

Beyond Humanism (but not without it?): Reflections on the Matter of Black Life

by KD Wilson

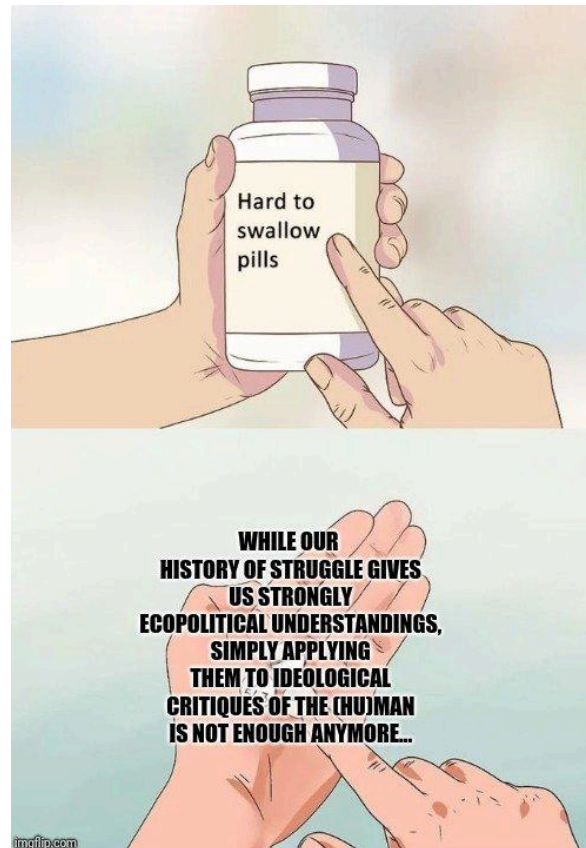


Image description: two cartoon images, blurry, bluish, greyish, white background. In the first, a pair of hands holds up a bottle which says "hard pills to swallow." In the second, some of the pills are in the left hand with the right hand pointing at some words in bold, black type saying "while our history of struggle gives us strongly (eco)political understanding, simply applying them to ideological critiques of the (hu)Man is not enough any more."

August 2014. A veil had once hung over the eyes of Amerikkka but the vigils in Ferguson tore it away, shaking Rome right in its noxious belly. Michael Brown had been shot cold dead, and left to the concrete like strange litter, calling forth the mighty stride of an eradicatory process that loped across those Missouri streets like a flood to lift a standard against the devil's 'post-racial' parseltongue and other Obama-era neoliberal forms of trickery. New Afrikan communities was tired, been tired; the grip of any notion that we were at last being treated as though 'created equal' was loosened. And, a rallying cry broke forth as we more deeply decided the kkkolonizer's representationalism could game us no longer. It was time we demanded that our lives be made to matter. We disagreed on exactly how we would secure the matter of Black life, though, even if we knew there at least was/could/should be something to ground our value in. The smokescreens of that blue party which Malcolm correctly identified as foxes were utter uselessness to us now, and only by us acting for ourselves again could we advance Black community.

This self-activity, by which Black people would struggle to make sure our lives matter, found its basis in the idea that we were 'Man.' That's how the nationalists brought it to me at least, in whose circuits I began to travel and mobilize in after watching Dorian Johnson cry out about his beloved friend's death in front of those lifeless, listless news screens. "I am a man," says the anti-racism I was raised on, which is to say that "I am human." And therefore, since my matter has humanity as its axiological reference point, the basis of my life's value, then I have/deserve the same experience of 'unalienable' rights as any other person. Demanding and attaining those rights was to be led by us, though — the people — for governance and the greedy capitalists would never accord them to us. We

would unite with other common folk similarly dispossessed of their humanity, instead, and find solidarity with one another in our own communities' respective quests for self re-humanization.

That is, unless these other so-called 'allies' were too invested in seeing us as non-human to allow us equal participation in their humanist projects. Then, of course, as we begin obstructing highways, flooding phone lines, burning flags, holding sit-ins, and teetering toward more escalated and organized forms of action, the people we should be solidary with would prove themselves to be traitors or enemies, like they was gunning for us too. This was especially true for those of us who were disabled or queer whilst navigating our 'Hamitic' flesh. Even the revolutionaries, radicals, the socialists, anarchists, communists — they too seemed keen on denying Black people our equal share in the fold of 'humanity' and in preventing us from doing what we needed to make our lives matter. And so, some decided, since the basis of our value seemed to be always at the exclusion of non-human lives, and Black people continued to be dehumanized, perhaps it was time to abandon 'humanization' as a project and give up on partaking in whatever projects were said to 'make' our humanity fulfilled or secured. The Black 'non-humanists' (as I call them) often turned to the work of critical theory (especially critical theorizing within Black Studies, queer studies, disability studies, animal studies, object studies, and ecocriticism) to further defend this new direction in thought. Their concern was with tracing the ways that 'humanism' fails Black people.

Humanism can be understood as the belief that our species has charge over our own destinies (as opposed to some cosmic force doing that), and the related belief that members of our species have the capacity to transform the conditions which might prevent such self-determination (again, precisely

because the hindrances are not cosmic). It is important to note that there are different kinds of humanism: the mainstream ones either tie self-determination and the mattering of life to bourgeois/liberalism (the Westphalian state and capitalism) or to proletarian revolution (socialism or communism). I was raised on anti-colonial humanism, like many Black people, which ties self-determination and the mattering of our life to expropriation of resources and development of autonomy for the Third and Fourth Worlds (anti-colonial leftism). Skeptics of humanism, however, argue that humanism is unable to account for the reality of non-humans and those treated as nonhuman.

Primarily trained in the academic spheres of cultural and discursive analysis (with aspects of phenomenology and psychoanalysis, among others), so called Black critical ‘non-humanist’ theory thus focuses instead on giving language to what its proponents see as already existing sources of Black rebellion and resistance that, on sheer virtue of our history as enslaved and dehumanized people, is said to have better implications for the fate of non-human Matters (and those treated as such) in ways that “humanism” cannot. In one of these lines of thought, it is said that this is about giving attention to the activity and ‘vantage point’ of ‘the Slave.’ It is not necessarily aimed at a particular political proposition or conclusion. For that reason, the labels used to describe this line of inquiry simply connect this slave-centered way of thinking about Blackness to some affective response or philosophical posture (and not so much an ideology). “Afropessimism” is the most popular of these labels. “Black Optimism” is a close second favorite label. Frank B. Wilderson is the father of Afropessimism, while Fred Moten is Black Optimism’s progenitor. Other names you might find in this side of Black critical theory and cultural analysis would be Calvin Warren, Saidiya Hartman, Jared Sexton, and Hortense

Spillers, Sylvia Wynter, although not all of them identify with either Afropessimism or Black Optimism (even to the point of outright rejecting the labels and/or the implications of these lines of inquiry).

