

# POLITICS OF A DEAD RELATION DEBATING THE PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF BLACK LIVES MATTER

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## INTRODUCTION

**B**lack Lives Matter, the most recent widespread social movement against racial oppression, calls directly for affirming black life and redefining how black life is understood and treated politically and socially in the United States. Black Lives Matter (BLM) and its reliance on an affirmation of life is the extension of a tradition of fighting racial oppression through movements grounded in the Henry Bergeson's philosophy of Vitalism. Vitalist movements, however, operate in contradiction to analyses of black life, namely the theory of Afro-Pessimism, which would assert that black bodies operate from a position of social death and could never enjoy an affirmation of life. Between the interpretation of the ultimate political problem of black bodies offered by Afro-Pessimism and the Vitalist, self-affirming ideals of the Negritude Movement which informed subsequent social movements against racial oppression, I find an interesting contention between the political theory that speaks to how oppression functions contemporarily and the philosophy designed to combat the effects of said oppression. In this paper, I intend to show the continuation between the philosophical underpinnings of the Negritude Movement by highlighting the Vitalist underpinnings of the BLM movement. After defining the Vitalist roots of the BLM movement, I intend to analyze BLM's continuation of the Vitalist tradition by putting BLM and its Vitalist philosophical foundation in direct conversation with the scholarship of Afro-Pessimism in order to explore to what extent a social movement that is historically and, philosophically optimistic and self-affirming can be useful for dealing with political issues that arise from a pessimistic, fatalist ontology, and analyzing whether or not if the pervasiveness of Afro-Pessimist theory suggests that the Vitalist tradition used to combat racial oppression needs restructuring in order to succeed.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Commonly accepted concepts about race support the view that racial differences are attributed to biological or genetic factors. However, there is no biological trait that designates race in our genetic code. Despite this fact, during the eighteenth century, after religious purists denounced the discriminatory nature of moral ideals used to uphold early forms of slavery, scientific studies emerged conceptualizing race as a biological hierarchy. The Enlightenment, for all its philosophical and scientific revolutions, also led to scientific developments that attempted to legitimize concepts of racial superiority based on race. The justification of beliefs about racial hierarchies with scientific principles, rather than moral ideals, made it possible to develop and defend systems of slavery that functioned on the basis of racial inferiority. It would be this system – bolstered by science and fortified in politics – that would carry over to the New World and become foundational in the formation of the United States.

An idealistic interpretation of United States history posits that the political framework of the nation was designed to promote equality and create an environment where social and political expression was free from persecution. Nevertheless, the erroneous, yet politically expedient, scientific justification of racial hierarchies allowed for this system of equality to exist without consideration of the diverse bodies that lived under its jurisdiction and subsequently gave rise to a consciously designed social structure rooted in exclusion. The social and political structure that resulted rationalized the existence of a just and equal citizenry living alongside an abused class of slaves.

The creation of this slave class introduced the question of what it meant to have a life in a sociopolitical sense in the United States. Slavery created a racial hierarchical system that classified and designated bodies as tools used for the purpose of political power

bodies serving purely as life forms. Theorist Jared Sexton delves into the question how the slave/citizen hierarchy affected the definitions and boundaries of what it meant to have social life in *The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism*. In this article, Sexton offers a framework to help question the ontological story of the slave and what lasting effects this ontology has on the social position of black bodies, as they exist today.

Following the tradition of other like-minded scholars, Sexton contributed to the theory of Afro-Pessimism through this ontological investigation. This theory is pessimistic and fatalistic in nature and self-identifies as a radical school of thought. The scholarship offers a telling of black ontology that is characterized by detachment. In lieu of an optimistic theory of reconciliation, Afro-Pessimism instead asserts that the lack of an identity within the dominant social/political structure, aggravated by the inability to reconcile or recreate the concept of black life, leaves the black population in a position of social death. Academics generally agree that framing the key conflict between black beings and the system that governs their lives as an antagonistic story of ontological death is a far-reaching interpretation of black ontology. However, Afro-Pessimist scholars of the theory deem this interpretation necessary because it is considered the only conclusion that can be drawn from the regenerating cycle of violence against the black body and a system designed to specifically exclude black existence from political life. While Afro-Pessimism frames the central conflict between black existence and society as an irreconcilable, pessimistic conflict between social life and social death, historically, movements structured against racial oppression have functioned based on quite an opposite and more optimistic philosophy of life.

