Today, we are talking, very broadly, about Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism.

We’ve got five articles that we’re going to talk about. We have Jared Sexton’s “The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism.” We also have [Jared] Sexton’s “Ante-Anti-Blackness: Afterthoughts.” We have Hortense Spillers’ “The Idea of Black Culture”; Fred Moten’s “The Case of Blackness”; and Saidiya Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson in a conversation called “The Position of the Unthought.”

These are partly texts that James has suggested and brought to us, and also, partly, suggestions from a listener, Eric Tenza. So, thank you, Eric, as well.

And, we should say before we get going, that there ... Some of these people, some other kind of people, working on these conversations, are on the list of upcoming episodes. We’re going to be talking about Frank Wilderson’s book sometime, upcoming. And, also, talking about Kara Keeling’s *The Witch’s Flight*, which is not an author that we’ve read here. But, she is involved in some of these conversations. So, there will be more of this going on in the Always Already future.

Excellent.

So, James, where do you want to start?

Well, perhaps Sexton’s article that is called “The Social Life of Social Death,” since it is a review. So, kind of a sweeping review, of Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism.

Well, boy, though, I don’t know how to start this. [laughing 00:04:02] [crosstalk 00:04:04]
I know how to listen to you all, but [crosstalk 00:04:07] I don’t know how to start talking.

John

Well, that’s why we put you on the spot, right?

B.

Maybe by actually exploring what these two fields are, then. Like, what it means to be within this field of study “Afro-Pessimism” and “Afro-Optimism.”

James

Yeah. So, Afro-Pessimism, and, this is coming out of Orlando Patterson, his 1982 book Slavery and Social Death. There’s also a fusion, and there are threads of this in Fanon, as well.

But, the Afro-Pessimist position is very seriously taking Orlando Patterson’s idea of social death, and using that as the way that they are thinking about the legacies of slavery that continue to persist beyond emancipation. And, looking at the categorical position of Blackness as social death. And, what that means for the ontology of being a Black political subject. So, there’s a political ontology that the Afro-Pessimists are doing.

Black Optimism doesn’t negate that idea of the political ontology of Blackness being - as Saidiya Hartman says, right, it’s the position of the unthought, or it’s a no-position.

But, what the Black Optimist school is trying to focus on, or put the attention more on, is the kind of ontological priority of Blackness, and that Blackness is not in a kind of dialectic resistance with police power, and with ... Well, yeah, with police powers and with regulation, but that Blackness is whatever is being called “Black” that we discover through categories of control, or through police regulation. Whatever that is, is preexistent to it coming into contact with the kind of dialectic political struggle.

John

Yeah, that’s really interesting. I mean, so, I think one of, kind of, the stakes, and I think, I suspect we’ll be talking about this throughout the conversation, is the extent to which these positions are in conflict with one another, and then in what ways they’re in conflict with one another. And, this is the point that Sexton kind of makes, in both of those articles, actually, that maybe the Black Optimist critique of Afro-Pessimism is what they’re ... Some of the things they’re critiquing Afro-Pessimism for, are actually things that Afro-Pessimism is doing.

So, if we turn to page 28 in Sexton’s “Social Life of Social Death,” he writes: “This is to say, what Moten asserts against Afro-Pessimism is a point already affirmed by Afro-Pessimism, is, in fact one of the most polemical dimensions of Afro-Pessimism as a project: namely, that black life is not social, or, rather, that black
life is *lived* in social *death*. Double emphasis, on lived and on death. That’s the whole point of the enterprise at some level. It is all about the implications of this agreed-upon point where arguments (should) begin, but they cannot (yet) proceed.”

So …

James

Is it just because there’s a “chicken and the egg” thing? Because I don’t know which one of these positions catalyzes the position. Because Moten’s … His flip-side to that is … I can look for it …

So, on page … Just to quote the kind of, what Sexton is talking about there with Moten’s position, in “The Case of Blackness...” on page 188, and there’s an interesting context that Moten has set up here, and I’m not … To bring the context in doesn’t help right now, but he’s asking this question: “How can we fathom a social life that tends towards death, that enacts a kind of being-toward-death, and which, because of such tendency and enactment, maintains a terribly beautiful vitality?”

And, his … I think his like, fear, or his, kind of critique, if he has a critique against Afro-Pessimism, is that, by focusing on social death so much, we can perhaps miss the vibrancy that is Black social life, and overdetermining the position of the political, is not actually going to capture the experience of Blackness.

But, again, I think Sexton, to the point you just quoted there, right? That Black life is *lived* in social death, is something that Afro-Pessimism is saying, too. So …

John

Yeah. I think there’s room for that vitality - I don’t know if we want to use that word - in at least some of the Afro-Pessimist thinking that we read for today, right? And, Sexton’s even engaging, you know, histories of, kind of, vitalist thinking, that are read through Blackness, right?

