

Burning Down the Ship from “the Inside Out”: Afropessimism’s Ethics of the Real

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“The prognosis is in the hands of those who are prepared to shake the worm-eaten foundation of the edifice.”

Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

Afropessimism begins with Frank Wilderson’s “psychotic episode,” triggered by the horrific failure of (what I am calling) his late mirror-stage experience at U.C. Berkeley. When Wilderson peers into the mirror, rather than discovering the typical *imago*, he encounters a “nightmare.” Facing a nightmare, rather than forming an ego, Blacks (the idea is) are precluded from being “*Human subjects*,” becoming “*instead structurally inert props*” useful for “*the execution of White and non-Black fantasies and sadomasochistic pleasures*” (Wilderson 2020, p. 15). Having experienced disaster in the Imaginary—insofar as what appears in the white mirror (a macabre Black as the White’s Other) in turn determines what appears in the black mirror—Blacks are relegated to the nightmare of the Real. In *Lacan Noir*, David Marriott reinforces this notion of a missed black Imaginary experience: “In order for there to be an imaginary,” he pointedly reminds us, “it is necessary for there to be an ego as the retroactive effect of disunity” (Marriott 2021, p. 20). Instead, Blacks and this nightmarish Real coalesce, starting *when Whites look in the mirror* and perceive their “Other” as a (black) “non ego, i.e., the unidentifiable, the unassimilable” (Fanon 1952, p. 139).

Yet, unfortunately, as Fanon writes, Blacks cannot benefit from this banishment into “hell.” There’s no *kenosis*, leading to resurrection, here. Rather, “There is a zone of non-being, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an incline stripped bare of every essential from which a genuine new departure can emerge.” “At least,” Fanon asserts, “in most cases, the black man cannot take advantage of this descent into a veritable hell” (Fanon 1952, p. xii). Distinguishing loss (which necessarily “indicates a prior plenitude” [Wilderson 2020, p. 248]) from absence, Wilderson explains that Blacks are deprived of the gift of loss that would enable desiring subjectivity: “There’s no place [...] for what the black man wants, or for a black unconscious driven by its own desire and aggression” (p. 47). Wilderson laments the inability of Blacks to *experience* the Real, to reap its benefits, insofar as they *embody* it. David Marriott, again in *Lacan Noir*, helpfully explains this issue in more technical Lacanian parlance: “While the (white) cogito knows what is ‘outside’, what is ‘different’, what is ‘not itself’,” *ab-sens*—which Marriott conceives as tantamount to blackness—“denies all that it is not for it is the not of the all” (Marriott 2021, p. 41). Lacan, charges Marriott, “opposes a sovereign vision of the world to that of the slave’s”: the Master “grasps its identity in division, and as a division” (p. 43), whereas the Slave is that from which the former divides itself. Marriott therefore discovers the truth of such mastery in the slave.¹

And there is a subsequent bonus, for the Master, involved here: Wilderson links such black “social death” with white *jouissance*. Anti-black violence, “the violence of social death” is necessary for “White people and their junior partners” to “know they’re alive” (Wilderson 2020, p. 94). The “*spectacle* of Black death is essential to the mental health of the world” (p. 225).

¹ An assertion Marriott made during a (Zoom) presentation he gave, in the spring of 2022, for my “Psychoanalytic Practices” seminar at Harvard’s Mahindra Humanities Center.

Blacks serve as both the lack (the “earlier lack [...] situated at the advent of the living being” — which is Real insofar as “the living being [...] has fallen under the blow of individual death” [Lacan 1998, p. 205]) as well as plenitude or “lack of lack” (the “lack of the lack,” Lacan also paradoxically theorizes, “makes the real” [ix]), with its concomitant *jouissance*, which Whites accrue via racial violence. (Lacan theorizes something similar in *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, about the master and slave, where he locates in Aristotle his sense that the master receives surplus *jouissance* from the slave’s work and borrows from Hegel the idea that the master “finds its truth in the work of the other [...] who only knows himself through having lost [the] very body he supports himself with, because he wanted to retain it for its access to *jouissance* — in other words, the slave” [Lacan 1991, p. 89]. In “Hegel as the Other Side of Psychoanalysis,” Mladen Dolar elaborates: “the slave pays the master with surplus enjoyment,” and this “spoliation of the slave’s enjoyment by the master” is “what makes the master’s discourse go round” [Dolar 2006, p. 133].) Providing the wellspring of *jouissance* for all non-Blacks, Blacks are in no position to secure a Human status — which is (actually), it turns out, not worth aspiring to, as Wilderson declares: for “the Human is unethical” (Wilderson 2020, p. 333).

