

# Afro-pessimism, Fugitivity, and the Border to Social Death

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## Afro-pessimism, Fugitivity, and the Border to Social Death

<https://www.e-ir.info/2017/06/27/afro-pessimism-fugitivity-and-the-border-to-social-death/>

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**This is an excerpt from *Critical Epistemologies of Global Politics*. Get your free copy on E-International Relations.**

Flight generally entails borders. Whether prison walls, plot boundaries, or borders between states, being fugitive implies that borders have been and/or are still to be overcome. One might assume that flight ends when the borders that stood between the captive and their freedom have been successfully crossed. Enslaved African Americans frequently fled their enslavers and legal owners in North America to gain freedom by, for instance, crossing the demarcating lines between slave plantation and the wilderness or the Mason-Dixon Line, the Ohio River, and the borders to Canada and Mexico into 'free' territory. However, with legislation such as the *Fugitive Slave Acts*, a fugitive slave remained retrievable property even in the supposedly 'Free North' so that freedom for a fugitive slave in nineteenth century North America was only a constrained form of freedom, if the term applies at all. But what if the 'social death' (Patterson 1982) that enslavement brought over 'people racialised as Black' (Coleman 2014: n.p.) has been never-ending as the Afro-pessimist Frank B. Wilderson III (2010) has suggested? And if so, how can we conceptualize Black social life that has undoubtedly endured despite social death in such a framework?

I assume that Afro-pessimism — in theorizing a structurally incommensurable demarcation between non-blackness and Blackness, civil life and social death, and between 'the inside [and] outside of civil society' (Wilderson, von Gleich, and Spatzek 2016: 15) — tacitly implies an epistemological border concept that continues to have very real (i.e., fatal) consequences for people racialized as Black in the United States of America and beyond since the transatlantic slave trade began.<sup>[1]</sup> Based on this understanding of Afro-pessimism as theorizing a structurally *a priori* incommensurable, absolute, and antagonistic demarcation, the border concept I consider in Afro-pessimist thought appears decidedly different from well-known conceptualizations of permeable borders as epistemological zones of dialectic cultural contact and conflict developed in American cultural and literary studies over the last thirty years. I argue that the concept of fugitivity is more suitable — than those concepts of borders as zones — when it comes to conceptualizing enduring Black social life in the face of anti-blackness as a constant struggle against social death. It is my contention that the 'Black border' in Afro-pessimism and the concept of fugitivity taken together might help convey very abstract and theoretically elaborate Afro-pessimist arguments, as figures of thought. They also make apparent the potential relations and tensions between the Afro-pessimist structural analysis of Blackness and fugitivity's focus on the level of experience and performance, shedding light on the paradox of Black social life in social death.

This chapter begins with a summary of basic Afro-pessimist arguments in order to show how a border concept could be entertained in this radical trajectory of contemporary Black Studies in the United States. Second, I compare and contrast the proposed 'Black border' with Mary Louise Pratt's concept of the 'contact zone' (Pratt 1991; 2008) as an example of a well-known conceptualization of a liminal border space. Third, I examine the ways in which fugitivity might be able to address both Black social life and accept basic Afro-pessimist assumptions condensed in the suggested border concept by drawing on Tina M. Camp's engagement with the concept of fugitivity in *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe* (2012). It is in this manner that I encourage readers to think of fugitivity as a constant struggle against the 'Black border' without, however, ever dismantling the

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border or arriving at the other side that bodes civil life inside civil society only for the 'non-black.' Thus, I propose that the concept of fugitivity carries with it the potential of linking analyses of fugitive experiences and performances with an Afro-pessimist structural analysis of the position of Blackness.<sup>[2]</sup>

