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The Pronominal Grammar of Ontological Anti-Blackness
Institutionality and Authority in *Afropessimism* and *The Undercommons*

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Abstract: Since the emergence of Afro-pessimism in the early 2000s, the focus of much critical conversation in and around the discourse has been on the viability of its ontological claims as to the non-'Human' status of blackness. Departing from these essential debates, this article turns rather to the generic qualities of Afro-pessimism, to suggest that the discourse's formal choices reveal discrepancies in the ontological theses being argued. In comparing two of the discourse's key texts, Frank Wilderson's memoir, *Afropessimism* (2021) and Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's *The Undercommons* (2013), I illustrate how Wilderson's memoir performs the thesis of ontological anti-blackness through the failures of its first-person singular narration; failures expressive of the impossibility of the black 'object' claiming access to the memoir's generic institutions of authorship and authority. By contrast, reading Harney and Moten's critique of the university through the genre of the manifesto shows their depersonalized first-person plural to adopt an appositional and 'fugitive' relation to the totalizing political authority entailed in the genre. Whereas the failures of Wilderson's text enact, then, a kind of refusal to participate in the institutions of authority enshrined in memoir's first-person singular, Harney and Moten's utopian 'we' 'refuse[s] to refuse.' Their 'undercommons' critique addresses, at once, the Enlightenment-born institution of the university, and related institutions of genre, representation, and, ultimately, subjectification. Through their appositional orientation to the manifesto, Moten and Harney propose an Afro-pessimist thesis formally and substantively different to Wilderson's—one arguably less predicated on failure.

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Between 2003 and 2013, the discourse of Afro-pessimism came to be seen in areas of the U.S. academy, as the theorist Fred Moten writes, as 'the most exciting and generative advance in black critical theory, which is to say critical theory,' of the decade.[1] The thesis of Afro-pessimism, that 'Human life is dependent on Black death for its existence and for its conceptual coherence,' and that blackness is 'equable to social death,' had been elaborated into a discourse: across papers and monographs by Jared Sexton and Frank B. Wilderson III, two of Afro-pessimism's most

[1] I use the hyphenated 'Afro-pessimism' to refer to the discourse and school of thought, in order to distinguish it from the non-hyphenated *Afropessimism*, the title of Wilderson's memoir. Afro-pessimism, a term first suggested to Wilderson by Saidiya Hartman, has also been used to describe 'the assumptive logic of international relations journalists and scholars who view sub-Saharan Africa as a region too riddled with problems for good governance and economic development.' Wilderson notes: 'My use of the word bears no resemblance to this definition' (2010, 58).

notable theorists; in responses in *Criticism*, *PMLA*, *CR: The Centennial Review*, and *The South Atlantic Quarterly* by Moten, among many others.[2] In the process, a 'tension' (Moten 2018, 193) had arisen, between Wilderson and Sexton's 'pessimism,' and what Moten came to describe as his appositional 'optimism.'

In his 2013 paper, 'Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)' (published in a revised form in 2018), Moten wrote against Wilderson and Sexton's insistence that 'Black has sentient capacity but no relational capacity' (Wilderson 2010, 56). He suggested a refocusing: that black life is, instead, 'irreducibly social,' and that insofar as black subjects 'are not subjects,' they are also not 'in the interminable analysis … "death bound"' (Moten 2018, 194). Moten's starting point, in this argument for black social life against the *a priori* impossibility of blackness having 'relational capacity,' was from a position of what he described as 'love': from the 'romance' of the belief that 'blackness could be loved,' and, in fact, despite the 'growing consensus that analytic precision does not allow for such flights of fancy,' that 'analytic precision' is a 'function of such fancy' (193). He thus gave rebuke not so much to Wilderson and Sexton's ontological thesis, but to their orientation towards their critical object. The 'infinitesimal difference between pessimism and optimism,' Moten wrote, lies in the space 'between an assertion of the relative nothingness of blackness' in the face of 'substantive (anti-black) subjectivity,' and an 'inhabitation of appositionality, its internal social relations, which remain unstructured by protocols of subjectivity' (205).[3] For Moten, an optimistic, loving, and romantic critical method expresses a capacity to explore and articulate that which remains 'unstructured' by historical and institutional 'protocols' governing subjectivity. Appositionality grants what is implied to be greater 'analytic precision' and critical rigor; rigor achieved in part through standing askance of anti-black discourses and institutions that position the subject. Moten depicts appositionality, in its rigor, as sidelong to the social: neither outside of it, nor fully enmeshed. It is a wayward critical orientation that enables Moten to think blackness without either opposing or entirely participating in the anti-black history of subjectification as he sees it—or the institutions that enact and prolong ('institute') those discourses, including academic and critical ones.[4]

I open with Moten's discussion of 'appositionality' in part to introduce his particular relation to the evolving discourse of Afro-pessimism—and in part to foreground that since the early-2000s, that discourse has revolved around problems of not just content and method, but of form and expression. This article takes up two of the most prominent texts of Afro-pessimism as they ask, in different ways: can blackness be institutionalized? Or: can blackness be expressed and recognized through institutions such as genre, and the academic institutions that shape critical genres, while remaining blackness? In comparing Frank Wilderson's memoir, *Afropessimism* (2020), and Moten and Harney's co-authored work, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (2013), I suggest that we find these questions engaged crucially at the

[2] See Moten 2004; Moten 2008; Moten 2009; Moten 2013. Much of this work was collected in a revised form in *The Universal Machine* (2018), the last of Moten's 'consent not to be a single being' trilogy of critical writings—it's from this version that I will be quoting. See also e.g. Jared Sexton (2011; 2012) on the relevance of some of this writing in the ongoing discourse of Afro-pessimism.

[3] I do not capitalize 'black' in this article, following arguments made by Jesse McCarthy among others. He writes: 'I tend to agree philosophically with Fred Moten that what is most important about blackness is its dispersive and de-essentializing qualities, its resistance to the assumptive logics of possessive individualism and state power, a function that I would argue is better captured aesthetically by the lower case.' McCarthy 2021, xii.

