Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge

Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear Word

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> You should raise your soul to the following idea: we are certain, absolutely certain of what we are saying (without this being certainty in the slightest, in the sense that you habitually understand it), and at the same time, at the same instant, completely deprived of all security...
> —Jean-François Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*

[1] Afro-Pessimism is a contemporary phenomenon, some may even scoff that it is trendy, but its political and intellectual evolution is considerably longer and its ethical bearings much broader than one might expect, and there is work yet to be done regarding a genealogy of its orientation and sensibility. No individual or collective effort, of course, springs forth whole cloth and yet the controversy that has accompanied the emergence of this discourse over the better part of the past decade has suffered greatly from a refusal—on the part of most critics and too many proponents as well—to follow the old Jamesonian edict to historicize the theoretical aim and object (Herman 2003). I only note the problem here, as the development of proper context would require far more space than available at present. The vacuum-packed controversy has been surprisingly pointed as a result, and it is easy to miss the true significance thereof between the epiphanic tone of recent acquaintance and the acrimony of recurrent denunciation.

[2] Some part of the pace and extent of debate about Afro-Pessimism to date is no doubt due to the proliferation of social media platforms in the same moment when the professoriate groans under the intensified administrative command to turn research into output with eventual market value (including the market value of "civic engagement"); the subsequent migration of much previously refereed scholarly commentary to these less (or differently) regulated forums in search of greater and faster measurable impact and, for better or worse, readership beyond the ken of advanced higher education; and the increased if uneven porosity of deliberations among activists, artists, educators, journalists, non-profit workers, researchers, etc. afforded by the digitization of print culture and the growing access to recordings of conference panels, public lectures, radio interviews, and the like. It is no exaggeration to say that, as a result of this convergence of global economic restructuring and technological development, there are thousands of online conversations underway across Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Europe, especially among students and young scholars, adjudicating the relative merits of Afro-Pessimism.

[3] But this much could be said about any number of topical discussions featured anywhere from chat

rooms and microblogs to virtual meetings and TED talks. What accounts for the particular critical purchase and affective resonance of what I called elsewhere "a highly technical dispute in a small corner of the American academy" has more likely to do with a growing understanding of the common (which is not to say shared, much less identical) political conditions of diverse black life-worlds with respect to claims and practices of freedom. That common sense of things is bound to a terrible and terrifying acknowledgement of not only the tragic material and symbolic continuities everywhere revealed by the history of post-emancipation societies throughout the Diaspora, but also, more fundamentally, the uncontainable categorical sprawl of the epochal transformation that names the emergence of racial slavery as such. In this, the postulate of a free black - whether non-slave or former-slave - would appear as oxymoron. None of which should stop anyone from believing its true, that being the crux. If Afro-Pessimism has captured the imagination of certain black radical formations and suggested a critical idiom, provoking a basic rethinking among more than a few of their non-black counterparts by the way, it has also, and maybe for the same reasons, struck a nerve among others, all along the color line, who fear that open-minded engagement involves forsaking some of the most hard-earned lessons of the last generation.

[4] The reticence expressed about the force and signification of Afro-Pessimism, which in some quarters has bloomed into open if largely uninformed resistance, has taken on the logic of preemptive strike. Though we have little engagement in print thus far, due in part to the recentness of the published literature, certain discussions are nonetheless afoot on the left "devoted to blaming pessimism for whatever crisis is thought to occupy us at the moment." Afro-Pessimism, in this case and on this count, is thought to be, in no particular order: a negative appraisal of the capabilities of black peoples, associating blackness with lack rather than tracing the machinations through which the association is drawn and enforced, even in the black psyche, across the *longue durée*; a myopic denial of overlapping and ongoing histories of struggle and a fatal misunderstanding of the operational dynamics of power, its general economy or micro-physics, reifying what should be historicized en route to analysis; a retrograde and isolationist nationalism, a masculinist and heteronormative enterprise, a destructive and sectarian ultra-leftism, and a chauvinist American exceptionalism; a reductive and morbid fixation on the depredations of slavery that superimposes the figure of the slave as an anachronism onto ostensibly post-slavery societies, and so on.

[5] The last assertion, which actually links together all of the others, evades the nagging burden of proof of abolition and, moreover, fails to acknowledge that one can account for historically varying instances of anti-blackness while maintaining the claim that slavery is here and now. Most telling though is the leitmotif of *offense*, and the felt need among critics to defend themselves, their work, their principles and their politics against the perceived threat. In place of thoughtful commentary, we have distancing and disavowal. The grand pronouncement is offered, generally, without the impediment of sustained reading or attempted dialogue, let alone careful study of the relevant literature. The entire undertaking, the *movement* of thought it pursues, is apprehended instead as its lowest common denominator, indicted by proxy, and tried *in absentia* as caricature.[1]

[6] Astonishingly, all of this refuses to countenance the rhetorical dimensions of the discourse of Afro-Pessimism (despite the minor detail that its principal author is a noted creative writer and its first major statement is found in an award-winning literary work of memoir) and 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.[2] Afro-Pessimism is thus not against the politics of coalition simply because coalitions tend systematically to render supposed common interests as the concealed particular interests of the most powerful and privileged elements of the alliance. Foremost, Afro-Pessimism it seeks, in Wilderson's parlance, "to shit on the inspiration of the personal pronoun *we*" (143) because coalitions require a logic of identity and difference, of collective selves modeled on the construct of the modern individual, an entity whose coherence is purchased at the expense of whatever is cast off by definition. The subject of politics is essentially dividual and there is in effect always another intervention to be made on behalf of some aspect of the group excluded in the name of the proper.[3] The ever-expansive inclusionary gesture must thus be displaced by another more radical approach: an ethics of the real, a politics of the imperative, engaged in its interminably downward movement. This daunting task entails making necessity out of virtue, as it were, willing the *need* for the black radical imagination and not just its revisable demand. If certain scholars whose work has been instructive or inspirational for Afro-Pessimism miss this point too, it may have something to do with the search for a method of gaining agency that, while rightly suspending the assumption of an *a priori* agent, nonetheless rushes past the hidden structure of violence that underwrites so many violent acts, whether spectacular or mundane.