In its everyday sense, the word “pessimism” is a “glass half empty” type mindset, where the attention is negative. Such negativity is an affective (or emotional) one, but it’s also more about where the attention goes: what is absent from the container. Water is gone from the glass. Now, imagine if this focus was a critical disposition or angle toward life. With Afro-Pessimism and Wilderson’s work, we find the focus/attention of analysis is on the ‘negative’ effects of Black struggle, for example the ‘loss’ of our original ethnolinguistic ties due to slavery. The loss is taken as a sufficient/vital enough source of or motivation for rebellion, such that we are then required to seek our freedom not in ‘progress’ but instead in things like the forced subversion that is the idea of the ‘nigger.’ The ‘nigger’ and what it means has been rendered opposite of every definition of ‘human’ grounded by the modern world’s socio-economic and politico-cultural matters. Afro-Pessimism says that analyzing and embracing this experience of Black negation from the ‘human’ is the only way to bring about the drive within Black people to ‘destroy the world’ system altogether and end the capitalist/colonial violence which exploits non-humans and those treated as such. Humanistic projects, on the other hand, are said to reinvest the people into the global colonial/capitalist system. They are seen as a bid to reclaim the structures that ground ‘human’ life, in violent contradistinction to non-humans. For this reason, Afropessimists see humanist politics and persuasions as untenable or unavailable to Black people.

Now, “optimism” in the everyday sense of the word is a “glass half full” type mindset, where the attention is positive. Such positivity is an affective (or emotional) one, but it’s also more about where the attention goes: what is there in the container. Water remains in the glass. Now, imagine if this focus was a critical disposition or angle toward life. With Black Optimism and Moten’s work, we find the focus/attention of analysis is on the ‘positive’ products of Black struggle, for example our creation of ‘new’ ethnolinguistic ties across national lines due to slavery. These ‘innovations’ are taken as sufficient/vital enough source of or motivation for resistance, such that we are then required to seek freedom not in ‘progress’ but instead in things like the forced survival techniques we had to take on amidst dehumanization. This survivorhood has persisted and existed outside of every definition of ‘human’ grounded by the modern world’s socio-economic and politico-cultural matters. Black Optimism says that analyzing and embracing the experience of Black affirmation despite the ‘human’ is the only way to bring about the drive within Black people to ‘make way out of no way’ in the modern world system, and thus end any further capitalist/colonial violence that exploits non-humans and those treated as such. Humanistic projects, on the other hand, are said to reinvest the people into the global colonial/capitalist system. They are seen as a bid to reclaim the structures that ground ‘human’ life, in violent contradistinction to non-humans. For this reason, Black Optimists see humanist politics and persuasions as useless or unnecessary for Black people.

Afropessimism and Black Optimism blew up during the heyday of the Black Lives Matter moment as questions of Black humanity and whether it mattered became pushed to the fore. They brought their version of critical ‘non-humanist’ theories to many of our political attention, on the ground in organizing spaces, on social media, and in the academy. For many, they provided an analysis

of the failures of multiculturalism in the ‘postracial’ age and an explanation for neocolonialism in the ‘postcolonial’ age as well as an understanding of Western assault on socialist movements worldwide (along with the colonality of many self-described socialisms). All were linked back to slavery and anti-blackness, where Afropessimism and Black Optimism presented the current aftermath of decolonization movements from the late 20th century as evidence that these struggles had been failed attempts to integrate into humanism. Afropessimism and Black Optimism were thus taken as clarifications about the conditions that made Ferguson possible.

But, for many others, Afropessimism and Black Optimism in particular (and critical non-humanist Black Studies in general) were both, if anything, confusing at best and counter-revolutionary at worst. I was one of those folk. My personal issue wasn’t so much with the Western philosophical orientation or the dense metatheoretical and theoretical nature of them both, although I can admit these elements certainly made them off-putting and frustrating to me (and still do). My major issue with them was that I had seen people use these lines of inquiry, especially Afropessimism, to make a wholesale rejection of decolonization. In these instances, the self determination of the colonized masses, the reclamation and expropriation of stolen resources from the First World by the Third (and Fourth) World — this was being called ‘anti-black’ and as necessarily reliant on violent and exploitative antagonism against non-humans (or those marked as such). And as someone who had cut my political teeth on Black nationalism and Pan Afrikanism, I couldn’t get with that position. I wasn’t thoroughly opposed to critiques of humanism, though, in the way that those more aligned with my political tendency often were. A number of intense and volatile debates exploded on part of the Black Left in response to the conclusions being drawn from Afropessimism in

particular. But, because I was open to critiques of humanism, I decided to take an extended foray into the Afro-Pessimist and Black Optimist world, hoping to see if there was perhaps any legitimacy to their conclusion about decolonization.

I was thrown off by the canon, even after reading through a lot of it. I tried to focus instead on the content of their analysis, and identify exactly why much of the Black revolutionary world has an issue with the two lines of inquiry. Time and again the best way I could tie them together why they were so controversial for many revolutionaries was that, according to my understanding:

Afropessimism teaches that people lack the capacity to meaningfully alter our external and internal realities beyond anti-black exploitation or devaluation because of an unconscious antagonism against non-humans that always manifests itself as (and comes from) our society/history making acts.

Black Optimism teaches that people have no need to affirm or to try and realize any capacity to alter our conditions because to do so is always already an expression of unconscious violence or devaluation toward non-humans, and thus not a genuine break from the exploitative history of human society/history making acts.

