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Afropessimism's Ethics

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antiblackness, afropessimism, Willy Apollon, ethics of the real, Jacques Lacan, Frank B. Wilderson

Abstract
By analyzing the xenopathic status of the gaze and the voice during the "mental breakdown" described in Frank B. Wilderson III's latest memoir, this essay reads afropessimism as a formalization of the lived experience of psychosis. It argues that Wilderson's understanding of antiblackness is significantly modeled on the imaginary mechanisms and ruses that define neurotic reality and confer psychic coherence to the neurotic subjects of liberal multiracialism. Treating psychosis as an immanent critique of antiblackness, this essay concludes by offering a clarification of the stakes of afropessimism's ethical imperatives: to end the antiblack world (of neurotic misrecognition) and to assume the position of social death (of a desire outside-of-language).

Etika afropesimizma

Ključne besede
protičrnskost, afropesimizem, Willy Apollon, etika realnega, Jacques Lacan, Frank B. Wilderson

Povzetek
S pomočjo analize ksenopatskega statusa pogleda in glasu med »duševnim zlomom«, opisanim v najnovejših spominih Franka B. Wildersona III, ta prispevek afropesimizem razume kot formalizacijo žive izkušnje psihoze. Avtor trdi, da je Wildersonovo razumevanje protičrnskosti v veliki meri oblikovano po imaginarnih mehanizmih in zvijačah, ki opredeljujejo nevrotično realnost in dajejo psihično koherentnost nevrotičnim

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subjektom liberalne večrasnosti. Psihotično stanje obravnava kot imanentno kritiko protičrnskosti, prispevek pa sklene s pojasnitvijo etičnih imperativov afropesimizma: končati protičrnski svet (nevrotičnega napačnega prepoznavanja) in prevzeti položaj družbene smrti (želje zunaj-jezika).

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Introduction

Among other things, afropessimism formulates an ethics of desire that responds to the lived experience of psychosis. In his latest memoir, *Afropessimism*, Frank B. Wilderson III dates the birth of this field to a "mental breakdown" in his life.[1] Afropessimism emerges in his memoir as a theory developed out of the *savoir* of a paranoid delusion about antiblackness. In the past,[2] Wilderson half-seriously wondered whether he suffered from a "major mental disorder," but it is only in this latest life writing that he more or less affirms a *de jure* psychotic episode and presents afropessimism as a theory of—even his personal solution for—his schizophrenic response to the "lived experience of blackness," as Frantz Fanon put it in his own theoretical self-analysis.[3] Given the psychotic's unique hyperbolization of a truth about the limits of the speaking-being, there may be no better case from which to draw up the borders shared between (and territories disputed by) psychoanalysis and afropessimism.

What Wilderson first called "afropessimism" in 2010—and it is strictly his interpretation of a far more heterogeneous field I treat here[4]—is also a critique of any

1 Frank B. Wilderson III, *Afropessimism* (New York: Liverlight, 2021).

2 Frank B. Wilderson III, *Incognegro: A Memoir of Exile and Apartheid* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

3 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 2008).

4 In 1997, when Saidiya Hartman published *Scenes of Subjection* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2022), and thrust the archive of American slavery into a new debate about the ends of abolition, afropessimism emerged as a particularly serious elaboration of its consequences for contemporary politics and the critique of everyday life. Inaugural afropessimist statements by Wilderson (in 2003 and 2010) were joined by those of Jared Sexton (2008), Fred Moten (2013), and David Marriot (2018), whose diverse readings of post-slavery culture—from film and music to politics, history, and philosophy—pivot to a significant degree on

number of theories of life and power in the critical and cultural studies. However, if his irreverent, even passionately disinterested attempts to convince his scholarly targets or defend against his ideas' detractors are any indication, afropessimism's conceptual *bona fides* are not his main concern. Afropessimism does not aim to persuade, to accrue value in the marketplace of ideas. It aims to invoke an experience outside of language and beyond political articulation, one in which the existence and believability of the world has already come into question. Afropessimism secures the only credentials it seeks from the unconscious response it evinces from the subject it addresses.[5] The different ethical position it consequently assumes makes it less of an argument against a given theoretical premise and more of a response to an extraordinary experience—madness—as well as a theory of antiblackness reverse-engineered from that experience. That theory, in turn, I understand as an *ethical* means to one of afropessimism's ends. This end is to produce a change of position in the subject that it addresses: a shift, that is, from persecuted object to desiring subject.

A close companionship between the ethics of afropessimism and the ethics of psychoanalysis has been there from the beginning, even if the unfitness of the latter to deal on its own with the political and existential dilemmas of black subjection has regularly been entered into the record.[6] Wilderson's early and admittedly restricted critique of Lacan's ethics of full speech notwithstanding, and despite his seeming preference since for deliberating the political effects of antiblackness (i.e., how it secures the psychic coherence of human life) over its

their contrapuntal reassessments of the psychoanalytic criticism of Fanon (2008) and Hortense Spillers (2003).

5 "Afropessimism is not an ensemble of theoretical interventions that leads the struggle for Black liberation. One should think of it as a theory that is legitimate because it has secured a mandate from Black people at their best; which is to say, a mandate to speak the analysis and rage that most Black people are free only to whisper." Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 173.

6 Psychoanalysis' ambivalent status in black studies is well-documented (Tate, 1996), but it seems that it is not so much psychoanalysis as much as certain varieties of psychological reason that illegitimately go under that name that Wilderson correctly deems as inadequate, which makes afropessimism more properly a *critique of the negation of psychoanalysis*. Owing to Wilderson's iconoclastic readings of Freud and Lacan, and to the far-reaching reassessments that these readings have prompted, psychoanalysis and black studies have since enjoyed an historically unprecedented level of theoretical exchange, one whose more recent landmarks include Sheldon George's *Trauma and Race* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016) and David Marriott's *Lacan Noir* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

ethical consequences on the black subject (i.e., how psychic coherence mortifies black desire and contracepts human freedom), Wilderson once forthrightly affirmed the "dream of an unfettered ethics"[7], an ethics of a desire to destroy settler coloniality and the slave estate, as he put it in 2010. Already, a Lacanian topology—between the desire articulated in dreams and the *jouissance* expressed in suffering—is plain enough to see at this early point in his theory. What qualifies the "slave's desire" as ethical is a purely negative criterion: it is caused by something outside-of-language and is symbolically inarticulable within all extant structures of political, aesthetic, or social scientific address. The foreclosure of the "slave's desire" does not lead to its extinguishment but leads it to constantly break in on personal and collective consciousness "like the somatic compliance of hysterical symptoms."[8]

In what follows, I trace afropessimism's ethics throughout the marrow of the field's propositions and try to measure the degree to which Wilderson betrays or maintains his fidelity to an ethics of the slave's desire—and all within the methodological fences of an immanent critique that judges the field's success by the standards of the author's own critical program (as condensed in this latest memoir) and lived experience (through a close reading of the psychotic decomposition and associated hallucination that Wilderson details at the beginning of *Afropessimism*). If psychoanalysis as such is unfit to realize black desire, one whose social and political disarticulation converts it into the bodily symptoms of entire populations, it also seems that an unfettering of the ethics of afropessimism cannot take its first step without expressing itself in the language psychoanalysis formalized to address the unspeakable, as Wilderson himself never stops doing.