[7] Such may provide reassurance for those informed by the basic assumptions and animated by the *esprit de corps* of the theoretical orientations and conceptual frames in question, but it cannot be mistaken for an adequate defense of a disposition. We would do well, on this score, to heed Joshua Dienstag's rather germane suggestion in *Pessimism: Philosophy, Ethic, Spirit* that "some thought should be given to why this word functions so well as a gesture of dismissal" and, likewise, to "the routine use of 'pessimist' and its cognates as a casual intellectual put-down" (Dienstag 2006: x). For present purposes, Afro-Pessimism as epithet would be the obverse of the unasked question: *Why has this discourse found its articulation now?* Rather than simply motivating speculation about the psychological states and political commitments of theorists, commentators, students, advocates or adherents; the intervention and implications of Afro-Pessimism, however they are adjudged, "need to be addressed at the theoretical level at which they arose" (Dienstag 2001: 924). Dienstag writes further:

> Critics have often mistaken a depiction of the world for a *choice* about our future, as if [scholars] had rejoiced at the decline or decay they described. [...] Yet, despite the abuse they attract pessimists keep appearing—and this should not be surprising since the world keeps delivering bad news. Instead of blaming pessimism, perhaps, we can learn from it. Rather than hiding from the ugliness of the world, perhaps we can discover how best to withstand it (Dienstag 2006: x).[4]

[8] *As if* they rejoiced about the wrong things and, by contrast, failed to rejoice about the right ones. Why not turn this (moralistic) accusation into (political-intellectual) opportunity? Indeed, the moniker "Afro-

Pessimism" emerges at a certain inaugural moment as the embrace of a critical outlook deemed, upon review, to be disappointing or discouraging to an ostensibly progressive, even modernist anti-racism (Hartman 2003). *Détournement*. Resignification. A simple enough term for withstanding the ugliness of the world—and learning from it—might be *suffering* and Afro-Pessimism is, among other things, an attempt to formulate an account of such suffering, to establish the rules of its grammar, "to think again about the position of the ex-slave," as Bryan Wagner puts it in his *Disturbing the Peace*, "without recourse to the consolation of transcendence" (Wagner 2009: 2). The difficulty has to do with the special force that the consolation of transcendence—be it cultural, economic, geographical, historical, political, psychological, sexual, social or symbolic—brings to bear on the activity of thinking, no less of speaking and writing, about those whose transcendence is foreclosed in and for the modern world.

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[9] In honor of the twentieth anniversary of her groundbreaking 1987 *Diacritics* essay, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," Hortense Spillers was interviewed collectively by Shirley Eversley, Farah Jasmine Griffin, Saidiya Hartman, and Jennifer Morgan for a special issue of The Feminist Press journal *Women's Studies Quarterly*. On that occasion, Spillers reflected on her pivotal intervention and the proximate series of articles—"Interstices," "Notes on an Alternative Model," "'The Permanent Obliquity of an In(pha)llibly Straight'":

> They all belong to that decade when we [black feminist scholars] were searching for a vocabulary and didn't find one that was immediately available. The available discourses all seemed to come out of experiences that somehow, when they got to me, did a detour. [Laughter.] Or the language broke down. Or it could not speak in theoretical terms. [...] And so my anxiety was finding a way to actually be in battle. To actually go to war with a whole repertoire of violent behavior that was always performed in a very genteel way (301).

[10] There are other moments in the interview where Spillers employs martial language to describe her vocation. For instance: "The need to confront psychological violence, epistemic violence, intellectual violence is really powerful. 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe' was about bolstering myself, living to fight another day. I became very good at being a marksman and ducking" (ibid). Among other points that Spillers attempts to make and maintain in this venue, this combative phrasing would seem to underline a central point of commentary for the entire event and perhaps her entire discourse: "In black culture a narrative of antagonism is inscribed in its memory" (306).

[11] For Spillers, that narrative is fragile and endangered, but also deeply grafted and irreducible. Whatever else there may be in black culture or cultures—in the most capacious, differentiated, global sense—a narrative of *antagonism* is inscribed there, powerfully and profoundly. And yet, as Spillers also demonstrates, that narrative is inscribed obliquely or obscurely, even and perhaps especially when addressing itself to intramural affairs, owing perhaps to an incommensurability between antagonism and narrative form itself. How, then, to derive a discourse from an engagement with and against the experience that Spillers indicates and inhabits in the historic instance? How to sustain the language and, moreover, make it speak *in theoretical terms*? How to theorize for battle, to go to war in theory, to fight

without experiencing a breakdown or detour in language? How to stay within the anxiety of antagonism (and the narrative crisis it precipitates), to be guided by it, and, again, even to will it?[5]

[12] "Blacks articulate and ruminate on these ensembles of questions, in hushed tones, in back rooms, quietly, alone, or sometimes only in our dreams" (Wilderson 2010: 140). So writes Frank B. Wilderson, III midway through *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*, the signal articulation of Afro-Pessimism, a text that considers some of the less immediate implications of Spillers' intervention and elaborates them with respect to a constellation of black thinkers viewed in parallax. Taken as a point of departure, we might begin to wonder aloud: What is Afro-Pessimism, in the first or final determination? What is involved in thinking about it, thinking with it or through it or against it, thinking its limit and its potential, thinking before it or beyond it or under its heading? Is it a description of existing practical-theoretical activity, or does it name an aspiration, a call or demand, or a wish? Is it a portmanteau term or a neologism? Are we better served to think about the intellectual convergence it names as something like *a contribution to the critique of political ontology*?[6] "Rather than celebrate Blackness as a cultural identity," writes Wilderson, "Afro-Pessimism theorizes it as a *position* of accumulation and fungibility; that is, as condition—or relation—of ontological death." Further, and due to this insight, "the Afro-pessimists are theorists of Black positionality who share Fanon's insistence that, though Blacks are indeed sentient beings, the structure of the entire world's semantic field...is structured by anti-Black solidarity" (58).

[13] There are over sixty references to Fanon in *Red, White and Black*, suggesting that, in an important way, Afro-Pessimism entails a certain motivated reading or return to Fanon, an attention to Fanon the theorist of racial slavery and "negrophobia" more so than Fanon the theorist of metropolitan colonialism. Crucially, this is not, as Jaye Austin Williams (2013) would have it, a statement about an inherent black *incapability*, but rather about an imposed black *incapacity*. Better put, it is about the general incapacity, which is not to say the ultimate incapability, of a world "structured by anti-Black solidarity" to appreciate the sentience, much less the sapience, of those marked by racial blackness, including most especially African-derived people. The capability for such appreciation may well be universal (though we have no good reason to suppose it), but black folks, by way of a protracted labor of love beset by complications inside and out, undoubtedly enjoy a privileged relationship to it. So, if we hear talk about "the state of virtual non-communication within official culture" (Wilderson 2010: 64), it is important to note that warrant for use of the term "virtual" is not undermined by exceptions to the rule. In a global semantic field structured by anti-black solidarity, it stands to reasons that the potential energy of a black, or blackened, position holds out a singularly transformative possibility, an energy generated by virtue of its relation to others in a field of force.