With this takeaway in mind, it became clear to me why those defending and decrying these lines of inquiry often became so hostile with one another, or just completely didn't understand one another at all. There was a basic, often implicit presupposition embedded within anti-colonial/socialist humanism that was being strained against by Afropessimism and Black Optimism, under the banner

of ‘non-humanist’ critique. This assumption is the *materialist* one. Materialism is what emphasizes our species’ capacity as living entities to alter our external and internal conditions. The application of Afropessimist and Black Optimist approaches to critical non-humanism seemed thoroughly against this premise, though, in the name of centering the ‘vantage point’ of an ‘object’ (non-human) — implying that nonhumans lack this capacity, and that seeking to utilize this capacity (or locate it in others) sustains antagonism against (or equals the devaluation of) nonhumans. Whether this anti-materialism is intentional or not, I cannot say, but what I can say is that in all my time spent trying to understand these lines of inquiry, I still very much find it problematic. But, this is not because I seek to protect humanism.

In fact, I must admit, I too share a skepticism of humanism, the same skepticism that Black critical ‘nonhumanists’ seem to share. I find issue with the way when using ‘human’ as a reference point for how/why we should make our lives matter, find fulfillment, have value — -people often unevenly divide who is or isn’t included. In my days as a Black nationalist (which is one of the major reasons I moved away from that tendency toward a Black Autonomous Radicalism) I witnessed how appeals to our common belonging in the fold of ‘Man,’ though well-intended defenses of our right to self-determination, pushed out those who weren’t cishet men or abled people. And, throughout the history of our movements, we have seen the way that a recourse to ‘rehumanization’ has failed to fully account for the way ‘human’ is portrayed as more deserving of liberty and value than others in the first place — a type of ideological neglect that has had detrimental consequences in our quest for autonomy, again, especially for queer and disabled Black lives.

That said my critiques of humanism do not involve a rejection of materialism. In fact, my critiques of humanism are only possible because I (try my best to) espouse materialist analysis. Materialism, in its most dedicated and principled form, is ecopolitical and not anthropocentric. Humanism in the revolutionary world bases itself on materialism, but is not the quintessential representative thereof. At the end of the day, the humanistic framing of a capacity to alter conditions and have charge over one's destiny as a 'human' thing — this only arose as an attempt to recognize the ecological (and not cosmic/karmic) situatedness of oppressed people's basic needs, the ecological situatedness of categories like labor, the ecological situatedness of experiences like hunger.

//In other words, that alteration and destiny have their fulfillment in ecological Ends; and the "progression" toward those Ends is not emphasized because genuine decolonial humanists value progress as a value unto itself. Instead, it is their materialism causing them to foreground consolidating around those ecopolitical Ends, a conscious clarification that is not necessarily because of a belief that we are wholly distinct from (and thus deserving mastery over) so-called 'nature.' The demand for "full unification" with more-than-human Matter that materialism strives toward comes, instead, from a recognition that we need such progression because we are *alienated* from deeper earthly participation and consciousness due to our history of domination.

From this angle, one finds that we only ever begin subverting and surviving because we are ecological entities struggling to more fully realize ourselves within our environment against the enkkklosures that have trapped all kinds of Matter. For this reason, socialists and anti-colonialists are able to identify capitalism and colonialism as ecocidal, and within their demands for worker ownership

of the means of production or of resource expropriation by/of the Third and Fourth Worlds we find more potential for a transformative ecopolitics than bourgeois/liberal humanism could ever allow for.//

If we're returning to the 'glass half empty' or 'glass half full' idea, when our attention and responses are turned to what's "lost" or what's "present", this focus bypasses another awareness: that there is a connection and relationship between whatever the container aims to hold (the water) and the molecular, biotic, geophysical realities beyond the glass from which the water originated and to which it returns. This bypass of the materialist and ecopolitical focus for a libidinal focus on part of the Afropessimist and Black Optimist is only correct if one considers all pursuit of the natural connection/relationship between those contained and that ecological universe which was dispossessed of us to be an idealization and myth, or to be a 'meta-narrative' aimed at upholding human-centric 'ownership' of Things. Far from idealized, though, or rooted inherently in human-centrism, it is more genuinely the vantage point of the object of human consumption (if the Slave stands in for the water in the glass) to defend its capacity to alter its conditions and emphasize the ecopolitical Ends of the materialist analysis that teases out said capacity. Because, in that instance, we would attend to the water freezing over at the call of the cold and rendering cracks in the glass, or rising up out of the glass in gas form as it is summoned by the power of heat energy, winds, and sun rays into evaporation and condensation, and as it cycles through sky, sea, land, and plant as well as animal bodies in metabolic journeys, and as it returns in the whirlwind or storm that rains down upon to destroy the master's house by which it was forced through the tap into the Man's glass (and then his mouth) in the first place. When it comes to Black liberation, therefore, my attention/focus is not primarily on the

affective, philosophical mechanisms that are contained in the history of Black subversion and survival (what is either or not there as we are held). As an Anarkata, I do recognize with Ashanti Alston how important these cultures of oppositionalism have been; I just don't put these sources of rebellion or resistance before me as more effective than a revolutionary proposition. They are not the primary or more effective arena from which to transform us. I believe that revolution is necessary, and this requires a conscious element (working in tandem with the unconscious), one which truly does require us to seek our freedom in the embodied and material quest for full unification with more-than-human forms of Matter, to address that which shapes how we have come to be. There are processes that went into how the glass was made that I want to deal with. It is this which will abolish the parts of us vested in hierarchy, ownership, and other captive mechanisms. It is this which tends toward liberation of all Things.

Now, colonialism is why Marxist humanisms fail at staying with the ecopolitical horizon of materialist analysis; and similarly, cishetpatriarchy and disablism are why many anti-colonial humanists are unable to clarify the ecopolitical horizon of materialist analysis as well. On this account we should be critical of humanism. Humanism hinders us making ourselves as ecologically conscious as materialist analysis ultimately intends for us. This is because humanism forces materialism's primary reference point to be the same construct so historically tied up with (and hard to separate from) anthropocentrism, racism, sexism, transmisia, disablism, anti-blackness, the dehumanization of fat folk, dark skinned folk, non-Christian folk, and more. In this way, ironically, humanism links materialism to metaphysical fictions that hierarchically assign value to living and non-living entities, and thus identifies the basis of self-determination erroneously — with oppressive authorities. In

understanding struggles for ‘humanization’ by the colonized as *corrupted* versions of materialism (that fail to fully consciously meet an ecopolitical horizon of understanding), we must still dig into materialism’s project of reclamation and reunification, which is a decolonial and anti-capitalist initiative, and recognize it as something that ties together our liberation with the liberation of more-than-human Matters. Realizing that the capacity to alter our conditions involves our environments, that it is shared with abiotic and other biotic entities cannot, therefore, be called anthropocentric (neither is it an anthropomorphizing of so-called ‘nature’ to uphold an ecopolitical origin/end for the materialist premise).