This ethical question has received a sliver of attention, not only in the reception of afropessimism (whether irrationally exuberant or in pearl-clutching outrage) but within the field itself. I think it is only now, over a decade after its christening, and with the chronicling of a psychotic crisis that firmly situates the subject of unconscious desire in relation to the dispositives of antiblackness that

7 Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 4.

8 Wilderson, 4.

overdetermine it, that we can finally supply some formal texture to the "ethical modernity" that Wilderson's afropessimism affirms against all hope.[9]

In the Psychotic Break

On a routine morning sometime in 2000, while peering into a mirror, "a stanza of poetry" suddenly flashes into Wilderson's thoughts.[10] He is immediately plunged into a vertigo. Wilderson can mutter the stanza's words, laugh at the inert, strangely material presence of its signifiers, but he cannot recall the whole thing or comprehend its significance. Wilderson pours himself down the stairs of his Berkeley apartment to board a city bus headed for a psychiatric clinic but finds himself increasingly trapped in the funhouse mirrors of a rapidly dissolving reality. It is then that he first experiences a disembodying vision: "I saw myself seeing myself through the eyes of the [white] passengers."[11]

Seeing myself seeing myself: this is both an iteration of W. E. B. Du Bois' famous formulation of black double consciousness and a repetition one of Lacan's equally famous formulas for consciousness, which he describes as a purely idealized self-apprehension.[12] Consciousness reduces the world, one's self included, to its representation, in which the hallmark of representation is its "belong to me aspect, so reminiscent of property."[13] But this feature is also an illusion that only gives the impression of providing the power to own or behold, with consciousness marking the primary strategy through which the neurotic elides the gaze as a limit of representation and a point of impossibility in the perceptual field. Repressing the gaze disavows the structural impossibility of any self to fully possess themselves, which proceeds when the subject objectifies themselves into an ego that is positioned to be seen by (and molded in the image of)

9 Wilderson, 3.

10 Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 3.

11 Wilderson, 6.

12 "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder." W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), xxii-xxiii.

13 Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 81.

the Other. By assuming the Other's supposedly panoptic perspective—in "seeing myself [from the position of the Other] seeing myself"—the subject achieves this imaginary transposition of places at the price of their "annihilation."[14] Forcing such an eclipse of the gaze of the Other by the "eye" of the ego leads the neurotic to appropriate the intrinsic lack in the visible as an extrinsic shortcoming of their own powers of perception. What any image cannot show is thenceforward misrecognized by the ego as something invisible or hidden. Neurosis spatializes sight, giving the visual field an alluring and constantly frustrating depth that it does not have.

This neurotic strategy does nothing for Wilderson. In his psychotic break, Wilderson experiences consciousness as a white conceit, fundamentally alien, as a perception emanating from the outside; the correspondence between his eye and the gaze of "white passengers" fails, and so does the coincidence between his consciousness and body; the position of the Other is estranging, disturbing, and his attempt to assume their position and apprehend himself in the mirror triggers the fragmentation of his body and the dissolution of meaning; his self-representation does not secure the illusion of the "belong to me aspect" of his identity but dawns instead an awareness of the "belong to them" aspect reminiscent of being a property for others. Both neurotics and psychotics hallucinate something that is not "there" to be seen—"reality, inasmuch as it is supported by desire, is initially hallucinated," says Lacan[15]—but it is only in psychosis that the subject does not *coincide* with their hallucinations. That is why the French psychiatrist Paul Guiraud distinguished psychotic hallucinations as "xenopathic" (coming from the "other" instead of from the "psyche").[16]

The appearance of this disembodying gaze is quickly followed by the emergence of another object, the voice, which issues a command that repeats in Wilderson's head as he encounters white people in public: "*make them feel safe*," an order he calls the "cardinal rule of Negro diplomacy."[17] The voice's command is neither rationalized nor warranted by any logical premise; Wilderson is barely able to move, much less hurt another; instead, this demand performatively

14 Lacan, 81.

15 Lacan, *The Psychoses*, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 84.

16 Quoted in Stijn Vanheule, "A Lacanian Perspective on Psychotic Hallucinations," *Theory and Psychology* 21, no. 1 (2011): 93, https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354310369275.

17 Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 6.

expresses and imposes the authority of the law, repeating the impure moment of its origin.

How the neurotic "normally" treats the voice echoes their strategy with the gaze: the radically external provenance of the voice—as the object through which the signifying chain imposes itself on the subject, and through which the Other's presence is first impressed on the body as an enigmatic *jouissance*—is pacified by the ego through its reflexive assumption of the Other's supposedly sensible discourse as an expression of their own "true self." By performing such an imaginary appropriation of the voice by the "inner voice" of the ego, the subject transforms the intrinsic lack of sense in the voice of the Other of language as a contingent failure of their own powers of communication. The only ever anticipated finality of sense that such a maneuver places at their disposal makes narrative, conversational, logical-rhetorical, and poetic modes of communication so seductive to neurotics.[18]

In psychosis, though, the voice is denuded in its xenopathy, a sound of pure and overwhelming evocation that comes to be heard as an unknowable and unsatisfiable demand from the other. "In terms of psychosis," writes Bret Fimiani, "we can say that the voice in hallucination is an effect of the Other of pure demand. The Other of demand, represented in the psychotic's experience of the voice, is a capricious Other that is by definition without limit."[19] Here, too, Wilderson exists in a relation of non-correspondence to the voice, an object that, instead of functioning as the sonorous support for the conveyance of sense, incarnates what is inarticulable in speech, a traumatic *jouissance* in language that is experienced as belonging to a ravenous Other. That Other issues to its victim an inscrutable demand for sacrifice—*make them feel safe*—without limit, reason, or self-regard.