[14] Afro-Pessimism, by this route, critically *supplements* the paradigm of critical ethnic studies in at least two ways: First, by moving conceptually from the empirical to the structural or, more precisely, from the experiential to the political ontological, especially insofar as the question of differential racialization—or the complexity of racial hierarchy—makes recourse to a comparative history and social science. Second, by reframing racism as a relation grounded in anti-blackness rather than white supremacy, or, more

precisely, by pushing through the conceptual framework of racism altogether toward an apprehension of the world-historical transformation entailed in the emergence of racial slavery. The color line, as it were, operates here as the division of the world into regions of blackness and non-blackness, or slavery contrasted to forms of freedom including the possessive investment in whiteness, rather than whiteness and non-whiteness, or freedom as the possessive investment in whiteness contrasted with forms of unfreedom defined by its relative absence or prohibition.[7] In a related move, Afro-Pessimism seeks to decenter, without diminishing, the analysis of political economy by discerning the libidinal economy that underwrites and sutures its dynamics. And so, in its formulation of power, and particularly of the nature and role of violence, Afro-Pessimism does not only describe the operations of systems, structures and institutions, but also, and perhaps more importantly, the fantasies of murderous hatred and unlimited destruction, of sexual consumption and social availability that animate the realization of such violence. It is an analysis, in other words, of how anti-black fantasies attain objective value in the political and economic life of society and in the psychic life of culture as well. Wilderson ponders, with respect to the medium and institution of cinema: "Can film tell the story of a sentient being whose story can be neither recognized nor incorporated into Human civil society" (96)? We may ask too, can art, literature, music, theater, or, for that matter, theory?

[15] Afro-Pessimism is, in the words of Christina Sharpe, an attempt "to build a language that, despite the rewards and enticements to do otherwise, refuses to refuse blackness, that embraces 'without pathos' that which is constructed and defined as pathology.... It is work that insistently speaks what is being constituted as the unspeakable and enacts an ethical embrace of what is constituted as (affirmatively) unembraceable." That is to say, Afro-Pessimism is both an epistemological and an ethical project, and these two tributaries of thought converge in the carefully navigated stream of consciousness whose abstraction enables a *theorem* of political ontology deduced or derived from the cutting edge of black studies: that infinitely narrowing margin of practical-theoretical activity that provides us with weapons. Wilderson once more:

> If, when caught between the pincers of the imperative to meditate on Black dispossession and Black political agency, we do not dissemble, but instead allow our minds to reflect on the murderous ontology of...slavery's gratuitous violence—seven hundred years ago, five hundred years ago, two hundred years ago, last year, and today, then maybe, just maybe, *we will be able to think Blackness and agency together in an ethical manner* (143, emphasis added).

[16] There is no rejection of the notion of agency in advance, but rather an endeavor to think rigorously about its conditions of possibility. The procedure involves the abstraction of a conceptual framework regarding structural positionality, a methodology regarding paradigmatic analysis, and a structure of feeling regarding the politics of antagonism that, taken together, remain implicit in the work of various luminaries of black studies but whose full effects only become available when rendered explicit and approached from another angle or raised to another level of theorization. That is the enabled task and, by and large, it still remains before us now. In a sense, Afro-Pessimism is not an intervention so much as it is a reading, or meta-commentary, on what we seem to do with, or how we relate to, what black creative intellectuals continue to generate without being able to bring fully into account. It is a reading of

what is gained and lost in the attempt—the *impulse*—to delineate the spatial and temporal borders of anti-blackness, to delimit the "bad news" of black life, to fix its precise scope and scale, to find an edge beyond or before which true living unfolds. It is an attempt to resist that centrifugal force that overwhelms us like fear or exhausts us like fatigue.[8]

[17] And what of the so-called Afro-Pessimists? If they are, as Wilderson puts it, "nothing as ostentatious as a school of thought," can they be described, as I have suggested elsewhere, as a motley crew? Or is even that designation a stretch, since the notion of a crew suggests the possibility for the formation of bonds of an impossible collective identity? Perhaps we should speak then, simply, of a bunch, or even a gathering of those whose *gathering* is what matters, like the gathering of momentum or the gathering of a storm. What I hear in the gathering discourse is a complex meditation on what Caribbean poet M. NourbeSe Philip (2005) calls "the matrix" of "modern capitalist society," namely, "the four hundred year [plus!] history of slavery, which destroyed so much in African life" (8). That history and that destruction—both of which, it bears repeating, are ongoing—are very much at the center of our thinking, as are the questions regarding how one might inhabit that history and that destruction. There is an *ars vita* here, maybe the truest one, because it emerges from within a global catastrophe so total that the creation or production of a black poetry, a black art, a stylization of the black body, a black sense of place cannot but be invented wholesale, which is to say made or devised without recourse to a reliable memory or tradition, a law or language or land, a body or kinship or community—no line to follow. So, too, without a future promising anything different or, rather, better.

[18] The meditation, singular and collective, works out from the space of the black body and its surround and it wonders aloud about how blackness might be thought, which is also to say presented and represented, in an anti-black world that shapes and structures every aspect of black existence, except—or including—whatever escapes. Fugitivity is not freedom, or not yet. And, given the especially troubled history of black women's claims to mobility and movement (Davies 1994, McKittrick 2006), this is in an important sense a meditation issuing from and about the black female body in particular, a meditation that does not so much reiterate an analysis of gender difference and its politics as it poses the question of the very possibility of engendering and embodiment—a desire for formulation in the most profound sense. What might a black girl or woman do with her own body, or with her child or kin, or in her dwelling, on the printed page, in song, in flight? And how might this thinking out from the problematic of black feminism ramify upon the open range of black sexual practice and gender performance? How to remark what is always already marked? This is, in other words, a meditation on possibility of the first order. It may be that the remedy to dispossession lies not in the spirit of claiming or reclaiming possession but in the paradox of an even greater and willed dispossession. But how, under constant assault, to defend what cannot be possessed?

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[19] Let us consider comments offered by Tamura Lomax, a founding editor of *The Feminist Wire*, in a recent interview for The *Chronicle of Higher Education*, entitled, "Scholars and Activists Speak Out About

Why 'Black Life Matters'." There, Lomax avers that we live in a moment "where white safety equals black murder, where black resistance is read as black terror, where black blood caulks the grounds on which we walk." Her response to such conditions is as follows: "My...goal as a black feminist mother of two teenage sons, and for every mother and father who's lost, or fears losing, a child, is that we *change the narrative*, that we foreground *both* black rage and black hope" (Mangan 2015, emphasis added). It is suggested that one can see readily the need to foreground black rage, but we must ask after the nature of an equally pressing emphasis on black hope. What would one hope for in a scenario where one's murder is required for others' peace of mind? More fundamentally, the effects of this social violence against oneself hold together the very basis of the status quo, shoring up the cracks in its foundation, bolstering the platform of its reproduction. Not for nothing, the earliest forms of caulking were used to make watertight the seams of wooden boats. And we know something of the ways that black blood was pressed into service for such maritime adventure.

