

# What is the Libidinal Economy of Antiblackness?

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Afropessimism offers a critique, not a theory of libidinal economy. By reconstructing that critique here, I hope to show how afropessimism's understanding of antiblackness is derived from a theory of history that is itself constructed through a critique of libidinal economy. That theory of history tessellates around a specific concern – both critical and political – over the *absence* of black revolution.

From the outset, we should be clear that the critique I intend to detail takes as its object a classical, early 19th-century understanding of economy (one venerated with scientific *bona fides* by the promulgation and lateral application of the laws of the conservation of energy from the field of physics) as a closed system, one presumably governed by the logics of harmony and equilibrium, organised by a metaphysics of equivalence and intrinsic value, and operating according to the general principle of conservation (of meaning or productive forces).<sup>1</sup> A bad, long-running common sense bequeaths this worldview, one on which afropessimism trains its crosshairs, and that necessarily imagines the human as an essentially pleasure-seeking or utility-maximising animal. This rationalist notion of subjectivity, which even 20th-century economic psychology and behavioural economics complicated on their own terms, still infiltrates theories of racialisation of all stripes. What I have in mind are those critical projects that, in one way or another, presuppose that white supremacy derives its so-called irrational vitality – its political legitimacy as well as its affective profitability – from the pleasure it provides (or pain it spares) its benefactors: whether we have in mind the notion of a “public and psychological wage”<sup>2</sup> it extracts from racial superordination, the enjoyment it stages from its accompanying spectacles of black suffering, or the fear and anxiety that antiblackness simultaneously produces and defrays. If this conceptualisation of the psychological utility of racism does not, in the end, seem very “irrational” at all, that is because it ascribes to antiblackness an essential economism of desire. While not in the immediate monetary (“material”) interests of its benefactors, antiblackness is still

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1 David Bennett, *The Currency of Desire: Libidinal Economy, Psychoanalysis, and Sexual Revolution* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2016).

2 W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction* (NY: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1935), 700.

conceived as libidinally (“sexually”) rational or politically interested. This will not do, if for no other reason than that such a notion of white supremacy renaturalises political economy’s proposition that “greed” is essential to human psychology into some basic harmony of narcissistic interests.

As if surplus libido could be in the interest of a sovereign self! As if the drive could be sublimated without loss!

In the end, such a notion of libidinal economy only recycles a psychological truism adopted by every classical political economist that Marx critiqued, all of whom posit the individual ego as a “rent-seeking” agent in the pursuit of utility or happiness or certain moral sentiments; one who, because they are somehow transparent to themselves, because they are not alienated (or unconscious) in any significant sense, begin and end by making free choices in free markets – whether commercial or sexual or both. We could find Freud’s early metapsychological precept on the economism of the unconscious guilty of the same sin, insofar as he, too, initially treats desire as the design of a scrupulous accountant: in wishes or jokes, Freud suggested, “a gain in pleasure corresponds to the saving of psychical expenditure.”<sup>3</sup> So here I am only restating the obvious: the critique of political economy is already a critique of libidinal economy. And that is because those critiques revolve around a shared object: the subject, the economically minded ego, or what Sylvia Wynter names the “bio-economic subject.”<sup>4</sup> Afropessimism, in turn, involves a critique of the economies disputed by both Marxism and psychoanalysis: it solders a disjunctive unity between these dual (and frequently duelling) traditions of critical theory by rebaptising their methods and concepts through the historical-structural instance of racial slavery.

If there is no economic subject as just described, that is consequent to the fact that *there is no (libidinal or political) economy* in this traditional sense. In rooting its critical concerns in the problematic inexistence of economy, afropessimism shares a vertex with, and a fair share of the ambitions of, a project on the “primary question of economy” proposed by Georges Bataille.<sup>5</sup> It is in his work that this classical conception meets its ruination, where we find an emphasis on nonreproductive expenditure and destruction over investment and conservation, where we see the dynamics of waste and extravagance elevated over use and growth into touchstones of the

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- 3 Sigmund Freud, “Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey (1905; reis., London: Hogarth Press, 1960), 114.
  - 4 Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 318.
  - 5 Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, trans. Robert Hurley (NY: Zone Books, 1988), 10.

limits of economisation, and where these dynamics cover an area of concern dealing with matter and human energy as such. Such a project, contended Bataille, “may hold the key to all problems posed by every discipline concerned with the movement of energy on the earth.”<sup>6</sup>

If afroprossimism is consubstantial with a project of general economy at this scale – and this is one of my implicit arguments – it is a grave mistake to date its birth to a simple shift in attention from the rational interests that racial domination serves (the economic utility of slavery and its afterlives) to the irrational wishes it satisfies (the erotic complexes that motivate and reward those institutions). Not that the body of afroprossimist writing is always free of passages that could suggest such an inversion, but a better interpretation is possible, which we can start to reconstruct from the beginning.

