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Forum

Consider Afro-Pessimism

SEBASTIAN WEIER

The election of Barack Obama to the presidency has been widely perceived as proof of the post-racial nature of today's United States society and the transcendence of its history of slavery and continued racial discrimination. Numerous publications on the declining relevance of activist notions of blackness or African Americaness in politics, as well as in arts and academia, have surrounded this election and have helped transform the perception of race from that of a morally legitimate socio-political position into that of an icon for interest-driven client politics (Cho; Dickerson; Purcell; Rich; Warren). At the same time, a group of authors has emerged that challenges these notions of post-racialism and insists on the radical potential of politicized notions of blackness. Referring to each other as "Afro-Pessimists," Saidiya Hartman, Frank Wilderson, Jared Sexton and others argue that the race line continues to be the foundational socio-political fault line in the United States.

American Studies is located on this fault line like no other academic discipline, and, like few others, in order to proceed in its endeavor it must both take into account and account for the theoretical and political visibility or invisibility of race. In offering a short introduction to Afro-Pessimism, this article proposes a framework for understanding and navigating this fault line. Sketching key Afro-Pessimist works and concepts, the following pages argue against the notions of post-racialism that have been affirmed by American Studies in Germany and elaborate on the urgency for and potential of a wider consideration of Afro-Pessimist thought in this field.

Anti-Blackness and White Civil Society

Inspired by Saidiya Hartman's book *Scenes of Subjection*, Afro-Pessimism as a school of thought began to emerge at the turn of the millennium.[1] Unsatisfied with the expanding rhetoric of a post-racial United States and the failure of

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[1] The terms 'Afro-Pessimism' and 'Afro-Pessimist' (uppercase and hyphenated) here refer to a stream of thought coming from African American or Black Studies. Although it must not be confused with the 'afropessimist' (lowercase and not hyphenated) approach concerning the postcolonial state and potential of the African continent that was popularized in the 1980s and 1990s, there are points of contact and works, such as those by Achille Mbembe, that are of relevance for both Afro-Pessimism and afropessimism.

existing political and cultural theories to explain what they perceived to be the continuing prevalence of racial discrimination within the United States, Afro-Pessimist authors such as Frank Wilderson and Jared Sexton began using Hartman's analysis of an anti-blackness contained in everyday scenes—rather than in moments of spectacular violence—in order to develop a critique of the constitutive role of anti-blackness for United States civil society. Instead of accepting a post-racial paradigm, Afro-Pessimism's core axiom posits that 'Black' still equals 'slave' in the United States as well as in the Western or 'white' world in general. 'Black' here refers not to an ethnic self-identification, but to a racializing "common sense" perception (Omi and Winant 11) and a specific structural position within civil society and its socio-economic, as well as its cultural and psychic systems. Although in practice it is not always possible to strictly separate this position from that of Asians, Latin-Americans, and Native Americans, Afro-Pessimism insists—for reasons elaborated on below—that these latter positions are "junior partners" in a white civil society (Wilderson, "Black Liberation") and partake, if to a significantly lesser degree, of the profits of non-blackness. Only black people are "always already positioned as slave[s]" (Wilderson, *Red, White & Black* 7) in that their position within white civil society is still that of the "social death" that defined slavery (Patterson 38), that is, of a life exposed to gratuitous violence, injured or withheld personhood, and denied humanity. Only black people, Afro-Pessimism contends, are invisible in the discourse of a civil society that has historically been structured around the fact that blacks were neither citizens nor humans, but chattel that could be traded and mistreated in ways that contradict the role of civil society to protect its members.

The Afro-Pessimist axiom asserts not only that 'civil' has always meant 'not-black,' but insists that this continues to be so; it takes Trayvon Martin's death and the acquittal of his killer, or the attempts undertaken by the states of Texas and North Carolina to change their voting rights immediately after the Supreme Court struck down Section 4 of the Voting Rights Act in June 2013, as just two recent cases in point. The invisibility of black humanity and the disregard of the rights attached to such humanity persist in spite of historical moments such as Jubilee, the passing of the Civil Rights Act, and the Obama presidency. This is not a static persistence, however, but continuity "*in* and *as* permutation" (Sexton, "The Social Life" 6).