Wilderson’s denunciation of the Human as “unethical” prompts us again to invoke Lacan who famously defines ethics, in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, as not “giving ground relative to one’s desire” (Lacan 1997, p. 321). What are we to think, then, of an agent who eradicates the very possibility of desiring or being ethical for another? It seems that Blacks must generate desire a different way, for which alienation and separation, the well-trodden paths of Human subjectivity, are inapplicable. And so Wilderson urges an embrace of disorder, incoherence, dancing the dance of social death that Blacks are, or rather have been compelled to be, to generate what he calls “a revolutionary desire” (Wilderson 2020, p. 250).

1. *Revenge of the White's Green Eye*

Fanon establishes in *Black Skin, White Masks* that “only a psychoanalytic interpretation of the black problem can reveal the affective disorders responsible for [a] network of complexes” (Fanon 1952, p. xiv); “the alienation of the black man is not an individual question” (p. xv). A “massive psycho-existential complex” has taken over, and Fanon sets out “to destroy it” (p. xvi). Prefiguring Wilderson’s attack on the concept of the “Human,” Fanon identifies “the problem” in terms of whiteness: speaking of the black Antillean, he explains, “the whiter he gets [...] the closer he comes to becoming a true human being” (p. 2). Rather than accept the “choice” between black skin and a white mask, Fanon presents a better, more widespread solution, one that Wilderson too advocates: “restructuring the world” (p. 63)—by reconfiguring its racist coordinates, psychoanalytically and materially. (The inferiority complex Fanon examines must be “ascribed to a double process: First, economic. Then, internalization or rather epidermalization of this inferiority” [pp. xiv-xv].) Blacks must be released from their wish to be white—a desperate response catalyzed by a sense of inferiority produced by the paralyzing so-called “white gaze” (p. 90).

Fanon provides theoretical background for the (here mistakenly invoked concept) “white gaze” (explaining what propels it) in laying the groundwork for one of Slavoj Žižek’s key points about racism among whites—that ostensibly something valuable, a source of *jouissance*, has been stolen from them. Fanon sarcastically confesses, “as a magician I stole from the white man a ‘certain world,’ lost to him and his kind [...] above the objective world of plantations and banana and rubber trees, I had subtly established the real world. [...] Between the world and me there was a relation of coexistence. I had rediscovered the primordial One. [...] Obviously, I must have a secret” (Fanon 1952, p. 107). In his *Refugees, Terror and Other Troubles with the Neighbors*, Žižek explains the supposed theft: “the other’s *jouissance* is

insupportable for us because (and insofar as) we cannot find a proper way to relate to our own *jouissance*.” And so, “to resolve this deadlock [...] the subject projects the core of its *jouissance* onto an Other, attributing to this Other full access to a consistent *jouissance*. Such a constellation cannot but give rise to jealousy: in jealousy, the subject creates or imagines a paradise (a utopia of full *jouissance*) from which he is excluded” (Žižek 2016, p. 83). Consequently, the White feels justified in exacting racist revenge for what is imagined to be a theft: “the ‘other’ wants to steal our enjoyment (by ruining our ‘way of life’) and/or it has access to some secret, perverse enjoyment” (Žižek 1991, p. 165). Racist revenge thus kicks in, assuming the form of objectifying the Black via what Fanon calls (again) “the white gaze”—bringing *jouissance* back to the White through Black social death, according to Wilderson. What is to be done?

Fanon turns to Sartre for assistance by considering the existentialist philosopher’s thoughts on negritude (simply put, the assumption of “a natural solidarity of all black people—in the Caribbean and in Africa” [Fanon 1952, p. viii], no doubt a European fantasy). In *Black Orpheus*, however, Sartre conceives negritude as merely a “weak stage of a dialectical progression,” “a moment of negativity” that paves “the way for a synthesis or the realization of the human society without race.” Profoundly disappointed by this reduction, Fanon complains that his former, supposedly Hegelian friend misses that “consciousness needs to get lost in the night of the absolute, the only condition for attaining self-consciousness” (p. 112). In a “paroxysm of experience and rage,” Fanon struggles to tell Sartre that his Negritude “reaches deep down into the red flesh of the soil” (p. 116) and comes to realize his need to lose himself “totally in negritude” (pp. 113-14), whose meaning metamorphoses from a positive black social identity to a supreme form of Negativity/Nothingness: “a feeling of not existing” (p. 118). Preparing the way for Wilderson’s dance of social death, Fanon’s subsequent move is to vanish within his

“negritude”—by facing “the ashes, the segregation, the repression, the rapes, the discrimination, and the boycotts. We need to touch with our finger all the wounds” (pp. 163-64). For this disappearance, he relies on Césaire, who dives down, who agrees “to see what was happening at the very bottom” so that “he can come back up” (p. 172). In his *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*, Césaire had wanted to drown himself in “the great black hole” but, upon immersing himself in it, now wants “to fish the night’s malevolent tongue in its immobile revolution” (p. 173). Pushed to the brink of self-destruction, the Black jumps into “the ‘black hole’” from which gushes “forth ‘the great black scream with such force that it will shake the foundations of the world’” (p. 175). Nothing less than such a plunge and accompanying scream seems necessary.