Especially, he spends a couple of pages working through Donna Jones, and Donna Jones’s kind of life philosophy, and of Bergson and such, through Blackness, through the Negritude movement, and so on. And, Sexton kind of makes the interesting point that the only way we can, kind of, reasonably do anything with life philosophy, or with vitalism, is if we think it through Blackness.

And, this actually made me think back of, to B, in our discussion of Roberto Esposito’s book, where, like, of all the things – And, this actually gets into the conversation I had with listener Eric Tenza about the Esposito episode …

James

All these rhizomes and connections, here!
John: You know, [inaudible 00:10:04], for all the critiques we had of Esposito, one of the ones we missed is, like, the kind of, the depth of his inability, in like, thinking about affirmation, or thinking about something like that, and his lack of engagement with race or with Blackness or any kind of category of colonialism, or anything like that.

And so, all this is to say that, like, I’m not so sure that, on this question of vitality or something … There’s a clear difference between Moten and Sexton. But, I don’t know if it’s as much of a difference as Moten’s thinking. And, I think Sexton is kind of trying to work to show that, at times, maybe, they’re not doing such different things.

James: Right. That’s why instead of an either-or, I think it’s a both-and. Or, perhaps Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism are two sides of one coin. And, B and I were talking about this earlier, that there’s … You need to have … Neither one of these positions could exist alone without the other contributing something to this perspective. If we’re going to look at Black life, or Black death, on both sides of this, requires not a dialectic.

But, there’s just an oscillation in dialogue, so, that way, at times, we can swing and focus on the political, and the material aspects of Black … Blackness, and necropolitics, BlackLivesMatter, and Ferguson, and Baltimore, Freddy Gray, and the church shooting in Charleston, right? All these kinds of things require you to think about: has Emancipation, and the legacies of slavery post-Emancipation, have we been able to, in any deep, structural way, change the position of Blackness?

Then, at the same time, you also need to remember that life is not always lived in a dialectic struggle, in a political mode, and that there are other spaces that are out of the frame, as Fred Moten, in his “The Case of Blackness” … He says …

John: While you’re looking for that, I mean, in Sexton, you know, back to that question of, ‘is it an “and/or” or “both/and” sort of thing’ … So, Sexton says on page 22 of “The Social Life of Social Death”: “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’? Why not articulate them through the supplementary logic of the copula? In fact, there might be more radical rethinking available yet.”

And this comes after he’s working through a quote by Moten, a quote by Hartman, and trying to think those two quotes together.
James: Right, right. So, the quote in “The Case of Blackness,” on page 179, it’s the first full paragraph: “What’s at stake is fugitive movement in and out of the frame, bar, or whatever externally imposed social logic, a movement of escape, the self of the stolen that can be said, since it inheres in every closed circle, to break every enclosure. This fugitive movement is stolen life, and its relation to law is reducible neither to simple interdiction, nor bare transgression.”

And, I know Moten has a politics of fugitivity that he’s working on. And, that, there, I guess, is the politics. But, the politics is, for Moten, what happens outside of the frame of a category that allows for movement to be intelligible, or what translates Black life for the civil body politic or whatnot. There are other things happening outside of those frames that … Moten is concerned what happens outside of the frame, and perhaps Afro-Pessimism wants to look at what happens when Black life moves in the frame.

John: That’s really good, especially because … It’s an interesting way to think about it, because both Moten, and then kind of the Afro-Pessimists that we’re reading, are both interested in Blackness as something that kind of travels across, right? So, maybe it is mostly a matter of emphasis. Because, both of them want to think through the way that Blackness is something that’s both something through which the social comes to be ordered, right? Through racist domination. And, at the same time, both … You know, and Sexton’s clear about this, and Hartman and Wilderson are clear about this, that, at the same time, Blackness is something that is excess or more or, maybe not prior in the way that Moten might say ‘prior to,’ but that it’s not just ordering. It’s also disordering.

James: Right, right. He says something very similar in those phrases, that Blackness is both a disruption of police power. But then also is the constitutive element that brings that power into being in the first place. Yeah, I think it is just a matter of emphasis, as to … Which one of these do you talk about more, I think, is situational, and context-based, and what is needed for the moment might determine which pole you swing towards.

B.: So, in like, defining the political here, what I’m catching is this notion of vitality existing in the unintelligibility of things, or outside of a particular framework for understanding. If we’re saying that Blackness exists in the unintelligible, as it were, in the moment it becomes intelligible, there’s a certain degree of, you know, a relation domination that’s there.