## The Black Border of Afro-Pessimism

Afro-pessimism takes as one central starting point the observation that a specific form of racism has targeted people racialized as Black in the United States since slavery, through the Black Codes, forced prison labour, and Jim Crow segregation all the way to today's 'New Jim Crow' and the 'neo-slavery' of the Prison Industrial Complex (Alexander 2012; also James 2005; Blackmon 2008). Taking up Lewis Gordon's claim that we live in an 'antiblack world' (Gordon 1995), Afro-pessimism assumes that U.S. society is fundamentally built on and structured by this anti-blackness which has made it possible to arbitrarily enslave, imprison, harm, and kill people racialized as Black for centuries. Anti-blackness is therefore understood as inherent to U.S. society and entails violence which Wilderson describes as 'ontological and gratuitous' (Wilderson 2003: 229) or 'metaphysical' violence (Douglass and Wilderson 2013: 122) directed against people racialized as Black not contingent on any prior transgression (see Wilderson 2010: 17-18).<sup>[3]</sup>

In his ground-breaking film study *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonism* from 2010, Wilderson focuses on the structural positions of people racialized as Indigenous, white, and Black inside and outside of U.S. civil society. Rather than the experiences and performances of those three groups of people, he is concerned with the *structures* that have assigned them different positions with respect to civil society and have constituted U.S. civil society as fundamentally white supremacist and anti-black. In accord with Saidiya Hartman's contention that today is the 'afterlife of slavery' (Hartman 2007: 6), Wilderson argues, first, that 'Black' still means 'Slave' (Wilderson 2010: 7) or 'prison-slave-in-waiting' (Wilderson 2007: 18). Second, he contends that 'white' refers to the 'senior ... partners of civil society' (Wilderson 2010: 38). Third, Wilderson describes other groups of people subordinate to the 'white' but who fall out of the category of 'the Black,' such as immigrants of colour and to some extent Native Americans as 'the junior partners of civil society' (ibid.: 28).<sup>[4]</sup> In this argument, the white 'senior partners' are located at the centre of civil society, their 'junior partners' at its inside margins, and Black people are positioned 'outside of Humanity and civil society' (ibid.: 55).

Wilderson explains the locating of Blackness at 'the outside of Humanity and civil society' with Patterson's description of social death in slavery as 'generally dishonored,' 'open to gratuitous violence,' and 'void of kinship' (Wilderson 2010: 10-11; see, also, Patterson 1982). On this basis, Wilderson supposes that it is not legitimate to analogize between Black people who are positioned as socially dead outside of civil society and non-black people who are positioned civilly alive inside civil society. All attempts would fall prey to what he calls the 'ruse of analogy,' 'erroneously locat[ing] Blacks in the world — a place where they have not been since the dawning of Blackness' as well as mystifying and erasing the 'grammar of suffering (accumulation and fungibility or the status of being non-Human)' that Blackness entails in this argument (Wilderson 2010: 37). This is also why Wilderson describes the relation of Blackness to the world and 'the Human' (who is defined as not Black) as 'antagonistic' (ibid.: 5, 26), while the 'junior partners' have a dialectic and agonistic relation to civil society that leaves room for negotiation, no matter how small this room and the chances to have claims admitted might be.<sup>[5]</sup>

Wilderson's argument that the relation between Blackness and the world should not be understood as a resolvable conflict but as an incommensurable antagonism inextricably linked with the constitution of the white, male, 'Western' subject makes Afro-pessimism one of the most challenging and radical trajectories of U.S. Black Studies in recent years. If we consider this complex argument in relation to border conceptualizations, however, we may conceive of the antagonistic demarcation — between Blackness as social death outside of civil society and non-blackness as civil life inside civil society — as a distinct border concept not previously analysed as such. In fact, Wilderson uses the metaphor of a fortress built around civil society against Blackness to make the argument that 'Anti-Blackness manifests as the monumentalization and fortification of civil society against social death' (Wilderson 2010: 90). The structural bordering also becomes apparent when Wilderson explains that gratuitous violence 'against Blacks' lives' is necessary 'to actually produce the inside-outside [of civil society]' (Wilderson, von Gleich, and Spatzek 2016: 15). The border that demarcates the inside from the outside defines what 'humanness' and the subject concept mean by

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delimiting 'the Human' — or 'the genre of Man' (Wynter and Thomas 2006: 24) — from the 'non-Human' at the expense of the subjectivity of people racialized as Black by, in other words, ostracizing them beyond the realm of 'the Human.' This epistemological demarcation is absolute because it has not allowed any kind of movement across the border and no relation between the two sides other than as a structural antagonism with respect to Blackness.

