

BOOKS JULY 20, 2020 ISSUE

THE ARGUMENT OF “AFROPESSIMISM”

*Frank B. Wilderson III sketches a map of the world in which
Black people are everywhere integral but always excluded.*

By Vinson Cunningham

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Wilderson argues that the state of slavery, for Black people, is structural and permanent. Emancipation is a myth. Photograph by Gordon Parks / “The Invisible Man, Harlem, New York” (1952). © The Gordon Parks Foundation.

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The best time to read a book by Frank B. Wilderson III, it turns out, is during a hot summer of uneasy isolation, social heartbreak, and racial uprising. I read his latest, “Afropessimism” (Liveright), twice: once before the world crawled to a halt under the horror of COVID-19, and again after anger about the killing of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis—Wilderson’s home town—erupted into a righteous spectacle of fire and glass. Since then, Wilderson’s work has received notice in unlikely places. In mid-June, the temperamentally soft and sunny conservative *Times* columnist David Brooks—who, five years ago, lamented that Ta-Nehisi Coates’s best-seller “Between the World and Me” would “trap generations in the past and destroy the guiding star that points to a better future”—suggested that readers who wished to understand the alienation of African-Americans should read “Afropessimism,” quoting the book’s insistence that “the spectacle of Black death is essential to the mental health of the world.”

Wilderson, a professor of African-American studies at the University of California, Irvine, is one of the founders of a philosophical school called Afropessimism—a slightly misleading bit of nomenclature. Neither the body of thought associated with the term nor Wilderson’s new book espouses an orientation toward the future, or gives much of a damn about social fortunes. Rather, Afropessimism sketches a structural map of human experience. On this map, Black people are integral to human society but at all times and in all places excluded from it. They are in a state of “social death,” a concept that Wilderson borrows from the sociologist Orlando Patterson. For Patterson, social death describes the experience of slavery as it has appeared across time and space—a slave is not merely an exploited person but someone robbed of his or her personhood. For Wilderson, the state of slavery, for Black people, is permanent: every Black person is always a slave and, therefore, a perpetual corpse, buried beneath the world and stinking it up. “Blackness is coterminous with slaveness,” Wilderson writes. And civil society as we know it requires this category of nonperson

to exist. Emancipation is a myth. (Patterson, for his part, does not think that African-Americans are currently “in a situation of social death,” and has called his influence on Afropessimism “ironic.”)

Wilderson contends that “the narrative arc of the slave who is *Black* (unlike Orlando Patterson’s generic Slave, who may be of any race) is *not an arc at all*, but a flat line.” This principle poses a challenge for the book, which is largely a work of memoir. Wilderson’s solution is to give us life 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 the events relayed in the book is a task. He was born in 1956 and spent the early part of his life shuttling among college towns. His parents were middle-class intellectuals, and his father’s faculty positions at various well-regarded universities made Frank’s childhood not unlike that of an Army brat. The Wildersons lived in Ann Arbor, Berkeley, Seattle, Detroit, and Chicago, but they stayed in Minneapolis long enough to call it home. They lived in upscale Kenwood; the mansion of the local hero and future Vice-President Walter Mondale was nearby. (Wilderson recalls Mondale’s effort to recruit his father to run for Congress.) Like many of the kids in Kenwood, Wilderson played football and idolized movie stars. Unlike nearly all of them, Wilderson was Black. The toll of that awkward fact accumulated subtly. The mother of a friend asked him, during a playdate, how it felt to be a Negro.

