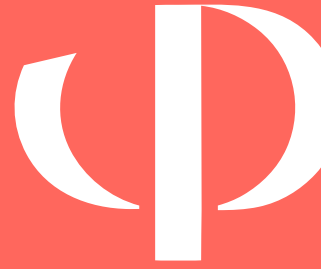


# Philosophy and the Black Experience



FALL 2020

VOLUME 20 | NUMBER 1

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APA NEWSLETTER ON

# Philosophy and the Black Experience

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STEPHEN C. FERGUSON II AND DWAYNE TUNSTALL, CO-EDITORS

VOLUME 20 | NUMBER 1 | FALL 2020

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## FROM THE EDITORS

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We begin this issue of the *APA Newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience* with a “Footnotes to History” featuring Cornelius Golightly (1917–1976). Golightly earned his PhD in philosophy at the University of Michigan in 1941 and then was a Rosenwald Fellow at Harvard University. He published articles in well-respected journals in philosophy, Negro education, and legal studies. When Golightly was hired by Olivet College in 1945, he became the first Black philosopher permanently hired to teach at a white institution in the twentieth century. He also became the first African American to teach at Wayne State University when he was hired to be an associate dean and professor of philosophy there in 1969. Throughout his career, he was a productive scholar, a leading teacher at several institutions, a public intellectual, and a social activist. He was also an elected member of the Milwaukee School Board in the 1960s and an appointed member of the Detroit School Board from 1970 until his death in 1976. This issue’s “Footnotes to History” section is a revised and expanded version of John H. McClendon III’s *Black Past* article on Golightly, “[Dr. Cornelius Golightly \(1917-1976\): The Life of an Academic and Public Intellectual](#),” which was originally published on March 25, 2014.

We are excited to publish Stephen C. Ferguson II and Gregory D. Meyerson’s essay, “Shred of Truth: Antinomy and Synecdoche in the Work of Ta-Nehisi Coates.” Ferguson and Meyerson’s essay originally appeared in *Cultural Logic: Marxist Theory & Practice* 22 (2015–2017): 191–233. It has been revised by the authors, and it is reprinted here with permission from both the publisher and them.

In “Shred of Truth,” Ferguson and Meyerson critically examine Ta-Nehisi Coates’s analysis of race and racism, especially in his acclaimed book *Between the World and Me* and his *Atlantic* articles from the early to mid-2010s, from a Marxist perspective. Not surprisingly, they find Coates’s analysis wanting. They claim that “Coates conflates class and caste, conflates race and class (where ruling race becomes ruling class), and conflates two very different binaries: freedom and slavery and ruling and working class.” These connotations on Coates’s part obscure how racism negatively affects every member of the entire

working class, regardless of race or ethnicity, both in the United States and globally. These connotations also obscure who belongs to the ruling class. For example, Coates’s analysis of race and racism cannot adequately account for the inclusion of more people of color into the ruling class—not as token, but as enthusiastic participants in the global capitalist order. Nor can it adequately demystify the dominant narrative where the major ideological conflict is between corporate multiculturalists and right-wing populists so that we can clearly see how capitalist exploitation and oppression currently operates in the United States.

We are also excited to publish two review essays in this issue. In the first review essay, “Not the Sound of the Genuine! A Review of Kipton Jensen’s *Howard Thurman*,” Anthony Sean Neal critically evaluates Kipton Jensen’s recent book on Howard Thurman’s thought. While Neal acknowledges that Jensen has succeeded in depicting Thurman as someone whose ideas are worth taking seriously, he criticizes Jensen for accomplishing this at the cost of making them only derivative in nature. In Jensen’s book, Thurman is depicted as someone who at best builds his thought from various traditions (e.g., Gandhian pacifism; American pragmatism; theistic, pedagogical, and philosophical personalism) and at worst simply parrots the better-known representatives of those traditions. In either case, Jensen does not explore what makes Thurman’s thought philosophically significant in its own right. Neal ends this essay by noting that Thurman deserves to be read on his own terms.

In the second review essay, “Ontology, Experience, and Social Death: On Frank Wilderson’s *Afropessimism*,” Patrick O’Donnell critically evaluates Frank Wilderson III’s recently published “memoir-cum-manifesto,” *Afropessimism*. O’Donnell reconstructs the main argument for Wilderson’s *Afropessimism* in that book and evaluates the general methodology underlining that argument. After he reconstructs Wilderson’s main argument for *Afropessimism*, he argues that Wilderson’s claim that Black people are Slaves simply by the virtue of them being Black is false. He then considers *Afropessimism*’s political upshot or lack thereof. He ends this essay by noting that perhaps his difficulty with entertaining Wilderson’s claim that Black people are Slaves, ontologically speaking, is due to him being a non-Black person.

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## SUBMISSION GUIDELINES AND INFORMATION

The *APA Newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience* is published by the committee on the status of Black philosophers. Authors are encouraged to submit original articles and book reviews on any topic in philosophy that makes a contribution to philosophy and the black experience broadly construed. The editors welcome submissions written from any philosophical tradition, as long as they make a contribution to philosophy and the black experience broadly construed. The editors especially welcome submissions dealing with philosophical issues and problems in African American and Africana philosophy.

All article submissions should be between 10 and 20 pages (double spaced) in length, and book reviews should be between 5 and 7 pages (double spaced) in length. All submissions must follow the APA guidelines for gender-neutral language and *The Chicago Manual of Style* formatting. All submissions should be accompanied by a short biography of the author. Please send submissions electronically to [apa.pbe.newsletter@gmail.com](mailto:apa.pbe.newsletter@gmail.com).

### DEADLINES

Fall issues: May 1  
Spring issues: December 1

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### FORMATTING GUIDELINES

- The *APA Newsletters* adhere to *The Chicago Manual of Style*.
- Use as little formatting as possible. Details like page numbers, headers, footers, and columns will be added later. Use tabs instead of multiple spaces for indenting. Use *italics* instead of underlining. Use an "em dash" (—) instead of a double hyphen (--).
- Use endnotes instead of footnotes. Examples of proper endnote style:

John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 90.

See Sally Haslanger, "Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be?" *Noûs* 34 (2000): 31–55.

segregation and seeking racial harmony. The grandson of former slaves, Cornelius Lacy Golightly was born in Waterford, Mississippi, on May 23, 1917. He was one of ten children born to Richmond Mack and Margaret Fullilove Golightly. A Presbyterian minister, Rev. Richmond Mack Golightly was a native of Livingston, Alabama, while Margaret Fullilove hailed from Honey Island, Mississippi. Richmond Mack farmed land, which supplemented his income as a minister. Growing up in Waterford, a small farming community between Holly Springs and Oxford, Mississippi, Golightly was subject to early and regular encounters with racial segregation and discrimination which would have an indelible impact on his life and motivate his activism.

In 1934, seventeen-year-old Golightly left Mississippi for Alabama where he enrolled at Talladega College. Founded in 1867 by two newly freed slaves, William Savery and Thomas Tarrant, its mission was educating the thousands of new freed people in the state. Golightly excelled academically as well as in athletics. As a student-athlete, he participated in football, baseball and tennis. His reputation for academics and athletics extended far beyond Talladega. On July 9, 1938, *The Carolina Times*, a Black newspaper in Durham, North Carolina, wrote glowingly about his participation in the "Intellectual Olympics," which the New History Society held in New York City. Golightly was one of only five Black students from across the nation to earn honors in this 1938 academic competition.

Golightly met his future (first) wife, Althea Catherine Cater, at Talladega. Catherine Cater was the daughter of James Tate Cater, the Academic Dean at Talladega and a former student of Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois at Atlanta University. Catherine Cater was herself a brilliant student who majored in English and minored in philosophy. Largely due to Dean Cater's concerted efforts, Talladega College developed a fine reputation as a strong liberal arts institution. Talladega, for example, received an evaluation of "A" from the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools in 1931, a rare designation for an all-Black institution.

This stellar academic environment facilitated the development of a small core of African American students who would eventually distinguish themselves as philosophers of note. For example, Dr. Carlton L. Lee graduated from Talladega in 1933 and Dr. Broadus N. Butler in 1941. Golightly and Winston K. McAllister, a fellow philosophy major, graduated in 1938. Dr. Winston K. McAllister later assumed the chair of the philosophy department at Howard University. Both Golightly and McAllister, in the ensuing years, were members of the American Philosophical Association and served on its Committee on the Status of Blacks in Philosophy.

After Golightly's graduation from Talladega in 1938, he decided to study philosophy at the University of Michigan. Remarkably, Golightly completed his doctoral work in three years, earning an MA in 1939 and a PhD in 1941. During this period a number of African American philosophers, including Golightly, were attracted to doing scholarly work on Alfred North Whitehead. Golightly's doctoral dissertation was on the Thought and Language in Whitehead's

## FOOTNOTES TO HISTORY

### *Cornelius Golightly (1917–1976)*

Philosopher, teacher, civil rights activist, public intellectual and educational administrator, Dr. Cornelius Lacy Golightly used his rich philosophical insights and commanding intellect toward the consistent aim of eradicating

Categorical Scheme. Ten years later, his first scholarly article, "Inquiry and Whitehead's Schematic Method," appeared in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (June 1951), a leading journal in the field. After receiving his PhD at Michigan, Golightly did post-doctoral work as a Rosenwald Fellow at Harvard University.

Dr. Alain Locke, chair of the philosophy department at Howard University, hired Golightly as an instructor of philosophy and social science for the academic year 1942-1943. Locke was keenly aware of Golightly's intellectual accomplishment and background partly because there were so few African American PhDs in the nation at the time, and partly because of his own interest in philosophy. Golightly fit the Howard model of scholar-activist because of his concern about how Black higher educational institutions confronted the reality of Jim Crow racism. His article in the July 1942 issue of the *Journal of Negro Education* titled "Negro Higher Education and Democratic Negro Morale" explores that dilemma. Golightly astutely remarks, "For Negro higher education to ignore the present reality of the color bar brings frustration and futility. Certainly education should not adjust Negro youth to accept the barriers of the status quo."

Golightly's commitment to a racially integrated world led him to serve as president of the Barnett Aden Gallery in Washington, DC, from 1942 to 1943. This gallery reflected Golightly's social philosophy of integration, whereby African American and white artists' works were displayed together and before an integrated gallery audience; a rare occurrence in then-highly segregated Washington, DC.

Golightly remained at Howard only one academic year. In 1943 he became a Compliance Analyst with the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC), a post he held until the end of World War II in 1945. The FEPC was a consequence of Executive Order 8802, which President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed on June 25, 1941. The committee's task was to ensure the end of racial discrimination in government employment and in those companies that had contracts with the federal government which in World War II meant thousands of employers and the millions of workers they employed. Executive Order 8802 was the most sweeping anti-discrimination measure taken by the federal government since Reconstruction and twenty-six-year-old Cornelius Golightly, as compliance analyst, was assigned the task of ensuring that the original order and a second order, issued in 1943, Executive Order 9346, which specifically outlawed discrimination in federal hiring, were carried out. Golightly's critical reflections on his work were included in a 1945 memorandum which he coauthored titled *Negroes in the Federal Government* and in a published article on the topic he co-wrote with John A. Davis, a leading civil rights activist. The article, "Negro Employment in the Federal Government," appeared in *Phylon* (October 1945).

Golightly resumed his academic career as an academic philosopher when he was hired at Olivet College in Michigan in 1945. This faculty appointment, as professor of philosophy and psychology at this small mid-state Michigan college, marked a historic moment when Golightly became

the first Black philosopher permanently hired to teach at a white institution in the twentieth century. Golightly was soon followed by Black philosophers Forest O. Wiggins (University of Minnesota) and Francis M. Hammond (Seton Hall) when both were employed in 1946, and William T. Fontaine at the University of Pennsylvania in 1947. Cold War restrictions on the faculty's academic freedom prompted Golightly and his spouse, Catherine Cater, to leave Olivet College in protest in 1949.

Golightly was quickly hired by the Philosophy Department at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, remaining there until 1955. He then joined the faculty of the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee working there for the next fourteen years until 1969. Throughout this period Golightly published widely in journals such as *Journal of Philosophy* and *Chicago Daily Law Bulletin*.

Although he remained a productive scholar and leading teacher throughout his career, Golightly also became more active in community life beyond the campus. Among his affiliations were member of the NAACP, ACLU, the Milwaukee Commission on Community Relations, and president of the Milwaukee Urban League. In 1961, Golightly became first African American to win the city-wide election to the Milwaukee School Board (which also made him one of the earliest Black elected officials in the state of Wisconsin). As board member, Golightly fought to introduce busing to promote the integration Black students into school throughout the city. Like most civil rights activists of the time, he believed Black student access to the best schools in the community through racial integration would lead to significant African American economic and political progress. Golightly, however, moved beyond most established civil rights leaders in the early 1960s when he pushed to have a federally sponsored free breakfast program for poor students. Unfortunately, both of his efforts were blocked.

In 1969, Golightly accepted an appointment as Associate Dean and Professor of Philosophy at Wayne State University in Detroit, thus continuing his string of "firsts" by becoming the first African American to teach in the Wayne State philosophy department. He also served in the Wayne State University administration as associate dean. At Wayne State, Golightly wrote several scholarly articles. His "Ethics and Moral Activism" in *The Monist* (1972) was typical of his research and writing during that period. As associate dean, among his numerous duties, Golightly served on the Community College Liaison Advisory Committee, Whitney M. Young Jr. Memorial Lecture Series, and the Committee on Admissions, Records, and Registration.

Golightly's legacy as a public intellectual and social activist in the greater Detroit community is best reflected by his tenure on the Detroit School Board. First appointed to a vacant seat in 1970, he was elected President of the Board in 1973, accordingly marking him as its first Black president. Golightly remained on the Detroit Board until his untimely death in 1976. He served during a volatile period of local and national racial confrontation around busing and school integration. A steadfast proponent of busing, Golightly was at the center of the issue when federal courts ordered

busing for Detroit, decisions that angered both Black and white opponents of busing. Sadly, Golightly never lived to see this contentious issue resolved. He died of a brain hemorrhage at the age of fifty-eight in Detroit on March 20, 1976. His family donated his body to the University of Michigan for medical research. To honor his legacy, the Detroit Public School system established the Golightly Career and Technical Center in September 1982, with the expressed aim to prepare “students for college and other post-secondary educational opportunities.”

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## ARTICLE

### *Shred of Truth: Antinomy and Synecdoche in the Work of Ta-Nehisi Coates*

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Labor cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded.

– Karl Marx

When I was in Washington last [Christ]mas, we should have met and gone over one or two possible things to be done in connection with my plans to leave Howard University. Perhaps it is just as well because my disgust with the place is just about as great as yours and good riddance...

– Harris to Alain Locke, May 10, 1947

People keeps saying, ‘We need to have a conversation about race. . . . This is the conversation. I want to see a cop shoot a white unarmed teenager in the back, . . . And I want to see a white man convicted for raping a black woman. Then when you ask me, ‘Is it over?’, I will say yes.

– Toni Morrison

On August 9, 2014, eighteen-year old Michael Brown was gunned down by police officer Darren Wilson, in the suburb of Ferguson, Missouri. Riots broke out a few days later, led primarily by working-class Black youth. The city was overtaken by “warrior cops,” the fog of tear gas, a hail of rubber bullets, and military tanks. Days later, members of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) would appear, arguing that voting at the ballot box was the only legitimate manner of addressing the anger in the streets of Ferguson. These politicians hoped to transform the anger in the streets into a midterm election turnout that would favor the Democratic Party. And President Barack Obama stated, “I won’t comment on the investigation [in the death of Michael Brown],” only to add, “Cynicism is a choice, but hope is a better choice. Get those souls to the polls. If we do, I guarantee we’ve got a brighter future ahead.”<sup>1</sup> By January 2015, “Black Lives Matter” was the rallying cry heard throughout the world; even typically apolitical Black professional athletes—like Reggie Bush, Derrick Rose, Kobe Bryant, and LeBron James—donned T-shirts with the slogan “I Can’t Breathe.”

The uprisings in Ferguson, Missouri, were the result of deindustrialization in the Midwest Rust Belt. The closing of two Chrysler plants in nearby Fenton, Missouri, in 2011 was the culmination of decades of plant closures beginning in the late 1970s. During its heyday as a boomtown

for industrial migration, North St. Louis County—which includes Ferguson, Hazelwood, and Florissant—was the home of railroad workers, several automobile plants such as Ford and Chrysler, as well as food production plants like General Mills and Sara Lee.<sup>2</sup> By August 2014, the Black unemployment rate in Ferguson was reportedly 19 percent, whereas the national Black unemployment rate was 11.5 percent. The median household income in Ferguson was \$44,000 compared to \$75,000 for St. Louis as a whole.<sup>3</sup>

One year after the tragic death of Michael Brown and scores of other Black men and women, Ta-Nehisi Coates with his *Between the World and Me* (*BWM*) published what many consider to be the political manifesto for the emerging “Black Lives Matter” movement.<sup>4</sup> Across the nation, on nearly every social media platform, in barbershops, reading groups, high schools, universities, and newspapers, Coates has been lauded as a literary genius who unveils the gut-wrenching truth about racial inequality in the United States. Coates’s book weaves together memoir, social commentary, and political manifesto in order to explain the World to his fifteen-year-old son, Samori. Borrowing the epistolary form of Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time* (1963), his book has created a fanfare, particularly after being lauded by Toni Morrison (“I’ve been wondering who might fill the intellectual void that plagued me after James Baldwin died”), then awarded the prestigious MacArthur “genius” grant in addition to the 2015 National Book Award for nonfiction. He has become a celebrated Black public intellectual by both bourgeois liberals and parts of the “Black Lives Matter” movement.

The vast majority of reviews have been positive—with the occasional critic being disappointed with Coates’s pessimism. Given its literary success, the arguments and presuppositions of the book (and affiliated writings) need to be subject to a critical evaluation. As Marxist literary scholar Barbara Foley has noted in another context, success in the US book market is not just a question of literary excellence or authorial prominence. Often, there are literary figures whose success hinges on a text’s embodiment of normative assumptions about bourgeois civil society and self.<sup>5</sup>

In this essay, from a Marxist perspective, we aim to examine the conceptual underpinnings of Coates’s analysis of race and racism, principally in his award-winning book but also in his well-known articles for *The Atlantic*. We hope to clarify the differences between Coates’s anti-racist (essentially liberal-nationalist) analysis and a Marxist (class) analysis of racism. We examine several antinomies that run throughout Coates’s work: class versus race, white freedom versus Black subordination, voluntarism versus determinism, and essentialism versus anti-essentialism.

In brief, Coates conflates class and caste, conflates race and class (where ruling race becomes ruling class), and conflates two very different binaries: freedom and slavery and ruling and working class. These confluations are partly expressed in his fetish term “the Black body,” a term which appears over one hundred thirty times in *BWM*, and in his belief that, as two expressions of this corporate body, he and his son are, in Derrick Bell’s phrase, “at the bottom of the well.” And these confluations are partly expressed in his view that all whites benefit from racism, though, following

James Baldwin, they are morally and psychologically damaged by the process of white self-invention. These contradictions are at the heart of his analysis and are the result of his failure to give any serious attention to the role of class and class struggle in history.

We will proceed with a close examination of Coates’s view of (1) American history—from slavery and Jim Crow to the “new Jim Crow” and “Age of Austerity”—that follows from the above confluations; (2) Coates’s romantic view of historically Black colleges and universities along with an attendant view on Black and white selves that repudiates vulgar romantic nationalism in favor of a hipper, socially constructed nationalism that we might call postmodern essentialism; and (3) his ersatz conception of political struggle, rooted in classic bourgeois antinomies.

We will argue that racism hurts the entire working class, both nationally and globally, through differential exploitation and oppression. The less exploited and oppressed do not benefit at the expense of the more exploited and oppressed. And contra Coates, the ruling class is not some mysterious white ruling caste. Class rule in the United States has never been that simple. Today, things are even more complex as more people of color—who are not tokens—are being incorporated into the ruling class. Moreover, corporate multiculturalism in conjunction with right-wing populism functions to mystify the nature of capitalist exploitation and social oppression operating in the US social formation.

## COATES’S ODYSSEY THROUGH AMERICAN HISTORY

Historian N. D. B. Connolly claims that “[w]ithout question, the historical profession has likely had no better evangelist” than Coates. Others such as MSNBC host Chris Hayes have declared Coates the “greatest essayist of our time.”<sup>6</sup> In short, there are no shortage of people who are celebrating Coates’s book for its insight into the “Black mind” in the Age of Obama.

Coates’s *bildungsroman* of sorts is divided into three sections. In these sections, Coates traces the history of white violence against “Black bodies,” “the long war against the black body” (98), which he claims is at the center of United States history. Coates often solicits the reader’s agreement on a number of key “nodal” points in United States history. The most prominent “structured silence” surrounds the notion of class as a determinate social relation in the United States and the World.<sup>7</sup> He attempts to persuade the reader that the United States is a caste system composed of “Black bodies” and “white Dreamers.” Coates portrays Euro-American people as those “who have been brought up hopelessly, tragically, deceitfully, to believe that they are white.” Here Coates—following the white privilege position so prevalent today—presents white people as “an undifferentiated mass with a common experience of privilege, access and unfettered social mobility.”<sup>8</sup> For Coates, there are no fundamental class divisions or differential power within the Euro-American population. All white people—as a result of their whiteness—have power over all nonwhite people.

His journey through US history begins with an acknowledgment that race is a social construction. In an attempt to explain the process that has led to the creation of a racist polity, he argues that racial divisions “were imposed on us by the Virginia Planters obsessed with enslaving as many Americans as possible” (42). This shorthand of the origins of slavery is obviously inadequate, as shorthands are—but it is also an important rhetorical maneuver used by Coates. He intentionally elides how the planters arrived at racialized slavery in the aftermath of Bacon’s Rebellion (*BR* is discussed in *The Case for Reparations*, not *BWM*). But it’s at least worth noting that the subject here is the Virginia Planters and the object is “as many Americans [a term anachronistically employed] as possible.” In the course of the book, the Virginia planters, or what a Marxist analysis would unapologetically call the ruling class, quickly morphs into “Americans” understood for the most part as “white.”

Coates thus embraces—following Edmund Morgan’s thesis in the classic *American Slavery, American Freedom*—what Theodore Allen calls the paradox view of American history. According to this view of American history, with the establishment of racial oppression, the multiracial working-class threat from below was solved and the “white race” was freed. With Black slavery comes American (white) freedom. Consequently, Coates concludes that “America begins in black plunder and white democracy.”<sup>9</sup> The implication here is that “America” begins shortly after 1676 in the aftermath of Bacon’s Rebellion. With the birth of racial slavery, we are to infer that the class exploitation of both free and bond labor, of both the African and European proletariat, was quickly transformed into white freedom based on Black slavery. From Coates’s narrative, we are led to believe that a system of caste oppression was founded after Bacon’s Rebellion and continues to imprison the United States polity.