One such permutation is the transformation of the perception of black people as willing slaves into a perception of them as pathological criminals. Starting with the post-Abolition Black Codes, this transformation first helped replace slavery with a system of mostly black convict labor and debt peonage and later lead to the mass incarceration of African Americans that marks the present.[2] It is a transformation of the social death of the slave into the civic death of the ghetto dweller as "prison-slave-in-waiting" (Wilderson, "The Prison Slave" 18) and of the convict as "neo-slave" (James); it is a social death that can cost convicted felons anything from the loss of their driver's license, to losing eligibility for welfare benefits and public housing, and even to losing the right to vote (Alexander 143). That this was

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[2] In 2006, 1 of every 14 black men was in prison or jail in the United States, compared to 1 of every 106 white men (Alexander 100).

a permutation rather than a revolution is implicit in the thirteenth amendment's well known subordinate clause: "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, *except as* a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction" (emphasis mine) and explicit in the 1871 Ruffin vs. Commonwealth verdict's description of the convict as a "slave of the State. He is *civiliter mortuus*, and his estate, if he has any, is administered like that of a dead man."

The invisibility of black humanity is thus tightly linked to a hypervisibility of black people as a source of danger. The common sense perception of an onto-logical black inability to participate in civil society finds expression in a fear of blacks as a threat to that same civil society. This perception centers on stereotypes of black welfare queens, thugs, and gang-bangers, on depictions of blacks *per se* as parasites and criminals, rather than contributing members of society (Berg, "Struktureller Rassismus"; Wacquant).

Afro-Pessimist authors, such as Frank Wilderson in his "The Prison Slave as Hegemony's (Silent) Scandal" and *Red, White and Black: Cinema and the Struc-ture of U. S. Antagonisms*, propose an understanding of the circumstances of so-cial and civic death as a constitutive structural exclusion of African Americans within United States society. They constitute, according to Wilderson,

> America's structuring irrationality: the libidinal economy of White Supremacy, and its hyper-discursive violence that kills the black subject so that the concept, civil society, may live. In other words, from the incoherence of black death, America generates the coherence of white life. ("Gramsci" 8)

In emphasizing "common sense" blackness as a position that defines the form of a social structure in which black humanity is present only as constitutive absence, Afro-Pessimism proposes a theoretical framework that does not consider black individuals or black culture as such, but focuses on the production of knowledge and its political consequences. Its aim is to deconstruct an epistemological blind spot in large parts of the humanities and social sciences that risks confusing hy-pervisibility and invisibility, misrecognizing representations as real, thus reiterat-ing the black invisibility constitutive of white civil society. By doing this, even sup-posedly progressive or radical approaches can be transformed into conservative ventures. Instead of considering blackness as just one position among others in the discourse of civil society—akin to that of class, gender, or sexuality—Afro-Pessimism insists on thinking of the structural exclusion of black people as the necessary foundation for the articulation of the latter positions. In doing so, it proposes a critique of (post-)modernity's theorization of the subject whose claims within civil society are based on a supposed possession of the self and right there-to that are constitutionally opposed to the literal possession of the slave or prison-inmate as commodity and chattel and the structural *de facto* (if not always *de jure*) exclusion of blacks from that same civil society. According to Afro-Pessimism, the structure of the subject's claim, based on (self-)definition as 'not-property,' be-ing neither dispensable nor disposable, ultimately amounts to asserting that one is not black in a white civil society and thus precludes any such claims from black people, both historically and today. Unlike 'the' worker, to give just one exam-