Frank B. Wilderson III, in his early 2003 article “Gramsci’s Black Marx,” deems a supplemental inquiry into the libidinal economy of slavery as the red thread of afroprossimism’s (at the time still-unnamed) intellectual canon.

It’s important to bear in mind that for [Saidiya] Hartman, [Walter] Johnson, [Orlando] Patterson, and [Hortense] Spillers the libidinal economy of slavery is more fundamental to its institutionality than is the political economy. In other words, the constituent element of slavery involves desire and the accumulation of black bodies and the fact that they existed as things “becoming *being for* the captor.” The fact that black slaves laboured is a historical variable, seemingly constant, but not a constituent element.<sup>7</sup>

The ensemble of “direct relations of force” that comprise the libidinal economy are strictly incompatible with the field of power executed through the wage relation, just as they are inassimilable to the gendering matrix installed via the reproductive labour (domestic and sexual) extracted through and beyond the wage relation. But the latter – the forces and relations of political economy that gender the sexual division of labour – are also only instituted through an interdiction and organisation of the violence of libidinal economy. Power (i.e., the political) mediates terror (i.e., the libidinal) and erects itself upon it, confirming Jean-François Lyotard’s guiding axiom that every political economy is libidinal.<sup>8</sup> Put another way, libidinal economy is the structural antagonism within, or the impossibility and immanent ruin of, every

6 Bataille, *Accursed*, 10.

7 Frank B. Wilderson III, “Gramsci’s Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?” *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture* 9, no. 2 (2003): 239, n 4. Internal quotation is from Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” *Dia-critics* 17, no. 2 (1987), 67.

8 Jean-François Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993), 108–122.

political economy. So already here, in the earliest hours of afropessimism's intervention, a quilting between the political and libidinal economy is clearly visible. The impossibility of economy as such – the fact that no system of power *relations* can cohere into a *body* of power – manifests through the libidinal economy's subversion of the political economy.

For Wilderson, the libidinal economy ultimately produces and manages access to black death, the latter a notion that historicises what Lyotard elsewhere calls an intensity or pulsion – an intrinsically useless force, something non-exchangeable, “inevaluable and unaccountable.”<sup>9</sup> It refers to the force of libidinal investment that exceeds any act of economisation (it is impossible to invest or capitalise intensities fully) and remains inassimilable, as the waste by-product of every procedure of governmentality. Freud called this force “the death drive,” a notion reworked more recently by Willy Apollon and the Québec school of psychoanalysis as the “unbound” drive that surges forth through the effraction of the living being by the advent of the faculty of speech unoriented by (and inassimilable to) adaptation or biological survival,<sup>10</sup> unleashing thereby an “energy that is diverted from the organism in the creation elicited by [a] representation that is outside of perception.”<sup>11</sup> On the other end of the spectrum, to radically dispose of such an intensity, to enact a total divestment of drive energy, is equivalent to what Jacques Derrida calls an “expenditure without reserve,” an “irreversible usage of energy ... that apparently interrupts every economy.”<sup>12</sup> Such an act of total discharge, as with the “pure” drive itself, is unserviceable to any dispensation of sovereignty, just as it impedes the procedures of conservation and equivalence that subtend value production. The drive's useless force and its total expenditure are inimical to investment; and both of these liminal states of the drive – being but two faces of the same coin – are dissimulated everywhere by the organisation, territorialisation, and investment of libido in relations of power. It is only by capitalising the drive, by instantiating those relations through the cathexis of social objects, in a process that can nevertheless never be fully consummated, that intensities are organised into various dispositifs of libidinal enjoyment – what we can call *modes of jouissance*. We will return to this notion and specify its contribution to formulating the problematic of the absence of black revolution at the end of this chapter.

Let me first warn the reader, then, about two misprisions that tend to shroud the whole topic of the libidinal economy of antiblackness. First, it would be folly to speak of any intrinsic coincidence between the aim and object of antiblackness, to assign

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9 Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, xvi.

10 Willy Apollon, “The Limit: A Fundamental Question for the Subject in the Human Experience,” *Konturen* 3 (2010): 107.

11 Willy Apollon, “The Subject of the Quest,” trans. Daniel Wilson, *Penumbra(a)* 2 (2022): 4.

12 Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), 19.

it an instinct for self-preservation, whether that be maintaining white supremacy, reproducing symbolic power, or even accumulating (surplus-value or bodies). Antiblackness is rather the uninterrupted uprooting of itself, an ontological crisis, one that – and this boggles the political imagination – cannot be sustained without opposing itself, without a binding of its energies and a blocking (or territorialisation) of its intensities, the latter being the necessary and adequate conditions under which various *formations* of antiblackness can emerge – imaginary and symbolic formations that rely on, but always remain distinct from, the *real of antiblackness*. What Frantz Fanon called negrophobia, although perhaps one of antiblackness' historically privileged forms – comprising a structure of relations that grounds an aggressive mass psychology – occurs only on the condition that the real of antiblackness is drained into a common identification against a black imago.<sup>13</sup> But negrophobia is not essential to antiblackness; the latter can theoretically exist without the former. The real of antiblackness rather subverts economisation of any sort and, with it, capital itself, which maintains its grip on the material conditions of life – vesting the political economy with its miraculous powers of adaptation – through this unceasing internal subversion.

