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## To Sit with Refusal: A Roundtable

Huey Copeland, Sampada Aranke, Athi Joja, Mlondi Zondi, Frank Wilderson

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Duke University Press, 2006). “Afro-fabulation” is discussed in Tavia Nyong’o, *Afro-Fabulation: The Queer Drama of Black Life* (New York: New York University Press, 2019). For “kinaesthetic contagion,” see Rizvana Bradley, “Black Cinematic Gesture and the Aesthetics of Contagion,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 62, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 14–30. Finally, for a discussion of “corporeal orature,” see Thomas DeFrantz, “The Black Beat Made Visible: Hip Hop Dance and Body Power.” in *Of the Presence of the Body: Essays on Dance and Performance Theory*, edited by Andre Lepecki. (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 64–81.

<sup>30</sup> See Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*.

<sup>31</sup> Jaye Austin Williams, “Radical Black Dramas-as-Theory: The Black Feminist Dramatic on the Protracted Event-Horizon,” *Theory & Event*, 21, no. 1 (2018): 196.

<sup>32</sup> See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (1952; New York: Grove Press, 2008), 89.

<sup>33</sup> Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Knopf, 1974), 31.

<sup>34</sup> My colleague, Dr. Cecilio Cooper (whose research deals more rigorously with the topic), helped me approach *Sula* with closer attentiveness to Eva’s “empty place,” particularly the knowledge it carries for Black study.

<sup>35</sup> This is a riff on W. E. B. Du Bois’s statement that “Negro blood has a message for the world.” W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; New York: Vintage/Library of America, 1990), 9. For a discussion of “the end of the world” in Black feminist aesthetics, see Denise Ferreira da Silva, “Toward a Black Feminist Poethics: The Quest(ion) of Blackness Toward the End of the World,” in “States of Black Studies,” ed. Alexander G. Weheliye, special issue, *The Black Scholar* 44, no. 2 (2014): 81–97.

<sup>36</sup> See Huey Copeland, “Tending-toward-Blackness,” *October*, no. 156 (Spring 2016): 141–44.

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## TO SIT WITH REFUSAL: A ROUNDTABLE

**HUEY COPELAND, SAMPADA  
ARANKE, ATHI JOJA, MLONDI  
ZONDI, AND FRANK WILDERSON**

In this text—edited from the November 17, 2017 transcript recording the closing conversation of the “Afro-Pessimist Aesthetics” symposium held at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago—scholars Sampada Aranke, Huey Copeland, Athi Mongezeleli Joja, Frank B. Wilderson III, and Mlondolozzi Zondi compare and discuss the ways in which Black radical thought puts pressure on both aesthetic theory and practice, regardless of medium or discipline. Building on and referring back to the other pieces included in this

dossier, the roundtable provides fresh insight into how cultural practitioners navigate life and work in a social field produced through and saturated by the logics of anti-Blackness.

—Sampada Aranke and Huey Copeland

**Huey Copeland/** I thought we might start our conversation by trying to think a little bit between and across the presentations, particularly through the terms that recur and that matter so deeply to all of the pieces: placelessness, social death, the void, and violence, all of which, of course, are crucial to Afro-pessimist theorizations of the Black's positionality. How do we think about how those terms shift or persist based upon the kinds of practices that you're each engaging so we can begin to understand the links and differences between modalities of Black aesthetic practice?

Frank, you're very much thinking with *12 Years a Slave* in order to deepen the Afro-pessimist theory of positionality. Mlondi, you're looking at *minor matter* in order to think about how that work opens up a discrepant space within the larger landscape of performative practices to find something else, even as the practice itself is symptomatic of the spaces in which it's emplotted. Sam, you are very much trying to use Afro-pessimist theory to think with and deepen how we understand David Hammons's performative interventions. And of course, Athi, you are tracing this other modality of the aesthetic that puts pressure on the ways in which we traditionally conceive it.

So, it seems like we have the aesthetic operating on a number of different levels here and being mobilized in different ways even as those key terms differently recur and inflect each other, a movement across registers that allows us to think both the range of aesthetic production and the work that Afro-pessimist theory can do with and against those registers.

**Sampada Aranke/** The question is really provocative because it's also asking us to think in relation to radically different contexts and historical moments. It's asking, what are the lines of continuity, but also, what ways can we think about different fault lines. For me, one answer to this question is materiality. The thing that makes Hammons's performance particularly generative as a location is that he is taking this [biological] material that is absolutely organic and internal and toxic waste and mobilizing it as [aesthetic] material. And so the rust that appears against Serra's steel becomes tactile. That material for me becomes particularly dynamic.

I think that the first thing I thought of, Mlondi Zondi, in your presentation is sweat, or Frank Wilderson, you give us this really rich description of the materiality of the scene, the things that we have to fill in.