Wilderson's aphasia fades as quickly as it hit him, and when he suddenly regains the ability to respond to the psychiatric staff, the errant stanza that triggered

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18 Willy Apollon, "What's at Stake in the Freudian Clinic," *Newsletter of the Freudian Field* 2, no. 1 (1987): 27–46.

19 Bret Fimiani, *Psychosis and Extreme States: An Ethic for Treatment* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 23.

Wilderson's delirium returns, for the first time, as part of a completed poem. It is a construction of his own:

> *For Halloween I washed my*
> *face and wore my*
> *school clothes went door to*
> *door as a nightmare.*[20]

What Wilderson credits with enabling his recovery is the same thing that triggered his psychosis: afropessimism, and in two distinct but inseparable senses. In one sense, as an experience of a profound alienation from the world that, in making the gaze and the voice tangible as objects, push the ego into a state of disembodiment. In another sense, as a theory *derived from this lived experience of psychotic crisis*, and which treats his xenopathic hallucinations as a valid (if compromised) insight into the foundation of the contemporary symbolic space. "I had suddenly realized what it meant to be an Afropessimist; that my breakdown was brought on by a breakthrough, one in which I finally understood why I was too black for care."[21] We will come back to this formulation in much greater detail. For now, we can provisionally conclude that Wilderson is no longer able to sustain the neurotic's belief in a fictive Other who cares about his wellbeing, and that his hallucination expresses the presence of an Other of unbridled aggression who enjoys causing and witnessing his suffering. His breakdown, in other words, is triggered by a latent awareness of the otherwise disavowed *jouissance* of the Other—the self-transgression of the law, its founding and unfounded violence—whose normative misrecognition props up the neurotic's belief in an ultimately just, law-governed world.

Wilderson's poem itself critically reflects on the dialectic of being and appearance at work here. It disillusions the neurotic belief in the revelatory image (i.e., that there is some definite thing that images hide) as a ruse that represses the structural inconsistency or incompleteness of reality, a misrecognition against which the psychotic symptom protests. In Wilderson's stanza, blackness is *not* a Halloween costume (i.e., a mask donned by the trick-or-treater) that deceives a neighbor, lover, or police officer into mistaking its bearer for a threat to the

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20 Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 17.

21 Wilderson, 17.

public welfare—as that would assume an incomplete Other whose blurred or misshapen vision could be corrected and, were they only able to see through or past the imaginary dress of racialization, would gain the ability to recognize behind blackness' appearance a true, universal being. Rather, if Wilderson terrifies in ordinary dress, if the disturbing effect he has on others (like the disturbing effect he first has on himself when looking in the mirror) is heightened by a polishing of his appearance, then blackness marks a strange type of *being-in-appearance* that plunges the reality-effect of perception into crisis (later on, Wilderson calls the conjunction of appearance and being in blackness as the "static imago of subjection"). Any attempt to decipher how blackness appears or signifies to the Other (and *ipso facto*, to find out what the Other wants from or knows about blackness) misses the more confounding manner in which the misrecognition of blackness subtends the very field of perception.

Instead of a "racialized" appearance behind which its true racial essence lies, blackness marks the disavowed point in the field of representation that spatializes perception. In appearing to be nothing but an appearance, in seeming to be full of hidden meanings that cannot be seen or are not yet revealed, blackness hides the fact that it hides nothing and creates the illusion that it is an illusion.

Wilderson diagnoses his mental breakdown as a subjective iteration of a general antagonism immanent to multiracial or post-racial societies, which gets actualized in individual and collective crises of meaning.[22] Those crises of meaning, what he calls *crises in the ruse of analogy*, cause the subject anxiety—not an anxiety concerning symbolic uncertainty, but a signal anxiety that warns of the imminence of an object from the real, whose presence annihilates the ego.[23] This real object forms an impassable frontier within the symbolic space of modern democracies, and assures their structural incompleteness or failure, but it is mediated by a battery of metanarratives that block its recognition: from the metanarratives of sovereignty that repress the lack at the base of a legal order founded on racial slavery and its afterlives to the metanarratives of historical justice that dissimulate the limit of political sense (and occult the impotence of

[22] Wilderson, 199.

[23] Sigmund Freud, "Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74), 20:75–176.

the Other of political appeal) as embodied in social death as a state of irremediable injury. Broadly understood, the anxiety that Wilderson experiences—and which his psychotic solution tries to contain—signals a structural failure in the terms of political order, social legitimacy, and cultural narrative, whose irruption compromises the rites that institute the individual in the imagined community.

In his brilliant reinterpretation of Freud's case study, Eric Santner reads Doctor Schreber's paranoid symptom as his own private response to a broader "crisis of symbolic investiture" that plagues the increasingly faulty procedures of social reproduction in modern public life. It is characterized by a general breakdown in the functioning of the rites and customs through which political authority is transferred and social and political standing is subjectively assumed.[24] Santner enables Schreber's hallucinatory construction to be reappraised as a testimonial to the attenuating legitimacy of institutions caused by the blooming crisis of subjectivity and power in early twentieth-century Germany (a crisis that the collective myths promulgated by totalitarian formations like the National Socialism of Schreber's day and age "manage" with equally disastrous results). As Santner and Wilderson both know, a psychotic break is not only a personal crisis but a form of relating to a historical impasse in the social and political Other. Their conspiratorial and delusional worldview, furthermore, functions as a "cure" to this breakdown in the psychosocial processes of subjectification (one that replaces a suddenly non-credible social world populated by "cursorily, improvised men" with an alternative, totalizing *Weltanschauung*).[25] The symptom is also a shaky "process of reconstruction" of the ego from the ruins of the imaginary reality that previous sustained it, thereby doubling as an ethical protest against the neurotic disavowal of the real lack in the metanarratives that support their imaginary identifications.[26]

Wilderson dismisses the "stress" of graduate school to explain his nervous illness as the bone he tosses the prying psychiatric staff to get them off his back;

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[24] Eric L. Santner, *My Own Private Germany: Daniel Paul Schreber's Secret History of Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

[25] Sigmund Freud, "Psycho-Analytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia (Dementia Paranoides)," in *Standard Edition*, 12:21.

