The Paradoxes of Blackness: Everything and Nothing All At Once

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Abstract

The Global capitalization of slavery was a strategically complex system to develop the world economically, politically, and socially for the domination of whiteness. Through the erasure of historical narratives, whiteness has aimed to produce a narrative where Black people enter history as slaves. Social death is a concept that is believed to be the state of Blackness through the time and space of slavery where the enslaved were robbed of their personhood and subject to gratuitous violence. This becomes more complex once we examine the truths around Black history and how these conditions of enslavement are still present in the way Black people are treated today. Black people did not enter as slaves, nor did they actually undergo the process of social death. We survive in what has been coined to be the afterlife of slavery. The afterlife of slavery maintains institutional systems of oppression that still disadvantage Black people inciting violence and anti-Black terror against them. Slavery was never abolished; it has simply been reproduced and manufactured into contemporary structures. In this discussion, I have drawn upon the research of scholars to formulate an analysis of how Blackness is constructed and its ways of being.
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To Triston, Marty, Madi, Simien, and Myla and your future Black world
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Introduction

It is impossible to address the history and formation of the world without discussing the permeation of slavery. The wealth and infrastructure of the globe was built off displacement and enslaved labor. Slavery is the transformation of people into commodities, but this transformation is only maintained through extreme violence and social death. “Social death” is a concept introduced by Orlando Patterson in his book *Slavery and Social Death*. Social death is the process in which society disregards and rejects an individual or collective and treats them as if they are non-existent or non-human. This facilitates the loss of social identity discarding their sense of power, agency, and autonomy. (Patterson, 1982) Social death is inherent to the process of slavery and has been found to be the commonality that exists across all examples of slavery in recorded history. In chattel slavery, social death explains the state of Blackness in which Black people are not recognized as fully human and therefore are considered disposable, treating them as if they are non-existent or dead. Through the erasure of historical narratives, whiteness has aimed to produce a narrative where Black people enter history as slaves with no past outside of their engagement with European colonial forces. Chattel slavery was the vessel for the process of social death where African peoples were animalized, considered property, and were forced to relinquish their social power in the face of murder and violence. Who they were before enslavement no longer existed, in fact it never existed. Any attempt to connect to their cultural ties and individuality was met with extreme violence and consequences. This loss of identity and power is the closest one can get
to physical death without being killed, although physical death is the inevitable outcome of social death and slavery. This becomes more complex once we examine the truths around Black history and how these conditions of enslavement are still present in the way Black people are marginalized today. Black people did not enter history as slaves, nor did they actually undergo the process of “social death”. To be socially dead is to be non-existent and without a history but Blackness is full of existence and history. Social death is not to say that Blackness is not imbued with life and culture, but it is simply meant to be theorized as a concept central to the political ontology of Blackness. What Blackness is and is becoming is not literally social death, but the concept of social death explains the conditions and experiences that those racialized to be Black are vulnerable to. This paradox is what makes conceptualizing Blackness so complex. I found myself navigating this paradox throughout choosing the direction of my research. Initially, my project was inspired by my experiences studying abroad in London. I wanted to examine transnationality and how Blackness translates across the experience of migration, but to answer that I had to first understand what Blackness is and how it is constructed. Throughout my project I refer to this notion as an ontology which explains the reality of existence, ways of being, and ways of becoming. (Webster) More specifically, I will be looking into the ontology of Blackness to understand what Blackness is, where Blackness became, and how Blackness can become.

My research is inspired by navigating my own positionality as a displaced African living in a settler-colonial state. Through the process of chattel slavery, I have
been racialized as Black and have been struggling to navigate that space since I became conscious of it. I grew up in a community where Black pride was promoted across the community, but it was also permeated by internal and external anti-Black sentiment. In the sixth grade, my South African band teacher asked my band class to participate in the Black history month assembly. He asked the girls to perform a choreographed dance and taught us the song Siyahamba which means “We are marching”. He taught us about the Zulu language and how this served as a protest song during the anti-apartheid movement. He also made us dress in all Black and wear dashiki fabric around our waist and taught us about how Dashikis originated in West Africa. The entire assembly was a big celebration of culture and an opportunity to be in community with other Black people experiencing the same joy and pride.

Later, in my sophomore year of high school, I got selected to attend a free summer program at Cornell University cultivated to allow BIPOC students to experience a free academic space in which they could have transformative educational experiences rooted in critical thinking and community. It was there that I was first introduced to Black Feminist Thought by two Black women professors who I am still closely connected to today. This program was such a transformative experience and gave me a space to name and learn about my experiences with Blackness and understand the intersectionality of my Blackness. It was there that I was first introduced to a glimpse of my true self, my true history, and how the world works systemically and structurally in relation to Black people. It was only my second week at the program where a casual trip to the convenience store with friends turned into a hands-on experience to everything I had been learning in class. While shopping at 7/11, my
friend accidentally spilled a slushy on the ground and the workers became very
hostile as we asked them for napkins to clean it up. The worker flagged in the police
that were coincidentally lingering outside and insinuated that we were inebriated and
attempting to distract the workers so that we could steal. The police ran with this
narrative and assumed that our IDs issued to us by Cornell were fake and it was
impossible that we belonged to any participating summer program the institution was
hosting. Luckily, we were able to call our program coordinator who happens to be a
white woman working at the institution. It wasn’t until she got there and stepped in to
talk to the police that they believed what we were telling them to be true. Their
demeanor instantly became less combative once she told them that we were students
in her program but what they really heard is that we were legitimized in that space
because we “belonged” to her. Without her stepping in, I could only imagine how
different that scenario may have concluded but I can’t help but be critical of how this
micro-aggressive experience—in addition to countless others that I would experience
while navigating upstate New York—exemplifies how Blackness cannot simply be
without persecution. This wasn’t the first time I experienced racist and anti-Black
incidents and it surely wouldn’t be the last, but it was the first time I could remember
being able to have the language to name and further conceptualize what it meant to
exist as Black. These contrasting experiences led me to question how could my
Blackness be capacious of both the experiences of joy and pride and the anti-Black
experiences that aim to produce me as a criminal, denying my agency? How is it that
I grew up in communities that taught me the power in embracing Blackness while
simultaneously being saturated with the rhetoric of anti-Blackness. These notions are
conflicting, paradoxical, and discontinuous and it has been something that I am trying to be critical of as I am decolonizing my understanding of Blackness. My project serves as a gesture towards understanding Blackness to which I must first understand how Blackness is constructed and who is responsible for its construction.

Above all, race is a social construction birthed out of colonialism. There is no definitive way of defining and experiencing Blackness in a specific space and time because Blackness is everything, everywhere, all the time. This leads me to my research question which is what is Blackness, how has it been constructed, and by whom? The sources I am drawing from will examine the following questions: How and when do we enter as Black? What is the phenomenology of Blackness? How does the concept of ontological plasticity produce Blackness as super-human, sub-human, and human at the same time? How is social death maintained by the logic of Blackness and what are its logics? Furthermore, as my argument shifts away from the construction of Blackness and anti-Blackness, I will question the following: How can concepts such as Black aliveness and Black worldmaking help to imagine a space in which Blackness can simply just be free and thrive? How do we transform our story of Blackness from life to aliveness? How do we reject the world of anti-Blackness and create a world that embraces Blackness? What would that require?