Following the collapse of colonialism and slavery, social movements against racial oppression focused on dismantling the scientific, social, and political structures that supported and perpetuated continued forms of subjugation. During the postcolonial era, after the fall of several European regimes in the West Indies, black writers, poets, scientists, and philosophers from French-speaking countries moved to France to obtain a traditional, Western education, that was not afforded on the Caribbean Islands. Even as educated black men, many noted scholars including Aime Cesaire, Leopold Senghor, and Leon Damas experienced and identified what they considered to be the central conflict afflicting Black populations post-

slavery: the contradictory reality of the 'free' black man in a post-colonial society that had yet to accept black existence as equal and free. The literature and philosophy of this era explain how the post-colonial experience created a discord for the Black person attempting to identify as citizen while existing in skin that classified him as uncivilized and savage. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon, a student of Cesaire, expresses this contention writing,

“As I begin to recognize that the Negro is the symbol of sin, I catch myself hating the Negro. But then I recognize that I am a Negro. There are two ways out of this conflict. Either I ask others to pay no attention to my skin, or else I want them to be aware of it. I try then to find value for what is bad—since I have unthinkingly conceded that the black man is the color of evil.”

*Black Skin, White Masks* expresses a story of detachment and a conflict of identity, fairly similar to the issues of detachment found in the work of Afro-Pessimist scholar Jared Sexton. However, differing from most Afro-Pessimist theory, that finds no remediation for this conflict, in response to the issue of detachment between the black body and society, scholars in the legacy of Cesaire found a remedy to this conflict in the creation of the Negritude Movement—a philosophy designed to combat the aftereffects of racism and colonialism by advocating for a unified black identity. Understanding Negritude as a political movement compounded with its philosophical importance is essential to understanding the philosophical traditions that underscored social and political movements ranging from the black interpretation of Marxism to the Black Nationalist movements in the United States. The movement grounded itself in the concept of self-affirmation. It was designed to create a common history, heritage, and identity for Black people across the national lines that could mend the disjointed reality and cases of missing identity that existed post-slavery and post-colonialism.

To understand the ultimate goal of Negritude philosophy, it is necessary to understand the philosophical background of Negritude literature and subsequent political movements. Here, the scholarship of Donna Jones traces the connections between Negritude and Vitalist philosophy of Henri Bergson. In *The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy: Negritude, Vitalism, and Modernity*, Jones illustrates how

Bergson's Vitalist philosophies informed Césaire and Senghor, influencing Negritude philosophies and concepts of life and racial unity, explaining that the Negritude Movement aimed to "reawaken a latent feeling of affinity for the common descent of all Africans who had long become separated into seemingly independent groups."<sup>1</sup> The founders of the movement sought to unify black bodies by connecting them through a common ancestry and singular narrative of detachment and reconciliation. According to Césaire and Senghor, if the black population could unite under this common identity and historical narrative, black population could then create a common culture, and mobilize this unified population to create a political and social change.

By tying the concepts of Vitalism and racial struggle, Jones highlights how the Vitalist underpinnings of Negritude were essential in redefining the concept of life from a black perspective. This reworking of the concept of life was essential in creating a new ontological foundation upon which black persons could affirm their lives and create larger and functional concepts of community.