[26] Freud, 12:70.

he is unable to convey the *real* reason why he believes he is mad.[27] Nonetheless, psychoanalysis can offer an interpretation of the stress phenomenon that not only beats the apolitical explanations of psychological behaviorism but also enhances an understanding of antiblackness by bringing clarity to the psychotic deconstruction, that is, to the moment in which antiblackness' imaginary mechanisms, which otherwise successfully institute the ego of political subjectivity, fail in a spectacular fashion. Dipping once more into the insights afforded by examining the sociohistorical determinants of the Schreber case, Santner proposes a reading of "signifying stress" as a complement and ineliminable remainder of the processes that inscribe the physiological body into social exchange, and thus as an affect that "supplements every act of symbolic investiture."[28] When that signifying stress surpasses a certain threshold, when it exceeds and exhausts the representational resources that a given culture makes available for assigning meaning to a subject's failure to conform to its symbolic ideals and for rendering intelligible the discontent triggered by the pressures of institutional participation (from "imposter syndrome" to "antisocial behavior"), it triggers a protest of anxiety that is capable of triggering a psychotic break.

Let me offer the following interpretation: the normative stress of conforming to institutional localization and the customs of interpersonal recognition simply becomes too much for Wilderson that morning, short-circuiting his alienating self-idealization in a spectacular reversal of the mirror stage. Once the walls of political sense girding the twenty-first-century United States are breached, they no longer contain the real of antagonism within the garden of illusory meanings and, through the anxiety that signals its collapse, shatters the ego alienated within its imagined (multiracial) community. Wilderson's psychosis reveals the conceit of a politics of multiracialism that attempts to reduce blackness—as both a metonym and object of fetishistic disavowal for the untreatable wound of subjectivity—to the imaginary frustration of an abstract complaint, which reinforces a quasi-religious belief in an Other of historical judgment and redemption. Moreover, he gives lie to the authority of psychiatric medicine whose technical ideology seeks to reinstate the very conformity that Wilderson refuses to suffer and through which psychiatry disavows its own lack of any ethics.

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27 Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 17.

28 Eric L. Santner, *The Royal Remains: The People's Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), xiii.

The Ruses of the Imaginary

What insights does this psychotic episode impart, and how are those lessons incorporated into the theoretical content of afropessimism? Put another way, how does the lived experience of psychosis support Wilderson's formalization of an unfettered ethics? Let me first spell out how his symptomatic hallucination—as a "form of knowledge concerning profound malfunctions in those politicotheological procedures that otherwise sustain the very ontological consistency of what we call the 'world'"[29]—is extracted into a knowledge about the manner in which antiblackness secures the psychic coherence of individuals and collectives.

First, Wilderson apprehends consciousness as an imaginary strategy for avoiding, in the field of representation, any recognition of what Lacan calls the "pre-existence to the seen of a given-to-be-seen."[30] In a minor twist to this psychoanalytic insight, Wilderson situates self-consciousness as the spontaneous perspectival bearing of any subject in the antiblack world. The illusion that psychosis therefore exposes or denudes as the alienating "view" of whiteness should be understood as a component-part of the *psychic coherence* that Wilderson deems to be the most consequential effect provisioned by antiblackness, provided we take "psychic" to mean, precisely, "egoic."

The ego's coherence is itself an illusion, and the subject's projected reification as an object among others in the world rests on a suppression of the gaze—on covering up the lack in the subject's desire to see, on side-stepping the "pre-existence. . .of the seen." But psychic coherence is *not actual*: the ruse of neurosis only allows the relative incoherence of desire to be lived as unthought; ego relations waylay the *assumption* of incoherence (i.e., desire) by interposing themselves between the subject and the unconscious. That makes the actualization of psychic coherence itself another imaginary ruse, now the ruse of psychosis, which supposes the (white) Other as a coherent identity or undivided being.

The psychotic episode simultaneously reveals the moral coherence of the world and the consistency of social and political life more broadly to be an illusion

29 Santner, *My Own Private Germany*, xiii.

30 Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 74.

correlative to that of the ego's objectification and coherence. That becomes evident in how the laws of social convention, instead of fading into the background as a set of abstract rules governing relations and guaranteeing the world's moral symmetry, materializes for Wilderson as an obscene or gratuitous command by the imagined voice of a hostile white public. In another rotation of this Freudian insight, Wilderson posits the act of the law's imposition as constitutive of the world *as* antiblack.

Yet, the institution of which aspect of the law, precisely, coincides with the coherence of the antiblack world? Here we must distinguish, within the object of the voice, between the specific commands issued by the superego (i.e., the domain of morality) and the place from which those statements are enunciated (i.e., the domain of ethics).

The moral superego issues the prohibitions and duties of a particular regime of values, one that demands a renunciation of unrestricted enjoyment, and whose internalization secures the subject an imaginary place in the social order. This includes the command that Wilderson follows to "make them [whites] feel safe." The superego voices the positive content of the law. And while having the appearance of being a consistent and exhaustive set of rules, its imperatives are intrinsically self-contradictory, and thus impossible to follow to the letter. The neurotic who strives to conform to its conventions and to attain the social identity they promise can only conduct themselves *as if* this moral law is fundamentally meaningful and consistent. When they inevitably fall short of fulfilling these supposed duties, neurotics frequently punish themselves for their personal shortcomings (or critique and correct the Other to set them straight) in lieu of recognizing the structural nature of the law's incoherence. Not only does this masochism or critique secure a surplus enjoyment, but it leads to the abdication of any responsibility for an act irreducible to any prescription.

The voice of enunciation, on the other hand, summons the being to speech, and precedes the articulation of any specific moral commands. It voices the universal interpellation to subjectivity that, through the material support of the signifier, calls the human into being in relation to the Other. This is the law that imposes the domain of human ethics. As Mladen Dolar puts it, the voice of enunciation is a "pure call which commands nothing specific and offers no guarantee"

but "delivers us to the Other and to our own responsibility."[31] The place of enunciation calls the subject into being in its symbolic indeterminacy, which makes a free act possible.[32]

By isolating the radical foreignness of the voice of enunciation, and thus the field of ethics, the psychotic reveals the neurotic's unconscious belief in the consistency of the moral law and the order of representation as a ruse that represses a real incoherence in the symbolic universe, denuding the neurotic's abandonment of the domain of ethics in favor of an accession to the social and moral order. Now, the psychotic too abdicates responsibility for their own desire when they pledge to carry out the commands issued by the "Other supposed to know" of their hallucination.[33] In the final instance, the ruse of psychosis, like the ruse of neurosis, disavows the irreducible freedom of the subject by foreclosing their desire in deference to a drive to satisfy a supposedly coherent moral dictum. Their minor difference is this one: instead of granting an imaginary consistency to the institutions of actually existing reality (i.e., neurosis), the ruse of psychosis institutes an imaginary consistency to their private hallucinatory worldview, which authorizes their often (self-)destructive mission (we will return to the "psychotic's enterprise" at the end of this paper).