Fanon gestures toward a psychoanalytic solution that benefits from a fall into the “zone of non-being,” to release the Black from being the White’s nightmare—a full inhabiting of this “veritable hell” as a way of taking it over. One of Fanon’s most compelling assertions, on the last page of *Black Skin, White Masks*—“the black man is not” (Fanon 1952, p. 206)—calls for such a Lacanian reading that extends Fanon’s emphasis on the Real. The Black is situated as the “not” in the White’s construction of subjectivity. Fanon advocates a leap into that “not,” that Real space of lack, to become himself “not,” that is, not Black. To Fanon, there is no such thing as a Black, except as a necessary infernal fantasy of the White. *Black Skin, White Masks* points to a drastic way of achieving that dissolution by appropriating the “black hole.” “For Fanon,” as David Marriott confirms, “blackness can only find its ontological fulfillment by no longer being black—or by entering its own abyssal significance” (Marriott 2018, p. x)—an idea that gives rise to the movement of Afropessimism.²

² Thus far I have zeroed in on two psychoanalytic moments: a mirror-stage moment that reflects a nightmare, rather than furnishes an ego, and thrusts the

It is not only fantasy, a craving for the Other’s fantasized *jouissance*, then, but also phobia that causes the White to racialize the nightmarish Black in the Real: “the lovely little boy is trembling because he thinks the Negro is trembling with rage, the little white boy runs to his mother’s arms: ‘*Maman*, the Negro’s going to eat me’” (Fanon 1952, p. 93). Full of envy and fear, the colonizer in particular approaches the Real of blackness. To Fanon, both White and Black bear a “relation” to the Real—the White through the Black, since the White incarcerates the Black there, and the Black through the White’s incarceration of the Black in the Real. But there is no Real outside of blackness, either external or extimate, no founding Real for the Black, blackness *being* the “unidentifiable and unassimilable.” Both White and Black meet blackness in the Real, although one is a Human that relies on the Real, as it is constituted by enviable and terrifying blackness, and the Other is tantamount to that Real.

In an endnote in *Whither Fanon*, however, Marriott distinguishes the Real in Fanon in one major respect from Lacan’s conception. Marriott proposes that Fanon’s “real” “needs to be understood differently from its inflection in Lacan’s late works” (Marriott 2018, p. 373): “whereas for Lacan the *réel* is at the foundation of the subject, in Fanon’s usage the *réel* is also *imposed*, and denotes a being confronted with a violence that makes the *réel* indistinguishable from *la réalité*, and thus the experience of a certain

Black viewer into the Real and a so-called “gaze” moment that interpellates the Black as an object. But it is crucial to keep in mind that the Lacanian gaze is located in the Real, and the (supposedly gazing) White (Sovereign) who transforms the Black (Slave) into an object is hardly situated in the Real—quite the contrary. What the white “gazer” inflicts on the Black is technically “the look.” For the gaze is located at the place of the subject’s lack, from where the subject is not. And, to reiterate, the White takes the Black to be what the White is not, thus erecting an anti-black social structure. As Marriott articulates it, the identity of whiteness springs forth from blackness, whereas one finds one’s blackness by accessing the night. The “this-is-me, this[nightmare]-is-not-me” structure of (white) subjectivity depends on such an anti-black psychic incarceration.

violence[.]” Marriott believes that to Fanon the Black “has no ontological resistance to the words or visions of anti-blackness” — the all-too-real that Blacks must cope with on a daily basis (p. 373).

While for Whites the Real serves as the basis of subjectivity, I argue in response to Marriott that the “real” for Blacks is to be that basis in the Real, which is where they are able to be deposited in the white psyche insofar as their “*réel*” is their “*réalité*.” It is due to the injection of *n’est pas*, non-being in the real world, that the Black is vulnerable to being positioned in the Lacanian Real. Wilderson’s conjoining of the two is expressed thus: “there is an uncanny connection between Fanon’s absolute violence and Lacan’s real [...] the grammar of suffering of the Black itself is on the level of the real” (Wilderson 2010, p. 75).

2. *Blackness: n’est pas*

It would only, then, be when “the Black” enacts the looking that some form of “Black desire” could emerge, since it is *an encounter with* the gaze that generates desire. The question would seem to be, therefore, how do Blacks extricate themselves from the “noose” that leaves them with “no ontological resistance to the words or visions of anti-blackness” (Marriott 2018, p. 373) in order to assume desire? How do Blacks experience the gaze?

This is an especially tricky question, if the idea is that “the Black is not” — meaning “is no more.” It would then be inappropriate to try to conceptualize “*Black* desire,” although that is Wilderson’s term, since the person no longer designated as black would need to be able to assume generic desire, the assumption of which would in turn correlate with the Black that is not, *where “not” is not non-being*. This is emphatically not to say that the Black would BE the not (that is the current woeful situation), but Blacks would not be. Instead, the new configuration would itself be *predicated on* what it is not.