ple, whose political conflicts concern his labor, 'the' black's antagonism with the structure of civil society concerns his increased risk of being killed by the police, his increased probability of incarceration, and his vulnerability to other forms of discrimination. 'The' worker, in other words, is recognized as fully human and a full citizen, and can articulate his claims because he has attained this recognition by distancing himself from blackness (Roediger). While the worker's struggles are located in a specific symbolic realm in which he has been recognized as a rightful member, the black's struggle is still about emerging from invisibility and attaining that recognition. Contrary to the worker, the black is not located within discourse as a subject with a specific set of rights, but is contained in the realm below these rights—a place where violence reigns. What is articulated by the human and civil subject as a conflict within the discourse of civil society amounts to (for the non-human and civilly dead black person) a structural antagonism that cannot be articulated within this discourse and can only be dissolved by dissolving that discourse, its modes of understanding, and its production. Opposed to the worker, who labors in the market or sells his labor as commodity, who can claim to be alienated and exploited in the process of producing the commodity and re-claim a reformation of the modes of production as a solution to his conflict with civil society, the black is the commodity itself, for example in the form of inmates delivered to prisons run by private corporations. Accordingly, in order to solve his antagonism with civil society, he must reclaim not simply a reform of his status, but a revolution of the mechanics of status-formation and -ascription. In order to recognize black people as human beings, it is not enough that production be orga-nized more democratically among humans; production must stop entirely in order to stop producing blacks as commodities (Wilderson, "The Prison Slave" 230). It is the extreme improbability of civil society mustering the desire for, or even willingness to recognize the parameters of, such a revolution that grounds the pessimism in Afro-Pessimism. In a constant evocation and reworking of Frantz Fanon, authors such as Frank Wilderson insist that

> [e]radication of the generative mechanism of Black suffering would mean the end of the world and they [whites and their junior partners] would find themselves peering into an abyss (or incomprehensible transition) between epistemes; between, that is, the body of ideas that determine that knowledge that is certain at any particular time. In other words, they would find themselves suspended between worlds. ("The Vengeance" 33)

The deep structure of black social and civic death and the black "grammar of suf-fering" is thus political and epistemic at the same time (Wilderson, "Gramsci" 6). While it does signal itself in terms of immediate physical violence, this structure also translates into questions located more firmly within the humanities than the social sciences. It is through posing these questions that Afro-Pessimism is of utmost relevance for American Studies, especially in its attempts to come to grips with the so-called post-racial moment.

Tracing pessimist permutations, Afro-Pessimist authors insist that historical events such as the Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement have not changed the position of African Americans within civil society. Rather, these moments are read through the conservative dynamics they unleashed: the Black Codes and

the propagation of black convict labor after the Civil War (described by Douglas Blackmon as *Slavery by Another Name*); the instauration of the 'War on Drugs' and the crackdown on black political movements; the development in the 1960s of the Prison Industrial Complex (what Manning Marable has called *The Second Reconstruction*). Rather than declare that the term 'African American' lost its conceptual force when Jim Crow legally ended because the external threat that created racial unity had dissipated (Warren, *What Was* 2), Afro-Pessimism insists on understanding the present age as *The New Jim Crow* (Alexander). For these authors, this present is the continuation of slavery's transformation of black bodies into black flesh, theorized by Hortense Spillers in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book":

> I would make a distinction in this case between the "body" and the "flesh" and impose that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject positions. In that sense, before the "body," there is the "flesh," that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography. [...] a theft of the body—a willful and violent (and unimaginable from this distance) severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire. Under these conditions [...] the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver. (67)