Desire, Cure, Care

Wilderson described the ultimate "breakthrough" he had extracted from his psychotic experience as discovering *why* he was "too black for care," a knowledge he gleans from his encounter at the psychiatric clinic:

> I was moaning. Sobbing. The crisp disposable sheet that lined the gurney rasped as I shifted. I sat up when they came into the room. No one was going to strap me down. But I didn't climb down for fear of giving them cause. In the glare of fluorescence, they—the doctor and the nurse—were white as dust. The gurney rattled as I shook and cried. They didn't approach. They didn't call for help, not for themselves nor for me, a monstrous aphasic too black for care. That's how I saw them

31 Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 98.

32 See, in general, Alenka Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real: Kant, Lacan* (London: Verso, 2000).

33 Jean Allouch, "Psychotic Transference," in *Lacan on Madness: Madness, Yes You Can't*, ed. by Patricia Gherovici and Manya Steinkoler (London: Routledge, 2015), 112–26.

> see me. And my urge to save them from me eclipsed my desire to be cured. But I couldn't speak. Not even to tell them that I wanted to protect them from me.[34]

Is Wilderson in fact "too black for care"? Does he believe this himself after recovering from his psychotic break, or does he glimpse something monstrous about himself, a desire he refuses to avow and that he projects onto the white avatars of psychiatry? Does his inclination to save the Berkeley clinical staff from their racial phantoms only reflect an inverted form of his desire, a longing to destroy them, a wish which he cannot bring himself to acknowledge? Wilderson parenthesizes the hall of mirrors in which he appears as "too black for care" by immediately repeating the formula for self-consciousness ("that's how I saw them see me"). This suspends any question about this statement's factuality while pointing to a greater truth: that Wilderson has renounced his "*desire to be cured*" in order to satisfy the supposed demands of the Other to "feel safe."

Already here, the voice of enunciation that brings Wilderson to the threshold of a subjective act is immediately drowned out by the obscene commands of the "cardinal rule of Negro diplomacy," an eclipsing of the ethical by the moral so complete that it closes even the narrowest of margins in which Wilderson would be able to articulate a desire beyond the demands of the Other, ultimately leading to a full foreclosure of speech ("I was moaning," "I was sobbing," "I couldn't speak"). What this panicked obsequiousness disavows is the incoherence of the superego's demand, its internal inconsistency. The more he tries to reassure his would-be persecutors of the innocence of his intentions, the louder Wilderson's monstrous silence becomes, and the more he loses himself in the fearing eyes of imaginary others.[35]

What does this scene indicate about the relationship between desire, cure, and care? What to make of the *desire to be cured* that Wilderson admits he has renounced, and that is preserved, in suspended animation, through its reappearance as a monster in the *camera obscura* of psychotic hallucination? Do we glimpse in it that desire whose foreclosure and inversion, as I have proposed, will be reversed and realized through afropessimism as Wilderson's self-cure for his "breakdown"?

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34 Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 3.

35 Wilderson, 4.

A contrast between the *cure* he gives up desiring and the *care* he provisionally supposes he is ineligible to receive is clarified by Wilderson's account of the period subsequent to his admission to the psychiatric clinic, in which he seeks and finds a series of black therapists who he hopes might accomplish what all the white therapists in his experience could not: to combine *care as an ethical handling of suffering* with the *cure as a means to the end of recovery*. Yet that hope is sorely and repeatedly disappointed, for if black therapists "cared like none of the White therapists I had sampled cared," treating him with an empathy that reminded him of Wilderson's own psychologist parents, their therapeutic powers are unable to address the truth of his psychosis.[36] While they could "solve all the problems [Wilderson] wasn't having" and successfully kept him "from going crazy" again, they could not cure him from the state of *being crazy* that constitutes an ethical testimony to the ruses of antiblackness.[37]

"Too black for care": where we can now understand *blackness* as indexing an ontological state of psychic incoherence that is repressed by the relations instituted through ego (i.e., the imaginary object in which the neurotic "hides the castration he [has accepted but] denies"[38]); and where this narrow and hegemonic notion of *care* must refer to the process by which a return to a prior state of psychic equilibrium is pursued, in the name of restoring a "mental health" that can only repress ontological incoherence anew. No matter if this care's dispenser is black or white: the inarticulable pain of blackness can only be neglected through its therapeutic handling by the "psy professions"—psychologists, psychiatrists, psychotherapists, and—why not?—parents, too. These professions designate those who all variously depoliticize the psychosocial determinants of subjective antagonism in their pursuit of a vague notion of psychic health. Further still, the critique implied by Wilderson's observation can be applied more broadly, turning what appears at first to be a complaint about an irreparable notion of care as such into a principled demand for something more than this form of treatment can provide, which only redoubles the slave's suffering by duplicating the negation of its desire.

36 Wilderson, 313. For further discussion on the divergences between care and cure, see Jared Sexton, "Antidoting," *The Black Scholar* 51, no. 3 (2021): 5–24, https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2021.1932383.

37 Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 313.

38 Jacques Lacan, "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious," in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 699.

At this point we can arrive at a couple provisional conclusions:

a) Care cannot be ethical if it treats unconscious suffering as a contingency whose symptoms can be removed from an ontologically whole personality, just as
b) the cure cannot be ethical if it is oriented toward a full recovery that disavows what is untreatable on the level of being.

Thankfully, the notion of care need not remain hostage to its reduction by the moralities of health ideology.[39]

Christian Dunker lays out the alternative link that Freudian psychoanalysis threads between desire, cure, and care: "Symptoms require treatment (*Behandlung*), while discontent requires care (*Sorge*). A symptom can be cured (*Genesung*) but the subject can never 'recover' (*Heilung*)."[40] It is impossible for the speaking-being to recover from the "pain of existence," which is experienced in daily life through the feeling that Freud called "ordinary unhappiness." The subject's ontological pain is often entangled in the symptoms through which it manifests (but that also do not exhaust it). Symptoms are treated and sometimes even cleared up over the course of analysis, even if the therapeutic cure is not the aim of psychoanalysis, and even if no subject can ever be free of all symptoms. Dunker therefore proposes an alternative way of thinking *care as the process of the cure*, which offers an ethical position regarding the pain of existence. Care (*Sorge*) in this Freudian declension is the accompanying of a subject as they bring the real of the symptom to speak against the ruses of the imaginary. This form of care brings pain to speak and aims at helping the analysand move toward a new subjective position (i.e., transformation) instead of trying to remove something painful (i.e., therapy).

