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Is there “something to save”? Death and Hope in Afro-Pessimism, Queer Negativity, and the late Baldwin

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the connections and dissensions between two fields of thought, which scholars rarely discuss alongside each other: Afro-Pessimism and Queer Negativity. Through interweaving Baldwin’s late nonfiction and interviews with these two fields, I ask theorists of Afro-Pessimism and Queer Negativity questions concerning their understandings of death, subjectivity, temporality, and hope. In doing so, I do not seek to compare these methodologies against one another to fashion a hierarchy; rather I place these theories in conversation with one another in the hopes to find how Afro-Pessimism’s logic can challenge Queer Negativity and how Queer Negativity’s logic can further Afro-Pessimism. While these two theoretical fields are immersed in death, negativity, irredeemability, and hopelessness, I use the insights of late Baldwin to unfold Afro-Pessimism and Queer Negativity and then tie them together. Ultimately, I argue that these modes of thought are anything but hopeless and assert that hope is located in the intense, provocative, and generative power of their works themselves.
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Is there “something to save”?: Death and Hope in Afro-Pessimism, Queer Negativity, and the late Baldwin

There’s a stench in the air, which, from this
distance underground, might be the smell either of
death or of spring—I hope of spring. But don’t let me
trick you, there is a death in the smell of spring and
in the smell of thee as in the smell of me.
— Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man

In his June 16, 1984, interview with James Baldwin for The Village Voice, Robert Goldstein asks midway through their discussion, “Are you as apocalyptic about the prospects for sexual reconciliation as you are about racial reconciliation?” Baldwin replies, “Well, they join. The sexual question and the racial question have always been entwined, you know. If Americans can mature on the level of racism, then they have to mature on the level of sexuality.” While this quote is highly popular throughout Baldwin and race/sexuality scholarship, few critics cite Goldstein’s question which elicits Baldwin’s response. This statement of Baldwin’s is quoted excessively for its clarity and powerful assertion: race and sexuality are inseparable. However accurate, I want to go beyond this point and consider the implications of Baldwin’s claim and Goldstein’s question through the theoretical lens of Afro-Pessimism and Queer Negativity.

Here, race and sexuality are not just solely any race or any sexuality. Race and sexuality, in general, are certainly connected. Yet, Goldstein’s question points to a particular sexuality and a particular race—those that need to be reconciled. In effect, Goldstein’s use of “reconciliation”

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2 James Baldwin, James Baldwin: The Last Interview and Other Conversations (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2014), 64.
3 Baldwin, James Baldwin: The Last Interview and Other Conversations, 64.
glosses over the real subjects, as “sexual reconciliation” is sexual queerness and “racial reconciliation” is blackness. Even if we exchange “reconciliation” for queerness and blackness, a hierarchy of oppressions still persists in the question, measuring sexuality against race. In the interest of connection rather than comparison, I want to ask questions, similar in topic to Goldstein’s but with different aims: What does it mean to be apocalyptic about queerness and blackness? Do blackness and queerness have similar or different apocalypses? What is the particular process of apocalypse for queerness? For blackness? What comes after the apocalypse for both? Is there an aftermath at all to these apocalypses? As these apocalypses exist across everyday incidents and the *longue durée*, where can hope be found? Can hope be possible in the apocalypses of blackness and queerness? If so, what can we do with this potential for hope in the face of these seemingly inevitable apocalypses? And yet, what happens if hope is no longer possible?

At the beginning of the interview, Baldwin notes, “The word ‘gay’ has always rubbed me the wrong way. I never understood exactly what is meant by it.” I aim to invest this “rub”: the frictions and harmonies among blackness’s and queerness’s apocalypses and hopes. I ask theorists of Afro-Pessimism and Queer Negativity these questions through particular moments in Baldwin’s late nonfiction and interviews. More specifically, I think through Afro-Pessimism’s and Queer Negativity’s conceptions of death, subjectivity, temporality, and hope along with the connections and dissensions between these theoretical lenses. I use late Baldwin’s logic to unfold

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4 I use apocalypse in the plural to note both black apocalypse and queer apocalypse, so that the apocalypse of queerness does not conflate to the apocalypse of blackness and vice versa.
5 Baldwin, *James Baldwin: The Last Interview and Other Conversations*, 59.
6 Queer Negativity is somewhat a rephrasing of the antisocial thesis in queer theory. While the phrasing antisocial thesis is more widely known, I use Queer Negativity, as this is the more contemporary label and emphasizes the negativity with the theory.
these theories to then tangle them together, in the hopes to see how their critical investments challenge and further one another. In tracing Afro-Pessimism’s and Queer Negativity’s theories of death, I hope to locate where the potentiality lies, where we can find hope. I do not use the term “hope” in the context of Western liberal progressivity or utopic ends. I use hope, as a signifier of the critical, physical, emotional, psychological, individual, communal, national, and global work which Afro-Pessimism and Queer Negativity look toward with the unavoidable imminence of death and with the seemingly unattainability of hope. In the vein of Baldwin’s entwinement of race and sexuality, I entwine these theoretical modes with Baldwin’s understandings not to compare but to engage the two. Like Fred Moten’s ensemble, Alexander G. Weheliye’s assemblage, and Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman’s theory-through-dialogue, this project is about a collaborative conversation across fields and ways of being to see what this “rub” is and where this “rub” will lead us.7