**Conceptualization of Race**

To be able to conceptualize Blackness we must first be able to conceptualize race. Race is a social construct that is a product of whiteness. It has no biological
application and facilitates the way the world perceives you based on your relation to whiteness. It is a political category that has been disguised as a biological one. Race operates as a global system of power and domination that arises along with and legitimizes European conquest. It is grounded in the belief that there are these inherited and fixed biological characteristics that can separate people into categories (Morning, 2011) Race is completely influenced by your phenotype because how you present racially determines how people value you and the extent to which you are considered a disposable (Roberts, 2011). This would mean that the ontology of Blackness is a political ontology that relies on the continuity of phenotype for racial stratification. Race itself may be made up but its consequences are very real. Racism is the discrimination, mistreatment, and degradation of people based on the political racial grouping they have been assigned to (Roberts, 2011). Race is a vessel in which groups of people become stratified. It determines who is disposable and is enacted to create a hierarchy to maintain whiteness. In this global hierarchy, whiteness is always positioned on top as the most valuable human and Blackness is consistently positioned on the bottom as the most abjected. The concept of Blackness is a historical phenomenon. Blackness was birthed out of slavery attempting to categorize as many people as Black to create a bigger labor force for commodification. Those who were labeled Black were stereotyped as lazy, threatening, and unholy therefore legitimizing their enslavement because they inherently were not considered “good” or moral beings (Fanon, 1952). Race is the vessel in which the construction of Blackness has been produced given that it is a social categorization to which racial difference is ascribed. Race is often misconstrued as being based on its biological and genetic
conceptualization, but it is rather based on its sociocultural relationship with other conceptualizations that also aim to classify differences (Hall, 1997). Furthermore, this facilitates the paradoxical complexities that occur through conceptualizing race because it is under constant reconfiguration depending on its relationality. The term “floating signifier” was coined in the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss where the signifier cannot be signified by a definitive object or interpretation. Race is an example of a floating signifier given that it is subject to change based on the context of its relationships claiming that there is no fixed definition or meaning (Hall, 1997). As a result of race being a floating signifier, racism as its consequence is relative, arbitrary, and subjective. In retrospect, we are not questioning whether there is evidence that race exists, but we are questioning how it works and what labor it performs. These racial categories become real through ideologies and in the everyday routine of institutions. Race and other social constructs require ideology—or what Bonilla-Silva likes to call “meaning working in the service of power” (Bonilla-Silva, 2009) ---in order to enact domination based on categories. Race becomes real because ideology provides practical maps for our day-day lives: “Ideologies are the frameworks of thinking and calculation about the world, the ideas with which people figure out how the social world works, what is their place it, and what they ought to do,” (Bonilla-Silva, 2009) Ideology and its idea materialize in language and behavior that occur in social sites such as schools, families, homes, prisons, etc. Ideology and racial categorization provide the mental roadmap to be able to allocate resources differently to people and treat people differently on the basis of the category they are assigned to. Race is made real through institutions and interactions and especially through
institutional practices aimed at preserving white racial hierarchy and domination. These are practices that manifest in the routine of everyday life and do not require intent. Ideologies can obscure and naturalize everyday action that perpetuate and maintain the logics of racism. We are examining how the concept of race shows up in the realities in which we live and how that works to construct notions of Blackness.

**Constructions of Blackness and Social Death**

Social death is characterized by its three main elements. The first pillar of social death is called natal alienation which refers to the lack of recognition and the separation of the slave from culture and biological ties. The difference between slavery and exploitation in Orlando’s position is that slavery entails the purposeful severing of kinship ties. Slave auctions and land dispossession became a vessel in which the enslaved were separated from their family and their ancestral roots. We first learn the importance of community and love through our family and kinship ties (Hooks, 2000). The narrative of slavery iterates that Africans went into slave ships and were produced as Black once they got off. Who, how, and where they were before this process is no longer significant because it no longer exists. To be a human and or part of a group there must be a history or ways of being before enslavement. If you do not have a consciousness of your people and where you are from, then you do not know who you are, and therefore are from nowhere. Kinship and family lineage are also a means to gain social capital and upward social mobility. Members of the same lineage are “intrinsic to one another’s existence” (Sahlins, 2013). The relationships that we intrinsically are tied to function as networks and support systems
in which a group of people rely on one another for survival and mobility. In a lot of family dynamics siblings, parents, cousins, etc. all participate in a social network that is based on the survival and care of each other. These networks are supported by affiliations with resources that are imagined to be accessible by all its members. All these factors contribute to upward social mobility which has historically been the main element of kinship foundations. The severing of these types of networks was deliberate to ensure that the enslaved had no access to community, love, support, and “mutuality of being” (Sahlins, 2013). It was done to isolate them so that they couldn’t feel connected to the people they were intrinsically tied to or the lives and histories they knew before.

The second pillar is general dishonor which speaks to the legacy of slavery that follows Black people despite degrees of freedom. The slave is disgraced in its very being before any wrong thought or action can be committed. (Wilderson, 2020) It didn’t matter if the enslaved were trusted with important responsibilities because “even though one might be extremely influential and powerful, at times the subject of honor, they were still considered generally degraded persons because of slave status” (Franklin, 1983). Although Black enslaved people were permitted to forgo significant tasks like overseeing of the slaves or caring for the master’s children, they were still positioned as a slave and no position of honor or responsibility could surpass that status. (Patterson, 1982) Although white people didn’t view Black people as human, they had no reluctance in allowing Black people to perform their reproductive labor and making the enslaved police and punish other slaves. The third pillar of social
death is gratuitous violence which refers to violence that exceeds utility or rationality. Gratuitous violence is given out prior to transgression. To say the slave is open to gratuitous violence is to say that they are structurally vulnerable to all systems of violence prior to any infraction (Wilderson, 2020). The slave’s very existence as a slave legitimizes this violence. The convergence of these three pillars positions the slave in a unique position. Social death robs Black people of the capacity to participate in the social world. Africans did not exist before slavery. They went into slave ships and came out Black. There is no power in the lack of social agency therefore there’s no “ontological resistance” that Black people can offer in the face of slavery (Moten, 2008). Moreover, Blackness is a commodity or an object status. It has no access to things like political deliberation, subjective expression, and shared histories. Commodities are fungible or substitutable relationships, and there is no ethical relationship that humans can have with commodities. The only relationship that occurs between the human and the commodity is ownership and the accumulation of capital. Essentially, this space of social death is where the commodification of Blackness is produced. The racial logics of chattel slavery that placed whiteness as superior to Blackness is still present today and manifests as the afterlife of slavery. The afterlife of slavery is “skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment” (Hartman, 1997). Essentially, the ramifications of slavery are still unfolding in the present moment. Saidiya Hartman has come to name this phenomenon the “afterlife of slavery” because we have not addressed the catastrophic impacts of chattel slavery and its afterlife’s impact on our everyday life. This includes a racial calculus that doesn’t see
Black people as humans, allows police to gun down Black people in the streets, and inequities that infiltrate all aspects of society. The past and pastness are both cultural and social inventions that create an illusion of separation between yesterday and today (Wright, 2015). This isn’t to say that chattel slavery exists today as it did in the 1800s, however, it is inaccurate to assume that the abolition of slavery ended the racial system underneath. The afterlife of slavery demonstrates historical continuity and shows how power changes its form over time but the system and its logics stay the same. The afterlife of slavery can show us where the philosophies, practices, and inequities of slavery exist, in our contemporary world.

Black is a term that was invented through the process of chattel slavery. The larger the population they could categorize as “Black”, the larger the labor force they could cultivate hence the one-drop rule. Skin color does not automatically deem you Black because DNA is a fallacy of Blackness because there is no Black gene. There are groups of people that physically resemble each other and share the same cultural ancestry but there is nothing inherent in their DNA and genetic makeup that makes them Black (Wright, 2015). The term Black has been reclaimed by Black people but the term was originally invented by European colonialists. Only white geneticists view Black as a scientific biological category. Socially and politically, we view Blackness as anyone who is a descendant of west Africa by way of the “middle passage”. We assume Blackness as starting with the Atlantic slave trade and the arrival to the Americas, and then we move through slavery to emancipation which is a step towards progress, and then we’re pushed back because of Jim Crow and the rise of incessant racial violence, and then we move forward with the civil rights
movement, and then we move back with the incarceration of political prisoners, war on crime, and pushback against civil rights and so on.