On this point about its transformative potential, however, Wilderson errs, and betrays the potential for bringing his psychotic protest against antiblackness and its imaginary ruses into productive—even destructive—articulation. That error

39 Jonathan M. Metzl and Anna Kirkland, ed., *Against Health: How Health Became the New Morality* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).

40 Christian Dunker, *The Constitution of the Psychoanalytic Clinic: A History of its Structure and Power* (London: Karnac, 2011), xxi.

relates to his later claim to observe no discernible distinction between the "end of analysis in psychoanalysis" and the "therapeutic cure in psychology,"[41] and in which he suggests that the talking cure, as with the techniques of psychotherapy, may just be "high-grade snake oil" that cannot displace blackness "as a static imago of abjection," and therefore cannot facilitate the black subject's assumption of a new ethical position with regard to this strange being-in-appearance.[42] In my view, Wilderson's error is twofold. On the one hand, psychoanalysis does not have an end that can be verified by the objective criteria of psychical or political normality and therefore is not a therapy. On the other hand, the cure that psychoanalysis achieves as one of its possible effects is also not its aim. A clarification of this error can help demonstrate how afropessimism intervenes into an ethical discourse that it always already shared with the Freudian field.

Bringing Antagonism to its Highest Pitch

What differentiates psychoanalysis from any sort of therapeutic program is its subordination of the analyst's desire to cure in favor of a love for a truth that a subject can never fully express in speech, whether in analysis or outside of it (an attitude that requires the psychoanalyst to "view cure as an added benefit," and nothing more[43]). As Freud conceded, psychoanalysis is interminable because it is incapable of guaranteeing the permanence of its cure.[44] Every analysis must eventually end, yes, but it cannot be completed, because it is both beyond psychoanalysis' powers and contrary to its ethics to materialize all current or future conflicts in the clinical space and to exhaust their possible range of expression in symptomatic formations. As Freud saw things, every conflict that the subject experiences in psychic reality, whether latent or actively lived, was originally a conflict in external reality. "Under the influence of education, the ego grows accustomed to removing the scene of the fight from outside to within and mastering the *internal* danger before it has become an *external* one."[45] Various defense mechanisms serve to internalize the subject's originally external conflicts with the world (i.e., with the Other). The intent of this internalization is to avoid danger, anxiety, and unpleasure. Yet, the repression of conflicts, the expenditure of

41 Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 313.

42 Wilderson, 314.

43 Jacques Lacan, "Variations on the Standard Treatment," in *Écrits*, 270.

44 Sigmund Freud, "Analysis Terminable and Interminable," in *Standard Edition*, 23:234.

45 Freud, 23:235; emphasis in original.

libidinal resources required to maintain those defenses, and the inefficient way that the ego discharges their functions all turn the ego into the pathogenic object *par excellence*, and create an internal suffering worse than the one excited by the original external situation. All of this brings "about an ever more extensive alienation from the external world."[46] This alienation may "pave the way for the outbreak of neurosis" or lead to the wholesale replacement of reality in psychosis by the construction of a hallucination that, for Fanon, "coincides with an abrupt annihilation of perceived reality."[47]

Contrary to eliminating conflict, psychoanalysis aims to reverse the effects of the disciplinary apparatuses that characterize modern subjectivation by establishing a transferential space in which unconscious conflicts that were once repressed from external reality—personal, social, political, economic—can be reproduced in psychical reality. "The transference thus creates an intermediate region between illness and real life through which the transition from the one to the other is made. The new condition has taken over all the features of the illness; but it represents an artificial illness which is at every point accessible to our intervention."[48] Within the transferential medium, the analyst seeks to "bring this conflict to a head, to develop it to its highest pitch, in order to increase the instinctual force available for its solution."[49] That solution, finally, consists in "ensuring *to a sufficient degree* the foundations on which a control of [the drive as the motor force of conflict] is based."[50]

By establishing this minimum of control, which shifts the subject's position toward its own conflict (in what Freud called an "alteration of the ego"), once-unconscious conflicts can be confronted at their place of origin. In a reversal of the process of the defenses, analysis accustoms the subject to putting things back in their right place by removing the scene of the fight from the internal

46 Freud, 23:238.

47 Freud, 23:238; Frantz Fanon and Slimane Asselah, "The Phenomenon of Agitation in the Psychiatric Milieu: General Considerations, Psychopathological Meaning," in *Alienation and Freedom: Frantz Fanon*, ed. Jean Khalfa and Robert J. C. Young (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 442.

48 Sigmund Freud, "Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through," in *Standard Edition*, 12:154.

49 Freud, "Terminable and Interminable," 23:231.

50 Freud, "Terminable and Interminable," 23:230; emphasis added.

psychic reality where it was repressed and back into the external social reality from whence it came. What safeguards this whole procedure is the ethics of the analyst's desire. The analyst receives and supports the patient's initial desire for the cure, sustains that desire against the resistances that pop up over the course of the treatment (which are but new defenses against the manifestation and confrontation of conflict), and brings the subject to the precipice of the end of analysis, an end or termination whose decision marks the first act for which the analysand takes sole responsibility. The liquidation of the transference then creates a *reconstitutive cut* between psychic reality and sociopolitical reality, engendering a new separation and connection between the two. Consequently, the end of analysis marks a point of inflection *within* its ethics of desire and an extension, by other means, of its interminable process of antagonization and intervention. Once conflicts are sufficiently mastered within the artifice of the clinical space (through a process of first repeating their dynamic in the relation between analyst and patient), that antagonism is developed to its highest pitch in the social space (through a process of first repeating their formal structure in the relations between the subject and the world). By whipping up the libidinal forces available for its solution, the intensified antagonism becomes accessible to intervention by the political subject of desire.

Black Desire without a Subject . . . Yet

If Freud finds it impossible to exhaust all conflicts that are initially imported into the clinical space from the world outside, he also recognizes that there is one conflict *in* external reality that is not *from* external reality (and thus one conflict in psychic reality that is not repressed from its confrontation in the external milieu). While having no particular form of its own, this source simultaneously supplies the variable, quantitative intensity to all forms of conflict, and this conflict which is not-one is the death drive; this drive can never be fully "tamed," just as the energy it makes available for the intensification of conflicts can never be depleted. That is because it is the irreducible and antagonistic force that peels psychic reality away from "real life" in the mythical moment of their original division. Willy Apollon describes this structural separation between interiority and exteriority, this moment that unleashes the drive, as the result of the advent of speech that transforms the human into a "thing that speaks," and which dislocates the psyche, whose original function was to equilibrate the organism to

its physical environment.[51] The conjunction and disjunction of speech and being institutes the subject of the unconscious (as separate from the psyche) and the drive emerges between the two to alienate both from the body. That subject thenceforward exists between the biological organism and the realm of pure mental representations (being neither the one nor the other), bringing the human into a relation of essential disharmony to its natural environment but also toward a relation of relative freedom from the demands of collective reality.