**Athi Joja/** Back home in South Africa, I have been noticing a return to arguments made in Wilderson's "Grammar and Ghosts," which is one of the texts that made me think about the possibilities and impossibilities of Black aesthetics. Of course, this carries from his *Red*,

*White and Black.* The question, for example, of how many Black cultural practices under apartheid were easily available for incorporation, meaning whatever political response they had toward the system was questionable. “Grammar and Ghosts” brought these questions back to us, about what the aesthetic can do in the event that power is always already welcoming it and opening up spaces for it to displace its capacities.

When Julian Mayfield said, in effect, well, my Black aesthetic is not John Coltrane necessarily, but it is when the young Jackson brother takes the judge or Bobby Seale chained up in a courtroom, he was trying to think of the Black aesthetic not too far from the revolutionary situation that it existentially cultivates. So for me, the Black aesthetic instantiates modes of Black articulations that though can and do get incorporated, it is the acts of refusal that matter.

**HC/** Yes! And I think Sam’s statement about trying to think about the very different kinds of contexts from which these practices emerge is something that may help clarify the variegation of these forms of noncooperation or refusal. One point of interest is that y’all are dealing with really diverse types of forms and audiences, which may demand different approaches to how anti-Blackness is specifically being produced or reproduced in those varying contexts.

**Frank Wilderson/** I don’t really know the answer to that, but I can see the problem. In that when one desires to be trained as an

artist and so one goes to MFA school, in my case it’s fiction, or studio art, or dance, the training is hostile to your own experience, and yet there are tools that you want through this training. The hostility is that the training is overdetermined by an ideological imperative. That imperative is founded on the idea that art can redeem as opposed to art would be an accompaniment to a gun, for example, you know, bring your song, but bring your gun also. The aesthetic is always haunted, if not explicitly, expressing a kind of Gramscian tautology of “free your mind your ass will follow.” So one has to learn the tools of art, but not succumb to the orientation and the goal of aesthetics that assumes that art has a redeeming quality to it. That’s a really tough thing to do.

**HC/** So what does it mean to make form or to put form out in the world from an explicitly Afro-pessimist perspective?

**FW/** Personally I never thought of that, though it’s a productive question. The problem for me is how, as Saidiya Hartman would say, does one emplot the slave? And what all of our work here has suggested is that emplotment comes with coordinates that assume there’s a prior plentitude, predicated on the dream of narrative art, which is the dream of a restoration or reorganization. But that arc itself does not apply to Black life. So, I don’t have an answer to your question. What I do is try to write critical theory but then not try to, when I write stories, to force them to articulate with imperatives of my positions as a critic. So, what I’ve learned and said

theoretically resonates with what I'm trying to do poetically but resonates in a way that I'm not aware of as it's happening.

**Mlondi Zondi/** I would echo most of what you said. In terms of my own practice, my approach to form is neither about translating Black suffering nor delivering a didactic message to the world, revolutionary or otherwise. Training in the dance studio is not really about preparing you for a revolutionary way of gesturing onstage, but it is sometimes a way of preparing artists to be better equipped to ask difficult questions in abstract and literal ways, and to problematize things even more.

Another aspect of training, though, which is also very difficult and quite impossible with this work, is the expectation that when you write anything about dance you have to focus solely on formal, thick description. I think about the tension between what I'm saying about formlessness and my own MFA training in Laban movement analysis, which is so tethered to a desire for perfect narrative summation. Black aesthetic practices that "tend-toward" form as already fragmented for the Black pose a challenge for movement analysis's desire to capture. How do you write about a "no dance," which is Ralph Lemon's term for his formless approach to dance and choreography?

**SA/** In considering your question, Huey, the first place that I went to is thinking about opacity, particularly "Open Boat," the opening to Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*.

It's the first thing that we encounter before engaging the rest of Glissant's theoretical project. He has this phrase that's repeated over and over again: "womb abyss." There's something around that that is a practice of opacity. It's a speaking to and between that might be unintelligible or at least nontranslatable, emergent, and perhaps fleeting or "fugitive."

For me, form is about that opacity or a kind of striving toward it, or better, just allowing one to be within that tension. I think we're all interested in what it looks like to be within that space, and I think that form could actually be a narrative that is unintelligible. So I'm not quite sure that narrative is necessarily antagonistic or is conflictual with a certain kind of modality or approach. I'm not necessarily interested in representation, but I'm thoroughly interested in abstraction, the ways that abstraction might open up a space of wonder or something within it that's irrecoverable.

**AJ/** I'm trained as a painter. At some point after graduation I stopped painting because painting didn't say what I wanted to say. I started writing because I thought writing was going to offer an alternative. Throughout my writing about art and politics, the attempt has always been raising "the political," which has been largely discouraged in the post-apartheid cultural discourse.