Reflecting his unease with the sort of solution I am entertaining here, in *Whither Fanon*, Marriott expresses his discomfort with the thought that blackness might vanish, no matter how: to “see the future of blackness in its absolute disappearance is [. . .] to imagine it as a thing obliterated.” Yet, he is keenly aware that, “however painful the discovery, to receive race as a destiny is to forget that [...] the only proof of its meaning is illusion [and suffering]” (Marriott 2018, p. ix). Marriott wrestles with the inconsistency that “blackness is [...] a fact of being,” even as it “remains unthought outside the forces that shatter it” (p. 215) and proceeds to view blackness as a philosophy that afropessimistically declines any idea of reparation that might free it from the contingency that constitutes it. It is, in fact, to Marriott, likely impossible to extract this impurity or flaw, *n’est pas*, even on the part of the Black who wishes no longer to be Black, since the negrophobic psychic effects or affects of that deadlock cannot be avoided: “shame, despair, and guilt [...] leave a residue” (Marriott 2020, p. 33).

Nonetheless, wishing to think the unthought of blackness, Marriott contemplates what he discerns as Fanon’s compelling paradox that to “find its ontological fulfillment,” blackness must enter its “own abyssal significance” (Marriott 2018, p. x). Blackness *is*, as Marriott puts it, “the forced exercise of its own denegation, and this is why it can only confirm itself as what it is not, and disarticulate itself as a ruined work” (214). Located there, denegated, “blackness remains necessarily unknown to any thought whatsoever [...] precisely because it remains unthought outside the forces that shatter it” (215). How then can such an “unthought” be of any use?

However, if no referent or unequivocal name is adequate for blackness, if it “escapes all attributes,” as Fanon and Marriott seem to claim, “including the unity of an ontic-ontological fugitivity or [...] the hypostatized name of ‘absolute dereliction,’” as Marriott writes (Marriott 2018, p. 224), are we not catapulted back to the “unidentifiable, the unassimilable” — to the edge of the Human — that saturates the white mirror that determines the nightmare that

creeps into the black mirror? The challenge would appear to be how to remove blackness from its “imaginarily misrecognized” (p. 225) significance as such a limit, or how to let it fall from the Imaginary into the Real *in a way that dissolves the nightmare*.

Obviously, all Afropessimists are not the same. Marriott’s sense of blackness as *n’est pas*, as well as his conception of the abyss into which blackness enters, is (in his estimation) not comparable with Lacan’s Real—a register that Wilderson makes use of and that Jared Sexton also invokes. In “Blackness: *N’est Pas*” (2020), Marriott contends (despite Fanon’s unequivocal assertions to the contrary) that Fanon distances himself from psychoanalysis to access the meaning of *n’est pas*. Marriott reads Fanon as declaring that a *culturally* injected impurity or flaw precludes an ontological explanation of blackness, placing Blacks outside of themselves (although it is “a means of self-knowing”); and this flaw “speaks from the side of the real” (but not Lacan’s Real), that is, from “the place where what is communicated is absent, prohibited.” And therefore we have, in Fanon, “a being that is also ‘being-qua-not-being’” (Marriott 2020, p. 31). The Black/Slave is an “excruciated” being that cannot harness, Marriott asserts, its own nothing, since “*the thing that makes it into non-being does not belong to it*” (p. 35, my emphasis).

But does that assertion not imply that this excruciated being needs somehow to have (not be) its own Nothing, to be in relation to it, rather than stuck in the black hole that cultural hatred has blasted within it?

3. *Afropessimism’s Gift of Death*

Frank B. Wilderson III’s *Afropessimism* establishes on its first Acknowledgments page perhaps its most fundamental premise, namely that “the Human is not an organic entity but a construct; a construct that requires its *Other* in order to be legible” and that

“the Human Other is Black” (Wilderson 2020, p. ix). Afropessimism basically posits as well that “Black people *embody* a meta-aporia for political thought and action.” A Black political agenda frightens even those on the Left since it “emanates from a condition of suffering for which there is no imaginable strategy for redress—no narrative of social, political, or national redemption” (p. 15).³ Wilderson asks how absence (loss of loss) can be narrated.

At the same time, there is a modicum of empowerment in Wilderson’s Afropessimism, as it enables the expression of what normally could or would not be said: the Human is a parasite on Blacks; while Blacks do not inhabit the world, there would be “no world without Blacks” (Wilderson 2020, p. 229); violence against Blacks is “a health tonic for everyone who is not Black” (p. 40); Blacks “can’t be wiped out completely, because our deaths must be repeated, *visually*.” The murders we witness on “YouTube, Instagram, and the nightly news [...] are rituals of healing [and as we know sources of *jouissance*] for civil society. Rituals that stabilize and ease the anxiety that other people feel in their daily lives.” Such “other people” can then comfortably know that they are Human because they are “*not Black*” (p. 225). Toward the end of his book, Wilderson explains to his mother, who pleads with him to put his effort into reform, that (despite or perhaps because of its unrelenting negativity) Afropessimism “makes us worthy of our suffering” (p. 328).