[20] There are several valences to this goal and we might read "rage" and "hope" here in gendered terms, as Lomax's double emphasis is intertextually linked to the contemporaneous intervention on the "Black Lives Matter" movement and its corresponding social media meme. The African American Policy Forum's report and media campaign, *#SayHerName: Resisting Police Brutality Against Black Women*, encapsulates a robust and ongoing critical rejoinder to the singular focus on black male victims of police violence.[9] The AAPF website maintains:

> #SayHerName gathers stories of Black women who have been killed by police and who have experienced gender-specific forms of police violence, provides some analytical frames for understanding their experiences, and broadens dominant conceptions of who experiences state violence and what it looks like.

[21] Though #SayHerName is framed as a compliment to #BlackLivesMatter, it also bears the trace of a corrective. Strange too since the latter is, from its inception, a queer feminist proposition *at least*. #BLM would not seem to require modification or specification or expansion against a presumptively male and heterosexual victim of anti-black violence precisely because it *is* that insistent modification and specification and expansion, the collective enunciation of a tradition of black queer feminist activist intervention and leadership dating back most immediately to the international demonstrations following the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of Trayvon Martin in the summer of 2013. Such leadership— radically democratic in form and content—has only continued and grown since that time (Pierre-Louis 2015). The phrase was coined by Patrisse Cullors (Founding Executive Director of Dignity and Power Now), Alicia Garza (Special Projects Director of the National Domestic Workers Alliance), and Opal Tometi (Executive Director of Black Alliance for Just Immigration) in order to challenge expressly "the narrative out there about black men being the only ones...impacted by state violence" and to assert, likewise, that when "we're talking about Black Lives Matter, we're talking about *all* black lives" (Smith 2014, emphasis added): Jordan Davis *and* Renisha McBride *and* Eric Garner *and* Aiyana Stanley-Jones *and* Sean Bell *and* CeCe McDonald *and* Jonathan Ferrell *and* Rekia Boyd *and* Tanisha Anderson *and* Yvette Smith *and* Miriam Carey *and* Shelly Frey *and* Malissa Williams *and* Shereese Francis *and* Tarika Wilson *and*....

[22] How, then, did a black radical political-intellectual project generated largely by the labor of black queer women and centrally by the discourse of black feminist and queer theory become associated, again and still, with a masculinist and heteronormative popular reception? How, moreover, to forge a different public understanding of its aims and objectives, its principal terms and concepts, and its actual constituency? In short, why is the hashtag and slogan - Black Lives Matter - not sufficient to mark the intervention and announcement of Cullers, Garza and Tometi? Why is *their* decision to employ that phrase deliberately, even provocatively, and to claim the fullness of the meaning of *unspecified* black lives, supplemented (supplanted?) by the introduction of a novel rallying cry? Does it not make an *enunciative* difference when black queer women invoke the particular universal of their movement?

> Our hope is that this document will honor the intention of the #BlackLivesMatter movement to lift up the intrinsic value of *all* Black lives by serving as a resource to answer the increasingly persistent call for attention to the Black women killed by police. This document offers preliminary information about the police killings of Black women that have not galvanized national attention or driven our analysis. The information presented here is organized around two themes. First, we seek to highlight the fact that many killings of Black women could be understood within the existing frames surrounding racial profiling and use of lethal force. The solution to their absence is not complex; Black women can be lifted up across the movement through a collective commitment to see what is in plain sight. Second, we present cases that highlight the forms of police violence against Black women that are invisible within the current focus on police killings. The challenge here is to expand the existing frames so that this violence is legible to activists, policymakers and the media (AAPF et al 2015: 3).

[23] Is it only the intention of #BLM and not the accomplishment? But then, is it possible to lift up the intrinsic value of *any* black lives, let alone *all*? Perhaps we cannot remedy the trouble with the latter *adequately* and build, as we must, "a gender inclusive movement to end state violence" unless we can address the problem with the former. The late Lindon Barrett, one of the last generation's most incisive theorists of gender and sexuality in the field of black studies, did not mince words when opening an article on the murder of high-profile black men with this striking line: "The dead body is one thing; the dead black body another" (Barrett 1999: 306). For Barrett, because racial blackness is "so fully defined by and within desire," the dead black body cannot assume its own death as "a site obdurately outside all desire." Rather, because the defining desirability of racial blackness "demands regulation, also by definition," the inert figure of the dead black body "has a highly useful social valence...a highly consequential social production" that is both profitable and subjectivizing for that collectivity "allowed to take public form in collective recognition and negotiation of the crisis" (ibid). The overriding question is, once more: "how do we create a world where black lives matter," to everyone or, rather, to everyone else as well? What economies—political, libidinal, symbolic—must be destroyed or negated, what others forged or affirmed?

[24] In the visual archive of the movement for black lives, I have found myself returning to an image I want to call "lucifer's nocturne." Photographer Stephen Lam captured the image for the *Reuters* international news agency during a November 2014 protest in Oakland, CA following the grand jury decision not to indict Officer Darren Wilson for the murder of Mike Brown in Ferguson, Missouri earlier that year.

Although the image presents what might be taken as a cliché of young black male defiance—the prototypical agent of protest is the prototypical target of state violence, betraying a recto/verso oscillation between threat and vulnerability—it displays several elements that cut against the grain. On the one hand, we have some familiar dramatic elements: within the nighttime setting, the bright white ring of fire establishing the border of the depth of field and forming a semi-circle behind the photograph's central figure, blurred flames rising overhead; the illuminated façade of buildings reflecting the soft orange incandescence in the background, punctuated by concentrated bursts of halogen streetlight; the vague outline of a crowd, of protesters or police or both we cannot discern. There is, as well, the acute juxtaposition of the ubiquitous political slogan, "Black Lives Matter," carefully hand-brushed in black paint on a white mounted placard and the anonymous graffiti, hastily written with black spray paint on the inside panel of the open lid of a nearby dumpster, exhorting the passing reader to "Kill Cops." One cannot help but notice that were the dumpster closed properly, the latter injunction would remain concealed amidst things thrown away and discarded by society. In this scene, however, the lid seems almost thrown or blown open by some incendiary force, scattering bottles, loose papers, and scraps of metal, and setting the vicinity ablaze.