But then I discovered the work of two artists, Ernest Mancoba and Dumile Feni, whom I'm writing about now. Even though these artists

were not necessarily trying to articulate radical projects, their work nonetheless opened up newer ways of seeing the world. In the late 1940s, Ernest Mancoba changed the look of modernity completely, though, of course, after that nobody remembered him. For Dumile, the same exact thing happened with regard to how his work wrestled with representing Black suffering in the 1960s. This is to say, reading form is not predicated on suspending content, but of them dialectically. In other words, to think of the content of the form as well as the form of the content.

**MZ/** When I was an MFA student in dance, I was very excited about writing a thesis that was going to be about all the wonderfully resistive ways of performing my way out of suffering [Laughter].

I don't know if Frank remembers this, but I was taking his class. It was during office hours and I had a lot of questions; one of them was, "Okay, I read the material and I understand it, but there's an impasse here: I'm an artist, that's what I do. I actually have to finish this MFA, so what do I write?" And he didn't offer me a prescription or a program—in my field, I feel that there's a lot of that—but instead posed a question: "Well, what would it mean for you to actually embrace that *cul-de-sac*?" And I think that's what I've tried to stay with, to hover in the *cul-de-sac* as opposed to fleeing, as euphoric as that might feel.

**FW/** Yes, I'm glad you didn't say the wrong thing! [Laughter] But I think that's a really

important point. I think it's emblematic of how these questions relate concretely to the ethics of practice and teaching. There is mutuality between the way MFA programs are run and the way prisons are run. Let's sit with that for a moment. [Laughter]

First of all, I think that in an MFA program Black people tend to be one out of a cohort or one out of a whole group. As you're producing, whether it's your performance thesis or, in my case, short stories or a novel, the question—whether it's asked by the teachers or haunts their discourse—is "How does this make me feel?" as opposed to "How does this make *you* feel?" It's not a conspiracy theory, but they're effectively saying, "This art doesn't speak to me" or "There's no hope here." So I think that what I try to do when I teach creative writing is to say: "Live in the *cul-de-sac*" and explore your own reality, regardless of whether other people think it's too dark or hopeless.

I did a reading at a bookstore and a non-Black person raised their hand and said, "I really like your work, but I find it so depressing." What was interesting is that immediately two Black people raised their hands and said, "We find it refreshing." It is that irreconcilable affect, which they're feeling in my work; it is not hegemonic. In schools or in publishing, you have to fight against an editor or an editorial board for a work of art that A) doesn't have closure or B) argues through symptoms and aesthetics that there are no redemptive qualities to the United States of America. Those authorial voices want you to lower the scale

of abstraction so that you're talking about discrimination or problems at the performative level as opposed to arguing that the whole country or world as one plantation.

My colleague, Jared Sexton, and I taught in a prison when we were in graduate school, which is why I said an MFA is like a prison. One week Jared would do critical theory and then the next week I would teach creative writing. And I found that the men in the class were, understandably, afraid of expressing themselves artistically. And so we began by working through mind-mapping exercises, where you read something or you see an image and you put the impression that comes to you in the middle of a blank piece of paper. You just start building out a spiderweb of associations until you hit what's called a trial web shift when a sentence comes. The whole thing can only take ten minutes so you write for that ten minutes. What you find is that normally you have a vignette that comes full circle, but you don't know where it comes from or where it's going. Those little vignettes can then build into a larger piece of narrative fiction.

Well, after about three weeks, all the stories were about, you know, offing the guards or breaking out of prison! [Laughter] The language of prison is honest in a way that the language of the academy is not, you know? The language of the academy wants to say, "I'm policing you to put hope or redemption into your work," whereas in a prison they'll just say, "You can't write that!" [Laughter]. Eventually, they put a guard in the classroom,

so I had to do a creative writing workshop with an armed guard standing in the back. Then they began filming it, then they wouldn't let any of my materials go to the death row prisoners, and then they just shut us down. I think that there's a kind of symbiosis between that hardcore process that took like three weeks and its softer version that can take three years in an MFA program.

**Marissa Baker [audience member]/** Thank you all for your presentations. I just had a quick question. What are the potentials or meanings of "Black interiority" in the context of Black social death?

**SA/** I would return to Glissant and his implied refusal to answer the question since I think it also marks that place of walking away from translatability. For instance, with Hammons I'm interested in the way that he performs an interiority which is an externalizing of an interior material, a material that doesn't necessarily *say* certain kinds of things but that communicates a lot. That kind of generativity is about a certain kind of opacity and refusal. So, I'm interested in the places where your question pushes against some of the exteriorities that we've communicated or offered up today.