We are led to an equally dead end if we insist on any straightforward distinction between the “rational” interests and the “irrational” exuberances of antiblackness, and precisely because the political and the libidinal are dimensions of the same process, always part of the same antagonistic cocktail, just as Bataille notes that “real life, composed of all sorts of expenditures, knows nothing of purely productive expenditure ... [and] nothing of purely unproductive expenditure.”<sup>14</sup> The point is that the “psychic” and the “material,” the flow of capital and the metonymy of desire – even if separating them out is provisionally useful as a heuristic device – are only ever found compressed in the same inorganic economy.

Against separating the psychic and the material, we might instead open a more useful distinction between the immaterial structure of slavery and the historical-material conditions from which it arises but to which it is irreducible. For the Marxist critic Alberto Toscano, the critique of political economy, at its core, involves a “*critique of ideologies of materiality*” (emphasis in original)<sup>15</sup> that applies equally to materialist ideologies of slavery. Only by distinguishing between slavery's material conditions (its social forms, juridical institutions, and the bodies they materialise) and its structure (antiblackness as such) can one explain its formal determination of the biopolitical crises of black life today: “the skewed life chances, limited access

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13 David Marriott, “Bonding Over Phobia,” in *The Psychoanalysis of Race*, ed. Christopher Lane (NY: Columbia UP, 1998), 428.

14 Bataille, *Accursed Share*, 12.

15 Alberto Toscano, “Materialism Without Matter: Abstraction, Absence and Social Form,” *Textual Practice* 28, no. 7 (2014): 1225.

to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment.”<sup>16</sup> Here, a certain internal dialectic links the material (concrete) and immaterial (abstract) dimensions of antiblackness. The intangible forms that inhere in exchanging, accumulating, and destroying black bodies, which are embedded in the social practices of racial domination, from chattel bondage to the murder of black people, both of which can be considered variants of a more general reproductive oppression of black women,<sup>17</sup> evacuate the body of its historicity and abstract from it a signifier – blackness – that transcends the material basis of its fecundation and takes on a symbolic life of its own. This new distinction – again, between what Saidiya Hartman calls a *formal* or symbolic “racial calculus and political arithmetic” and the *material* conditions of the “afterlife of slavery,” which *may or may not* be positively correlated to it<sup>18</sup> – is roughly divided, in afropessimism, between its intertwined critiques of economy: the political economy encompassing the historical and material formations of antiblackness, and the libidinal economy indexing their constant displacement, the impossible unity between antiblackness’ form and content, and the intrinsic volatility, the inhibition of its own aim, that guarantees that *antiblackness does not stop materialising itself*.

“Slavery and freedom do not refer to material well-being.”<sup>19</sup> For James Oakes – whose close attention to the negative juridical status of the slave, bearing as it does such an “uncanny resemblance”<sup>20</sup> to Frantz Fanon’s calibration of blackness as a defect in ontology, justifies including him as a fellow traveller of afropessimism – slavery’s governance, unlike the symbolic instruments employed to organise the social space of political freedom, has a peculiar legal and symbolic status. Never directly governed or juridically defined, racial slavery in the southern United States rested on an indeterminate negation of society. “Where the law in general establishes the rules by which men and women organise their social, personal, and political relations, the law of slavery merely declares those laws irrelevant to the slaves themselves.”<sup>21</sup> The law of slavery integrates – without incorporating – slavery *into* society based on its foreclosure *from* society. The slave (and slavery) is therefore not a status that can be differentiated – quantitatively or qualitatively – from the status of

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16 Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 6.

17 Dani McClain, “The Murder of Black Youth is a Reproductive Justice Issue,” *The Nation*, August 13, 2014, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/murder-black-youth-reproductive-justice-issue/>.

18 Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 6.

19 James Oakes, *Slavery and Freedom: An Interpretation of the Old South* (NY: Norton, 1998), xvi.

20 Jared Sexton, “Don’t Call it a Comeback: Racial Slavery is Not Yet Abolished,” *openDemocracy*, June 17, 2015, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/beyond-trafficking-and-slavery/dont-call-it-comeback-racial-slavery-is-not-yet-abolished/>.

21 Oakes, *Slavery and Freedom*, 56.

freedom (and its free subject). The slave is the absence around which slavery society materialises. Post-slavery society, in turn, constitutes itself on a certain Hegelian negation of the negation of society, or around the valorisation of the slave's constitutive absence. The critique of libidinal economy reckons with the fact that, like the economy or the sexual relation, *antiracist society does not exist*.