Black struggle allows us to free materialist anti-colonialism from cooption into the silly notion of our species’ exceptionalism (and the exceptionalism of those who “overrepresent” themselves as at the apex of our species) — a problem to which humanism has been historically so vulnerable, or which humanism hasn’t effectively called our politics out of. We absolutely should go and fetch our history as Black people and use its insights to strain against the brutal weaponization of hierarchical ‘human’ valuation against all life/non-life and especially against the most marginal of Black people. Taking Black critical ‘non-humanism,’ however, and synthesizing it with a materialist basis for liberation that has always had ecopolitical implications is the only way we will more clearly locate our people’s activity in the earthly source of power and call forth the drive in Black people to bring about a world that is free of antagonism and contradiction, ultimately destroying the one so full of it currently. The mattering of Black life is in, quite literally, matter; and the grounds for our value is, quite literally, the ground. And this is not because we (should) control it, but because we come from and are part of it. To ensure that we matter, we must conspire with ground/matter against Massa’s house, built on

objectifying/thingifying and exploiting us. Yes, that means ending our species' participation in those violences. Yes, however, that also means decolonization, which does not have to be anti-black or linked to these violences. Hence, alongside a critical analysis of our rebellion/subversion or our resistance/survival — and the implications these have for the fate of non-humans — we need a conscientious ecopolitical science of our revolutionary struggles, which has similar 'non-humanist' (non-anthropocentric) implications.

Suggested reading:

Below are some suggested works for better understanding of this piece. Some of these works overlap in terms of what themes they bring clarity to. For example, in the last section, the Richard York paper could also go in the second to last section

A. For introduction to Afro-Pessimism

1. Afro-Pessimism by Patrice Douglass, Selamawit D. Terrefe, Frank B. Wilderson
- 2. "Gramsci's Black Marx" by Frank B Wilderson
- 3. The social life of social death: on Afro-Pessimism and black optimism by jared sexton
- 4. On Black Negativity, or The Affirmation of Nothing by Daniel Colucciello Barber and Jared Sexton
- 5. Onticide by calvin warren
- 6. The Year Afropessimism Hit The Streets: A Conversation at the end of the world (Aaron Roberts Talks to Frank Wilderson III)*****
- 7. Black Nihilism and the politics of hope (Calvin Warren)
- 8. Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World (Zakkiyah Iman Jackson)

B. For introduction to Black Optimism

- 1. The undercommons: fugitive planning and black study by fred moten and stefano harney
- 2. Fred Moten's Radical Critique of the Present by David Wallace

C. For introduction to Black women's critical work often inaccurately labelled AfroPessimism*

- 1. Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Truth/Power by Sylvia Wynter
- 2. Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe by Hortense Spillers
- 3. Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route by Saidiya Hartman
- 4. The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women's Labors

by Saidiya Hartman

-5. For Those Seeking or In Flight: Towards a Black Trans*feminist Nihilism (g)

-6. Towards The Sociogenic Principle (Sylvia Wynter)

7. Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human As Praxis (Katherine McKittrick)

D. For introduction to critiques of AfroPessimism

- 1. Afro-Pessimism and the (Un)Logic of Anti-Blackness by Annie Olaloku-Teriba**

- 2. Afro blue notes: death of Afro-Pessimism by greg thomas

- 3. Bad Faith and Afropessimism: Notes Toward a Debate by marcus sundjata brown

E. For introduction to turns in critical theory toward supposed 'non-humanism'

- 1. On the Limits and Promise of New Materialist Philosophy by Kyla Wazana Tompkins

-2. Habeus Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black feminist theories of the human by Alexander G. Weheliye ***

F. For introduction to ecology/natural science drawn from historical materialism

- 1. Critical human ecology: historical materialism and natural laws by richard york and philip mancus

- 2. Economic and philosophical manuscripts of 1844 by karl marx

-3. The Dialectical Biologist (Richard Levins and Richard Lewontin)

G. For introduction to ecopolitics that centers Black/Afrikan people

- 1. Who's Man is This?: Black Radical Ecology and the Anthropogenic Question (KD Wilson)

- 2. Burnin Down Massa's House: Notes Toward a Black Radical Ecology by ~~KD Wilson~~
- 3. Ecocide and Genocide are the Secret of Capitalist Efficiency by Bruce A Dixon
- 4. Go Back and Fetch It: Black Radical Ecology and the African-Centered Paradigm by ~~KD Wilson~~
- 5. We Need Histories of Radical Black Ecology (Romy Operman)
- 6. Racial Capitalocene (Françoise Vergès)
- 7. Mapping Black Ecologies (JT Roane and Justin Hosbey)
- 8. Omenala: Towards an African-Centered Political Ecology and Ecophilosophy (Kwesi Densu)
- 9. Black Ecology and Critical Environmental Justice (Michael Warren Murphy, George Weddington, and AJ Rio-Glick)

*Black women's critical canons are what I have noticed the 'nonhumanist' trend as practiced by Black people to be the most inspired by, myself included. I have not seen any of these theorists self identify as that label, which is why I tried my best to use it in quotes throughout the piece. It is important to mention that scholarly turns toward New Materialisms, Posthumanisms, Transhumanisms, which all claim to challenge orthodox humanism in some way, often steal from and recontextualize Black women's critical canons; and that Wilderson's Afro-Pessimism has been critiqued for doing the same act of cooption and misrepresentation. In writing this piece my hope is that I did not mischaracterize either the critical theorizing of Black women (more specifically the uses of such theorizing as I have encountered them in organizing spaces and political discourses) when I describe them as part of a larger tendency toward a 'non-humanist' politics. Instead, I hope to emphasize a space of conversation that

Weheliye points to in *Habeas Viscus*, one created by thinkers like Sylvia Wynter or Hortense Spillers who demonstrate a “project of thinking humanity from perspectives beyond the liberal humanist subject, Man.” My hope and desire is to see that such Black feminist re-formulation of humanity is properly taken up within ecopolitical projects rather than misrepresented.

