ENDS OF THE WORLD
DECONSTRUCTION AND FRANK WILDERSON'S
AFROPESSIMISM

THOM VAN CAMP

"Thus I used to think, and thus I used to speak to myself; goaded almost to madness at one moment, and at the next reconciling myself to my wretched lot." - Frederick Douglass[i]

"I'm not sure just how or when the idea was first dropped by the Welfare workers that our mother was losing her mind. But I can distinctly remember hearing "crazy" applied to her by them when they learned that the Negro farmer who was in the next house down the road from us had offered to give us some butchered pork—a whole pig, maybe even two of them—and she had refused." - Malcom X[ii]

Frank Wilderson's autobiographical style—introduced in his seminal *Incognegro* (2015), and well-rehearsed here, in 2020's *Afropessimism*—is inherently tied to the author's critical project of the same name.[iii] *Afropessimism* relies on a framed narrative, beginning with the nervous breakdown Wilderson suffers as a graduate student, losing control of his body and his voice. From the book's first sentence there is psychosis, which Wilderson describes not as an aberrant episode, but as an acute eruption from perpetual madness which has no "season of sanity" (3). The book moves nonlinearly from there, bouncing between various personal episodes and theoretical progressions, yet it concludes with an episode mirroring Wilderson's foundational description of madness. As such, there is a contradiction between the stable parallelism of *Afropessimism*'s form and Afropessimism's internal illogic of madness.

The most prominent critiques of Frank Wilderson's *Afropessimism* (and the eponymous theory) deride its <u>flatness</u>, its <u>narrowness</u>, and its bent toward <u>totalization</u>.[iv] These critiques—

appearing increasingly in mainstream venues—are neither unfounded nor unsupported, but they do not go far enough in accounting for Afropessimism's internal tensions, even its madness. I provoke the maddening nature of Afropessimism through a comparison to deconstruction, the urtext of critical frustration. The reasons for this comparison are manifold; primarily I contend that reading Wilderson's work alongside deconstruction emphasizes the neglected complexity of the former, and perhaps suggests the continued utility of the latter. Namely, deconstruction accounts for the Afropessimism's indistinction between literature and theory.

The final pages of *Afropessimism* recount the onset of dementia and ultimate death of Wilderson's mother, a lifelong liberal and reformist. The two clashed over political agendas, and much besides, but enjoyed a ceasefire in the final years of her life when "a war of attrition…had ended" (335). Alongside this reconciliation, Wilderson depicts a conversation between himself and a young and emotionally tormented Black undergraduate (described as a newly minted Afropessimist) in which Wilderson—now tenured, published, trademarked—recounts the story of his own breakdown with which the book began. So, psychosis, madness, and the loss of memory and language act as the framing condition, catalyzing both Wilderson's narrative (*Afropessimism)* and the analytic (Afropessimism) he derives from his life story. Yet such images of incoherence— Wilderson's clenched jaw which renders him mute, or his mother's declining memory and loss of recognition—seem at odds with a narrative structure built on correspondence (the young student who recalls a young Wilderson) and reconciliation (Wilderson's mended relationship with his mother). As such, Wilderson's latest book, with madness at its center, tears against itself, arguing for the central unthinkable, impossible, anti-narrative of Black existence, but by way of the author's relatively cohesive personal plot.

For Wilderson's many critics, the inconsistency between a generic, generationally structured story of reconciliation and the radical terminalism of its pessimistic content provides evidence of some hypocrisy, if it is not ignored entirely. But the contrast is by no means disqualifying; on the contrary, this rhetorical tension is essential to Wilderson's project. Citing work on deconstruction, Jared Sexton notes that "the skepticism expressed toward Afro-Pessimism takes forms bearing uncanny resemblance to the hostile reception of other critical discourses assumed to disable thought and action."[v] Importantly, the both deconstruction and Afropessimism rely on style, that is, the very writtenness, of their form; Sexton notes the refusal among critics "to countenance the rhetorical dimensions of the discourse of AfroPessimism" despite the connection between it and Wilderson's auto-theoretical mode. The rhetorical dimension of deconstruction is less easy to ignore, but it is a feature regularly labeled as a bug. Paul de Man writes that "Literature as well as criticism—the difference between them being delusive—is condemned (or privileged) to be forever the most rigorous and, consequently, the most unreliable language in terms of which man names and transforms himself" (19).[vi] This citation contains the terms needed to substantiate the comparison between Afropessimism and deconstruction. First, both fields dissolve the distinction between criticism and literature; though, importantly, this is not a leveling aimed at coherence. Second, both analytics rely on the unreliable mediums of language and theory, mediums they at once utilize and upend. Finally, as a result of this dissolution and embrace of unreliability, Afropessimism, like deconstruction before it, asks us to linger in the terminal, the absent, and the impossible. Both Afropessimism and deconstruction have been maligned for their unceasing terminality, but the incurabilities they espouse are precisely what must be answered.[vii]

