only know yourself in relation to those beings that are adjacent to you, and those beings that are completely opposed to your identity. That's how you create knowledge. The slave is necessary to the creation of knowledge about collectivity. For the first time in the long *durée* of what we call the Human, slavery has become not just an experience that some people go through, but the actual dynamic of a certain position. Despite where [Achille] Mbembe would like us to take his work, *On the Postcolony* actually says more about Africa as a *slave estate* than as a colony. His work has actually done a lot more than he intended, just as Patterson's did a lot more than he intended.

As Jared Sexton says, if Africa and slaveness cannot be dis-imbricated, and Blackness and slaveness *cannot* be dis-imbricated, then we've got a real problem. It's a problem that must be addressed, but cannot be redressed. The reason it cannot be redressed is because to redress it, you have to have coherence, diachronically or synchronically. For it to have coherence diachronically, you have to be able to point to the concept of Africa, to the concept of Blackness prior to slaveness; a plenitude prior to the condition of natal alienation—which I theorize, by extension, as being *affilial* alienation as well.

And I don't think anyone can do that. The Dred Scott decision is just one of many texts that remind people (here it is a message to the lower courts) that Black people are guilty *a priori* not because they did something but because

they have, nor have they ever had, any standing as juridical subjects. To work on it synchronically, you'd have to point to a scale of abstraction, whether it's the psyche, the unconscious, the conscious, the family, the city, the state, or the globe, you have to factor some kind of scale of geographic abstraction where Blackness exists outside of a condition of gratuitous violence. What Marriot is saying is that the Black unconscious is always anchored by this churning of violence. That means that there's no scale of abstraction in which Blackness actually exists in a state of repose. This is why it is so, so hard for politics of redress to be developed when it comes to the recent spate of (filmed and reported) murders of Black people. How do you redress a dynamic that subtends the psychic health of the world?

SW Okay. That's interesting. This is what you mean when you say this is an ontological and not an experiential question? Jared Sexton also talks about how we need to see this position of Blackness as a global phenomenon. We don't need to only look at slavery in relation to the north Atlantic. This is one of the issues when talking about Afro-pessimism in South Africa. Many people get stuck on the idea of the slave, and whether it is useful in the South African context. People struggle with how to think about that, and often go to an abstraction with the term 'slave'. Can you talk about how you have been thinking about slavery in relation to South Africa, or beyond the north Atlantic?

FW The first move that I make is that slavery has to be re-conceptualized so that we take it away from the plantation. We take it out of the temporality of the nineteenth century, and we think about it in terms of its constituent elements. The constituent elements are natal alienation, general dishonor, and gratuitous violence.

This is *absolutely* applicable to South Africa. As I indicated, I don't think that the Marikana massacre would have happened, at least like it happened, if the police were who they were (Black Africans) and the workers were (so-called) colored. I'm not saying that no one would have gotten killed. What I'm saying is that there would be some kind of stoppage, some type of intervention in the psyches of those people pulling the triggers. They would have to momentarily adjust to remind themselves: 'Oh yeah ... they are slaves also. We *can* kill them.' And I think that if the workers were white, it wouldn't

have happened at all. What I'm suggesting is that the question of who is a slave, and who is not a slave, and does this slavery look like that slavery, is moving us more towards experience and away from ontology. I think that the importance should be placed on thinking paradigmatically—thinking less about political praxis and more about political ontology. People get tripped up by thinking paradigmatically when it is about Blackness and otherness in a way that they don't get tripped up in thinking paradigmatically about capitalism and communism. The anxiety quotient is so much higher here, and that's interesting.