**Intersections and Dissents: Black Studies and Queer Theory**

Before discussing the particularities of Afro-Pessimism and Queer Negativity, definitions of queerness and blackness, along with their general fields, are needed to place the overall relationship between the two. Of course, queer theory arose as predominantly white in its subject matter and considerations. Writers and theorists, such as Roderick A. Ferguson, Barbara Christian, Evelyn Hammonds, E. Patrick Johnson, José Esteban Muñoz, Jasbir K. Puar, Kathryn Bond Stockton, and Jack Halberstam, have attended to the field’s treatment of race “as an addendum.”8 However, more work needs to be done in this regard, for the whiteness of queer

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7 See Fred Moten’s *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, Alexander G. Weheliye’s *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*, and Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman’s *Sex, or the Unbearable.*

8 José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 11.
studies still persists. We see this most explicitly in the ways in which queer theory and queer of
color or black queer theory appear as separate entities in disciplinary categories and even indexes
of books. Even if one considers queer of color theory as a subfield of queer studies, the blackness
in the theory must be stated; otherwise, queer theory assumes whiteness.

A similar dynamic applies to black studies, for unless queer is stated in the title of black studies or in one of its projects, heterosexuality prevails as the assumption. Homophobia in the black community is certainty a partner in this, which has been thoroughly critiqued by Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, and other black feminist theorists. Similarly, systematic racism speaks to queer theory’s white default. This is not to say that the black community is more homophobic than others or that racism and homophobia are comparable injustices. The point is that social and political discriminations penetrate these theoretical modes. The fields’ focuses certainly contribute to this issue, as queer theory attends to sexuality and black studies to race. The issue is not the areas’ concentrations but is the assumptions which underlie their projects and manifest in their scholarship. In other words, queer theory and black studies have enacted the norm of the other: queer as white and black as heterosexual.

These theories and communities at large still enact these norms, perhaps, on more subtle levels or, perhaps, not so subtle registers. We witness this in one recent controversy concerning the rainbow flag. In the summer of 2017, the city of Philadelphia redesigned Gilbert Baker’s original rainbow layout by adding two stripes to its rainbow—one black and one brown placed above the rainbow. Philadelphia’s flag was a part of the city’s More Color More Pride campaign, aiming to illustrate gay liberation’s need for and enactment of inclusivity. Despite the flag’s intentions, its new design drew harsh criticism within the white gay community, as the critique
followed that the rainbow flag already represents everyone, and, thus, there is no need to modify it.\(^9\)

Again, we see this “rub” or, as Stockton notes, the “uniquely asymmetrical” quality between and within black and queer.\(^10\) Even considering all the brilliant work by those named above and many others, the entwinement of queerness and blackness remains volatile territory. In terms of my project, Afro-Pessimism and Queer Negativity are subfields within the realms of black studies and queer theory. While they certainly possesses their own specific methodologies, archives, and aims, these disciplinary subsets emerge from and operate within their broader fields’ pasts. In fact, these two practices came to be through critiquing assumptions within their own disciplines, and entwining their critical work together offers us new ways to explore blackness’s and queerness’s overlaps, divergences, and complications.

**Definitions and Positionalities: Afro-Pessimism and Queer Negativity**

With blackness and queerness, I do not use the terms interchangeably or suggest that one always already references to the other. On the surface, blackness may appear solely to signify the color of flesh, and queerness seems to only indicate a sex act of the flesh. While the body and, thus, ontology are central to both, blackness goes far beyond just color, and queerness extends that of just sex. Fred Moten’s study of black audio avant-garde and history, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, opens by defining blackness: “Blackness—the extended movement of a specific upheaval, an ongoing irruption that anarranges every line—is a

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strain that pressures the assumption of the equivalence of personhood and subjectivity.”

Blackness continuously eradicates stability and coherency between human and subject. However, blackness’s target for rupture is “specific” to Western ideology, which serves as the master voice of and for subjects and, thus, regulates who is and is not a subject or human. For Moten, blackness is not outside history or Western ideology but operates on a subaltern frequency within these worlds, acting as a sonic modality to give an alternative, more encompassing and profound account of beingness.

Afro-Pessimists take Moten’s definition and critique of Western hegemony a step further. They position blackness or, more specifically, antiblackness as constitutive of Western thought, politics, and society. Quoting Saidiya Hartman, Jared Sexton outlines Afro-Pessimism’s practice and object of study:

This “afterlife of slavery,” as Saidiya Hartman terms it, challenges practitioners in the field to question the prevailing understanding of a post-emancipation society and to revisit the most basic questions about the structural conditions of antiblackness in the modern world. To ask, in other words, what it means to speak of “the tragic continuity between slavery and freedom” or “the incomplete nature of emancipation,” indeed to speak of about a type of living on that survives after a type of death.