On the side of “unrelenting negativity”: one of the epigraphs of Wilderson’s Epilogue is from Marriott who asks, “*What do you do with an unconscious that appears to hate you?*” (Wilderson 2020, p. 309). Upon reading this line, Wilderson seems to relive his U.C. Berkeley traumatic episode. The specular word “*appears*”

³ Jared Sexton elaborates this point, in his interview conducted by Daniel Barber, in proposing that blackness not only constitutes the outside of every social bond, but it also has the potential to unravel every social bond, which it negatively dwells within, and therefore to release the space for expressing the *unthought*.

crushes his skull “like an elephant’s foot.” He becomes preoccupied with the effects of a feeling of self-hatred that pervades his unconscious. Wilderson is led to think that the Black is “a static imago of abjection” (p. 314). Especially the term “imago” takes us back to U.C. Berkeley, where Wilderson snapped while washing his face. A certain stanza of poetry entered his mind: “for Halloween I washed my / face and wore my / school clothes [...] went door to / door as a nightmare” (p. 17). He feels faint, overpowered by nausea; it is as if he’s “looking into a deep ravine” (p. 6)—collapsing into a “zone of non-being,” a “veritable hell”?

Fanon, Marriott, Sexton, and Wilderson all converge on this point: blackness is devoid of substance, as it is the absence that provides a kind of fortification for others. The image of the man of color’s body, writes Fanon, is “solely negating” (Fanon 1952, p. 90). To Marriott, “blackness cannot be represented as a psychical object in a way that will serve as the narcissistic basis for later experiences.” When the colonized, in particular, “contemplates his existence in the mother’s lofty but stern majesty, he is told to turn his gaze away from the lowly black objects around him, and to stop speaking or acting *nègre*.” He is pressured to “love himself as white and exclude the body, which belongs to blackness alone” (Marriott 2021, p. 64). (Whereas Lacan’s mirror-stage contains the mOther domiciled in the Real, from where she offers a fullness to be lost for subject formation, the colonized mother stands awkwardly and no doubt ambivalently in the white Symbolic, from which she makes unacceptable practical demands that smack of betrayal.)

Rejecting the white mask offered to him by his mother, Wilderson in effect embraces the unembraceable by opting for the nightmare and in turn urges others to join him in assuming this “position” of social death. Afropessimism confronts what he describes as “an endless antagonism that cannot be satisfied (via reform or reparation), but must nonetheless be pursued to the death” (Wilderson 2020, p. 251). Wilderson has seized the reins of the death drive to ride it all the way to the end of the world, the world being “one big plantation” (p. 257). Toward the

conclusion of *Afropessimism*, refusing suicide but committing to madness—that is, to “the fact” that his “death makes the world a decent place to live”—Wilderson *owns* his “abjection and the antagonism that made [him] Humanity’s foil.” He pledges to reside in “the hold of the ship and burn it from the inside out” (p. 323), operating (as I understand Wilderson) at the level of the unconscious, as a way of carrying along Fanon’s Lacanian goal of “restructuring the world” (Fanon 1952, p. 63).

Returning to *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, we find a larger-than-life Lacanian figure that Wilderson seems modeled on. Like *Antigone*, *Afropessimism* is “a turning point in the field that interests us, namely, ethics” (Lacan 1997, p. 243). Lacan poses the same question about Antigone as Wilderson does regarding the Black, namely “what does it mean [...] [to go] beyond the limits of the human?” (p. 263). It is around this limit that the dramas of *Antigone* and *Afropessimism* play. Lacan describes a hymn to Dionysus that breaks out in the penultimate appearance of the play’s Chorus, which turns out to be because “the limits of the field of the conflagration have been breached” (p. 269). Antigone is between two deaths, her literal death and what Lacan calls “the second death.” She occupies *Afropessimism*’s “social death”—a living death experienced outside the Symbolic. She declares from the very start, “I am dead and I desire death.’ [...] An illustration of the death instinct is what we find here” (p. 281). However, all is not lost: appearing as “the victim at the center of the anamorphic cylinder of the tragedy” (p. 282), Antigone sacrifices “her own being in order to maintain that essential being which is the family *Atè*” (p. 283) and in so doing reveals “the line of sight that defines desire.” Her “unbearable splendor” fascinates us and, upon being lost to us, generates our desire (p. 247).