But Coates goes further to argue not merely the “paradox” thesis of American history, but that the contradiction between white freedom and Black slavery is analogous to the contradiction between classes. Or more accurately, to the extent that class exists in his narrative, it is synonymous with caste. Indeed, it is not far from the truth that Coates eliminates class structure, class rule, and class exploitation in the Marxist sense from his world. He substitutes a ruling race for a ruling class. As he states in his widely read article, “The Case for Reparations”: “at the beginning of the 18th century, two primary classes were enshrined in America” (*CR*, IV). Black people have become America’s “indispensable working class” and all whites have become rulers. Coates uses—as evidence—an 1848 quote from the former Vice President and Senator John C. Calhoun, quoted in both *BWM* and his essay on reparations:

The two great divisions of society are not the rich and poor, but white and black. . . . And all the former, the poor as well as the rich, belong to the upper class, and are respected and treated as equals.<sup>10</sup>

Coates adds the following commentary: “And there it is—the right to break the black body as the meaning of sacred equality. And that right has always given them [“whites”]

meaning, has always meant that there was someone down in the valley because a mountain is not a mountain if there is nothing below. . . . You and I, my son, are that ‘below.’” In “The Case for Reparations” article, Coates—surprisingly—uses John Wilkes Booth to bolster his case for caste (which in turn underlies his case for reparations):

This country was formed for the white, not for the black man,” John Wilkes Booth wrote, before killing Abraham Lincoln. “And looking upon African slavery from the same standpoint held by those noble framers of our Constitution, I for one have ever considered it one of the greatest blessings (both for themselves and us) that God ever bestowed upon a favored nation. (*CR*, V: *The Quiet Plunder*)

Coates, as noted, is following the historian Edmund Morgan, who opens the door to a sociogenic analysis of racism (a class analysis as opposed to a psychocultural one). At one point, Morgan argues: “the answer to the problem [of preventing a repeat of Bacon’s Rebellion] was racism, to separate dangerous free whites from dangerous slave blacks by a screen of racial contempt.”<sup>11</sup> But then towards the end of his book, Morgan shuts the door he opened when he introduces the paradox analysis of American history, an analysis based on the false assumption that when “race” replaced class, there were then “too few free [white] poor to matter.” In response, Theodore Allen argues that Morgan “is wrong on the facts and wrong on the theory.”<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, the proportion of landless European-Americans did not shrink to insignificance as a social category in the plantation colonies in the century between Bacon’s Rebellion and the American Revolution. In 1676, the overwhelming proportion of the population of Virginia was in the Tidewater region. Of its economically active (titheable) European-American population, half were bond laborers and another one eighth were propertyless freemen. Of the 40 percent that did own such labor, about one fourth were large landowners, those owning over five hundred acres.<sup>13</sup>

While the status of poor whites improved relative to African Americans, “they faced a decline of opportunity for social mobility after 1680.”<sup>14</sup> When we widen our lens to the country as a whole, “in 1770 when Ben Franklin praised ‘middling America,’ 3% of the people owned 30% of the wealth; and in de Toqueville’s America of 1830, one percent of Americans owned nearly half the wealth.”<sup>15</sup> On this account, we should not take Coates seriously nor Calhoun about the upper class consisting of rich and poor whites.

As Allen notes, the “all whites benefit” line leaves much unexplained. If Black slavery was based on the collaboration of the formerly poor whites with the gentry, a shared interest due to the formerly poor whites becoming property holders, then “why did that collaboration not diminish when the contrary tendency [spread of propertylessness] set in, as it evidently did, and ‘racial’ competition for employment became one of the well-known features of American society?” And what is the rationale for the exclusion of the free Black people? “[I]f the operation of the slave

economics was such as to make free people generally into property holders, why were the free African Americans excluded from a fair share of the bounty? Would not their participation have strengthened the front against the threat of slave revolt, which strengthening was calculated to be the effect elsewhere in the Americas?"<sup>16</sup>

Coates's quick change from class to race, a transition that is a transition in causal analysis, is based, interestingly, not on Morgan's analysis of separating dangerous white from dangerous Black people (dangerous from point of view of social control), but based on the cheapness of the African slave and the status of the European indentures as English subjects. But this truncated narrative is in its own way as distorted a narrative as Morgan's own when Morgan describes the free white poor as too few to matter.

It is simply false to assume that the "rights" of Englishmen were respected in the case of European indentures. As Allen notes, before the invention of the white race, women bond servants in the colonies, as a punishment for marriage, had their terms extended often by two and a half years.<sup>17</sup> The flip side of this is that male supremacy ("the 'man's home is his castle' principle"), a key feature of English social control, was abrogated for European male bond servants.<sup>18</sup>

This "denial of the right to marriage and family" was "not a social aberration" but an "indispensable condition" to the preservation of "that particular form of capitalist production and accumulation." But there are complexities. In doing this, the plantation bourgeoisie denied themselves the "benefit of patriarchy as a system of social control over the laboring people." Allen surmises that one of the elements encouraging the 1676 rebellion of servants and slaves was this loss of privilege.<sup>19</sup>

In the transition to the white race, this privilege would be returned to the now whitened European male and denied not only to slaves (this is obvious) but to "free Negroes and Mulattos." Allen provides voluminous evidence against the Morgan "paradox." The existence of this large propertyless strata, according to Allen, requires that they be given privileges of status centering on stripping the "free male Negro" of his status. After all, we return to this in a moment, why not allow the "free Negro" to occupy his normal class status as part of the buffer against the negro slaves, much as was done in the Caribbean?

Allen demonstrates how much work the plantation bourgeoisie had to do to set up the system of ruling class social control. In doing so, he contests Winthrop Jordan's thesis that it was an "unthinking decision" flowing from the "need to be white."<sup>20</sup> He also contests the second half of Morgan's thesis, as indicated above, that the ruling class in acting out of social control motives in effect undid itself in mutating into a ruling race. And Allen's thesis is clearly at odds with Coates's take on American history where a tendency on the part of the plantation bourgeoisie to impose lifetime servitude on African bonded labor is strengthened due to the cheapness of the labor on the one hand and the presumed inherited citizenship rights of European indentures on the other.

Allen argues that the cheapness of African labor would not have been affected by retaining the status of the "free Negro"; that the cheapness of the labor was decidedly secondary to social control. Allen focuses on the well-known landmark legislation of 1705 Virginia that set free and slave "Negroes," Indians, and Mulattos apart and was so central to the invention of the white race, i.e., the white race class collaborationist social control formation; it's worth focusing on later acts taken by Maryland Governor Gooch in 1723 and English Attorney General Richard West's initial objections to these laws. Richard West's response to the law of 1723 (West was responsible for evaluating laws in the colonies for their compatibility with English law) was to wonder "why one freeman should be used worse than another, merely on account of his complexion." And he concluded, after enumerating the rights of freemen, that it "cannot be just . . . by a general law . . . to strip all free persons of a black complexion . . . from those rights which are justly valued by every free man."<sup>21</sup>

It should be noted that these laws, including those put into effect by Governor Gooch, which included the elimination of the franchise for "free Negro men" and the right to hold office, meant "repealing an electoral principle that had existed in Virginia for more than a century."<sup>22</sup>

The contrast with the bourgeoisie's behavior in the Caribbean cements the analysis that deliberate ruling class social control not "race consciousness" was operative:

In the early 1720s, at the same time that the Virginia assembly was emphasizing the exclusion of free Negroes from any place in the intermediate social control stratum, in Barbados, free Negroes and other persons of color, like other free persons, were required to serve in the colony militia, and in Jamaica the assembly offered free Negroes and persons of color free homesteads. In both cases the policies were calculated to promote and maintain social control and the security of those colonies.

And again:

the difference between the English plantation bourgeoisies in the British West Indies and the continental plantation bourgeoisie cannot be ascribed to a difference of degrees in "white consciousness. . . . The difference was rooted in the objective fact that in the British West-Indies there were too few laboring class Europeans to embody an adequate petit bourgeoisie while in the continental colonies, there were too many to be accommodated in the ranks of that class (vol. two, 240 and 243).

Let's return to the Calhoun quote. Coates himself shows the quote is false when he notes that three fourths of the whites in the South in 1860 did not own slaves. Of the one fourth who did, most of those owned one or only a few.

The justification of slavery by Calhoun, George Fitzhugh, and others attempted to present slavery as the best of all

possible worlds. But Calhoun's ideological statement did not represent the views of all Euro-Americans in the United States. With the consolidation of capitalist slavery in the United States, the hatred of one class against another was intense. As Abram Harris and Sterling Spero observe, "The poor white envied the slave's security and hated him for his material advantages, while the slave envied the white man's freedom and hated him for the advantages of his whiteness. Each group, in an effort to exalt itself, looked down upon the other with all the contempt which the planter aristocracy showed to both. The slave was a 'nigger' and the poor white was 'po' white trash."<sup>23</sup>

For centuries, historians, philosophers, and sociologists have debated the character of antebellum slavery in the Old South. One thing is certain. While all slaves were necessarily Black, not all exploited people in the United States were Black. It is generally agreed that the majority of slaves were owned by 4 percent of the Southern white population.<sup>24</sup> The historian Mark R. Cheatham further explains:

. . . in 1860, almost half of the South's slaveholders owned fewer than five slaves. Only 12 percent (approximately 46,000) owned more than twenty. Around 1 percent (approximately 3,800) owned fifty or more slaves. Owners of over 100 slaves numbered 2,292. There were only fourteen with 500 or more slaves, and just one with more than 1,000. Interestingly, of the fourteen largest slave owners, nine were rice planters; the largest, Joshua Ward, was a South Carolina rice planter (Parish 1989, pp. 26-28; U.S. Census). These figures indicate that by 1860, the typical slaveholder owned few slaves, but the typical slave lived on a sizable plantation.<sup>25</sup>

Given the unequal distribution of wealth within the slaveholding class, the majority of Euro-Americans were engaged in subsistence farming on small plots of land. According to the 1850 census, there were only 347,525 slave owners out of a total white population of about six million in the South; there were a total of 23,191,876 people in the United States with a total slave population of 3,204,313. When we include the total population of the United States in 1860, which was 31,443,321 people, the percentage of Euro-Americans who owned slaves decreases further. (In 1860, it is calculated that there were 3,953,761 slaves, representing 12.6 percent of the total population.) As of 1860, one third of Southern white people had no assets of any kind, including slaves or land.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, among the ruling class, for fifty of the first sixty-four years of United States history, the presidents were slave owners.<sup>27</sup> Between 1789 and 1850, eighteen of thirty-one Supreme Court justices were slaveholders, from the Old South or ideological representative of the plantation bourgeoisie, most notably, John Jay (New York), John Marshall (Virginia), and Roger B. Taney (Maryland).<sup>28</sup> The planter aristocracy vis-à-vis the common white yeoman was a dominant force in national politics prior to the Civil War.

Hinton Rowan Helper's 1857 book *The Impending Crisis and How to Meet It* provides a counternarrative to both Calhoun and Coates. Helper was no friend of "the Negro." In protest against the poverty and powerlessness of the Southern

nonslaveholding class, he exposed the relationship between Black subordination and the class rule of the plantation bourgeoisie. Helper argues: "The lords of the lash are not only absolute masters of the blacks, who are bought and sold, and driven about like so many cattle, but they are also the oracles and arbiters of all nonslaveholding whites, whose freedom is merely nominal, and whose unparalleled illiteracy and degradation is purposely and fiendishly perpetuated." For Helper, the only solution to the "impending crisis" was a social revolution in which the white nonslaveholders of the South overthrew the planter bourgeoisie and destroyed slavery, "the frightful tumor on the body politic."<sup>29</sup> Moreover, in calling for the abolition of slavery, Helper proposed that slaveholders be taxed in order to colonize all free Black people in Africa or Latin America.

Calhoun as pro slavery ideologist may have said that slavery was "the most safe and stable basis for free institutions in the world," but a *New York Tribune* editorial, in a statement representative of the Republican position, commented that "the slavery question" was "a question whether the mass of Americans would retain their liberty or whether it would be nullified like that of the poor whites in the South."<sup>30</sup>

And Richard Wright has noted in *12 Million Black Voices*, analyzing the antebellum period,

But as we blacks toiled, millions of poor free whites, against whom our slave labor was pitted, were rendered indigent and helpless. The gold of slave-grown cotton concentrated the political power of the Old South in the hands of a few Lords of the Land. . . . To protect their delicately balanced edifice of political power, the Lords of the Land proceeded to neutralize the strength of us blacks and the growing restlessness of the poor whites by dividing and ruling us, by inciting us against one another.<sup>31</sup>

Later, Wright argues:

poor whites are warned by the Lords of the Land that they must cast their destiny with their own color, that to make common cause with us is to threaten the foundation of civilization. . . . And so both of us, the poor black and the poor white, are kept poor, and only the Lords of the Land grow rich. . . . The Lords of the Land stand in our way; they do not permit the poor whites to make common union with us, for that would mean the end of the Lords' power.<sup>32</sup>

Wright clearly outlines how racism (in both its ideological form and material practice) is used as a means of social control by the "Lords of the Land," that is, the antebellum plantation ruling class. Wright was not alone in assuming that racism, by dividing the working class along ideological lines and differential oppression, harmed the class interests of both white and Black workers. Abolitionist Frederick Douglass stated unambiguously of slaveholders, "They divided both to conquer each."<sup>33</sup> Douglass elaborated, "Both are plundered and by the same plunderers. The slave

is robbed by his master, of all his earnings above what is required for his physical necessities; and the white man is robbed by the slave system, because he is flung into competition with a class of laborers who work without wages."<sup>34</sup> However, with Coates (and by default Calhoun) the planter *class* becomes representative of the ruling (white) race, and class is transformed into caste.

## HOUSING DISCRIMINATION AS SLAVERY BY OTHER MEANS

In the "Case for Reparations," just as Coates moves "smoothly" from Bacon's rebellion to Calhoun's quote taken as real social analysis, he also moves from slavery to housing, as if housing is the modern equivalent of slavery in terms of its reproduction of white supremacy. As our analysis (below) of the statistics indicates, the cases are not analogous. Slaveowners made up one fourth of whites and slaveowning was greatly concentrated within the Southern population. Homeownership reached much higher proportions (60 percent by 1960) and, of course, sizes of houses obviously differed with differences of wealth among whites. Black people for all practical purposes did not own slaves; but Black people do own homes. Coates draws a further analogy between slaveowners' purchase of *De Bow's Review* and today's homeowners purchasing *This Old House* (*CR*, V: The Quiet Plunder). Coates's point is to suggest that slaveowning and homeownership were part of the American dream (a similar point is taken up in *BWM*), and thus aspirational. As we have seen in the stunning use of Calhoun and Wilkes Booth as historians offering evidence for his view of white supremacy, Coates's faulty historiography involves treating American ideology as if it's actually true, substituting ideology for history. In effect, to treat slaveowning and homeownership as continuous is to treat aspiration as reality, American dream for reality. It is well known, for example, that one form of American idealism comes in the form of the hopes of college students to be millionaires. In surveys, roughly one third of college students see themselves as millionaires. But what Americans aspire to is not equivalent to reality.

Though much of the housing discussion in *CR* focuses on the racist profit-making behavior of real estate figures in Chicago, Coates again smoothly transmutes the focus to all whites benefitting from housing discrimination against Black people, and if we slide some of his assumptions over from *BWM*, this discrimination comes from "the democratic will" of (white) Dreamers. The dynamic Coates describes is economic, on the one hand. He notes that even wealthy Black folks, those making over \$100,000 per year and living in mostly Black neighborhoods, live in neighborhoods equivalent to whites making \$30,000 per year (Coates conflates Black people making \$100,000 per year with those living in predominantly Black neighborhoods, thus excluding Black people with the same income who do not live in predominantly Black neighborhoods). He notes that Black people are on average much more likely to live in impoverished neighborhoods (many of which are hypersegregated—usually defined as areas with under 10 percent whites) than white people. As Cedric Johnson notes, his analysis of housing discrimination reduces to whites viewing Black people as a "contagion." Rather than

discussing the role of capital flight, Coates would have us focus on the free will of whites and so-called "white flight."

First, the mechanisms of housing segregation, including the process of Black stigmatization, need explaining. It's not enough to point to contagion as if that's its own explanation. The explanation involves not the democratic will but powerful real estate interests allying with the government in the production of at once the federal highway system and suburbanization, a process driven by racism. These mechanisms involved block busting (orchestrated by real estate companies), redlining (denying home and business loans and insurance to people in poor and segregated neighborhoods), and racist law; and when laws were passed banning such discriminatory behavior, enforcement was lax.<sup>35</sup> Interestingly, Coates uses the term "contagion," suggesting that "white flight" is an instinctual racial process. In reality, what he shows is actually quite similar to what we have described above, with big real estate interests spreading panic among whites so that they sell cheap to real estate agents who then turn around and sell dear to people of color.<sup>36</sup>

In a recent *Forbes* article, the author noted that neighborhoods lost value when Black people reached 10 percent of the neighborhood population. She noted also that housing values in rich Black neighborhoods were 18 percent below that in rich white neighborhoods. What to make of these statistics?<sup>37</sup> The 10 percent statistic appears to confirm the contagion notion of Coates. But serious analysis should not accept this reification as an explanation. Is there really evidence of an internal barometer in whites which causes them to flee Black people unless whites outnumber them nine to one?<sup>38</sup> Coates's statistics about Blacks and whites growing up in poor neighborhoods need scrutiny because the shape of American racism changes. Coates notes that for those born between 1955 and 1970, 62 percent of Blacks grew up in poor neighborhoods while only 4 percent of whites did. But to capture racism's changing shape, one we contend is incompatible with a caste analysis, you have to then ask the same question about the next generation just as you would ask about the prior generation. What the numbers seem to suggest is complex, with segregation decreasing overall and hypersegregation increasing. We hope to explain this dynamic below. Coates does not explain it; his history is cherry picked to eliminate variation, class stratification, and class struggle.

Now, while little to nothing is being done to transform "American apartheid" (in fact, it is being exacerbated by mechanisms we will explain), that is, those neighborhoods where racialized poverty is entrenched, America as a whole is becoming more diverse and it is this mixture of diversity at some levels and segregation at others that needs explaining, and it cannot be explained on a caste analysis. The number of all-white neighborhoods, defined as 90 percent or more white, declined markedly from 1990 to 2000, from 38 percent to 25 percent. Neighborhoods, however, that were 90 percent minority or more did not decline but in fact increased from 9 to 12 percent.<sup>39</sup> Mixed neighborhoods are on the increase. More recent statistics, based on a GAO study, indicate that from 2000 to 2014, the percentage of

schools with so-called racial or socioeconomic isolation grew from 9 percent to 16 percent. Isolated schools are “those in which 75% or more of students are of the same race or class.” The Civil Rights Project at UCLA notes that the percentage of “hypersegregated schools, in which 90% or more of students are minority, grew since 1988 from 5.7% to 18.4%.”<sup>40</sup>

Meanwhile, diverse neighborhoods are spreading and there is some evidence to show that the most diverse neighborhoods are characterized by appreciating housing values. In a recent study comparing diverse neighborhoods to alternatives, the “more diverse neighborhoods have higher population growth and stronger price growth in the past year and they’re a bit more expensive to begin with.”<sup>41</sup>

The author notes correctly such appreciating neighborhoods are likely to drive poorer people of color out. In other words, diversity that leads to housing appreciation is likely inseparable from gentrification processes, that this kind of diversity cannot be understood apart from the social class of the *multiracial* gentrifiers. A complex process whereby racialized poverty in neighborhoods could be amplified while gentrified multiracial cosmopolitanism expands is what needs explanation. And it’s not that hard to explain. For professionals with enough resources to make lifestyle choices, cosmopolitanism may not just be a social preference but a real professional benefit, especially in a context of neoliberal globalization. Just as we should expect to see more corporate diversity, we should see professionals seeking more diversity. This kind of diversity carries much benefit and little cost, either to capital or to the professionals seeking to move into diverse neighborhoods in urban and suburban areas. Once these neighborhoods get underway, resources will flow in. Very little in the way of egalitarian incentive structures would have to be set up. However, to produce working class diversity, with stable home prices not subject to precipitous devaluation, etc. in neighborhoods made impoverished by both historical legacy and the battening processes of neoliberal deindustrialization (whether we are talking about the bigger problem of hypersegregated racialized poverty or the left behind white working class areas in the Rust Belt) would require major social investments, including something like a massive insurance program to buttress homes against devaluation, a necessity to discourage flight and encourage entry. In other words, diversity consistent with market forces will be fostered while diversity inconsistent with it will be discouraged.

The analysis as stated would explain increased market-friendly diversity, but it would not explain increasing (not just ongoing) segregation coupled with concentrated poverty. But this increasing segregation is well explained by books like Matthew Desmond’s *Evicted*, which offers us a host of positive causal forces (in addition to the negative forces, those absent forces that are absent since they conflict with market mechanisms and profit desiderata) that work to reinforce the combination of segregation and concentrated poverty.<sup>42</sup>

Desmond’s study focuses on Milwaukee’s renters, and within this population he studies ethnographically a

“poor white” trailer park (and its white landlord) and poor Black renters (along with respective Black landlords) in Milwaukee’s North side “ghetto.” Desmond makes clear that poor women bear an enormous eviction burden, but that poor Black women are especially burdened. And as we will see, evictions both augment concentrated poverty and reinforce prior segregation through mechanisms that punish the poor, especially the poor with children, but are largely race neutral, though always inequality reinforcing. The eviction rate in general and the racialized differentials in particular have little (though not nothing) to do with the differential (i.e., racist) behavior of current landlords, who generally want their rent money.<sup>43</sup>

Black women in the poorest Black neighborhoods are nine times more likely to be evicted through the court system (many evictions do not pass through the court system) than poor white women living in the poorest white neighborhoods. In general, in Milwaukee, Desmond finds that Black renters have a one in five chance of eviction compared to one in twelve and one in fifteen for Hispanics and whites, respectively.<sup>44</sup>

In the Milwaukee case, the high rate of evictions among poor women is closely connected to the devaluation of single motherhood. Poor single mothers in Milwaukee and the US (and poor single mothers with more children) are more likely to be evicted than poor single women for a host of reasons: one is for the simple reason that poor single moms are on average poorer, in part because they generally require more expensive (however substandard) housing but also have more difficulty on average keeping a job, precisely because of childcare responsibilities assumed to be the sole responsibility of the parent in the absence of a social commitment to universal daycare. Desmond notes that in Milwaukee circa 2009, high-quality- and low-quality rental housing differed in price by an average of only \$275.

This high price of low-income housing is itself the result of the deterioration of affordable housing stock not just in Milwaukee but nationally. So the upshot is that substandard rental housing is very expensive comparatively, and two-bedroom-and-up rental housing is even worse. So those struggling to make ends meet have the burden of more expensive housing, making nonpayment more likely. Insofar as Black women are more than three times more likely to be single moms than white women (for reasons themselves related to prior racism), they are more likely to be evicted.<sup>45</sup>

Single moms with children are generally more vulnerable, thus easier to evict; insofar as children themselves in poor neighborhoods can be hard to “control,” their perceived “bad” behavior often leads to eviction. “Nuisance laws,” which put increasing responsibility on landlords to police their tenants, mean that child-related complaints, either made by other tenants complaining about the children of (more vulnerable) single moms or made by some moms in defense of their children, often lead to eviction.

Poor women of color in Milwaukee, especially Black women, with an eviction on the record, are more likely to end up in less stable, more dangerous, more segregated

neighborhoods. Once a person is evicted, it goes on the record available to landlords, who then, of course, are likely to reject those with prior evictions or prior criminal records. The rental agencies use screening process software sensitive to prior eviction and criminal records of you or those living with you. Thus, any poor person with prior records directly or indirectly in these areas will be forced into worse neighborhoods of concentrated poverty. And both events make it harder, for different reasons, to find and/or retain (low-wage) employment.

The role of Milwaukee's legacy of segregation can perhaps be understood in the following way. If we control for poverty, single motherhood, and number of children, working-class Black single mothers from Milwaukee with an equal number of children to their white counterparts—with an eviction history or not—are more likely to be steered in the direction of hypersegregated neighborhoods, which have historically, by design, been less stable and more dangerous. These poor single moms are then more likely than their white counterparts to be evicted or evicted again. The more vulnerable the neighborhood, the more vulnerable the renter to landlord action, whatever the race of the landlord.