For Afro-Pessimism, slavery not only continues to live; it literally and figuratively fleshes out the West. For instance, freedom is not just liberation or independence. Freedom is a Western concept which comes to exist through its enforcement of antiblackness. This “REVIST[ING] OF THE MOST BASIC QUESTIONS” concerning ontology, slavery, freedom, life, death, and survival is where Afro-Pessimism lays and does its groundwork. In effect, asking “What is freedom?” is not a

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question solely about definition, but a question about on what “grammar of suffering”—“the grammar of assumptions regarding the ontology of suffering”—was this definition established.\footnote{Frank B. Wilderson III, \textit{Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms} (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 6 and 5.}

Additionally, Afro-Pessimism returns to terms, which are usually taken as universally understood, for universal understanding is Western understanding. More simply, the universal is the West, and the West forms through antiblackness. Frank B. Wilderson III discusses the ways in which universality speaks to Western violence against blackness. In \textit{Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms}, Wilderson’s finds that “Black positionality” is the locus of Afro-Pessimism’s analytics and, thus, catalyzes these interrogations of “the most basic questions.”\footnote{Wilderson, \textit{Red, White, and Black}, 58.} In doing so, Wilderson asserts that Afro-Pessimism “shits on the inspiration of the personal pronoun we.”\footnote{Ibid., 143.} This “we” signifies Western ideas of universal inclusivity, but as Afro-Pessimism argues, antiblackness functions as the basis for Western ideology and community, this “we” is predicated not on the exclusion of black bodies but on the psychological and physical trauma and suffering of them.

From the first question of his interview with Goldstein, Baldwin takes on this “we” of the West and, more particularly, of America. To begin the interview, Goldstein asks Baldwin, “Do you feel like a stranger in gay America?”\footnote{Baldwin, \textit{James Baldwin: The Last Interview and Other Conversations}, 59.} This initial inquiry signals his desired topic of discussion: Baldwin’s personal take on sexuality. Baldwin’s reply begins, “Well, first of all I feel like a stranger in America from almost every conceivable angle except, oddly enough, as a black person. The word ‘gay’ has always rubbed me the wrong way. I never understood exactly what is
meant by it.” Before commenting on the word “gay,” Baldwin calls himself “a black person,” which is not one of the reasons that he feels “like a stranger in America.” On the surface, his remark seems contradictory, considering America’s racism undoubtedly exists before, in, and after the time of this interview. Is Baldwin’s comment that a black person is a stranger in America contrary to America’s racism? In other words, is racism or, more specifically, antiblackness a stranger in America? For Baldwin and Afro-Pessimists, the answer is a resounding, ongoing, reverberating “No.” Baldwin’s reply points to how antiblackness is no stranger, outsider, or alien to America but structures the nation. Baldwin’s articulation of racism as non-stranger in America follows Afro-Pessimism’s evisceration of “the personal pronoun we.” The West, America, and “we” exist and maintain themselves through antiblackness. What are we do with Baldwin’s rub with “gay” and “gay America”? The term “gay” rubs Baldwin “the wrong way” partially due to its investment in Western identitarianism. Thus, antiblackness structures “gay” and especially “gay America,” as they are referential of the West and, in effect, antiblackness. Queer Negativity also has a problem with the way “gay” and “gay America” rubs it. Why is “gay” used in conjunction with America, when antiblackness is already suggested by naming the nation? Firstly, “gay America” places gay as inconsistent with America, locating gay outside the nation and, in turn, marking gay as exceptional to America. At the same time, the phrase implies a relationship between gay and America. Gay becomes a sexuality of and for the nation. Queer theorists, especially those on the side of negativity, would push against Goldstein’s phrasing and, like Afro-Pessimism, locate and

17 Ibid.
explore the “most basic” presumptions underlying “gay America” and the community this phrase fosters.

Firstly, scholars use the term “queer” rather than “gay” to reference sexualities that extend beyond that of (white) male-to-male desire. Additionally, even suggesting the possibility of “gay America” implies that queer sex can be normalized and sanctioned by the country. While some scholars of queer studies strive for “gay America” to become reality, theorists of Queer Negativity contest this desire. Queer Negativity resists normalization and institutionalization, as they define queerness by the radical nature of its queer sex. Thus, normalizing or institutional ventures, such as the right to marry and to participate in the military, follow LGBTQ+ activism rather than Queer Negativity’s aims. In other words, Queer Negativists find that queer, emptied of its revolutionary political and sexual charge, would be “gay America.” In effect, “gay America” may be possible, but “queer America” is the antithesis of queerness itself.