In addition to its philosophical importance, Negritude also had very clear political aims, and it became influential in the development of black political thought. Jones, in her scholarship, goes on to clarify that the unity that Negritude advocated was "not in fact a product of blood or ancestral values but political opposition to colonial rule."<sup>2</sup> By reaffirming that black existence and the black experience occupied a unique position in the political world, the philosophy of the Negritude Movement underscored the notion that the political struggles of the masses could not be conflated with the political struggles waged by black populations.<sup>3</sup>

The Negritude Movement created a strong political and philosophical tradition that still influences modern political struggles. Recently, political movements against racial oppression have attempted to shift the Vitalist energy of such movements from internal affirmation within the oppressed community to demands for an affirmation of life from society -at-large. Specifically, the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM) developed with the explicit aim to openly and unapologetically affirm all black life without qualification in response to an uptake in publicized instances of police brutality and killings of unarmed black men and women by police forces. The BLM movement sets forth this affirmation of life with the sole purpose of recognizing black life as an entity that

can exist as both human and citizen. Emphasizing that black bodies exist essentially as social and political life demands that they receive the same political treatment and respect to human rights as all others. By using an affirmation of life as the guiding force to achieve political and social equality, BLM continues in the tradition of Negritude. However, it goes further than previous Vitalist movements, demanding of society what Afro-Pessimism would suggest is impossible: to shift the social position of black bodies in the United States from social death to social life.

## THE VITALIST TRADITION

The foundation of the post-colonial Negritude Movement is specifically tied to the concept of Vitalism as defined by philosopher Henri Bergson. Bergson's interpretation of Vitalism, or *élan vital*, emerged from a resistance to the idea that life functioned and moved forward on a cyclical, mechanical model.<sup>4</sup> In Bergson's view, this mechanistic, dominant ideology of the time stripped life and nature of its creative properties and left no room for the natural forces at play propelling life forward and keeping nature functioning as a system.<sup>5</sup> The founders of Negritude philosophy borrowed from this ideology in forming their movement. Negritude philosophy asserted that as humans naturally capable of connecting to the forces of life and nature that pull natural systems together, all black bodies displaced through slavery could reunite by creating a common identity centered around a common 'soul.' As previously noted, Donna Jones in *Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy* defines the Vitalist aims of this movement, explaining that the founders of the Negritude grounded their social and political aims around the idea of a singular black identity, giving the detached black population a common ancestry as well as a common cause.

Politically, the Negritude Movement was essential in creating a means through which black identity could consolidate in order to form social movements in opposition to widespread oppression. The Vitalist tradition underpinning the movement was essential not only as a political philosophy, but also as a political tool that worked to solve the issue of displacement and create mobilizing unity among all black nationalities. The commonalities of African heritage emphasized in the Negritude Movement, as well as the commonality of struggle that was emphasized as the black people acknowledged the unilateral oppression faced globally, created a demand for the black community to advocate for identities, histories, and even nations that were

completely their own, in which their lives and identities could finally be realized and expressed. A strong affirmation of life is essential to this ideology. As a social movement that relied heavily on Vitalist tradition, Negritude, by definition, had to acknowledge the spirit and soul of the Black community and furthermore, give that spirit power and agency to affect change and determine its own life course. This philosophy created the foundation upon which subsequent movements, like the BLM movement, structured their own social and political aims and provided a blueprint for how the black community responds to moments of violence and crisis.

### A LOVE LETTER TO BLACK PEOPLE: THE RISE OF BLACK LIVES MATTER

On February 26, 2012, a young man watching a basketball game with his father decided to go outside to buy a snack. Dressed in a black hooded sweatshirt and jeans, seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin went to the 7-11 near his home and purchased a bag of Skittles and a drink before making his way home. Sitting nearby in a parked vehicle, unofficially acting as neighborhood patrol for the evening, was George Zimmerman. Zimmerman, a man with a recorded violent history, was armed. When he saw Martin walking home, he became suspicious and decided to call the local authorities. On the phone with a dispatcher he murmured, "This guy looks like he's up to no good or he's on drugs or something... And he's a black male... Something's wrong with him... These assholes, they always get away."<sup>6</sup> A few moments later, Zimmerman reported that the male in question was walking away. Zimmerman decided to follow Martin, going against the direct orders of the authorities on the phone. The two men eventually got into an altercation, the facts of which are heavily disputed. During this altercation, Trayvon Martin was shot and killed.