To understand how Blackness is experienced we must seek to understand Africa as a source, and we must seek to understand its contributions. The fact of Blackness is the fact of Africaness. Enslavement didn’t mean African practices and traditions stopped. Our culture does not remind us of Africa because it is Africa. Throughout history, African descendants have found ways to preserve African culture and traditions while being suppressed by their host country (Lovejoy, 1991). Culture has been primarily preserved through traditions and religious practices as we can see tangible through the archives of music, hairstyles, foods, and spiritual practices. Creolization is the infusion and merging of different cultures to create a new culture (Lovejoy, 1991). This is essentially what occurred within diasporic communities that were brutalized for practicing their culture while simultaneously being forced into the assimilation of whiteness. Not every aspect of each culture could be preserved because there were far too many cultures that varied in tradition and way of life so that it was impossible to have a solid foundation (Mann, 2001). Their indigenous cultural practices in addition to the practices that emerged had to both become relevant to create a community in an effort to survive. Eurocentrism has tried to erase the complexity and vastness of Africa completely negating the fact that there were so many different cultures that were dispersed, forced to interact, and create community with people they couldn’t initially communicate with. In the myth of the negro past, Herskovits has coined the term Africanisms which he refers to as a set of cultural traits or practices within diaspora African communities that trace back to Africa. With
this concept, Herskovits was trying to combat the assumption that Black people in the United States have no culture and therefore no history. Furthermore, Lovejoy is making connections between Black people in diasporic communities and relates it back to similar practices in various parts of Africa. Through the process of chattel slavery and social death, European colonialists worked endlessly to expunge Blackness of its roots.

Social death explains the ontological position of Blackness and how structures of violence have been produced and maintained to marginalize Black people. It can be understood how slavery facilitated the process of social death through complete psychological, physical, and social alienation. Social death is essentially a condition that defines the existence of Blackness, but it is not the only concept that defines the experience of Blackness. Social death is present in the ontology of Blackness because it explains Blackness in relation to the world, but it does not account for the consciousness of Blackness. Phenomenology is “the science of the essence of consciousness” (Husserl, 1931). It loosely refers to the study of that which is or that which appears. More specifically it refers to the study of the mind through subjective lived experiences. It is predicated by intentionality and centered “in the first person” (Husserl, 1931). Phenomenology aims to create an objective science of subjective experiences. The method of doing this is to reflect upon one’s own subjective experience and analyze it as objectively as possible. It is a science of consciousness highlighting that if we can understand subjective experiences then we can understand lived experiences. This conscious experience requires the presence of self-awareness because it informs the type of social situations and behaviors that are produced out of
this awareness. This awareness is also defined as introspection as it is the foundation to understanding one’s internal experience. (Gutland, 2018) Phenomenology focuses on the “when” and “where” this consciousness occurs. Furthermore, these locations of when and where are considered symbolic and literal locations that occur through space and time (Wright, 2015). Black is not a what but rather a question of which is, and which appears and when and where it appears as such and how. If Blackness operates within the ideology of race and race is a floating signifier, then there is no “common denominator” of Blackness because it transforms depending on its context. Blackness cannot be definitively located on the body, nor can it be defined by one fixed experience. In phenomenology there is no fixed way to experience Blackness meaning that it is fluid in appearance, performance, and exposure. Blackness is endless and must be imagined based on perception (Wright, 2015). We must then question the level of agency Black people have in constructing this perception. The phenomenological understanding of Blackness “sheds light on issues of exclusion and lack of agency, it also raises troubling questions: most pressingly the conundrum of whether Blackness is ultimately in the eye of the beholder or of the performer.” (Wright, 2015) Furthermore, Blackness is about the perception and performance of the inhabitor but is also about how it is perceived by the outside subject. This is what makes the construction of Blackness so paradoxical given that it can transform depending on the context, location, time, and subject. We can see this through the conceptualization of Blackness and the process in which we ascribe individuals as Black and how that too is subject to change based on social context. Race is constituted by variability meaning that Blackness exists as everything, everywhere, all
the time. Because of the capacious nature of Blackness, it "remains undefined and suffering under the weight of many definitions, not one of which covers every type of Blackness or coheres with all the other denotations and connotations." (Wright, 2015) This is the labor that race performs where Blackness is not simply about identity and culture, but it also must encompass the social, political, and historical. Blackness cannot be understood as here or there or rather then and now because those locations are monolithic and linear and cannot contain the complexities of Blackness. It is not simply a matter of personal identity or a matter of how the world understands Blackness, but it is an all-encompassing conceptualization that triggers the phenomenology of Blackness and how it is experienced and performed. We must reconceptualize the way that we frame identity and "instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation." (Hall, 1997) There is no fixed way to experience, perceive, and interpret Blackness because what is Black and what appears as Black is not linear and is dependent on location, time, and the lens through which Blackness is being interpreted, whether that interpretation be introspective or extroverted. This variability represents the convergence of the "when" and "where" as they occur in the now, forever updating, and reconfiguring Blackness. Furthermore, it becomes complexified as we critique how the ontology and phenomenology of Blackness are interpreted within the realm of anti-Blackness in which the world operates.
Critical Framework

A critical framework is a lens of analysis that allows for deeper evaluation and reflection of claims and arguments that are made. It is important because it provides us with opportunities to critique and expand on our arguments by viewing them through the lens of multidimensionality. Black Existential Philosophy entered academia once introduced by William R. Jones. Black Existential Philosophy is the philosophical inquiry premised on the concern of agency, liberation, and sociality. (Bassey, 2007) Furthermore, it is a critique of the subjugation and brutalization of Black people globally. Bassey argues that Black existential philosophy and the popularized notion of existentialism are not to be conflated in their entirety. They are distinguished based on the premise that existentialism is limiting because it is formed through European conceptualization whereas Black existential philosophy is marked by the existential demand of understanding how Blackness frames the lived experiences of African peoples all over the world (Bassey, 2007). Furthermore, Bassey highlights that although European existentialism and Black existential philosophy have parallels, they are distinguished by the fact that European existentialism is predicated on the notion of the individual whereas Black existential philosophy aims to center the existence of all Black people in continental and diasporic communities. In Jean-Paul Sartre’s book Being and Nothingness, he talks about how one’s reality is simply a product of how one constructs it for themselves. Jean-Paul Sartre is a renowned existentialist who pioneered this principle of existentialism rooted in the European principle of individuality. Other renowned
Africana Critical Theorists alike Lewis Gordon and Frantz Fanon argue that this notion of individuality is a privilege and not applicable to the Black experience. (Bassey, 2007) Although Black people exist as individuals, the experience of the Black self is predicated on the way that race is experienced by the collective that is racialized as Black. Furthermore, it is through the liberation of the collective that the individual self will too be free.