I think that the anti-Black psyche a) cuts through geography and b) cuts through time, and it cuts through individuals so that anti-Blackness is the generative mechanism that structures my unconscious and your unconscious. Not that it structures your unconscious and not my unconscious. Marriott says that Black unconscious is usurped by the eagle-eyed view of moving toward the light—whiteness—and understanding that one must garrison oneself against the intrusion of the Black phobic object. That is as operative in the Black unconscious as it is anywhere else. I think that dynamic was at work during the Marikana massacre. You can slow down that dynamic with a so-called colored person, or someone like Halle Berry. But, then the dynamic picks up again, once it is recognized that 'oh no, this is Blackened flesh, just a little less so', then it comes up again. It comes up in weird ways, like that person might not be thought of as a Negrophobic object, but rather thought of as a Negrophilic object: someone to possess with passion as opposed to someone to be afraid of and repel with violence. The same dynamic is still there, the so-called colored or bi-racial person in the United States is as fungible as the very dark skinned person, they're just put to different uses. The fungibility of Blackness allows for the absence of thought, when it comes to what to do with that. Whether it is absence of the thought of what to do with that pleurably, the absence of the thought of what to do with that violently. It is the absence of thought that is really important here. And the Marikana policemen were implements of that. They are not agents or the beneficiaries of their own aggressivity against Blackness, even though it saturates their psyches in ways similar to White racists.

SW I suppose the question that lingers is whether relationality and consent are possible *between* Blacks, at the level of the interpersonal, when we remove

whiteness altogether. In your thinking is there a space for Black friendship and relationality, or are Blacks also forced to see each other as fungible?

FW That is the biggest question. This is really difficult. I think that in the big and not so big moments of throwing ourselves against the world, something *loving* happens between Black people. This is where Fanon and *Wretched of the Earth* is important to me, because I do think that violence is a modality constitutive of liberation. No two ways about it. Fanon writes: '[T]his world cut in two is inhabited by two different species.' Species. It is an important word, symptomatic of Fanon's Afro-pessimism, even though, for the most part he is ventriloquizing a postcolonial perspective. And he goes on to write that, through revolutionary violence, the native ... 'finds out that the settler's skin is not of any more value than a native's skin; and it must be said that this discovery shakes the world in a very necessary manner'. Well, the world that shakes in a necessary manner is not just the world of the settler, his/her arrangement of power, but it is also, most importantly, the psyche of the Black that is shaken. And here is where Black friendship, Black love flowers; here is where the capacity for or promise of relationality is elaborated for the slave, in the slave revolt. Because, for a brief moment (and these are *always* brief moments) the slave is confronting her/his/their *real* enemy; which is not the performance of subjugation by the master class, but the capacity for that formation to exist. We *know* where our relational capacity went during the Arab slave trade, during the Middle Passage, during our long and torturous existence here. It went into the creation of the Human. And so, there is something that happens when we confront *capacity* itself; and that something is a glimmer, not much more than a glimmer, but a glimmer of a possibility for us to *be* with, of, and for each other. To experience Black love and freedom. I think that that is a precondition for the elaboration of the *truth* of intra-Black love, Black friendship. But there can be, and are, provisional, or partial encounters as well; which don't require an uprising in order to be staged. Such as jazz and poetry and Black literature. But I think people who are scholars tend to make too much of the emancipatory promise of those moments. As one young blood said to a cultural nationalist back in the day, 'yeah, alright, bring your music but bring your gun as well'. I believe Saidiya Hartman more than Fred Moten. Saidiya Hartman says, you feel like you have this transcendence, you have a marriage, which has

transcended something or, any of the little micro encounters that happen, Black to Black. The fact of the matter is that it has changed a lot in your intra-personal dynamics, but it has not changed very much in the structure of where and how you are positioned, paradigmatically. She asks, if I become a great musician, and the music does something for me, and even for my relations with others, has that musical moment been an effect of my agency? Or is it merely an extension of the master's prerogative. In other words, the musical performance is an occasion to come up to the big house and play, or to play in your cabin after sundown. It is occasioned and allowed (as I think Hortense Spillers said somewhere). Nothing happens in Black life that is not beneath the pall of this cloud of 'occasioned and allowed'. You can forget this at times, but not escape it. To turn your head from this is to believe that you are Black and not completely saturated, subsumed by anti-Black violence simply because you work in a bank or at a university—because, that is, you don't live in the ghetto. Bullshit. Sandra Bland didn't live in the ghetto. And nor did she kill herself. And, dig this, even if it turns out that she did hang herself, she certainly did not kill herself. That happened before she was born.