It should be clear by now that the libidinal economy is not somehow more important than the political economy, but that its critique clocks the effects of the absence of any "outside" to the relations of power. The critique of libidinal economy describes capital in its inorganic totality, in its hegemonising relation to its own outside. It is a theoretical procedure for determining the consequences of the fact that there is no "sacred" space beyond political economy. It thus provides a critical position from which to recognise that all conceptualisations of a point of reference beyond it, all hope in the existence of an instance of lack or excess that would undo capital, are illusions native to any (critique of) political economy that does not account for the libidinal. Indeed, there is perhaps no more consistent point across the history of the critique of libidinal economy than this one, from Lyotard's rebuffing of an anthropological romance about a body or primitive society outside the economising logic of capitalist social formations ("*there is as much libidinal intensity in capitalist exchange as in the alleged 'symbolic' exchange*" [emphasis in the original]<sup>22</sup>) to Samo Tomšič's axiom that it is not exploitation that alienates the worker under capitalism, but that capitalism derives its tenacious grip on life and limb by exploiting the subject's fundamental alienation by the structure of the signifier ("capitalism exploits the 'ontological weakness' of human beings"<sup>23</sup>) – and finally, to Wilderson's contention that racial blackness has no ontological plenitude before or beyond the "metaphysical holocaust" of transatlantic slavery.<sup>24</sup> There is nothing in human nature, nothing outside the Western episteme, nothing before or after the advent of racial slavery that is not already fundamentally alienated by the structure of the symbolic, which means that the current conjuncture – slavery and capital in their identity and difference – procures its powers over the subject precisely by exploiting the lack at the core of the human experience and harnessing the libidinal energy unleashed by the collision between body and speech. *Therein* lies its aneconomic efficiency, antiracism's perverse intransigence, its defective success.

When Étienne Balibar writes that the "real universality" of global markets is achieved by constructing abstract relations of equivalence – not equality – across all

22 Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, 109.

23 Samo Tomšič, *The Labour of Enjoyment: Towards a Critique of Libidinal Economy* (Berlin: August Verlag, 2019), 54.

24 Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham: Duke UP, 2010), 38.

things,<sup>25</sup> he does not imply that history is at its end or that capital is complete. On the contrary, post-slavery capital is built on including or valuing its constitutive alterity, what we have called the slave or the “inevaluable” real of antiblackness, which demands renewing our attention on the exclusions and incommensurabilities that emerge *within* the social. The political economy – including the global market and the penetration of its rationality into the crevices of private life – is both realised and detotalised through its infiltration of, and dispossession by, the field of surplus jouissance. *Capitalist power is universalised by including its own subversion within itself; and racial blackness is the talisman of the inclusion of the slave as negation of value, meaning, and pleasure.* As such, the libidinal economy, representing both the inner negation and driving force of power relations and value production, results in a twofold figure, an “extimacy” of economies, where the irruption of libidinal intensities – the very subversion of political economy – is captured, capitalised, and integrated into the global process of equivalence and valorisation. Such a twofold figure of economy that accounts for the productive and destructive aspects of antiblackness is a consistent feature in the last decades of black cultural theory: whether in the dialectic between the violent expenditure of blackness and its dissimulation in the transactions of racial value,<sup>26</sup> the complex between the general (meaning-destroying) and restrictive (meaning-making) economies of white supremacy,<sup>27</sup> to the topology between the symbolic economy of the body and the real of the flesh,<sup>28</sup> and through to the asymmetrical reciprocity between the coherence and incoherence of psychic life.<sup>29</sup> The latter – psychic incoherence – is the heading under which Wilderson now indexes the problematic of libidinal economy first fully explored in his *Red, White & Black*.

Since it is not a substantive thing, the *libidinised* political economy of antiblackness (or what we could also call the *politicised* libidinal economy) must instead be defined by the logic of its processes. Freud called the displacement and condensation of libido the “primary process” of the unconscious. For Wilderson, the abstract processes of the political economy of antiblackness – again, the *fungibility*, *accumulation*, and *destruction* of black bodies – are the primary process of the libidinal economy of antiblackness. A psychic mode of enjoyment corresponds to each of these primary processes: *fungibility* is conditioned by the alienability of blackness as a sig-

25 Étienne Balibar, “On Universalism: In Debate with Alain Badiou,” *transversal texts*, June 2007, <https://transversal.at/transversal/0607/balibar/en>.

26 Linton Barrett, *Blackness and Value: Seeing Double* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), 11–54.

27 Jared Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 27–29.

28 Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 67–68.