[4] On the use of the verb 'to institute' in relation to institutionality, see e.g. Rosen 2019 and Robbins 1988, 767.

level of form. The nearly two-decade-long debates in articles and books on the constitutive qualities of Afro-pessimism leading up to Wilderson's memoir are displayed in the differing presentations that Wilderson and Moten, among the many other theorists of Afro-pessimism, adopt: like Walter Benjamin's figure of the balled-up sock, in which content is popped from within form, these works illustrate distinct methodological approaches to the same core ontological position, and its relation to institutionality, through their stark generic and deictic differences.[5]

Notably, in these generic differences, and particularly their use of the first person singular and plural respectively, *Afropessimism* and *The Undercommons* relate differently to what I am calling *institutions of authority*. Wilderson's *Afropessimism*, as literary memoir, centres a close, autobiographical 'I.' *The Undercommons*, with its depersonalized 'we,' I read as being in dialogue with the tradition of the manifesto. If we understand genre to be, as Frederic Jameson famously suggested, essentially a 'literary institution' or 'social contract … between a writer and specific public' (Jameson 1975, 135), we might in this context read Wilderson's personal-memoir-cum-thesis as engaging an idea of authority and authorship that rests on the stability and significance of the individualized first person, as well as its recognition—whether receptive or hostile—by a given literary public. Reading Wilderson alongside theories of black institutionality such as R.A. Judy's, and against the work of writers on personal 'authority,' such as Nancy K. Miller, I suggest that Wilderson uses the memoir to argue that to inhabit an authoritative 'I' involves participating falsely in the 'institutionality' of the 'Human.' He does so, in part, and paradoxically, through the anecdotal first-person singular. Ultimately, then, the text relies on a fissure at its centre. It expresses its thesis through the impossibility of its own positionality, as for Wilderson the memoir entails an institutionalized 'Human' subject that is defined against blackness.

Moten and Harney's depersonalized first person plural is conversant with a different set of assumptions and recognitions: those that constitute a literary and political public as inscribed in the Enlightenment history of the manifesto. Working 'appositionally' to the genre of the manifesto, *The Undercommons* similarly makes an Afro-pessimist argument as to the ontological status of anti-blackness. Rather than repeatedly illustrating the apparent impossibility of speaking a critical and personal 'I' as a black subject, as Wilderson does, however, Moten and Harney use their form to critique also the pessimistic and oppositional mode in which a rebuttal such as Wilderson's operates. Their form, in *The Undercommons*, centres the depersonalized first person plural to propose an optimistic, social, and appositional critique of institutions based in anti-blackness; their 'we' performing a 'refus[al] to refuse' (2013, 31) recognition by—or, in the same vein, opposition to—the institution. This practice allows them to suggest and speak to a black sociality 'unstructured' by institutional—which is to say academic, critical, and generic—'protocols' of subjectification.

Reading these two texts through institutions of authority, then, I take their generic differences to be in no sense incidental to their respective arguments. In proposing Afro-pessimism in the form of a memoir, Wilderson argues the absolute thesis of ontological anti-blackness and 'social death' through the partiality and partialness of the speaking 'I': an 'I' through which, as Jesse McCarthy puts it, Wilderson's life lessons come to 'serve as both occasions and exempla for expounding Wilderson's adopted philosophy' (McCarthy 2020). Where a critic such as McCarthy sees Wilderson's personal memoir as appearing to 'need to perform his own

[5] Benjamin reflects on his pleasure as a child of drawing out the 'present' inside the 'pocket' of a balled-up sock, though the 'present' keeps alluding him. 'For now I proceeded to unwrap "the present," to tease it out of its woolen pocket … but "the pocket" in which it had lain was no longer there. … It taught me that form and content, veil and what is veiled, are the same' (2006, 96–97).

suffering for the reader's instruction,' to the effect of 'undermin[ing] the lucidity of his arguments,' I read Wilderson's 'I' as intentionally and effectively partial: his memoir's fascination with the anecdotal self realizing a particularly absolute and ahistorical version of Afro-pessimism. If, as Wilderson suggests, 'Blackness is coterminous with Slaveness' (2020, 102), then the authorial 'I' must be thwarted in the sense that 'every attempt to employ the slave in a narrative ultimately resulted in his or her obliteration' (Hartman and Wilderson 2003). How, Wilderson asks, 'can the Black be framed if the Black, by definition, has no capacity to take place?' (Wilderson 2010, 281).

The problem that blackness is un-narrativizable and unrepresentable, in this scheme, is solved or at least expressed in the partialness of autobiography, and the limitations of the close first-person singular. The reliance on the fallible personal perspective, when then coupled with the omniscience of Wilderson the theorist, creates a circular economy of authority. The only authority appealed to is that of the 'I,' whether in the partiality of the autobiographical, or in the absoluteness of the Afro-pessimist interpretation of that experience. The 'I,' in turn, receives its authority from the apparent impossibility of articulating a speaking, 'Human' black subject, so that its own partialness reads as an expression of that thesis. Rather than reading widely across Black Radical thought, or rooting his argument in material history, Wilderson's memoir finds its authority not despite the partial-total polarity of its form, but through that limitation. The 'I' performs, in other words, a pessimism that equates to what McCarthy reads as a lack of 'lucidity,' and Moten describes as a failure of 'analytic precision'—but that we might rather take to be an understanding, at the level of form, of the circumscribing force of the personal.

In Moten and Harney's *The Undercommons*, the totality of the 'I' gives way not to an absolute and coercive collectivized voice in the manifesto, but to a roving, depersonalized 'we' that speaks of and to a fugitive 'undercommons.' Against the circular and frustrated authority offered by the personal in Wilderson's text, Moten and Harney reject the oppositional logic by which an 'I' is posed against the unrepresentable totality of the death of the black subject. *The Undercommons*, and its successor, *All Incomplete* (2021), are forceful and directed manifestoes against the modern university—and through the university, against the *longue durée* of the 'terrible institution' of slavery, as borne out in modern institutions. But reading from formulations of 'fugitivity' and 'waywardness' developed by Saidiya Hartman (Hartman 1997; Hartman and Best 2005; Hartman 2016), among others, I suggest that rather than adopting the outrightly oppositional stance of the Enlightenment-origin manifesto, Moten and Harney's 'fugitive' text takes an appositional approach to the genre. Instead of recreating the 'us' versus 'them' constructions of the manifesto, their 'we' forges an unrepresentable 'undercommons' beneath the manifesto's totalizing political binary. The distinction between these works, then, reveals not just differing approaches to the goals and possibilities of Afro-pessimism, but also illuminates some of the weighty political implications of personal and impersonal criticism, and criticism's performances of authority and institutionality.

