

What Us?

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Hope, the other side of fear, is a sad affect connected to the uncertainty of the future; it is also, more importantly, a form of deferral to the future. Jared Sexton (2016) locates the theoretical and political orientation of Afropessimism in the longer tradition of pessimism, which works to expose the lie of linear and universal narratives of progress (para. 7). Afropessimism specifically intervenes against the pretension to universal emancipation of radical theoretical projects like Marxism, psychoanalysis, feminism, and post-colonialism. But it works against liberals like McGhee as well. In response to McGhee's (2021) titular "us," what she identifies as "the 'we' who can't seem to have nice things," Afropessimism, in Wilderson's (2010) words, "shits on the inspiration of the personal pronoun *we*" (p. xi; p. 143).

For the Afropessimist, the problem of the *we* is simple: in a society structured by the antagonistic relationship between White and Black there cannot be, as McGhee (2021) proposes, "common struggles and linked arms" (p. 106). The ontological positions of White and Black are characterized by two irreconcilable grammars of suffering: White suffering consists in alienation and exploitation; Black suffering consists in the accumulation and fungibility of the Slave. For the Afropessimist, Blackness cannot be separated from the social death of the Slave because to be Black is to be subjected to gratuitous violence, non-relationality, and general dishonor. This ontological difference between White and Black is indexed to the political difference between something to save or hope for and nothing to lose.

"Division," then, is not the "common enemy," as McGhee (2021) tries to convince us (p. 133); rather, the real ethical and political problem is the disavowal of the division that constitutes our world. If, as McGhee (2021) herself acknowledges, the U.S. is a "compromised republic that was established at our founding, in the interest of racial slavery," then we cannot hope for anything from it; we must end it (p. 147). I suggest that at the level of form, McGhee herself knows this. Wilderson observes that in cinema, form often betrays the false hope of narrative: lighting, P.O.V., sound, and other filmic strategies belie the stories of racial redemption. The form of McGhee's book involves a similar betrayal of her narrative of "the sum of us": nine of ten chapters lay out the way anti-Blackness has resulted in systemic inequality and uneven suffering; the bulk of each chapter consists in the irrationality and brutality of anti-Blackness, followed by a few pages of counter-narratives on the so-called solidarity dividend. This disparity between form and narrative in the book would be, of course, unconscious on McGhee's part. This brings me to the second problem: her voluntarism. I will skip over the presupposition of the book that "until we destroy the idea" of the zero-sum paradigm, we cannot move closer to "having nice things" – as if ideology

operated only at the level of ideas, let alone one idea (McGhee, 2021, p. 15; p. xi). Instead, I will focus on her voluntarism, namely, the suggestion that such a change is a matter of decision. Early in the book, McGhee (2021) recalls that in her policy work she had to come to terms with the fact that “everyone wasn’t operating in their own economic rational self-interest” (p. xvii). On this point McGhee’s narrative, not her form, exposes the lie. As the Afropessimists tell us, anti-Blackness is not about economic gain or any other rational form of “interest”; it is about the libidinal economy through which anti-Blackness unifies and shores up the whole of civil society, Whites and P.O.C. (their junior partners, as Wilderson calls them). Even though McGhee recognizes that “the zero sum was never solely material; it was also personal and social,” every single page of the book appeals to the rational self-interest of the “we” who are reading the book (p. 9). Her plea to “tally the hidden cost of racism to us all” and pursue “cross-racial public investment” fails to contend with the irrationality of the symbolic value of anti-Blackness that the book assiduously documents (McGhee, 2021, p.xx; p. 65). So is my brief review *just* an Afropessimistic dump on McGhee’s petition for coalition politics? I...um...hope not. Instead, I want us to embrace McGhee’s powerful catalogue of anti-Blackness: wealth, education, incarceration, policing, healthcare, housing, unions, the vote. But I also want us to see it for what it is and argue, together with the Afropessimists, that there is “no imaginable strategy of redress...no redemption” here (Wilderson, 2020, p. 15). Despite all the so-called gains made through historical conflicts in civil society, the antagonistic paradigm is still the same. Instead of rectification through the reconfiguration of civil society, which McGhee calls the solidarity dividend, Afropessimism calls for the “disconfiguration of society” (Wilderson, 2020, 251). This review does the same. Let’s listen to the Afropessimistic demand that we “call not merely the actions of the world but the world itself to account” (Wilderson, 2010, 2).

References

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