Queer Negativity began as and is most often termed the antisocial turn in queer theory. In 2006, *PMLA* published a roundtable discussion entitled “The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory,” which collected views from senior scholars, such as Robert L. Caserio, Lee Edelman, Jack Halberstam, José Esteban Muñoz, and Tim Dean, on queerness’s antisociality. While diverse in its archives, methodologies, and objectives, the debate among these theorists frequently condense to questions concerning either queer’s “political negativity” or “queer utopianism.” Similar to Hartman’s, Sexton’s, and Wilderson’s critique of Moten’s use of

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18 In contemporary queer scholarship, the definition of queerness has surpassed that of just sex and sexuality. Theorists now use queer in discussions on aesthetics, ecology, psychology, age, animal, objects and many other objects of study. For my project, I use queer in relation to sex and sexuality. Additionally, while the field of queer studies may be considered institutionalized, as it is a visible and recognized discipline, I am referring to the notion of queer, signifying its resistance toward institutional forms.

blackness, Edelman denounces queer utopianism because it fails to recognize “that organization depends on internal antagonism, on the self-constituting tension of negativity that forms of liberal utopianism.”\textsuperscript{20} Altogether, negativity is not outside or alternative to the social but is structurally essential to it, and queer negativity reads this construction through sexuality and sex acts.

At the same time, sexuality does not solely act as a lens for theorists of Queer Negativity, but it is the location for the most potent “undoing” of one’s self.\textsuperscript{21} Queer Negativists follow Leo Bersani’s view of sexuality in his landmark essay, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” In his piece, Bersani forgoes queer sex’s or even sex’s redeemability or optimist possibility by psychoanalytically mapping sexuality’s powerful “self-shattering” effects on the already-divided subject.\textsuperscript{22} Robyn Wiegman’s recent review of the queer theory’s turn to negativity notes how Bersani’s thesis stripped sexuality of repressive understandings, for he “conceiv[ed] of sexuality as resistant to the imperative to socialize our conception of it.”\textsuperscript{23} From this, Queer Negativity arose and found one of its primary voices in Edelman’s polemic, \textit{No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive}. Employing Lacan, Edelman theorizes his concept of “reproductive futurism” which is heteronormativity’s ideology based around the family’s and, more importantly, the Child’s futurity and locates “the possibility of queer resistance” “outside the political domain.”\textsuperscript{24} Queerness is “outside” the (heteronormative) social because queer bodies are non-reproductive.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{23} Wiegman, 220.
and, thus, cannot participate in heteronormative relations and futures established by sexual reproduction.

Yet, the social works to position the queer as “outside” its realm, which is structurally similar to Afro-Pessimism’s account of the West’s formation through and by antiblackness. In Sex, or the Unbearable, Edelman along with Lauren Berlant further this point by recognizing how queerness, negativity, and queer negativity are not merely “outside” the social but “intrinsic” to it. As heteronormativity rules the social, they make the point that queer bodies are politically, socially, and ontologically negative beings. Subsequently, the idea of “gay America”—a nation-building type of queerness—requires the queer to be not only normalized but productive in the heteronormative sexual, social, and political senses. In other words, the possibility of “gay America” requires a future which is not only unreachable to queer bodies but also, as Edelman argues, is illusory to all. For Edelman and other Queer Negativists, the future is an ever-deferred temporality, a “fantasy” which sustains the fantasy of heteronormativity’s “stability,” “coherence,” and “order.” In effect, “gay America” is an unattainable and undesirable ideal for Queer Negativity, as it not only enacts a future but enacts a future based on institutional integration and nationalist profits.

Death: Afro-Pessimism’s Ontological Battle and Queer Negativity’s Driving Force

Discussing Afro-Pessimism’s and Queer Negativity’s conceptions of death seems to echo the narrator of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man: “The end was in the beginning.” While Ellison’s narrator refers to the narrative construction of his telling, his statement certainly translates to Queer Negativity and Afro-Pessimism, as the end or death serves as a beginning for these

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26 Edelman, No Future, 7.
27 Ellison, 571.
thinkers too. These theorists turn to death is not purely an end or beginning; rather this turn speaks to endings, beginnings, and, ultimately, an ongoing ontological state for black and/or queer bodies. Death marks the starting point of these conversations, since coherent subjectivity, humanity, and even life are not guarantees for blackness and queerness. Seeing that the ontologies of blackness and queerness do not and cannot afford to take life as inherent to all beings, scholars of Afro-Pessimism and Queer Negativity must interrogate Western ideologies to show the constructed nature of innateness and inheritance. Without political, social, economic, or any recognized form of subjectivity, living is no longer a promise. Thus, death is who, where, and what thinkers of Queer Negativity and Afro-Pessimism must lead their explorations and questions, for death’s before (humanity, subjecthood) and after (inheritance, continuance) are not constituents for being queer and/or black. While their interests overlap, these theories tackle subjectivity and the future in differing ways. Their divergences push against theories of the other, subsequently furthering the considerations and possibilities of each.