[25] But, on the other hand, the high contrast between the asymmetric violence of and against the state is displaced by the strange repose of the young black man, our *lucifer*—"the shining one," "the bringer of the dawn," "the morning star"—resting with his weight shifted back and feet out turned, arms upon his knees, pensive perhaps, in the midst of burning refuse. There is an unusual sort of composure here that does not strike us as resignation or fatigue so much as the secular miracle of "thinking in disorder," to borrow a phrase from RA Judy. The delicacy of such political-intellectual activity, indexed by an almost palpable absence of kinesthesia, is underscored by the fact that this image captures a black body set upon the forklift pallet where usually there is commercial cargo in the process of circulation of capital. Though replete with trappings of contemporary consumer culture—dark sweatpants and bomber jacket, highlighted brand-name training shoes, a designer watch and trendy bracelets, ear buds to a portable media player placed gently on the ground—the lost interval between (the threat of) protest and (the vulnerability of) pedestrian life collapses the narrative of progress into the eternal, or sempiternal, time of slavery. And with that narrative goes the emancipatory pretense of access to, and perhaps investment in, civil society and its accoutrements, including, one must hope, hetero-patriarchal gender and sexual discipline. This rather different cool pose suggests something of the transformation of dominant aspirations possible, or imaginable at least, in apprenticeship to this movement: the reeducation of a black radical political culture as a movement for all black lives.

[26] Returning to Lomax, we see that she is no stranger to what the incomparable Audre Lorde once called "righteous rage." Indeed, Lomax defends it elsewhere against all those who would, for instance, advise black mothers of slain children to manager their anger (Lomax 2014). And still, she is careful to distinguish and even to distance rage from violence and would seem to solder rage and hope together lest the former become despairing or vengeful. In foregrounding black rage *with* black hope, I suspect she means to avoid, say, the tragic violence of an Ismaaiyl Brinsley, whose self-styled retaliatory execution of two officers of the New York Police Department and subsequent public suicide in December

2014 was preceded by his shooting and wounding a former intimate partner, a black woman named Shaneka Thompson—an entrenched pattern in which black men commit reactionary forms of domestic violence they understand to be prefatory or preparatory to public acts of insurrection against the state, a pattern that, I would add, reposes fundamental questions about what constitutes revolutionary (and reactionary) violence in the first place.[10]

[27] To be sure, there is a venerable tradition in defense and celebration of black feminist rage. But is there such thing as black feminist violence? Not (or not only) a tradition of black women militants engaged in armed struggle normatively associated with men, from the nineteenth-century historical accounts of Harriet Tubman, after whose military exploits during the US Civil War the black lesbian feminist Combahee River Collective took its name, to the twentieth-century emergence of African women soldiers in the socialist-inspired anti-colonial wars of liberation, depicted powerfully by the titular "Bush Mama" in Haile Gerima's 1979 film; but rather (or also) a tradition of black women's violence as a distinct form or mode; not black feminists that deploy or make recourse to violence but ways and means of violence that are black *and* feminist. If black rage and hope are thought to combine into a non-compliant but non-violent alloy, is there not a way to think by contrast about a violence indifferent to hope, violence unmotivated by rage, violence irreducible to the dialectics of love and hate? Is there a violence that, as Nikki Giovanni once said, simply "cannot take the weight of a constant degradation" (Fowler 1992: 96), a violence that operates as a response *per se*, as what we might call defense without positive content? Is this not a subtext of Saidiya Hartman's (1997) discussion of the 1855 Missouri Circuit Court case of nineteen-year-old Celia, a slave, who in defense of herself against the institutionalized rape and sexual assault of her master beat him to death with a stick, dismembered his body and burned the remains? Or, returning to *Bush Mama*, would this not be another way to consider the case and conditions of the protagonist Dorothy, who in defense of her daughter against the state-sanctioned rape and sexual assault of an officer of the Los Angeles Police Department stabs him to death—*in media res*—with the sharp end of an umbrella?

[28] How might an exploration of the possibility of black feminist violence reframe even those contemporary campaigns of support for black women in defense of themselves? For CeCe McDonald, who stabbed to death Dean Schmitz in her defense against a racist, transphobic attack by Schmitz and his friends; for Marissa Alexander, who fired a warning shot from a pistol to stop an attack from her abusive husband; for the New Jersey 4 (Patreese Johnson, Renata Hill, Venice Brown, and Terrain Dandridge), who were accused of beating and stabbing Dwayne Buckle in the course of defending themselves against sexist, homophobic harassment and assault; for Montilla Seewright, who was one of the so-called "Sisters in Pain" granted clemency in 1996 by outgoing Kentucky Governor Brereton Jones for the murder of her abusive boyfriend; for Cyntoia Brown, who was sentenced to life in the Luttrell Correctional Center in Memphis, TN for her conviction, at the age of 16, for the 2004 murder of 43-year-old Johnny Allen.

[29] None of the above cases involves self-defense against an agent of the state in the discharge of a duty, a point that encourages us to revisit and reconsider especially the momentous 1974 case of Joan

Little, who, at the age of twenty, killed a white male prison guard in defense against his sexual assault while in custody. Little's case was a touchstone of radical politics in that moment and the improbably successful legal defense was spearheaded by black women's national and international organizing (Davis 2002). The "Free Joan Little" campaign drew upon and contributed to the longstanding collective efforts of black women to resist physical and sexual violence, including mobilizations around the 1944 interracial sexual assault case of Recy Taylor that involved the dedicated work of one Rosa Parks and played a pivotal role in developing the political infrastructure of the modern Civil Rights Movement (McGuire 2010). This is the historical template: on the one hand, white male state officials, or deputies of whatever race-gender configuration, claiming fear for life and limb before the imagined threat of a conglomerate blackness and deploying lethal violence with impunity; on the other, black women and girls in particular inhabiting "long centuries of unregulated violence" (Spillers 2003: 19), seeking an impossible and inadmissible defense by any means necessary, up to and including recourse to the deadly strike.[11]

[30] Such proposition runs the risk of elevating use of violence to the level of principle—rather than a tactic among others in a broad strategic integration—with the concomitant risk of implying a threshold of resistance to establish the political phenomenon in the first instance. But "any means necessary" is not to be conflated with "any means available," which is how too many misinterpret the idea. Sexual violence against one's enemy is often available, but it is never necessary, which is to say it can never be justified on any grounds, political or otherwise, perhaps especially in the midst of armed conflict. Nor is torture. Nor trafficking. Nor enslavement. The aim of raising the preceding questions concerning violence of a black feminist provenance is to pursue some other means of communicating with and within a frequency whose transmission is too often broken up by interference or signal loss. Let this account of protests over the November 2014 police killing of Aura Rosser, who was shot dead in her home in Ann Arbor, Michigan during a domestic dispute response, serve as a prompt:

> There, a young black woman who had shared a jail cell with Aura Rosser grabbed the megaphone. "If you don't know, we are at war! And you can't fight war with peace. Tomorrow we go to war, " she yelled. An older white woman in the crowd, a product of the New Left generation, yelled back, "No, tomorrow, we go to work, to work together." The young woman responded, "Y'all ain't hearing me."