Wilderson doesn’t say much about his schooling, but he did well enough to earn admission to Dartmouth—where he was eventually suspended, for two years, after protesting in support of some white laborers on campus. By this time, he has become the kind of post-civil-rights-era young man who quotes from *Ramparts* and earns an F.B.I. file before his senior year in college. (The file, now declassified, “is riddled with redactions like sprigs of buckshot etched on the flank of a deer,” Wilderson writes.) Back in Minneapolis, he begins dating a woman named Stella, who is almost twenty years his senior and is raising a young daughter. She teaches Frank how to listen to Miles Davis and listens to him read bits of the novel he’s writing. She’s an activist, too, and has filed a lawsuit against a Great Society-era anti-poverty program, accusing its administrators of embezzlement, among other crimes. (A note on the copyright page explains that “names and other potentially identifying characteristics of some people in this book have been changed,” and this seems to be the case with many of those involved in these events.) Stella also has a falling out with a white neighbor named Josephine, and soon she and Frank begin to experience burning sensations whenever they’re in Stella’s apartment: their joints hurt, their armpits and private parts start to smart. They

conclude that they’re being poisoned—perhaps Josephine has procured radioactive material from the university lab where she works. They flee the apartment, and sleep, when necessary, in the car Frank has stolen from his parents.

What ensues is part “Bonnie and Clyde,” part “Waiting for Godot,” and part “The Pilgrim’s Progress.” Either because of Stella’s lawsuit or because of the government suspicion that Wilderson himself has provoked, they find themselves on the run from shadowy figures they assume to be with the F.B.I. On the road, they are followed, and occasionally chased, by anonymous white men, and Wilderson breaks his account of these chases into shardlike mini-chapters. The couple visit a succession of Stella’s old friends, hoping for shelter and some time to think. Wilderson implies that these acquaintances are scared to get involved in such a dangerous matter, though it seems equally plausible that nobody believes the couple. (My own intermittent trouble swallowing the story made me feel like a race traitor more than once.) One of these friends, a former member of the Weather Underground who has withdrawn into the life of a respectable middle-class white person, treats the two like a pair of ghosts.

In the end, nobody dies, and nobody’s arrested. Wilderson winds up back at Dartmouth; soon, without any closure, Stella falls out of the book entirely. “This is a story I’ve never told before,” Wilderson writes—not even to his current wife, he adds. You can’t blame him.

It’s possible to regard Wilderson’s manner of spinning toward and away from the particulars of a story without ever fully *telling* the thing as a critique of the Black autobiographical tradition—which, in America, begins with the slave narratives of Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass and includes Richard Wright’s “Black Boy” and the autobiographies of Malcolm X, Angela Davis, and Assata Shakur. Common to the genre, even in its most radical iterations, is a narrative thrust that accentuates the forward movement of the writer. (“Narratives of ascent,” the literary theorist Robert B. Stepto called them.) Douglass learns to read and escapes slavery; Malcolm finds God and Elijah Muhammad; Davis, wanted by the government, goes on the run and gets put in prison but ends up free. Even if progress isn’t the message, it insinuates itself into the rhythm of this kind of book and becomes a quiet component of its logic. Wilderson obliterates that logic. What happened to him yesterday is what will happen to him today, only more loudly. Nothing has really changed: Black

people still occupy the position of slaves, and what matters in the story of Frank and Stella is the nature of the forces arrayed against them, not how and whether they get away. (No one gets away.)

After Dartmouth and a surprising stretch as a stockbroker in Minneapolis—an experience that goes mostly undescribed in “Afropessimism” but which Wilderson has elsewhere characterized as a kind of double life—Wilderson enrolls in the creative-writing program at Columbia. At night, he attends classes at the New School, where stream of consciousness is in vogue. That downtown influence still shows: Wilderson skids from one glint of perception to the next without much regard for grounding details or fluid transitions; in the middle of an anecdote, he tosses you down a chute and you find yourself stumbling through a thick tangle of theoretical jargon. He thinks vertically, in terms of hierarchies and structures; the horizontal time line is beside the point. He writes from history’s humid basement, or from its even less accessible underground bunker, and the plants that bloom in his writing are less floral than fungal—his arguments and remembrances grow in tight groups, close to the ground and propped atop rotting anecdotal logs, all of them adding to the shroomy funk of the room.