Shaping the World

If deconstruction is interested in using language and theory against themselves, then Afropessimism facilitates a similar inversion of criticism and politics. As such, both modes operate similarly in terms of their critical orientation. This similarity is evident, for example, in their shared, fundamental interest in paradigmatic centers. "The center is not the center," Derrida knew.[viii] Exposed as a metaphor, Derrida's structural center posits the structure around it, but is at once absent from that structure by nature of its centrality. The center must be there, but it must not be. If the center of a structure is both constitutive of, and separate from, the whole then we must accept a succession of centers; always elsewhere, these shifting centers provide the "freeplay" upon which Derrida's good times hinge.

On one hand, this Derridean disruption of totality sits comfortably next to an Afropessimist perspective, with totality depending upon a central point that can be neither incorporated nor fixed. Afropessimism claims that the paradigmatic *Human* is (like Derrida's structure) another whole with an absent center. For Wilderson, the Human category remains contingent upon a repeated violence at its center; specifically, an anti-Black violence that cannot ever end and cannot ever be incorporated into the category it creates. For Derrida this repeated deferral, though not without its discomfort, is ultimately a site of play and of potential. Derrida finds joy because the discovery of absence provides new terms for origin, truth, and understanding. Like a view of alienation that would be encouraged by the potential inherent to an outsider position, deconstruction finds possibility in the destabilizing weight of its discoveries. Afropessimism,

clearly, is less optimistic. For the center of the structure *has* been named, and from the undergirding position, Wilderson does not see possibility; at least, it is not a brand of proliferative potential that would comfort the activist, politician, or writer.

The problem of the metaphorical structure, at stake in both deconstruction and Afropessimism, risks lingering in the realm of the abstract, but takes on maddening material purchase in the question of legality. Deconstruction and Afropessimism each arrive at the issue of justice and note the madness inherent to that seemingly sober category. For Derrida this is most thoroughly worked through in *Force of Law*, where he differentiates *justice* from *law*, a differentiation that hinges on the aporia, the non-path.[ix] Law, the "exercise of justice," Derrida writes, is "constructed on interpretable and transformable textual strata" (15). As such, law is on the side of what Derrida calls "generality." In contrast, justice "is incalculable" (16). The "experience we are not able to experience," justice supposes the aporia, the appearance of a path that has not existed, and the decision which has never yet been made (17). Derrida writes that "there is no justice without this experience, however impossible it may be, of aporia. Justice is an experience of the impossible." Building to this point, Derrida relies on the Kierkegaardian aphorism, that "the instant of decision is madness." Deconstruction announces a boundless structure with an aporia at its gut; there is something mystical to this originary absence, drawing Derrida continually to the poles: the rottenness at the beginning of the law, and the essential "madness" at its end. However, precisely from this rotten madness justice arises; it is the undecidability, the impossibility, and the non-path that give justice its character.

In one of *Afropessimism*'s very few footnotes, Wilderson defines aporia as "an irresolvable internal contradiction or logical disjunction in a text, argument, or theory" (227). Crucially, he

contains this definition within the realm of the textual. This limitation makes way for Wilderson's claim that the position occupied by Blackness is in fact a "meta-aporia," exposing a point *beyond* Derrida's structure. Afropessimism works on "unearthing and exposing the meta-aporias, strewn like land mines in what these theories of so-called universal liberation hold to be true" (14). A "wrench in the works" of any progressive politics or theory, Blackness, for Wilderson, is forever relegated to the "meta," outside position, that is, the unincorporated center upon which the whole rests. "*Blacks are not Human subjects, but are instead structurally inert props*," Wilderson emphasizes, suggesting that a violent structure can neither incorporate nor give justice to the pillars upon which it is built (15). This is where the *Afropessimism*'s narration of madness coincides with the maddening nature of its aporia. As it names an irresolvable failure in the political structure, Afropessimism is a "grenade that has no pin" (172). Wilderson is not shy to say that the only plausible redress or reform would be the "end of the world." Given this, critics read Afropessimism itself as a non-path. But toward the accusation that Wilderson's writing "disables thought and action," it would be more accurate to say that Afropessimism seeks to expose the inherent limitations of liberatory politics as they are currently able to exist.