Initially, no charges were pressed. Zimmerman claimed self-defense, an excuse readily accepted by the Florida police department at the time. The black community, however, was incredulous and vocal in their dismay. As more facts became public, the death of Trayvon Martin played out a tragic, but familiar, story of how racial profiling led to the demise of a young black man. George Zimmerman was charged and tried for second-degree murder and manslaughter. On July 13, 2013, he was acquitted of all charges. While several major cities became sites for large-scale, multiday demonstrations of civil unrest, social media became a space for mourning. The general sentiment online

was a mixture of confusion and despair. On Twitter and Facebook, users wondered openly what this case and its verdict meant for the lives of black men and women. How did this case speak to the value placed on the life of a young black man in the United States?

In the midst of the mourning, editorial writer Alicia Garza posted on Facebook what she describes as, "a love letter to black people."<sup>7</sup> The post read,



*Original Facebook post, Alicia Garza, July 13, 2013<sup>8</sup>*

Inspired, Patrice Cullors, a friend of Garza's, wrote a post in response, amending the Garza's last three words to create a hashtag,



*Original Facebook post by Patrice Cullors, July 13, 2013<sup>9</sup>*

The mourning online community found strength in these words and began to use the hashtag as a rallying cry. Opal Tometi, a friend of Garza and Cullors, saw the power behind the phrase and used her skill set as a community organizer to turn the hashtag into a movement.

Central to the narrative of BLM is a conversation and conflict about the concept of life. Garza describes using the phrase, "our lives matter," as an affirmation of life, and the subsequent movement as described by Cullors was created not only address the abuses of black men and women by police forces, but also as an intervention designed to declare the importance of all black lives.<sup>10</sup> The action of affirming life as intervention directly follows the tradition of the Negritude Movement that emerged during the post-colonial era, which similarly used a call to life as a philosophical and political tool towards racial emancipation.

### A LOVE THE VITALIST PRINCIPLES OF BLACK LIVES MATTER

The stated principles of the BLM Movement show

a clear continuation of grounding social movements against racial oppression in Vitalist principles and also show the concept of life-affirmation as a social and political goal. According to statements released by

BLM, the movement defines itself as, “an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks’ contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression.”<sup>11</sup> BLM’s guiding principles include concepts such as globalism, the creation of black villages, and the notion of being unapologetically black. These principles philosophically and politically perform the same functions as the principles of Negritude.

The concept of globalism acknowledges that the racial oppression of the black body exists in different forms throughout the world. While BLM is an organization and a movement founded in the United States, this principle recognizes oppressive structures that affect black bodies in different contexts in other nations. This principle is similar to the principles of the Negritude Movement in that it calls for creating unity rather than distinctions between these international contexts and aims to unify the international black community by acknowledging a common narrative and plight. Rather than having the distinct cases of racial oppression that exist in different nations be treated as singular cases, BLM calls for all of these social and political cases of racism to be understood, and thus treated, as one all-encompassing issue of racial oppression against the black body. Building on the idea of creating a common culture, the concept of creating black villages is defined by the organization as being, “committed to disrupting the Western-prescribed nuclear family structure requirement by supporting each other as extended families and ‘villages’ that collectively care for one another.” This principle follows the tradition of amplifying black culture in two distinct ways. It calls for the disruption of an aspect of Western culture and demands that aspect be replaced with a distinctive aspect of many African cultures. In doing so, it creates a common sense of culture and identity useful for unification and mobilization. This process of reunification and finding a common culture and identity connects directly to BLM’s core principle of being ‘unapologetically black.’ The call to stand unapologetically in black culture and identity reinforce the notion that black life does not need to be qualified by Western culture in order to

exist and embody its own importance.