This "theft of the body," this "zero degree of social conceptualization" of the "flesh" as Spillers contends, has neither gender nor history; it is a mere commodity that is subject to society's whim and will, but has no part in it. Those who were reduced to flesh were severed from their culture and history and scattered across the globe in the process. They were historically cut off from lineage, as black flesh was constantly open to legal rape, an openness that turned birth into the mere reproduction of property that may be sold at any time and put the notion of family under permanent threat (Sharpe 27-66). From an Afro-Pessimist angle, to write of a black "grammar of suffering" is to highlight how the black flesh of the slave—cast outside humanity, history, and family—as well as its contemporary permutations, cannot be grasped in the standard framework of materialism, feminism, psychoanalysis, or postcolonial studies. All of these latter approaches focus on positions inside discourse. But unlike 'women,' the black cannot demand full participation in the profits of whiteness. Unlike Native Americans or other post-colonial subalterns, the black person living within white civil society cannot claim redress in the form of a return of the land and a rewriting of history (Wilderson, *Red, White & Black* 120). For these reasons the focus of Afro-Pessimism is not on the possible claims of African Americans— although they do reflect on and support claims such as those for economic reparations (Hartman and Wilderson 198; Wilderson, "Reparations")—but on the impossibility of articulating these demands within the "American grammar" (Spillers, "Mama's" 68) from a position of black social and civic death that is the constitutive moment of whiteness and white civil society.

    This, then, is a variation on the Afro-Pessimist axiom: the black person is not a "body," but "flesh," not a "human subject," but a "sentient being" (Wilderson, "Vengeance" 3); s/he is situated to discourse not in a relation of contingent violence, exploitation, alienation, and hegemonic contestation, but in a relation of gratuitous violence, accumulation, fungibility, and terror. The implications are manifold.

In "The Avant-Garde of White Supremacy," Jared Sexton and Steve Marti-not analyze contemporary racialized police violence in order to explain how the difference between gratuitous and contingent violence plays out the matrix of si-multaneous invisibility and hypervisibility of black flesh within civil society. Ac-cording to their argument, assuming that police violence is contingent upon acts of those suffering from this violence amounts to thinking in terms of transgres-sion within a fundamentally sound system. Such a train of thought would insist that police violence is generally a legitimate response to a perpetrated or pend-ing criminal act. It would admit that cases of excessive brutality and cruelty ex-ist, but portray these as exceptional moments and articulate any demand to stop this violence in terms of containment of those exceptional moments. Sexton and Martinot oppose this focus on the spectacle of the exceptional to the quotidian experience of African Americans, for whom police brutality is not an exception, but a constitutive part of everyday life:

> Most theories of white supremacy seek to plumb the depths of its excessiveness, beyond the ordinary; they miss the fact that racism is a mundane affair. The fundamental excess of the paradigm of policing which infuses this culture is wholly banal. (173)

A prime example of such banality would be the everyday nature of racial profil-ing and the successful attempts of its proponents to portray it as fundamental to the maintenance of law and order, following the decision by a federal court to declare the New York Police Department strategy of 'stop and frisk' uncon-stitutional for disproportionally targeting minorities.[3] Partaking of the logic of banality and common sense quietly connects public perception to those concepts of pathological black criminality that were used to arrest and auction forced black convict labor. Assuming that police brutality is always contingent upon criminal acts amounts to believing in the necessity and righteousness of mass incarcera-tion. Afro-Pessimism contends that this belief is reproduced every time a com-plaint about racialized police violence is not articulated in revolutionary pam-phlets and violence but in appeals to the State and 'the system.' It is the task, they argue, of the avant-garde of white supremacy—the police, the media, the judicial system, and the education sector—to produce a perception of gratuitous violence as violence contingent upon criminal acts. The task is to create white ignorance of the structural nature of anti-black violence and therewith render invisible the constant gratuitous disrespect for and wounding of black humanity in civil soci-ety's discourse and perception. The task is to assure the right questions about that violence and discrimination are not asked by promoting the spectacle of society's excesses. It is to emphasize the descriptive surface question as to whether it is necessary to shoot at someone twenty-seven times in order to make the normative