***Afropessimism*'s 'I'**

Afropessimism is Wilderson's third book, following his first memoir, *Incognegro: A Memoir of Exile and Apartheid* (2008), which recounts his political organizing in South Africa during apartheid, and his scholarly study, *Red, White & Black*: *Cinema and the Structure of US Antagonisms* (2010). Like those earlier works, *Afropessimism* is born out of Wilderson's activism and scholarship: his involvement in the African National Congress (ANC) and Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) in South Africa; his participation in student movements in South Africa and the U.S.; his experience among Black Panthers, the Black Liberation Army, and the Weather Underground. Both earlier works lay

the foundations for Afro-pessimism's titular thesis in his latest memoir. Sexton, Wilderson's contemporary at Berkeley—where he completed his doctorate—has described *Red, White & Black* as 'the signal articulation' (Sexton 2016) of Afro-pessimism. At Berkeley, Wilderson was also supervised by Hartman, her tutorage informing his and Sexton's evolving and discursive theorisation of Afro-pessimism. In this context, in which Wilderson had been writing about Afro-pessimism for at least a decade, the memoir was seen by observers as 'poised to fill the gaps in the many scattered journal articles that treated the subject and to explicate, for a more mainstream audience, what the thrust of this intervention into conversations on race is meant to achieve and how its ideas work' (McCarthy 2020). It would serve, as McCarthy suggests, 'if not as a manifesto for a wider movement, then at least a guide for the perplexed' (2020).

When it was published in 2020, *Afropessimism* was in fact received with less stress on its critical fluency or theoretical detail than on, as Paul C. Taylor put it, the 'economy and poetry of [Wilderson's] provocations' (Taylor 2020). This was, in part, because of the formal 'challenge' posed by Wilderson's memoir. Where *Incognegro* had not striven to elaborate a titular thesis so much as trace Wilderson's involvement in a specific liberatory struggle, *Afropessimism* now argued that 'the narrative arc of the slave who is Black … is not an arc at all, but a flat line' (Wilderson 2020, 226). In doing so, Wilderson refused generic structures of chronological narrative. The work found itself caught in what critics such as Vinson Cunningham saw as 'life [presented] as a series of cutouts': 'His memories are like scraps fished out of the shredder and reassembled into the shape of a monster; just to figure out the order of events relayed in the book is a task' (Cunningham 2020). In 'weaving the abstract thinking of critical theory' into 'blood-and-guts stories of life as it's lived' (2020, x), Wilderson offered his theory in the form of a series of apparently anti-narrative snippets: less a 'guide for the perplexed' than actively perplexing for, if not wider readers, then certainly a number of critics.

My contention, against this scene of critical confusion, is that what Taylor identifies as the formal 'economy' of Wilderson's memoir is a series of limitations—partialities—produced by the autobiographical 'I.' These partialities render the work a set of active 'provocations,' that then express the totality of ontological anti-blackness as Wilderson sees it. In choosing, in his expression of the central thesis of Afro-pessimism, to depart from the analytical mode of the monograph—as in *Red, White & Black*—and to instead state his thesis as a memoir, Wilderson stakes a claim for the personal as the ideal expression of the impossibility of narrativizing the non-'Human' nature of blackness. His 'I,' then, constitutes the provocative, as opposed to (to use Moten's terms) 'analytically precise' quality of *Afropessimism*. What appears, in context, as Wilderson's total theory, realized through the partialness of the 'I,' turns the anecdotal and personal first-person singular into a pessimist methodology in and of itself. Rather than simply recreating and participating in what I am calling the institutions of authority enshrined in and performed by the first-person singular in the genre of memoir, Wilderson's repeated structural, expressive, and narrative failings enact, in fact, a critique of those institutions.

The effect of Wilderson's pronominal grammar, as an expression of un-narrativizability, is well-illustrated in the book's central chapter, 'Hattie McDaniel is Dead.' In this, the longest and most intensely personal section of the work, Wilderson weaves together his memories of 1978–1980, focusing on his relationship with Stella, his partner at the time; the suspected violence perpetrated on them both by Josephine, their white neighbour, in collaboration or collusion with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI); and a sustained reading of Steve McQueen's 2013 film

adaptation of Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years A Slave*.[6] It is outside the scope of this article to trace the full events of the chapter, which follows the pair's flight from Josephine, following her suspected planting of radioactive materials in their plumbing. Instead, I'm going to dwell on a moment at which that violence appears narratively to begin, when Josephine lets herself into the house where Wilderson, Stella, and Stella's young daughter, Malika, are eating dinner. Here, we see how Wilderson's personal mode allows him to read his own anecdotal past into the history of Atlantic slavery; the limits of his argument thereby suggesting the un-narrativizable quality of ontological anti-blackness.