29 Frank B. Wilderson III, *Afropessimism* (NY: Liverlight Publishing Co., 2020), 250.

nifier,<sup>30</sup> engendering a limitless variety of meanings endowable with a pleasure of sense (*jouis-sens* or “enjoyment-in-sense”); *accumulation*, on the other hand, is a mode of *jouissance* structured on the modality of inhibition, or the intensifying postponement of gratification (the surplus-enjoyment found in thriftiness or anal-retentive characters, for instance); *destruction* involves an extravagant expenditure, the discharge of libidinal tension through aggression, the transgression of the law, or the destruction of normative ideals (as found in the premodern potlatch or gratuitous antiblack police violence now); and all three modes of enjoyment are saturated in the *jouissance* of compulsion, in the structure of failure and the repetition of the same. Each mode of *jouissance*, none of which can be described as simply or only pleasurable, therefore produces different subjective modalities, different ways of libidinally capitalising on (and subjectively relating to) antiblack subjection. A certain fantasy frames each of these modes of enjoyment too, just as they mirror various patterns of historical experience (mass incarceration, police killings, the “donning” of blackness in music, style, and sex, and so on). But antiblackness is *not* any *one* of these logical processes; rather, the libidinal economy consists of the mechanisms through which black death – the real of antiblackness – is deintensified, regulated, and invested in various subjective and collective modes of enjoyment.

Perhaps the most frequently cited of afropessimism’s definitions of libidinal economy is found in Wilderson’s first theoretical monograph:

Jared Sexton describes libidinal economy as “the economy, or distribution and arrangement, of desire and identification (their condensation and displacement), and the complex relationship between sexuality and the unconscious.” Needless to say, libidinal economy functions variously across scales and is as “objective” as political economy. It is linked not only to forms of attraction, affection, and alliance, but also to aggression, destruction, and the violence of lethal consumption. Sexton emphasises that it is “the whole structure of psychic and emotional life,” something more than, but inclusive of or traversed by, what Antonio Gramsci and other Marxists call a “structure of feeling”; it is “a dispensation of energies, concerns, points of attention, anxieties, pleasures, appetites, revulsions, and phobias capable of both great mobility and tenacious fixation.”<sup>31</sup>

What is presented in template form here is the force of the libidinal (sexuality and the unconscious) and its simultaneous negation by economisation, and we should therefore carefully separate out what are identified here as its economic processes – distribution and arrangement, condensation and displacement, all the forces that

30 Christopher Chamberlin, “The Transmission of Slavery,” *European Journal of Psychoanalysis* (April 2021), <https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/articles/the-transmission-of-slavery-chamberlin/>.

31 Wilderson, *Red, White & Black*, 7.

contribute to the great mobility of affective investments – from the libidinal economy as such, which cannot cohere as an economy precisely because its interminable flux is proof of its inability to equilibrate itself as a system. Libidinal economy cannot escape what is always and everywhere improper to economy: its object, the drive. The libidinal is economised whenever its movement is fixed (cathected or invested) in “concerns, points of attention, anxieties, pleasures, appetites, revulsions, and phobias.” The implacability of antiblackness does not reside in some insurmountable, invariable element but in its regular, inexhaustible processes, through which it constantly transforms in the attempt to totalise or objectify itself. *Antiblackness is impossible*, and that is why it does not stop realising its own terror.

What we have here is the only structural “law” of antiblackness, which is that change – driven by the incommensurability between the drive and its object, between antiblackness and economy as such – is its only constant. Antiblackness, like the Lacanian real, is that which always returns to the same place. What then displaces this incommensurability and prevents the aim and object of antiblackness from settling into any single form? How do the modes of jouissance that “successfully” attach the subject to the formations of racialisation and instruments of domination fail? On this question of historical change, afro pessimism no doubt endorses a heavily de-romanticised version of the Marxist premise that a universal antagonism is the engine of history: antiblackness is transformed through structural crises, which come to a head when political agencies at various scales realise the internal contradiction between the libidinal relations of terror (metonymically, the slave) and the political relations of power (metonymically, the human). Such a theory of resistance as the engine of dialectical history is, of course, not Marxism’s or afro pessimism’s alone but rooted deeply in the Black Radical Tradition, as exemplified in W. E. B. Du Bois’ contention that the most successful general strike in the history of the United States – slaves’ *en masse* abandoning plantation work – served as the tipping point of the Civil War and catalysed the crisis of the colour line in the following century.<sup>32</sup>

But the hypothetical enclosure of the libidinal by the political – slavery’s negative assimilation into the structure of capital – is not consummated without a remainder; capital, as we have already highlighted, constantly subverts itself *because* it incorporates the unexchangeable and incommunicable real of antiblackness that resists its economic procedures. If the internecine conflict between the political and the libidinal results in what Lyotard calls the constant “dissimulation of intensities into values and values into intensities,”<sup>33</sup> could we not similarly describe post-slavery capital as the interminable dissimulation of antiblackness into value and values into antiblackness? If so, that means, on the one hand, that the antagonism between

32 Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 55–83.