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[3] U.S. District Judge Shira Scheindlin declared 'stop and frisk' unconstitutional on August 12, 2013. Both New York police commissioner Ray Kelly and Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg denounced the decision, saying it would lead to an increase in violent crime and ultimately cost lives (*NBC*; Bloomberg). Contrary to Bloomberg, Kelly did not try to dissociate 'stop and frisk' from racial profiling, instead attempting to legitimize the high number of black and other minor-ity people it targeted. The ruling was put on hold, and Judge Scheindlin recused from the case on October 31, 2013.

depth analysis that even one bullet is too many to shoot anybody disappear under it (Sexton and Martinot 174). This analysis does not seek to deny that some blacks do commit crimes, but seeks to emphasize how white civil society constructs a perception in which black people as such are always-already criminals and how this perception is instrumentalized, among other things, to cover up strategies of racialized police terror. It is an analysis that considers the cases of Amadou Diallo—who was shot at 41 times and hit 19 times by New York police officers—or Darius Simmons, Oscar Grant, Jonathan Ferrell, and many others as examples of foundational structural discrimination rather than individual cases of police brutality and prejudice.[4]

The leading questions derived from the Afro-Pessimist axiom would be thus: how is the impossible and invisible black subject narrated, and how is the white subject implicated in this narration? This is a problem posed by Saidiya Hartman in her work *Scenes of Subjection*, which serves as a founding document for much Afro-Pessimist thought. It is here that Hartman introduces the shift in focus from the spectacular to the banal and attempts to produce an understanding of the constitution of blackness based on everyday practices, such as work or dancing, rather than spectacular events such as flogging and lynching. It is at once an enquiry into the mode of erasure of black life in historical and fictional documents and an interrogation of reading practices in which suture is produced through a mode of empathic identification designed on the replacement of the black subject by a projection of the writer/reader. Such a reading, to give an example, would amount to writing and reading the toils and troubles of a black mother through identification with 'mother' while ignoring 'black,' an identification whose mode would be the replacement of the invisible and often impossible black motherhood through a white motherhood unwittingly assumed to be universally valid. It is in this sense of erasing black particularity under a white self-overrepresentation, under a belief in the universality and thus transferability of life in the mode of whiteness, that the position of the invisible black (neo-)slave becomes "the position of the unthought" that lingers under an hypervisible ersatz-presence produced by discourse to structure its own coherence (Hartman and Wilderson 185). In tracing this position, Hartman demonstrates how black flesh is not only consumed as commodity, but how even its discursive position is subject to the same fungibility—a fungibility defined as "the joy made possible by virtue of the replaceability and interchangeability endemic to the commodity" (*Scenes* 21).

The 'black' position of the unthought, then, is a position that can be and has been traced in the form of the mark of constitutive and gratuitous exclusion that permeates the quotidian independent of any 'black' transgression, yet is con-

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[4] Like Trayvon Martin and Diallo, Simmons, Grant, and Ferrell are examples of black men killed through gratuitous violence. Darius Simmons was a teenager shot to death by a white racist in front of his mother a week after the killing of Martin. When the police arrived on the scene, his mother was questioned and his brother arrested while his murderer was later released on bail. Oscar Grant was shot in the back, while lying on the ground, by a police officer at the Fruitvale Rapid Transit Station on New Year's Day 2009. The event was filmed on digital video and cell phone cameras and disseminated on the Internet as well as through the media. Jonathan Ferrell was killed by ten police bullets in September 2013, while trying to get help after a car accident.

stantly being rewritten as such and thus made to disappear in the most diverse sorts of narratives: from the political events, historical documents, and theoretical and fictional texts already mentioned, to the film and photography analyzed by Kara Keeling, Frank Wilderson, and David Marriott, and beyond. This unthoughtness is the form in which the black 'slave,' both historical and contemporary, is present and reiterated in large parts of American Studies discourse. It not only describes the positionality of the black, but marks the constitution of the not-black through the exclusion of the black as the "political ontology" of the United States (Wilderson, *Red, White & Black* 97), that is, as the essence of a society that could not be what it is without that exclusion. It is because of this ontological role that (anti-)blackness is not merely the subject of African American Studies, but the matrix of all of American Studies, and that Afro-Pessimism is of relevance not only to the former, but maybe even more so to the latter. The epistemological challenge posed by Afro-Pessimism consists in deconstructing a "people-of-color-blindness" of whites and their "junior partners" vis-à-vis blacks. Jared Sexton defines this blindness as a