> Josephine seemed to think that the downstairs part of the house was simply an extension of the upstairs part, where she lived. … We heard the front door open and close. Josephine appeared in the threshold of the kitchen with bushels of lilacs in a straw basket. … No doubt, in her mind the gift of flowers offset her violation of our space. But, looking back on it, all I see is the extension of the master's prerogative in the way Josephine treated Stella. (Wilderson 2020, 72)

Writing from the vantage of a confirmed Afro-pessimist, Wilderson reads in Josephine's imposition a scene from the film, *12 Years A Slave*, in which Edwin Epps, the slave owner, bursts into Northup's and his wife's cabin while they are in bed. While initially shocked by Josephine's intrusion, Wilderson, writing now, appears sanguine. 'It has taken me forty years to understand how neither [Epps] nor Josephine had violated anyone's space,' the theorist-narrator (as opposed to the close memoirist of a moment before) reflects. 'The regime of violence that made them his property and prosthetics of his desire made it impossible to see what he did as a violation. That is to say that I was wrong to think Josephine did something wrong' (72). Collapsing Josephine's imposition with Epps' violation, Wilderson also collapses, here, the filmic with the autobiographical, the fictive with the historical and material; a concertina effect that compresses into the tight thesis of Afro-pessimism. 'Eastern Seaboard slaves,' he writes, 'had grown to believe in the elasticity of accumulation and fungibility': they had, 'like me and Stella in 1980,' imagined that their dwellings were also their homes.' In other words, the 'Eastern Seaboard slaves' were '*not* … Afro-pessimists' (72; emphasis in original). This moment, in its reliance on the partiality of autobiography, reiterates that the only way to understand either the personal or the historical frames that Wilderson sets up is through Wilderson's own later, theoretical revelation. His omniscient narration guides us from the confusion of partialness and partiality, to comprehension in and by Afro-pessimism.

In Wilderson's monograph, *Red, White & Black*, the idea of being 'wrong to think' that a master figure such as Josephine 'did something wrong,' finds expression differently in a reading of Haile Gerima's 1976 film, *Bush Mama*. There, a policeman's rape of a black girl illustrates for Wilderson 'that "Black home" is an oxymoron… The absolute vulnerability of Black domesticity finds its structural analogy—if it can be metaphorized as an analogy—with the domain known as the slave quarters' (2010, 127). Whereas in that reading, Wilderson carefully explores the film's presentation of violence as an expression of the 'terrible institution's' continuance in twentieth-century North American policing—what Steven Martinot and Sexton identify, and what Wilderson in *Red, White & Black* paraphrases, as 'the circuit of mobility' between 'the social incarceration of Black life and the institutional incarceration of the prison-industrial complex'

[6] I use *12 Years A Slave* and *Twelve Years A Slave* to distinguish respectively Steve McQueen's film, which Wilderson is discussing, and Northup's autobiography, which is not discussed in the text.

(Wilderson 2010, 140; Martinot and Sexton 2003)—in the memoir this historical and analytical specificity is stripped out. 'Eastern Seaboard slaves' become one with the younger, not-yet-Afro-pessimist-Wilderson and Stella, who are also one with both the historical and filmic figures of Northup and his wife. Josephine, meanwhile, becomes one with Epps, the institution of slavery, and the institutions of the modern police state. The collapse is provocative: rather than being concerned with 'failure[s] of analytic precision,' Wilderson's reflections turn to Afro-pessimism as the only way of understanding the remembered scene of intrusion. It is a scene that cannot be understood, for Wilderson, except in recourse to its characters' resistance to narrativizability and historical sense-making.

In Wilderson's Afro-pessimism, after all, there is no possible narrative arc for blackness, but only what, via Hortense Spillers, he calls 'historical stillness' (2020, 102). '*Afropessimism* is premised on a comprehensive and iconoclastic claim,' he writes: 'that Blackness is coterminous with Slaveness: Blackness is social death: which is to say there was never a prior meta-moment of plenitude …: never a moment of social life' (102). His interpretation of Orlando Patterson's theory of 'social death,' from Patterson's 1982 opus, *Slavery and Social Death*, evolves into a theory of narrative. White subjects, like Josephine, are granted 'intra-communal narrative arcs of transformation' (102), he argues, because as 'Human' subjects they are relational: only through relation does the Human have 'transformative capacity' and thus narrative potential. That potential stands not only in contrast to the black subject, 'a being outside of relationality' (2010, 11), but is a direct product of the non-capacity of blackness. 'In short,' Wilderson writes, 'White (Human) capacity, in advance of the event of discrimination or oppression, is parasitic on Black incapacity: Without the Negro, capacity itself is incoherent, uncertain at best' (2010, 45). Blackness is, in this scheme, 'a structural position of non-communicability in the face of all other positions' (2010, 58). Structuring *Afropessimism* into a narrative becomes, therefore, a necessarily impossible task: the work must 'somehow be indexical of that which exceeds narration' (2020, 246), and in fact, Wilderson suggests, its failures become proof of its success. In indexing that which exceeds narration, Wilderson argues that readers' 'incomprehension' of the work is illustrative of 'the indices … actually escap[ing] the narrative' (2020, 246).[7] Crucially, that goal of failure, as seen in the passage above, is predicated on not only the artifice, but the theoretical limitations produced by the partial and yet totalizing autobiographical 'I.'

Wilderson's narrative 'I' leans into the impossibility of organizing non-capacity. His gaze shifts repeatedly across the scene in which Josephine enters their space, first immuring him in the physical encounter with the white interloper, then moving abruptly to the vantage of the omniscient Afro-pessimist interpreter. The passage reminds us of Wilderson's background in film studies. We hear the front door open and close. We see Josephine penetrate the space. Then, as though slamming against the question, 'can the Black be framed if the Black, by definition, has no capacity to take place?,' the frame collapses, or clarifies, into a comprehensive reading. Wilderson's 'I' delivers the reader to the structuring paradigm of Afro-pessimism: 'looking back, *all I see* is the extension of the master's prerogative' (italics added). Rather than resisting what Hartman has called the urge to 'narcissistic identification that obliterates the other' (Hartman 1997, 4) in portrayals of anti-black violence, Wilderson illustrates the totality of anti-blackness through a manipulation of that obliteration. In his provocative equivalences, he creates a comprehensive vision from the partiality and partialness of ahistorical reflection, as from personal memory. The effect is that not only is Wilderson's deictic 'I' given the role of speaking

[7] I'd like to thank Elizabeth Gregory for our conversations on this point.

into being ontological anti-blackness, but of exposing at the same time the limitations that surround its articulation in that personal grammar.