The absoluteness of this border is also reflected by the ways in which it is supposed to have withstood any attempts to change its position and structure since its erection as part of the transatlantic slave trade. The changes that have taken place in the United States, for instance through the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, do not figure in the 'conceptual framework' (Wilderson 2010: 10, 57) and on the level of abstraction Wilderson calls for in his work. In fact, from an Afro-pessimist perspective, those endeavours have not fundamentally changed the structural positionality of Blackness outside of civil society other than as what Jared Sexton (2011: 5) has called 'permutations.' Since the socially, culturally, and historically important changes have taken place on the level of experience and performance, Wilderson and Sexton would argue that they have not disconnected Blackness from 'Slaveness' on a structural level (Wilderson 2010: 11). According to this argument, the constitutive nature of the demarcation of Blackness as 'Slaveness' from 'humanness' for civil society makes any form of change inside civil society seem futile in terms of structure. To align it with the register of the border, the changes have happened within civil society and have therefore not effectively dismantled the epistemological border structure that has enclosed civil society and demarcated it from Blackness understood as the outside of civil society — or, more precisely, making Blackness civil society's outside.

### Contact Zones and the Border to Social Death

Having established the 'Black border' between Blackness as social death outside of civil society and non-blackness as civil life inside, one may wonder in what ways the concept differs from other border concepts developed in American cultural and literary studies, such as Mary Louise Pratt's 'contact zone' (1991; 2008), Gloria Anzaldúa's 'borderlands' (1989), Homi K. Bhabha's 'third space' (1994), and Walter D. Mignolo's 'border thinking' (2000). Indeed, at first glance the 'Black border' exhibits commonalities with all four. All seem to use spatial tropes to conceptualize the relation of differently racialized people and their (im)possibilities in terms of dwelling and thinking as well as communicating within a specific epistemological space. Relations between these groups are rooted in colonialism and slavery, and their ongoing legacies are still affected by these origins. While some concepts, such as Pratt's 'contact zone,' construct borders as generally contingent, dialectic, and permeable, the 'Black border' I consider in Afro-pessimism appears absolute, antagonistic, and impermeable with respect to Blackness. In order to illustrate this, let me briefly compare and contrast the two.

The contact zone is well known within and beyond cultural and literary studies for its conceptualization of a space of cultural contact across asymmetrical power relations in the long aftermaths of colonialism, the transatlantic slave trade, and slavery in the Americas and the Caribbean. First coined in her essay 'Arts of the Contact Zone' and further developed in her study of European eighteenth and nineteenth century travel writing in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Pratt (2008: 4) defines contact zones as 'social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination — like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today.' Pratt conceptualizes (post-)colonial cultural contact and communication between the (former) colonizers and the (former) colonized and enslaved (ibid.). As she shows in her analysis of Guama Poma's writing, Pratt understands this contact as a form of forced conversation on unequal grounds in which 'the subordinate peoples' find ways to talk back and self-represent through 'transculturation' and 'autoethnography' (Pratt 1991: 36). In this way, the contact zone takes on the issue of resistance to subjugation and the role knowledge production and dissemination plays in this context. It therefore refers less to a specific geographical location and more to an improvised interpersonal and epistemological space for communication and interaction in the (post-)colonial world. The space the two parties enter is hierarchically structured, but it still leaves room for 'the subordinate' to negotiate with 'the dominant' and therefore also presupposes (a limited form of) agency on the side of the former.

Juxtaposing the contact zone with the border concept proposed here, the term *contact* already implies a relation that the 'Black border' seems to forbid with its assumption of a structural antagonism between Blackness and the world.