Toward the end of his essay, “Down at the Cross: Letter from a Region in My Mind,” Baldwin reads humanity through death, as a way to motivate readers to think about death but not become paralyzed by it:

Perhaps the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death, which is the only fact we have. It seems to me that one ought to rejoice in the fact of death—ought to decide, indeed, to earn one’s death by confronting with passion the conundrum of life.  

For Baldwin, death is a centralizing nucleus for the living, but through psychological and religious powers, the living attempt to evade not only death itself but “the fact” of it. We should

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“rejoice” in this fact, Baldwin says, because evacuating death from life empties life of its
“beauty.” Here, one should also “earn one’s death” by intensely encountering and interrogating
“the conundrum of life.” While Afro-Pessimism and Queer Negativity do not advocate for
“rejoic[ing]” for or in death, Baldwin’s attention to “the fact of death” speaks to issue of
ontology and subjecthood in black and/or queer death.

On Wilderson’s site Incognegro.org, he has a page devoted to outlining
Afro-Pessimism’s definition and aim, and the first line of his piece reads: “Rather than celebrate
Blackness as a cultural identity, Afro-Pessimism theorizes it as a position of accumulation and
fungibility (Saidiya Hartman); that is a condition—or relation—of ontological death.”
Blackness within itself is death. Like “the personal pronoun we,” death is Westernized concept as
well as ontology. Frantz Fanon, a psychiatrist and philosopher whose work catalyzed
Afro-Pessimism, writes, “Ontology—once it is finally admitted as leaving existence by the
wayside—does not permit us to understand the being of the black man.” The West
overdetermines blackness’s affinity with death by inventing blackness along with major
philosophical modes to determine blackness as “ontological death.” No matter how the coin is
flipped—to blackness or death—the sides no longer matter, as they are the same under the
Western regime. And yet, blackness still signifies the real or, more precisely, the physical deaths
of blackness, those of countless unnamed slaves and those of black bodies throughout history
which have suffered and continue to suffer at the hands of the West.

Returning to Sexton’s statement quoting Hartman, Afro-Pessimism engages with the
“afterlife of slavery,” signifying major, irredeemable deaths by slavery preceding this

“afterlife”—”a type of living on that survives after a type of death.” This survival is not one of redemption, as Afro-Pessimism renounces the idealism of reparative readings. However, Sexton complicates blackness’s “ontological death” by furthering Baldwin’s point concerning life and death’s relation and relationality: “Rather than approaching (the theorization of) social death and (the theorization of) social life as an ‘either/or’ proposition, then, why not attempt to think them as a matter of ‘both/and’?” Instead of life and death being based on difference, life and death can co-exist and do so, as black bodies continue to life within the social despite and alongside their ongoing social death. Hartman’s “afterlife of slavery” does not signify slavery’s passing; rather it attends to the black lives lived within a world forever marked by and maintained through slavery. Hartman’s afterlife of slavery, Sexton’s social death, and Wilderson’s ontological death, however different in their conceptions of death, all find that blackness carries on the traumatic past of slavery. As Sexton notes, “[B]lack life is not social, or rather that black life is lived in social death.” Thus, black bodies are living within an ongoing death of and in the past that has yet to conclude.

Through Bersani and Edelman, Queer Negativity takes on “the fact of death” by means of the death drive. Bersani’s employs Freud’s use of the concept, while Edelman holds to Lacan. For Freud and Lacan, the death drive marks one’s drive, psychologically and behaviorally, toward death, in contrast to the drive toward sex, reproduction, and survival. Opposing the death drive’s traditional psychoanalytic connotations, Bersani and Edelman connect the death drive to sex, and in particular, queer sex. Edelman asserts, “[A]s the inarticulable surplus that dismantles the subject from within, the death drive names what the queer, in the order of the social, is called

32 Ibid., 22.
33 Ibid., 29.
forth to figure: the negativity opposed to every form of social viability.”\textsuperscript{34} The queer finds itself against all sociality and immersed in negativity, a specific negativity that tends toward death and sex rather than toward death but not sex. The connection between death and sex emerges from queer bodies’ inability to sexually reproduce and, thus, inability to productively engage in the social. Death for Queer Negativity is not grounded in ontological questions like Afro-Pessimism. Rather Queer Negativity finds death most potent in questions of temporality: the concept of not having a future. The queer bodies literally and figuratively embody the unattainability and, in turn, fantasy of futurity. Edelman also notes, “[A] death drive movement, a back and forth that betrays the insistence of something we can never resolve, get beyond, or make peace with.”\textsuperscript{35} Queerness’s enactment of no future—death—is certainly that something we are not able to “make peace with” because the idea of resolution or reparation is dependent on a future that queerness cannot and directly refuses to fix, whether for the better or worse unreachable future.