While I am reading the analytical failures of Wilderson's articulation of Afro-pessimism in the memoir as effective and expressive of *Afropessimism*'s thesis, Sexton has suggested that to read the work as failing is to miss the point. It's here that we might begin to see the centrality of 'institutionality' in Wilderson's form and argument. For Sexton, critics of Afro-pessimism have repeatedly declined to recognize the significance of its 'major statement' being in an 'award-winning literary work of memoir.' Such critics overlook 'the rhetorical dimensions of the discourse of Afro-pessimism,' he suggests, and particularly

> the productive theoretical effects of the fiction it creates, namely, a meditation on a poetics and politics of abjection wherein racial blackness operates as an asymptotic approximation of that which disturbs every claim or formation of identity and difference as such. (Sexton 2016)

Sexton sees ontological anti-blackness—as expressed in the asymptotic relation of anti-blackness to the infinity of 'Human' subjectification—realized in the 'productive theoretical effects' of Wilderson's 'I,' and the 'fiction' of the personal that it performs. For theorists of personal feminist criticism, such as Nancy K. Miller and Jane Tompkins, the personal and autobiographical has offered the potential to 'reclaim theory: turning theory back on itself' (Miller 1991, 5), in that it troubles the 'authority effect' (Tompkins 1993, 31) of critical language. For Wilderson, meanwhile, such recourse to and recognition of institutions of authority—even in opposition—is void in the face of his ontological thesis. Reading from R. A. Judy's concept of borrowed institutionality (Judy 1993), Wilderson argues that blackness does not have the 'capacity to be essentially exploited and alienated (rather than accumulated and fungible) in the first ontological instance' (2010, 42), so that to 'be known as anything but Black—worker, woman, man, gay, lesbian, and so on' (2010, 100) constitutes a 'feigned' institutionality. Thus, 'Black "institutionality' … is not simply impossible; it is unthought and unimaginable' (2010, 100). Even to reject or trouble the personal as a source of authority is, here, to assent to the idea that the subject has the capacity to access that 'institution' of authority. The personal and autobiographical therefore becomes, in Wilderson's memoir, a means of dramatizing the narrative limitations of objectified blackness. His form illuminates his apparently impossible relation, as a black subject and deictic 'I,' to what is figured as 'Human' and capable of personal narrative. If, additionally, the fact that such a dramatization entails a reliance on the personal 'I' as a source of authority—as opposed to, say, reliance on critical readings, or material scholarship—that is not accessible to the black speaking subject 'in the first ontological instance,' then that only underscores the impossibility of speaking ontological anti-blackness.

We see this again in the inescapably personal quality that criticism takes on, in the context of the memoir-cum-thesis. Characterizing Afro-pessimism's critics, in 'Hattie McDaniels is Dead,' Wilderson writes:

> Anyone who thinks nineteenth century [*sic*] slave narratives are reports on the past isn't paying attention. Such a person will experience the analysis of *Afropessimism* as though they are being mugged, rather than enlightened … they can't imagine a plantation in the here and now. (2020, 101)

Wilderson suggests here that a failure to accede to the core ontological argument of Afro-pessimism is necessarily a failure of emotional proclivity or prior disposition. Whereas in *Red, White, & Black*, the form necessitates an examination of the specifics of the *longue durée* of the 'terrible institution' in North America, in the memoir, that history becomes a question of 'imagin[ation].' While ostensibly pointing to the racism expressed in a reader's failure to comprehend the incontrovertible 'wake' (Sharpe 2016) of Atlantic slavery, born out as the heart of modern institutionalized anti-blackness, Wilderson turns from the specificity of social conditions and historical analysis to the partiality of personal experience and personal feeling. Participating in the ability to 'imagine' the continuous life of slavery becomes not just a prerequisite for understanding Afro-pessimism, but leads necessarily to its paradigmatic thesis: to being 'enlightened.' Imaginative sympathy is made to equate to radical theoretical and political understanding—a dynamic that risks reproducing the very sympathy model that Wilderson's major influences in his thinking on institutionality, such as Hartman, have placed at the centre of their critique. Importantly, this is a direct product of the memoirist's appeal to the authority of the personal—which then, in accordance with Wilderson's sense of the impossibility of such an appeal, collapses under its own weight.

Wilderson's sense of the impossibility of the black subject accessing 'institutionality' finds expression, ultimately, in his anti-coalitional politics, as in his declaration, in *Red, White & Black*, that Afro-pessimism seeks to 'shit on the inspiration of the personal pronoun *we*' (2010, 143). Glossing Wilderson's statement, Sexton writes that Afro-pessimism is not simply opposed to coalitions because they 'tend systematically to render supposed common interests as the concealed particular interests of the most powerful and privileged elements of the alliance'; but also because coalitions require 'a logic of identity and difference, of collective selves modelled on the construct of the modern individual' (Sexton 2016). Where, for Wilderson, the 'institutionality' of 'exploited and alienated' identities might find expression in coalition, in those identities' access to the 'construct of the modern individual,' blackness by contrast 'can only meditate, speak about, or act politically as a worker, as a postcolonial, or as a gay or female subject—but not as a Black object' (2010, 142). Blackness, in this scheme, is inevitably subsumed by the coalition. The autobiographical 'I,' in *Afropessimism*, is tasked then with 'articulating the ethical dilemmas of the Slave's position without … appeal to some shared proletarian or White feminist ensemble of questions' (2010, 143). Wilderson's solution to this is to appeal, instead, to the impossible authority of the 'I' constituted by ontological anti-blackness, an 'I' that, as I have suggested, cannot in Wilderson's schema be articulated, or relied upon for an 'indexical' authority.

The Undercommons' fugitive 'we'

From Wilderson's totally personal thesis, and concordant rejection of coalition, I want now to turn to the depersonalized, collectivist, and utopian strategies of Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's *The Undercommons* (2013). I read Moten and Harney's collaboratively-written text, and its successor, *All Incomplete* (2021), as wayward manifestoes *against* institutionality as represented in the university, and *for* a more collective, optimistic, and loving life of the social. The position of being *for* something does not, as Jack Halberstam points out in their introduction to *The Undercommons*, mean proposing a plan with neat political solutions; nor does it mean, in the context of my own argument, resolving the impossibility of 'indexicality' with autobiography. Rather, the book's exploration of 'fugitive planning and black study' is 'mostly about reaching out to find connection': it is about 'making common cause with the brokenness of being,' where brokenness 'is also blackness, … remains blackness, and will, despite all, remain broken because this book is not a prescription for repair' (Halberstam 2013, 5). I read *The Undercommons*, here,

as akin to the historical, Enlightenment-born manifesto in its declarative and impersonal qualities, its scathing critique of institutionality, and its call to the collective. But unlike that form, it is not premised on a political programme, a projected and absolute resolution, or indeed a neat logic of opposition. Instead, as I've suggested, *The Undercommons* takes a 'fugitive' and 'appositional' relationship to the manifesto form, which reflects its appositional orientation to institutionality—including institutions of authorship and authority.