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By foregrounding the possibility of negotiation in a highly asymmetrical space, Pratt assumes that even though different groups of people do not possess the same position of or to power, they can still enter, live in, communicate across, and occupy the socio-symbolic space of the contact zone. Thus, it seems not too far-fetched to compare the position of 'the subordinate' in the contact zone with the position of Wilderson's non-black 'junior partners' located at the inside margins of U.S. civil society. From this point of view, contact zones could be found within civil society as spaces where Wilderson's 'junior' and 'senior' partners negotiate across asymmetrical power relations, whereas Blackness positioned as 'Slaveness' would provide the basis for these negotiation processes by enclosing civil society with the 'Black border.'<sup>[6]</sup>

### Fugitivity against the Border

But how can we grapple with Black sociability that happens against all odds on the other side of the border, where social death seems to deny Blackness any leeway for negotiation in or with civil society? If we look at the 'Black border' that condenses the Afro-pessimist arguments outlined above, there seems to be no place in Afro-pessimism or on the 'Black border' to apprehend the everyday lives of Black people and their battles and negotiations in the United States other than to consider them as being 'permutations.' This is because they figure on the level of experience with which Wilderson's conceptual framework seems hardly concerned. Nonetheless, scholars such as Saidiya Hartman and Fred Moten — whose work appears closely related to but arguably different from Afro-pessimism as developed by Wilderson — have attempted to mutually address Black sociability and the structural position of Blackness in the 'afterlife of slavery.' Interestingly, both draw — to different extents — on the long history of Black fugitivity to do so (see Hartman 2007; Moten 2009).

In a similar vein, the historian Tina M. Campt also draws on the concept of fugitivity in her landmark monograph *Image Matters* (2012) to examine the ways in which Black diasporic photography participated in community and identity formation in a hostile environment that negated Blackness. In her study of vernacular photography of Black German families (1900–1945) and portrait photography of 'African Caribbean migrants to postwar Britain' (1948–1960), Campt addresses the broad question of 'how do black families and communities in diaspora use family photography to carve out a place for themselves in the European contexts they come to call home?' (Campt 2012: 14). Campt puts the concept of fugitivity to direct use in her analysis of 'snapshot' photographs of the lives of Afro-German families in Nazi-Germany. Her image analyses reveal the ways in which the 'fugitivity of these photos lies in their ability to visualize a recalcitrant normalcy in places and settings where it should not be' (ibid.: 91). The images practice a form of fugitivity by displaying and thereby (re)creating spaces of private refuge for Black German subjects in Nazi Germany. Consequently, in her preceding discussion of definitions of the term *fugitive*, Campt explicitly includes those who 'cannot or do not remain in the proper place, or the places to which they have been confined or assigned' (ibid.: 87). Thus, for Campt, the images challenge us 'to see in [them] everyday practices of refusal, resistance, and contestation' (ibid.: 112) of and against 'the very premises that have historically negated the lived experience of Blackness as either pathological or exceptional to white supremacy' (Campt 2014: n.p.).

Admittedly, relating Afro-pessimism concerned predominantly with the structural positionality of Blackness in the United States to a concept of fugitivity developed with respect to vernacular photography of Black diasporic life in Europe seems quite a stretch — not only across different levels of abstraction but also across diverse geographies and histories. Nevertheless, when we juxtapose the 'Black border' in Afro-pessimism being proposed here with Campt's concept of fugitivity, we may imagine fugitivity as conceptualizing the 'lived experience of Blackness' as constant practices of 'refusal' to accept and to remain within the structurally ostracized position of social death. Fugitivity could then be understood as a constant running up against 'Slaveness' that — instead of successfully crossing or overcoming the 'Black border' — still remains on the outside of civil society where social death is located. In fugitivity, Black freedom as the supposed end of social death may be expressed and experienced, for instance through photography, but only as 'Fugitive Dreams' as the title of Hartman's last chapter of *Lose Your Mother* suggests (Hartman 2007: 211), without ever reaching a position from where to lay claims to civil society that has defined freedom as 'not Black/not Slave' for hundreds of years. In this way, fugitivity as a figure of thought enables us to accept the structural antagonism Afro-pessimism poses as well as reflect on the strategies and expressions of Black survival, perseverance, and sociability in an anti-black world, with the latter being unaccounted for in Afro-pessimism and exemplarily analysed in Campt's work.