Writing the World

The structural comparison with deconstruction helps clarify Afropessimism's theoretical interest in philosophical and political limitations, but the question of rhetoric or style remains

open. Afropessimism style is inseparable from the autobiographical form. Derrida is concerned about understanding, for example, the *singularity* of justice which relies on the *generality* of law. As much as Wilderson's latest book is positioned as a broad, public defense of the Afropessimist project, its essential quality springs from *singular*, often confessional, experience, and *generalizes* from there. Much of this experience is marshaled as evidence against the limits of political strategy. In one passage, for example, Wilderson and his then partner go on the run and attempt to hide out with a former member of the Weather Underground, only to find their ally's strategic role has shifted from anti-capitalist guerrilla back to upstanding white citizen. In his parting, apologetic reasoning, the ally says "You know me…I was in the trenches when I thought it made sense" (146). Though the ex-Weatherman has previously tried to separate himself from "his tribe," in this final statement, at least for Wilderson, any distinction collapses and the ally acts as analogy; the singular example acts generally. His statement exposes the white ally's attachment to "sense" and, by extension, Wilderson and his partner's inability to be directed by "sense." That is, the ex-Weatherman can dip in and out of the trench as sensibility dictates; an option foreclosed to the Black radical. Wilderson's extrapolation of this interaction furthers what has proved to be Afropessimism's most controversial claim, that the Black experience is entirely distinct from the experience of the non-Black subject, even from other violently marginalized groups; this distinction is made through a series of three claims, all emerging specifically from the madness that emerges when "sense" is foreclosed.

First, Wilderson writes that "The narrative arc of the slave who is Black…is not an arc at all, but a flat line" (102). The white subject, and even the non-Black subject, for Wilderson maintains a "transformative promise" which can never be granted to the slave. The distinction of Blackness

as a paradigmatic position hinges on narrative a lack of narrative mutability, or what Spillers calls "historical stillness." Understood as such, the Black narrative is never progressive; it may experience swells and flux, but never a rise or fall. Wilderson concedes that this Black position is constructed (not unlike class, gender, or disability) but he argues that the slave's constructed position is distinct from others because it cannot be "assumed," taken up, celebrated, or transformed in a narrative sense. Second to this narrative fungibility, there is a temporal distinction. For the worker, for example, there is a prehistory: before enclosure or industrialization, and for the colonized, there is before the settler. These shifts occur within "historical time," a temporal paradigm of logical, if violent, progression. Conversely, what Black people experience is the time of a paradigm predicated on Black suffering. Black people are of the world, constitutive of it, but not in it. This returns to the absent center and the meta-aporia; Wilderson's gambit, repeated here, is that Black life is always producing a world, a paradigm, and a temporality that it cannot enter. Finally, having argued for the Black slave's "flat" arc that exists outside of progressive, historical time, Wilderson articulates the sum of such total, originary alienation, claiming that "The human need to be liberated *in* the world is not the same as the Black need to be liberated *from* the world; this is why even the most radical cognitive maps draw borders between the living and the dead" (252). One might complicate this last clause, as plenty of radical orientations scrub the boundaries between past and present, but Wilderson's point is that no other history—the history of the worker, of the colonized, or of the non-Black subject— has remained so thoroughly unaltered. The ex-Weatherman has an arc: a logically governed movement from radicalism in the trenches to a sensible withdrawal. His transformations play out across a historically legible and linear timeline. Wilderson names Afropessimism as a "corrective

to Humanist assumptive logic," throwing "into relief" the unreconcilable difference between a *sensible* paradigm and the essential, maddening illogic of Blackness that holds the paradigm together.