And so, within that unintelligibility, is there something political happening in itself? Is the unintelligible, or to remain unintelligible, a site of political action? Is the unintelligible actually, then, a site of political activity, aside of its own political subjectivity that can be
used as a means of ... And, I think that maybe, James, you were saying this, is disruption, or perhaps John you were saying, as a site of disruption?

So, for instance, I think this relates a lot to, and I think that, in many ways, you know, trans studies borrow a lot from, in this way, you know, Black Optimism, is this notion of unintelligibility and social death, perhaps social life and social death, as being, you know, potentially, sites of resistance to say ‘no.’ Simply, we reject certain norms of intelligibility that seem to want to create a perfect subject, right? And that, the subjection should be, on some level, rejected? I don’t know.

James

Right. Like, is intelligibility, you know ... It’s like, one of the hero movies or something, superheroes have a cloak of invisibility, and that’s their special power. And, in some ways, are we giving up this power of invisibility if we are also striving to, like, achieve intelligibility and recognition in a political category that allows for your movements to be translated and to kind of, have meaning for other people? Perhaps that’s ...

Okay, so, Saidiya Hartman gets to this point. And, we haven’t talked about her yet. But, her book *Scenes of Subjection*, is from 1996, and that book has set the tone for a lot of the debates that have come afterwards in these other articles. So, in the interview with Saidiya Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson, III, in “The Position of the Unthought,” she’s talking about ... Because, this question of the politics, using emancipation as the event is an interesting way to have all of these questions be kind of highlighted in a historical situation, because you have people who were moving from this position of slavery, which, the only way they were legible in the political system was as property rights, or when they committed a crime, that’s the only personhood that shows up in legal code for any enslaved in the United States. And so, post-Emancipation, now, with the 13th, 14th, 15th amendments, you have people who are citizens – what does that actually mean, then, when you have to look to the common law and create rights that had not been there for them yet? Or can we include them?

And so, Saidiya Hartman mentions ... She’s talking about her book, and she says, “So, certainly, it’s about more than the desire for inclusion within the limited set of possibilities that the national project provides. What, then, does this language, the given language of freedom, enable? And, once you being to realize its limits, and begin to see its inexorable in certain notions of the subject and subjection, then the language of freedom no longer becomes that which rescues the slave from his or her former condition, but the site of the re-elaboration of that condition, rather than its transformation.”
B. I mean, you can look at Weber and see laws as, you know, sites of continuing this kind of, the genealogy of slavery, of ensuring that the subjection of the criminal is the ... Or to say, the subjectivity of the criminal, rather, in the political system, is what’s alive and well for Black bodies, as they move into, you know, like, as the bodies, as a site of political control – that survived.

James Right, right.

B. The criminal survives. Yeah. I think we were actually speaking about this earlier.

James Right, right, yeah. The ... A lot of scholars have started to – and, Saidiya Hartman has made this point that – instead of looking at Emancipation as an event, you know, in the Hegelian kind of sense, we should look at Emancipation, rather, as a transition in modes of subjection, and modes of domination. And, it’s that legacy that, even then, okay, so, you move from that into Reconstruction, and then a Jim Crow situation, which, I don’t mean for us to jump ahead like that ... So, you don’t move straight from slavery to Jim Crow. But, we do when people talk about it, people do that today. And then, from Jim Crow, you move into Michelle Alexander’s The New Jim Crow, right?

So, the pertinency of this, what seems maybe like a kind of very abstract, theoretical conversation, is being fueled by the ongoing, very imminent, and very real, dire ... I’m trying to think of a word, here ... The frailty of Black life, the exposure of Black life to death, or terror, or just the kind, existential possibility of that.

John So, in that sense, is one of the implications of making that claim something along the lines of Afro-Pessimism is, maybe in some ways, maybe more attuned ... And, “lived experience” as a category that’s thrown into question by all of these authors? So, I’m wary of using that. Is Afro-Pessimism, in some ways, closer to lived experience than Black Optimism?

James Well, see, I guess Fred Moten would not, probably, agree on that, because there’s a Black experience that doesn’t ... We don’t even know how to talk about it, or will never actually recognize it, because it doesn’t take place within categorical places that can be observed.

James He says, like, this conversation ... Fred Moten says ... Or perhaps I’ll look for it and someone should fill in. But ... Okay, I found it.

Fred Moten, page 178, says that, “This strife between normativity and the deconstruction of norms,” so, this general conversation, “is
essential not only to contemporary Black academic discourse, but also to the discourses of the barber shop, the beauty shop, and the bookstore.”

And so, like, this … There is Black life happening in lots of places and spaces. And, sometimes, that life is coming into contact with the political and the realm of the intelligible, and the body politic. Sometimes, that life is not. And so, what is “lived experience”? What does that mean now?