* * *

[31] In his famous essay, "Cultural Studies and Its Theoretical Legacies," the late Stuart Hall asks what happens when a political-intellectual project "tries to develop itself as some kind of coherent theoretical intervention?"

> Or, to put the same question in reverse, what happens when [a]...theoretical enterprise tries to engage in pedagogies which enlist the active engagement of individuals and groups, tries to make a difference in the institutional word in which it is located (Hall 1996: 271)?

[32] The passage is cited by Spillers in her own chapter, "Peter's Pans," the dense and sweeping introduction to her landmark collection *Black, White and In Color*, at the very moment when she reflects

upon how "the mainstream university, responding to 'external political pressure' [and in a few cases around the United States, *violent* 'external political pressure', as the academy would not have responded otherwise, even remotely] was forced to recognize the 'university's function as a social institution responsible for the development and transmission of knowledge' along a range of unwelcome and turbulent emergence, from Black Studies, to Women's Studies, to Feminist Theory, and all the incredible aftermath" (Spillers 2003: 40). She goes on to write:

> I realize that some of us would rather forget what I have just described—for all its messiness and lack of loft—but we will not be able to unwrite it, even as we rewrite it, no matter how unpleasant and 'untheoretical' and 'unclean' these beginnings might appear to our anxious mind. The question that interests us...is what the 'newcomers' in the mainstream are going to do *now* and are doing *now* with this fragmented legacy—these shards of broken desire— that yawns over the university rendered 'impossible', an 'imagined community' no longer where it was, and a project trapped between a 'pre-theoretical' nostalgia and a theoretical moment that would 'consume' it, not entirely unlike the sacrificial host; in other words, what makes our 'crisis' [that is, the crisis of the black creative intellectual] seem so hard is the truth of its ambivalence.... And so, here we are, everywhere *in* it and *of* it—the world's mess...(ibid).

[33] To be sure, "the world's mess" is the oblique common object of analysis linking the varied articles in this issue as well: the mess that the world produces and the mess that produces it. They meditate upon the forms and forces of violence that enable the engineering of collectivities—from the scale of the species and its sexual division, to the citizens of a nation and the members of a community, to the party cadre and the intimate couple, to the relation to oneself across the life-course. What they reveal, each in their own way, are not only matters of oversight or exclusion, however severe, but also the active production of the illegible, the illegitimate, the illicit—terms that motivate and justify an unrelenting suffering. The production is, as noted, both a structural requirement for a massive semantic operation defining an entire field of meaning and an elaborate psychosocial dynamic animating a mode of enjoyment. In thinking of the material-discursive elements of anti-blackness, these writings push us to think about the problematic as involving far more than the specificity of anti-black racism; something more like an "ethico-onto-epistemological" totality of anti-blackness (Barad 2007).

[34] The attentive reader may have noticed that the development of what once went by the name of "theory" has taken on a new, or perhaps renewed, bifurcation of late. And what might be a fork in the road has presented students and practitioners with an uncanny decision between being institutionally supported, socially sanctioned and well liked, and being educated in such a way that might allow for the posing of a relevant question and the possible articulation of an effective truth. Though this bifurcation would seem to follow a rough determination marked by the relative presence or absence of racial blackness shaping one's fate and fortune, the tension, in fact, shoots straight through what Spiller's called above "our anxious mind" and wreaks havoc on our arguments, right down to the level of the sentence – verb tense and word choice beware. That is to be expected when the field and function of speech is prohibited by organized violence, and when it is opened, or, *pace* Spillers, earned in an atmosphere of counter-violence. To reverse the popular adage: easier done than said.

[35] Perhaps that's the difference between a theory and a tendency, a tendency and an impulse, an impulse and a wish. For if Afro-Pessimism is defined by anything—a theory or theorem, a method or approach, a motley crew or citational network, an ensemble of questions or set of postulates—then it may be the motive force of a singular *wish* inherited in no small part from black women's traditions of analysis, interpretation, invention, and survival; what sometime social commentator Cedric Kyles, in a moment of comic insight, once termed "the wish factor." Born of a confrontational style that assumes a general antagonism, the wish factor contrasts sharply with "the hope creed" characteristic of those engaging the politics of everyday life through the assumption of a general consensus disrupted by conflict.[12] If Afro-Pessimism strikes a nerve, confusing the bounds of the intramural and the extramural in the process, then it is not unrelated to a certain conjuring of spirit, or attitude, of those still willing to fight for what is right and necessary rather than simply in the immediate interest. For our contributors, the benefit and the strength of the scholarly endeavor arises, in part, from the decreased distance between those dual considerations, a politics pursued without need of a base or margin of power, a struggle that radicalizes every struggle it touches, inside and out.

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57.