As Lacan asserts in the chapter following the sections on *Antigone*, “realizing one’s desire is necessarily always raised from the point of view of an absolute condition”—such as Fanon’s (Hegelian) night of the absolute from which negativity must draw its value. It is “this trespassing of death on life that gives its dynamism

to any question that attempts to find a formulation for the subject of the realization of desire” (Lacan 1997, p. 294). Befriending death, Antigone commits a radically transformative, Lacanian “authentic act,” which in my view Wilderson emulates as a way of enabling his reader’s own authentic act. In her *Ethics of the Real*, Alenka Zupančič explains that “After an act, I am ‘not the same as before’. In the act, the subject is annihilated and subsequently reborn [...]” (Zupančič 2000, p. 83). Lacanian ethics involves “something that ‘happens to us’” that “throws us ‘out of joint’” since it

inscribes itself [...] as a rupture. [...] [T]he Real happens to us (we encounter it) as impossible, as ‘the impossible thing’ that turns our symbolic universe upside down and leads to the reconfiguration of this universe. [...] This is when ethics comes into play, in the question forced upon us by an encounter with the Real: will I act in conformity to what threw me ‘out of joint’, will I be ready to reformulate what has hitherto been the foundation of my existence? (p. 235, my emphases)

Wilderson lures his readers into the zone of the Real as Antigone summons her spectators, and analysts bring their analysands into this same space, to reconfigure their unconscious coordinates. The aim in the case of Wilderson is to incite “a revolutionary desire” that subtends a “politics of refusal and a refusal to affirm, a program of complete disorder” (Wilderson 2020, p. 250). This is its condition of possibility. Wilderson draws his readers beyond the brink of disaster, invites them to accompany him in the dance of social death, and establishes himself firmly in the place of the gaze, beckoning/jamming.

Targeting the Real, as I suggest Wilderson does, enables “our own death [social death] or a general catastrophe [...] to function as the ultimate horizon of our desire,” leading to an “‘awakening’ of [...] the ethical” (Zupančič 2000, p. 237). By locating itself in Fanon’s “zone of non-being,” that “veritable hell,” Afropessimism shows how *ab-sens* can be *experienced* by a person with black

skin. Wilderson stands firmly in the Real place of the *non-moi* to demonstrate that it does not, or rather should not, serve as a foundation strictly for privileged non-blacks. A person with black skin planting his two feet staunchly there, insofar as they *can* stand there, jams up the racist structure, precluding the *non-moi* from *being* blackness, cancelling its status as a nightmare. Wilderson takes over the *n’est pas* to which Blacks are consigned, so that the idea that blackness is tantamount to the Real makes no sense.

The anti-blackness integral to the “this-is-me, this [nightmare]-is-not-me” structure of non-black subjectivity must be abolished as the self-hating Black unconscious (recall Marriott’s unconscious that hates him) that upholds it is reconfigured. The Real must become emptily available for all—rather than constituted by the blackness of some and harnessed by a privileged coterie. Demonstrating an ethics of the Real, Wilderson’s Fanonian/Lacanian work offers *an experience of the Real* in order to transfigure the collective unconscious, so that Blacks no longer “form a mass of indistinguishable flesh in [that] collective unconscious” (Wilderson 2020, p. 162), so they no longer serve as *ab-sens* (for the so-called Human subject to get off on) but instead bear a relation to it of their own. Similarly, Jared Sexton celebrates a certain “encounter” of an “abyss into which we’ve been cast and the void that is at the heart of our existence” (Sexton 2017), which seems to slide from Marriott’s abyss (the black hole into which Blacks are ideologically thrust) to the void that, from a Lacanian viewpoint, ideally founds subjectivity. In fact, Sexton takes this encounter even further in locating in Fanon a push “toward the *ex nihilo* capacity for affirmation—‘a “yes” resonating from cosmic harmonies’”—as well as in entertaining the idea that such an analytic experience might be linked with mysticism. The climax of Daniel Barber’s interview of Sexton touches on a “mysticism of the flesh (of the earth)” that “pushes us toward the nothing from which we all emerge[.]”

We can grasp, even more fully, the radical change that a disappearance of such an inferiority complex might accomplish

by reversing the elements of Žižek’s conception of parallax. In *Sex and the Failed Absolute*, Žižek explains parallax basically as the “displacement of an object (the shift of its position against a background) caused by a change in observational position that provides a new line of sight” (Žižek 2021, p. 5)—what Wilderson’s Afropessimism, I believe, is meant to activate. We can observe such a transformation in the viewer’s anamorphic experience with (the cuttlebone in) Holbein’s “The Ambassadors,” as the viewer *looks* in a way that unveils a skull (or two) to confront the viewer’s own nothingness:



“The Ambassadors,” Hans Holbein the Younger, 1533, National Gallery, London, Permission from Art Resource