**There is a particular quote from Olaloku-Teriba’s piece which also inspired my writing here.

Olaloku-Teriba works to correct Afro-Pessimist readings of Frantz Fanon which project their particular approach to what I call critical non-humanism onto Fanon’s work:

“Fanon is less concerned with the slave as an opposing pole from which ‘Man’ has built community... Fanon’s elucidation exposes the slave as contingently black, not ‘paradigmatically black’. In [the Afro-Pessimist] world-view, it... becomes necessary to begin by treating ‘race’ as a problem fundamentally rooted in the formation of sociality – in which the Black precedes the historical order and the processes, both violent and mundane, which create her.” I find Olaloku-Teriba’s description of how Afro-Pessimists theorize ‘race’ to also be correct, since a definition of Black as ‘preceding’ the conditions of her own possibility is pretty much exactly what Jared Sexton is getting at in the concept of ‘ante-anti-blackness.’ The reason Afro-Pessimism does this is, as Olaloku-Teriba points out, because race is not taken as just a ‘mystification’ that ‘makes possible’ the capitalist aspiration for workers to be stripped down and reduced to a ‘mere mechanism’ (the definition of the Slave that Olaloku-Teriba correctly identifies as truer to Fanonian understanding). Instead, the capitalist aspiration for a reduction to slaveness, to the Afro-Pessimist, originates in an ‘antagonism’ against a uniformly definable cultural ethos that groups designated as ‘Black’ have innately occupied since premodern

times. What interests me about this retroactive ‘paradigmatic’ historical contrivance in Afro-Pessimism (and its circular logic) is how it is framed as *the* way to understand dehumanization by sheer virtue of a popular *ideative* association between ‘Blackness’ and slaveness. The thesis seems to be that such an association is ‘evidence’ that racism/racialization aren’t a technology of the material pursuit but rather should be a catch-all term to describe the politico-economic stage upon which a psychodrama about human to nonhuman conflict—one always already enacted between Black Afrikans and the rest of our species—is played out. For me, I don’t see a necessary connection between concern with “the slave as an opposing pole from which ‘Man’ has built community” (I agree with Olaloku-Teribu that this isn’t Fanon’s focus) and a definition of Afrikan struggle as paradigmatically Black in the Afro-Pessimist sense. I also believe that Afro-Pessimists are well aware of the leap in logic that this thesis requires, which is why they defer to libidinal analysis within a particular historical epoch and center that arena as the primary focus for transformation. As someone who is critical of humanism, however, and yet committed to materialism, I think it totally possible to formulate that concern with human-nonhuman antagonism and not base it on an ahistorical definition of Slaveness, perhaps through the definition of it that Olaloku-Teriba expounds for us from Fanon. Here, race truly is understood as a mystifying technology that aids in (and arises from) colonizer/capitalists’ aspiration to reduce us to mere mechanisms. In this instance, the slave becomes an ‘opposing pole’ from which the community of ‘Man’ is made manifested insofar as the modern global State/capitalist colonial system (the domain of the modern human) and the mass ecocide (the “Anthropocene”) it causes all rely on our “thing-ification” (Cesaire’s way of speaking about colonization). There was a violent pursuit of the land which Afrikans nurtured and communed with from which modern Western/capitalist ecocide was born. For me, foregrounding the land’s kinship with us and the ecocide built into an exploitative

disruption of that relation puts the non-human at the center. Afrikan struggle under enslavement within this colonial context becomes the visceral and ‘visual’ drama that plays out on capitalism’s ecocidal stage simply because modern environmental catastrophes could not be made possible without the hierarchical, material subjection of our people by which our homeland is taken captive. For those interested in Black critical non-humanisms, I often suggest that Aimé Césaire’s calling colonization “thingification” could be taken up as an entry point into this way of tying Black/Afrikan struggle to the material exploitation of other (more-than-human) ‘Things’ such as land, water, minerals, etc. I believe deploying the term in this way calls forth the underlying drive toward making non-anthropocentric understanding of our dehumanization by racial ideology, while first keeping the plane of discussion and the focus of our transformation at a material level. The fact that the Hamitic hypothesis, a religious doctrine which taught that Blackness-as-slavery was a divine curse upon Canaan and all Africans as a result of Ham’s supposed sexual perversion, is reportedly (according to Edith R. Sanders) rooted in conflict over land prior to ever having become racialized in the Abrahamic faiths, gives me reason to lean on this perspective even more.

*** I think it helpful to read the closing remarks of my piece through what Alexander G. Weheliye has called a ‘materialist reconceptualization of suffering.’ Weheliye builds on words from Asma Abbas and suggests a vision of Black struggle under political violences such as slavery which allows our liberation projects to overcome hierarchy, individualism, and appeals to the State so tied to discourse about (de)humanization by instead foregrounding a relation to Otherness which sees our suffering and labor as not phenomena one group deserves to experience less (as ‘humanization’ can imply), but sees them as phenomena which co-constitute the prevailing world order. The title of my piece is ‘Beyond

Humanism (but not without it?)’ because I am looking to suggest (or ask of my readers) that even while my ecopolitical emphasis locates me philosophically beyond humanism, Weheliye’s materialist thinking of “suffering and enfleshment as integral to humanity” (and thus our experience of the world order as a people) points to the possibility of precisely the “genre” (to borrow a term from Sylvia Wynter) of humanism that those of us who have concerns about the fate of non-human forms of Matter cannot dispense of—since it ties our struggle with that of the non-human alterity which certain discourses challenging “dehumanization” may fail to account for in emancipatory fashion. This, then, calls for not a reduction of us to said shared fate of suffering but an outlook which seeks to identify the source of co-constitution for our own suffering and that of nonhumans within any world order (a lens which I have seen advanced in the Afrocentric ecowomanism of Shamara Shantu-Riley, who writes: “world history can be seen as one in which humans ... bind the material domination of nonhuman nature with the economic domination of other human beings.”)