I live in a white neighborhood, in a rich republican suburb. It's only because I've been allowed to, and the occasion is allowed because I'm a professor at a university. But I am not the agent of all that in a way that one could say I was structurally different from the condition of my ancestors in chains. I don't make moves that transform civil society. Civil society makes a decision to become elastic, or rigid. Depending upon when I was born and where, and where I live, that decision made by others for me will affect the quality of my life. That is the most important dynamic of intra-Black relations. There is no such thing as a pure intra-Black relation that is void of, absent, or beyond that fact. Which is why the Afro-pessimist end of the world, which is the end of the ability to think in the way that we think, is not Marx's end of the world because he's talking about the end of an economic system. We are talking about the end of what sustains people as people. Because what sustains them as people is Black death. When we move against the generative mechanisms of Human life, something happens between us. Even in those moments when our conscious discourse calls it a revolution for economic transformation, there is an excess, a Black structure of feeling that cannot be explained or contained because it portends an epistemological

break; an ontological catastrophe. Our renewal beyond what we can imagine. We can love each other, we can experience (though not necessarily narrate) liberation in those moments. Remember what George Jackson said about his younger brother who died trying to liberate comrades from the Marin County courthouse: 'for a moment he was free'. Now, I am not saying go out, kill a cop and be free for a moment. In fact, there is almost nothing of a prescriptive nature in anything I say or write. That's because if it is to be valid and lasting it cannot come from someone like me. It has to come from the ground up. But what I am saying is that Black love portends the end of the world. That should be clear. It's an exhilarating or terrifying proposition, depending on who you are.

SW Given what you've said here, how do you relate to the BlackLivesMatter movement?

FW Sexton and others have homed in on a vital point: that here we have a grassroots movement mobilized by Black queer women. And something really remarkable can come out of this *if ... if* BLM does not speak to the world at the expense of speaking to Black people. And this is the danger of any Black movement in the U.S. But so far, I'm thrilled. I think that what BLM has shown is that it is possible to broaden the iconic range in terms of how we think Black suffering.

In other words, we know that the world is narratively more interested in what they perceive as the phobic threat of the Black man. That is where civil society's interest is. We pick that up, in terms of dealing with our grievances and dealing with the murders of Black men, which there are tremendous amounts of. But in Los Angeles, Black women have been murdered in the hundreds for the past 30 years. Many of them were dismissed as sex workers whether they are or they're not—as though that impacts upon their worthiness as victims. Their lives aren't counted, and because it's probably the work of Black men, it goes off the radar in terms of how we think about these questions. We're running dangerously close to repeating the 1960s in which the violence against Blackness is first and foremost imagined as the violence against Black masculinity in the political imagination. If we were actually to create a political movement based on these women's deaths, we couldn't mobilize around that, I mean, we must try. We must try. But we

can't mobilize around it precisely because our psyches are as captivated by white anxiety about Black masculinity as white psyches are. Or, if they're not captivated by it, we understand intuitively that this is the only way to get heard. By talking about police killing Black men. We think we have to start there, otherwise, we won't hear ourselves and no one will hear us. BlackLivesMatter is struggling against that. That's a beautiful thing. Now, if, at the same time, BlackLivesMatter struggles against the insistence levied against us by White people and their junior partners (colored immigrants) to say 'all lives matter' or to condemn the murder of police officers, then a really significant milestone will have been reached. We will have turned the corner on heteronormativity within Black political formations *and* we will have given the proverbial middle finger to all those people from Bernie Sanders to Hillary Clinton down to the White leftist who likes to tell us what we need and what we should do, or how universal our suffering is, or why we should show remorse instead of relief when a cop is killed. Neither liberal humanist pacifism nor intra-racial homophobia will press down on our movement. We will respond to the world the way our ancestors did, with the knowledge that it is all one big plantation.

That's why I said I would love someone to show me that Afro-pessimism is wrong, but at every scale of abstraction I see violence and captivity. Whether it's the psyche alone in one's apartment, or whether it's the kind of ethical scaffolding of film, or whether it's the intuition behind a political project. It's all one big plantation. And we will recognize in the policeman's bullet, the liberal's handwringing and in the words of Al Sharpton telling people to go to the police and demand the end of police brutality, and don't riot—we'll see the same anti-Black violence. I think BlackLivesMatter has the potential to do all of that. But in order for that to happen the movement has to have two trains running.