In addition to Africana Critical Theory, I will be looking through the lens of Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism as I believe that they converge and are contingent upon the understanding of each other. Although Afro-pessimist literature existed prior to it being coined, Afro-pessimism was coined by Frank B. Wilderson in his book Afro-Pessimism. It is a critical framework that highlights the afterlife of slavery and colonialism and how they facilitate society’s dependence on anti-Black violence that positions Black people as non-human and as a perceived threat (Wilderson, 2020). This highlights how Blackness itself is integral to every aspect of human life yet simultaneously excluded from it so much so that the exclusion of Blackness is included in every aspect of life. This shapes the claim that Blackness is essentially a state of perpetual enslavement, slave meaning the exploitation of the mind, body, and soul and therefore the stripping of personhood and humanity. It is predicated on the notion of social death expressing that to be without personhood and humanity is to be in a perpetual state of death. As a result of this, Blackness and slaveness become codependent as oppressive forces. Through this lens, it becomes inconceivable for Black people to exist within this realm being that it is a realm of anti-Blackness that conspires against Blackness where the inevitable outcome of
Blackness is death and suffering. Because of this perpetual state of enslavement, the experience of freedom in its purest and truest form appears inconceivable in the past, present, and future (Wilderson, 2020). Afro-pessimism centers on the specificities of being Black in an anti-Black world. Black people are not human but objects to be used by white and non-Black people. Blackness is a state of social death and slavery, and the world needs anti-Black violence, death, and suffering to make sense of and reproduce itself (Wilderson, 2020). As a result, the concept of Blackness must exist to maintain the logics of anti-Blackness but also to maintain the position of whiteness. It stems beyond racial hatred or conflict, anti-Blackness under this framework is deeply embedded and affects everything because Blackness and slaverness are the same. In this framework, slavery is not an event but a “relational dynamic” and “paradigmatic position that cannot be” separated from Blackness because of its ontological position (Wilderson, 2020). It centers on Black suffering, police brutality and extrajudicial murder of Black people, mass incarceration and the prison industrial complex, structural racism, education inequities, school-to-prison pipeline, food apartheid, medical apartheid, reproductive injustice, land dispossession, etc. Anti-blackness overdetermines Black experiences and robs Black people of agency and consent. The exclusion of Blackness is included in every aspect of life where Blackness becomes a perpetual state of enslavement and endangerment. The slave doesn’t happen to be Black; Black is the slave because Blackness is ontologically and structurally positioned as the slave because of social death.

Slavery never ended as it exists through the experience of micro/macro aggressions. At any time, any black person can be killed or be brutalized with
violence just for existing. Blackness has never been human because society has never seen Blackness as a concept that is co-terminus with the concept of humanity. Analyzing race through a black-and-white binary is unproductive. It is critical that we shift our focus by “moving away from the Black/white binary and reframing it as Black/non-Black, to de-emphasize the status of whiteness and to center analysis, rather, on the anti-Black foundations of race and modern society. In other words, ‘it is racial Blackness as a necessary condition for enslavement that matters most, rather than whiteness as a sufficient condition for freedom.’” (Wilderson, 2020) We assume that the relationship between Black people and non-Black people represents a shared value. We assume that there is a commonality that exists between us that allows us to understand the experience and lived embodiment and reality of another person. It has been proven that this shared value is untrue given the myth of “POC unity”. The divide and conquer tactics of white supremacy have taught non-Black racially marginalized communities to invest in anti-Blackness. This has cultivated the “model minority” myth in Asian communities and the ingrained colorism and anti-Blackness that exists in Latinx communities. They are taught to despise Blackness and measure their humanity against the humanity of Blackness (Wilderson, 2020). Although other racially marginalized groups experience their own unique challenges, they find safety in the notion that they are not positioned as Black and therefore are not at the bottom of the hierarchy. They are conditioned to view this position as a superiority complex where although they may not be white, at least they are not Black and treated as such. These ideals are a result of the deliberate global exportation of anti-Blackness where the consequences of anti-Blackness are now perpetuated by all non-Black people
(Fanon, 1952). There does not exist a location globally in which Blackness is not vulnerable to structural violence.

Afro-pessimism is a structural framework that encourages us to think of the ways in which we can elevate our current analysis of systemic racism to a point in which we can understand the true and lived experience of all Black people. It allows us to think critically and get to the root of the violence that Black people are being subjected to. Why are Black people being murdered every day by the hands of police, medical professionals, and white vigilantes? Why is it that Breonna Taylor was murdered in her own home? How is it that Korryn Gaines, a legal gun owner was murdered defending her child? Afro-pessimism is critiquing our assumption that these acts of violence are not part of a pattern, but that they are not symptomatic of the way the world thinks, acts, and views Black people.

Afro-pessimism calls us to examine the liberation movements cultivated by Black people and examine the problems that these movements are constantly being met with. Afro-pessimism is asking why is it that liberation movements such as Black Lives Matter, the Black Panther Party, the Black Liberation Army, etc., have continuously been met with liberation struggles. We believe that the shared value that exists between us as humans allows us to overcome the way that we are violent toward one another and that becomes the assumptive ethic that we have about the world. Afro-pessimism is calling us to think about it consciously and existentially so that we can come to an understanding of the way that Black people are constantly positioned as a tool for liberation struggles. Through this process, Black bodies become made available and accessible for the world’s consumption.
It should be noted that it is a critical framework and not an ideology and should only be used as a lens to view and explain the world, not as a lens to alter our actions or how we conceptualize solutions. Given this, Afro-pessimism is not a call to action nor is it a religion, ideology, or advocating for us to do anything. Many of these critiques stem from our pragmatic nature as humans longing to find applications of the lens. Afro-pessimism makes it easy to identify the ways anti-Blackness shows up in society. If you can analyze the world with the preconceived notion that in any space, Black people will be oppressed in that realm, you will be able to identify and interpret anti-Blackness easier. It also allows us to see the evolution of oppression as it evolves to become more nuanced and complex. We need to understand that oppression hasn’t gotten better but simply evolved from slavery to Jim Crow, to now. While all critiques of Afro-pessimism are valid, we shouldn’t view the claims of Afro-pessimism so literally but rather use it as a space of understanding to be critical of the way solutions are framed. As oppression becomes less simple and more concentrated it becomes weaker. The type of change we imagine is inconceivable within this capitalist and anti-Black society because it is too deeply rooted. It doesn’t just change, it was constructed and must be deconstructed, therefore it must become weaker to deconstruct.

Another critique is that Afro-pessimism isn’t as optimistic as Marxism. Wilderson discusses how within Marxism there is an absence of Black subjectivity. Marxism follows the assumption that we all fit the requirements of being human. It negates that the Black body does not fulfill the basic categories of “work, production, exploitation, historical self-awareness, and overall hegemony” (Wilderson, 2020).
Marxism’s goal of overthrowing capitalism doesn’t necessarily guarantee Black people's liberation. Because the slave cannot exceed the condition of social death, the slave’s labor and production will never be of value under the guise of capitalism. As a result, the worker and the slave are not produced in the same space which is the reason why social death determines the difference between slavery and exploitation. No demands that the exploited worker can make will solve the ontological Black death because it is a social death and depends on the end of civil life for Black people to gain being.

**Concept of Humanism vs Animalism**

Like Marx, historians attribute modern humanism to ideals from the enlightenment period that says humans are rational, have autonomy and are independent, and should prioritize reason and science (Jackson, 2020). These ideals are being formed at the same moment as colonization, the global slave trade, and the formation of race. The "Universal Man" is a category and ontology that determines what makes a human a human and separates it from other categories of existence. It is made from a white Eurocentric position that is not universal. This is happening during a time when the very people (European colonialists) who are deciding what humanity is are colonizing other people for their own profit. The concept of "human" is created at a moment of confrontation with perceived difference, in which stolen Africans and others who do not match the picture of the “Universal Man,” are being ontologized and seen as less than and not as human because they don't fit a subset of the world's idea of humanity.
This connection with humanity is complex and is reflective of Black peoples’ current relationship to the world. The crux of this relationship is that European imperialists who developed and designed the institutions of slavery conceived of slaves as an issue of property and not as people. Fundamentally, they understood that they talked and walked and did the same things as humans, but they classified them as property to remove them from the concept of the human. The same type of ideologies that existed when slavery was legally in effect have become insidious thought processes where people project their disdain of Black people onto the flesh of Black bodies. The worth of Black people has been endlessly negotiated in relation to “the human”. The notion that Black people are human is in fact not a shared value between the Black and non-Black, there is no commensurability (Wilderson, 2020). The idea of a human-animal divide is fairly recent and was made at the same time as conceptualizations of “the human” and carries its same racist and anti-Black connotation (Jackson, 2020). The concept of the animal, just as the concept of the human is forged within “the logic of conquest, slavery, and colonialism which produced a linear and relational conception of human animality. Whereas Europeans are moral/rational/ political animals, the recognition of Black people’s humanity did not elevate Black people’s ontologized status compared to that of nonhuman animals” (Jackson, 2020). We can look at recent scholarship to understand how the categories of human and animal interact. It suggests that “race is a by-product of the prior negation of nonhuman animals. These fields, particularly animal studies, are slowly advancing the thesis that the human-animal binarism is the original and foundational paradigm that discourses of human difference, including, or even especially,
racialization was erected.” (Jackson, 2020) This would mean that the mistreatment and negation of animals paired with Black people being compared to and thought of as animals are why we have anti-Blackness. Racialization is what colors how we think about animals and how “the categories of ‘race’ and ‘species’ have coevolved to be mutually reinforcing terms.” (Jackson, 2020) It’s important because this means just critiquing “anthropocentrism”: the belief that humans are the most important beings in the universe, and humanizing animals is not a critique of humanism and the racialization and anti-Blackness that comes with it. What we actually have is a “failed praxis of being,” meaning that we must interrogate the ontological roots of this divide (Jackson, 2020). One part being the animalization of Blackness and how Blackness is seen as both animalistic and as the “animal” itself. Being seen as a human does not protect Black people, and this is because “animalization is not incompatible with humanization: what is commonly seemed dehumanization is, in the main, more accurately interpreted as the violence of humanization or the burden of inclusion into a racially hierarchized universal humanity” (Jackson, 2020). It’s important to note that the “human” and the “animal” are both forged together. Because of this, it is possible to simultaneously experience the ontology of the human and of the animal.