33 Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, 110.

capital and slavery is internal to capital; and on the other, that the subject of political economy, the proletariat, and the subject of libidinal economy, the slave, are neither separate nor identical entities but the *same non-whole subject determined by a binary internal structure*.

With that we are returned to the opening question on the theory of the subject of economy, and to a rather vexing conclusion: the particular historical structure of post-slavery capital is defined by its relation to a *universal subject*. Not a subject of political representation, not one that shares a common sociological extraction, inhabits the same cultural milieu, or shares the same history, but one alienated by the universal structure of the signifier and that is subject to the same extra-cognitive laws of discourse. This is a highly specific notion of the subject, one reduced by Claude Lévi-Strauss to what he calls the “human symbolic function,” but one also surprisingly reaffirmed in the Civil Rights Era clinic. In the 1960s, the psychoanalytic psychiatrists William Grier and Price Cobbs – who should also be read as afropessimists *avant la lettre* – analysed how their African American patients psychically lived the abstract materiality of racial domination. As summarised in their explosive manifesto, *Black Rage* (1968), the considerable extensions of psychoanalysis that their clinical work required only reinforced a notion of the universal structure of the symbolic. This results in their theoretically and ethically principled *refusal* to racialise the subject at the level of the unconscious:

There is nothing reported in the literature or in the experience of any clinician known to the authors that suggests that black people *function* differently psychologically from anyone else. Black men's mental functioning is governed by the same *rules* as that of any other group of men. Psychological principles understood first in the study of white men are true no matter what the man's color (emphasis in original).<sup>34</sup>

Libidinally, each subject is the indeterminate effect of the symbolic laws that structure and articulate antiracism. Fungibility, accumulation, and destruction of black bodies determine every subject, including black subjects (even if they relate to these formations in ways as specific as their collective and individual singularity); not only that, but these libidinal dispositifs, and the particular ways they capture the free drives to attach subjects to their social position, are limited in their scope and variety to those that historically predominate in the libidinal economy of antiracism. Finally, this means that social antagonism – personified in the intractable combat between “human” and “slave” – is the engine of history in the truest, ambivalent sense: antagonism is not only the source of structural transformations (whenever the drive escapes economisation and wherever the subaltern

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34 William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs, *Black Rage* (NY: Bantam Books, 1968), 154.

revolts) but also its limit (when and where the drive is bound to the social order and subjection is capitalised).

Long before, Frederick Douglass had already posited a denaturalised notion of the subject as the basis for a theory of history structured by the dialectic between slavery and freedom: “The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress.”<sup>35</sup> This notion of “endurance” – of slaves’ ambivalent attachment to their social and political position – resonates with the psychoanalytic premise that the desire of the human subject is rooted neither in nature nor in culture but in the unconscious; that the subject of this denaturalised desire does not even organically incline toward life, having no naturally precluded capacity to adapt – or rather maladapt – to their material conditions. Death, that is, is also no limit to desire. For Douglass, this variable power to accommodate or refuse subjection determined the limit of slavery *and* its condition of possibility. Where oppression could and would be borne, racial tyranny would continue unabated; when it becomes unbearable, tyranny enters a crisis, and the possibility of its transformation through a political act arises. The endurance or *drive* of antiblackness is thus strictly correlated to the inherent nonreproductivity of desire and the limitless perversity of libidinal enjoyment. And an unflinching reckoning with the slave’s “resilience” as the principal determinant of the structural resilience of antiblackness is a theme carried across the afropessimist critique of libidinal economy, where the subject – the slave’s *relation* to their structural position, beyond the structural position itself – consistently comes into view as the decisive factor of antiblackness’ aneconomic efficiency.

To give you a sense of the consistency with which this theoretical and political concern arises in afropessimism’s texts, I will only provide a few points of reference that meditate on the relation between an *underdetermined universal subject* and the *overdetermined structure of antiblackness*, through which a critique of the economism of libidinal enjoyment swims into focus.

Saidiya Hartman first unambiguously located enjoyment as the axis of racial relations under slavery: not only the white subject’s enjoyment, as found in abolitionists’ pleasurable identification with the pain and suffering of slaves, but more importantly, black subjects’ enjoyment. The “instrumental recreations of plantation management” stabilised routine violence by eliciting the libidinal expenditures of the subjected; plantation dances and other forced amusements amounted to a “use of the body as an instrument against the self”<sup>36</sup> that pitches the subject’s *jouissance* against their social, political, and organic life.

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35 Frederick Douglass, “West India Emancipation Speech,” *University of Rochester Frederick Douglass Project*, originally presented August 3, 1857, <https://rbscp.lib.rochester.edu/4398>.

36 Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (NY: Oxford UP, 1997), 22.