> common refusal to admit to significant differences of structural position born of discrepant histories between blacks and their political allies, actual or potential. We might, finally, name this refusal *people-of-color-blindness*, a form of colorblindness inherent to the concept of "people of color" to the precise extent that it misunderstands the specificity of anti-blackness and presumes or insists upon the monolithic character of victimization under white supremacy—thinking (the afterlife of) slavery as a form of exploitation or colonization or a species of racial oppression among others. (Sexton, "People-of-Color" 47-48)

The fallacy of people-of-color-blindness is its implicit assumption that the problematic constitution of blackness and black social and civic death can be considered on a par with other problematics such as that of 'the' worker, 'the' woman, or 'the' postcolonial subaltern. Afro-Pessimism does not intend to deny or delegitimize the existence and importance of non-black contestations to white hegemony or the idea of a post-racial society (Wilderson, *Red, White & Black*).[5] Nevertheless, it insists that within a white civil society those struggles are not only structurally over-determined by anti-blackness, but do, at a minimum, implicitly engage with its mechanics in the articulation of their own positions. The Afro-Pessimist critique of "people-of-color-blindness" is a refusal to accept racialization and the constitution of blackness as secondary problematics that may or may not be considered, as well as an insistence that there can be no consideration at all of the United Sates, its culture, and its white civil society without an understanding of (anti-)blackness as the matrix in which all other social, economic, cultural, and libidinal problematics are framed.

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[5] Consider for instance the increasing debate surrounding the name of the Washington D.C.-area NFL team and the racist commodification of Native American culture (Zirin; "Obama Points").

Afro-Pessimism in American Studies in Germany

Afro-Pessimism poses both a methodological and a moral challenge to American Studies in Germany, where its reception is still marginal and confined to the field of African American Studies. Apart from rare interventions indirectly touching upon the Afro-Pessimist critique of post-racialism through the question of the Prison Industrial Complex and political disenfranchisement (Berg, "Disenfranchisement"; Buschendorf; Knopf), the work done by Sabine Broeck and other at the University of Bremen constitutes the only engagement with Afro-Pessimist theory in German academia.

In addition to the insistence on the over-determining role of race for any consideration of the United States, two primary research dynamics arise from the Afro-Pessimist methodological challenge. The first dynamic concerns the consequences of the injunction that whiteness and white civil society are created and sustained by anti-blackness not only in the United States context, but globally as well. How and why, one might ask, is there a white 'enslavism' in Germany that reproduces itself by reproducing blacks as non-citizens and slaves? How can American Studies's long-standing engagement with matters of race become fertile ground for an understanding of Europe? Is it possible, for example, to mine the potential of American Studies to offer a structural explanation for the deaths of Oury Jalloh and Laye Alama Condé, both of whom were killed in police custody in Germany? Through questions such as these, Afro-Pessimism permits not just a reworking of existing American Studies in Germany, but also a rethinking of the potential of American Studies for an understanding of Europe. Going beyond such obvious points of American Studies's interest—Europe's role in the colonization of the North American continent, in the Middle Passage, or in nineteenth-century migration—Afro-Pessimist approaches would force a reconsideration (to give another example) of the role of the contemporary European border and migration policy and politics in the production of not only black social death within European civil society, but also the very real deaths of the hundreds of people who drown in the Mediterranean Sea each year while trying to enter Europe.