**Ontological Plasticity**

This nuance is further conceptualized through the concept of “ontological plasticity”. Ontology questions what things are and what makes their existence distinct from others. It is significant when examining anti-Blackness because much of anti-Blackness is experienced on an ontological level. Plasticity refers to the state of being malleable or able to be molded into multiple forms. Jackson explains the
plasticity of Blackness as: “a mode of transmogrification [or extreme changes] whereby the fleshly being of Blackness is experimented with as if it were infinitely malleable such that Blackness is produced as sub/super/human at once, a form where from shall not hold: potentially ‘everything and nothing at the register of ontology’” (Jackson, 2020). Blackness is transformed in different situations. This benefits white supremacy as: “Blackness, in this case, functions not simply as a negative relation but as a plastic fleshly being that stabilizes and gives form to human and animal as categories” (Jackson, 2020). Throughout my life I can recall many instances in which I have been in positions where I had to deal with ontological plasticity. Specifically in my academic experience at K, I have continuously navigated spaces in which I am seen as superhuman, human, and subhuman at the same time. With the beast of burden mentality that Shackles Black womanhood, I am seen as experiencing less pain, able to handle more work, and am told by the institution that I just have to keep going. I am not allowed to be overwhelmed or express myself when I am experiencing difficulties because I’m supposed to be strong enough to handle it without complaining. I am seen as subhuman because I am an “outsider” in this space and am legitimized based on the myth of Black exceptionalism (Asare, 2021). I am not seen as professional as my white and non-Black peers are. I am micro-aggressed and face many instances of anti-Blackness in this academic space. As a student here, I represent my whole race and am often put on the spot to speak on topics because of my identities. While I am sure that some people do see me as an individual person, the important part is that my Blackness is transformed in different situations.
Recognizing non-western forms of being and adapting a more unruly sense of being, feeling, and knowing can break apart the foundations of the “human”. The “human” and the “animal” are metaphysical categories that have their material consequences (Jackson, 2020). Our conceptions of anti-Blackness are often conflated with dehumanization, being denied humanity, or exclusion. The process of making the slave relied on the abjection and criminalization of the enslaved’s humanity, rather than simply the denial of it (Hartman, 1997). Recognition and inclusion further plasticize humanity where the animal is not the only form in which Blackness is imagined to encompass. It’s more complex than the inclusion or exclusion of Black people, the humanized vs. the dehumanized, and the human vs the animal. Anti-Blackness is too complex to understand through a binary paradigm. This is why representation alone isn’t revolutionary. We have seen many instances where Black people have been included and dominated certain spaces but it’s not a reliable solution. Jackson coins it as “gestures of potentiality” for Blackness. These gestures perpetuate the myth of meritocracy where we are taught to aspire to Black success stories and those who were able to “make it out”. These success stories are the “exceptions” to the rule but are weaponized to shame other Black people for not “making it”. These successful Black figures become tokenized to negate the anti-Blackness that everyday Black people are still facing. There is no ethical way to thrive within this capitalist system without the exploitation of others which is how many Black figures gain economic and political access (Coleman, 2019). This exploitation still leaves impoverished and working-class Black folks vulnerable and disposable. Although these gestures may disguise themselves as efforts towards
liberation, the people afforded this “inclusion” are operating within the system anti-Blackness and perpetuating harm. Operating within these logics doesn’t extricate these individuals from their ontological position of Blackness because they are just as vulnerable to experiencing anti-Blackness. Inclusion, recognition, and increasing visibility are not an end-all-be-all solution for deconstructing anti-Blackness.

The concept of the "human" is organized by race and difference. In retrospect, we should not be aiming to fit into the category of the “man” or “human” because both concepts perpetuate violence to people who do not fit into the mold of whiteness. We must understand that “The Negro is not so much excluded from the category of man (...)Is the Black a human being? The answer is hegemonically yes. However, this, in actuality may be the wrong question as an affirmative offers no assurance. A better question may be: If being recognized as human offers no reprieve from ontologizing dominance and violence, then what might we gain from the rupture of ‘the human’?” (Jackson, 2020) Just being seen as human doesn't save Black people from humanity’s racial hierarchy. In this way, getting rid of race would not help us because the very concept of a "human" is racialized and anti-Black. The “human” is not a unitary sign with uniformed effects but it is rather a racially stratified and stratifying concept. Jackson asks us to think about what we might gain from getting rid of the concept of the “human”. This is one reason why saying “all lives matter” is a problematic response to “Black Lives Matter”. My humanity is qualified, questioned, and not as human in a way that a normative white man's would never be. Anti-Blackness requires an answer to the question: How do we distinguish Black people from others to know who is a threat, who should be treated poorly, and who's
less than? Unfortunately, the concept of the “human” does not save us from this question.

**What is anti-Blackness as an operation of white supremacy**

Although we can start with racism to understand anti-Blackness, racism and anti-Blackness are not one in the same. Earlier, we defined racism as the consequence of the ideology of race that positions whiteness as inherently superior under the notion that there are biological attributes that support this complex. The latter is that there are biological attributes about Black people and other people of color that renders them racially inferior. Race as a political category is the “conceptual violence that precedes physical violence. You must be thought of as inferior before your body is used, abused, manipulated, and consumed” (Aph Ko, 2019). This is the labor that race and racism perform. This is the ideology that legitimizes the global enslavement and displacement of Black people. It allows these atrocities to make sense. Anti-Blackness is a political ontology that structures all aspects of life through a paradigm of Black versus non-Black. It is a common misconception that because slavery was “abolished” and we have cultivated so many movements for liberation, somehow America has progressed further than the era of chattel slavery. In the afterlife of slavery, the concept of social death is foundational in the construction of all social institutions, and it is present in the way Black people continue to suffer from racial disparities within all social contexts.

Anti-Blackness is “what it means to be marked as Black in an anti-Black world” (Ross, 2020). It can’t be oversimplified as just racism against Black people
because “it’s a theoretical framework that illuminates society’s inability to recognize our humanity and the disdain, disregard, and disgust for our existence” (Ross, 2020). Anti-Blackness is different from racism because it “indexes the structural reality so that in the larger society, Blackness is inextricably tied to ‘slaveness.’ While the system of U.S. chattel slavery technically ended over 150 years ago, it continues to mark the ontological position of Black people. Thus, in the minds of many, the relation between humanity and Blackness is an antagonism, is irreconcilable.” (Ross, 2020) Afro-pessimism claims that freedom is inconceivable in a structure that is maintained by Anti-Black violence therefore Blackness and subjugation become coterminous under the operations of anti-Blackness. It is the reality of gratuitous violence that saturates the lives of those who have been racialized as Black.