**** **As of October 4, 2020** I am officially noting in this article that from *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, I now understand Katherine McKittrick as having identified Sylvia Wynter’s body of work as a “counterhumanism.” A friend of mine has suggested I continue to try thinking through Wynter’s counterhumanism in my approach to critiques of humanism, as I did in the article *Who’s Man is This?: Black Radical Ecology and the Anthropogenic Question*. The counterhumanist angle, from what I gather, particularly in reading *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, affirms the materialist basis for any humanism which I speak of in this piece—the belief we as a species have the capacity to alter our internal/external conditions and experience. Counterhumanism affirms that this ecogenic (“world making”) capacity of ours is the source of “human trouble” or the problem with

humanism—agreeing somewhat with the concerns that Afropessimists and other critics of humanism share. But counterhumanism does not assume that the ecogenic/world making capacity (to alter our external/internal conditions) which materialist analysis identifies is an inherently oppressive, hierarchical, exploitative tendency. Counterhumanism seems to assert, instead, that it is historical, cultural, social contradictions which make the expression of our ecogenic capacity an issue, not the capacity itself. Human trouble is therefore not an inescapable issue or something we cannot consciously transform: it is a contextual problem, where how we are to express our world-making capacity is tied to the State and capitalism, to ableism, to cisheteropatriarchy for no other reason than that it *serves the material interests of the current world order to frame it that way*. Resolving these structural contradictions is key to transforming how we express the world-making/ecogenic tendency (the capacity to alter our lived conditions), because liberation struggle will always require us to challenge the terms justifying our oppression. Now, equally important to counterhumanism, which differentiates it from Afropessimism in my opinion, is acknowledging why it may *seem* that human trouble is an inescapable, "ontological" condition of our existence. It is because all oppressive world orders mask their praxic root or basis: they make idealist explanations for why we (must) live the way we live. Idealism explains things through smokescreens, rather than the real struggle underlying it. So, "human" experience gets explained in terms of either *bios*, as in the biotic, which the current Western world order (and its emphasis on genetics or "evolution") pretends is the cause or source of our modern lived conditions, or *mythois*, as in the mythic, which other more spiritual or religious world orders (and their emphasis on legend or "God's will") pretends is the cause or source of our lived conditions/experience. Counterhumanism, however, says the source of our conditions is at the interstices of both; it says we operate in both biotic and mythic dimensions—that a 'sociogenic'

dimension, as Fanon observes stands 'alongside phylogeny and ontogeny.' The ruling class profits off a one-sided, undialectical view of how our "human" conditions/experiences accumulate; and it is simply this narrative project for their benefit that makes understanding humanism or working to change our ecogenic (world-making) praxis of being seem inescapably hierarchical or despotic. But, if one shifts to a counterhumanist line, then the cause of our internal and external conditions is neither (anyone's) biology or (anyone's) mythology, but rather the interplay of both; it's nature and nurture, it's biological potentiality and social structure (as I illustrate with Gouldian terms in *Who's Man is This: Black Radical Ecology and the Anthropogenic Question*)—and material interests in either hierarchy or liberation struggle is the decisive factor in how such a process unfolds. The emphasis on context, on a world order or power struggle, is important because that explains why Wynter claims there are potentials for resolving the epistemological as well as the social, racial, gender, economic, etc. problem humanism poses. For, according to counterhumanism, the margins and the "gaze from below" anticolonial struggle in particular are understood as, out of necessity, advancing a cumulative legacy of alternative "human" (bios/mythos, nature/nurture) understandings and relations. From this counterhumanist line of understanding, oppressed people have different "genres" of being (ontogeny/sociogeny modes of existence), based in completely different material interests as folk fighting for freedom, thus reorienting the expression of our ecogenic capacity (the tendency to alter our lived, internal and external conditions) as a species toward liberatory horizons. I believe that just like nationalism is valuable to concretely addressing the color line in anarchism (according to Ashanti Alston), even if it has limitations, because it does raise our consciousness of specific contradictions in anti-capitalist movement (ie, colonialism and race being central to how revolutionary praxis unfolds), the framing of anti-colonial humanism for addressing the anthropogenic/human question (in Sylvia

Wynter's formulation), even if there may be limitations (a lingering question for me is whether sociogeny can explain observed social/cultural lives and the cognition/behavior of non-human primates, cetaceans, corvids, and other species), should also be taken into account as well, because it does raise our consciousness about the specific contradictions of colonial "overrepresentation" on what it means to be (ie, oppression being central to how ecogenic/world-making praxis unfolds).

***** **As of Wednesday June 15 2022**, I felt compelled to revisit this draft and add more suggested resources, most notably an interview of Frank B Wilderson III which I think is illustrative of the points about my divergence with Afropessimism I tried to make when I wrote this piece. Before examining what specifically about this interview I find important here, I want to add that I no longer go by the name used in the initial writing of this piece ("KD Wilson"). I currently write under the name Nsambu Za Suekama, and moving forward I would like it so that any of my writings that were published when I went by "KD Wilson" be cited under "~~KD Wilson~~" or at least have a note included that specifies that we (KD Wilson and Nsambu Za Suekama) are the same person but by a different name. I haven't rewritten this piece nor changed the author name *listed on this piece* at all because I also have grown both as a person and a thinker since first writing it, and therefore have chosen to leave the piece itself unchanged for purposes of citation and record keeping. Still, every so often I will revisit the *suggested reading section* and include some notes such as this so as to demonstrate new directions in my thinking. Now, to the subject at hand, and the interview with Wilderson: Contrary to some popular critical interpretations, Afro-Pessimism cannot be compared to a race-first nationalism of the Afrocentric variety as these have distinct origins in time, place, and distinct areas of focus. One need only to give a cursory treatment to Molefi K Asante's work, or the work of 20th century scholars operating in an

African-centered capacity, to glean this. Still, there is a superficial similarity, and that revolves around the proposing of an idealist emphasis as the *preferred* solution to Black oppression. The privileging of indigenous African philosophical and spiritual traditions in the vein of Afrocentricity and the creation of analytical frameworks for the modern academy around them is but one kind of idealism. But in the case of Afro-Pessimism, what we have is an idealism unique to the postcolonial period that has more in common with the debates between what Paget Henry in *Caliban's Reason* call "poeticist" and "historicist" traditions of Afro-Caribbean philosophy than it does with US-based forms of cultural/race-first nationalism. The former is a better comparison for understanding Afro-Pessimism, especially insofar as Afro-Pessimism is driven in part by particular interpretations of the works of Frantz Fanon, and Aimé Césaire, all Afro-Caribbean intellectuals. Without spending too much time on this point, let's just say that the best way to understand Afro-Pessimism, in order to either defend or critique it, is, in my opinion to situate it with regards to the kind of "poststructuralist intervention" within the poeticist versus historicist debate that Paget Henry describes of Sylvia Wynter's body of work on Part II of *Caliban's Reason*. My personal interpretation is that Afro-Pessimism is not in line with Wynter's Counterhumanism, however, as should be clear from the preceding note dated to October 2020. In any case, it's a certain kind of poststructuralist oeuvre that has produced a number of analyses of Black struggle which focus on the affective or libidinal, typified in frameworks like Afro-Pessimism and what I call its "glass-half-empty" approach that essentially posits an ideational framing of non-human matters as the most important characteristic in how the lived experience of the Black is shaped and analyzed. The ideative register also becomes the primary source of rebellion and transformation. What I find to be a clear example of this is a moment in an interview with Frank Wilderson that came about in the wake of the George Floyd Uprisings of