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Yet by imagining fugitivity as running up against social death, I cannot help but fall back on the assumption of some form of Black agency in relation to the 'Black border' and the civil society it encloses, a 'capacity' that the concept of social death problematizes in Wilderson's framework (Wilderson 2010). No matter how tentatively I weigh my words to describe flight and the struggle to survive social death, the concept of fugitivity still demises to the fugitive some 'capacity' to act as a subject or agent. The question of agency — obviously inseparable from Black social life and arguably incommensurable with social death — appears as a central fault line when attempting to grapple with Black sociability and social death across the levels of structure and experience.

The supposed agency attached to the concept of fugitivity appears, however, reasonably different from the constrained agency of 'the subordinate' that the concept of the contact zone adopts. While Pratt would deem it possible to negotiate with and self-representing against Wilderson's white 'senior' partners towards change, the fugitive practices of refusal and the 'stealing away' of the socially dead assume a more indeterminate form of agency. In fact, an Afro-pessimist analysis of the structures that position Blackness as social death outside of civil society implies an utter lack of symbolic agency in relation to that society. Within this framework, fugitivity might merely comprise the capacity to flee and struggle against the border between social death and civil life, without causing more than reverberations of the otherwise intact border structure. Moreover, under the auspices of Afro-pessimism, the fugitive's running up against the border of social death from outside civil society is not a matter of choice but rather appears as the crux of Black social life doomed to social death. Understood in this way, Black sociability entails the capacity to survive, live, and struggle, using Campt's words, in places 'where it should not be' (Campt 2012: 91) and by extension seems almost congruent with fugitivity in social death.

However, fugitivity may conceptually account for fugitive experiences and performances as Black social life only as long as the 'Black border' remains intact and still positions Blackness outside of civil society and the world as 'Slaveness.' Consequently, Afro-pessimism would deem crushing the 'Black border' between 'Blackness-as-Slaveness' and 'humanness' as its ultimate ambition. Since Wilderson renders imagining Black freedom against the backdrop of today's 'afterlife of slavery' in this 'antiblack world' problematic, he maintains with Frantz Fanon that the world — built on the demarcation of Blackness from 'humanness' — would have to come to an end for Blackness to entail something other than social death (Wilderson 2010; Fanon 2008).<sup>[7]</sup> In other words, the antagonistic border regime of white supremacy and its junior partners that I suggest Wilderson points out could only be overcome if said epistemological border structure would be completely demolished.

## **Fugitive Conclusions**

Interpreting central Afro-pessimist assumptions as a border concept might not only help us to better understand Afro-pessimism. It also enables us to see how the premises of Afro-pessimism condensed in the 'Black border' differ from other well-known border concepts such as Pratt's 'contact zone.' When we conceptualize it as a border, the theoretical demarcation Afro-pessimism offers between non-blackness and Blackness, freedom and 'un-freedom,' and white social life inside civil society and Black social death outside of it appears insurmountable and absolute in its demarcation. The 'Black border' does not seem to allow for any dialectic relation between the two sides other than as a structural antagonism that disregards the level of experience. Fugitivity as elaborated by Campt might make it possible to account for Afro-pessimist assumptions about social death and reflect on the persevering 'lived experience of Blackness.' In this way, fugitivity might be understood as a running up against the absolute and impermeable border between social death and civil society that nonetheless remains intact. Consequently, fugitivity refers to a struggle for the transformation from 'Slaveness' to freedom that is not within actual reach but sought after as/in flight.