The concept of whiteness is linked to intelligence, purity, and rationality (Fanon, 1952). The way that whiteness is set up in opposition to those racialized as non-white relies on the logic of anti-Blackness. The set of anti-Black ideals responsible for racism tries to tell us that white people are "standard" because they are more common, more attractive, more rational, and therefore more deserving than Black people. The reason whiteness can exist as the “best” is because it's set up in opposition to Blackness where Blackness is the worst (Fanon, 1952). Anti-Blackness is not equal to white supremacy. The idea of white supremacy is predicated on the assumption that the world and its institutions are structured by hierarchy where whiteness is considered universal, good, and the standard by which all other races are compared against. The whiter you are—or appear to be—the more likely you are to be accepted by society and the more likely you can evade relentless violence. Given
this, it’s not necessarily that we’re dealing with white supremacy, but Black abjection. The Blacker you seem, the more likely you are to be subject to gratuitous violence and the more likely you are to be robbed of autonomy. Furthermore, assimilation will not save you. You cannot adopt white mannerisms and ways of being to escape this violence because it doesn’t work.-Anti-Blackness is maintained by Black abjection because whiteness fears “losing political, economic, and social dominance-combined with fears of unruly, rebellious Black people-led to massive investments in punitive control over Black people, rather than massive investments that might have repaired the harm caused by centuries of racial oppression.” (Hannah-Jones, 2021) The ontology of Blackness is predicated on the notion of its perceived threat to whiteness. America continues to uphold the myth of post-racism and false notions of progress but in every attempt Black people made toward progress, they were met with violence and inevitably death (Hannah-Jones, 2021). The American settler-colonial state employs agents of white supremacy to aid in the destruction and death of Black people because all Black members are deemed disposable and undesirable. We fall victim to the myth that progress is intrinsic and inevitable where the only thing that is inevitable is the progression of subjugation (Hannah-Jones, 2021). We can see this exemplified through the afterlife of slavery because it is a manifestation of the progression of racism and anti-Blackness. Every effort toward justice has been met with an act of injustice. Even the “abolition” of slavery was met with the war on crime/terror and the lack of restitution. Black people were “freed” with no access to land, education, or currency disabling any efforts towards mobility and socio-economic capital (Hannah-Jones, 2021). Abolition and critical justice reform cannot
be the only quintessential solutions because they are formulations of justice within this paradigm, the same paradigm that denotes Black people of any sense of humanity and sentience. The civil society is anti-Black and the problem is far more fundamental than the proposed solutions can accommodate. How does the demilitarization of the police combat the act of police aggression that is exercised without the use of weapons and the military? What does the abolition of police do when white vigilantes have deputized themselves to commit gratuitous violence without consequence?

There is no way to conceive of freedom as long as this structure is maintained because this realm is constructed to dispose of all beings it ascribes as Black. The perceived threat in question is the liberation, agency, and autonomy of Black people across the globe. It doesn’t serve us to operate within the constructions of anti-Blackness because whiteness is based on investing in the notion that Blackness is the state of non-being, therefore, inciting and legitimizing violence and terror. It is through the radical deconstruction of anti-Blackness that Black people can be liberated globally. Through this, we can move towards a Black Optimist construction of Blackness that says that Blackness exists as a collective cultural identity formed by the multiplicity of experiences and ways of being that transcend the position of anti-Blackness.

**Black Non-Being**

Afro-pessimism itself is not revolutionary but it is an analysis that can be used to support other ideologies that corroborate with Afro-pessimism. It is often critiqued through the lens of Black Optimism, but I’d like to examine both frameworks not as opposing forces but as two sides of a coin that are aiming toward a common goal.
Black Optimism is a critical lens through which the ontology of social death is rejected reimagining the possibility of social life in social death or rather social life after slavery (Sexton, 2011). It is formed by the notion that Blackness and the social life within Blackness precedes and takes priority over the anti-Blackness that conspires against it. Black Optimism is demanding that we reimagine freedom and what that would look like for Black people and how to make it attainable. Black Optimism cannot be theorized without affirming the advances of Afro-pessimism. Both frameworks are predicated on the notion that it is not Blackness itself that causes this condition, but it is the fact of the anti-Black realm in which Blackness must exist. This forces us to imagine the freedom of Black people in a world in which it is inconceivable, unbound by the fact of anti-Blackness. Afro-pessimism and Black Optimism converge at the end of this world because, as Sexton informs us, it is not Blackness that catalyzes anti-Blackness but the world itself in which Blackness is rendered worthless. With Afro-pessimism and Black Optimism also comes Afro-futurism. Afro-Futurism is a movement and way of expression within literature, art, music, and other creative forms that take futuristic concepts and aesthetics and blend them with Black culture and history. Furthermore, it is critiquing the lack of Black representation in science fiction picturing Black people through positive and optimistic representations. Even though Afro-futuristic art is often themed as a social commentary, it reimagines a world outside of the white gaze. This intersection of technology, imagination, and future liberation simply imagines a world where Blackness is free, creative, empowered with resources, and rejects any notions of
violence or oppressive forces. This is the space in which we must wish to imagine
Blackness.

Anti-Blackness and white supremacy produce Blackness in a space where
premature Black death is seen as normative. Throughout her book *In the Wake*,
Sharpe paints metaphors and stories with the beauty and tragedy of Black experiences
in the aftermath of chattel slavery and diaspora. Sharpe introduces a concept called
"the wake" which takes on multiple meanings: "the keeping watch of the dead, the
path of a ship, a consequence of something, in the line of flight and/or sight,
awakening and consciousness" (Sharpe, 2016). One of the most visceral examples
being the slave ship with racism as its engine, creating waves that crash and echo into
our present reality. "The wake" examines the intimate relationship between Blackness
and death and the ways in which we exist within that relationship and the ways that
we transcend it. Sharpe grounds "the wake" in her experiences of familial grief and
tragedy and describes the wake as sitting with the dead. She talks of her parents
moving to the suburbs for opportunity only to find that "things were not better in this
'new world" (Sharpe, 2016). With this comes the definition of wake as the state of
wakefulness and consciousness that her mother exhibited "in how one's life and mind
are organized by a position to apprehend the world through the optic of the door and
anti-blackness," (Sharpe, 2016). We can understand the wake as an "unfinished
project of emancipation" and as "the precarities of the afterlives of slavery" (Sharpe,
2016). Instead of trying to resolve this unfinished project, we must question what
survives anti-Blackness, looking into "the paradoxes of blackness within and after the
legacies of slavery's denial of Black humanity. I name this paradox the wake, and I
use the wake in all of its meanings as a means of understanding how slavery’s
violeces emerge within the contemporary conditions of spatial, legal, psychic,
material, and other dimensions of Black non/being as well as in Black modes of
resistance" (Sharpe, 2016). I find the wake to be a useful concept to explain the many
dimensions of anti-Blackness, from the uneasiness and terror of living in an anti-
Black world to the ways anti-Blackness manifests in my life. Sharpe has given us a
concept that can handle the agency that is encompassed in the ontology of Blackness.
The wake is capacious of both the ontological position of Blackness and Black
consciousness. The Hold talks about how the logics of colonialism and anti-Blackness
create “anagrammatical Blackness” (Sharpe, 2016). This concept is about how when
words of humanity such as “child”, “woman”, and “mother” meet Blackness, those
words shift meaning. Black children are not seen as children but as older. Black
mothers are seen as unfit. We are unseen through the optic of Blackness.