Ending the World

Wilderson has articulated his position before laying it out in *Afropessimism*, though never as fully; in his recent writing he is if nothing else an excellent teacher. His latest book, partly a continuation of his personal narrative, feels largely directed by the reception of Afropessimism, particularly in academic circles. It is noteworthy how admissible it is today to claim something to the effect of "slavery is an enduring condition that continues to structure Black life;" this claim has been maintained repeatedly across humanistic disciplines and in popular studies following Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow*, now published more than a decade ago. Yet by comparison it feels terminal to take up something called an Afropessimist position. For example, a cursory search shows that Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake*—a brilliant study of anti-Black violence's continuation that the comprehensiveness of that violence to the scale of an atmospheric event—has been cited more in the past four years than the work of Wilderson and Saidiya Hartman combined over the past ten. These are not exclusive categories or scholars, as Sharpe cites both Wilderson and Hartman at length. Neither are they synonymous; while Hartman and Wilderson argue that slavery is a foundational, continuous paradigm, their work aims to account for the libidinal and psychological fallout of this paradigm. Also, especially for Wilderson, the distinct nature of Black suffering is vital to the Afropessimist project, as is the critique of

progressive and radical politics with their calls for unity and cooperation. The point of this comparison is to suggest that within the array of what might be termed Afropessimist archive, there is a difference in reception that is tied to both the mood and implementability of theory. Most every critique of Afropessimism questions its utility for activists, and its political engagement in general; in fulfilling its uncompromising promise to the non-path, Afropessimism is labeled regressive, and therefore useless.

Reading Wilderson, particularly as a white, able-bodied academic, it feels impertinent to follow him in delineating borders between marginalized groups, either theoretically or when thinking about activism and strategy. That is, when working toward universal harm reduction and racial equity, it is inconvenient to insist on the particularity and incomparability of anti-Black violence. On the other hand, Wilderson's arguments remain difficult to dismiss. It is vital to remember that Wilderson's landscape is theory and, as he insists both in *Afropessimism* and in interviews, not activism—Afropessimism may best be described as a personal intellectual history, or auto-theory about theory, that gives way to an interpretive historical and cultural lens. Never backpedaling from Afropessimism's most contested claims, Wilderson maintains its humble aspirations. His favored metaphor is the ear trumpet, with Afropessimism detecting and amplifying the "Black peoples 'suffering that [can] not be accommodated" by any other theory or political structure, lest they collapse on themselves. Described modestly, Afropessimism simply hinders the easy acceptance of analogies; but, at its most radical, Afropessimism gives language to both a distinct, desire-driven counter-history and an uncomfortable critique of contemporary activism. As such, Derrida's description of his writing applies here; Afropessimism is "not a method…[it is] something that happens and which happens inside." For many, Afropessimism's view of the past

remains too static, and its image of the future too vacant. But, between these poles, there is a maddening terror ignored at great expense; Wilderson questions the "cartographic integrity" of a Humanistic paradigm, insisting that there is something outside, something beyond, a violent meta-aporia producing the aporia we believe we understand. The cost of reaching this beyond, Wilderson calculates, is too high for most, as it requires an end to the world. Afropessimism forces the question, if I do not want the world to end, what exactly am I committed to saving?

End notes

[i] Frederick Douglas, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass An American Slave*. Cambridge, Harvard UP, 2009.

[ii] Malcom X, *The Autobiography of Malcom X*. New York, Ballantine Books, 1964.

[iii] Frank Wilderson, *Afropessimsim,* New York, Norton, 2020.

[iv] Kevin Ochieng Okoth, "The Flatness of Blackness: Afro-Pessimism and the Erasure of Anti-Colonial Thought." *Salvage*, January 2016. https://salvage.zone/issue-seven/the-flatness-of-blackness-afro-pessimism-and-the-erasure-of-anti-colonial-thought/

Jesse McCarthy, "On Afropessimism." *LARB*, July 2020. https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/on-afropessimism/

Vinson Cunningham, "The Argument of 'Afropessimism.'" *The New Yorker*, July 2020. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/07/20/the-argument-of-afropessimism

[v] Jared Sexton, "Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear Word," Rhizomes, 29. 2016.

[vi] Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*, New Haven, Yale University Press. 1979.

[vii] David Hume writes that "This sceptical doubt, both with respect to reason and the senses, is a malady, which can never be radically cur'd, but must return upon us every moment, however we may chace it away, and sometimes may seem entirely free from it."

[viii] Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, Chicago UP, 1978.

[ix] Jacques Derrida, *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, New York, Routledge. 1992.