Current racist practices would be landlords illegally charging higher rents to Black people or reserving properties in worse condition for Black people while charging the same price that would be charged to non-Blacks for nicer properties (on the racist argument that Black people don't take care of property as well as non-Blacks). After observing such behavior on the part of a landlord, Desmond reported the person (he never was contacted). Were this problem remedied, the race-neutral mechanisms battenning on past unremedied discrimination would still continue to reproduce the worsening status quo.

It is worth noting, as it makes more precise the dialectic of class and race, that with the dissolution of the old Jim Crow, working-class Black folks lost network resources as better-off relatives could move out of segregated neighborhoods. "Normal" processes of class formation among the Black population made things worse for those left behind. And finally, it is extremely important to note that this correlation of single motherhood and poverty is not inevitable and in fact is much less likely to be found in countries with stronger social safety nets.<sup>46</sup> *Single motherhood does not cause poverty; it is associated with poverty in societies which punish single moms.*

If housing is the new slavery for Coates, as his reference to the Calhoun quote would suggest, Coates must view white and Black poverty as not merely different in degree but in kind. Coates offers a single piece of evidence from white and Black poor neighborhoods in Chicago. This single example will function as a synecdoche for the claim that the white and Black poor live in different universes. In *CR*, he cites a study where "a black neighborhood with one of the highest incarceration rates (West Garfield Park) had a rate more than 40 times as high as the white neighborhood with the highest rate. 'This is a staggering differential, even for community-level comparisons,' Sampson writes. 'A difference of kind, not degree'" (*CR*, II. "A Difference of

Kind; Not Degree"). While we will not question this particular statistic's accuracy, we do question its rhetorical function as representative, that is, synecdochic. The point of Coates's statistic is to support a thesis that imprisonment is not a problem among the white working class, nor is poverty. The differences in imprisonment rates in this example are stark and clearly not representative of the overall situation since the white/Black differential in imprisonment rates is between five and six to one, not forty to one. Coates uses statistics to *maximize disparity between whites as a group and Blacks as a group*. As we will see, the cherry-picked use of shocking disparity in imprisonment rates will facilitate his caste interpretation of the prison industrial complex. But the reality is that, following our Marxist thesis on differential oppression, the extreme oppression of Black workers makes things worse for all workers, in part by making it seem as if white workers live in a different universe or, in Coates's interpretation, are part of Calhoun's "Upper Class." A book like Desmond's which details racial inequality in housing but also shows the panoply of race neutral mechanisms affecting the Black and white poor alike refutes Coates analysis. Instead of just averages, the statistic most susceptible to synecdochic distortion, we suggest thinking also in terms of departures from average, i.e., distributions, with means and standard deviations and outliers; and mechanisms, racialized, race neutral, and entangled.

## THE NUMBERS GAME: PLAYING GAMES WITH STATISTICS

The notion of "white skin privilege"—that is, all whites share a common interest in upholding a system of white supremacy—is foundational to Coates's outlook.<sup>47</sup> From the "rosy dawn" of slavery until now, we are told that the white population, "the Dreamers," benefit both psychologically and materially from the domination of "Black bodies." Coates uses the concept of "the Dreamers" to characterize all whites or as he puts it "these new people who have been brought up hopelessly, tragically, deceitfully, to believe that they are white" (7). White people exist in a "liberated" white galaxy, where "children [do] not regularly fear for their bodies." We are told that, today, the white galaxy is suburban and "endless." As opposed to all Black people, white people qua Dreamers reside in "perfect houses with nice lawns," living a dream that "smells like peppermint but tastes like strawberry shortcake" (20-21).

Those people who believe they are white became white through a process, "through the pillaging of life, liberty, labor, and land; through the flaying of backs; the chaining of limbs; the strangling of dissidents; the destruction of families; the rape of mothers; the sale of children; and various other acts meant, first and foremost, to deny you and me the right to secure and govern our own [Black] bodies" (8). He notes that "white America" is "a syndicate arrayed to protect its exclusive power to dominate and control our bodies." And that whiteness is inseparable from this "domination and exclusion," without which "white people" would cease to exist. The difference between "their world" and "ours" is that we (black bodies) "did not choose our fences."<sup>48</sup>

Coates places the “long war against the black body” at the center of his social analysis. (98) The “Black body” is “enslaved by a tenacious gravity,” governed by “cosmic injustice” and disciplined by violence and fear. The “Black body” is in “constant jeopardy.” (18) The “Black body” is caged by the prison of racism (or what Coates sometimes refers to as white supremacy). The “Black body” is putatively the site of the concrete, the specific, and the particular.

In the hands of Coates, the “Black body,” which seems to be a corporal, material body, is in fact a reifying abstraction severed from the historical materiality of class struggle, the divisions of labor, and social relations of production. The abstract concept of the “Black body” replaces the concrete—and contradictory—experiences of the Black lumpenproletariat, working-class, petit bourgeoisie, and bourgeoisie. We are to believe that the “Black bodies” of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, and Rekia Boyd are the same as Barack Obama, Susan Rice, Ursula Burns, Rosalind Brewer, Richard Parson, Sheila Johnson, and Michael Steele—all, along with Coates and his son, at the “bottom of the well.”

The key point about this epistle letter to his son is that it functions as a false concrete universal. Coates’s son is at once intimately particular, immediate, proximal, and, on the other hand, abstract universal. He is there only in the form of an abstract Black body, but also a particular instantiation of the Black body’s miraculous diversity. (In fact, we only become aware of his son’s existence after reading sixty-eight pages of the book.)

By implication, Coates offers a dual systems theory with racism existing relatively independent of and distinct from capitalist relations of production. As the sociologist Oliver Cox noted—so many years ago—this approach “lumps all white people and all Negroes into two antagonistic groups struggling in the interest of a mysterious god called caste. This is very much to the liking of the exploiters of labor, since it tends to confuse them in an emotional matrix with all the people.”<sup>49</sup>

As such, for Coates, nonwhite people can never be members of the ruling class in the United States—even if they are president, secretary of state, attorney general, director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons, a correctional officer, a police officer or a billionaire. Based on this presupposition, he argues, as we note above, that the gut-wrenching nature of Black poverty is qualitatively distinct from white poverty. The reader could be led to the conclusion that, as we note above, white poverty really doesn’t exist at all.<sup>50</sup>

A good part of the narrative surrounding *Between the World and Me* (*BWM*) is the story of Prince Jones, a former classmate of Coates. Jones, twenty-five, was shot to death in September 2000 by Cpl. Carlton B. Jones, an undercover Prince George’s County, Maryland, police officer. Cpl. Jones fired off sixteen shots into Prince Jones’s car. Prince Jones’s body was riddled with six bullets. One shot ripped into his arm; five shots struck him in the back. The officer suspected Jones of being a drug dealer. Not only was the officer’s suspicion mistaken, everything points to the possibility that he acted criminally in shooting Jones

and that his plea of self-defense was fraudulent. Coates writes that the killing and the immediate absence of any subsequent prosecution of the officer “took me from fear to a rage . . . and will likely leave me on fire for the rest of my days” (83). One thing that Coates leaves out of his letter to his son is the role that collective political struggle played in garnering some measure of justice for Prince Jones’s family. In the aftermath of Prince Jones’s murder, community activists, Howard University students, and leftist organizations (like Revolutionary Communist Party – United States and the Progressive Labor Party) held rallies and marches seeking justice for Jones. We would note, and will return to this point below, that this omission on Coates’s part is no accident.

The most interesting facts about the Prince Jones shooting are the following: Prince Georges County was and is the wealthiest Black-majority county in the United States; there were Black officials in the highest positions in local government; both the county executive and the county prosecutor were Black, as were many elected officials; and the cop who shot Prince Jones was a Black man.<sup>51</sup>

The Prince Jones shooting had a tremendous impact on Coates. How could a member of the Black petit bourgeoisie with a future—who was not doing anything criminally wrong—lose his life at the hands of a Black police officer in a county run by Black folks in control of their own bodies? Coates describes Cpl. Jones as a “force of nature, the helpless agent of our world’s physical laws” (83). Coates writes: “I knew that Prince was not killed by a single officer so much as he was murdered by his country and all the fears that have marked it from birth” (78). He later claims:

The truth is that the police reflect America in all of its will and fear, and whatever we might make of this country’s criminal justice policy, it cannot be said that it was imposed by a repressive minority. The abuses that have followed from these policies—the sprawling carceral state, the random detention of black people, the torture of suspects—are the product of democratic will. And so to challenge the police is to challenge the American people who send them into the ghettos armed with the same self-generated fears that compelled the people who think they are white to flee the cities [see the contagion metaphor above] and into the Dream. *The problem with the police is not that they are fascist pigs but that our country is ruled by majoritarian pigs.* (79, italics added)

In *CR*, it is clear that those to be sued by the victims of racism are not the ruling class or “elites,” but the citizens, assumed to be white. These citizens morph into Dreamers or majoritarian pigs in *BWM*. One interpretation of what is said above is that the murderer of Prince Jones had no free will but was the vehicle of the Dreamers’ democratic will (who nevertheless cannot help themselves), those who “need to be white.” Whether the Dreamers include the Black petit bourgeoisie and bourgeoisie who reside in Prince George is never made clear, but following the logic of the above quote, since Black agency that reinforces the status quo is erased, and is made the puppet of the Dreamers’

majoritarian agency, the answer here would seem to be, “No.” If state violence and police shootings are a force of nature, that is, inevitable, why should we resist what is inevitable? And yet, there was resistance, a resistance to which we will return later. We might note briefly that Coates lambastes Richard Wright for his naturalism in *Native Son*, turning social forces into natural forces, because it robs Black people of agency. Yet that is exactly what he does here.<sup>52</sup>

After discussing the tragic murder of Eric Garner, Coates writes to his son: “All you need to understand is that the officer carries with him the power of the American state and the weight of an American legacy, and they necessitate that of the bodies destroyed every year, some wild and disproportionate number of them will be black” (103). Now, this statement is significant because it expresses what has been taken as an “article of faith” in political circles, media coverage, and social media.

Since the shootings of Trayvon Martin (not killed by police), Michael Brown, and Tamir Rice, the world has been focused on the “wild and disproportionate” number of police shootings in the United States. What is striking about the media coverage around these shootings is the assumption that white people are *basically unaffected by the problem of police shootings and by extension the criminal justice system*. This assumption, prominent throughout the media, characterizes the “Black Lives Matter” movement and, not surprisingly, Coates’s writings. What is of note is that media coverage has focused almost entirely on Black victims, making it seem as if police shootings operate in a near caste-like manner. On the Black Lives Matter’s understanding of white supremacy and white privilege, it would be expected that media coverage of Black victims should be underreported quantitatively and qualitatively and media coverage of white victims should be overreported quantitatively and qualitatively. But media coverage has focused on Black victims over white and Latino/Hispanic victims—following BLM’s focus on the misleading racist character of “all lives matter,” and the demand for Black particularity with the slogan “say the names.” Oddly enough, given the media coverage generally, most people paying attention know the names of Black victims: Sandra Bland, Tamir Rice, Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Freddie Gray in Baltimore, and past victims, from Sean Bell to Amadou Diallo to Oscar Grant.

One of the common claims made primarily through social media is the following: “Black males aged 15 to 19 are 21 times more likely to be killed by police than white males in that age group.”<sup>53</sup> This statistic has become a synecdoche, often standing in for people’s perception of the whole problem, particularly activists associated with “Black Lives Matter.” We saw above how Coates’s use of statistics is cherry picked to emphasize “wild and disproportionate” racial disparity.

This statistic comes from a ProPublica analysis of federally collected data on fatal police shootings. While this statistic has circulated widely through social media, there has been relatively little discussion of the flaws in ProPublica’s analysis of the data. First of all, the authors of the study—

Ryan Gabrielson, Ryann Grochowski Jones, and Eric Sagara—examined more than 12,000 police homicides stretching from 1980 to 2012 contained in the FBI’s Supplementary Homicide Report. Yet, their major statistical finding is selectively focused on 1,217 deadly police shootings during a three year period from 2010 to 2012. And even more than that they only report on male shooting victims from the ages of fifteen to nineteen.

Second, the authors acknowledge that the FBI database is flawed because there are often more police shootings in the United States than are reported by the FBI database and, yet, they report their statistical findings as if they are representative of what is actually happening or probably can happen. If we take the FBI data—for what it is worth—the data shows that the Black male-white male disparity over the past fifteen years is much lower than the three-year period featured by ProPublica. The 21:1 ratio is the result of the way ProPublica parsed the data. We would point out that the reason that the three-year period cited by ProPublica gave such a high ratio is *that only one non-Hispanic white was reported as killed in 2010*, skewing the figures. By only analyzing a three-year period rather than a total of fifteen years, eliminating Hispanic youth from the category of whites, and focusing on young victims rather than all victims, we arrive at a fantastical probability or ratio—a “wild and disproportionate” racial disparity. The wild exaggeration of the actual disparity, incidentally, by falsely painting the fantasy of separate universes, tends to deprive Black victims and their families of the cooperative support and active participation in mass protests by the families, friends, and allies of working-class white victims.

Third, there is a methodological error in the study which, interestingly enough, is tucked away in a footnote in the article. The authors observe:

ProPublica calculated a statistical figure called a risk ratio by dividing the rate of black homicide victims by the rate of white victims. This ratio, commonly used in epidemiology, gives an estimate for how much more at risk black teenagers were to be killed by police officers. Risk ratios can have varying levels of precision, depending on a variety of mathematical factors. In this case, because such shootings are rare from a statistical perspective, a 95 percent confidence interval indicates that black teenagers are at between 10 and 40 (the interval is large due to the small sample) times greater risk of being killed by a police officer. The calculation used 2010-2012 population estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey.<sup>54</sup>

So the nineteen to twenty-one figure is taken as the mean of the confidence interval without giving the actual range, substituting instead an inaccurate putative range, and the numbers are based as noted on a small sample (three years) of a flawed FBI database, with the small sample containing a number (one non-Hispanic white killed in 2010) which is almost surely a fiction as we will see, but, on the face of it, at best an extreme statistical outlier. It is also important to note that risk ratios are usually associated with epidemiological studies characterized by far larger sample

populations, since the larger the sample, the smaller the margin of error.<sup>55</sup>

In contrast to Coates and others, we contend that police shootings, police brutality, and racial profiling—on the part of police—are not merely an example of irrational white hatred of the “Black body.” The use of racial profiling is a manifestation of repressive state power for the purposes of social control and is ideologically justified as a means of targeting those most likely to commit crimes. We are told that police—in their role as armed agents of the bourgeois State—are merely fighting a necessary evil, in the course of the infamous “War on Drugs,” in order to keep crime down or to thwart the threat of gang violence by “urban terrorists.”<sup>56</sup> What is class-based racial profiling becomes just good ole’ preventive police work.

The police in conjunction with the military function to enforce the rule of the bourgeoisie. It is principally working-class—white, Black, and brown—communities that are most heavily policed—not Brookville, New York (where the average net worth is estimated at \$1,670, 075) or Rolling Hills, California (\$1,647,622), or Belle Meade, Tennessee (\$1,578,235).

The expansion and intensification of the activities of the police, the courts, and the prison systems over the last thirty years has been first and foremost a *class* phenomenon; it is not a *mass*—broad and indiscriminate—phenomenon. (To highlight the class character of police shootings and the criminal justice system in general is not to diminish the murder of Prince Jones, a member of the petit bourgeoisie, but it is to emphasize that Coates takes Jones’s situation, an outlier, as representative in order to make his caste argument.) Historically, the State apparatus uses its coercive powers—in the form of the army, police, prisons, and the judicial system—to maintain the hegemony of the ruling class. The message is simple: “We have the guns, we have the dogs, you will obey.”<sup>57</sup> In preserving “law and order,” police even draw upon members of the working class, whether through “community policing” or as employees of the police, prisons, and courts. In times like these we are reminded of the words of left-wing prison activist and writer George Jackson. In his 1972 classic *Blood In My Eye* Jackson observed, “Anyone who can pass the civil service examination today can kill me tomorrow. Anyone who passed the civil service examination yesterday can kill me today with complete immunity.”<sup>58</sup> Here we should note that Jackson does not use metaphors such as “majoritarian pigs” that blur the true nature of power relations. For Jackson, “anyone who passed the civil service examination”—whether Euro-American, African-American, Asian-American, or Latino-American—is allowed to justly kill someone in the name of maintaining “law and order” or, as in the case of Trayvon Martin, “standing your ground.”

In the post-civil rights era, it is important to note that the “rule of law” is carried out on behalf of a *multi-racial/multi-national* ruling class—composed of both men and women—which includes Charles E. Samuels, Jr. (former head of the Federal Bureau of Prisons), Edward Lee (mayor of San Francisco, California), Jean Quan (mayor of Oakland, California), Stephanie Rawlings-Blake (mayor of Baltimore,

Maryland), Susan Rice (United States National Security Advisor), and Barack Obama, among many other individuals who are extremely diverse ethnically.

The media coverage has led well-intentioned and learned people to make some rather absurd and callous statements. Take, for instance, the remarks from the Nobel prize-winning author Toni Morrison: “People keep saying, ‘We need to have a conversation about race. . . . This is the conversation. I want to see a cop shoot a white unarmed teenager in the back,’ Morrison says, finally. “And I want to see a white man convicted for raping a black woman. Then when you ask me, ‘Is it over?’, I will say yes.”<sup>59</sup>

The framework of this sort of comment is repeated by Coates in his *Atlantic* article on reparations when he suggests, “[a]n unsegregated America might see poverty, and all its effects, spread across the country with no particular bias toward skin color. Instead, the concentration of poverty has been paired with the concentration of melanin.”<sup>60</sup> Now, as we have suggested, an “unsegregated America” would rob the ruling class of one of its main sources of social control. But putting this point aside for the moment, what is interesting about Coates’s and Morrison’s comments is that they weirdly mirror the neoliberal ideal, which would eliminate racial and gender inequality and naturalize gross class inequality. The point is that both Morrison’s and Coates’s claims are based on some questionable assumptions. In order to get a better grasp of the issue, let’s actually look at some of the statistics concerning police shootings.

Race	Raw Numbers	Percentage
White	495	50%
Black	248	25.1%
Hispanic	171	17.2%
Other and Unknown Racial Background	101	10.2%

Source: *The Washington Post*, Police Shooting Database, 2015.

Age	Raw Numbers	Percentage
Under 18	16	2%
18 to 29	260	32.5%
30 to 44	292	36.5%
45 and up	215	26.87%
Unknown	17	2.13%

Source: *The Washington Post*, Police Shooting Database, 2015.

Age	Total	White	Black
Under 18	18	10	5
18 to 29	330	120	124
30 to 44	353	171	91
45 and up	277	190	34
Unknown	12	3	4

Source: *The Washington Post*, Police Shooting Database, 2015.

Race	Raw Numbers	Percentage
White	578	51%
Black	303	27%
Hispanic	194	17%
Asian American	28	2%
Native American	13	1%
Other and Unknown Racial Background	24	2%

Source: *The Guardian*, Police Shooting Database, 2015.

Age	Raw Numbers	Percentage
Under 18	19	1.7%
18 to 24	189	17%
25 to 34	359	31.5%
35 to 44	243	21.3%
45 and up	326	28.5%

Source: *The Guardian*, Police Shooting Database, 2015.

Country	Total Number	Per Million
United States	1,145	3.56
Canada	22	0.63
United Kingdom	3	0.04
China	4	0.02
Germany	2	0.02
Japan	0	0

Number of people killed by police throughout the world in 2015. Source: *The Independent*.<sup>61</sup>

Depending on the source, in 2015 alone, there were between 990 and 1,145 police *shootings/killings* in the United States—compared to twenty-two in Canada, three in the United Kingdom, two in Germany, and none in Japan. According to the *Washington Post* database, there were a total of 990 fatal police shootings. Of the total number of “fatal shootings,” the vast majority of victims were males. Of the total number of “fatal shootings,” 50 percent of the victims were Euro-American and 25.1 percent were Black people. A total of 93 people (or 9.4 percent) killed by police were unarmed; Black people accounted for a total of 41 percent (38 of the 93) shot dead compared to 34 percent (32) who were white.

Now, if we compare the *Washington Post* database to *The Guardian*, there are some interesting differences. *The Guardian* reports that a total of 1,145 people were killed—not necessarily shot and this difference between shootings and killings appears to account for most of the difference in the numbers—by police in 2015. Two hundred thirty-three of the people killed were unarmed compared to ninety-three as reported by the *Washington Post*. Out of the 233 who were unarmed, 105 of them were white compared to seventy-nine Black people. A total of thirty-three people armed with a toy weapon were killed according to the *Washington Post*; twenty-two of these people were white, and five were Black. On the other hand, *The Guardian* shows that twenty-eight people with a toy weapon were killed in 2015. In *The Guardian*, those killed with a toy weapon are included in a separate category called “other.” In this category are included victims who do not fall clearly into either the armed or unarmed category (as the example of toy weapon suggests) and includes using a vehicle as a weapon (driving toward an officer) or holding a baseball bat. Or where the facts are somehow “unknown.” In this category of “other,” fifty of the victims are Black, one hundred four are white.

These statistics are pretty stark evidence of racism. After all, Black folks are about 13 percent of the population while white (non-Hispanic) folks make up about 62–64 percent. On the one hand, in 2015, twice as many whites were fatally shot by cops in absolute terms as Black people. On the other hand, Black people were shot 2.5 times more by the police, relative to their proportion of the US population. If we look at the data disaggregated, we find that in the 18–29 group, the numbers as a percentage of the population are roughly five to one Black/white; for under eighteen, the ratio is roughly five to two in 2015. The older people get, the smaller the ratio, and in the category of men 45–54, white men are killed at a slightly higher rate.

Now, imagine if a group focused on this latter statistic and treated it as synecdoche? We might assume whoever did this to be a white supremacist, neo-Nazi, or, to cite a more establishment source, a news anchor on Fox News. Coates, Morrison, and various members of the “Black Lives Matter” movement are guilty of cherry picking the numbers. What is clear is that the BLM meme of Black youth killed at a rate of nineteen to twenty-one times that of white youth is not supported by the best sources for statistical information.<sup>62</sup>

From a Marxist perspective, police violence is part of a larger crisis within the political economy of monopoly capitalism *affecting all working-class people*. It is not the result of a “white conspiracy” against “Black bodies.” In line with the sociologist Loïc Wacquant, we argue that police practices, the courts, and prisons “have been finely targeted, first by class, second by that disguised brand of ethnicity called race, and third by place.”<sup>63</sup> The *regular* victims of police harassment, arrest, imprisonment, and shootings are members of the working class; this includes “disproportionate numbers of the homeless, the mentally ill, the alcohol- and drug-addicted, and the severely handicapped: nearly one in four suffers from a physical, psychiatric, or emotional ailment serious enough to hamper their ability to work.”<sup>64</sup> If we focus on the *Black-white duality* when it comes to the criminal justice system, we will ignore the existence of *class disproportionality* within both white and Black people as a group. That is to say, members of the Black bourgeoisie and petit bourgeoisie are far less likely to be victims of police shootings, harassment, and arrest. Why? Because of their class position and the places they frequent, their neighborhoods, that is, geographical locations, the Black petit bourgeoisie and bourgeoisie are less likely to come in contact with police and the criminal justice system. As Bruce Western argues, “the cumulative risk of imprisonment for African American males without a high school diploma tripled between 1979 and 1999 to reach the astonishing rate of 59%, the lifetime chance of serving time for black men with some college education decreased from 6% to 5%.”<sup>65</sup>

Note that Western’s statistics say little about the Black petit bourgeoisie and bourgeoisie, as many people attending *some* college are themselves working class and will remain so. But the comment does give some idea of how much education matters even as it is only a weak proxy for class. As Wacquant so eloquently puts it, to focus on the Black-white duality in discussions of the criminal justice system “obfuscates the fact that *class disproportionality inside each ethnic category is greater than the racial disproportionality between them*.”<sup>66</sup> To be clear, we are not implying that members of the petit bourgeoisie and bourgeoisie are never victims of police shootings, harassment, or prison incarceration.<sup>67</sup>

Even though Coates and others may argue that working-class whites belong to the “master race,” and are “Dreamers,” should we view their deaths as “justifiable homicides of felons,” collateral damage, or the result of friendly fire? Sociologist Paul J. Hirschfield makes a perceptive observation: “Although various forms of racism are likely important to any valid explanation of America’s exceptionally lethal police, they are far from the whole story. American police are also killing whites at alarming rates. Using FE (fatalencounters.org) data, I calculated that 490 non-Latino white Americans were fatally shot by the police in 2013. If German police fatally shot as many people (seven) in 2013 as they did in 2012 (Lartey 2015) and all were white, then white Americans were 26 times more likely to die by police gunfire in 2013 than white Germans.”<sup>68</sup> For Coates, the number of Black people killed can only be “wild and disproportionate” because he completely ignores the *real* number of whites killed.