Though “Afropessimism” may veer from the Black autobiographical tradition, the book doesn’t escape genre altogether. It falls into a category sometimes called “auto-theory,” an attempt to arrive at a philosophy by way of the self. The most pertinent example is “Black Skin, White Masks,” by the French-Martinican psychiatrist and philosopher Frantz Fanon, who worked up his theory of “epidermalization”—the process by which the societal inferiority of Black people is grafted onto the skin—by recounting his own experiences, along with a series of psychiatric case studies. Wilderson takes from Fanon—and then exaggerates, literally to death—a critique of humanism as it has been practiced (or, more often, not practiced) in the Western world. “Leave this Europe where they are never done talking of Man, yet murder men everywhere they find them, at the corner of every one of their own streets, in all the corners of the globe,” Fanon wrote. And yet, for Fanon, the process of decolonization—by way of inevitably bloody revolution—was also a process of humanization. “Decolonization,” he wrote, in “The Wretched of the Earth,” “is the veritable creation of new men.”

For Wilderson, Fanon’s cup is too full. Other previously colonized peoples are indeed human, but not Black people. One of the bleakest aspects of Afropessimist thought is its denial that there is any meaningful analogy between Blacks and other nonwhites. When Frank and Stella try to explain their

poison-induced injuries to a Chinese-American doctor, she turns them away, and Wilderson muses that “Dr. Zhou is as much a master as Edwin and Mary Epps, the antagonists in *12 Years a Slave*.” In Wilderson’s view, “people of color”—a term he uses for those who are neither white nor Black—are “junior partners” to whites in the enslavement of Blacks. One of the memories that recur in “Afropessimism” involves a Palestinian friend named Sameer, who, detailing life under Israeli occupation, describes the “shameful and humiliating way the soldiers run their hands up and down your body,” then admits that “the shame and humiliation runs even deeper if the Israeli soldier is an Ethiopian Jew.” This expression of anti-Black racism from a Palestinian is a cataclysm for Wilderson. Now he understands that, “in the collective unconscious, Palestinian insurgents have more in common with the Israeli state and civil society than they do with Black people.”

In the same vein, Wilderson describes a meeting that his father attended, as an emissary of the University of Minnesota, with several Native American leaders, hoping to resolve a conflict about reservation lands. Young Frank was in the audience, and someone sitting near him cried out, “We don’t want you, a *nigger man*, telling us what to do!” The lesson that Wilderson takes from the episode is that the Native Americans—raped and slaughtered on these lands, subjected to a genocide that enabled the Americas as we know them to exist—are “sovereigns,” and therefore human, while his dad, middle class, American, and Black, is not. In a previous book, “Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms,” which grew out of his dissertation, Wilderson describes “the Red, Indigenous, or ‘Savage’ position” as existing “liminally as half-death and half-life between the Slave (Black) and the Human (White, or non-Black).” In “Afropessimism,” even that gradation is gone. Wilderson overwrites history with the darkest, most permanent marker.

Every society has a murderous hierarchy: someone’s always knocking at the basement door, trying to get free. But life is prismatic—it’s possible to be Black and degraded in America while also profiting from wanton extraction of resources overseas, oppressing millions of non-Black others, and living on land stolen from indigenous people. We are always joined in our sufferings, often by somebody we can’t see through the darkness. We speak of solidarity precisely because the empathetic act of analogy is a way of acknowledging this complexity, and of training our ethical senses, again and again, to widen the circle of our concern. Any system of thought that has refined itself beyond the ability to imagine kinship with the stranded Guatemalan kid detained at the U.S. border, or with the

functionally enslaved Uyghur in China, or, again—I can’t get over it—with the Native American on whose stolen ancestral ground you live and do your business, is lost in its own fog.