Such a confrontation is, in other words, what Wilderson’s *Afropessimism* is designed to catalyze, as the black reader, reading awry, encounters Wilderson as another Holbeinian skull. Crucially, as Žižek clarifies, with a nod to Hegel, the change is not a question merely of a different point of view, but “subject and object are inherently ‘mediated’, so that an ‘epistemological’ shift in the subject’s point of view always reflects an ‘ontological’ shift in the object itself” (Žižek 2021, p. 5). For those who read *Afropessimism* psychoanalytically, at the level of the unconscious—awry—Wilderson turns from being mere book author, black-studies theorist, professor, etc. into a figure of social death at “the center of the anamorphic cylinder of the tragedy” (Lacan, 1997, 282), meant to light the resisting revolutionary spark of desire in that reader, upon reflecting the reader’s “own nothingness”:

i) PARALLAX

1) Black object, in the shifting position of observer BECOMES a reader, reading awry and ENCOUNTERS

2) Wilderson as
Antigone/Lack/Gaze/
Nothing/Social Death
to BECOME

3) a Subject of Revolutionary Desire.

Subsequently, *Afropessimism* effects what I call a reverse parallax. Once the Black “object” (here, within this Lacanian paradigm, in the place of the observer/reader) frees itself from the shackles of social death by owning that death, through its immersion within the Real that Fanon and Wilderson point to, claiming as its own base the void it had been forced to serve (parallax), then the “Human” will no longer have the luxury of that

“object” as the confirmation of its existence. The black rug having been pulled out from under it, *it* (the Master) will be forced to metamorphose (reverse parallax). The ship will necessarily sink. Transfiguration of the Black object as it *experiences* the Wildersonian gaze (meaning Wilderson/Antigone as the gaze), and is thereby released from any unconscious sense of self-hatred (again, parallax), in turn will result ultimately in a radical demolition of the subject-object (anti-black) structure that desperately relies on that abjected object:

ii) REVERSE PARALLAX

- 1) Black object, in the shifting position of observer/
reader BECOMES
a Subject of Revolutionary Desire, looking at:
- 2) the Human (White or non-Black) THAT BECOMES
- 3) ~~the Human (White or non-Black).~~⁴

Dissolution of the Black object—achieved once that “object” fully absorbs the horrendous fact that it is black social death, as Wilderson insists, that “makes the world a decent place to live,” that black abjection renders it “Humanity’s foil” (Wilderson 2020, p. 323)—will generate a new political-subject-of-refusal propelled by revolutionary desire, fueled by the drive that ties it to Antigone, freed from embodying the Real that constitutes white or non-black subjectivity. And the departure of blackness from this space will effect a second transformation. In a reversal of parallax, a shift in the position of the Black object (after enabling a resisting subject of revolutionary desire) will drastically alter the so-called Human—will effect its demise. Instead of black social

⁴ It might be objected that focusing on the need to dissolve this supposed inferiority complex, as Fanon does, is to put the onus on the Black, and perhaps it is, in the same way that analysts must take responsibility for submitting themselves to analysis.

death, whiteness will necessarily die, as the eye that looks looks at the Human and sees it for what it is: nothing.

For all its pessimism or maybe I should say by virtue of it, *Afropessimism* proclaims that “*social death can be destroyed*”: “like class and gender, which are also *constructs* [and] not divine designations, social death can be destroyed. But the first step toward the destruction is to assume one’s position . . . and then burn the ship or the plantation, in its past and present incarnations, *from the inside out*” (Wilderson 2020, p. 323, my emphases). Herein lies, through appropriation of Fanon’s “zone of non-being,” after all, the potential for a “genuine new departure” (recall Fanon’s qualifier—in “most cases” a genuine departure is impossible)—instigated by the “revolutionary desire” that Afropessimism, in the spirit of Antigone, has the potential to ignite.

The unconscious of the Black object or Slave as it is imbricated with that of the White or non-Black subject or Master must be reconfigured so that the former no longer finds itself to be a nightmare and the latter no longer finds its support in that nightmare—a change the latter will be forced to make once the former breaks the bounds of its objecthood, once the Slave, having vanished as an object and become a political descendant of Antigone, *looks*, turning the Black as gaze to an eye.

4. The Non-Human Subject

I have occasionally intermeshed Marriott and Wilderson, although Marriott ultimately stresses undecidability, while Wilderson invokes the potential of (black) revolutionary desire and claims that black social death can be defeated. They also differ in their reliance on Lacan (at least in my reading of Wilderson’s *Afropessimism*). In *Lacan Noir*, Marriott, on one side of his professed ambivalence, charges Lacan with ignorance of blackness. To Marriott, Lacan’s joining of the signifier to slavery (Lacan writes that “we are all irredeemably enslaved *as speaking subjects*” [Marriott 2021, p. 4])

encodes a certain ignorance. That is, Lacan neglects “incommensurable differences in how the enslaved body . . . is enunciated as a typology via chains, whips, spikes, nooses, and dogs” (p. 127). The experience of Lacanian lack is taken by most Lacanians to be universal, whereas to Marriott it is white. All desire in Lacan, to Marriott, is “a desire for mastery” (Marriott 2021, p. 127). Psychoanalysis can perform its so-called universalism only by masking its disavowal of racism; the void in psychoanalysis that sutures thought to being is “a black emptiness” (p. 18).