In order to reach the conclusion that the number of Black people murdered by police is “wild and disproportionate,” Coates has to make the United States polity a caste system. This is evident in his *Atlantic* article “The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration.” He explains the prison industrial complex in a nutshell as *giving employment to white workers to guard Black bodies*. Black bodies suffer and white workers benefit seems to be the obvious implication. It is further implied that this stark dichotomy updates the relation of white slave patrols to Black runaway slaves. This narrative is reinforced in his response to Cedric Johnson where he notes, as discussed above, that white and Black workers live in different universes with regard to the prison industrial complex. If we put the two comments together, we have the following argument: they are in different universes with regard to imprisonment but are reunited in the prison in the form of white workers ruling over Black bodies. Coates returns to this claim in *BWM*. The following quote comes as part of a culminating narrative in which Black bodies continually play the same role (the plundered) for the Dreamers:

In the New Deal, we were their guestroom, their finished basement [note: recall the incessant trope whereby Black bodies are as a group at the bottom of the well, here the image is “basement,” and elsewhere it is “dungeon”] and today, with a sprawling prison system which has turned the warehousing of black bodies into a jobs program for Dreamers and a lucrative investment for Dreamers; today when 8 percent of the world’s prisoners are black men, our bodies have refinanced the dream of being white. Black life is cheap but in America black bodies are a natural resource of incomparable value. (131)

In “The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration,” Coates notes: “Deindustrialization had presented an employment problem for America’s poor and working class of all races. Prison presented a solution: jobs for whites, and warehousing for blacks.”<sup>69</sup>

If we look at the statistical data from both *The Washington Post* and *The Guardian*, we can only reach the conclusion that Coates has provided us with a “wild and disproportionate” claim grounded in his immediate perception, not objective reality. First of all, there are nearly 900,000 non-Hispanic whites in jails and prisons.<sup>70</sup> One of the implications of a “race first” or “liberal nationalist” analysis of racism, as we have been arguing, is that while the racial disparities (i.e., racism) of the prison system and other US capitalist institutions are highlighted, the impact on whites, particularly white working-class folks, is assumed to be either negligible, irrelevant, or a “benefit.” Statistics show that the white male imprisonment rate of 678/100,000, while dwarfed by the Black male rate of 4300/100,000, would itself lead the world by a wide margin. The caste interpretation misses the larger picture of how racism impacts the entire working class negatively and by virtue of this omission almost inevitably acts to divide the working class further.<sup>71</sup>

Second, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, as of 2015, Black people make up 11 percent of the “judges, magistrates, and other judicial workers,” 26 percent of “bailiffs, correctional officers, and jailers,” and 23.3 percent in the category of “probation officers and correctional treatment specialists.”<sup>72</sup> The statistics around police shootings and the prison industrial complex seriously undermine Coates’s caste account. For Coates, the statistics expressing the reality of police shootings and the prison industrial complex are all about a one-dimensional plunder of “Black bodies” for the benefit of Dreamers, those who think they are white. But the reality we say fits a Marxist view of racism, hurting all workers enormously *but differentially*.

To be blunt, Coates’s focus on the “Black body” lets capitalism off the hook by blaming injustice on whiteness abstracted from class dominance. If the vast majority of victims of police shootings—whether Euro-American, African-American, Latino-American, or Asian-American—are from working-class backgrounds, how do you separate racism from class exploitation and domination? To be fair, it is possible to imagine “class differences” without exploitation if we assume that class is Weberian in nature and really about status, income, occupation, or education. However, from a Marxist perspective, as Ellen Wood astutely notes, “the difference that constitutes ‘class’ as an ‘identity’ is, by definition, a relationship of inequality and power, in a way that sexual or cultural ‘difference’ need not be.”<sup>73</sup>

The political scientist Adolph Reed is on the right track to argue that the “race first” position reflects the neo-classical economic presupposition—associated with Milton Friedman, Gary Becker, and Thomas Sowell—that “the market is a just, effective, or even acceptable system for rewarding talent and virtue and punishing their opposites and that, therefore, removal of ‘artificial’ impediments to its functioning like race and gender will make it even more efficient and just.”<sup>74</sup>

The “Black Lives Matter” movement and Coates, through their “race first” analysis, separate out racism from class dominance, and as part of this separation, incorporate liberal versions of whiteness studies and the social construction of race while rejecting Marxism as “class reductionist.” One of the most prevalent beliefs emerging from this strain of antiracist politics has been a level of visceral and vitriolic anti-Marxism. For instance, Marissa Johnson, co-founder of the Seattle “Black Lives Matter,” rallied against Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders for being a “class reductionist” and not recognizing that the struggle for racial democracy is separate from issues related to economic inequality.<sup>75</sup> (Of course, we beg to differ.) As such, it could be implied that the fight for racial democracy is the antipode of socialist democracy, that is to say, addressing grievances that could be construed as specifically racial take precedence over and are separate from issues dealing with the redistribution of wealth or the elimination of capitalism. This position is rooted in the *explanatory* primacy of race.

Whiteness becomes a mysterious property brought into being by the presence of nonwhite bodies so that the

Norwegian, Jew, and Irish person are turned white—not by a complex ideological process shaped primarily by the ruling class—but by an impetus triggered by the opportunity to dominate nonwhites bodies. The new antiracists also incorporate liberal versions of queer theory, thus updating Black nationalism for our neo-liberal, multiculturalist moment. To return to Barbara Foley’s point on what publishing success and the integration of BLM into the democratic establishment narrative indicates about civil society’s normative assumptions, Coates’s work (assigned to the entering freshman class at Howard University, by the way) itself may be helping to restructure bourgeois social control, facilitating the class rule of a neo-liberal, multicultural bourgeoisie and fostering divisions among multicultural/multiracial workers.

Coates’s caste analysis in conjunction with the policy suggestions offered by the liberal faction of the “Black Lives Matter” movement never question the legitimacy of bourgeois civil society and the “dictatorship of the bourgeoisie.” They are content to suggest that body cameras, bike patrols, community policing, and other such efforts are possible solutions to police shootings. They never question whether these reforms will only further legitimate the use of police in working-class communities. The only real reform—possible under capitalism—is to take away the right of police officers to use violence against citizens, that is, take away police weapons. We don’t need community policing or more appropriately friendly repressive police tactics. Given their objective role in the reproduction of bourgeois civil society, police can never be simply “benevolent problem solvers” in working-class communities, though such problem-solving may occur on occasion, e.g., when they act as an ambulance to rush an injured person to the hospital or remove a spouse abuser from the house without injury. As Kristian Williams convincingly argues, “Community policing turns the citizenry into the eyes and ears of the state and by the same means creates a demand for more aggressive tactics. This is where street sweeps, roadblocks, saturation patrols, zero-tolerance campaigns, and paramilitary units come into the picture.”<sup>76</sup> In recent years, we have seen community policing has gone hand-in-glove with urban renewal, neighborhood revitalization and ultimately gentrification. We need a de-militarization of the police force.<sup>77</sup> We need to do away with “zero-tolerance policing” and take away police officer’s militaristic weapons and tactics and access to “legitimate” state violence. This is not a utopian demand; this is a demand for the protection of our human rights and an end to arbitrary harassment, brutality, and arrest. As long as police officers have weapons, violence—or the threat of violence—is implicit in every police interaction with citizens and is more likely to rear its head when it is inappropriate and illegitimate. Any effort to reform criminal justice policy in the United States must have a broad working-class base in order to make a difference.

### **“A DIFFERENT WORLD”: HOWARD UNIVERSITY AND BLACK BOURGEOIS COSMOPOLITANISM**

In the discussion of the historically Black Howard University, Coates presents the reader with political commentary in the form of self-criticism. This retrospective on his “student days”

at Howard offers a portrait of the political enlightenment of the young Coates, in which he soothes the reader's potential anxiety about his adoption of an essentialist form of nationalism. Since his nationalist dream is torn to shreds at Howard University, Coates would deny that he should be characterized as a nationalist. But the reality is that he reconstitutes his nationalism in a way that might be called postmodernist; that is, he discards racial essentialism with respect to Black people, adopts a social constructionist conception of race, only to replace his conception of Black identity with Black bourgeois cosmopolitanism. The whole process is almost dizzyingly incoherent and so please be patient as we attempt to analyze its incoherence, historical inaccuracies, and rhetorical function.

Coates spends a considerable amount of time reminiscing about his time at Howard University, a historically Black college in Washington, DC, which he calls "The Mecca" (a reference full of ambiguities given his professed atheism). "The Mecca" is a "machine, crafted to capture and concentrate the dark energy of all African peoples." He even describes DC as "the capital of federal power and black power." In this section, we argue that Coates's discussion about Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) functions as a form of ideological mystification about bourgeois civil society.

Coates presents to the reader and his son his initial dalliance with Black nationalism and racial essentialism. The first stage of Coates's political enlightenment ("the cold steel truths of life") comes as a result of being exposed to Black nationalism and/or Afrocentricity through the works of Chancellor Williams, J. A. Rogers, John Jackson, and others; he states that the African historian and Howard professor Chancellor William's book *Destruction of Black Civilization* was his Bible.<sup>78</sup> Like so many before and after him, Coates came to accept the myth that all Black people are descendants of African kings and queens.<sup>79</sup> At Howard, Coates finds "the Dream of a 'black race'" as the antipode of the American (white) Dream. Coates's nationalist Dream—"the story of our own royalty"—becomes an intellectual weapon against white supremacy, against the Dreamers. After taking courses in the history department at Howard, however, he is awakened from the false dream of Afrocentricity and/or a naïve form of nationalism.

Coates's journey contrasts Black nationalist mythologies with the white Dream. Eventually, Coates reaches the conclusion that there is nothing essential about being Black. He notes: "There was nothing holy or particular in my skin; I was black because of history and heritage. There was no nobility in falling, in being bound, in living oppressed, and there was no inherent meaning in black blood. Black blood wasn't black; black skin wasn't even black" (55). He later reaches the conclusion: "To be black and beautiful was not a matter for gloating. Being black did not immunize us from history's logic or the lure of the Dream. The writer, and that was what I was becoming, must be wary of every Dream and every nation, even his own nation. Perhaps his own nation more than any other, precisely because it is his own" (53). One of the ironies of this quote is the suggestion that even Black people can be Dreamers.

He prefaces his journey beyond naïve nationalism with the comment that the Black World is more than a "photonegative" of "that people who believe they are white." The Black World is full of diversity, teeming with "Ponzi schemers and Christian cultists, Tabernacle fanatics and mathematical geniuses." "The Mecca" is the "crossroads of the black diaspora" (40). All the students at Howard University were "hot and incredible, exotic even, though we hailed from the same tribe" (42). Howard, the so-called "Capstone of Negro Education," becomes the embodiment of Black bourgeois cosmopolitanism for Coates. While Coates admits that he is driven by nostalgia, he, nonetheless, sees Howard as a place of self-discovery and self-invention, "a machine, crafted to capture and concentrate the dark energy of all African peoples" (40). Clearly, this Black self-invention is to be contrasted to white self-invention, with its need to dominate.<sup>80</sup>

Coates's self-criticism of his naïve nationalism is focused on its essentialism, that is, the view that all Black people are essentially the same and qualitatively different from those "people who believe they are white." Despite the fact that essentialism is often counterposed to social constructionism, with Coates we get a modification. While *not all members of the Black "tribe" are identical in every respect*, their identity rests in *the essential diversity of Blackness*. So, a close reading of the book reveals that he does not completely reject nationalism. Rather Coates's nationalism is reconstituted on the basis of an *essential diversity of Blackness* (Blackness as a "herd of dissenters") (50); but it is an essential diversity itself rooted in the dismissal of class "diversity" among Black people and the aestheticization of this diversity as "hot."<sup>81</sup> The Black body is a "spectrum of dark energy" (50). This metaphor, Coates's official rejection of Afrocentrism notwithstanding, should remind the reader of the idealist presupposition of Afrocentrism associated with Molefi Asante, Marimba Ani, and others. Asante's concept of a "composite African" entails that continental Africans and people of African descent—whether in Cuba, Brazil, the United States, England, or Africa—respond to "the same rhythms of the universe, the same cosmological sensibilities, the same general historical reality."<sup>82</sup> Here a concept of Black particularity is grounded on a theory of identity frozen in time that conveniently ignores dialectical change. The essence of identity, for Asante, is not seen as a process of *becoming*; rather, it is a fixed, natural, state of *being*. We should take note that Asante's claim is presented as a self-evident fact or apodictic.<sup>83</sup> We would add if, in this version, African peoples are reessentialized through their essential diversity, "whites" are essentially homogenous.

Coates's stroll down memory lane is more fantasy than reality. There is no denying the fact that most African Americans were not allowed to attend predominantly white colleges and universities prior to the elimination of Jim and Jane Crow. Consequently, HBCUs took on the mission of "uplifting the race" and providing quality education to Black people. The HBCU motto could be summarized as "All those who desire an education should have the opportunity to receive one." Even today, HBCUs are marketed as the only educational institutions in the United States which provide nurturing environments for Black students. Yet,

today, the missionary spirit of these institutions has died a slow death, the quality of education has declined, and they have become completely subordinated to the logic of capital—no different than white peer institutions. Whatever truth there was to the missionary spirit of the HBCUs, these institutions have become “purveyors of super-American, ultra-bourgeois prejudices and aspirations.”<sup>84</sup>

All universities and colleges have been and are currently subjected to the pressures of the capitalist market, that is, the drive for profits. As Ferguson has observed:

University presidents, government leaders in conjunction with “captains of industry” [have begun] restructuring the university in order to completely subordinate it systematically to corporate and finance capital. The capitalist restructuring of universities [means] that each department [is] . . . a “revenue center,” each university course a consumer product, each student a customer, each professor an academic entrepreneur, each administrator a manager, all stakeholders in promoting the university in its never-ending search for profits. A “new” free-market vocabulary of customers and stakeholders, shared governance, massive open online courses (MOOCs), niche marketing, technology and curriculum innovation, assessments and branding [have become] the governing mantras on college campus[es]. . . . Priorities in higher education [have become] increasingly determined by the bottom line.<sup>85</sup>

This describes any and all institutions of higher learning in the United States—whether HBCU or PWI.<sup>86</sup> By ignoring this reality, Coates’s portrait of HBCUs becomes as romantic as Spike Lee’s *School Daze* or the television sitcom *A Different World*. We are not discounting the rich history of HBCUs. But this history must not be romanticized. We have to look at the antinomies of HBCUs. Coates willfully ignores the views of John Hope Franklin, Abram Harris, Ernest Everett Just, Alain Locke, Amiri Baraka, and too many others who criticized HBCUs, particularly Howard, for being “citadels of political quiescence and paternal authoritarianism,” sinking in economic quicksand and lead by incompetent and bureaucratic leadership.<sup>87</sup>

The renowned African American historian John Hope Franklin, a member of the Howard history department from 1947 to 1956, was quite critical of Coates’s Mecca. Franklin was disgusted with the authoritarian impulses of Howard’s first Black president Mordecai Johnson, who rivaled Ralph Ellison’s larger-than-life character Dr. Bledsoe.<sup>88</sup> Based on his experience as a faculty member at Howard, Franklin recalled that Howard’s administration ruled as feudal lords through tyranny and bureaucracy, while fleecing any and all money from the pockets of students. Franklin later recounted that his experience at Howard was nothing short of a “series of frustrations.”<sup>89</sup>

Coates writes as if HBCUs have never been in a constant state of impending crisis. Whether Mordecai Johnson’s Howard University, Benjamin May’s Morehouse, or

Charles S. Johnson’s Fisk, or, in modern times, Wayne A. I. Frederick’s Howard University or Harold Martin’s North Carolina A&T, these institutions preach a gospel of “make do with less.”

In the Age of Austerity, HBCUs are trapped by Booker T. Washington’s dream of industrial education. Today, the dream is one of producing more Black engineers or stockbrokers rather than the next Romare Bearden, John B. McLendon, Jr., Kara Walker, or Paul Beatty. The business of universities is to construct majors tailored to the marketplace. Institutional funding trickles down to the humanities, particularly English and philosophy.<sup>90</sup> Historically, these institutions languish in the dungeon of anti-intellectualism, heavy teaching loads, and underpaid faculty and staff—while every Black chancellor or president is imprisoned with the hope that their institution will be the next “Black Harvard.” And, yet, these institutions remain underfinanced and understaffed caricatures of whatever predominantly white institution they have decided to emulate. Students and faculty are left to their own devices when their library resources are a notch above most high school libraries. In fact, scholarly research is virtually impossible without access to the library resources of a nearby predominantly white college or university.<sup>91</sup>

In our “post-racial” times, HBCUs find themselves competing with predominantly white colleges and universities for Black students. Many HBCUs—like Bennett College and Chicago State University—are on the brink of closing their doors because of low enrollment and/or declining state funding. And those HBCUs that are receiving public funding are struggling to retain and/or graduate students. HBCUs awarded only 15 percent of the bachelor’s degrees Blacks earned in 2012-2013 compared with 35 percent in 1976-1977.<sup>92</sup> In his flight of fantasy, Coates ignores the ways in which HBCU presidents are paid mid-six-figure salaries while tuition is rising and the salaries of faculty and staff are stagnating—if not declining. Today, presidents at HBCUs, the Board of Trustees, and donors have become prisoners of government and military funding in addition to capital-fund projects such as \$1.3 million clock towers and lavish multimillion student centers.<sup>93</sup> Desegregation becomes both a blessing and a curse for HBCUs.

While HBCUs do not substantially differ in many respects from predominantly white colleges and universities, the key difference rests in the manner in which the Black College Mystique is used to perpetuate the fraud that HBCUs are “crafted to capture and concentrate the dark energy of all African peoples.” Such that Coates tells his son, “Struggle for the warmth of The Mecca” (151). What is the “warmth of The Mecca,” the reader might ask? We do know that the fictional images that Ellison paints in *The Invisible Man* and Nella Larsen in *Quicksand* are closer to reality than “The Mecca” of Coates.

### “I URGE YOU TO STRUGGLE” – FOR WHAT? COATES’S SUBJECTIVIST CONCEPTION OF POLITICAL STRUGGLE

Coates often utilizes metaphors of natural disaster when describing the horrors that result from the history of

racism in the United States. As Lester Spence astutely notes, for Coates, “white supremacy has the impact, the visceral impact, of what Christians would call an act of God. But [Coates] simultaneously believes it is the creation of institutions with very specific man-made roles and powers.”<sup>94</sup> As such, Coates’s narrative oscillates between voluntarism and fatalism. This is reflective of the age-old antinomy between free will and determinism. This antinomy is largely shaped by Coates’s need to see whites (mostly American) as plunderers of “Black bodies” and the Earth. It would seem to derive from a deep and for all practical purposes psycho-cultural essentialism that immunizes the “Dreamers” from change to the extent that they are not worth struggling with. US society is dominated by those who freely invent themselves as white in order to dominate Black folk and Mother Earth. And yet they cannot help themselves. Coates’s rhetoric thus describes those who need to be white as products of self-making and democratic will on the one hand yet driven by deep psychocultural influences they appear largely incapable of resisting on the other—influences that Coates does not analyze, relying on James Baldwin to do the analytical work. White people—who are representatives of the democratic will of America, the majoritarian pigs whose lead the police follow—have willingly plundered “the Black body” and yet they are driven by psychocultural forces beyond their control. Black folks, on the other hand, are faced with their own version of this antinomy: on one hand, those like Prince Jones are helpless victims of “cosmic injustice”; on the other hand, others, like Coates and his son, can struggle, but not with the Dreamers, who cannot be reached or are not worth reaching.

Coates, as noted above, claims that racism is “a force of nature, the helpless agent of our world’s laws” (83). Coates offers us many reiterations of this point throughout *BWM*. Here is one example:

Perhaps one person can make a change, but not the kind of change that would raise your body to equality with your countrymen. The fact of history is that black people have not—probably no people have ever—liberated themselves strictly through their own efforts. *In every great change in the lives of African Americans we see the hand of events that were beyond our individual control, events that were not unalloyed goods. You cannot disconnect our emancipation in the Northern colonies from the blood spilled in the Revolutionary War, any more than you can disconnect our emancipation from slavery in the South from the charnel houses of the Civil War, any more than you can disconnect our emancipation from Jim Crow from the genocides of the Second World War. History is not solely in our hands. And still you are called to struggle, not because it assures you victory, but because it assures you an honorable and sane life.* (96-97, italics added)

While this might seem in isolation compatible with the Marxist view that people make history but not in conditions of their own choosing, it is not. White supremacy becomes naturalized as the product of the curse of whiteness. It is

a force of nature, the ultimate form of “cosmic injustice” (106). If white supremacy is an unstoppable force of nature, then there is no objective necessity to engage in political struggle.

He tells his son in essence that the “Dreamers” cannot be struggled with; that the “Dreamers” must struggle with themselves. Engaging in class struggle (a term he never uses) is futile. Having already written off the white working class because they are also “Dreamers,” Coates’s analysis also writes off the Black working class. We would note here, to return to the events surrounding the shooting of Prince Jones, that Jones’s shooting occasioned a fierce and prolonged struggle of multiracial leftist forces against the verdict. And while we noted Coates’s omission of this struggle above, it is important to note that Coates’s text has to omit it as the facts of multiracial antiracist class struggle in protest of the shooting and the behavior of the Prince George Police Department would absolutely undermine his entire ontology of struggle.

Coates and his son’s “Black bodies” are in the “dungeon,” or “the bottom of the well.” As Coates observes, “You and I, my son, are that ‘below.’ That was true in 1776. It is true today” (105). Magically, despite their objective class position as members of the petit bourgeoisie, we are to believe that Coates and his son are eternal members of the “wretched of the earth.” Moreover, anyone who has a Black body is supposed to be below—politically and economically—whites, the Dreamers, regardless of their class position. In our “post-racial” times, we are to believe that Barack Obama and Sonia Sotomayor (associate justice of the United States Supreme Court) are “below” a white working-class male or female.<sup>95</sup>

In the aftermath of the Great Recession of 2008, we find the specter of right-wing and extremely racist populism (Donald Trump in the United States, Marine Le Pen in France, Matteo Salvini in Italy, Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Geert Wilders in the Netherlands, as well as True Finns in Finland, and the UK Independence Party in the United Kingdom) is on the rise. Throughout the world, the anarchy of capitalism has become, as James Joyce’s Stephen declared in *Ulysses*, “a nightmare from which [we are] trying to awake.” The world is caught in a seemingly bottomless state of crisis in which “Dante would have found the worst horrors in his *Inferno* surpassed.”<sup>96</sup> What advice does Coates give his son (and by proxy the reader) on how to struggle against the exploitation and oppression throughout the world? What advice does he give his son on fighting against the juggernaut of “justified homicides” on the part of police officers—“our friends in blue”?