In highlighting that *The Undercommons* is *for* a life of the social, I intend to both indicate the work's relation to the manifesto tradition, and to underline its removal from Wilderson's implied critique of collectivist politics as inevitably coalitional.[8] As Janet Lyon points out in her remarkable study of the modern history of the genre, the manifesto has—from the French Revolution and Chartism, to late-nineteenth-century anarchism, the Commune, and later Latin American revolutions—'functioned to circumvent ordinary parliamentary avenues of public redress, and to challenge the ostensible universalism that underpins modern democratic formulations' (Lyon 1999, 2). In order to do so, the manifesto has often fallen prey to a different kind of universalism. In marking the 'exclusions and deferrals experienced by those outside the "legitimate" bourgeois spheres of public exchange,' manifestoes construct an 'us' that claims the 'moral high ground of revolutionary idealism,' and a 'them' characterized by ideological tyranny and corruption (Lyon, 3). In speaking into being an unimpeachable collectivity of the overlooked and oppressed, the manifesto finds itself caught in a series of paradoxes, expressive of what Lyon describes as modernity's 'signal crisis': the question of 'how to negotiate between radical individualism and forms of representation' (Lyon, 5). In other words, the manifesto's core concerns—of an 'us' versus a 'them'—creates its distinctive contradictions. How can the manifesto best speak a collective into being, without succumbing to 'the ostensible universalism that underpins modern democratic formulations' of representation? How can it realize the human force and experience of the individual worker, artist, colonial subject, or feminist, in a necessarily depersonalized, collectively-voiced form? How can it best manipulate what Wilderson describes as the 'inspiration of the personal pronoun *we*,' without alienating or homogenizing the collective for which it claims to speak?

These questions are not resolved in the manifesto, but become its central tensions, riven into its form. As Lyon suggests, the manifesto's paradoxes are born out in a genre 'at once political and aesthetic, rational and irrational, angry and restrained, and always poised between the violence of the armed insurrection and the stasis of the written word' (Lyon, 5). The genre is forced to negotiate these contradictions, in part, because of the totality of its position: the absoluteness of its unilateral authority and 'resolute oppositionality' (Lyon, 9) to whatever institution is its object. This absoluteness is, paradoxically, its flexibility. Where the manifesto closes down possibility, removing any individual deviation from its vision of collectivity, it also invites speculation. In its opposition to institutionality, it sets itself up as another immovable institution, giving light to the qualities of the institutional in response. In shutting down debate, it stimulates conversation and argument, outlining the qualities of an 'ostensibl[y] universal' mode. In its totality, it becomes reflexively fabulative. And because it speaks with a unilateral 'we,'

[8] I mean, by this, not that Wilderson rejects all collectivist politics, but that in arguing as he does that coalitions exclude blackness on the basis of the black subject's *a priori* lack of access to 'alienation' as opposed to 'fungibility,' the implication is that blackness cannot be recognized in intersectional action, workers' struggles, feminist struggles, etc. Collectivities grouped around these goals—even if comprised only of black people—would for Wilderson require the black subject to falsely inhabit 'institutionality' in order to access 'alienation' in the ontological instance.

rather than a personal 'I,' its argument engages the collective—rousing collectivized response—so that in refusing 'dialogue or discussion' (Lyon, 9) it becomes material for general debate.

Moten and Harney's *The Undercommons*' adoption of an appositional relationship to the absoluteness of the manifesto illuminates and expands its willing contradictions. Their work expresses not the opposition of 'us' versus 'them,' but what they describe as a refusal to refuse. '[T]he maroons,'[9] they write, referring to undercommons workers, 'refuse to refuse professionalization, that is, to be against the university,' because 'to be against the university is always to recognize it and be recognized by it' (2013, 31). This refusal to refuse draws on what Hartman has explored as fugitive practice, and that speaks, in a later historical context, to her idea of 'waywardness.' In her 1997 classic, *Scenes of Subjection*, Hartman reads from Michel de Certeau in discussing how 'exploiting the limits of the permissible, creating transient zones of freedom, and reelaborating innocent amusements were central features of everyday practice' (Hartman 1997, 50) for enslaved people in nineteenth-century America. 'The tactics that comprise the everyday practices of the dominated,' she writes, 'have neither the means to secure a territory outside the space of domination nor the power to keep or maintain what is won in … necessarily incomplete victories' (50). Mapping such 'incomplete victories' for 'the dominated' in the wake of Atlantic slavery, Hartman returns to the contours of 'alternative operations' in the idea of waywardness in the early twentieth century.

> Wayward, related to the family of words: errant, fugitive, recalcitrant, anarchic, wilful, reckless, troublesome, riotous, tumultuous, rebellious and wild. … Waywardness articulates the paradox of cramped creation, the engagement of escape and confinement, flight and captivity. … It is a beautiful experiment in how-to-live … Waywardness is an ongoing exploration of *what might be*. (Hartman 2019, 227–228; emphasis in original)

Waywardness speaks to fugitivity's being, as Jarvis R. Givens puts it, 'anchored by the historical figure of the fugitive slave,' while also 'index[ing] a broader repertoire of secret acts and subterfuge in black life and culture' (Givens 2021, 14). In this sense, waywardness, like fugitivity, and like appositionality, 'holds in place both the realities of constraint and black Americans' constant straining against said confinement' (Givens, 15). As Hartman writes of the enslaved subject's 'necessarily incomplete victories': 'This acknowledgement implies neither resignation nor fatalism but a recognition of the enormity of the breach instituted by slavery' (Hartman 1997, 51).