John

Right. And then … So, that Moten point that you just read is like, the counterpoint to me imposing “lived experience.” Like, is this academic category to make that thing legible to me as the white academic, right? Like, that I have to translate it into that category when, you know, I said, all of these thinkers are trying to throw that category into question, as, like, this thing that we can kind, easily grasp and specify, ‘All right, that’s their lived experience. I know what that is, and I know how to categorize that and fit that into other things.’

James

And it’s, because, a lot of this too, that they’re throwing “lived experience” into question, is coming out of Fanon, and his phenomenology. So, *Black Skin, White Masks*.

John

Right. So, that’s, like, I want to ask both of you a question of, like, to some extent, the disagreement between, say, like, Moten and Sexton, or Moten and Hartman, like, one over how we read Fanon?

James

It’s, see … I think you could simplify the sprawling-ness of the discussion into, yeah, different interpretations of different moments of Fanon in different places. And, I love that he, you know, he’s becoming one of those thinkers now that is important. And, I know your Mignolo episode, and I’m … I am putting the plug in that I listen, and don’t just come on here. [crosstalk 00:24:10]

I had to just like, packing to get up here. But, listening, because I had to do my homework before I came, as a fan and listener.

You know, so, but Fanon, there, gives Mignolo … Fanon, there, becomes a possibility for Mignolo’s thought. So, Fanon is becoming one of these writers, more, I, even now, I think, that you keep going to for theory, and critical theory, not just Black critical race theory, and thinking through his categories.

John

I think of someone like Sara Ahmed, right, who goes to Fanon for something, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, goes to him for something different in *Queer Phenomenology*, then goes to him for another *different* thing in *The Promise of Happiness*, right?
Right, right. And, I think these writers who become prolific this way, there isn’t one Fanon. So, he’s going to show up in different moments. And, so, I think the Afro-Pessimists and the Black Optimists are using different moments of Fanon, where different resonances are stronger on the surface rather than, maybe, submerged. And it just becomes a matter of, then ... I think constant discourse is the only thing. Because, there is no ... This isn’t a dialectical thing. We’re not going to synthesize it, because both of these sides of Blackness, the death and life, and then the, kind of, Moten’s vitality that happens in places that we can’t observe – They’re all happening at the same time in, I guess, an integrated perspective, but not a synthesized one.

So, I just want to ask the question of like: so, where does gender and sex fit, in specific, into this picture of conversations about how Blackness is operating? And, like, specifically, is there a kind of slippage where subjectivity is no longer sexed, or no longer gendered? Or, is like, and what’s specifically highlighted about that, in, throughout these texts?

So, it’s ... Okay, I’m looking for it, because Sexton does mention ...

It’s all in the footnotes on that. So, I think ...

Right! It doesn’t ...

In the “Ante-Anti-Blackness,” by Sexton, you know, he says it at a couple different points, mostly in the footnotes, that liek Black feminism is the undercurrent through all of these debates, and that like ...

The ground water!

Yes, the ground water.

The ground water of Black studies is Black feminism, and gives Hortense Spillers her due, as like, she was doing this 30 years ago.

And Sexton says that like, the debate, in that piece, he says, that the debate between Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism, is, to some extent, different readings of Spillers’ work.

Which, yeah, and there are other thinkers who don’t ... That are not included in this actual debate that’s taking place between Wilderson and Hartman and Moten and Sexton, but that are being drawn on. Oh, here, of course, when you want to name someone off, you can’t think. Black Marxism is the name of the book that he ... Cedric Robinson, in the late 70’s. So, he’s another thinker who has, kind
of, laid the groundwork for the emergence of this new discussion.

Do we want to talk about Spillers?

John

Yeah, let’s let the Spillers ... [crosstalk 00:27:47]

I went to Spillers to think about like, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s, Maybe” in regards to B’s question about how, like, to some extent, if ... You know, I think one of the ways to read that piece is to think about the way that, you know, that “the flesh” and the category that she talks about “the flesh” in is something that is stripped of any ability to be, like, thrown into kind of conventional gendered and sexualized matrices of legibility and understanding.

Actually, I saw a really good talk by Alexander Weheliye about that particular question of, kind of, the de-gendering or de-sexuality of Black flesh that’s really interesting.

James

That sounds interesting.

B.

That is interesting.

James

Yeah, there ... So, because we can turn a bit, I think, because there are two dimensions of this, where, one aspect of this conversation is looking at, like the historic, ongoing situation of Black lives, and, you know, the actual material context.

But, then, there’s also something going on in these readings where they are trying to re-define theory, broadly, that ... funneling things through Blackness as the kind of all theory.