**MZ/** I'm also skeptical of that kind of question, not only because it presumes a boundary between interiority and exteriority—but also because it usually means, "These Negroes are doing all of this work about social death and they have not redeemed this one aspect of Black being that might go against what they're theorizing.

Interiority might be a place where they can salvage some kind of Black self-proprietorship.” So I will not answer the question. And I think maybe we should sit with that a little bit.

**Tyrone Palmer [audience member]/** My question resonates with what Huey Copeland asked in terms of form. I was really struck by the use of terms like deform and dissemble, deconstruct and destroy, as well as the idea of formlessness as Mlondi Zondi specifically articulated it, but also as it resonated across the papers. So, I’m wondering if you could say more about how you perceive an Afro-pessimist approach to formal analysis in light of the kinds of formlessness and sorts of deformation that are characteristic of Blackness but also of expression. For instance, in your talk, Frank Wilderson, you provide a careful formal analysis of the film, the shots, and where the camera was placed, demonstrating the failure of form to hold in the face of the inarticulable.

**AJ/** I’ve always found it difficult, personally, to think about formal analysis in terms of Afro-pessimism. On the one side, in Afro-pessimistic writing, there’s a certain approach to form that dis-forms, which is to say that troubles any formality or even threatens to destroy prevailing forms. I’m thinking here about the kinds of paradoxes and flips that inform Jared Sexton’s writing. I am thinking about such phrases “social life of social death” or “fugitivity is not freedom, not now.” The need to think from the singular place of Blackness, which

is nowhere or underground, certainly puts a pause on our generic forms of knowing, of seeing and ultimately of being. Thus, an Afro-pessimistic form becomes, simultaneously, a form of destabilization of all other forms, without the blessing of messianic promissory note of an alter-native or manifesto.

**SA/** I am really interested in deformation as a strategy. I think somebody like Hannah Black does this too, in a way. It’s where the question of deformation, which is also a question of deformity, points us to the notion with which Mlondi led: the assumption that the body itself has some integrity and by extension that the way we see or the way that we experience the object assumes an integrity to the objecthood of that object. Black is trying to point us precisely to the places where we have to pull the rug out from underneath the discourse. This means understanding the limitations of a certain kind of language, a certain kind of grammar, and it also requires grappling with the excess and in-excess that is mobilized around the object. What it can and can’t do. This line of thought is always moving us to those places where we have to consider what the object cannot do for you or for itself. For me, that is a place where thinking about form within a certain kind of grammar of impossibility becomes about having to figure out a language that is not readily here and is not here yet. Maybe it has never been here. I vibe with this tension around the problem of thick description, and yet I’m like, “Well, let’s pour over it.” Can we write a thick description, as



I think Frank does, that moves us to push the wall with our expectations even if we keep hitting that wall over and over and over again? That for me is the possibility of deformation as a kind of critical strategy.

**MZ/** In dance and dance studies, there's been a tension for years between dance and writing. Any kind of formal analysis, no matter how deformed it is, first has to grapple with this very long and storied tension. Dance as an object exists as something that some believe is a disappearance that does not repeat, and others believe is a repetition that simultaneously disappears and records. Dance notation and criticism are attempts to capture and make intelligible what in fact was slippery and was never whole in the first place. It's a challenge to think about what it would mean to write about Black dance in a way that honors that formlessness, at the level of aesthetic form and formlessness as a feature of Black (non)being. Second, thick description, whether traditional or reimagined/disformed, is always anticipated by co-optation and/or annihilation. Afro-pessimism helps me understand that in this world, all Black writing, Afro-pessimist theory included, happens within a context of coercion.

of Exile and Apartheid (Duke University Press 2015), and Red, White, & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms (Duke University Press 2010). He spent five and a half years in South Africa, where he was one of two Americans to hold elected office in the African National Congress during the apartheid era. He also was a cadre in the underground. His literary awards include The American Book Award, The Zora Neale Hurston/Richard Wright Legacy Award for Creative Nonfiction, The Maya Angelou Award for Best Fiction Portraying the Black Experience in America, and a National Endowment for the Arts Literature Fellowship.

## RESPONSE

# A SPLINTER TO THE HEART: ON THE POSSIBILITY OF AFRO-PESSIMIST AESTHETICS

**ADRIENNE EDWARDS**

Informed by the critical and historical contributions of Frantz Fanon, Saidiya Hartman, Ronald Judy, Orlando Patterson, and Hortense Spillers, Black studies scholar Frank Wilderson posits Blackness as an ontology of slavery, measured solely in relation to the State, its apparatuses of power, and ultimately the structure of that power relation. A cursory review of Wilderson's writings exemplify his thoughts on the matter: "the Black, a subject who is always already positioned as Slave," the Slave lacks "Human capacity," "the Slave is a sentient being but not a subject," "a Black is the very antithesis of a Human subject,"

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