**Subjectivity: Afro-Pessimism’s Problem and Queer Negativity’s Failure to See It**

While it may be obvious in their titles, Afro-Pessimism and Queer Negativity both abstain from optimism, as it stems from prejudicial exclusion and fantasy. Each interrogate the work of reparative readings or “reconciliation,” not to forgo hope or life but to generate more productive and pragmatic understandings of black and queer processes of survival. Both question subjectivity as a way to interrogate optimism’s promotion of the subject as inherently good. In the vein of asking “the most basic questions,” Afro-Pessimism refuses to assume that blackness possesses subjectivity, personhood, and even humanness. In fact, their work actively shows that

\textsuperscript{34} Edelman, *No Future*, 9.
\textsuperscript{35} Berlant and Edelman, 28.
blackness can never be a subject or human under Western thought. Instead, as Hortense J. Spillers’s pathbreaking essay “Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book” asserts, blackness is flesh: “that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography.”

Flesh marks a being’s ontology before ideologies or discourses encounter it.

Again, as the West’s constitution depends on antiblackness, the subject—a Western creation—excludes blackness. In a 1969 interview titled, “Disturber of the Peace: James Baldwin—An Interview,” Eve Auchincloss and Nancy Lynchy ask Baldwin about the Negro, and Baldwin’s reply redirects the conversation to the issue of terminology:

Interviewers: Can a Negro ever talk about anything but being a Negro?
Baldwin: I get so tired of black and white, you know, so tired of talking about it, especially when you can’t get anything across. What you have to do, I suppose, is invest the vocabulary with something it doesn’t contain yet. Don’t you see what I’m trying to do? I’m trying to find another word besides Negro to say what I mean, and I can’t use tragedy.

Baldwin addresses the difficulty of talking about one’s experience and positionality, when the language available is structured around the exclusion of that experience. In other words, Negro is the Western term used to describe Baldwin and his experience, but the constructed identity of the Negro fails to “get anything across” that he desire to communicate. Afro-Pessimism’s critique of Western thought and language becomes apparent in Baldwin’s trouble with articulating himself through “vocabulary with something it doesn’t contain yet.” Here, blackness operates similarly to Negro; language cannot encapsulate these states of being, especially considering the vocabulary’s source.

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37 Baldwin, James Baldwin: The Last Interview and Other Conversations, 81(emphasis added).
Why does Baldwin refuse to use “tragedy” as a substitute term for Negro? Firstly, nothing can substitute the term Negro or blackness, as they are overdetermined by their ontological, historical, temporal, sexual, linguist, social, and political significances. Fanon notes the excessiveness tied to blackness: “I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: “Sho’ good eatin.’”\(^\text{38}\) Fanon’s discovery of blackness is really his discovery of the West’s view of him. Western language—blackness, Negro, and tragedy—rely upon antiblackness or, more precisely, is contingent upon “batter[ing] down” blackness with exorbitant symbolic meaning, so that it is emptied of personhood through its overflow of referents. However, this referential spillage does not arise from blackness itself. Quoting Ronald A.T. Judy, Wilderson asserts, “[T]he Negro is a symbol that cannot ‘enable the representation of meaning [because] it has no referent.’”\(^\text{39}\) The Western hegemony generates this referential overproduction with blackness. In doing so, the West uses antiblackness to define subjectivity and, ultimately, life, so that the West appears coherent and stable and blackness seems irrational and violently erratic. Within this space of blackness’s no-referential state, Afro-Pessimism challenges Western referential lineages regarding the connections among body, human, consciousness, and subjectivity because these links not only do not apply to blackness but also are predicated on undeterminable “grammar of suffering” experienced by black bodies.\(^\text{40}\)

Ultimately, Baldwin’s and Afro-Pessimism’s challenge of language leads to the challenge of subjectivity. How does Queer Negativity handle the problematic implications of the West’s

\(^{38}\) Fanon, 112.  
\(^{40}\) Wilderson, Red, White, and Black, 6.
language and sense of self? Put simply, it is not their question, for these theorists use Western language and philosophy to articulate and support their projects. The role of the West in their archives and terminology goes largely unnoticed. This lack of questioning is partially due to their interest in Western formations of the social, but again, the Western qualities of these formations remain unstated. Additionally, Queer Negativity presumes the subjectivity and human status of bodies. By returning to Bersani’s point of sexuality’s “self-shattering” effects, we find that the self, in some manner, exists before this sexuality-induced shattering occurs. While Queer Negativity regards the self as undone, it fails to ask: do queer bodies have selves or subjectivities from the start?; what determines one’s having of subjecthood?; and what is the connections among flesh, body, human, personhood, and subject?