2020, Frank Wilderson explicitly outlines his articulation of the revolt's validity, using a metaphorical recourse to our history of enslavement:

“I want to be one of those people who is known for just staying in the hole of the ship. Even when they open up the gate and say, “You can come on up and get some air,” no, no, no, no. I’m gonna stay right down here with all the slop and the shit and the oatmeal and the dead bodies and the chains, and I’m not coming up because we haven’t done enough work on this. I think that’s where our power is too. I think it’s my job to make sure that *I do not pay attention to all those other forms of possibility* so that at least I’ll leave behind something *that celebrates the absoluteness of the rage.*” (emphasis added)

Thus, akin to a secular mysticism, there is a contemplative register that gets lauded as the root from which our resistance is expressed or is to be analyzed and discursively articulated. The absoluteness of rage (psycho-affective), and the commemoration thereof, and injecting all philosophical and theoretical attention within these both is of central importance. My understanding is that the logic must be that since material struggles will involve nature (non-humans) it must be an expression of a psychic antagonism toward the same, therefore leading to anti-blackness. This is the crux of the "paradigmatic" critique of what leads to the failures of socialism, feminism, anticolonialism for Black people (with "paradigm" I assume being defined in terms of the presuppositions inherent to what Leninists and others speak of as the "science" of revolution). The anti-materialist retreat to the unconscious becomes the only basis of a real transformation because the primary contradiction is a psycho-affective failure to break away from unconscious repression of the so-called non-human which has been ontologically construed as Black. The term I have arrived at to describe this approach to the assumed necessary *area of attention* for understanding where our repression and resistance alike spring from is "ontological reductionism," or "ontoreductionism." When I use that term, my aim is not to use it as a slur or an epithet, but to be very precise and exacting about what jumps out to me as a pivotal feature of Afro-Pessimism's metatheoretical presuppositions.

To be very clear, reductionism is not inherently bad, I have come to learn during my course of studies. Reductionism can be a methodology, and the most common form of reductionist method is that which is used in the modern secular Western biological sciences. Richard Lewontin and Richard Levins in *The Dialectical Biologist* outline how this "bioreductivism" looks when derived from Decartes:

In the Cartesian world, that is, the world as a clock, phenomena are the consequences of the coming together of individual atomistic bits, each with its own intrinsic properties, determining the behavior of the system as a whole. Lines of causality run from part to whole, from atom to molecule, from molecule to organism, from organism to collectivity. As in society, so in all of nature, the part is ontologically prior to the whole.

Western bioreductivism has often been used terribly. It has provided a quasi-naturalistic explanation for class society, colonialism, racism, cisheterosexism, ableism, and more. In Western bioreductivism, a society in which the human "Other" is oppressed, exploited, dominated, indeed *alienated* by the dominant ethnoclass gets reflected in "nature." So now facets of lived human experience including biological trait expression of the whole humanity are to be atomized. This atomization of body parts especially creates a "proof concept" for material relations, in which a the dominant ethnoclass' genre of being (to use Wynter's terms) conception has "Othered " certain populations. It does so by drawing a "line of causality" from the social and even ecological through the physical to the molecular and now recently (given the explosion of genetics research, quantum theory, and digital technology), the gene, the karyotype, quantum reality, and information/data itself as defined digitally. Deterministic of the system as a whole, like Lewontin and Levins articulate, intrinsic or innate qualities that reflect the biases and overall coerced positions forced onto people and the world are now attached to the parts which have been rendered atomistic and isolated in the Western bourgeois view, to rationalize the present order. That present order is one in which mercantile, entrepreneurial, capitalist endeavors are seen as the most rational and quintessentially human expression of nature, perfected at the hands of those "overrepresented" as human (to borrow Wynter's term): which is the European and the bourgeoisie, whose cultural and biophysical trait expressions are, again, atomistically prior to the human contextual whole and reductively construed as the basis of supremacist divisions within the latter.

Lewontin and Levins put it this way:

"The change from a feudal world in which cleric and freeman, when they engaged in an exchange, were each subject to the laws and jurisdiction of his own seigneur, to a world in which buyer and seller confront each other, defined only by the transaction, and both subject to the same law merchant; from a world in which people were inalienably bound to the land, and the land to people, to a world in which each person owns his or her own labor power to sell in a competitive market—this change has redefined the relation between the individual and the social.

The social ideology of bourgeois society is that the individual is ontologically prior to the social. Individuals are seen as freely moving social atoms, each with his or her own intrinsic properties, creating social interactions as they collide in social space. In this view, if one wants to understand society, one must understand the properties of the individuals that "make it up." Society as a phenomenon is the outcome of the individual activities of individual human beings.

Inevitably people see in physical nature a reflection of the social relations in which their lives are embedded, and a bourgeois ideology of society has been writ large in a bourgeois view of nature."