Marriott’s definition of blackness as *n’est pas* might lead one to think he shares Fanon’s and Wilderson’s emphasis on the Real. But that the non-being Marriott locates in the Black has been injected into the black unconscious *ideologically through negrophobia*, to Marriott, keeps *n’est pas* and the Real apart. The black *n’est pas* is “an ontological impurity that is the *trace* of the Other within us,” as Marriott writes with his Derridean pen (Marriott 2020, p. 51); and *this* is how blackness turns into absence. Marriott envisions “the great black hole” as “a mirage” (p. 43)—an illusory “depository of a cultural hatred” (p. 47) and by no means a function of repression, interpellation, an existential situation, or the unsaid—not the Lacanian Real. Perhaps we might think of it as the injection of a pseudo-Real?—whereas in Wilderson the Black is rendered a Real nightmare, which the Black becomes when the White looks in the mirror reflecting a nightmare that is transferred to the black mirror. In fact, we might read Wilderson here as offering a way of understanding a relation between the *n’est pas*—the black hole—which Marriott theorizes is ideologically drilled into the Black psyche—and the mirror stage for Whites and Blacks, as the White passes on unconsciously the nightmare of *n’est pas* to the Black. Wilderson retains Lacanian theory, whereas Lacan is for Marriott part of the problem rather than the means of a cure.

Still, the question might persist as to whether Marriott’s *n’est pas* can be removed (to think in Marriott’s terms) or if the Black can be peeled away from the Real (to think in what I take to be

Wilderson’s terms) in order to give Blacks an experience with the Real—*without reinforcing the structure now in place of the unethical Human*. In other words, *is* lack/desire white? I have argued that such extractions and their consequent transformations are possible, in that what I have outlined entails the movement of blackness out from under the Human, thus dismantling that very concept.

But what could/would blackness then be? Would conceiving blackness as undecidable *at that point* undermine the arduous operations I have laid out in my reading of Wilderson? Or would Fanon’s “invention” have more potential once the individuals deemed to be Black undergo the kind of psychic changes that Wilderson’s book can set in motion, once they expel Marriott’s *n’est pas* or tear themselves away from the Real, which they can only do upon possessing a Nothing of their own? Perhaps Marriott at least must be credited for conveying the difficulty of knowing who will be there in relation to that Nothing. Will it then be possible to solve the dilemma of not wanting to give up blackness but also not wanting, or knowing how, to retain it, how to get beyond that suspension? Could that suspension somehow be the continuing carrier of revolutionary desire? Or must the fundamental fantasy of blackness be entirely traversed?

Marriott stresses the cultural imposition of non-being onto the Black, declining to regard the *n’est pas* as tantamount to the Real, while Wilderson posits Blacks in the Real, and so employs the Lacanian register. Yet, ironically, Marriott hangs on to the non-being of Blacks in his unwillingness to relinquish blackness entirely, as he ponders it as “unthought” as well as in his thought-provoking sense that what precludes our *understanding* of blackness is “*inherent to blackness itself*,” which is what, he claims, “makes blackness both black and undecidable” (Marriott 2020, p. 28, my emphasis). Marriott, we recall, conceives the absolute disappearance of blackness as a lamentable obliteration. Moreover, at times, Marriott’s privileging of the spectrality of black undecidability appears to be for the sake of remaining

open to moments when the prejudice that sentences the Black to abjection—the petrification of social death—yields to the abyssal (qua de-petrification) as the site or non-site in which the *tabula rasa* becomes the potential for transfiguration. Andrew Kaplan locates this idea in Marriott’s “poetics of corpsing,” which Marriott identifies in Césaire and Fanon: “the unflinchingly iterative inhabitation of blackness’s intrinsically failed performance (i.e. social death) can give way to the depetrifying potential of the abyssal as the (non)site in which the politics of *tabula rasa* and invention coincide.”⁵

But that isn’t enough; the emergence of a *tabula rasa* from the abyss requires a transformation, one that ignites the spark of revolutionary desire produced by a rigorous analysis, which is what I think Wilderson offers through his Lacanian text. The sick political structure of (sadistic) Human on top of (not masochistic, but victimized) blackness is a distortion of the Lacanian model of desiring subjectivity and requires the Lacanian ethics of the Real to be restored to health. In other words, the Subject is not “the Human.”

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⁵ This is from an email exchange on 12 December 2022 with Andrew Kaplan, whom I thank for invaluable communications over the summer of 2022 on all of this essay’s issues. See his article on related matters: Kaplan 2020.

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