James Oakes elsewhere catalogues how southern plantation owners responded to the resistance of slaves (from sabotage to open rebellion) through “patterns of accommodation.” By winning informal rules that limited violence and interference in their lives, slaves secured conditions that reduced overt conflict between oppressor and oppressed and thus paradoxically made domination sustainable. “[T]he fact that so many masters learned not to interfere too deeply in the private lives of slaves is testimony to the implicit compromise that masters and slaves had to respect if the system was to function at all.”<sup>37</sup>

Grier and Cobbs similarly analyse the prevalence of a “black rage” that afflicted their patients to inquire precisely into the paradoxical *rarity* of revolt against the Jim Crow system, into the mechanisms that bind the intensities of suffering instead of discharging them in rebellion. “The question we must ask is: What held the slave rebellion in check for so long?”<sup>38</sup> Their conclusion? That a matrifocal source of inhibition, reinforced through routine violence, converts black rage into a masochistic grief. Their question was undoubtedly shared by Frantz Fanon, whose political and clinical practice consistently concerned itself with how and why the internalisation of aggression arises as the default response by the colonised, a project condensed in a question that David Marriott shorthands in the following way: “Why do people disavow what could truly liberate them?”<sup>39</sup>

Could the lesson of the critique of libidinal economy concern precisely the subject’s masochistic investment in their own domination – and power’s inverse interest in the enjoyment of its subjects? Could elaborating the link between the subject of desire and the social and historical economisation of enjoyment indicate how a violence otherwise unserviceable to management and control, without a value proposition, nevertheless “works” simultaneously for and against its subscribers? This project’s scandal – and so the scandal of afropessimism – would be this: it analyses domination on the level at which it is libidinally invested by the defeated who *enjoy their living death – up to and including their extermination*. To get at its radically impersonal character we could even say: *it, antiracism, enjoys*. And to remove any final ambiguity entailed by the English word “enjoy,” we should more plainly state that *subjection is jouissance*, including for those whose so-called rational interests would most benefit from that subjection’s demise. Unless we confuse enjoyment with consent, and mistake freedom for the lifting of repression, this simple point justifies nothing and remains psychoanalytically uncontroversial.

I want to conclude by collating two incendiary passages from the history of the critique of libidinal economy. The first, “the most exorbitant claim in all of Lyotard’s

37 Oakes, *Slavery and Freedom*, 147.

38 Grier and Cobbs, *Black Rage*, 59.

39 David Marriott, *Whither Fanon? Studies in the Blackness of Being* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2018), 41.

outrageous book,<sup>40</sup> dares to expound on the perverse relationship between capital (and thus labour) and the proletariat:

the English unemployed did not become workers to survive, they – hang on tight and spit on me – enjoyed [*ils ont joui de*] the hysterical, masochistic, whatever exhaustion it was of *hanging* on in the mines, in the foundries, in the factories, in hell, they enjoyed it, enjoyed the mad destruction of their organic body which was indeed imposed upon them, they enjoyed the decomposition of their personal identity, the identity that the peasant tradition had constructed for them, enjoyed the dissolution of their families and villages, and enjoyed the new monstrous *anonymity* of the suburbs and the pubs in the morning and evening.<sup>41</sup>

The proletariat is here alienated thrice over: first by the signifier that (through its imposition of an imaginary body) alienates the subject from their desire; then from their surplus-value; and finally *through their own enjoyment*, or by how the technologies of modern life and extraction (the second level of alienation) fantasmatically suture the absence that grounds the subject in symbolic exchange (the first level of alienation). It is not that the subject throws themselves into the machinery of work out of a misguided attachment to survival over liberation, much less out of a cowardly refusal to risk their life in a dialectical overcoming of the master, but that they are seduced by the destruction of the alienating corporeal and symbolic schemas imposed on them. The dissolution of the imaginary (“organic” or “peasant”) body makes alienation and exploitation – even death – enjoyable. For Lyotard, several dispositifs characterise the relationship between the proletariat and the capitalist libidinal economy: the *jouissance* of anonymity, the *jouissance* of repetition, the *jouissance* of self-destruction, and so on.

Now let us turn to a passage from Wilderson, which can be found in various modified forms throughout his writings, and which works through the problematic of an *ahistorical* – yet *historically imposed* – *unconscious*:

The Human need to be liberated *in* the world is not the same as the Black need to be liberated *from* the world; which is why even their most radical cognitive maps draw borders between the living and the dead. *Finally, if we push [David] Marriott's findings to the wall, it becomes clear that eradication of the generative mechanisms of Black suffering is also not in the interests of Black revolutionaries.* For how can we dis-imbriicate Black juridical and political desire from the Black psyche's desire to destroy the Black imago, a desire which constitutes the psyche? In short, bonding with Whites and non-Blacks over phobic reactions to the Black imago provides

40 Eleanor Kaufman, “The Desire Called Mao: Badiou and the Legacy of Libidinal Economy,” *Postmodern Culture* 18, no. 1 (September 2007).