For Moten and Harney, writing on, ostensibly, the university, but through the university on institutions of anti-black subjectification as born out in the *longue durée* of the 'terrible institution,' the idea of 'refus[ing] to refuse' captures an insistence on not recreating 'the space of domination' through opposition, but 'appositionally inhabiting' instead a wayward, sidelong, fugitive, and recalcitrant underground. The orientation of *The Undercommons* towards institutions of subjectification is realized in its wayward relationship to the manifesto: its depersonalized voice enabling the text to sidestep the bind of representation; to subvert 'recognition' by the university; and so to operate in what Moten identifies as the capacity of the subject who, 'insofar as they are not subjects are also not, in the interminable analysis, "death

[9] Moten and Harney use 'maroons' with reference to communities of fugitive slaves (*OED*: n.2; adj.2), the act of becoming fugitive (v.4), and the sense of being 'marooned' or abandoned on an island (v.2), in describing the undercommons operative and the act of 'black study.' *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, 'maroon' (Oxford University Press, March 2022).

bound"' (Moten 2018, 194). As we have seen, Wilderson's memoir absorbs debate: criticism constitutes either a failure to be 'enlightened,' or is expressive of the text's successes in indexing 'that which exceeds narration'; and in joining his argument to personal experience, to doubt Wilderson's thesis comes to mean doubting the man. Moten and Harney's depersonalized and 'fugitive' exploration of 'black study,' by contrast, sidesteps the forms of oppositional critique Moten and Harney associate with the university, and with systematized racist-capitalist-imperialist power represented in institutions of higher education and associated generic forms. Reading *Afropessimism* and *The Undercommons* through and against the manifesto, then, illuminates many of the core contradictions that dog a written redress to institutionality—and therefore many of the distinctions between Wilderson's, and Moten and Harney's, sense of the limitations and possibilities of expressing Afro-pessimism within the institutionalized space 'of cramped creation.'

On the first page of *The Undercommons*, Moten and Harney signal their sidelong relationship to the absoluteness of the manifesto, and to totalizing political constructions more broadly.

> Our task is the self-defense of the surround in the face of repeated, targeted dispossessions through the settler's armed incursion. And while acquisitive violence occasions this self-defense, it is recourse to self-possession in the face of dispossession (recourse, in other words, to politics) that represents the real danger. Politics is an ongoing attack on the common—the general and generative antagonism—from within the surround. (2013, 17)

Here, the oppositional politics of 'us' and 'them' is figured through the opposition of the 'surround' to the isolated protection of the colonial settlement.[10] The commons is aligned with the 'surround': the place of the people, cut off by high walls from the seat of power. Yet rather than reinforce that demarcation, Moten and Harney shift our attention to within the 'surround.' The 'real danger,' they write, is after all not the armed incursions with which the settlement, the institution, or the locus of representational power penetrate the commons, but the recourse that the commons might readily reach for: self-possession, individualization, and 'politics,' which is a sickness that comes from within the commons itself. Politics constitutes a dangerous individualizing of the struggle which acts within and necessarily against the 'general and generative antagonism' of the collective. It is the creeping, solution-based thinking that dilutes radicalism, and is born directly of individualism being figured in antagonism with representational power.

Politics here maps onto what Lyon sees as the signal crisis of modernity—or onto the crisis that occasions the contradictions of the manifesto. Moten and Harney's solution to the problem of politics is, crucially, not to double down on oppositional binaries—neither 'us' versus 'them,' nor 'us' versus the 'them' within the surround—but to shift the grounds of debate. They redirect us from the 'commons' towards the 'undercommons,' thereby refusing the reinforce the boundaries set out by the institution, in this case represented by the colonial settlement. The undercommons, unlike the 'commons,' is not plagued by the issue of politics, because it is removed from the binarism of inside and out. Instead, the undercommons exists against but

[10] This passage references Frantz Fanon's articulation of colonial and native 'zones': 'The zone where the native lives is not complementary to the zone inhabited by the settler. The two zones are opposed, but not in the service of higher unity.' Fanon 1963, 38. Wilderson discusses Fanon's articulation directly in *Red, White & Black*, 79–80.

always within the institution: it is underneath and subversive of the illimitable spaces of power. By refusing to position the commons in neat, and neatly homogenized antagonism to the totality of power, Moten and Harney then refuse the 'signal crisis' of modernity, historically encountered by the manifesto: the question of representation versus individualism.

The undercommons' subversive relation to representation, as to individualism, is reflected in Moten and Harney's impersonal but collaborative form. Where Wilderson performs a paradigmatic theory through the autobiographical 'I,' Moten and Harney eschew the responsibilities and political dangers of representation through their discursive but depersonalized collective voice. 'An abdication of political responsibility?' They write. 'OK. Whatever. We're just anti-politically romantic about actually existing social life. … We cannot represent ourselves. We can't be represented' (2013, 20). The position of being 'anti-politically romantic' recalls Moten's argument, which I quoted earlier, that 'analytic precision' is 'a function of such fancy' as believing that 'blackness could be loved': if 'black life is lived in political death,' to the effect that 'the subject,' because they are politically 'not subjects' are also not then '"death bound",' then this method of romantic anti-politics constitutes a loving inhabitation of what is possible outside or underneath the institutions that Moten and Harney understand as historically circumscribing subjectivity. The oppositionality of being 'anti-political' is challenged or complicated by the form in which it is stated. 'We aren't responsible for politics,' they write: a move that both refuses the problem of representation, and refutes the authority of their own voice, which has just defined 'politics' and foregrounded its significance. Such manoeuvres recur across the text, with Moten and Harney conjuring a term and then, rather than opposing it, simply sidestepping. In doing so, they create an appositional relationship to the institutions and concepts that they are representing, including that of the manifesto. Coming up beneath the manifesto's binary contradictions, Moten and Harney embrace the dialectical operation of unresolved tensions. Their interrogation centres on the unrepresentable and nonetheless declarative 'we': 'We cannot represent ourselves,' they write. 'We can't be represented' (2013, 20).