The challenge thus becomes thinking fugitivity together with Afro-pessimism because the former inevitably devolves a rudimentary 'capacity' to act in this world onto the fugitive that Afro-pessimism would call into question. This 'capacity,' however, has not entailed choice or triggered structural change, but has paradoxically warranted no more and no less than the enduring social life of the socially dead. In an Afro-pessimist framework, true agency would presumably mean bringing about the end of the world, or 'the freedom dream of a blackened world in which all might become unmoored, forging in struggle, a new people on a new earth' (Sexton 2010: 223). To pay heed to the potential realisation of this 'freedom dream' in the form of the end of the world while focussing on fugitive acts of

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refusal against social death within this world presents another important challenge of thinking fugitivity and Afro-pessimism together.

Instead of overriding the structural antagonism that locates Blackness outside of civil society and condemns it to social death and 'Slaveness,' I propose that we should instead consider how the Afro-pessimist argument and the concept of fugitivity together might bear the potential of regarding both social death and the enduring sociability of Blackness. My hope, for want of a better word, is that fugitivity might indeed function as a figure of thought that enables us to better appreciate fugitive practices of survival and resistance in the face of social death, but only if we also bear in mind the momentous challenges this fugitive thought experiment, which certainly needs further testing, abides. Ultimately, the question Black Studies has frequently addressed for centuries recurs: What does it take to dismantle the border erected between people defined as humans and people condemned to 'non-humanness' and to forge a new and truly all-encompassing concept of 'the Human'? Wilderson's answer, echoing Frantz Fanon, is as old as the question posed: 'the end of the world' as we know it.

## Notes

[1] In this chapter, I use the term *Blackness* to refer to the ongoing structural positionality that has been assigned to 'people racialised as Black' in the United States of America. The term *Afro-pessimism* references the radical trajectory of U.S. Black Studies that has theorized this position, most influentially in the work of Frank Wilderson (2010). Afro-pessimism is also influenced, for instance, by Frantz Fanon (2008), Saidiya Hartman (1997; 2007), Orlando Patterson (1982), Hortense Spillers (1987), and Sylvia Wynter (1994; 2006). It differs from the pessimist perspective on the future of Africa under the same name. For a more elaborate discussion of Afro-pessimism and the challenges it poses (not only) to European and to German American Studies, see Weier (2014).

[2] Parts of this essay are indebted to deliberations on Afro-Pessimism and a more detailed analysis of Wilderson's work in von Gleich (2015; 2016).

[3] The often-arbitrary cases of fatal police violence against unarmed African American men, women, and children are painful reminders of this violence that has disproportionately targeted and killed people racialized as Black in the United States. Some of the more recent cases, involving Sandra Bland, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, Tamir Rice, and Walter Scott, have been widely covered in U.S. public and social media because of social justice movements such as #BlackLivesMatter. On state violence and policing, see, for example, Martinot and Sexton (2003).

[4] In *Red, White, and Black*, Wilderson ascribes the structural position 'Red' to Indigenous people in the United States as distinct not only from the positions of the 'White' and 'Black,' but also from the 'junior partners' (see Wilderson 2010: 29–30, 48–50). In a recent interview, he slightly revised this assumption when he explained that 'In some ways, American Indians are a liminal category, and in other ways they are more profoundly on the side of "junior partners" and antagonistic to Blacks' (Wilderson, von Gleich, and Spatzek 2016: 14).

[5] Wilderson argues that in the liminal case of Indigenous peoples, the object of negotiation would be land and in the case of migrants of colour it would be 'immigrant rights' (Wilderson 2010: 3).

[6] For a more elaborate consideration of a border concept in Black feminist and Afro-pessimist interrogations of the category of 'the Human,' see von Gleich (2016).

[7] For a differently accentuated view on the ongoing endeavour of creating new encompassing concepts of 'the Human' in and through Black Studies, especially Black feminism, see Weheliye (2014).

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