Sharpe brings up an example of a news story from 2015 about a white 18-year-
old young man and a 13-year-old white girl who committed various crimes but was
still afforded humanity in the news stories instead of being called a predator and
prostitute: “Blackness would produce, they are called “Bonnie and Clyde” and
“teenage sweethearts” (Sharpe, 2016). This is compared to innocent and unarmed
Black people who are gunned down and executed by police who become “thugs and
menaces”’. This is compared to the death of Aiyana Stanley-Jones, an unarmed and
sleeping seven-year-old who was shot in her own home by a police officer. The
difference is that Aiyana and the countless Black people executed by the police are
“armed with Blackness” (Sharpe, 2016). This is the hold of anti-Blackness as “US
incarceration rates and carceral logics directly emerging from slavery and into the present continue to be the signs that make Black bodies” (Sharpe, 2016). Under these logics, Blackness is interpreted as threatening and dangerous. How do you not make furtive movements when stopped by the police, if Blackness itself is furtive? Sharpe discusses a different pipeline, instead of school-to-prison, it’s cradle-to-grave and womb-to-tomb. We can see how every structure is interconnected where we can “connect the birth industry to the prison industry, the machine that degrades and denies and eviscerates reproductive justice to the machine that incarcerates” (Sharpe, 2016). The cradle to the grave is being “produced as the same space” and how Blackness is produced towards death. (Sharpe, 2016) She condemns the way that the hold is conceptualized as a place of sanctuary and safety. School is one of those spaces: “How can the very system that is designed to unmake and inscribe her also be the one to save her?” (Sharpe, 2016). It’s not about fear as an emotional state of being but it is how threat is constructed as fear.

The ontological positioning of Blackness has psychological ramifications in addition to its social and physical consequences. Black people have been dehumanized in the global society in the sense that they cannot exist as human beings and have to exist as a “non-entity” or non-human being. (Fanon, 1952) The only thing that is coterminous with humanness is whiteness and because of this, there is a desire amongst Black people to be white in order to obtain access to humanity. The dehumanization of Black people by white people also correlates to the dehumanization of white people themselves because, in their acts of dehumanization, they cannot be fully human. White peoples’ barbaric acts inflicted upon Black people
and the barbarism that infiltrated their very beings withdrew their ability to feel empathy for Black people making them blind to the fact that Black people are sentient beings. (Fanon, 1952) This relationship informs how we internalize the superiority and inferiority complexes that have been produced by racism and anti-Blackness. As a result of this white people will internalize themselves as psychologically superior while Black people will internalize themselves as inferior.

Language is inherently political and is used as a tool of power. The language of the colonizer gives access to power, civilization, education, and culture. When the colonized try to assimilate themselves into the colonizers' culture, it is done through language. It is through language that the colonized first experiences the desire to become white. The reason they try to assimilate themselves into the colonizers' language and culture is that it gives them access to superiority (Fanon, 1952). He further explains how Black people will never be seen as equal by adopting the colonizers' language because the colonizer will always make Black people feel as if their efforts towards assimilation are inadequate. They will never be able to be seen as equal to white through assimilation. Black people are held to a higher standard of account and morality. For example, if a Russian person or a German person cannot speak the language, it is forgivable because it is considered that they have their own language, culture, and history. Black people were not seen as having their own culture, language, and history because they are uncivilized.

Fanon says Black people counter this to assert that they have their own language, own culture, and own identity. It is distinct from the colonizers’ culture, but it is no less sophisticated. However, Fanon says that this counter-narrative is doomed
to fail because the colonizers’ entire society is permeated with images of Black people portrayed as uncivilized, as primitive, and without history and culture (Fanon, 1952). This exportation of negative imagery contributes to negative constructions of Blackness. The media plays a big role in this exportation and aids as a vessel in promoting these narratives that paint Black people as violent, parasitic, and threatening to white hegemony. The media is consumed globally and not only does it affect how Black people are perceived, but it also affects how Black people are treated socially, politically, economically, etc. In return, the mistreatment of Black people is justified and legitimized because Black people are commodities. This rhetoric has created a profitable and self-serving industry for the american settler colonial state that profits from the incarceration, death, and destruction of Black people. The states employ agents of white supremacy to aid in this destruction who become physical manifestations of these violent ideologies. These ideologies infiltrate the entire society and manifest as anti-Blackness. Black people are then portrayed as non-human because Blackness is innately uncivilized. Through this, language becomes a negotiation of cultural belonging because Black people must assimilate for survival but will still never be seen as equal. Black people are perceived based on the exportation of anti-Blackness subjecting us to conditions of social constructions designed for our demise.

**Surpassing Black Violence and Death Through Black Aliveness and Black Worldmaking**

Afro-pessimism has various critiques against it labeling it as defeatist, reactionary, and anti-progress, and to some extent these critiques are valid. Jose
Sanchez critiques how Afro-pessimism overdetermines Black subjects as ontological objects saying, “Afro-pessimists take the slaveholders at their word and mourn that the nonhumanness of the slave is marked onto their very being — ignoring the tenacious humanity exercised by the enslaved at every turn” (Sanchez, 2022). This quote encompasses the main sentiment that many critics attempt to discuss. When taken for face value, Afro-pessimism does seem to be defeatist and anti-progress because it claims that the gap between the slave and the human is irreconcilable. If we as a people genuinely believed this sentiment to be true, then there would be no reason to conceive of a world not bound by anti-Blackness. The fact that we are able to conceptualize such a world means that there can exist a realm in which Blackness is liberated and exists just as is without constraint.

Is it impossible to imagine a Black world in which one encounters Black being as it is rather than only as it exists in the shadow of anti-Black violence? Black worldmaking makes a case for Black aliveness even in the face of the persistence of death in Black life. Black aliveness invites us to imagine a Black world where “the case of our lives is aliveness; not death, not even death’s vitality, but aliveness” (Quashie, 2021). Quashie theorizes “aliveness” through the aesthetics of poetry, reading poetic inhabitance in Black feminist literary texts by Lucille Clifton, Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Toni Morrison, and Evie Shockley, and others, showing how their philosophical and creative thinking constitutes worldmaking (“perceiving differently what the world is or looks like or can be, Quashie, 2021”). This worldmaking conceptualizes Blackness as capacious and Blackness as a condition of oneness. The first-personness of these texts offers us to conceptualize aliveness. It is
not necessarily the pronoun of “I” but the pronoun of “one” that the speaker is
capturing. The pronoun “one” is impersonal and personal in which a person
interrogates their experience and projects beyond those experiences in relation to
others. “One” is the philosophical pronoun in which ideas are imagined and
conceptualized (Quashie, 2021). If we imagine that every human could live in the
world through the pronoun “one”, then it could offer a world beyond the idea of
individuality that is connotated to the pronoun “one”. It is difficult to imagine
Blackness through the lens of oneness because of the ways that Blackness has been
made to be a monolith denying Black subjectivity (Spillers, 1987). The concept of the
“one” is a gesture towards understanding a way of being in the world from the
standpoint of one’s encounter and experience. Furthermore, it is a gesture towards
understanding how those experiences allow us to project beyond ourselves that
demands that we be prepared for encountering others. It is an invitation towards self-
reflection causing us to ask ourselves: Who am I and how am I? This level of
introspection is displayed through the lens of consciousness and subjectivity which is
predicated by the notion of Aliveness.

Black Aliveness is distinct from Black life because Black aliveness is the shift
in the ideology of accepting Black life for what it is to understanding and cultivating a
Black world where Black people do not encounter the violence of anti-Blackness but
rather experience Blackness solely through aliveness which imagines the world for
what it can me. Reading for poetic aliveness becomes a means of exploring Black
being rather than nonbeing and animates the ethical question of “how to be.” Quashie
offers a Black feminist philosophy of being, which is a philosophy of the becoming of the Black world.