Perhaps Wilderson would counter that the irreducible level of antagonism lies in the human-slave distinction, one whose irreconcilability exists *in* political reality without necessarily being *from* political reality. Notwithstanding this possible counter, these seemingly irreconcilable propositions—Freud's, about the inexhaustible divisibility of the drive, and Wilderson's, about the structural antagonism of antiblackness—can be reconciled. If the drive is a purely quantitative factor, an "intensity" invested in all object relations, antiblackness would be the purely qualitative form that mediates the free drive at the hypothetical zero point at which it divides the subject and the Other. Wilderson dates the moment of its hegemonization to the start of the Arab slave trade around 1,400 years ago.[52] This symbolic paradigm would amount to something like a highly durable and plastic global symbolic form, a territorialization machine that immediately overwrites the relation between subject and the Other on the level of desire by rendering the slave's desire irreconcilable (or incoherent) to the desire of the subject and the Other. From that historical and structural point onward, the reality "selected" by antiblackness, that reduces the irreducible conflict of the drive to an irreconcilability between neurotic desire and Black desire, begins to predominate as the medium that alienates the modern subject from themselves.

This alienation is absolute for Wilderson. "Black desire" cannot coincide with a subject in given reality, and something like the "black subject" has no conceptual coherence in afropessimism at all—just as it would also not be possible to posit this conjunction in the psychoanalytic conceptuality. Why? The subject, as summoned by the voice of enunciation—and preceding any imaginary

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51 Willy Apollon, "The Subject of the Quest," trans. Daniel Wilson, *Penumbr(a)* 2 (2022): 1–14.

52 Frank B. Wilderson III, "The Black Liberation Army and the Paradox of Political Engagement," in *Postcoloniality—Decoloniality—Black Critique: Joints and Fissures*, ed. Sabine Broeck and Carsten Juncker (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2014), 203.

inscription, historical articulation, or sociological insertion through symbolic forms—cannot be called "black" without positing blackness as a constitutive feature of the speaking-being, a speaking-being whose evolutionary debut Apollon's anthropology places much earlier, approximately 300,000 years ago.[53] Within the strictest of Freudian-Lacanian-Apollonian terms, one cannot speak of a racialized subject at all without essentializing blackness to the signifying order. Only an ego, sculpted by the education of a particular epistemic and moral order, can be properly called "black"—but a black subject, again, does not exist in the real of speech.

This raises the bigger question of whether something like a *black (or slave's) desire without a subject* is even theoretically comprehensible. Can a non-subjective desire have any ethics to speak of, "unfettered" or otherwise? We can offer the following propositions as a pivot toward some final conclusions:

I) that a *desire without a subject cannot be ethical* because desire, as materialized in speech, must be consecrated in an act that always "presupposes a subject,"[54] a subject who then has the ethical imperative to take responsibility for that act in relation to the Other;
II) that an *ethics without a subject precludes desire* because the subject of the unconscious is the effect and guarantee of the lack in the Other that makes an incompletely determined (i.e., free) act possible; and that, if both of these propositions are true,
III) black desire remains unethical without a subject, or more precisely, *the ethics of black desire remains virtual until it is assumed by a subject in an act*.

Two Ethical Imperatives

For Apollon, the treatment of psychosis aims to wrest the ethics of the psychotic from its occultation in the symptom. That aim is pursued by opening the self-references of the delusion through a radical questioning of its truth. In this way, the aim is to sustain and transform, rather than eliminate, what is called the *psychotic enterprise*, as driven by a singular desire to do something for the whole

53 Apollon, "Subject of the Quest," 2.
54 Lacan, "Variations on the Standard Treatment," 291.

of humanity.[55] At the structural origin of psychosis is, for Apollon, an initial experience of the "collapse of the world," one triggered by an encounter with a gnawing absence in the symbolic that was insufficiently mediated by the disavowing mechanisms of the imaginary, and which exposed the subject to something unspeakable and irrepressible in their own body. As an attempt at assigning this thing in the body a meaning, the paranoid symptom elaborates a grand conspiracy that structures a subjective quest (often assigned by a xenopathic voice) to expose a defect in reality and thereby mend a real hole that appears, in the delusion, as a fundamental and portentous "evil." That this horror demonstrates a tacit knowledge about an excess of sense in the world is clear enough, and the psychotic rightly finds fault with the inconsistency of common reality. But instead of affirming this symbolic indeterminacy as the locus of the possibility of human freedom, the psychotic strives to plug the hole in the Other through a destructive or self-sacrificial act, giving way on their desire in conformity to a will to satisfy the demands of an imagined other. With the zeal of a messiah and the narcissism of a martyr, the psychotic thus "digs its way out to a solution [to the 'collapse of the world'] by exposing his being and dedicating his body to mending the default in the symbolic order."[56]

Wilderson, too, experiences the world come to an end during his psychotic crisis, which he is the first to admit "is no picnic."[57] Yet, which world has ended exactly, if not the antiblack world whose non-existence was only denied by a combination of the "ruses of power" (and its narratives of seduction)[58] and the ruses of analogy (and its narratives of repair)? Does his psychosis not document the end of the *semblance* of the world, one whose social and psychic coherence, as illusory as it is, hinges on the maintenance of a constant state of disavowal about its own substantial inexistence?

55 Willy Apollon, Danielle Bergeron, and Lucie Cantin, "The Treatment of Psychosis," trans. Tracy McNulty, in *The Subject of Lacan: A Lacanian Reader for Psychologists*, ed. Kareen Ror Malone and Stephen R. Friedlander (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000), 209–28.

56 Willy Apollon, "Theory and Practice in the Psychoanalytic Treatment of Psychosis," in *Lacan and the Subject of Language*, ed. Ellie Ragland-Sullivan and Mark Bracher (New York: Routledge, 1991), 121.

57 Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 3.

58 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 79–112.