Notes

1. Denunciations of Afro-Pessimism, whether muted or full-throated, are likely symptomatic of condensed and displaced worries among a "politerati" floundering in a reactionary conjuncture whose global scale coordinates are, as Jameson and others have argued, impossible to cognitively map. Along those lines, I cannot help but notice that the skepticism expressed toward Afro-Pessimism takes forms bearing uncanny resemblance to the hostile reception of other critical discourses assumed to disable thought and action (see, for instance, Egginton 2007 and Rapaport 2001). There is an illuminating resonance as well with a recent debate between two mid-career black political scientists in the pages of *Dissent* magazine over the political orientation of *Atlantic* columinist Ta-Nehisi Coates' 2015 epistolary essay, *Between the World and Me*. Melvin Rogers (2015a) of UCLA, while admiring Coates' literary talent and historical perceptiveness, nonetheless faults his reflections for betraying a failure of political imagination. Lester Spence (2015) of Johns Hopkins University responds to Rogers' charges of 'pessimism' (Rogers actually calls it 'fatalism' initially and 'despair' later) with a defense of Coates' as a political realist, only to have Rogers (2015b) restate and sharpen his criticism of Coates in turn. This is the relevant passage: "Coates rejects the myth of American exceptionalism and its logic of certain progress. Yet he embraces the certainty of white supremacy and its inescapable constraints. For him, white supremacy is not merely a historically emergent feature of the Western world generally, and the United States in particular. For Coates, white supremacy does not merely structure reality; it is reality. There is a danger in this. After all, the meaning of action is tied fundamentally to what we imagine is possible for us. But when one views white supremacy as impregnable, there is little room for one's imagination to soar and one's sense of agency is inescapably constrained" (Rogers 2015a). One could commit an article to just these two presumptions of Rogers—that imagination requires possibility in order to flourish (does it not flourish precisely in the face of impossibility?) and that agency suffers from inescapable constraint (is constraint not rather a precondition of agency?). But the point not to be missed here is the guilty verdict: "Coates isn't hopeful." Indeed, he is not, and by his own account. And he is unhopeful in a very particular way. In fact, Rogers quotes, but utterly fails to read, the following lines in his own critique: "This is not despair. These are the preferences of the universe itself: verbs over nouns, actions over states, struggle over hope." For Coates, hope is the fatalistic posture and, contrary to Rogers' derivation of hope from humility (regarding knowledge of the future), a sign of hubris as well, a seeking after redemption. The impulse to struggle, perhaps at its most genuine, need not speculate upon its prospects. Edmond Rostand's Cyrano, in a very different scenario, expressed well the sentiment: "What are you saying? That it is no use? I know it! *But one does not fight because there is hope of winning!*" See Johnson (2016) for a related—and similarly flawed - critique of Coates, regarding the latter's comments on the racial politics of the social democratic vision of Vermont Senator and Democratic Presidential hopeful Bernie Sanders.

2. See Millay's (2013) related discussion of Jameson's "theoretical pragmatics." He argues: "Jameson's particular understanding of theory can thus be helpfully labeled *theory as pragmatics*. And let me be clear right away: this practice of theoretical pragmatics has nothing to do with the philosophical school of pragma*tism*; rather, the practice of theory as pragmatics is made up of

theoretical interpretations of philosophy, economics, political theory, culture, and art that do not aspire to Truth but rather to change the world in this moment. This is theory as pragmatics, not the philosophical school of pragmatism, but the practice of using theory to change the present world" (48).

3. Wilderson (2010) glosses this process as follows: "At every scale of nearly every genre of social meditation on value and its drama, the personal pronoun *we* assumes a fetishized and hypothesized value-form. Simply put, Humankind is taken as a given. Its reification as a rhetorical commodity goes something like this: Through symbolic interventions all people are capable, have the capacity, of transformation and recomposition. This change-power, this subjective transformation and recomposition, happens over time and across space. *We*, then, registers in cultural discourse, albeit superficially, as in *we* all have a language, *we* all have customs, *we* all can dream of home, *we* all have families, *we* all have a heritage, *we* all have a place of origin. The inspiration of *we* is a Humanizing inspiration. It welcomes all to the family of (wo)man except the Family Thanatos" (262).

4. This point can be taken further still. One might say with respect to this political-intellectual formation that is has earned its pessimism, to borrow a phrase from the UK-based Marxist journal *Salvage*. Editor-in-Chief Rosie Warren (2016) notes on that score: "For some there is no difference between accusing pessimists of dereliction because their analysis is wrong, and accusing them of dereliction because they are 'demoralizing'...irrespective of the truth of their claim. For them, optimism is always presumed, regardless of the situation, regardless of the balance of forces, regardless of the world around them. It is always necessary to find a positive spin. [...] *This* is a dereliction of duty. We do not, and should not, do the things we do because we are certain we will win. We can never be certain. We do them—should do them— because we cannot do anything other." By contrast, the general representation of pessimism in Thacker (2012) approximates the caricature of Afro-Pessimism entrenched among its critics. I say approximates because Thacker's treatment of pessimism, while unsparing, is neither a broadside nor a dismissal.

5. This point was instigated by a passage from Lyotard's *Libidinal Economy* (1993): "...this is anxiety and this is what we must *will*. But this 'will' is beyond all subjective liberty, we can only experience this dissimulation [or duplicity] from the side, *neben*, like fugitive blind people [sic], since it is unbearable and there is no question of rendering it pleasant" (256).

6. Ontology is, of course, a contested term and its invocation of both the building blocks of reality and a mode of analysis can be confusing, no less in the present context. Political theorist Robert Nichols, in *The World of Freedom*, offers a useful delimitation: "Ontology here does not refer to an essentialized structure of reality, that is, a rough synonym for metaphysics more generally. Instead, ontology refers to a particular form of analysis, one that affirms the idea that knowledge claims about the world are also interpretations of what sorts of entities there are to be known, and, simultaneously, a certain ethical positioning of the subject of knowledge in relation to the world so interpreted...a thesis on freedom always contains within it an implicitly or explicitly held understanding of the fundamental framework or field of conditions within which meaningful actions may be actualized, an understanding of the kinds of entities that exist and act within this field, and the range of possibilities within which they operate" (58). In this respect, those erstwhile critics of Afro-Pessimism, who smugly excoriate it for failing, as it were, to provide an account of resistance or survival, only pull tighter the knot of their own insistence. For the immediate question facing

such judgment is: *resistance or survival in the face of what, precisely?*

7. In this reframing of the history of race, there is, I think, a (yet undeveloped) link between Afro-Pessimism and the formidable work of Sylvia Wynter. In her famous essay, "Beyond Miranda's Meanings" (1990), Wynter writes that "with the shift to the secular [from the sixteenth century onward], the primary code of difference [in the dominant expanding European civilization] became that between 'men' and 'natives', with the traditional 'male' and 'female' distinctions now coming to play a secondary - if none the less powerful - reinforcing role within the system of symbolic representations...." This shift is discussed as an epochal movement of displacement from the primacy of the *anatomical* to the *physiognomic* register in the social order, "in which sex-gender attributes are no longer the primary index of 'deferent' difference, and in which the discourse that erects itself is no longer primarily 'patriarchal', but rather 'monarchical' in its Western-European, essentially post-Christian, post-religious definition" (358). Wynter suggests here a means for thinking simultaneously about race, gender, sexuality and class without maintaining that they are either equivalent or analogical. This should not be confused with a 'race-first' or 'race-only' analysis, which criticism in fact presumes the very equivalence or analogy Wynter upends. On another, related point, Wynter addresses the question of equivalence or analogy *within* the processes of racialization. In "1492: A New World View" (1995), she deconstructs the conflict emerging in the historic instance between the agents of Euro-American settler colonialism (both *white* North American and *mestizo* Latin American) and the indigenous peoples of the hemisphere from the vantage of the enslaved African, or what she terms "the third perspective." She writes:

> This third perspective is so invisibilized within the logic of our present order of discourse and its system of symbolic representations...that it tends to be [reflexively] erased by both celebrants and dissidents [regarding the Columbian adventure] alike.... Nor is it included as a third perspective in its own right, with the other two, in spite of insightful discussions on the centrality of the enslavement of the African ancestors of today's black Americans to the economic development of the post-1492 societies of the Americas and the Caribbean. Yet...it is the African-descended (and Afro-mixed) population group who formed, with the other two, at the very origins of the post-1492 Caribbean and the Americas, the integrally triadic model rather than the social-existential model presupposed by the [indigenous/settler] conflictual perspectives. [...] The basis of this triadic model was itself established some half a century *before* the voyage of 1492 (9).