So, I guess I’ll just quote Sexton, because this is a very sweeping statement. It says, at the beginning of “Ante-Anti-Blackness,” where says, “I am guided in the following task by a two-sided idea...:1) all thought, insofar as it is genuine thinking, might best be conceived of as black thought and, consequently, 2) all researches, insofar as they are genuinely critical inquiries, aspire to black studies. Blackness is theory itself, anti-blackness the resistance to theory. I suspect that this premise might help us to re-frame questions of theory in cultural studies by referring to – or forging – another criterion of evaluation.”

And, I think the question ... So, you can use Blackness when feminist critiques, gender critiques ... If your main project, or some or all of that work, is to be critical theory, and to decolonize theory, and like, I think this relates to Mignolo, again, then all of this research is Black, even if Black research is feminist critique. It’s Black because it is a critique of whiteness, where whiteness is then being used as a kind of short-hand for North Atlantic modernity, and
neo-liberalism. So, Black, in this regard, is just kind of, like, the solvent for all of these problems. And, Spillers’s piece, “The Idea of Black Culture,” she’s picking up on this definition of Black, where ... I’ll paraphrase, and then I’ll look for a quote later. But, she’s saying that Black culture is critical culture. And, if you’re going to develop a critical culture ... She’s using Marcuse, and there’s kind of a separation between, like, civilization and culture. And civilization becomes the stand-in for the body politic, the powers that be, the structure of economic and political oppression, for Black and brown and non-standard bodies. Then ... What was I saying?

[crosstalk 00:21:27]

Okay, yes.

B. It’s interesting, because it seems like, from that, then, to be sort of, I guess, epistemically disobedient, if you will, is to move away from, like, maybe, from, like interiority ...

John We only ding for Always Already.

B. Always Already!

James Ohhh! And, that is in the reading. [crosstalk 00:31:45]

John That’s a good one.

B. We do need a sound effect if we refer to a previous show.

James Yeah, it’s ... There you go.

B. It’s just, maybe to interrogate those terms, then it’s like, that ... So, if we’re using ‘subjectivity,’ we’re using ‘gender/sex,’ I think you were mentioning this, John, we’re using even the word ‘ontology,’ is to then interrogate the ways in which they’ve already been fixed within a Western notion of what these terms means specifically.

And so, how does one then re-think or re-cast these terms? Or, even, do we want to use these terms in ways? Because, by doing that, by asking the ... by my even asking the question “Where does gender/sex come into play,” does it get dissolved in our conversations about political subjectivity in terms of Blackness and social life and social death, might actually be, you know, reifying, within that question, a notion of whiteness, and you know, a way of, like, really, kind of, Eurocentric epistemology, right?

So, it’s like re-examining the very use of these terms in themselves and how they are trying express particular bodies is ... Ought to be the project. If some much is to [inaudible 00:32:52] and
interrogating, right?

John Yeah. Which is, I think ... Really, I mean, that’s an interesting thing, right? And, in some ways, that’s one of Spiller’s big projects, like: what constitutes, and is constituted by, the category of “the human,” or “Man” more generally, right? And, what and who are left out?

And so, there are some really interesting quotes. Because, I think one of the things that’s shared across all these texts are exactly the question you pose, James, of like, what happens when we push these questions and theories and ideas and modes of reading, and all of these sorts of things? And then, what happens, in some ways, when we generalize them? And, “generalize” is not quite the right term, right? Because, it’s Sexton talking about how, you know, what if thinking theory and Blackness is just theory, like, that’s what theory is?

James Right, right.

John And so, there’s a couple of those moments in Spillers. So, on page 22, and I’m just going to kind of pick some sentences between 22 and 25 from her piece …

So, first, she writes, “Chandler argues from W.E.B. Du Bois’s ‘double-consciousness’ that African-American identity formation, might be generalized, not only to American identities, as such, but to ‘modern subjectivities in general.’”

Then we go to the next page: “Chandler shows that even under the most extreme circumstances imaginable, such as the condition of enslavement, both subjectivation and subjectivity occur in relation between parties.” Then, if we keep going on to the –

James I have each one of these highlighted. So, I thought we’re on the same page.

John Yeah. Then, like, to the next page: “If subordination, then, is already imminent in the hegemonic posture and the hegemonic posture in the subordinate, there is on longer ‘black’ or ‘white’ culture, per se, if there ever were, or the power monopoly implied in the formulation, but, rather, ‘only differences of force.’”

Skip down a little bit more: “To that extent, we should think that ‘black culture,’ which might be established as an ‘example,’ might take us back or ahead to the problematic of culture in general and ‘as such.’”

And, one more sentence: “It seems, then …”
James: Yes! This Spillers, give her her due!

John: “It seems, then, to Du Bois and the latter-day theoreticians need the specificity of context in order to articulate a generality of ontological procedure.”