The second research dynamic asks how we might deconstruct and avoid reproducing the epistemological blind spot that assures the invisibility of structural anti-blackness within the discourse of white civil society. One possible conclusion could be the "hermeneutics of absence and pedagogy of the trace" proposed by Sabine Broeck ("European Borders"), which attempts to undo white ignorance and approach white "enslavism" by mining discourse and its archives for dynamics and artifacts in and through which the closure of white civil society's self-narrations fail, searching for moments in which the rewriting of invisibility into hypervisibility is ever so slightly disturbed, to permit the apperception of absence and start its analysis ("Enslavement").

The task of an Afro-Pessimist methodology is to locate and undo a suppressed absence within civil society and its discursive formations. For this reason it applies to fields of study where it would not necessarily be intuitively expected. It is a highly politicized approach whose moral challenge to American Studies in Germany consists of demanding that it not be a part of the "avant-garde of white

supremacy"—that is, that it recognizes and stops the possible production of "the position of the unthought" and applies its potential towards undoing anti-blackness in both academia and socio-political reality. American Studies in Germany is thus defied to navigate the pessimist desire for the end of whiteness, the unlikely end of white society, and the problematics of forming coalitions across the racial fault line. The challenge to any non-black academic is to put an end to white innocence, to dare to face and bear one's structural involvement in, and profiting from, the reproduction of black social death and to work toward its undoing. This means not only thinking and acting against the obviously racist, even though current debates such as those concerning black-facing as Zwarte Piet in the Netherlands or as Rappaport in German theaters prove that this can be difficult. It also implies engaging in the deconstruction of an at times all too conspicuous compassion with black people that easily turns into proto-racist condescension in its brute simplicity. Such a condescension—familiar from Christian charity organizations' paternalist depictions of a helpless and needy 'Africa'—sustains the rereading of structural anti-blackness into transgressive events lamented by Sexton and Martinot. It propagates an understanding that promises the possible exoneration of one's own structural enslavism at the least, while, through this promise, working towards the conservation of those structures.

The importance of Afro-Pessimism for American Studies in Germany is twofold, first because it offers a meta-theoretical critique of its methodology and epistemology, and second because it promotes the potential of American Studies in Germany to articulate a specific critique of European society. The charge for American Studies scholars is not to renounce their structural whiteness in an impossible attempt to dissociate their existence from the anti-blackness of their society and culture. Rather, it is to seek to resolve this anti-blackness by unraveling the epistemological foundations of the white civil society that anti-blackness is made to maintain. What are the mechanics of making sense, when the Italian Minister of the Interior publicly suggests that those collecting the dead bodies of the drowned from the shores of Lampedusa should be nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, all the while defending a law that makes those who save 'illegal' immigrants from drowning liable to be sued in court for assisting illegal immigration? What is the structure of knowledge when the local government of the city of Hamburg threatens to sue anyone who shelters 'illegal' immigrants for assisting illegal residence and pursues a general policy of stopping-and-frisking anyone of black skin color in order to find such 'illegal' immigrants? American Studies has, for many years, developed a specific set of tools for deciphering such implicit statements on the common sense contradiction between blackness and citizenship, blackness and legality, blackness and humanity.

Afro-Pessimism offers a post-racial vision that is radically different from those contained in the versions of post-racialism and color-blindness that have been the subject of much recent debate, in that it identifies current white civil society's discourse as racialized and racializing instead of locating race and its transcendence within this discourse. Anti-blackness, here, is not merely a form of racism; it cannot be made to disappear through educational and activist measures targeting individuals alone. Only a refounding of the basic intellectual and political frame-

work of society would permit a transcendence of anti-blackness.[6] True to their name, most Afro-Pessimist authors' attitudes towards the possibility of achieving such a radical refoundation through a politics of alliance (rather than a violent revolution) is one of skepticism as to the ability of white people to transcend an internal economical and libidinal prohibition of the white self-annihilation-as-white that such a reinvention would require. As Frank Wilderson puts it:

> There's a structural prohibition (rather than merely a willful refusal) against whites being allies of blacks, due to this—to borrow from Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* again—'species' division between what it means to be a subject and what it means to be an object: a structural antagonism. (Hartman and Wilderson 189-90)

Engaging with this skepticism, American Studies in Germany must continue to promote the decentering of its knowledge production with the help of work emanating from, among others, Black Studies. Breaking black invisibility within white civil society and its discourse necessarily implies breaking white academic dominance in this society and discourse. The extent to which this is possible in spite of the "structural antagonism"—that is, from within existing discourse—is a matter of debate among Afro-Pessimist authors. This is the point at which some writers, sharing the analysis of pessimist permutations, nevertheless articulate a:

> metacritical optimism [...] bound up with what it is to claim blackness and the appositional, run-away, phonoptic black operations—expressive of an autopoetic organization in which flight and inhabitation modify each other—that have been thrust upon it. (Moten, "Black Op" 1745)

This belief of Afro-Pessimism's all but identical twin, Afro-Optimism, is largely considered inconsistent with its structural analysis by many Afro-Pessimist authors and has been criticized as a refusal of its exponents to face the gravity of the Afro-Pessimist endeavor and a complicity in the expiation of white innocence (Hartman and Wilderson). Against the possibility of a performative undoing of black social death from within discourse, and against the idea of arts and other "phonoptic operations" as locations of black agency and articulation and cross-racial coalition building, most Afro-Pessimists would insist on the invisibility of any such acts within a white civil society and its modes of making sense and thus, in the end, would insist on the inaccessibility of the unthought to white people.

American Studies in Germany is, at this historical moment, condemned to be optimistic. It cannot follow Afro-Pessimism to its ultimate conclusion where, at the cost of navigating themselves into an argumentative dead-end that is racializing in its own right, Afro-Pessimists portray the racial fault line as unpassable. American Studies in Germany cannot share Afro-Pessimism's (especially Wilderson's and Sexton's) always acknowledged but never openly articulated advocacy of violent revolution as the only thinkable solution to anti-blackness. What nevertheless legitimizes a consideration of Afro-Pessimism, in spite of the impossibility of ever completely adopting it, is that its epistemological critique and methodologi-

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[6] This argument is, of course, not restricted to Afro-Pessimist works. See for example Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* or Elizabeth West's article on the tropes of the founding fathers in African American discourses of democracy.

cal and moral challenges function even without completely accepting its political radicalism. Whatever degree of pessimism one finds convincing or bearable, it is hard to deny the urgency Afro-Pessimism gives to writing against the notion of a post-racial present. Whatever the potential for an intra-discursive emergence of the unthought, it cannot be denied that within the United States and other Western societies, black people are more likely than whites to be killed, incarcerated, or deported. Whatever the means one considers available for ending structural anti-blackness, any take on post-racialism as the end of pessimist permutations must always be about accepting that the enjoyment of structural white enslavism is the most central obstacle to surmounting the anti-blackness of civil society.

This is what it would mean for American Studies in Germany to consider Afro-Pessimism. As this short introduction has shown, it is above all a meta-theoretical and "metapolitical" approach whose main thrust is the deconstruction of the anti-blackness structuring white western civil societies as well as large parts of their knowledge production (Sexton, "The Social Life" 15). Engaging both academic and common sense understanding, Afro-Pessimism traces this anti-blackness even in those fields where blackness or race seem not to be the imminent subjects of enquiry or are present in any way. Its proposition is not a programmatic vision of a world yet to emerge, but refers the questioner—specifically, as I have argued, American Studies in Germany—back to its methodology and morals. It proposes neither an end to achieve nor an undisputed set of means, as illustrated by the ambiguous status of violence within Afro-Pessimist thought. For American Studies in Germany, to consider Afro-Pessimism means considering a critique of a racial unthought, an entanglement with it, and the potential to undo this entanglement and the politics deriving from it.

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