Wilderson's memoir has, for critics like McCarthy, opened itself to the charge of prioritizing autobiographical reflection, emotional response, and the 'interstices and banal marginalia of academic life' (McCarthy 2020) over and above the specifics of anti-racist struggles contemporary to its publication. Moten and Harney's appositional 'we,' meanwhile, dodges that risk of navel-gazing, in that it turns away from the personal and towards a more general meditation on the possibilities for social revolt within and against the institution. In their presentation of the black everywoman figure of the undercommons intellectual, for instance, they explore, without wholly representing, modes of subverting the progress narrative of institutionality, and the time and space of 'enlightenment.'

> She disappears into the underground, the downlow low-down maroon community of the university, into the *undercommons of enlightenment*, where the work gets done, where the work gets subverted, where the revolution is still black, still strong. (2013, 26; emphasis in original)

In the underground, the 'downlow low-down' community beneath the university, subversive teaching—or what Moten and Harney call 'the beyond of teaching' (27)—runs counter to the progress narrative of the institution. Where Wilderson depicts a sympathetic disposition as not only a route into Afro-pessimist thinking, but a starting point that predicts that eventuality, Moten and Harney's undercommons escapes the overground site, with its focus on progress and resolution: towards, for instance, 'the research post with no teaching'; a progress that entails

succumbing to 'recognition' and therefore circumscription by the institution. Against the movement towards institutionalization, the undercommons subverts 'enlightenment' through a programme of 'fugitive planning & black study,' which works beyond or (sometimes literally) 'under' the institution's impetus towards confinement.[11] Enlightenment, here, is refigured as not the revelatory and absolute embrace of a total thesis, but a way of occupying the underground. Upending the illuminating image of enlightenment—of stepping into the sun—the 'undercommons of enlightenment' suggests an inverted, subterranean relationship to 'the work' of knowledge production. Rather than refusing the terms of the institution, Moten and Harney adopt and rework ideas of teaching, labor, and study, turning the institution's forms and ideas against it from within.

Conclusions: *All Incomplete*

To write of Afro-pessimism in an academic article is, inevitably, to risk not only reproducing many of the structures that Wilderson, Moten, and Harney are critiquing, but also to risk entirely missing the heart of Afro-pessimism's claims. When Wilderson is faced, in the chapter 'Punishment Park,' with a 'dust up' at an academic conference, in which a room of academics responds emotionally to his paper on Peter Watkins' film of the same name, he tells the assembled group: 'I'm just a parasite on the resources that I need to do work on behalf of Black liberation.' He finishes his thought in narration rather than aloud, turning from the room to what appears, now, to be an alternatively public discourse with the addressed reader: 'Just as the world has always been a parasite on me in pursuit of its legibility and presence' (2020, 187).

I have argued that *Afropessimism*, in its titular articulation in a memoir, relies on recourse to a closed and circular, personal and inevitably failed authority. In the context of Wilderson's statement, though, such an argument might seem to overlook the intently outwardly-facing orientation of *Afropessimism*: Wilderson's apparent preference for the partiality of the personal, as against critical debate; and for the totality of an expansive, paradigmatic thesis, as against the critical and historical rigors of theory in and around academic institutions. To write about the work is to risk participating in a critical tendency, as Wilderson warns, to 'fortify and extend the interlocutory life of widely accepted political common sense' (2008, 36) as well as to further, as Sexton adds, 'its theoretical underpinnings' (Sexton 2012).

Yet implied in Wilderson's statement above, that he is 'a parasite on the resources' needed to work towards 'Black liberation,' is also the suggestion that his personal mode is primarily productive and active, contributing to real political change. He implies that in constructing a partial-total polarity at the centre of his memoir-cum-thesis, he is working more insistently 'on behalf of Black liberation' than a more analytically precise (to recall Moten's phrasing) alternative. I have no desire to adjudicate that claim, even if it were possible to measure the degree of direct political action resulting from the diffuse and varied reception of Afro-pessimism in undergraduate classrooms and high school debate halls, on blogs and on social media. Rather, I hope to suggest that the personal as a mode of critique and of theorizing, when such work is

[11] As Jarvis R. Givens has illustrated: 'Critical parts of black education had always taken place underground— sometimes *under a desk,* as in the case of Tessie McGee's use of Woodson's textbook; or *under a hat,* as was the case for the enslaved Richard Parker of Virginia, who kept his copy of the *Webster Blueback Speller* on his head, under a hat, and hidden from public view; or literally *under the earth,* as Mandy Jones recalled of the pit schools in the woods surrounding the Mississippi plantation on which she was enslaved. Orbiting at the margins of the American School has always been a veiled black educational world, where fugitive pedagogy was a critical part of content and form' (Givens 2021, 15).

what is being undertaken, here lends itself to a criticism that centres on impossibility and failure. Whether that failure leads to revelations outside of the text is open to debate. But it is worth noting, I think, that such revelation is predicated on the internal collapse of the text's argument.

Moten and Harney's work offers a different way in, or under. As the manifesto itself shows, no work can be entirely stripped of the personal: the most impersonal manifestoes rouse personal response in their deflections of individuality; and besides, far more manifestoes than that are intensely reflective of their writers, or the interpersonal dynamics of a movement or group. In thinking, however, toward both 'analytical precision' and the 'romance' and 'love' of radical sociality, it is significant that Moten and Harney opt for the depersonalized 'we.' That 'we' allows them to approach the difficulties of representation—whether representation of their own argument, or of the non-subject that lies beneath and against 'politics' and institutions—waywardly and sidelong. In doing, they point us toward the wider possibilities of not just appositional thinking, but of impersonal criticism. The impersonal, in their hands, is not just a route to subverting the institution of the manifesto and its totalised 'we'; it is also a means of subverting and sidestepping, without entirely rubbishing, the authority of the 'I.' Is the impersonal, then, a way in which we can speak not against but crookedly to the authority claims of the first-person singular? Is a fugitive 'we' a means by which we can speak not in vain rejection or refusal of the personal, but of a more capacious and collective alternative? What new horizons of possibility for critique might that deixis open, within and below the illimitable forms of institutionality? What might we do with a 'we' that refuses to refuse to fail?

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