Right? So, there’s these moments of generalizing from, throughout, but I think speaking to the ideas that you two are talking to.

James: Right. Yeah. It really … And I … In some ways, and I’m biased, because this is where I’m going, right? This is my world. But, I do really think that, you know, “the Negro problem,” to use 19th century words, this has been the site. This is ground zero for the Enlightenment. This is ground zero for humanism. If you’re going to be a post-humanist, and you want to be post-Enlightenment in your thinking, and, you know … Then, going to, like, not just that time period of the … I think this sounds like the Mignolo episode again!

You know, like, the historicizing of these theories and the categories that come out of the European Enlightenment, but then, not only going back to that in a general way, but then saying, “Look at the category of man, how it emerges within Enlightenment and humanist discourse.” And then, go to the actual site of Blackness within that discourse itself, in its time and history. And, you find Africans and slaves in chains, and that position of slavery precluding any humanity in a way that, then, if you use Blackness, Blackness is post-human or anti-humanism, because it was not in the category. And, this whole project, maybe this whole … The whole story of America is trying to make humanism work for Black people.

John: And, because that exclusion is constitutive of humanism and the Enlightenment, and such, right? That, Blackness is thus always going to be pushing to do something that’s not humanism.

James: Right.

I know, and I’ve heard Sexton describe it. I don’t know if it’s in these … It might be in these readings. But, whiteness, as the structure, the orienting structuring impulse of Western North Atlantic modernity, and then Blackness being its antipode … We’ve used theory where whiteness … without realizing that whiteness was the premise behind all of our categories. So, what happens then, if Blackness becomes the, kind of, heuristic behind all the categories, and not just the generalized, universalized Blackness, but the historical Blackness, the modern constitution that Spillers was talking about – what happens to theory?

You know, these questions, Sexton asks these kind of questions:
what happens if we just turn theory around, instead of just using Europe and white man cis bodies as the site of normalcy? Let's theory through Blackness and see what happens with all of our categories of political and ethical concerns.

John Yeah, and, Sexton points like one mode that that kind of track would take, right?

So, I’m just going to quote from him again, because he was really good. On page 15 to 16, he writes: “To interrogate ‘the racial discourses of life philosophy’ is to demonstrate that the question of life cannot be prised apart from that thorniest of problems: ‘the problem of the Negro as the problem for thought,’ that dubious and doubtless ‘fact of blackness,’ or, what I will call, in yet another register, the social life of social death. This is as much inquiry about the nature of nature as it is about the politics of nature, and the nature of politics; in other words, it is metapolitical no less than it is metaphysical,” getting back to this earlier discussion of the political.

Then, if we skip ahead a little bit, he says: “Reading Deleuze and Guattari, Foucault or Agamben cannot remain the same, nor should it, to the extent that we haven’t engaged the tragic-comic complexities of existence in Black,” which then also takes me back to Alexander Weheliye’s book, *Habeas Viscus*, right, where he does a complete re-reading and critique of Foucault and Agamben from the position of Blackness, and the flesh.

James Right. And, I think we can keep picking up on this line here, where Saidiya Hartman, to show how the, kind of localized, historical context of the questions that they’re working through, become ways, likes, prisms, to have much wider discourses.

And, so, Saidiya Hartman is describing the way Black history had been written up to the mid-20th century, and she says: “I think there’s a certain integrationist rights agenda that subjects who are variously positioned on the color line can take up. And that project is something I consider obscene: the attempt to make the narrative of defeat into an opportunity for celebration, the desire to look at the ravages and the brutality of the last few centuries, but to still find a way to feel good about ourselves. That’s not my project at all, thought I think it’s actually the project of a number of people. Unfortunately, …”

I’m sorry, this is page 185: “Unfortunately, the kind of social revisionist history undertaken by many leftists in the 1970s, who were trying to locate the agency of dominated groups, resulted in celebratory narratives of the oppressed. Ultimately, it bled into this celebration, as if there was a space you could carve out of the terrorizing state apparatus in order to exist outside its clutches and
forge some autonomy. My project is a different one. And in particular, one of my hidden polemics in the book was an argument against the notion of hegemony, and how that notion has been taken up in looking at the status of the slave.”

So, in that quote from Hartman, she’s coming at liberal premises of looking for agency, all these categories of liberal ...

John

Not just liberal, though, also white radical.

James

White radical, right. What is liberation, defined by when you’re the scholar? Or, then also, hegemony?

And so, her polemics ... She’s got some cites in her ... She’s coming for ... That I really did appreciate. Because, I did think there’s something obscene about all of the scholarship that’s so deeply premised upon some kind of liberation narrative, and a rights kind of agenda, or, you know, that that frame occludes so much of what’s actually going on. And then, it also kind of imparts motives to peoples’ behaviors that they might not be ascribing to what they’re doing themselves. Because you deem every action as some kind of ...