Black thought at its best has been a vehicle for and a product of analogy. Black Christians saw the liberatory potential in the story of the Hebrews rescued by God from beneath Pharaoh’s thumb and, still more, in the life of the Jewish Palestinian preacher Jesus, put to death by the colonizers of his homeland. Some of them looked to Latin America, where liberation theology blossomed; they created Black liberation theology, and forever transformed the flavor of American religion. A feeling of kinship with the colonized people of India, and with Gandhi in particular, helped make nonviolence a core practice of the civil-rights movement. A study of the revolutionary struggles in Algeria, Fanon’s great subject, helped to make the case—argued most famously by the Black Liberation Army, an influence on Wilderson—for the occasional necessity of violence. None of this is incidental: the impulse toward freedom is always seeking friends.

While he was studying at Columbia, Wilderson was in a long-distance relationship with a woman he had met on a trip to South Africa. After completing his M.F.A., he moved to Johannesburg. It was the early nineties, the end of the apartheid era. He became involved with the African National Congress, Nelson Mandela’s party. He participated in political education and worked for a time as what sounds like a minor spy; eventually, he became an elected official in the A.N.C. Later, he broke with Mandela, siding with the party’s more radical members. These adventures are the subject of his first book, “Incognegro: A Memoir of Exile and Apartheid.” The South African section of “Afropessimism” mostly concerns Wilderson’s brief employment as a waiter at an Italian restaurant.

He takes the job after getting fired from a teaching gig, essentially because of his political commitments. The restaurant, Mario’s, is owned by a white immigrant, and Wilderson works there alongside several Black Africans: an older waiter who tries to school him in the intricacies of racial manners under apartheid; two cooks who, he learns too late, are supporters of the reactionary party that opposes the A.N.C.; and a young woman named Doreen, who is casually harassed by the owner and eventually framed for theft by his wife, Riana. Everybody tiptoes around the whites except for Wilderson, who, by his telling, is a charismatic, bombastic presence. He meets, flatters, and befriends the Nobel-winning novelist Nadine Gordimer, a regular at the restaurant. He goads his Black peers

into taking ever more brazen liberties with the whites. Why should they sit in the kitchen eating porridge during their breaks when the whites are out in the dining room, feasting on Italian? Owing to his obvious erudition and, above all, his Americanness, he’s invited to join the whites one night. He drags the other Blacks along with him, largely against their will. He chows down while everyone else falls silent. Of course, he understands the situation. He sort of glories in it.

When Riana tries to frame Doreen, as a pretext for firing her, Wilderson confronts Mario, and the two men fight. Mario fires Wilderson, but he doesn’t accept the dismissal. “Wait till your regulars, like Nadine Gordimer, read this,” he says. “Did you know she’s a member of the ANC?” Mario and Riana are white, but, being immigrants, they are puzzling through precarities of their own, and surely some of the reason that Wilderson’s confrontation with Mario doesn’t turn into a lynching scene is Mario’s fear of reprisal from the American government. But, in Wilderson’s reading of the incident, Mario’s restaurant is a plantation, and all the Black people who work there are, in equal measure, slaves. He insists that his differences from the Black South Africans are “important” but not “essential,” and seems not to notice, or to care, that he is treated as a kind of “junior partner” to Mario and Riana. Among other things, Wilderson’s book is the story of an American who thinks of his Blackness as normative, and, therefore, as characteristic of Blackness around the world. (This mistake is familiar to me; I make it all the time.) Careful not to extend too much imaginative empathy to Palestinians, Chinese-Americans, white women, and sundry others, Wilderson is nonetheless quick to claim sameness with—impose analogy upon—a group of Black South Africans. He’s down on internationalism (a “talisman” that he has had to learn to “let go of”), but only to a point. Blackness, that fixity, that hole, is everywhere and always the same.