At best, Coates’s answer is pessimism clothed in apparent realism: Son, get along the best you can in a country “lost in the Dream.” At its worst, his answer is escapist, driven by an “irrepressible desire to unshackle [his] body and achieve the velocity of escape”—and, ultimately, go to France (21). Unfortunately, Coates does not tell his son to join the ranks of working-class Black youth and engage in the struggle against police violence. He does not tell his son to commit “class suicide” and fight to make the lives of working-class people better. There is not one mention of socialism, class

struggle, or anticapitalist struggles throughout the book. He doesn't tell his son to link the fight for the national democratic rights of Black people with the struggle for decent jobs, quality integrated housing, education, and health care for all. At best, we get a call for reparations based on the historical wrongs done to Black people. At his worst, Coates gives us the following:

I do not believe that we can stop them, Samori, because they must ultimately stop themselves. And still I urge you to struggle. Struggle for the memory of your ancestors. Struggle for wisdom. Struggle for the warmth of The Mecca. Struggle for your grandmother and grandfather, for your name. But do not struggle for the Dreamers. (151)

Throughout *Between the World and Me*, the question lingers, what is Samori to struggle for? What is the struggle that Coates wants us to engage in? His warning—to his son—that he should not “struggle for the Dreamers” leads us down the path of political quietism and inertia. The end result of Coates's political odyssey is nothing more than stoicism, subjective passivity in the wake of objective crisis. *And ultimately the handmaiden and mirror image of the very racism that divides and conquers all the separated sections of the working class.*

The trope of the “Black body” allows Coates to avoid offering a class analysis of the World writ large. We never get a sense of the social totality from Coates. In a period in which the “outdated antagonisms” of class struggle are staring him in the face, his vision is blind to the necessity for a leftist critique of bourgeois civil society and class dominance. Coates is perhaps the latest incarnation of the Black public intellectual—interpreting the hidden injuries of living in a Black body for the white (liberal bourgeois) public.<sup>97</sup> Ultimately, despite his call for his son to engage in struggle, the reader of his book is left with a *subjectivist* conception of political struggle grounded on bourgeois cosmopolitanism, existential pessimism, moral suasion, and a politics of empathy seeking to invoke white guilt. Coates's son is the victim of his father's antinomies: “Struggle for the warmth of The Mecca. . . . But do not struggle for the Dreamers.”

Coates's work focuses on the *political* and *cultural* representation of racial differences and, in turn, relegates the *economics* of difference to the margins of the theoretical universe. From a Marxist perspective, class differences are not reflective of differences in terms of status, lifestyle, or income. Class denotes one's objective relationship to the means of production. And exploitation, from the standpoint of Marxism, derives from one's objective relation to the means of production where power is attached to owning the means of production. Because the working class is not in possession of the means of production, they are subject to exploitation in the sphere of production—if they want to live. Because of the objective phenomenon of socialized production which is privately appropriated by the bourgeoisie, both Black and white workers are exploited under capitalism. This workers share in common despite racism, differences in culture, chauvinism on the part of white workers, etc. The struggle to overthrow capitalism

and the fight against racism and racial chauvinism are not mutually exclusive but integrally united. This is not a purely academic question which can be politely ignored given the fact that the vast majority of Black people are members of the working class.

A class analysis of racism begins with the presupposition that in class societies power is not distributed equally. Power is always constituted at the level of production—at the level of the separation between those who own the means of production (as a class) and those who do not own these means of production and thus are forced to sell their labor power in order to survive. Power is a structural relation deployed (particularly through the mediation of the State) for the purposes of exploitation and not a free-floating abstraction to which all people, regardless of their position in the social division of labor, have access.

We must acknowledge that not all Black people are subject to exploitation in the Marxist sense. Some Black people, as a result of their relationship to the means of production, are exploiters and oppressors. Here we could mention Oprah Winfrey (CEO of Harpo, Inc., and OWN network), Janice Bryant Howroyd, Stephen L. Hightower (founder and CEO of Hightowers Petroleum Co.), TIAA-CREF President and CEO Roger W. Ferguson, Jr., Harold Martin (Chancellor of North Carolina A&T), Kenneth I. Chenault (Chairman and CEO of American Express), Chairman and CEO of Xerox Corp. Ursula Burns, Carl Horton (CEO of the Absolut Spirit Company Inc.), Attorney General Loretta Lynch, former Attorney General Eric Holder, Merck Chairman and CEO Kenneth Frazier, Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, or Robert Parsons (CEO of AOL Time Warner). Can we seriously entertain the claim that Barack Obama or Oprah Winfrey as members of the ruling class are at a disadvantage with respect to the white working class?

Despite the fact that Coates divides the world into Black bodies and the (white) Dreamers, he tells his son, “It does not matter if the agent of those forces [that assault the Black body] is white or black—what matters is our condition, what matters is the system that makes your body breakable” (18). Yet, Coates does not offer us much detail on “our condition” or “the system.” We might note that Coates's use of the term “system” trades on more radical connotations; but it is senseless on the caste interpretation he commits himself to. This is yet another example of the incoherence, which if not pointed out for what it is, allows him to seem liberal, nationalist, antiessentialist, and radical all at once or, more appropriately, a “Black radical liberal.”

Leading up to the 2016 presidential election in the United States, there is much to justify the “radical Black liberalism” of Coates. Social media and news pundits have given voice to a fraction of the ruling class—fueled by the rhetoric of Barry Goldwater, George Wallace, Richard Nixon, Pat Buchanan, Ronald Reagan, Rudy Giuliani, and Donald Trump—which appeals to the “Silent White Majority,” pitting one segment of the working class against the other in the hopes of “making America great again.”

On the other hand, a significant, yet often ignored, reality today is that the ruling class and its political allies and

especially its ideologies are multiracial in character. The power relations of class domination and racial inequality are being mediated by the articulation of a multiculturalist ideology. Corporate multiculturalism is functioning as a new model of social control. Corporate diversity or multiculturalism can facilitate capital accumulation and reproduction. But it should not be inferred that corporate multiculturalism will lead to the elimination of racial inequality or the redistribution of wealth in order to destroy class inequality. This new form of social control is a form of “benign neglect” of class inequality; while integrating more nonwhites into the ruling class, the exploitation of a segregated multiracial working-class continues.

The advance of a few individuals into the ranks of the petit bourgeoisie and bourgeoisie should not signal the end of racial inequality. Rather, it is a sign of the restructuring of class domination. So, while racial inequality has not disappeared, the Black petit bourgeoisie and bourgeoisie is playing a significant role in the reproduction of racial inequality via its support of finance and corporate capital. The social consciousness of this new Black bourgeoisie differs from that of the old Black capitalist class because its economic existence depends to a greater extent on finance and corporate capital. It does not market its services or commodities exclusively to the Black community and it has a weaker affiliation with and interest in the political, social, and economic development of the Black working class.<sup>98</sup> The increased immiseration of the Black working class goes hand in glove with the growing political power and wealth of the Black bourgeoisie.

Clearly, we are not arguing that we live in a post-racial society. We are arguing that the manner in which racism is reproduced has definitely changed. Historically, the existence of the “Color Line” as a system of oppression ostensibly involved the *exclusion* of non-whites, particularly Black people, from participation in bourgeois (white) civil society at all levels. In the post-Civil Rights era, however, deepening class conflict within the Black class structure has greatly impacted the reproduction of racism.

The ongoing class struggle for political and ideological hegemony is reflected in the appropriation of multiculturalist discourse. This multiculturalist ideology is not tokenism but a systematic process of political incorporation. It would appear that multicultural tolerance of difference has become something practiced by the ruling class; it is not just an ideal. (Even Trump has Latino and Black supporters like Katrina Campins and conservative pastor Darrell Scott). Tokenism has become dialectically sublated by multiculturalist ideology, and corporate diversity has come to function as an ideological smoke screen for the reproduction of class domination and racial inequality. Political strategies organized around the politics of identity discount the political economy of differences, that is, class inequalities, or pit “race” against class, while distorting both.

In today’s times, images of diversity are everywhere including news staffs, advertisements, presidential campaigns, sports coverage, entertainment, and popular television shows. It is common to witness companies such

as Google, Hewlett Packard Enterprise, Qualcomm, and EMC Corp. denouncing North Carolina’s recent anti-LGBT legislation Public Facilities Privacy & Security Act (NC HB2). In April 2014, Donald Sterling, then-owner of the Los Angeles Clippers, was stripped of his ownership, banned from the NBA for life, and fined \$2.5 million by the league after private recordings of him making racist comments were made public. Ultimately, Sterling was forced to sell 100 percent of the Clippers to former Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer for \$2 billion; Sterling made a record profit since he purchased the struggling San Diego Clippers (the predecessor to the Clippers) for \$12.5 million in 1981. It has become a common practice of both political parties to routinely run political candidates that are multiracial, female, and gay, who are not politically radical but committed to the reproduction of bourgeois social relations of production. Multiculturalist discourse celebrates diversity without fundamentally changing power differentials between the working class and the bourgeoisie. It functions as a smoke screen for the continuation of racism with the participation of a multiracial ruling class—composed of both men and women.<sup>99</sup> One has to look at the irony of corporate executives coming out to oppose North Carolina’s HB2 law, but no corporations have come out in opposition to a plethora of voter ID laws—which primarily impacts the participation of working-class people in the political process—passed by state legislatures in the past few years.

Why has Coates’s “middle-class” Black rage and consequent appeal to white guilt propelled him to his success? One answer would be that Coates’s ideas are now hegemonic, reflecting the ideas of a fraction of the ruling class, namely, the liberal bourgeoisie, which has had to respond to and incorporate a host of movements from below. Coates’s social commentary and political ideas represent an attempt to combine bourgeois liberalism and bourgeois nationalism as an answer to the crisis of capital. While he publicly entertains the idea of a “beautiful struggle” for social democracy, he silently accepts that the vampire of capitalism is here to stay. This would, perhaps, explain why Coates has become the doyen of “Black radical liberalism.”<sup>100</sup>

## CONCLUSION

As noted briefly above, Coates sees the plunder of Black bodies being extended to the plunder of the earth. That the Dreamers threaten the planet is on the one hand an absurdity, as noted just above. But if we take it seriously, this makes his position on struggle even more incomprehensible and certainly incoherent.

Although our focus here is on the relation between Coates’s essentialist (however updated) understanding of whiteness and Blackness and its implications for his understanding of struggle, it ought to be pointed out how misguided it is to analyze climate change as deriving from flawed national character (the need to plunder) and not capitalism’s triple imperative of maximum profit, competition, and constant growth. The problem of constant growth should be obvious on a finite planet while competition fueling the growth imperative almost guarantees that global cooperation (including the sharing of genuinely green innovations) required to solve this problem will not occur.<sup>101</sup> And of

course the profit criterion makes the problem of sunk capital a very serious one since massive investments in fossil fuels are not likely to be written off: witness the serious problem that China has with its relatively recent coal plants they've built, totaling according to Vaclav Smil upwards of 300 billion dollars.<sup>102</sup> It is well known that at this point, the world's leading emitter of greenhouse gases annually is China, and India is pretty likely to pass the US as well. Will we now be condemning three national characters or arguing nonsensically that the Chinese and Indians have become themselves "Dreamers"?<sup>103</sup>

It has been our point all along that Coates omits class struggles from his narrative. And—similar to Cedric Johnson's critique—Coates leaves us with white liberal guilt (like Baldwin); instead of solidarity, Coates asserts that "exclusion promotes solidarity" too. Coates notes, "whiteness confers knowable, quantifiable privileges, regardless of class—much like 'manhood' confers knowable, quantifiable privileges, regardless of race. White supremacy is neither a trick, nor a device, but one of the most powerful shared interests in American history."<sup>104</sup>

Our response to this is the following: There is the solidarity of multiracial working class unity, where antiracism is made central to the forging of such unity, rooted in the understanding that divisions in the working class always operate in the interests of capital and against the interests of the exploited class. And then there are class collaborationist, even fascist, forms of solidarity like white supremacy. Solidarity in the interests of human flourishing cannot be equated with solidarity rooted in rhetorics and strategies of fear and insecurity. And these rhetorics and strategies, to the extent that they gain power, cannot be laid at the feet of ordinary workers. As Wright notes in *Native Son*, solidarity can go in many directions: Bigger is as attracted to fascism as he is to the rather embarrassing reds Wright offers us. Bigger fantasizes being a Mussolini type, whipping people into a "tight band." Are these two solidarities equivalent? Does Bigger have a shared interest in both? Why not? Coates collapses questions of solidarity with questions of interest, a conflation that underlies his tendency to take the appearance for the reality.<sup>105</sup>

Johnson's reference to white guilt does not deny the material effects of racism, as Coates supposes. To say that "whites" get democracy while Black bodies get plundered means white liberal antiracism necessarily takes the form of guilt. This guilt then forms the basis for the moral appeal underlying the case for reparations, even as, to articulate one of Coates's numerous antinomies, such an appeal is undermined by the ontology of struggle presented in *BWM*. One of the reasons Coates's central metaphor of the "Black body" carries such fetishizing, synecdochic power is because it registers what Johnson has called the "morally powerful but historically specious view of universally felt racial injury." The problem with universally felt racial injury is that it, in our current moment, makes (nationalist) class collaboration *feel right* and multiracial working class unity, where common class interests must trump the absence of common experience, *feel wrong*.

NOTES

1. Dave Boyer, "Obama Says Michael Brown's Death in Ferguson 'Stains the Heart of Black Children,'" *The Washington Times* September 28, 2014.
2. Today, North County is home to Boeing's Defense, Space & Security Unit, and Emerson Electric Company. See Walter Johnson, "Ferguson's Fortune 500 Company," *The Atlantic* (April 26, 2015). See also Tim O'Neil, "Look Back 250 • Factories and Foundries Once Powered St. Louis Payrolls," *St. Louis Dispatch*, January 11, 2015, [http://www.stltoday.com/news/local/metro/look-back/look-back-factories-and-foundries-once-powered-st-louis-payrolls/article\\_31fd26e3-442b-56ce-bec8-6ffe6208a164.html](http://www.stltoday.com/news/local/metro/look-back/look-back-factories-and-foundries-once-powered-st-louis-payrolls/article_31fd26e3-442b-56ce-bec8-6ffe6208a164.html) (last accessed May 7, 2016); Lisa Brown, "Sara Lee Selling North American Bakery Business," *St. Louis Dispatch*, November 10, 2010, [http://www.stltoday.com/business/sara-lee-selling-north-american-bakery-business/article\\_a4de47a0-2d35-5a22-a74e-56263316b391.html](http://www.stltoday.com/business/sara-lee-selling-north-american-bakery-business/article_a4de47a0-2d35-5a22-a74e-56263316b391.html) (last accessed May 7, 2016).
3. Stephen Gandel, "The Economic Imbalance Fueling Ferguson's Unrest," *Fortune*, August 15, 2014, <http://fortune.com/2014/08/15/ferguson-income-inequality/>.
4. The hashtag "Black Lives Matter" was created by Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors. For an overview of the "Black Lives Matter" movement, see Jelani Cobb, "The Matter of Black Lives," *The New Yorker*, March 14, 2016.
5. See Barbara Foley, "Rhetoric and Silence in Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father*," *Cultural Logic* 16 (2009).
6. Quoted in Cedric Johnson, "An Open Letter to Ta-Nehisi Coates and the Liberals Who Love Him," *Jacobin*, February 3, 2016.
7. Foley, "Rhetoric and Silence in Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father*," *Cultural Logic* 16 (2009): 18.
8. See Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2016), 210. For Coates, all white people are either Bill Gates, Alice Walton, or Donald Trump. Or, more poetically, every white person is the "American Psycho" Patrick Bateman, aspiring to be Donald Trump, imprisoned by their whiteness and a psychological desire to destroy the Black body.
9. Coates, "The Case for Reparations," *The Atlantic*, 2014, part IV.
10. Also quoted in Coates, "The Case for Reparations," part IV, "The Ills That Slavery Frees Us From."
11. Quoted in Theodore Allen, *The Invention of the White Race, vol. two: The Origin of Racial Oppression in Anglo-America* (New York: Verso, 1997), 249. Its companion is volume one, subtitled *Racial Oppression and Social Control* (1994). Further references to this volume and its companion in text.
12. Allen, Volume One, 18-19.
13. *Ibid.*, 18.
14. *Ibid.*, 20.
15. Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 31.
16. Allen, Vol. 1, 18-19.
17. Allen, Vol. 2, 146.
18. *Ibid.*, 147.
19. *Ibid.*, 146-47.
20. See Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).
21. Allen, Vol. 2, 240.
22. *Ibid.*, 242.
23. Abram Harris and Sterling D. Spero, *The Black Worker: The Negro and the Labor Movement* (New York: Antheneum, 1974), 4.
24. James Oakes, *The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders* (New York: Knopf, 1982), 38.

25. Mark R. Cheatham, *Jacksonian and Antebellum Age: People and Perspectives* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2008), xii-xiv.
26. Oakes, *The Ruling Race*, 38.
27. The list includes the following presidents: George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, James Monroe, Andrew Jackson, Martin Van Buren, William Henry Harrison, John Tyler, James K. Polk, Zachery Taylor, Andrew Johnson, and Ulysses S. Grant.
28. William L. Richter, *The A to Z of the Old South* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2009), 12.
29. Quoted in Ronald T. Takaki, *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Knopf, 1979), 123-24. Thanks to Malik Simba for bringing this point to our attention.
30. Bernard Mandel, *Labor, Free and Slave: Workmen and the Anti-Slavery Movement in the United States*. Introduction by Brian Kelly, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007 (originally published in 1955).
31. Richard Wright, *12 Million Black Voices* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 16-17.
32. *Ibid.*, 46-47.
33. Frederick Douglass, "Life and Times of Frederick Douglass," in *The Oxford Frederick Douglass Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 267.
34. Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, ed. William L. Andrews (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 188.
35. On the role of the real estate industry, see Kevin Fox Gotham, *Race, Real Estate, and Uneven Development: The Kansas City Experience, 1900–2010* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2014); and Mary E. Pattillo, *Black on the Block: The Politics of Race and Class in the City* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2007).
36. It should be noted that recently the Supreme Court updated the Fair Housing Act of 1968 by stating that disparate impact (neighborhoods where people of color live being devalued relative to neighborhoods where most whites live) was the basis of remedy. See <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/06/25/417433460/in-fair-housing-act-case-supreme-court-backs-disparate-impact-claims>.
37. Dorothy Brown, "How Homeownership Keeps Blacks Poorer Than Whites," *Forbes*, December 10, 2012. Coates's (and Brown's) example here, beyond the problems we raise, fails to control for demographic differences in great part because of the seeming obviousness of the race first example. Imagine two communities, one much smaller than the other: one with 30 million members and the other with 150 million members. Assume that both communities have roughly equal percentages (this assumption does not apply to Black and white families but is employed to make a point) of families making over \$100,000 per year, which means there are many more families in the larger demographic group making over this amount. Also assume (a highly problematic assumption entertained for this example) that these two groups prefer to live with other members of their group. Hypothetical housing communities consisting of one or the other homogenous group, all of whose families earn more than \$100,000 per year, will have different and probably significantly different house values due to demographics alone. That is to say that two identical high-end housing developments—one for the smaller community, the other for the larger—will have different price structures based on the fact that the demand for luxury housing in these exclusive neighborhoods will be much greater in one case than the other due to the larger number of wealthy people who can bid for the housing.
38. Coates himself notes that ordinary white homeowners, given the set up equating Black presence with devaluation, would have had to be self-sacrificing to contest racism in isolation. In the case of the Myers family's attempt to move into Levittown, Coates notes that neighbors "had good reason to be afraid" as "housing policy almost guaranteed that their neighbor's property values would decline" (*CR, V, The Quiet Plunder*).
39. Margery Austin Turner and Lynette Rawlings, *Promoting Neighborhood Diversity: Benefits, Barriers, and Strategies*. The Urban Institute, August 2009, 6.
40. *USA Today*, May 18, 2016, 3A.
41. Jed Kolko, "America's Most Diverse Neighborhoods and Metros," <http://www.forbes.com/sites/trulia/2012/11/13/finding-diversity-in-america/print/>.  
Kolko notes that among the one hundred largest metros, 17 percent of the population lives in diverse neighborhoods, where median price per square foot is \$157 compared to \$142 in other neighborhoods. The study measures diversity as follows: "the share of a metro area's or ZIP code's population in its largest racial or ethnic group: the smaller the share of the largest group, the more diverse the neighborhood is. For instance, an area that is 70% White (the largest group), 20% Black, and 10% Asian is less diverse than one that is 60% Hispanic (the largest group), 30% White, and 10% Black" (2).
42. Matthew Desmond, *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*. New York: Random House, 2016.
43. On the prior segregation that forms the all-important backdrop to the analysis of eviction mechanisms, Desmond notes that "the ghetto had always been more a product of social design than desire . . . always been a main feature of landed capital, a prime moneymaker for those who saw opportunity in land scarcity, housing dilapidation and racial segregation." *Ibid.*, loc. 3918, chapter 20.
44. Desmond notes that "[w]omen from black neighborhoods made up 9 percent of Milwaukee's population and 30 percent of its evicted tenants." Note that this mismatch is severe but far less severe than the comparison of "poorest areas," whose differential is nine rather than ~3. The difference here is inseparable from the legacy effects of prior segregation and current neglect. The race neutral mechanisms discussed here work on the raw material of prior conditions, reinforcing them. Though it is reasonable to assume at some point on sheer demographic grounds that "undesireable" multiracial neighborhoods will begin to form. For Desmond's statistics, see chapter 8 and loc. 4709, Epilogue.
45. "Living Arrangements of Children, by Race and Hispanic origin, 2015," <http://www.childtrends.org/?indicators=family-structure>.
46. See Legal Momentum, The Women's Legal Defense and Education Fund, "Poverty Rates for Single Mothers Are Higher in the US Than in Other High Income Countries," [http://www.ncdsv.org/images/LM\\_PovertyRatesSingleMothersHigherUS\\_6-2011.pdf](http://www.ncdsv.org/images/LM_PovertyRatesSingleMothersHigherUS_6-2011.pdf). As the tables show, the US poverty and near poverty rate for single mothers is 1.88 and 1.61 times higher than the average of 16 high income countries. Compare the 49 percent poverty rate to that of Denmark, 8 percent.
47. We are distinguishing between the liberal and left-liberal interpretation of "white privilege" and that of Theodore Allen. While we don't agree with everything in Allen's understanding of the term and reject its use, Allen makes clear that white workers do not benefit from "white privilege" but are harmed by it.
48. We agree that "white identity" is a distortion and, following Allen, has been inseparable from racism. Note, though, the ease with which Coates conflates, following his caste analysis, ruling class practices with nonruling class practices. And note how he overpathologizes white identity, a practice that facilitates a psychocultural analysis of identity instead of a materialist one.
49. Oliver C. Cox, *Caste, Class, & Race; A Study in Social Dynamics* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1959), 520.
50. See Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Enduring Solidarity of Whiteness," *The Atlantic*, February 8, 2016.
51. Jonathan W. Hutto and Rodney D. Green, "Social Movements Against Racist Police Brutality and Department of Justice Intervention in Prince George's County, Maryland," *Journal of Urban Health* 93 (April 2016): 89–121.
52. Coates makes the following comments about Richard Wright via Twitter: "I kinda hate Native Son. There I said it." He goes on to complain that Wright's literary naturalism is "too deterministic" in that "I thought his basic point—racism destroys black humanity—just wasn't true. It misses one of the lovelier [sic] aspects of black life," <https://storify.com/sjemery/opinions-on-richard-wright-s-native-son> (last accessed May 31, 2016).