I know, so, Genovese, Eugene Genovese, slavery scholar, his idea in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, of accommodation versus resistance, and that these were the two poles of slave life. But, fitting everything into the dialectic is colonizing this ... The peoples whose behaviors and their cultural logics might not be able to be mapped onto that kind of a framework of thinking about things. You know, Hegel is easy to beat up on. But he is, you know ...

B.

I mean, so is Marx. He was using a Marxist interpretation for *Roll, Jordan, Roll*. So, it’s like ...

James

That ... You know. Yeah, we ... There’s been a lot of good scholarship, and I think that there is modes of resistance. But, everything can’t be resistance, because then you are, in some ways, re-inscribing the domination by making everything resisting that domination.

And, I guess this is somewhat in Moten, too, that, sometimes, Black people are ding things that are not taking their queue from the power structure. Like, there are other things, you know. But, then again, there’s Saidiya Hartman saying that you’re not going to be able to carve a little space out of the terror apparatus that is the state. Or at least we can’t talk about it that way anymore. There are moments of re-appropriation. And, in her book *Scenes of Subjection*, she talks about how enslaved peoples re-appropriated the uses of their bodies, because their body was the fungible
economic object.

And so, by re-appropriating your body, through dance, even though the dance space was already cordoned off, and most masters were encouraging their enslaved populations to indulge in those kinds of fun things, because that’s how you control people too ... But, it’s in the actual performance, where, if their ... “agency” is really not the word. But, if there’s going to be something, it’s not just that the enslaved populations were singing and dancing on the plantation at night, and so that is their resistance – no. But, it’s the strategic use of the body, and the way they move or dance. And, in her book, she gets into this, more.

But, yeah, there’s a different way to talk about it. So then, just saying ‘carving out a space of freedom within a larger context of oppression,’ we can’t talk about this anymore, like that. I think that’s the point of all of these theories, theorists, that we need to develop new language.

John  Do we think, or do you think, that Moten can get us there, or that [Black] Optimism sometimes, maybe not explicitly, but implicitly, falls back onto some of those notions of freedom, or something like that? And, I mean, I don’t know In the Break. You know In the Break, James.

James  Ahh, that’s ... I’ve read ... In the Break.

John  Okay. Fair enough.

James  I’ve ... I love you, Fred Moten, if you’re listening! I’ve tried to decipher. Because, I feel like it is a cipher that, there’s this code Moten is giving you, like, a treasure map. But, I don’t know, quite yet, how to read that treasure map.

But, Fred Moten uses Black music as, not just the like, materiality of the archive that he deals with, and performances, but then also uses music as metaphors for other things. And so, he uses jazz improv, and the idea of, like, a jazz improvisational performance, where there is no kind of pre-planned-ness to it. But, like, different instrumentalists can just kind of show up and start jamming. And, this thing doesn’t ever really end if you just have constant ... You could constantly have new performers showing up and adding their line to the ensemble performance, and then leaving, and then new people showing up.

And so, this is the way Fred Moten thinks about Black life, as an ensemble project of improvisation of, sometimes you take the solo, sometimes I take the solo. And so, I think there is a lot to be learned by looking at Black music aesthetics and at Black music
organizing. I don’t want to call it “politics,” because now I’m using another word that … I’m importing the word “politics.”

But, there is a logic of social organization that takes place within these kinds of Black performance spaces that could be used to think about ways to organize society more broadly. Can we have a jazz improvisational society, in the way our whole society functions? I think he could get you there. It’s just, do people want to go into that kind of a world?

What was the line? Here I go again, from a couple episodes ago, this – Latour’s line, “Do we want to live the good life together?” That question that Latour asks.

B. Oh!

John Oh, in the … About the parliament thing. That was [inaudible 00:47:04].

B. The parliament. Oh, of …

John It’s not the Democracy of Objects. That’s, what’s his name …

B. We’re talking about The Politics of Nature.

James But, I think that question of like, are we ready to live the good life together, is kind of, Moten is on ensemble. He wants us to be in an ensemble, improvisational society.

John To flip it kind of back, then, the reverse of the question that I just pushed was, then, is thinking through Black social death, in the way that Hartman, or Wilderson, or Sexton thinks through it, one route towards the ensemble? Or, is it a different enough project that they don’t converge somewhere?

James You know, I think, perhaps, too, some of the Afro-Pessimists, they’re in conversation with Moten and the [Black] Optimists, but they’re also, kind of, in conversation with the kinds of integrationist approaches that Saidiya Hartman was talking about. And so, I think there is a value in … Because, not everyone who is working in Black studies is on board with the social death of … Like, just the categorical impossibility for there to be a legible political life for Black people.