41 Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, 111.

the Black psyche with the only semblance of psychic integration it is likely to have: the need to destroy a Black imago and love a White ideal. "In these circumstances, having a 'white' unconscious may be the only way to connect with – or even contain – the overwhelming and irreparable sense of loss. The intruding fantasy offers the medium to connect with the lost internal object, the ego, but there is also no 'outside' to this 'real fantasy' and the effects of intrusion are irreparable" (Marriott, "Bonding over Phobia," 426) (emphasis in original).<sup>42</sup>

The "overwhelming and irreparable" real of antiracism is sutured through what, in the above, is described as an unconscious desire (to "destroy the Black imago") and an economic interest (in constituting "the psyche") that together foreclose a political need (to be "liberated from the world").

Wilderson is clear that psychic integration is only ever an ideological semblance. The coherence of identity, the wholeness of the body, is denied by the structure of the signifier that constitutes the subject in its cleavage from a radically alien drive that permanently displaces its foundation. Where a "White unconscious" constitutes the shared symbolic heritage, antiracism hostility becomes the *exclusive* mechanism for constituting the semblance of psychic integration, while the drive it radically alienates, the intensity that remains structurally inassimilable to the body and disjunctive to the self, is consequently racialised through a "Black imago" that represents (or gives an image to) the unrepresentable real of antiracism. This consequently introduces the desire for the destruction of (and disidentification from) the Black imago as the only ideological route to the overcoming of castration, the disalienation of the subject, and the recovery of a fantasmatic organic body. But this *neurotic* pursuit of psychic integration through a mutual phobic hostility to the Black imago is only one subjective strategy for containing and enjoying the overwhelming real of antiracism.

There is also a second subjective strategy: the perverse enjoyment gained in the fetishistic circumvention of the symbolic that aims to destroy every semblance of psychic integration. This is the *jouissance* that accompanies, precisely, the decomposition of the body and the deconstruction of personal identity. Yet the perverse enjoyment of the destruction of one's own ego, identity, and body is only a semblance of disalienation that is as imaginary as the neurotic pursuit of psychic integration constructed through the negrophobic complex of unconscious identifications and disidentifications. And that is because the former – the *jouissance* of dissolution or the abject pleasure in the "shattering of the subject"<sup>43</sup> – organises the real

42 Frank B. Wilderson III, "The Vengeance of Vertigo: Aphasia and Abjection in the Political Trials of Black Insurgents," *InTensions* 5 (Fall/Winter 2011): 33–34.

43 Benjamin Noys, "Shattering the Subject: Georges Bataille and the Limits of Therapy," *European Journal of Psychotherapy and Counselling* 7, no. 3 (2005): 128–131.

of antiblackness *not* through the repression of castration (i.e., the denial of the structure of the signifier) but through the *libidinal capitalisation* of the subject's alienation from blackness. If the neurotic quest for embodiment and coherent identity *represses* the structure of castration, then the perverse quest for the enjoyment of castration equally disavows the structural impossibility of a "beyond" of castration, betraying a tenacious attachment to psychic coherence of a second order.

If we recall that for Wilderson, Human and Black subjects are equally, if asymmetrically, subjected to the libidinal economy and its alienation of blackness (i.e., fungibility, accumulation, destruction), then "the ability to take pleasure in abjection" that Darieck Scott describes as a method of "racialisation through sexual humiliation,"<sup>44</sup> as with the moral masochism Fanon tracks throughout *Black Skin, White Masks* – which he finds in white subjects who, wracked by guilt of their own antiblack aggression, objectify themselves to an aggressive black other in the staging of an imaginary self-punishment – are mechanisms in which the self-destructive enjoyment of castration itself disavows castration. The point here is that *black subjects, too, enjoy the mad destruction of an organic body imposed upon them, relishing in the decomposition of their personal identity.*

And which "organic" body has been imposed here if it is not quite the same peasant body that enters Lyotard's historical purview? Because the racial structure of primary identification retroactively superimposes whiteness onto a universal corporeal schema that precludes the existence of a black body on the imaginary level, as I have argued elsewhere,<sup>45</sup> it is only possible to assume one body: a white one (or a non-black body). We are, therefore, brought to this paradoxical conclusion. *For all subjects – regardless of their racial identity – it is the destruction of the historically imposed white body that is enjoyed. The dissolution of whiteness is thus as essential a component of the libidinal structure of antiblackness as the phobic hostility to blackness.*

An axiom of the critique of libidinal economy of antiblackness: social death does not exist except through its libidinal capitalisation. And its investment, by those who materially and erotically benefit from it, as much as by those who are undone by bearing the brunt of its gratuitous violence, makes its force available for the constitution of the modern subject.

44 Darieck Scott, *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination* (NY: NYU Press, 2010), 169.

45 Christopher Chamberlin, "Affective Ankylosis and the Body in Fanon and Capécia," *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 19, no. 2 (2018): 125.

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