Coates's difficulty accounting for the murder of Prince Jones should be compared to Michelle Alexander's much more convincing discussion of minority police officers and police chiefs in *The New Jim Crow*, 237-38. Alexander (see note below) compares such police officers and police chiefs to Black slave drivers and Black plantation owners. We think, despite the decided advance over Coates, this is where her caste metaphor gets her into trouble. Contemporary class formation among US Blacks is different post Jim Crow and pre Jim Crow. Under Jim Crow, there was no Black ruling class. Period. Now there is. And police officers and police chiefs are not part of an under caste, though the people they dominate are often members of a hypersegregated working class.

53. Ryan Gabrielson, Ryann Grochowski Jones, and Eric Sagara, "Deadly Force, in Black and White," October 10, 2014, <https://www.propublica.org/article/deadly-force-in-black-and-white> (last accessed May 31, 2016).

54. Ibid.

55. We will be looking at the *Post* and *Guardian* data momentarily, but to give you a sense of how easy it is to cherry pick as synecdochic possibly unrepresentative samples, when we last looked at the *Post* database, it listed through May 388 shootings for 2016. In the forty-five and up age group, whites killed by the police outnumbered Blacks fifty-one to five. Imagine the headline if this statistic were taken as representative of the relation of race and policing and widely publicized?

Some statistical terms: The standard deviation represents the typical distance from any point in the data set or distribution to the center (mean, average) of the distribution. Given a bell curve or normal distribution, one standard deviation from the mean delimits 68 percent of the distribution; two standard deviations delimits 95 percent of the distribution, and three standard deviations, 99 percent.

The confidence interval is for judging whether or not a hypothesis (that police shootings are shaped by "race," for example) is statistically significantly likely to be true. The standard for statistical significance is by convention often though not inevitably chosen at 95 percent.

A textbook example might involve estimating the number of people in a population who drive red cars. If you sample at random one thousand drivers, and you desire 95 percent confidence, your confidence interval must be given with a margin of error above and below the sample's proportion of red-car drivers by two standard errors (SE measures how much a sample statistic deviates from its mean in the long term). This means that if you sampled drivers over and over (say one hundred samples of one thousand drivers each), ninety-five of those counted numbers of red-car drivers would be expected to fall within your confidence interval. To quote the old reliable *Statistics II for Dummies*, "a confidence interval represents the chances of capturing the actual value of the population parameter over many different samples." Small sample sizes are unreliable and if your sample statistic is based on a small sample, the confidence interval will be large, as in this case, since the smaller the sample the larger the confidence interval.

56. See Mike Davis, "Los Angeles: Civil Liberties between the Hammer and the Rock," 170 *New Left Review* (July/August 1988).

57. Christian Parenti, *Lockdown America: Police and Prisons in the Age of Crisis* (Verso, 2008), 74.

58. George Jackson, *Blood In My Eye* (Baltimore, Maryland: Black Classic Press, 1990), 7.

59. Gaby Wood, "Toni Morrison Interview: On Racism, Her New Novel and Marlon Brando," *The Telegraph*, April 19, 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/books/authors/toni-morrison-interview-racism-brando/> (last accessed May 31, 2016).

The statistics from the *Washington Post* and *Guardian* belie Morrison's simple assumptions about race and criminal justice. A recent example from Leonard Pitts adds texture to the contemporary tendency to eliminate police violence against the white working class from our purview. See his February 2, 2016, *Miami Herald* story on Caroline Small, a working-class white woman with mental health issues whose shooting at the hands of police was covered up. Pitts notes that "her death was every bit as outrageous as those of Oscar Grant, Eric Garner,

Walter Scott, Freddy Gray and Tamir Rice but has received only a fraction of the attention."

60. Coates, "The Case For Reparations."

61. Tom Baird, "Stop the Killing: Fatal Police Shootings in Canada," *The Independent*, April 14, 2015, <http://theindependent.ca/2015/04/14/stop-the-killing-fatal-police-shootings-in-canada/>.

62. Here are select *Guardian* statistics for 2016: 1,024 killed as of December 13; 71 of the victims are unknown; 504 are white, 243 are Black. In the category of unarmed, 38 are Black, 75 are white. In the category of "other," 126 of the victims are white, 59 are Black. The ratio of Blacks killed to whites controlling for population is about 2.4. If we combine unarmed and other, the ratio is about 2.1 (2.1 times as many Blacks are killed as whites controlling for population) for these categories.

63. Loïc Wacquant, "Class, Race and Hyperincarceration in Revanchist America," *Socialism and Democracy* 28, no. 3 (2014): 41.

64. Ibid., 43.

65. Ibid.

66. Ibid., 44.

67. Robert Fikes, Jr., "Breathing While Black: Rude and Frightful Encounters with the Police Recalled by Distinguished African Americans, 1860-2012," *Journal of Pan African Studies* 5, no. 5 (June 2012): 41-65. Wacquant himself shows that Blacks with some college education are nearly seven times more likely than whites with some college education to be victims.

68. Paul J. Hirschfield, "Lethal Policing: Making Sense of American Exceptionalism," *Sociological Forum* 30, no. 4 (December 2015): 1112.

69. Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration," *The Atlantic* 316, no. 3 (October 2015): 75.

70. The total numbers of imprisoned people have varied between 2.2 and 2.3 million for around the last decade, the high year being in 2008. "Non Hispanic whites" make up 39 percent of the prison population (compared to 40 and 19 for Blacks and Hispanics, respectively). So this would mean the population of whites would vary between 858,000 and 897,000. Statistics show that the white male imprisonment rate of 678/100,000, while dwarfed by the Black male rate of 4300/100,000, would itself lead the world by a comfortable margin. See <http://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2016.html> for statistics.

71. It is commonly accepted, and rightfully so, that what brought the racist character of the prison system clearly into view had much to do with Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. While her book focuses on the panoply of mechanisms producing racial disparities in imprisonment, it also suggests, even as it uses the caste metaphor repeatedly, that this system of racial control, as she calls it (we would call it racial control as social control in the service of class rule), hurts poor whites or working-class whites. And she further suggests that affirmative action has actually functioned as a kind of "racial bribe" akin to whiteness that has helped to obfuscate the racist character of the prison system.

A couple of comments as this is not the place for an extended discussion of Alexander's important book. Because the focus is so much, and for good reasons, on racial disparity, the raw numbers can get lost: that the US imprisons a larger percentage of its population than any other country by far, and that this number includes large numbers of non-Hispanic whites. Alexander's own racial metaphors actually screen from view—through a synecdochic reduction not entirely dissimilar to Coates's despite the superiority of her overall analysis—the very negative impact of the prison system on the "majority" population, to emphasize the far more negative impact on the Black population, especially the Black working class and poor. And even here she occasionally, in her analysis of the trope of the "black criminal," resorts to synecdoche so as to erase the class component emphasized by Wacquant. While her overall argument about affirmative action as racial bribe is provocative, with even revolutionary implications—she notes that its combination of "meager material advantages" and "significant psychological benefits to people of color" are exchanged for "the abandonment of a more radical movement that promised to alter the nation's economic and social structure"—her

- parallel between affirmative action as racial bribe and the racial bribe of whiteness has its limits (232). She includes the role affirmative action has played in helping to create a Black elite—CEOs graduated from Harvard and Yale, Rice, Powell, Obama, but calls this the “black middle class” (235). So she has perhaps conflated members of the ruling class with the middle class and that in turn with the bribe of “whiteness.” This kind of mistake is actually of a piece with the conflation more systematically carried out by Coates.
72. See US Bureau of Labor Statistics, Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey, Employed persons by detailed occupation, sex, race, and Hispanic or Latino ethnicity, 2015. Retrieved from <http://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat11.htm> (last accessed May 16, 2016).
  73. Ellen M. Wood, *Democracy against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 258.
  74. Adolph Reed, “The Limits of Anti-Racism,” *Left Business Observer* #121, September 2009, <http://www.leftbusinessobserver.com/Antiracism.html> (last accessed May 31, 2016).
  75. MSNBC, NewsNation, August 1, 2016, <https://youtu.be/ajWs3z8rs0> (last accessed March 31, 2016).
  76. Kristian Williams, *Our Enemies in Blue: Police and Power in America* (Brooklyn, New York: Soff Skull Press, 2004), 256.
  77. For a good discussion of the increased militarization of the police in the United States, see Radley Balko, *Rise of the Warrior Cop: The Militarization of America’s Police Forces* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2013).
  78. Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 45.
  79. For a critique of the Afrocentric thesis that all Black people are descendants of African kings and queens, see Stephen C. Ferguson, “The Utopian Worldview of Afrocentricity: Critical Comments on a Reactionary Philosophy,” *Socialism and Democracy* 25, no. 1 (2011): 44–70. For a critique of Afrocentricity as a form of philosophical idealism, see Stephen C. Ferguson, *Philosophy of African American Studies: Nothing Left of Blackness* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).
  80. Coates, *Between the World and Me*, 43.
  81. The process of re-essentializing Blackness as essential diversity is not a smooth one. Coates learns from his professors at Howard about Queen Nzinga, who treats her slave as a chair. This example is key to his abandonment of his Afrocentric nationalism. While a striking example of class “diversity” among Black people, it does not impact his analysis of US history, however, where class quickly gives way to race (defined incoherently at once in class and caste terms, as our essay shows). He also learns from his professors about the Irish, a group not always viewed as white. But what he learns about the Irish has little conceptual impact on his understanding of whiteness as something that Europeans do to themselves, as perverse democratic self-invention. For a detailed critique of the thesis around Irish white self-making, see Kelly’s introduction to Mandel.
  82. Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity* (Africa World Press, 2003), 4.
  83. For a critique of Asante’s notion of a “composite African,” see Ferguson, *Philosophy of African American Studies: Nothing Left of Blackness* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).
  84. Christopher Jencks and David Reisman, *The Academic Revolution*, 425. As Ralph Bunche argued so many years ago, “It is not likely that any Negro school could include a sympathetic course in labor tactics, involving an honest account of labor strikes, picketing and boycotting. Negro schools can offer courses designed to prepare students for business and professional leadership, but they would be quickly embarrassed if they were to incorporate a course in workers’ education, or in training leadership for mass protest against injustice and oppression.” See Ralph Bunche, “Education in Black and White,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 5, no. 3 (July 1936): 356.
  85. Ferguson, *Philosophy of African American Studies*, 55.
  86. For a class analysis of universities, see David N. Smith, *Who Rules The Universities? An Essay in Class Analysis* (New York: Monthly Review, 1974).
  87. Ferguson, *Philosophy of African American Studies*, 25.
  88. The African American historian Rayford Logan makes the following observation about Mordecai Johnson: “There is, however, one view about [Johnson] on which friends, adversaries, and neutrals tend to agree—that he possessed a ‘Messianic Complex.’ . . . This Messianic attitude became increasingly evident in President John’s public statements. . . . In certain ‘Messianic Moments’ he would tell the late E. Franklin Frazier the kind of sociology to write or the late Abram Harris the kind of economics to study.” Rayford W. Logan, *Howard University: The First Hundred Years, 1867–1967* (New York: New York University Press, 1969), 249.
  89. See Yohuru Williams, “John Hope Franklin’s Troubled Tenure at Howard University, 1947–1956, Professor of History,” *Negro History Bulletin* 61, no. 3-4 (July-December 1998): 72–76. See also Michael R. Winston, “Through the Back Door: Academic Racism and the Negro Scholar in Historical Perspective,” *Daedalus* 100, no. 3 (1971): 678–719.
  90. Most recently, Howard University contemplated getting rid of its philosophy department—the academic home to Alain Locke, Eugene C. Holmes, and William A. Banner. See Charlayne Hunter-Gault, “Hard Times At Howard U.,” *The New York Times*, February 4, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/09/education/edlife/a-historically-black-college-is-rocked-by-the-economy-infighting-and-a-changing-demographic.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/09/education/edlife/a-historically-black-college-is-rocked-by-the-economy-infighting-and-a-changing-demographic.html?_r=0) (last accessed May 31, 2016).
  91. Ironically, Black college presidents were at the forefront of crushing academic freedom; to promote academic freedom could jeopardize monetary gifts from bourgeois liberal philanthropists and capital donors. Ironically, Black colleges and universities have been a safe haven of sorts for both white and African-American left-radicals, socialists, and communists (such as Lee Lorch, Forrest Oran Wiggins, Eugene Holmes, Oliver Cox) who become so completely burdened with heavy teaching loads that they were and are nearly rendered politically impotent. Fisk President Charles S. Johnson was in the forefront of fighting against the threat of communism and fired professors suspected of communist affiliation. Philander Smith College (Little Rock, Arkansas) hired Lee Lorch to be chair of the Mathematics department—after he was fired from Fisk. Dr. Marquis L. Harris, philosopher and then-president of Philander, forced him to resign after his involvement with the desegregation of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas—under the risk of losing financial support from white donors and philanthropists. See autobiographical entry on Lorch at The Encyclopedia of Arkansas History and Culture: <http://www.encyclopediaofarkansas.net/encyclopedia/entry-detail.aspx?entryID=8396>.  
  
See also Ibram H. Rogers, *The Black Campus Movement: Black Students and the Racial Reconstruction of Higher Education, 1965–1972* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).
  92. National Center for Education Statistics, Fast Facts, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, <http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=667> (last accessed May 31, 2016).
  93. John Newsom, “NC A & T Campus To Get Clock Tower,” *Greensboro News & Record*, October 30, 2014; and Kristin Zachary, “One of the Largest Construction Projects in this University’s History Is Moving Closer to Reality,” *Triad Business Journal*, June 2, 2015.
  94. Lester Spence, “Coates Is a Realist, Not a Pessimist”: Lester Spence Responds to Melvin Rogers,” *Dissent*, August 13, 2015, <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/blog/ta-nehisi-coates-is-a-realist-not-a-pessimist-lester-spence-melvin-rogers> (last accessed May 31, 2016).
  95. Coates is committed to this view given his caste categories, but he does not really believe it and so notes that Obama’s daughters have opportunities beyond the wildest dreams of white workers, but then changes the subject and suggests that the Black wealthy like the Obamas should not be compared to white workers but to the Bush kids, where Coates then assumes that the Black rich have to work twice as hard as the white rich. It would have been more interesting had Coates compared Obama’s daughters to Chelsea Clinton. Will the Obama daughters have to work twice as hard as she? What sort of statement is this? It appears empirical, but no evidence is forthcoming for the claim. It is meant as a crowd pleasing

assumption, enabled by the comparison with the silver spooned Bush progeny.

96. Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, 353.
97. For an excellent critique of "Black public intellectuals," see Adolph Reed, "What Are the Drums Saying, Booker? The Curious Role of Black Public Intellectual," in *Class Notes: Posing As Politics and Other Thoughts on the American Scene* (New York: New Press, 2000), 77–90.
98. Thomas D. Boston, *Race, Class and Conservatism* (Boston, MA: Unwin Hyman, 1988).
99. See Sahay, Amrohini. "Transforming Race Matters: Towards a Critique-al Cultural Studies," *Cultural Logic* 1, no. 2 (1998). We note that the Black and brown ruling class is, while not token, nowhere near its proportion in the population as a whole. As we discussed above, there is easy diversity (diversity posing little disruption to market forces) and hard diversity (constructing stable multiracial working class communities). Bringing a Black and brown ruling class up to its population proportions would be an example of this hard diversity and together with that other hard diversity would make no sense on social control grounds.
100. For representative examples of "Black radical liberalism," see Tommy Shelby, *We Who Are Dark: The Philosophical Foundations of Black Solidarity* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005); Charles W. Mills, "Black Radical Liberalism," PEA Soup, <http://peasoup.typepad.com/peasoup/2015/02/black-radical-liberalism-and-why-it-isnt-an-oxymoron.html>.
101. Minqi Li, *The Rise of China and the Demise of the Capitalist World Economy* (New York: Verso, 2009).
102. Vaclav Smil, *Energy Transitions: History, Requirements, Prospects* (New York: Praeger, 2010).
103. We would also note that this depth-psychology explanation, deriving either from national character or the European mind (Silko), has tended to look very unfavorably on nuclear power, especially associated with domination on this view, not just due to the association with bombs but with mining. This is a serious problem for the world as, on our view, nuclear is the only clean source of power that is reliable enough and energy dense enough to power a modern society, capitalist or anticapitalist. This kind of analysis also blinds people to the huge material (including mining) requirements and fundamental unfeasibility of a wind, water, and solar economy.
104. Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Enduring Solidarity of Whiteness," *The Atlantic*, February 8, 2016. In opposition to "white Marxism," the Afro-Caribbean philosopher Charles Mills proposes such a dual systems theory with racism existing relatively independent of and distinct from capitalist relations of production. The Racial Contract (or white supremacy)—we are led to believe by Mills—has an agency all its own. Under the guise of "black radical liberalism," Mills argues racial exploitation vis-à-vis class exploitation stems from the unequal distribution of wealth among whites and African Americans. See Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1997).
105. Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York: Harper & Bros, 1940), 130.

## REVIEW ESSAYS

### *Not the Sound of the Genuine! A Review of Kipton Jensen's Howard Thurman*

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In *Howard Thurman: Philosophy, Civil Rights, and the Search for Common Ground*, Kipton Jensen, a philosopher in the Department of Philosophy and Religion at Morehouse College, has provided an examination of Howard Thurman's thought as a philosopher. Jensen is adamant in this book on the significance of his classical philosophical training, revealing some presuppositions about the task before him. Since the training of philosophers today is not a singular prescription or regimen, and Jensen does not provide a statement detailing what exactly is meant by being a classically trained philosopher, readers are left to their own devices in determining the statement's meaning. For the purposes of this analysis, the assumption will be made that his classical training here equals formal training in philosophy, which is usually based upon readings of canonical figures. African American philosophers or philosophers of the Black experience, of which Howard Thurman could reasonably be included, are often not among the canonical figures studied by classically trained philosophers. Also, given that Jensen wrote his dissertation on Hegel, it is unlikely that his formal training would have included readings from Thurman's oeuvre. Given these factors, it is a curious notion that Jensen would mention his credentials in relation to the philosophers of the classical American tradition who he associates with Thurman's thought. This is only of benefit if it provides a clearer window into Thurman as a philosopher. Whether this strategy is a legitimate one will be determined later in this review of Jensen's book.

I will begin with an overall reading of Jensen's book, its main interpretive positions, and its fundamental methodological and ideological orientation. After a full explication of these points, I will critically analyze Jensen's book with special attention given to the philosopher Thurman as presented in this text. I use two evaluative principles to examine why Jensen reads Thurman in the way he does and whether this Thurman is actually Thurman or is a new creation.

Jensen interprets Thurman's thought as being an "African American Philosophy of Nonviolent Resistance" (see chapter 1) while providing an understanding of Thurman's thoughts through three frames:

1. *Philosophical personalism*: Jensen explores Thurman's thought by historically situating it alongside a few philosophical personalists (e.g., Walter Muelder and Martin Luther King, Jr.) and by outlining which of Thurman's ideas are commensurable with theistic and philosophical personalism because he finds it to be useful in understanding Thurman as a philosopher. He prepares the reader for this approach to

interpreting Thurman's thought in chapter 3 where he focuses on what he calls "pedagogical personalism." For the sake of clarity, he describes personalism "as a belief that souls are of infinite metaphysical value" (51) and "God is personal [making] persons sacred" (51). He put forth Morehouse College as the preeminent place where pedagogical personalism entered into educational theory and put into practice specifically during Thurman's tenure as a student there. John Hope, as president of the college during his time there, is hailed as a maker of men and the prime proponent of this educational theory. Jensen also connects Benjamin Mays and, rather interestingly, E. Franklin Frazier, to pedagogical personalism. He describes Morehouse as a place where the sacred or otherwise inviolable dignity of persons was stressed. Accordingly, armed with these concepts, Morehouse professors utilized a strategy that attempted to activate the potential of all students. Jensen focuses much of the chapter on Mays, King, and the established of pedagogical personalism as a pedagogical tradition, only focusing on Thurman towards the end of the chapter.

In chapter 4, Jensen demonstrates the commensurability of Thurman's thought with American personalist thinkers by setting aside the question of whether it actually fits within a specific tradition of theistic and philosophical personalism (e.g., Boston personalism) and concentrating on the similarities between it and philosophical personalism broadly understood. As he states at the opening sentence of the chapter, "the concern here is less with accurately locating Thurman within the topology of American personalism—in Boston or anywhere else—than it is with showing that Thurman's philosophical writings display many of the characteristic features of philosophical personalism broadly construed" (65). This move allows for a more inclusive vision of what counts as philosophical personalist and of who can be included into this conceptual milieu. He can now claim Thurman was a theistic personalist without having to situate him in any specific personalist tradition. He can offer an account of how one can move from King's personalism to Thurman's personalism. The breadth of participants in this account is certainly extensive and nearly exhaustive.

2. *Social activist mystic*: In chapter 5, Thurman is read as a social activist mystic. This goal exposes the trajectory of thought in the analysis of Thurman's mysticism, which is the quality of the experience. With this in mind, Jensen builds on the work of Alton Pollard and Luther Smith. Despite being the book's shortest chapter, allusions are made of many influential works that could provide the reader with sources from which to do further research. Jensen appropriates Angela Davis's notion that religion can either assist them in their liberation or undermine their efforts at liberation in her work on Frederick Douglass at the end of the

chapter to support his interpretation of Thurman as a liberation theologian who believes that religion can be liberatory (see 104-105).

3. *Prophetic Pragmatism*: Cornel West's prophetic pragmatism is a form of cultural criticism rooted in the "American heritage and its hopes for the wretched of the earth" (qtd. in 105). West's brand of prophetic pragmatism is skillfully combined with liberation theology. In chapter 6, Jensen attempts to support the view that West's prophetic pragmatism has something in common with Thurman's philosophical aims. Arguably, the aims of West's and Thurman's thought, the material conditions under which they wrote, and sources/interpretations from which they draw have little overlap. One might assume that Jensen compares Thurman's thought to West's prophetic pragmatism because of West's prominence; Jensen could reply that he is simply exploring the connection that both of them have to Dewey's pragmatism. However, it should be clearly stated that West could rightly be called a Deweyan pragmatist, whereas Thurman was not philosophically committed to Dewey's pragmatism. Certainly, the distance between Thurman and Dewey is wide and cavernous on the matter of Truth. After making intelligible West's prophetic pragmatism and demonstrating where Thurman might fit comfortably within this tradition, Jensen paints Thurman as an African American liberation philosopher.

Now, with regards to interpretive positions, Jensen's book may be described as attempting to provide a bridge between classical American pragmatists and African American philosophers. Jensen does not use a hermeneutical approach to Thurman's work. Instead, he places Thurman into particular philosophical traditions by demonstrating a certain commensurability between Thurman's thought and those traditions. For example, to support the claim that Thurman is an African American philosopher of liberation, Jensen makes liberal usage of Angela Davis's *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle*. Many individuals, along with Thurman, are listed as feeding into this tradition, which Jensen designates as the Black philosophical tradition. Jensen also explains that this tradition stretches back to ancient Egyptian-Kemetic thought. Ultimately, Jensen explains that it is not important whether or not Thurman is indeed within the tradition of prophetic pragmatism, but simply that he takes up the same project that made the tradition necessary. Lastly, Jensen's methodological and ideological orientation is mostly grounded in the work of previous Thurman scholarship, especially the first generation of Thurman scholars.<sup>1</sup> Where he differs from previous Thurman scholarship is in his charting a path from prophetic pragmatism to a Black philosophical tradition with ancient roots and then placing Thurman within this tradition.