And so, as long as there will still be other projects of people using humanist … Not just language, but also humanist understandings of subjectivity and whatnot – as long as that is still going on, there will be a need for the Afro-Pessimists to kind of slap down on that, and just say, at some point, we have to stop thinking that one more
reform is going to change something deeply structural. Although it is pessimistic to talk about this, right?

Because, I guess it is ... It ... You want there ... I guess, liberalism’s rhetoric can sound good on paper, and it sounds good on paper coming out of the [inaudible 00:49:30] regime, perhaps, where, like, we can have a society of equal citizens, equality before the law: these are good-sounding things. But, the historical nature of all these discourses, and the way that Black life has been negated throughout the history of the West, it requires us to think out of ...

I don’t know what the answer is yet, and I’m struggling in my own scholarship to think through this. Because, once you arrive at these premises, there’s a kind of sense, “well, then what?” But, there is no “then what,” because, going against the premises of Western philosophical categories is also going against an idea of progress in general, and that there isn’t some kind of a telos to progress. And so, I’m not sure where we go from here, or if “going anywhere” is the language to use.

But, there is a pickle, there’s a real dilemma in these readings that is born out of a real crisis that is happening, and has been happening for 500 years. And, there, I don’t know. I don’t know.

John Right. Well, that’s maybe, actually, a place to leave it.

James Oh. So grim!

John But, you know, and this is something that the three of us were talking about before the show, is that, you know, in some ways, it’s, you know, I don’t know ... “Dishonest” is the word that’s coming to mind, although that’s not quite right ... If it’s like, you think about Baltimore, you think about Charleston, you think about Black churches being burned throughout the South, it’s like, it would be naïve of us not to go to that grim place, right?

James Right, right.

You know, okay. We’ll end this, maybe on a little upper note. Because, I wanted to mention the Mignolo episode one more time, in case people haven’t listened to it yet. I thought it was very interesting, and I told B this earlier, that the examples that were coming up in that podcast, as performances of epistemic disobedience – right, that’s the phrase, epistemic disobedience? So, you all talked about Bree Newsome, Malcom X’s speech came in, and of course Fanon gives a lot of things to think about.

But, here are all the things that come out of the Black radical tradition. Being the examples of how a decolonized epistemic
practice, what it could look like. And so, that to me, was like, wow, maybe there is something to Sexton’s broad, sweeping ‘all theory is black, all researches are black,’ like, the best go-to examples that are kind of, just, subconsciously, in the ambient, here, were Black radical ones.

B. And it seems to me like, there’s nothing necessarily negative, or, well, I don’t want to use the word pessimistic ... Or, I guess ... There’s nothing bad about wanting to lose juridical notions of subjectivity. There’s nothing wrong and negative about wanting to drop these juridical ideas that has an entire constitutive focus, whose entire constitution was drive by discourse on racism and exclusion.

So, it’s like, again, I think it was just sort of repeating what you were saying, it’s like, moving past these juridical notions of subjetchood, is that there’s something to be gained. There is a lot to that project. It’s not just sort of like, leaving things empty ... Well, it is leaving things open, but that’s exciting. It’s leaving things open to the possibility of the political imagination. Whereas I think juridical conceptions of, what is a human, what is a body, etc., leave things closed. There is no imagination left for that. And so, maybe leaving on a happy note is precisely that, right? That these notions are, that is the political imagination of radicalism, but specifically Black radicalism.

James Right. And, that, like, going back to Bree Newsome’s example, she’s a really great example of how jazz improvisation, as a political performance, right? Like, that flag discussion was taking place in a normal kind of, like, the legislature had to meet and have a vote.

And what does she do? She riffs on the whole and just climbs up, as a performance! This thing was a performance, right? So, I think that is a Fred Moten fugitivity, a politics of fugitivity, a kind of, you are already kind of ready to go, you know? She was kind of ready to go before there was ever an issue.

B. She was always already ready!

John Ding!

James Right! She was always all-ready!

Just, when the moment came, it was like, “okay, I’m going to climb.” And she was, she just, she went into performance mode. So, that is the open-ended possibilities that open up when the normal political realm is foreclosed. And that we just stop ... Because this is my other Black scholars, Black studies scholars: can we please all start harnessing our collective productive forces into this kind of
imaginative possibilities? Because, you know, the more time we keep spending thinking about how to integrate those civil body politic is less time that we could be creatively thinking of just, new possibilities. And, I know, there’s no ... There’s room for everyone to do everything. But, you know, everyone can do something different. But, I really think that it’s, we need to be thinking about the futurity, here, and like, let’s just stop the old ... Let’s just stop!

John          All right. Well, we’re going to take a quick break.