For Queer Negativity and Afro-Pessimism, universal inclusivity is a fictitious liberal ideal striving for reparative understandings. Both fields note the pitfalls of desiring racial and sexual reconciliation. Like Afro-Pessimism, Queer Negativity refuses the fantasy of universality. And yet, Queer Negativity recognizes this universality as a symptom of neoliberalism rather than Western thought. If Queer Negativity refuses inclusivity, then the notion that all beings have subjectivity would fall short. At the same time, subjecthood and its ontological entanglements with body, human, and self remain knotted together for Queer Negativists. Queer Negativity and queer theory overall find a challenge in asking “the most basic questions” like Afro-Pessimism. Yet, this does not mean this task is impossible. By interrogating the very existence of subjectivity, Queer Negativity may find a clearer image of their aims. Edelman urges us to treat futurity as the fantasy and radically reside in the present and just that. Dismantling institutions to just erect new ones requires a future to work and look toward. Thus, Edelman argues, “[T]he aim
of queer negativity is rather to hammer [institutions and other normalizing entities] into the dust” and leave them as that. If subjectivity, self, and humanness are the cornerstones of Western thought, refusing to take them as givens would certainly destabilize the powers that be. In effect, Queer Negativity’s recognition of subjectivity as a privileged promise rather than a guarantee would already do the work it pursues—to leave neoliberal Western ideologies in “the dust.”

**Temporality: Afro-Pessimism’s Boundless Past and Queer Negativity’s No Future**

Afro-Pessimism and Queer Negativity locate negativity in different temporal registers. Afro-Pessimism discusses the ways in which slavery’s past is unending, as slavery marks all time and all blackness that follows it. Queer Negativity lays its interest in the future or, more specifically, the fantasy of it. Queerness aims to embody a constant state of radical presentism, in order to avoid falling into the illusion of the future. These temporal focuses appear to be the antithesis of the other—blackness with ongoing past, queerness with a nonexistent future—yet queerness’s treatment of time may benefit blackness’s temporal understandings.

Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* directly tackles black bodies’ inheritance of slavery’s trauma. Sharpe’s uses the term “wake” to temporally and spatially indicate the time of slavery’s beginning to the contemporary moment, as slavery’s presence is still felt and subjected on black bodies. With this, she notes, “In the wake, the past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present,” and refers to Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s concept of the past as “a position,” and “[t]hus, in no way can we identify the past as past.”

Under Afro-Pessimism, both blackness and “pastness” are positions rather than bounded categories or

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limited systems of knowledge. Further into her monograph, Sharpe summarizes the state of
“Black positionality” in terms of slavery’s “singularity”:

In the United States, slavery is imagined as a singular event even as it changed over time
and even as its duration expands into supposed emancipation and beyond. But slavery
was not singular; it was, rather, a singularity—a weather event or phenomenon likely to
occur around a particular time, or date, or set of circumstances. Emancipation did not
make free Black life free; it continues to hold us in that singularity. The brutality was not
singular; it was the singularity of antiblackness.

Singularity, for Sharpe, does not imply a singular entity, for she uses the physics definition of the
term, which connotes “a point or region of infinite mass density at which space and time are
infinitely distorted by gravitational forces and which is held to be the final state of matter falling
into a black hole.” There is more than an afterlife to slavery; there is also an infinite state of
“brutality” and death fleshed out in anti/blackness. Black bodies inherit the trauma of slavery, an
infinitely transforming and existing death, which simultaneously extends and collapses time and
space to find itself in “the singularity of antiblackness.”

What if we were to apply Queer Negativity’s forgoing of the future to Afro-Pessimism?
Baldwin has words to help situate this question. In her 1979 interview with Baldwin titled,
“James Baldwin: No Gain for Race Relations,” Hollie I. West writes, “Baldwin is nearly as
articulate in his speech as in his celebrated writing. And on this day his words have painted a
paradox. All during the interview he has said he’s an optimist. So why is he voicing such
pessimism?” To that, Baldwin responses: “It’s a contradiction… When I say I’m not a
pessimist, I mean that I don’t consider that everything is lost even though I don’t see how we’re

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43 Referring back to Wilderson’s observation that Afro-Pessimism concentrates on “Black positionality.”
44 Sharpe, 106.
45 Sharpe, 106, quoting Merriam-Webster Online.
46 James Baldwin, Conversations with James Baldwin, eds. Fred L. Standley and Louis H. Pratt (Jackson: University
Press of Mississippi, 1989), 172.
going to have a future or even present.” While Baldwin says he is not a pessimist because he does not believe “that everything is lost,” he remains unsure about what the current moment and the time to come. Baldwin’s statement does necessarily suggest that he entirely aligns with Queer Negativity’s disavowal of the future. At the same time, his apprehension toward futurity speaks to Queer Negativity, as Baldwin questions the possibility of a future and worth of striving toward it.