Now that I have summarized the main points of Jensen's book, I want to offer a substantive criticism of Jensen's interpretation of Thurman's thought. A number of issues deserve attention. First, Jensen fails to draw a clear line of distinction between Thurman and Gandhi in the first chapter.

Are we to believe that he was simply parroting Gandhi? Are we supposed to view Thurman as an independent thinker? Second, Jensen namedrops thinkers with the expectation that the reader not only knows those thinkers' thought, but also how they are relevant to the discussion at hand. For example, on page 52 he noted that E. Franklin Frazier and Benjamin Mays are both assimilationists. He does not explain in what way this is true. Nor does he explain whether Frazier is an assimilationist in the same way that Mays is an assimilationist. Moreover, he does not explain how his interpretation of them as assimilationists is consistent with their work. On page 60, he lists Frazier, Mays, W. E. B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, and Mordecai Johnson as all having influenced Thurman's pedagogical personalism without offering any evidence for this contention. Just as with his comparison of Frazier and Mays, he needs to provide more evidence to support his claim. Otherwise, the reader will not know how Frazier, Mays, Du Bois, Locke, and Johnson influenced Thurman's pedagogical personalism.

The most troubling of these lists occur on page 115: "For those with eyes to see and ears to hear, Thurman was really lockstep with many thinkers now that we now consider to 'Liberation Philosophers,' including Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, and Kwame Gyekye." When we turn to the footnote to see what evidence he provides for this point, we are even more confused. In what ways are all four of these gentlemen in lockstep? According to the footnote, Thurman shared Nkrumah's commitment to philosophical materialism, Nyerere's commitment to African Socialism via Ujamaa, and Gyekye's communitarianism. There are clear differences between these thinkers that Jensen is not aware of. To label them simply as "liberation philosophers" may be confusing for people who are not familiar with the determinate differences between them.

Jensen does not have a view of Thurman's dialectical development or the fundamental tenets of Thurman's philosophical framework. Thurman's ideas were developed over the course of many years of philosophical reflection. They were not formed during brief conversations with others such as the conversation he had with Gandhi, which, at best, lasted a few hours. Jensen shows Thurman as someone who used philosophical positions he received from others, but there is no attempt to demonstrate the originality of Thurman's philosophical architectonic. For example, Thurman was already a pacifist before meeting Gandhi in 1936. It is clear that Thurman was thinking through strategies to better the conditions for Blacks in America. What he found significant in Gandhi's message was not a philosophy of pacifism or nonviolence as a strategy for social change. Thurman was influenced by the idea that Gandhi believed that if Black people in America were successful in a nonviolent struggle against white racism, and it is important to say white racism here,<sup>2</sup> this success could change the world. Also, this Gandhian notion must be coupled with the fact that Thurman was called a "traitor" to all darker people of the world for being a Christian by another Indian, in spite of the harsh racist practices of white American Christians. One might ask, how can I form this conclusion? Thurman wrote no text on his conversation with Gandhi. In fact, if one were to add all of the pages that Thurman wrote on the Gandhian influence

on his thought, it would at best be a pamphlet and not justly called a book. But being called a "traitor" to all the darker people of the world by another Indian, not Gandhi, during his time in India prompted Thurman to write *Jesus and the Disinherited*, where he separates institutional Christianity (that is, "the religion about Jesus") from the Religion of Jesus and makes the shocking declaration that he followed the Religion of Jesus and not Christianity. Here Jensen could have consulted the important philosophical discussion of this topic by the Black philosopher John H. McClendon III.<sup>3</sup>

Next, Thurman had an organic mind<sup>4</sup> able to use the thoughts of others to express his own ideas. Oppression made many Blacks follow this practice. Thurman was also more than an amalgamator of the profound ideas of others who are traditionally found acceptable in philosophy canons. He arose from a people that existed during a time of crisis which limited access to their ability to publish. Oftentimes, Jensen gives very little consideration to how the Black community in general influenced Thurman. If the voices of whites and others are consistently privileged over Blacks voices, a type of cultural violence is performed. Very few, if any, ideas are attributed to how the Black community provided an important historical and intellectual context for Thurman's ideas. The concept of the "always already"<sup>5</sup> should be applied in this case. In performing this type of cultural violence, the perpetrator assumes the culture being violated has no agency, and thus whatever oppression they suffered or continue to suffer is justified.

Jensen writes about Thurman as a philosopher but never presents him as one. He presented Thurman as no more than a mule for the ideas of others. If Jensen's Thurman is a philosopher, then he is perhaps an uncritical sycophantic vessel for the ideas of others, having learned nothing from his own experience of Blackness in America. For instance, does Thurman not disagree with Royce's racist intent found in his writings? Would Thurman not take issue with Dewey's concept of Truth? Is Thurman a materialist in the way that others to whom he is linked are? Is there only one notion of African American philosophy, the tradition to which Jensen links Thurman?

Jensen downplays Thurman's great concern about the damage oppression was doing to American society in general and its damaging effects on Black people in particular. For example, in his 1965 book, the *Luminous Darkness: A Personal Interpretation of the Anatomy of Segregation and the Ground of Hope*, Thurman wrote, "The fact that the first twenty-three years of my life were spent in Florida and Georgia has left its scars deep in my spirit." His deepest and most well-known philosophizing on the matter of oppression was published in his 1949 book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*. In that book, he expresses his thoughts on the question of oppression; however, the purpose here is to demonstrate what Jensen neglects—namely, how Thurman put forward ways to address oppression in general while standing within the African American tradition narrowly defined.<sup>6</sup>

Beyond the major thesis of *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Thurman identifies three ancillary struggles for those

who are the object of oppression. The first is fear, which Thurman described as a capacity to affect aspects of experience and detailed states of mind. In these aspects, fear becomes a tactic used by imperialist forces to wage war on the consciousness of the oppressed. Black people held captive in America fell victim to this oppressive tactic of their slave captors. After realizing that in combating this tactic, a stronger opposite force was needed, Thurman put forward his thoughts on the matter, using analogy. Thurman did this by reflecting on a quote from his grandmother, “*you are not niggers. you are not slaves. You are God’s children.*” This quote, if understood as a rule, was intended to apply to a particular moment in time and for a specific group of people. However, Thurman’s intent in its reuse was as a principle. The underlying principle can be understood as such: In the face of great oppression, freedom equals choice. Sometimes the choice is as simple as saying yes, no, or maintaining a meaningful silence. No, to hurled epithets. Yes, to being equal to your greatest ideals. In maintaining a meaningful silence, there is the notion that the oppressor cannot own the thoughts of the oppressed.

Unfortunately, Jensen’s book is yet another demonstration of how a Black thinker or philosopher is thought to matter if they can be shown to have ideological debt or commensurability to white philosophers. So much is lost when this is done! The Black community is never taken to be a generative space for reason to occur. The value of Black intellectuals, and thus their humanity, is measured by who inspired their thought. If their ideas are thought to have derived primarily from their own culture and the Black communities that nurtured them, then they are viewed as inferior or deformed in some way. In order to make their ideas relevant to philosophers, they need to be put into conversation with the ideas of white thinkers, or there needs to be an account of how white thinkers influenced the Black thinkers in question, regardless of how much they have written or done before encountering white thinkers.

In conclusion, Jensen’s book represents a spirited and learned attempt at a philosophical analysis of Gandhi’s satyagraha, Martin Luther King, Jr.’s personalism, prophetic pragmatism; and Royce’s Beloved Community, along with a demonstration of how they might be placed in conversation with Thurman’s thought. This tapestry of thinkers is broad. But, from time to time, Jensen manages to tackle the task at hand, comparing Thurman with “traditionally accepted” American philosophers. He focuses his attention on presenting Thurman within this American tradition while also being contingently tied to African American philosophical and social thinkers. In order to properly place Thurman within American philosophical traditions, I would suggest that the reader read Jensen’s book alongside of John McClendon and Stephen Ferguson’s prodigious contribution to the history of African American philosophy: *African American Philosophers and Philosophy: An Introduction to the History, Concepts and Contemporary Issues*.

There is a certain value derived from Jensen’s focus on American philosophical traditions. One does gain a basic understanding of these variously mentioned philosophical traditions. Based on this focus, however, there appears to be a conspicuous attempt to understand Thurman as a pacifist in the Gandhian sense<sup>7</sup> and as an uncritical pragmatist,<sup>8</sup> while simultaneously focusing on the struggle for African American freedom. To be sure, there are ideas which Thurman found useful in these traditions; however, a true depiction of any thinker worthy of study should also include where she departs from prominent thinkers and ideas. Let us end with Thurman’s own critique of this type of reading oneself uncritically through the thoughts of others: “There is something in every one of you that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in yourself. It is the only true guide you will ever have. And if you cannot hear it, you will all of your life spend your days on the ends of strings that somebody else pulls.”<sup>9</sup>

#### NOTES

1. Jensen’s basic interpretation of Thurman, as per his citations and interpretive view derived from those citations, is grounded in the “first wave” writers on Thurman, namely: Luther Smith, Walter Fluker, Peter Eisenstadt, Gary Dorrien, Alton Pollard, Mozella Mitchell, and Quinton Dixie.
2. It is significant that whiteness and white racism are taken to be ubiquitous in this moment, given that Thurman made a significant connection in the oppression of Indians and that of Black people in America.
3. John H. McClendon III, *Philosophy of Religion and the African American Religious Experience: Conversations with My Christian Friends* (Brill, 2017).
4. As used here, “organic” means spontaneous developed or informally produced. This does not mean that Thurman lacked formal training, but that he used his formal training to clarify ideas of which he developed prior to being formally trained or outside the confines of formal schooling.
5. When there are components of an event or occurrence beyond the awareness of the observer but known to be present in similar events and the presence of which is thought to logical, these components should be thought to be always already present.
6. The “African American tradition narrowly defined” can be understood to mean that Thurman was using the particular issue of Black oppression in the United States to say something about oppression in general. However, to make this universal claim, he first validated the African American tradition by introducing the quote from his Grandmother—“you are not niggers, you are not slaves, you are God’s children”—to demonstrate that the tradition was worthy of being used as a source of inspiration and also ideas. This is a practice used by others such as W. E. B. Du Bois, in *The Souls of Black Folk*, when he uses the last chapter to intimate the importance of the Negro Spirituals.
7. The Gandhian encounter demonstrated to Thurman that the ideas of Grandma Nancy were more relevant to him because they arose for the Black experience. Thurman’s ideas, while universalizable, arose from the existential crisis of Blackness.
8. Tommy J. Curry, *Another white Man’s Burden: Josiah Royce’s Quest for a Philosophy of white Racial Empire* (SUNY Press, 2019).
9. “The Sound of the Genuine,” The Spelman College 1980 baccalaureate address.

## Ontology, Experience, and Social Death: On Frank Wilderson’s Afropessimism

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This is a critical discussion of Frank B. Wilderson III’s memoir-cum-manifesto *Afropessimism*. The central claim of Wilderson’s book is that Black people occupy the structural position of Slaves, and are thus subject to social death. I reconstruct and evaluate Wilderson’s argument for this claim, as well as the general methodology that underlies the argument. I also consider some of *Afropessimism*’s political upshots. Along the way I consider some complications endemic to the project of evaluating a text that is first and foremost addressed to Black audiences from the standpoint of a non-Black reader.

Section 1 outlines Afropessimism’s philosophy of Black suffering, while Section 2 focuses on the strengths of Wilderson’s book. Section 3 suggests that *Afropessimism*’s narrative and theoretical goals are sometimes at odds. Section 4 offers an extended reconstruction and criticism of Wilderson’s claim that Blackness is equivalent to Slaveness, while acknowledging the limitations of a non-Black perspective on this issue. Section 5 considers some possible political upshots of *Afropessimism* and suggests that the book’s political imagination has serious limitations. Section 6 concludes the essay by suggesting that while *Afropessimism* often falters in its arguments, it may succeed in articulating what many Black people need no argument to understand.

### 1. THE PHILOSOPHY OF BLACK SUFFERING

There is a perennial question at the heart of much Black philosophy, art, and literature: Why are Black people so persistently not recognized as human? We cannot banish this question by demonstrating what is beyond doubt, namely, that Black people belong to the same *biological* or *psychological* class as non-Black people. Rather, the question requires us to ask about the *metaphysics* of humanity, or what *ethical* status Black people hold in the community of persons. Proponents of the humanistic liberal tradition hold that Black people are indeed human, but that racist social orders have consistently failed to recognize this fact. More radical traditions, such as postcolonialism, often hold that racial domination defines more than the relations of power in a society—it defines the ontological conditions for being human at all. Following Thrasymachus, who contends in Plato’s *Republic* that justice *just is* the will of the strong over the weak, humanity *just is* whatever the powers-that-be decide it is. And since the powers-that-be at all manner of times and places have never seen fit to recognize Black people as human, there is a strict sense in which Black people are not human.

Afropessimism starts from the Thrasymachean view of humanity, pairs it with Frantz Fanon’s view of the totalizing violence that anti-Blackness visits upon Black bodies and consciousness, and pushes the consequences of this potent combination to its limits. According to Afropessimism,

Black people are not Human, but Slaves—the sentient beings in opposition to which Humanity defines itself. While slavery is a historically existing relationship, Slaveness is an ontological structural position. Black people need not be enslaved in order to be Slaves. Drawing on the seminal work of sociologist Orlando Patterson, Afropessimists contend that, as Slaves, Black people exist in the condition of *social death*. In social death, sentient beings are unable to achieve recognition as “subjects” within social and civic relations. At best, Black people are unequal *participants* in the projects of Humans, or *mere tools* for the furtherance of Human ends. At worst, Black people are *objects* or *targets* for sadistic anti-Black violence.

Social death triangulates the Black Slave via three vectors. Slaves are subjected to *gratuitous violence* divorced from actual or perceived transgression, *natal alienation* from the coherence of family structure, and *dishonor*, or a perennial state of social abjection and contempt. And since Humanity is essentially defined by its *not* being Slaveness, the very coherence of the social domain is built upon a foundation of Black suffering. Social life cannot exist without social death.

Afropessimism presents an uncompromising metaphysics even by the standards of philosophies of pessimism and nihilism. The idea that suffering without reason is the *sine qua non* of Blackness, that (anti-)Blackness is the *sine qua non* of the world itself, and that there can therefore be no possible way to compensate and redeem Black suffering fundamentally reorients the “problem” of race. The problem of race is no longer one we can satisfactorily address through *political* means. The problem is one of *ontology*. The liberation of Black people would take place in a liminal space that would be literally impossible for any politics to achieve. Black people becoming Human would signify the end of social coherence, of time, of Humanity. The desire for true Black liberation is a desire for the apocalypse.

The starkness of this philosophy has not prevented it from having a bit of a moment, from grassroots to ivory towers. Beyond its cache in the academy, Afropessimistic themes appear in the work of critically acclaimed bestselling authors such as Claudia Rankine and Ta-Nehisi Coates. The internet is replete with Afropessimistic analyses of high-profile pop culture such as Ryan Coogler’s *Black Panther* and Childish Gambino’s “This is America.” There are indications that the worldview has captured the minds of inquisitive young people in the form of self-published social media. If you happen to debate competitively at the high-school or collegiate level, a working knowledge of Afropessimism is rapidly becoming a requirement for success. In a time in which the problem of Black suffering has truly hit the non-Black mainstream, Afropessimism promises to reveal the horrific and irresolvable depths of that suffering.

### 2. FRANK WILDERSON’S AFROPESSIMISM

Wilderson’s *Afropessimism* takes bold strides into this moment. Alongside scholars such as Hortense Spillers, Saidiyah Hartman, and Jared Sexton, Wilderson can lay claim to developing the philosophy of Afropessimism—he is even credited with coining the term.<sup>1</sup> *Afropessimism*, a manifesto within a memoir, is an impressive yet flawed experiment that attempts to anchor the theoretical edifice of

Afropessimism within the narrative of a remarkable life. As a memoir, the book charts Wilderson's gradual intellectual journey from Catholic boy to Marxist radical to resigned Afropessimist, and how that journey has been formed by his own lived experience. As a manifesto, the book aims to establish Afropessimism as a "meta-theory" of the politics of liberation. It also aims to explain how the "assumptive logics" of "Marxism, postcolonialism, psychoanalysis, and feminism" are rooted in an inability or refusal to grasp the depth and uniqueness of Black suffering (14).

According to Wilderson, these discourses fail to understand the fundamental relationship between Black suffering and social order. If Blackness is the condition of social death, then Black existence is rooted in "a condition of suffering for which there is no imaginable strategy for redress—no narrative of social, political, or national redemption" (15). Insofar as Black people are not "subjects" within these narratives, their role is to serve as "structurally inert props, implements for the execution of white and non-Black fantasies and sadomasochistic pleasures" (15). Black bodies are simultaenously sites for the fulfillment of non-Blacks' political and erotic desires and the mass of flesh upon which ghastly spectacles of violence are enacted. Within this by turns "Negrophilic" and "Negrophobic" libidinal economy, Black suffering is the lifeblood of the social order.

*Afropessimism* is an engrossing, well-told story. Among other things, the narrative spans Wilderson's childhood in an affluent, practically all-white neighborhood of Minneapolis in the 1960s, being suspended from and subsequently reinstated to Dartmouth, being in a relationship with a revolutionary lover who changed his life, getting schooled on racial politics in South Africa in the 1990s while waiting tables at an Italian restaurant, engaging in aboveground and guerilla political struggle in Johannesburg, finding revolutionary clarity during Edward Said's office hours, experiencing a nervous breakdown during a conversion experience from Marxism to Afropessimism, and culminating in a wrenching epilogue in which Wilderson watches his mother—an accomplished psychologist, and no pessimist—succumb to dementia.

Wilderson's expertise in film reveals itself here in the form of careful pacing and directorial *savoir faire*. He knows just when to switch scenes, when to drop and pick up a narrative thread, and when to reintroduce a leitmotif. He is also a writer with a deeply poetic sensibility and an attentive observer capable of crafting descriptions of remarkable clarity. More than once I was stopped in my tracks by a phrase or paragraph that I needed to read again, say aloud, and ponder in silence. And while no one may *experience* Black suffering quite like Black people, Wilderson's talents allow him to render a painfully sharp phenomenological account of what it is like to recognize oneself as Black in a thoroughly anti-Black world, to realize that one is, as Fanon puts it, "an object in the midst of other objects."

On a theoretical level, the chief value of *Afropessimism* lies in its interpretation of Black suffering and social vulnerability as first and foremost a problem of *ontology*. Wilderson's admirable clarity on this point is a welcome

perspective in a debate which often frames the problem of Black suffering as fundamentally cultural, political, or economic while shuffling unstated ontological assumptions into the background. *Afropessimism* is also worth reading for its unforgiving questioning of humanist, liberal, and progressive orthodoxies about the causes and remedies of racial oppression. Optimists should test their views against Wilderson's perspective, and the book should serve to temper the complacency and self-satisfaction one often finds in these quarters. If "civil society is a murderous juggernaut of murderous vengeance void of contingency, trial, or debate" for Black people, and "violence without sanctuary is the *sine qua non* of Blackness" (161), Black suffering presents an existential problem that can never be reconciled by the strategies of humanist meliorism.

To this extent, *Afropessimism* is a welcome addition to philosophies of pessimism more generally. Admirers of pessimism know it to be a philosophy in which depth of thought is often inseparable from depth of feeling. The great pessimists tend to feel the weight of the world more acutely than most, and it is this melancholic depth which allows them to push ever more deeply into those thoughts that would offend, depress, or terrify those less sensitive to the world's horror. Pessimists are always "glad" to meet a fellow sufferer (more accurately, a fellow sufferer who *knows* they are a fellow sufferer), and they should find one in Wilderson, a writer with both the hard head and the tragic heart of a pessimist.

Yet from a pessimistic point of view, it is perhaps fitting that a book of such depth and power should also have correspondingly serious flaws. The back cover of *Afropessimism* features encomia from a number of well-respected authors, and each blurb reflects a common challenge: "you may not agree with this book, but it's important to read it and articulate where you think it goes wrong." Here goes. *Afropessimism* falters in two major places. First, the narrative and the theory don't always mix together well. Second, the book's central theoretical claims are undermotivated, oversold, and almost certainly false.

### 3. NARRATIVE AND THEORY

*Afropessimism* suffers from frequent dissociation between the narrational and theoretical goals of the book. First, in contrast to the flowing, pensive narrative, much of the theoretical meat of *Afropessimism* is doled out within the boxy steel cubes of post-structuralist jargon. It is simply jarring to find the same writer dropping the remarkable phrase "Birds strafed the sun like a fist of pepper in the last good eye of God" (51) at just the right place in a tense moment, and later artlessly explaining that "my writing must be indexical of that which exceeds narration, while being ever mindful of the incomprehension that the writing would foster, the failure, that is, of interpretation were the indices ever to escape the narrative" (246). When he switches into theory mode, Wilderson often gives into the all-too-academic temptation to use a \$25 word for a \$5 concept. This is all the more puzzling when we remember that the former were supposed to make the latter *more* precise, and that Wilderson's lyrical style would have been more than adequate to the task of conceptual explication in any case.

Second, and more seriously, there are times when the *logic* of the narrative clashes with the logic of the theory. For instance, Wilderson argues that humanist politics presupposes an optimistic narrative structure that leads from dispossession to struggle to eventual redemption, but this narrative coherence is not available to Black people. Drawing on a seminal essay by Hortense Spillers, Wilderson argues: "The narrative arc of the slave who is *Black* (unlike the generic slave who may be of any race) is *not a narrative arc at all*, but a flat line of 'historical stillness': a flat line that 'moves' from disequilibrium to a moment in the narrative of faux-equilibrium, to disequilibrium restored and/or rearticulated" (226).

Note that from a pessimistic point of view, it is not clear that the pseudo-progression from "disequilibrium to a moment in the narrative of faux-equilibrium, to disequilibrium restored" is unique to slave narratives. After all, such is life (squalid birth, meager satisfaction, boundless disappointment, annihilating death). Nevertheless, this claim about the uniqueness of Black slave narratives allows Wilderson to unite three core claims: 1) that Black people lie "outside" the narrative framework that humanistic optimism presupposes, 2) that Black people are subject to an eternal recurrence in which the same forms of violence and dispossession ("disequilibrium") accrue to Black people over time, and 3) that no moment of "equilibrium" will ever redeem or compensate Black suffering.

Yet, the appearance of this claim is strange in what is ultimately a memoir. Curiously, Wilderson describes this dynamic disequilibrium-faux-equilibrium-disequilibrium structure as a "flat line of historical stillness." And while the story that Wilderson tells in the narrative is not quite one of redemption, it is also not a "flat line." Stuff happens in a coherent narrative order, with the resolutions and denouements which characterize any story with a point. The theoretical conception of Slave time thus seems to undermine the logic of a memoir told from the perspective of a Slave (as Wilderson identifies himself in the acknowledgments.) Wilderson might claim that this performative contradiction between theory and narrative is one of the work's many irresolvable "paradoxes" that we must "sit with," but it really is not. Here are some options: 1) Wilderson is a Slave and therefore can have no narrative arc; 2) Wilderson is not a Slave and therefore does have a narrative arc; 3) Wilderson's claims about the Black Slave having no narrative arc are false, true in some trivial sense, or inapplicable to the current narrative. The first claim seems flatly false (after all, we can *read* the narrative!), but for reasons we will discuss in the next section, I'd bet that claims 2 and/or 3 are true.