Wynter is referring to the establishment of the Iberian prerogative to the lands of "the peoples of Neolithic Berber stock in the Canary Islands" and elsewhere in the western Mediterranean and later the eastern Atlantic islands as the basis for a similar protocol of conquest in the islands of the Caribbean and eventually throughout the Americas. So too with "the slave-trading system out of Africa that had been established by the Portuguese in the wake of 1441, large numbers of peoples of African descent would be trans-shipped as the substitute slave labor force whose role would be indispensable to the found of the new societies (11). Crucially, it is not only, and perhaps not even principally, the economic function of the enslaved—"the totally disposable, coercible, and unpaid labor force that *alone* made possible the acclerated economic development of the Americas" (emphasis added)—that characterizes their indispensability:

> They would also play a central role in the instituting of the bases of the new social structure. In this role they would not only serve to free the indigenous peoples from the outright slavery to which many had been reduced in the immediate decades

> after 1492.... As the liminal category whose mode of excluded *difference*, based on the hereditary slave status of its members as the only *legitimately enslavable* population group, they would also generate the principle of similarity or of conspecificity that would come to bond, if on the terms of sharply unequal relations, the incoming Spanish settlers with the indigenous peoples. From the mid-sixteenth century on, this principle would come to bond the latter as members of a category whose status was that of *hereditarily free* subjects of the Spanish state. This third population group [enslaved Africans], therefore, would come to embody the new symbolic construct of *Race* or of innately determined difference that would enable the Spanish state to legitimate its sovereignty over *the lands of the Americas* in the post-religious terms of Western Europe's now-expanding state system. It would do so by instituting by means of the physical reference of the group's enslaved lives and labor the empirical basis of...the 'moral and philosophical foundations' on which the Spaniards 'accepted' the indigenous peoples 'into their societies, however rudely'" (11-12).

8. The above epigraph from Lyotard continues: "...but stripped once and for all of the protection of the concept, thrown out of the sanitary cordon of the thought of systems, and thus fragile like children, suspects, the insane, stupidity awaits us, close to us, drawing us out from it and throwing us into your arms, men of the concept, days when the fire is too intense, when we may fear that in our words and ideas, this is no more than the death drive busy consuming everything, and when we no longer dare to breath above the surfaces which you would have divided up, frightened to be swept along with it" (32). The "Family Thanatos" that Wilderson notes cannot be "welcomed into the family of (wo)man" would be, in Lyotard's terms, that gathering initiated by or eventuating in collective attempts to endure the intensity of fire, the risk of the death drive's unlimited consumption, the anxiety of relinquishing desire for control while swept along its surface. Such attempts may not be so much heroic—unless we mean to redefine the term—as they are mundane. As such, they span the erstwhile gap between protest and pedestrian life, between moments of reactionary torpor and revolutionary fervor. Anthony Farley (2005) broaches a kindred consideration in his powerful commentary on the legacy of the 1791 slave revolt in the colony of Saint-Domingue: "The slaves burned everything, yes, but, unfortunately, *they only burned everything in Haiti*. Theirs was the greatest and most successful revolution in the history of the world, but the failure of their fire to cross the waters was the great tragedy of the nineteenth century" (236, emphasis added). As a summary phrasing of Afro-Pessimism, one could do worse than "a generalization of the incendiary Spirit of '91."

9. The African American Policy Forum, a think tank founded by prominent legal scholar and political commentator Kimberlé Crenshaw, partnered with the Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies at Columbia University and Soros Justice Fellow Andrea Ritchie in preparing and revising the report.

10. I thank Selamawit Terrefe for making this crucial point. In this light, I hope to revisit an earlier analysis of the notorious career of Eldridge Cleaver, former Minister of Information for the Black Panther Party for Self Defense and radical political exile turned conservative Republican pundit and evangelical Christian (and, still later, member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints) (Sexton 2003).

11. Spillers herself mused about something in this vein during her 2014 Koehn Lecture at the University of California, Irvine, "Some Speculations on Sentiment: Women and Revolutions" (presenting themes later reprised in her 2014 W.E.B. Du Bois Lectures at Harvard University).

Amid a critical reading of Barbara Chase-Riboud's acclaimed 1979 novel, *Sally Hemings*, Spillers described a pivotal moment of clarification for the eponymous enslaved protagonist regarding her master and eventual President of the United States, Thomas Jefferson, whom, in lamenting his forlorn paternal legacy, has just disavowed the four sons shared by him and Hemings: "I don't have four sons," he states. "You have four sons" (276). Spillers delighted in the fictional Hemings' response, which I quote at length: "Silence. I had burned for him and I had birthed for him. Seven times I had descended into that valley from which neither his wife nor one of his daughters had returned. And my sons stood as testament and hostage to a body I could never call my own. I felt an explosion of insulted motherhood, all red and brown, like the leaves scattered on the lawn outside the window. His back was turned to me. My eyes sought the iron poker lying within my reach near the chimney. I wanted to strike that broad blue-sheathed back. I wanted to strike and strike again, with all my strength, to smash him. Oh God, I wanted to kill him, for now, after all these years, I understood what he had understood from the beginning, but had not had the courage to tell me" (ibid). Spillers subsequently concluded her lecture with this powerfully apposite comment: "What our writers have paid imaginative witness to is the fact that there is no human loneliness and alone-ness remotely comparable to that of the enslaved beyond the reach and scope of love and freedom. The day that the enslaved decides to act out the threat of death that hangs over her, by risking her life, is the first day of wisdom. And whether or not one survives is perhaps less important than the recognition that, unless one is free, love cannot and will not matter."

12. Cedric Kyles is, of course, better known by his stage name, Cedric the Entertainer. His notion of the "wish factor" is proffered most famously in his routine for Spike Lee's 2000 documentary film, *The Original Kings of Comedy*.

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