With Afro-Pessimism’s focus on the past of slavery rupturing all that comes after it, what would happen to the inheritance of slavery if the future was treated as fantasy? This is definitely easier asked than theorized. This is not to say that Afro-Pessimism is invested in maintaining the inheritance of slavery because their thinkers currently do not view the future as an ever-deferred temporality. By its logic, Afro-Pessimism partially supports Queer Negativity’s concept of the future as illusion maintain the continuance of the social because asserting no future undermines Western ideologies. My aim is not to critique Afro-Pessimism’s understanding of the past as a position and slavery as an non-concluded, traumatic event. I think playing with the notion of the future as fantasy, which is integral to Queer Negativity, may afford Afro-Pessimism another articulation of the “afterlife of slavery” and may allow slavery to be stripped of its inherited status.

How would Afro-Pessimism’s theorizations of slavery’s “singularity” change if the future is seen as fantasy? On the surface, Afro-Pessimism does not engage with the future, yet for slavery’s “singularity” to have its infinite, boundless impact in and on time, it needs a future for this to transpire. Taking the future as nonexistent would alter the continuance of slavery’s

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afterlives. However, saying that the future is a fantasy does not preclude time from progressing; consequently, naming the future as fantasy would not automatically rid slavery’s marker from time. Queer Negativity’s call for no future functions as a complete dismantlement of the social, West, and anything that needs a future to be recognizable and coherent. Claiming a similar polemic against futurity may be a way for Afro-Pessimism to tackle and work toward undoing slavery’s “singularity,” not to forget slavery’s cruelty but to halt its continuance of violence on black bodies for the West.

**Hope: The Work of Afro-Pessimism’s and Queer Negativity’s “Rub”**

While in dialogue with Edelman, Berlant takes note of their practice’s limitations: “As with sex and politics, theory is that to which we look both to disturb things and to repair them. But Lee and I begin with problems that are not reparable by theory or, perhaps, by anything.” These irresolvable “problems” of death, subjectivity, temporality, and hope are just a few irredeemable and undeterminable issues within Afro-Pessimism and Queer Negativity. While a problem’s irreparability would usually suggest hopelessness, Afro-Pessimism and Queer Negativity locate the most productive hope in these hopeless endeavors. We see this near the end of *Black Skin, White Masks*, as Fanon states, “In a savage struggle I am willing to accept convulsions of death, invincible dissolution, but also the possibility of the impossible.” Despite their monikers of pessimism and negativity, Afro-Pessimism and Queer Negativity interrogate “the impossible” to see “the possibility” within it. Thus, hope is not traceable to one of their focuses or methods; it is instilled in the practices themselves.

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48 Berlant and Edelman, 71.
49 Fanon, 218.
In his manifesto-like piece, Sexton’s “Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear World” ends with: “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.”⁵⁰ In Sex, or the Unbearable, Berlant concludes her theory-through-dialogue practice with Edelman by noting, “Structural consistency is a fantasy; the noise of relation’s impact, inducing incompletion where it emerges, is the overwhelming condition that enables the change that, within collaborative action, can shift lived worlds.”⁵¹ Sharpe’s In the Wake opens with questions concerning how “to tend to” Black people and their dead, and her answer is, “It means work. It is work: hard emotional, physical, and intellectual work that demands vigilant attendance to the needs of the dying, to ease their way, and also to the needs of the living.”⁵²

Here are the ultimate “rubs”: these contacts, connections, and collaborations across Afro-Pessimist and Queer Negativist thought. Sexton’s call for “those still willing to fight,” Edelman’s and Berlant’s call for world-shifting “collaborative action,” and Sharpe’s call for “hard emotion, physical, and intellectual work” all see hope in these attitudes and actions. By putting these fields in direct conversation with one another, we see how Afro-Pessimism’s and Queer Negativity’s conceptions of death, subjectivity, and temporality all relate and complicate one other, fashioning larger conversations, projects, and work to be done.

Near the beginning of Red, White, and Black, Wilderson points to Baldwin’s essay “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy,” to emphasize how the structure between whiteness and blackness precludes blackness from empathy. He quotes this line from Baldwin: “There is a

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⁵¹ Berlant and Edelman, 125.
⁵² Sharpe, 10.
difference between Norman and myself in that I think he still imagines that he has something to save, whereas I have never had anything to lose.”⁵³ While Wilderson’s reads this as a “barring” of blackness from empathy, I think Baldwin’s statement forces us to ask generally: Is there “something to save”? and Is there “anything to lose”?⁵⁴ Afro-Pessimism and Queer Negativity extensively chronicle the physical, emotional, psychological, sexual, political, and social losses tied to blackness and queerness. Through their engagements with loss, death, irredeemability, pessimism, negativity, and hopelessness, Afro-Pessimism and Queer Negativity both find “something to save” in the act of saving. In other words, these fields work to save current understandings of saving, redemption, and reparability through their refusal to save the social and West from themselves. Instead, Afro-Pessimism and Queer Negativity work through the hopeless to find hope in the very act of their work. Whether dead or living, being or subject, an ongoing past or nonexistent future, Afro-Pessimism and Queer Negativity “rub” against, alongside, and across one another, hoping through their work to make impossibility possible and possibility impossible.

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Bibliography