In the essay “Theory as Liberatory Practice,” the writer bell hooks offers an account of her initial attraction to theory. It had nothing to do with cherished books or favorite teachers—nothing to do with education, as we think of it, at all. She’d had a sad childhood. “I came to theory because I was hurting,” she wrote. “I found a place where I could imagine possible futures, a place where life could be lived differently.” Wilderson’s philosophical framework is impersonal; Blackness, for him, is a structural position. But “Afropessimism” is also, in its way, a chronicle of personal pain. The book opens after Columbia, after South Africa, when Wilderson is a “middle-aged graduate student,” experiencing what he refers to as a psychotic episode. He’s staring into the mirror in his apartment,

feeling “as though my shirt were made of insects.” He starts to drool, and, fearing that his white neighbors will hurt him if he cries out for help, makes his own way to the hospital. It’s a jarring, dramatic curtain-raiser, and it gives the rest of the book the feeling of a flashback—all these events are the prelude to a breakdown.

But, unlike hooks, Wilderson does not choose to imagine possible futures. The only way to cure the condition of slavery that ails Black people, he says, is “the end of the world.” There will have to be a total end to things—an apocalypse. From civilization’s ashes something truly new might finally grow. How to hasten this final reckoning? Wilderson doesn’t say. To offer some further prescription would be a betrayal of the style of his book, and of the shape of his ideas.

For all the word’s problematic history, I like “Black” as a shorthand for African-descended people everywhere precisely because of its indefiniteness, its fluidity, its fealty to no nation. It is as fleeting and symbolically rich as the color image it brings to mind, and is always flirting with and escaping strict classification. It brings me joy. It tends, on its best days, to grow. The cultural theorist Stuart Hall, in his posthumous memoir, “Familiar Stranger,” writes of the colonial Jamaica of his youth, in which middle-class “colored” families like his—their brownish skin the product of congress between white colonial planters and the descendants of African slaves—would never think to call themselves Black. That word was reserved as a slur for the darker-skinned, lower-class masses, against whom people like Hall’s mother defined themselves. (In the wildly mixed society of antebellum New Orleans, some “colored” Creoles—people who today would undoubtedly be considered Black—were not only free but owned darker-skinned slaves.) Only when Hall moved to England to study, and started to meet other African-descended people—first from other West Indian islands, eventually from points all over the world—did he understand Blackness as a wide-ranging political category, always unfixed but centered on justice for all, including the colonized Third World peoples of Asia and Latin America, who were their siblings in struggle.

Something similar is happening right now among people of Latino heritage. Many of the Dominican kids I knew when I was growing up in Washington Heights had skin as dark and hair as kinky as mine. None of them would ever have called themselves Black. (Some of their parents made it a point, they told me, to periodically remind them that they weren’t.) Today, an increasing acceptance of, and pride in, African heritage among young Puerto Ricans and Dominicans means that many of these people celebrate their “Afro-Latinidad.” By Wilderson’s lights, were these people humans before this

change of mind, but slaves now? Were they always socially dead, but pitifully unaware? Does Blackness have simply to do with ancestry, with which box a person ticks off on the census, or with how that person is seen by the police and understood by the state? My preference, in any case, is just to say, “Welcome home.”

The most radiant American example of an always gathering, instinctively expansive conception of Blackness comes from the Black radical feminist tradition. One of its most famous documents, the Combahee River Collective Statement, is frank about the woeful position of Black women in society, and about how poorly they have been treated by others—including Black men—who should be their allies. “We realize that the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation are us,” the statement says. Still, the collective was steadfast in its commitment to solidarity, and asserted that the “position” of Black lesbians—oppressed by dint of class, race, gender, and sexual orientation—would help their struggle against capitalism, racism, patriarchy, and homophobia, and would help bring about the freedom of the entire world. “We might use our position at the bottom,” the statement says, “to make a clear leap into revolutionary action. If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression.” That’s an end of days I’d like to see. It will require, I think, a conviction that our lives, however devalued, have many facets, and that we are all intimately related, and that one sufficiently emancipatory gesture might scoop us all up. ♦

RACE, POLICING, AND BLACK LIVES MATTER PROTESTS

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- The Black Lives Matter co-founder Opal Tometi on what it would mean to defund police departments, and what comes next.

- The quest to transform the United States cannot be limited to challenging its brutal police.

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*Vinson Cunningham joined *The New Yorker* as a staff writer in 2016.*