The point here is not that this theory of Slave time is false or uninteresting. Rather, it is that the tension that claim generates in *Afropessimism* is less a symptom of an irresolvable paradox at the heart of Black experience, and more a symptom of Wilderson overplaying his hand in an attempt to bridge theory and memoir. Another indication of the tenuous coherence of that experiment is Wilderson's propensity to repeat certain phrases and paragraphs nearly verbatim throughout the book. This might be an intentional meta-comment on the recurring narrative flatness of Slave time, but it just as easily might not.

#### 4. ARE BLACK PEOPLE SLAVES?

Let's turn our attention to the metaphysical theory of Blackness that *Afropessimism* presents. Is that theory defensible on its own terms? It's hard to tell from the book itself. Despite the provocative nature of its central claims, *Afropessimism* does not attempt to *argue* for many of those claims at all. In Wilderson's hands, they take on the status of *a priori* truths, or of axiomatic constraints on what an acceptable theory of Black suffering would be. Yet, it is precisely because so much rides on the truth of those claims that one would hope to see arguments for them, and not only reflections on what implications their *possible* truth would have for Black liberation, Marxism, post-colonialism, feminism, etc.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, readers (especially non-Black readers) might ask themselves whether it is fair to expect an *argument* from Wilderson. As in Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, many of Wilderson's theoretical claims are rooted in direct experience of being Black in an anti-Black world. If Wilderson is correct that Black suffering and susceptibility to anti-Black violence are phenomenologically unique, at least some of the evidence for the truth of *Afropessimism* is only accessible and appreciable from a Black perspective. This in itself does not mean that there are no arguments that can be marshalled against this philosophy, but non-Black readers in particular would do well to treat some of Wilderson's phenomenological claims with an appropriate degree of moral deference.

Yet, *Afropessimism* is clearly not only a reflection on how the world "seems" from a Black perspective. Wilderson also tries to paint an accurate picture of the social world, and he argues that the accuracy of this picture makes pessimism a rational attitude. To that extent, the book is partially aimed at rational persuasion, and not only at a rhetorical appeal to common experience. This section attempts to reconstruct an argument for Wilderson's central claims and suggests that the argument fails. I then turn to some more general concerns about Wilderson's methodology in the book.

Let's start with the basic claim that Black people are Slaves. Wilderson goes so far as to say that "Blackness cannot exist as other than Slaveness" (229). One way of putting that claim is that all Black people (necessarily) occupy the same structural position in the social order, and that position is (necessarily) characterized by vulnerability to the experiences characteristic of social death. Note that this is much stronger than saying that Black people are especially *vulnerable* to certain harmful experiences. That much is uncontroversial. Wilderson's controversial claim is this: the harmful experiences to which Black people are vulnerable share an *essential property* in common that no other form of experience shares. It is not simply that Black people's diverse experiences of suffering have a "family resemblance" with one another. Rather, these experiences constitute a *kind* which shares a common underlying "grammar of violence."

In evaluating this claim, it is worth considering in more detail the nature of the connection between structural position, lived experience, and social death. First, does sharing the same structural position entail having

“essentially the same” sorts of experiences? Second, does a purported “essential similarity” in experiences across Black people provide *evidence* that Black people occupy the same structural position? Third, do Black people’s experiences necessarily take place in the context of social death? Wilderson presupposes that the answer to all three of these is “yes.” Yet, there are reasons to be skeptical.

First, consider the idea that structural position entails essential similarity in lived experience. It is already controversial to assert that Black people *qua* Black people occupy the same structural position in the social order, not least because there are multiple social orders and multiple ways that Black people are embedded within them. But let’s set that aside. Even *if* all Black people occupy the same structural position, it does not follow that the individuals who occupy that position will have much *else* in common at the level of lived experience. For example, Marxists sometimes contend that everyone who must work for a living is technically part of the “working class.” It may even be the case that to occupy this position is to suffer *exploitation*. Yet, a comfortably upper-middle class tenured philosophy professor fifteen years shy of their retirement goals is not embedded within the dynamics of capitalism in precisely the same way as a quasi-homeless door-to-door salesman. The professor is largely spared the debilitating experiences and life trajectories that accompany exploitation, and their comfortable position is even *made possible* by exploited labor. The salesman is far less sheltered from these experiences, and largely *is* exploited labor. Occupying a structural position, even one that has a generalizable connection to oppression, often tells us little about the texture of individual lives that labor under that oppression. This diversity is not surprising. After all, structural positions don’t have lived experiences; people occupying those positions do, and their experiences are affected by much more than their structural position. Similarly, even if every Black person occupies the “Slave” position, it doesn’t follow that all Blacks necessarily have much in common at the level of experience. To take an extreme example, Barack Obama and Mumia Abu-Jamal are both targeted by anti-Blackness, but the two men’s life experiences are not readily comparable.

Of course, Wilderson is aware that Black people have diverse experiences. Yet, Wilderson contends that the surface diversity in Black peoples’ experiences has an underlying “logic” or “grammar” of violence that makes these experiences essentially similar on a deeper level. Readers may be surprised to discover that the experiences that share in this grammar of violence include not only slavery, lynching, incarceration, genocide, and rape, but also microaggressions, inquisitive white people, dirty looks, religion, leftist politics, and skepticism about Afropessimism. What entitles Wilderson to the claim that these diverse experiences have an essential similarity?

Wilderson’s response is that all these experiences have a similar *functional role* within a broader economy of pleasure and power that allows non-Black people to achieve “confirmation of Human existence” (219). These experiences are products of Humans’ projects to define their identity in contrast to Slaves. The question then

becomes whether these diverse experiences play the “same role” in this project.

Here is where the authority of Black experience comes in. In chapter 5, Wilderson finds himself in a breakout session at an academic conference on race in which Black attendees discussed their experiences out of the earshot of non-Black attendees. Freed from the burden of analogizing Black suffering to that of other people of color, “I was able to see and feel how comforting it was for a room full of Black people to move between the spectacle of police violence, to the banality of microaggressions at work in the classroom, to experiences of chattel slavery as if the time and intensity of all three were the same” (205). Wilderson maintains that, while no one in the room presumes these to be literally equivalent, the discussion reflected “a collective recognition that the time and space of chattel slavery shares essential aspects with the time and space, the violence, of our modern lives” (205).

Yet, it is unclear what evidence this exchange is supposed to provide for the claim “Black people are Slaves.” Let’s first bracket the complication that no one alive today has ever had a firsthand experience of American chattel slavery, and so even an experientially informed Black perspective can render no authoritative judgment on what “essential aspect” it might share with casual disrespect in the workplace. More important is that this exchange demonstrates that the assertion of an underlying sameness in Black people’s diverse experiences over time is not actually *evidence* for the claim that Black people occupy the position of Slaves. Why not? Because it only makes sense to think of Black experiences of the brutality of chattel slavery and Black experiences of microaggressive social contempt as sharing “essential aspects” if you are *already* prepared to treat Black people’s structural position in 1852 as “essentially the same” as Black people’s structural position in 2020.

To throw this underlying circularity into relief, let’s summarize: Wilderson claims that all Black people have the same structural position (Slaveness.) Occupying this position makes it the case that Black people are vulnerable to the same harms, and the harms to which they are vulnerable share an “essential similarity.” If the considerable variation among Black people’s experiences or vulnerabilities to those harms is pointed out, Wilderson can claim that this indicates mere “surface” diversity that masks an underlying essential “grammar of violence” that unites those experiences.

When we ask why we would think that all these experiences (from chattel slavery to microaggressions) share in this selfsame grammar of violence, Wilderson has two answers: 1) Black people just *know* that these experiences share in this grammar through direct experience of anti-Black racism, and 2) Black people always have the same structural position, and this structural position entails essential similarity in experience. I’ve suggested that 1) may be true in a qualified or metaphorical sense. Yet, 2) renders Wilderson’s defense of “Black people are Slaves” explicitly circular, because the assertion of “essential sameness” among Black peoples’ diverse experiences is

both evidence for and implication of the claim that Black people share the same structural position.

Perhaps this circularity is nonvicious. If Wilderson is correct that Black people always occupy the condition of social death, and are forever alienated from counting as full “subjects of relations,” then the idea that Black people’s suffering constitutes a common grammar is on stronger grounds. Yet again, the claim that Black people are socially dead is too strong. This is not to deny what every person who is not in willful denial should see: Black people are demonstrably and especially vulnerable to state violence without sanction, mass incarceration, social contempt, interpersonal racism, economic dispossession, and political silencing. This calls out for social explanation and diverse strategies for redress. Yet, it is one thing to say that being Black at a certain time and place makes one *especially vulnerable* to these harms. It is another to say that the harms to which Black people are made vulnerable are, in all times and places, and in every case, harms which arise from the condition of social death.

Wilderson’s account simply ignores this distinction. And despite the horrific and consistent institutional failure to understand and address Black oppression in the twenty-first century, there’s little reason to think that Black people occupy the condition of social death. For one thing, it discounts the investment that many modern social orders have in recognizing Black people as subjects. Representation of Black people in politics, the creative arts, academia, sports, the police, military, and so on all give the lie to the notion that Black people are socially dead. For these reasons, Orlando Patterson, who originally coined the concept of social death, unequivocally denies that unenslaved Black people still occupy that condition. Again, we can recognize that Black people are full subjects while also acknowledging the depth and ubiquity of anti-Black racism.

This brings us to the matter of *Afropessimism’s* troubling methodology. Wilderson often fails to recognize a distinction between *inferiorizing representations* of Black people in the “collective unconscious” and *actual facts* about the Black people represented. This is a consequence of the radically conventionalist or Thrasymachean view of humanity we described at the outset. In the hands of the powerful, the myths about Black people become the truth about Black people. Yet, the conventionalist perspective is not forced upon us. Universal belief in a fairy tale doesn’t make the tale true, and the same goes for the tenets of anti-Black racism.

To this extent, *Afropessimism* is a paradigmatic example of what Barbara and Karen Fields have identified as *racecraft*.<sup>3</sup> For Fields and Fields, “race,” like “witch,” is a concept without extension. While both these concepts can fuel oppressive practices from sham trials to lynchings, the existence of those practices does not manage to “construct” race as something real. Fields and Fields thus part ways with the standard social constructionist line in philosophy of race, according to which social practices involving race lend race a social rather than biological reality. Racism and race are both “social constructions” in some sense, but they belong

to different classes. While racism is a “social construction” in the same way religions, murder, and genocide are, race is a “social construction” in the way witches and the causal power of the evil eye are. The former are concrete human social practices, but the latter’s “existence” is a mirage sustained by the widespread acceptance of particularly destructive myths.

For Fields and Fields, it is the failure to recognize this distinction, and the assumption that race is in any sense *real* that generates racecraft: the various sleights-of-hand by which the causal power of something real (racism, power, violence) is taken as *evidence* for the causal power of something which is in no sense real (race, the objects of myth.) In *Afropessimism*, this sleight-of-hand appears in Wilderson’s confidence that the historical contingency of what was and is *done* to Black people becomes something that *essentially defines* Black people. Forever entrapped within social death, Black people become “structurally inert props,” “implements,” “slaves,” “objects,” beings with no “self to be violated.”

It might be possible to tell a plausible story about how historically contingent anti-Black practices manage to construct an ahistorically subsisting abject structural position for Black people. Yet, Wilderson nowhere succeeds in doing so in the book. Consider one attempt. As his “mind abstracted in ever-widening concentric circles,” Wilderson concludes that, since nineteenth-century courts often did not recognize Black slaves’ right to bodily and personal property, Black people *everywhere* “are a species of sentient beings that cannot be injured or murdered, for that matter, for we are dead to the world” (198-99). Between premise and conclusion is a dizzying series of nonsequiturs. Of course, we shouldn’t expect this argument to work. What a nineteenth-century court *thought* about Black slaves couldn’t be less relevant to whether or not enslaved humans are actually injured when they are tortured or actually murdered when they are unjustly killed. What a nineteenth-century court thought is even more obviously irrelevant to whether or not Black people could be injured or murdered in the fourteenth century, or can be in the twenty-first. Wilderson’s racecraft often transforms historical contingencies of racism into the ontological necessity of race.

Finally, even if you are antecedently convinced of Wilderson’s uncompromising claims, the narrative structure of *Afropessimism* shows what unfortunate aesthetic consequences you should be prepared to live with. Packaging Black people in all their diversity under the ahistorical rubric of Slaveness gives Wilderson license to draw dramatic analogies between his own experiences and mythic paradigms of anti-Blackness. A moment when young Frank accidentally draws blood from a chubby, unpopular white playmate in an affluent Minneapolis neighborhood becomes the Fanonian moment in which the denigrated Black colonized subject shatters the illusion of the white colonizer’s omnipotence. A presentation poorly received by a room full of non-Black academics becomes akin to a lynching, in which Wilderson is expected to suffer horribly while absolving his tormentors. A contentious relationship between Frank, his lover, and a cloying, unstable white

neighbor becomes an extended meditation on how Frank and his lover bear essentially the same relationship to the neighbor as did Black slaves' constant vulnerability to the violent pleasures of their masters. (In fairness, while the analogy still strikes me as fraught, this last episode is the catalyst for a nightmarish cycle of anti-Black racism, conspiracy, and fugitivity which Wilderson relates at length across some of the book's most compelling pages.)

In light of the aforementioned moral deference non-Blacks often owe to Black people, these are especially tricky criticisms to make. Perhaps I morally err simply in making them. Yet, sometimes a philosophical view fails to add up not because it is logically incoherent, but because it bends under the weight of its unreasonable implications. If being Black itself necessitates the lived experiences characteristic of social death, practically every moment of suffering, as long as it is experienced by a Black person, can license a comparison to horror in extremis. Early on, I took Wilderson's frequent comparisons between comparatively mundane experience and paradigmatic anti-Blackness to be a bit of wry irony, the kind of self-consciously hyperbolic gallows humor that is the sweetness around the bitter pill of pessimist wisdom. The gradual revelation that Wilderson is a narrator too earnest for such small pleasures represents, at least to this reader, another shortcoming of the book.

## 5. THE POLITICS OF AFROPESSIMISM

Finally, it is worth discussing the political upshots of *Afropessimism*, and how the book "reads" within our current political moment. Wilderson's own political stance is clear enough in its broad outlines: Black liberation requires the total destruction of the existing relation between Slaves and Humans. In one of the book's more hopeful moments, Wilderson grants that "social death," like class and gender, can be overcome, since it is ultimately "constructed by the violence and imagination of other sentient beings." Overcoming social death, however, is necessarily apocalyptic: "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" (103). *Afropessimism* proposes a political ethic for those *outside* politics, whose engagement with the political would signify the end of politics as we know it.

Wilderson's political vision is a "grenade without a pin" or a "looter's creed" which strives to bring about the Fanonian "end of the world" (174). Yet, if your politics requires you to "burn the ship or the plantation . . . from the inside out" with yourself inside, you should be *extremely* sure that this politics is rooted in a true and comprehensive vision of Black people's situation in the world. Pinless grenades and looter's creeds can fall into anyone's hands. They can harm countless bystanders. Their volatility makes them unpredictable. What if the theoretical conceits of *Afropessimism* not only fail to bring about the end of the world, but give succor to projects dedicated to making an already awful anti-Black world worse? Ironically, those with reactionary anti-Black politics, or those in thrall to the magic of whiteness and convinced of the subhumanity of Blackness, should appreciate the work that Wilderson accomplishes here. In fascist hands, a claim like "it is absolutely necessary for Blacks to be castrated, raped,

genitally mutilated and violated, beaten, shot, and maimed" (219) in order for non-Blacks to achieve "confirmation of Human existence" is just the sort of work a society running on the myth of Black inhumanity and subpersonhood requires.

More predictably, *Afropessimism* takes aim at leftist coalitional, solidarity-based, and intersectional politics. It is not just that historically existing forms of socialism, feminism, and multiculturalism have left Black people out (which they often have). Rather, in Wilderson's mind, these forms of politics *terrorize* Black people simply by positing analogies and similarities among diverse forms of Black and non-Black oppression (220). The monolithic view of Blackness *Afropessimism* presents seems to have little room for the idea that Black people are lots of things *besides* Black, and that their interests and concerns are often formed in ways similar to non-Blacks' interests. To be sure, we should mark a distinction between Wilderson's politics and misappropriations of his vision. Yet, if Black people are literally *terrorized* by working-class struggle, multicultural coalitions, immigration rights, feminism, and other forms of counter-hegemonic politics, one might wonder why Black liberation strategies should bother accommodate the stated interests of people who are, in addition to Black, queer, religious, anti-capitalist, female, poor, immigrant, working class, indigenous, and/or incarcerated.

Those sympathetic to Wilderson might suggest that Black people have little to lose by abandoning solidarity-based politics. Yet, not-so-ancient history suggests that there may be higher stakes here. As Paul Ortiz has recently demonstrated, many of the material, political, social, and symbolic gains for Black and Latinx people throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were generated by an emancipatory internationalism that drew explicit analogies between Black and non-Black freedom struggles.<sup>4</sup> The United States' interest in slavery, of course, first and foremost oppressed Black people. Yet, because slavery was so deeply interwoven with the oppression of non-Black people as well (in the form of Indian removal and extermination, violent expropriation of Mexican land in a war to expand slavery, etc.), Black and non-Black abolitionists were able to engage the problem of Black oppression not in isolation, but with a view to how it undergirded a more generally unacceptable social order. Of course, just because solidarity was a useful tool for achieving *those* political goals doesn't mean it will work *now*. Nevertheless, in a time when Black oppression has once again become one of the clearest symptoms of a more broadly unacceptable social order, perhaps it is wise to remember this emancipatory spirit.

Finally, one wouldn't think that a political imaginary that at first seems so radical would be so amenable to the status quo. Wilderson suggests that his view of the fundamental distinctiveness of Black suffering extends "the critique of neoliberalism," and registers surprise that leftists do not welcome his perspective (182). Yet, it is just as easy to see *Afropessimism's* performative transcendence of the political as *embracing* a neoliberal class politics. The book's simplistic social ontology and monolithic conception of violence makes each Black person into All Black People, thus aiding a crucial neoliberal elision: even

if Wilderson draws no essential distinction in station and suffering among Black people, the market certainly does and will continue to do so. *Afropessimism's Sturm und Drang* is often a pleasure to explore, but it fits right in with a masochistic cultural moment that cedes the floor to public proclamations of suffering and rituals of deference to it while simultaneously cordoning off these performances from any political will to eradicate the causes of such suffering in the first place. Performing catharsis itself may be a political act, but it is increasingly one whose relation to subversive strategies is not always clear. Whether had by feminists, anti-racists, anti-capitalists, or *Afropessimists*, the small pleasures of lamentation do not threaten. One imagines the dominant social order quoting Nietzsche to itself: "What are my parasites to me?, it might say, 'may they live and prosper: I am strong enough for that!'"<sup>5</sup>

In a final irony, perhaps *Afropessimism* is not pessimistic enough. We occupy a stultifying political moment whose routines have been so corporatized that even avowed anti-racists must negotiate racism roughly the same way a human resources department must negotiate an unruly employee: correct, cancel, or cash in, depending on what the cost-benefit analysis says. As a result, self-congratulatory anti-bias training, identification with the "right side of history" (on which side of course can be found the most "socially conscious" brand-name corporations), underclass tourism, performative wokeness, cyclical rituals of call out and contrition, and perhaps a "diversity initiative" here and there seem to be the only intellectual and practical tools current institutions are willing to raise against the nexus of racial and socioeconomic oppression. Wilderson of course recognizes that racism is a deep feature of the social order, and so is rightly pessimistic about the efficacy of the usual "anti-racist" tools. But he may be right for the wrong reason: pessimism about the end of racism isn't warranted because Black suffering necessarily anchors the world; it's warranted because it is nigh-impossible to imagine a future world so thoroughly reorganized around the well-being of the dispossessed that racism and anti-racism themselves have ceased to be useful strategies for consolidating and protecting elite power and wealth. Perhaps this is the source of the unsettling feeling that Wilderson's tools might simply be retrofitted to the neoliberal apparatus. The content of Wilderson's version of *Afropessimism* makes it a stranger cousin than most, but its uptake in the mainstream may signal neoliberal politics as usual: a lucrative but politically impotent brokerage relationship between elites willing to monetize Black suffering and its supposed antidote, and the audiences happy to consume both.<sup>6</sup>

## 6. CONCLUSION

The Spanish pessimist Miguel de Unamuno once pointed out that "the baneful consequences of a doctrine may prove, at best, that the doctrine is baneful, but not that it is false."<sup>7</sup> It is indeed an admirable feature of pessimisms the world over that they are bold enough to entertain the notion that the darkest, most alienating, most anti-human possibilities might be true, baneful consequences be damned. *Afropessimism* is no exception, and readers should be grateful for Wilderson's deep, sobering perspective. Yet, in this critical discussion, I have tried to show that the consequences of Wilderson's view are baneful, and that the

view itself is undermotivated and very likely false. Precisely because *Afropessimism's* possibilities are so baneful, the argumentative stakes are high. Extreme claims require considerable substantiation, and *Afropessimism* fails to accomplish that work.

But yet again, perhaps I should be more pessimistic about my own ability to engage these views. As a non-Black reader, I am simply not part of the audience *Afropessimism* is really meant to address. Wilderson claims that the lifeblood of *Afropessimism* is "the imaginations of Black people on the ground, and the intellectual labors of Black people in revolt," and that his own work is merely a theoretical articulation of what "Black people at their best" already know (173). In a cinematic retelling of a poorly received presentation in Berlin, Wilderson tells a room full of non-Black academics: "I'm not talking to anyone in this room. Ever. When I talk, I'm talking to Black people. I'm just a parasite on the resources I need to do work for Black liberation" (187). Toward the end of the book, he listens as a young Black woman tearfully describes how his class has given her a vocabulary to account for the resentment she holds for her white mother and Asian-American boyfriend: "they are all embodiments of capacity, and capacity is an offense" (333). Passages like this effectively establish choir and preacher, and the choir probably didn't get to where they are because someone gave them a convincing *argument*.

The rest of us may console ourselves with Wilderson's often poignant narrative, but otherwise there's no way in. Perhaps it is for people better placed than I to pick up what Wilderson is putting down. Perhaps many of Wilderson's readers will already know something I don't, by virtue of walking a path I could never walk. Perhaps the fact that people like me just don't get it is one of the highest compliments that can be paid to this book. Yet, if you are one of the many readers who does not already experience the truth of *Afropessimism* in your bones, *Afropessimism* simply shouldn't change your mind.

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## NOTES

1. Some terminological clarification is in order. The italicized "*Afropessimism*" denotes Wilderson's book. From here forward, the non-italicized "*Afropessimism*" will denote Wilderson's own theoretical commitments. Unless explicitly noted, my summary and criticism of "*Afropessimism*" should be understood to be about Wilderson's particular views as they appear in *Afropessimism*, and not the philosophy of *Afropessimism* as it has been developed by other thinkers.
2. To this extent, readers seeking a more theoretically straightforward introduction to *Afropessimism* would be better off with Wilderson et al., *Afro-pessimism: An Introduction*.
3. Fields and Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life*.
4. Ortiz, *An African American and Latinx History of the United States*.
5. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 72.
6. For more on the problem of elite capture of counter-hegemonic political strategies and goals, and on the political possibilities within this matrix, see Olúfemi O. Táiwò's excellent recent pieces, "Identity Politics and Elite Capture," and "Power over the Police."
7. Quoted in Dienstag, *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit*, x.

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