Afro-Pessimism is an ideology that is trying to get us to conceptualize the way that Blackness and violence against Black people are structurally integral to modern society. The discontinuity between Afro-Pessimism and Black aliveness is that Black aliveness is an “attempt to displace anti-Blackness from the center of my thinking. That is, though I don’t deny the terribleness of the world we live in nor its antiblack perpetuity, I am interested in conceptualizing an aesthetic imaginary founded on black worldness. (...) in thinking through a black world, I am trying to surpass terror as the uninflected language of black being, as well as to suspend the anti/ante position of blackness” (Quashie, 2021). Afro-Pessimism requires us to understand that all social institutions depend on structural violence towards Black people or the possibility that that violence can be done. This imagines Blackness itself as an antagonism to society and stemming from that comes the endurance of terror or a state of non-being. This leads us to question what does it mean for us to live in a world where we are surrounded by the evidence and concepts of Black death and yet there is still Black life? The threat of death is prominent in how we think about the social world, but it cannot be the totality of Blackness if Black life still persists. Afro-pessimism teaches us that ending anti-Blackness is irresolvable and can only come about by ending this world.

Black Aliveness helps us imagine how to end that world and move into what’s next. This imagination is already taking place in our literature and art which encompasses the aesthetics of aliveness. Quashie introduces a lot of this literature to
the readers throughout the book showcasing the work of many Black poets and writers. Poetry is meant to feel alive by allowing the reader to connect to the speaker and expand from their experiences. This is the work that Black poetry does where we get to live inside the worlds they conceptualize as a reader. Aliveness is “a quality of being, a term of habitat, a manner and aesthetic, a feeling—or many of them, circuits in an atmosphere” (Quashie, 2021). Black Aliveness moves us from the “non-being” and “being against” of anti-Blackness to the inherent being in being Black. It calls us to question what would you do if you didn’t have to fight against racial injustice, if the fight was already won? Before reading this, it was somewhat inconceivable to me but I imagine I’d be dancing, singing, eating the food I want, spending time in nature, and just simply being. That is Black aliveness, it's in our poetry, cultures, music, the aliveness which with we meet every day. Quashie repeatedly says that aliveness cannot be captured in words, but he attempts to define it. He says, “indeed ‘imagine a black world’ is a love gesture that says to the one: Be as you are. You will become and you will undo. As you are, you are and are worthy—inhabit that and unfurl in and into the world” (Quashie, 2021). Black worldmaking is a perpetual project of creation. We can think about Black worldmaking in regard to the project of black studies: “That is, as philosopher Sylvia Wynter argues, black, studies” intellectual ambition wants to reject the world of anti-blackness and to organize, instead ideologies of and for a world that could embrace Blackness. Such worldmaking manifests also in the declarations of the Black Arts/Aesthetic movement, which emphasizes blackness as an idea that could be remade beyond the limits of a racist discourse. This investment in the possibilities of ideation--what literary historian
Margo Natalie Crawford describe as a ‘black post-blackness’- is vital to conceptualizing an overhauled universe realized through aesthetics” (Quashie, 2021). Black worldmaking can happen both in the imaginary and subjunctive, so the not yet or will be, and in the present and past with folks’ intent to live in a Black world. Black worldmaking is calling us to not take the world for what it was, or is, but what it can be for Black people. “Anti-Blackness is part of blackness but not all of how or what blackness is. Anti-Blackness is total in the world, but it is not total in the black world” (Quashie, 2021).

The important part of futurism and optimism is that they allow space to create societies and cultures without anti-Blackness or that critique why anti-Blackness exists at all. Afro-futurism is a gesture toward Black worldmaking. Freedom dreams is a methodology in which we can come to understand and create futures. Freedom Dreams include the quilts that functioned as maps to the north, Harriet Tubman’s desire to free herself, her family and as many others as she could, the Combahee River Collective Statement, the dreams of civil and human rights activists, to the current dreams manifest in the shouts of “Black Lives Matter” at protests. Freedom Dreams conceptualizes the importance of dreaming: “we must tap the well of our own creative imaginations, that do what our earlier generations have done: dream. Trying to envision “somewhere in advance of nowhere,” as poet Jayne Cortez puts it, is an extremely difficult task, yet it is a matter of great urgency. Without new visions we don’t know what to build, only what to knock down. We not only end up confused, rudderless, and cynical, but we forget that making a revolution is not a series of clever maneuvers and tactics but a process that can and must transform us” (Kelley, 2002).
The question that comes from this is what do we want to bring with us into the future? One thing that strikes me about the tension between structure and agency or anti-Blackness and Black freedom is that dichotomies are really stifling. Heterogeneity is a concept that Quashie highlights throughout the book Black Aliveness. In a Black world, we wouldn’t necessarily be defined by our Blackness. We would be defined by our being and all the forms that being can take. I am taking this concept of heterogeneity into my future because I simply just want to be.

Conclusion

Throughout this project, I have tackled some very discouraging truths, so I think it’s important that I end this project through a hopeful lens. The commitment to understanding is a proposal towards love. I love Blackness and I want to seek to understand Blackness. Through my research I learned a lot about what Blackness is, why Blackness is, and how Blackness has become and is becoming. As I am continuously unpacking and decolonizing my conceptions of Blackness, I’ve come to understand the complexities of occupying the space of Blackness. In this research, I hoped to hold space for the capaciousness and nuances of Blackness through examining how Blackness has been constructed within racist discourse and discovering how Blackness can be remade beyond the limits of anti-Blackness. We can imagine and cultivate a world where Blackness can just be and transcend all structures of anti-Blackness that produces Blackness in the same space as social death.
Although the realities of Black existence can be desolating, I’d like to think that if we are able to conceptualize a world that embraces Blackness then it must be so that it is also a possibility. There is so much aliveness in my Blackness and so much aliveness in the Blackness that I see that we could never be bound by an anti-Black realm because our life surpasses death. The critical frameworks of Afro-Pessimism and Black Existentialism are provocative and compelling for the ways that they remind us that there is so much work that we have left to do as an effort towards decolonization. It reminds us that we exist in the afterlife of slavery and are impacted by contemporary reconfigurations of social death. These conditions affect the ontology of Blackness and how it is experienced socially but the afterlife of slavery is not the totality of Blackness. Blackness is complex, capacious, and holds space for nuances. If we can create worlds through literature and film in which there exists a world that embraces Blackness, then it must be possible to create one. I often pondered, is it wishful thinking to yearn to understand what it feels like to just be free? Is it too much to ask to simply just exist? To yearn to understand what it feels like to have always been free and to always be free. If we lived in a world not bound by the violence of anti-Blackness it would save so many Black lives that fall victim to colonial structures of violence. Lives that fall victim to medical apartheid, gun violence, food insecurity, mass incarceration, police brutality, socially produced poverty and countless other social structures infiltrated by anti-Blackness.

This leads me to question what would it mean to be rid of anti-Blackness?

Abolitionists from many eras have dreamed impossible dreams and asked impossible
questions. Getting rid of slavery, prisons, schools, and the state has been the core goal of abolitionism. Essentially, abolition asks how can we be more free? Abolition urges us to “rather than try to imagine one single alternative to the existing systems, we might envision an array of alternatives that will require radical transformations of many aspects of society” (Davis, 2003) Abolition in addition to Black worldmaking are efforts toward Black freedom and liberation. Every moment that we live is an opportunity to create the world we live in. This would mean every encounter with something that we view as problematic is an opportunity to create the world we dream of. We must imagine worlds beyond anti-Blackness to embrace being of Blackness. I can conceptualize my idea of a Black world through the understanding of biodiversity. It’s similar to nature, biodiversity breeds survival and thriving. When you look at a jungle, it’s never just one plant growing in every direction, it's a million different types of plants and trees relying on each other and their relationship with each other. I long for that for us as Black people, for us to have many different ways of being and moving forward that are outside of any anti-Black or monolithic ideals that are projected upon us. For us to celebrate all our ways of thinking and being as we embrace our shared histories and cultures. I hope that we grow upward and onward and closer to our wildest dreams. I hope that we grow towards love and life. I hope that we wake up happy and carefree. I hope Black people experience nothing but the sweetest of days. In this Black world I hope that we know how it feels to truly be free.
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