If Santner is right to speculate that a crisis in the meaningfulness of symbolic titles and the legitimacy of power prepared the way for Schreber's break with the sociopolitical reality of early-twentieth-century Germany, it seems that the radical annulling of the credibility of the antiblack world to which Wilderson once unconsciously consented coincides with a suddenly uncontained crisis in the ruse of analogy. That ruse is the metaphorical operation that otherwise mystifies black suffering by assigning it—alongside all other positions of moral standing in the modern demos—the discrete meaning of an abstract and generalizable injury. On the psychic level, that state of injury is equivalent to the frustration through which the neurotic ego responds to its alienation. Wilderson's psychosis momentarily renders him incapable of unconsciously visualizing a claim to injury and the associated ability to seek recourse to the state or other authorities for redress. This should not be controversial, since Wilderson is describing, on the level of unconscious reality, what Wendy Brown already systematically describes as a phenomenon of political reality. Both analyses describe how the incitement to and assumption of a state of injury becomes a general condition for political legibility that disciplines the desires of identitarian subjectivities in late modern democracies like the United States.[59]

If its political effect is to institute the imaginary world of neurosis and guarantee the semblance of its affiliations, the ruse of analogy is also the primary instrument for securing the "*the death of Black desire*."[60] This renders the ruse of analogy as a mechanism for foreclosing an insatiable desire irreducible to any concrete object, and that, in exceeding the coherence of any demand for redress, finally escapes the moral-affective mobius that loops left-liberal politics and neurosis together in a double noose, with its infinite braid trisected into the phases of frustration, aggression, and cathartic compensation. Here at last we can introduce the first ethical imperative of afropessimism: *to end the world*. While appearing as a political call to action, it is only the experience of the psychotic position that can illuminate its ethical dimension, provided we remain wary of the shortcomings of the psychotic "solution" to their own experience and ethical insights.

59 Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

60 Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 220–21; emphasis in original.

For, unlike the psychotic—who projects a world on the verge of ending *and* seeks to repair it in a self-sacrificial act before it is too late—Wilderson calls for recognizing that the world of neurotic liberalism has already ended, even though it is still unconsciously lived *as if* it existed. This imperative stops short of the psychotic dereliction of the ethical, which consists in the hallucinatory praxis that believes the world can be made whole again, and which just rests on another ruse of analogy. That ruse which equates the real object—an impassable stumbling block intrinsic to reality—to some contingent and fixable historical evil (e.g., whether a grand plot to destroy humanity or a grand plot to destroy black people). Instead of attributing a paralyzingly certain knowledge about the world to an actualized Other and throwing up his hands in a dereliction of any ethical relations, Wilderson's afropessimism calls for a generalized recognition of the lack in the neurotic's virtualized Other. He interpellates the subject to a place between absolute freedom and absolute determination: the scene of enunciation in which one must act in accordance with a desire that can neither be prescribed nor guaranteed in advance. This will have been an act that puts psychic coherence at risk.

Now, in the throes of the wholesale failure of the ruse of analogy in front of that Berkeley apartment's mirror something irrepressible and unspeakable emerges in Wilderson's body, and which can no longer "remain hidden under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography."[61] That is, beyond the range of relations to imaginary others and demands that constitute the expressive content of his symptom, Wilderson describes the suffering at its core as a tearing apart of the body by a "beast with insane rage [that] struggled to burst through my skin in a shower of blood and bile."[62] This bestial force, which seems to shuttle between the virtual and the actual in an interminable labor of conception and abortion, triggers the vertiginous anxiety in himself and others whose signal warns of ego death and psychic dissolution. Yet, this image also literalizes the violence through which the ruse of analogy—whose metaphoric operation "normally" brings this visceral substance of the real into symbolic circulation and political subjectivation—is not without an a-signifying remainder, a leftover

61 Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 206.

62 Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 6.

that is condemned to the flesh of blackness as "slaveness," but whose mechanisms the psychotic breakdown brings to a momentary standstill. To put it another way, *Wilderson lives in his fragmented body the structural failure of analogization*, which otherwise rests on unconsciously recognizing in blackness an irrecuperable state of social death (only to negate it by way of juxtaposition to any political subject of standing whose legibility rests on a contrastive claim to a redressable injury). In the same movement, recognition blocks the black subject from claiming the very quality of "slaveness" that is extracted from the position of social death to constitute all non-black subjects in their representation of themselves to themselves and to the Other (from the scale of multiracial democracy down to that of coalitional politics and interracial relations). That is why blackness cannot even represent itself to itself as a political subject.[63] "Blackness and Slaveness are inextricably bound in such a way that whereas Slaveness can be separated from blackness,"—and *must* be extracted as an analogue for representing all other places of political subjectivity—"Blackness cannot exist as other than Slaveness."[64]

Here, finally, we can introduce afropessimism's second ethical imperative: to *assume the position of social death*, a position whose assumption is both politically impossible and exclusively ethical. Assuming social death consists of neither celebrating the contraction between blackness and slaveness nor disavowing the necessity of the latter, but in recognizing slaveness as *both* inevitable—in the sense of long preceding the subject as their cause in the Other—*and* inextricably bound to blackness as the historical product of the imposition of an imaginary that disavows all others' relationship to slaveness. "Black people," Wilderson immediately continues, "are often psychically unable and unwilling to assume this position [of social death]. This is as understandable as it is impossible."[65]

Understandable: to assume social death is, by definition, in no one's interest, and since the neurotic has already unconsciously decided against its assumption in assuming an ego. Even and especially in the case of black neurotics, since "bonding with White and non-Blacks over phobic reactions to the Black imago provides the Black psyche with the only *semblance of psychic integration*

63 Wilderson, 247.
64 Wilderson, 42.
65 Wilderson, 103.

it is likely to have."[66] Yet, impossible: the ego cannot avow social death without recognizing the castration that they themselves have disavowed and without risking the semblance of being that this disavowal buys them. To assume the position of social death is thus to reverse what Wilderson calls the *cynical divorce of black rage from black desire* by bringing the subject to assume this desire in the radical undecidability of its psychic and social implications.[67] This clears the way for taking responsibility for an act that introduces something new and irreducible to the world.

An act, for instance, like the invention of afropessimism, whose ethics are sustained by the psychotic's radical care for the suffering of the speaking-being. One possible mode of this human would be a blackness that, instead of coinciding with slaveness, exists in a relation of poetic otherness to it. *Wo Es war, soll Ich werden*.[68]

Data availability statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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66 Wilderson, 252; emphasis added.

67 Wilderson, 204.

68 Sigmund Freud, "Neue Folge der Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Psychoanalyse," in *Studienausgabe*, ed. Alexander Mitscherlich, Angela Richards and James Strachey (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1969–75), 1:516.

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