This was an important teaching point of the simulation exercise we did when I conducted a workshop for thirty-five organizers from BlackLivesMatter at what was the Audubon Ballroom where Malcolm X was killed (it's now The Malcolm X and Dr. Betty Shabazz Memorial and Educational Center) on 168th and Broadway. I titled the exercise 'Strategy and Tactics', but, colloquially, I call it two trains running. I wanted us to see how and why it was/is important for us to transform our political rhetoric and the horizon of our revolutionary goals to be higher than transforming police behavior, so

that that rhetoric and horizon can evolve to be against the existence of the police themselves. I'm not saying that BlackLivesMatter's tactics that move toward the reform of police behavior be abandoned, because we need relief right now ... we need two trains running. By that I mean, we have to have that tactical and immediate response to *tactical* police violence—in order to quell it. But we can't let that tactical response to police violence 'contaminate'—for lack of a better word—our overall orientation towards the police. We have to be against the existence of the police even if our tactics are such that they cannot rise to that level at this particular moment. And just being able to *own* that rhetoric (to speak from Blacks to Blacks) without hesitation or apology—my god, that would be a great leap forward! Combining that with a movement *away* from being transfixed by civil society's anxiety about the phobic object as masculine ... well, we'll be on our way then.

SW What's fascinating, and what seems impossible to know, is whether there is the potential for things to be so entirely shattered that one could begin again that it could be possible to create a new beginning. I think at the micro level and at the level of intimacy, we experiment. Of course you can never solve the problem at the level of the intimate, but at the level of the intimate perhaps there is an ability to play safely with violence. Perhaps there can be a testing out of another potential at the level of the encounter, a way to see a shimmer of something else on the horizon?

FW There are a lot of contradictions. For example, on one hand you have a guerrilla cell, which is part and parcel of what I would call generative violence against the violence that structures Black (non)existence. As I indicated earlier, I think that in those moments there is something that happens. Maybe not necessarily in the cell alone, but when the cell is coordinated with a mass Black movement, which is also taking this stuff up. That was what I hoped for in South Africa before Chris Hani was killed, when he and Winnie Mandela were just being marginalized. Not that they were the intellectual architects, but they were beacons of something that was iconoclastic that would sometimes help people to not be so captivated by Mandela-ism, and by culture. Winnie and Hani captured the imagination of the most dispossessed.

I think in the cell I felt something for Heinrich that I hadn't felt for a white person. Something different was happening. And, over the past eight

years or so I have felt that in my marriage, my deep love for Anita. I don't want to cathedralize either relationship more than that just yet. In addition, clandestine intimacy is its own beast, because the other problem is that clandestine activity is also kind of an anathema to intimacy. Intimacy is all about saying openly what's on your mind—sharing your thoughts and feelings. Clandestine activity is everybody keeping a little bit of the puzzle to themselves. I know there were times when Heinrich got me to do and say stuff, and he might have just lied to me about why he was telling me to do what he was telling me to do. There was all this intimacy, but it was not like friendship in another terrain because there were also secrets. I was a nobody to these people, I was just an asset. (My aboveground activity, as an elected official and as someone seconded to various regional structures, was less ambiguous.) An asset that they loved, but let's not confuse the dynamics. They were revolutionaries because they got to have the meetings, and hear all the secrets, and they decided what they were going to tell me, and at the same time I had this intimate bond. I found it to be a very fascinating thing to think about. I don't have a conclusion for that. 'Play safely with violence ...?' Well, I'm not entirely sure what you mean, but I don't think that you or I have agency here. In the movies we're taught that love conquers all; but this facilitates our disavowal of the violence that has always already conquered love.

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NOTES

- 1 In his writing, Wilderson explains that he capitalizes the words "*Red, White, Black, Slave, Savage, and Human* in order to assert their importance as ontological positions and to emphasise the value of theorizing power politically rather than culturally." (2010, 23) We have followed his usage here.
- 2 Eric Gardner died after an officer in the New York Police Department put him in a chokehold on a minor infraction in July 2014. Outrage at his killing sparked the BlackLivesMatter movement. One year later, Sandra Bland was found hanged in a jail cell in police custody in Texas, followed by protests against her arrest and stated cause of death.
- 3 Mngxitama is no longer part of the EFF party.