Lewontin and Levins, however, distinguish between this bioreductionist worldview, versus reductionism as a method, although they do acknowledge that the two "feed on a recreate each other." The structure of reductionism as a *method*, according to these authors is that it is a

"way of finding out about the world that entails **cutting it up into bits and pieces** (perhaps only **conceptually**) and **reconstructing** the properties of the **system** from the **parts** of the parts so produced." (*Emphasis mine*)

Lewontin and Levins say that Cartesian reductionism in particular has been pivotal as a method in physics, chemistry, and molecular biology, but that "this has been taken to mean that the world is like the method." They argue that this is why manipulation of genes has had immense technological success at this point whereas a comprehensive analysis of psychological development, by comparison, has not. Reductionism as a method opens up certain objective possibilities for understanding reality; but becomes a *modus operandi* and a metaphysics because of Capitalist (and western) interests. Whereas those realities for which reduction may not be as useful in understanding, go ignored, and alternative methods are pushed aside, because of the bourgeois interests undergirding science. A similar observation about the ambivalent character of reductionism in modern secular scientific inquiry can be found in Engels:

"The analysis of nature into its individual parts, the grouping of the different natural processes and natural objects into definite classes, the investigation of the internal anatomy of organic bodies, in their manifold anatomical forms, was the basic condition for the gigantic progress in the knowledge of nature, made during the last four hundred years. But it has likewise bequeathed the habit of regarding natural objects and natural processes in their isolation, detached from their connection with the vast whole; therefore, not in their movements, but in their state of rest; not as essentially changeable but as fixed and constant; not in their life, but in their death. And when this way of looking at things was transmitted from natural science to philosophy, as was done by Bacon and Locke, it produced the specific narrow-mindedness of the last centuries..."

The point I am trying to make is that there is a similarity between the ontological reductionism of Afro-Pessimism and the biological reductionism of the dominant modern Western scientific episteme. As a method, ontological reductionism involves disassembling the phenomenon that is a post-60s/70s landscape of "multicultural" civil rights/flag independence and its attendant emancipatory discourses within the academy and movement spaces (both liberal and revolutionary). As a method, ontological reductionism takes this now disassembled "discursive" landscape to analyze the different notions of "identity" or "liberation" that comprise it, again be those liberal or revolutionary theories. And as a method, ontological reductionism within Afro-Pessimism is very similar to the deconstruction and reconstruction processes in poststructuralist thought, especially because of the primacy put on discursive analysis (many Afro-Pessimists come from literary and cultural studies). In this way, what is latent behind the social "text" of multicultural democracy and even anticolonial solidarity can be uncovered with regards to contradictions around antiblackness that anyone who has studied the legacy of the Hamitic hypothesis cannot simply say is a superstructural residue of capitalism.

But, like any reductionism, Afro-Pessimism ceases to have clarificatory import with regards to more complex phenomena outside the most convenient purview of attention. Its rational kernel, for me, is the sheer "gall" to bring antiblackness into conversation with not just the failures of multiculturalism and neoliberal democracy but with many socialist and Third World revolutionary tendencies regarding the African struggle and that of Fourth World peoples. But that is where its clarificatory import starts and ends for me. Granted, there is no intellectual tradition that can be said to be a "theory of everything," so that is not what I'm getting at here. The problem comes in when its attention gets turned to realities which cannot be *causally linked* to the discursive or the unconscious, or rather when it broaches the assertion that no such realities exist: this is a worldview now, no longer just a method, and that becomes narrow. Particularly when it also involves a *spatiotemporally invariant* view of even antiblackness itself (where things are never not and can never be what they are now), much less other questions, contemporary contradictions around identity/liberation become ontologically a priori with regards to this particular epoch's social whole and its relation to the totality of human history. There is then an a posteriori enumeration of the composition of the problem but projected back in time in a flattened understanding of social evolution. The "parts" of the current landscape then "always already" possess the traits and qualities (such as negation from the prevailing discourse or ontology/metaphysics) that they had before being disassembled for methodological purposes, features that were imparted to them in a specific context. While not a bioreductivism which violently naturalizes the bourgeois Western order, ontological reductionism is in unity with bioreductivism as far as not allowing for apprehension of a dialectical "interpenetration" of parts and wholes, which Lewontin and Levins define as follows:

"“Part” and “whole” have a special relationship to each other, in that one cannot exist without the other, anymore than up can exist without “down.” What constitutes the parts is defined by the whole that is being considered. Moreover, parts acquire properties by virtue of being parts of a particular whole, properties they do not have in isolation or as parts of another whole. It is not that the whole is more than the sum of its parts, but that the parts acquire new properties. But as the parts acquire properties by being together, they impart to the whole new properties, which are reflected in changes in the parts, and so on. Parts and wholes evolve in consequence of their relationship, and the relationship itself evolves. These are the properties of things that we call dialectical: that one thing cannot exist without the other, that one acquires its properties from its relation to the other, that the properties of both evolve as a consequence of their interpenetration."

Afro-Pessimism is not interested in dialectics. Afro-Pessimism has substituted the bourgeois projection into the physical world a projection onto *all metaphysical or cosmological constructs* across cultures and histories and regions. Where the bioreductivist would project their experience of bourgeois society onto physical nature in an undialectical and spatiotemporally invariant manner, the ontoreductionist projects the antiblack relations with they are most familiar onto all metaphysics/cosmology in an undialectical and spatiotemporally invariant manner. Afro-Pessimism has substituted the bourgeois bioreductivist project of false universalism with an ontologically reductive kind of universalism, regarding not the physical reality, but again "human" metaphysics/cosmologies. All society is an outgrowth of not atomized individuals but

atomized unconscious antagonisms of each population's metaphysics/cosmologies as they have been contemporarily articulated under the sign of "identity" or "movements." And each of these disassembled parts has intrinsic properties because they are taken as atomistic *paradigms*: some "Black" and others "nonblack," that are stand ins for nonhuman and human ontology however defined. There is no room here for a perspective by which we would speak of "parts" and "wholes" as dialectically interpenetrated and co-evolving; of unconscious antagonisms and a population's metaphysics/cosmologies as imbricated visavis genre specific historical material and socioecological conditions. Paradigms just are as they are, here, by sheer virtue of the fact that they have *in the current order* substituted "nonhuman" and "human" in antiblack fashion; and this is because the "conditions of possibility" for that substitution and constitution are not viewed as emerging from the interstices of phylogeny/ontogeny and sociogeny. Their conditions of possibility instead lie in the realm of the psycho-affective. Of course, when one takes alienation of the "Slave" from land on face value, as an ontological a priori, and makes the metaphysical/cosmological a primary sphere of attention and political activation, it makes sense that these other features of ontological reductionism would be present. But alienation of any sort *is not a given*. And a transcultural perspective on the contradictions of metaphysics and cosmologies would not necessarily yield Afro-Pessimist conclusions. In fact, both those interested in dialectics and in ontological reductionist methodology alike would probably both learn and grow a great deal from meeting at the "demonic ground" for *that* question. Both camps have a lot to learn.