Keeping with the Vitalist tradition of the Negritude Movement, BLM uses similar principles to emphasize the autonomy of the black identity as its appealing and motivating force, and then strongly and unequivocally affirms black life in a way that creates a foundation upon which black individuals can use their agency to change their circumstances. Implementing the same tactics used during the Negritude Movement to unify previously colonized and physically displaced black communities, BLM uses concepts like globalization and black villages to detach black culture and identity from a Western context, and further aims to reconnect the black population with an aspect of their ancestral culture. In this common cultural context, the black population is then able to define itself separately from the racially oppressive definition of the black body present in Western culture, giving the black population a common position from which they can structure their resistance.

An important distinction between BLM and the Negritude Movement is the extent to which these vital forces exert agency inside the black community as opposed to extending them to function in society-at-large. Unlike Negritude, BLM calls for an affirmation of life, not only from black individuals, but also from the society that wages violent oppression against black bodies. Historically, the affirmation gained through adopting Bergeson’s Vitalist philosophy has functioned as a means of self-affirmation within the black community. The philosophy empowered and informed a social narrative that created commonality, unity, and even political motivation among black bodies. However, the philosophy as it functioned within Negritude, and subsequent Black Nationalist movements, demanded little, if any, affirmation from the society outside of the oppressed community. This is not to say that both Negritude and subsequent Black Nationalist and Pan-African movements did not advocate for dismantling structures that perpetuated violent oppression. Rather, I make this distinction to note that any demands to dismantle oppressive structures in society were components of the movement designed to create an environment in which the black identity could independently and peacefully exist and did not directly require Vitalist energy to function outside of the realm of self-affirmation. This differs from BLM’s aim to demand widespread affirmation of life from non-black actors. This outside affirmation is the political demand of the movement and its ultimate societal goal. The limits to

with the intention of dismantling structures of racial oppression. If social movements led by the black community are only informed by a philosophical tradition intended to self-affirm life, but not demand affirmation of life from society, can such movements actualize racial equality in the face continued violent oppression?

To answer this question, BLM deals directly with the issue of detachment that has allowed for the normalization of violence against the black body. In the original social media post that spurned the movement, BLM co-founder Patrice Cullors stated that, “Black bodies would no longer be sacrificed for the world’s enlightenment.” Designing a movement that prioritized the issue of life before the issue of violence suggests that the founders of BLM believed that solving the foundational conflict, in which violence is used as a maintenance tool, was the first and most important step to ending the oppression of black bodies. However, this call for an affirmation of life was met with a resistance that arguably exemplified the reasons Afro-Pessimism denies the possibility of structural, societal change.

When the BLM hashtag first become popular, demanding for society to affirm black life, an opposition emerged that refused to give black life its own distinction, creating the counter-narrative All Lives Matter. The All Lives Matter narrative functionally denied the existence of racial oppression and the existence of state-sponsored violence targeted specifically at the black community. In further opposition to BLM, the Blue Lives Matter narrative emerged and aimed to defend police forces and reinforce the need for their protection and wellbeing. Blue Lives Matter advocates overwhelmingly relied on understating or denying the existence of systemic bias within the police force that was leading to the deaths of unarmed black men and women.

When viewed through a pessimistic lens, this opposition exemplifies the difficulty or impossibility to have all of society accept and understand the black bodies as an entities of life deserving of citizenship that exists outside a system of violence and oppressive forces. Such opposition challenges and questions the practicality of a movement that attempts to seek an affirmation of life from a society dependent on the notion that black bodies cannot personify an equal definition of social life.

## QUESTIONING THE POSITION OF BLACK LIFE

Afro-Pessimism deals directly with the question

of life and how the black community can (or cannot) escape from a position of social death. In conversation with BLM, the Afro-Pessimist position is uniquely important in that it specifically addresses the creation and function of the definition of black existence in the United States that BLM, in message and function, is attempting to disrupt. BLM is designed to be an intervention into the commonly accepted and normalized concept of black life as an entity characterized by vulnerability and fatality. In contrast, Afro-Pessimism offers a means of discovering the ontological story of this normalized concept of black life and a pessimistic solution of sorts to the subsequent problem of oppression.

The Afro-Pessimist theory, as articulated by Jared Sexton in “The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism,” explains the social position of Black existence by examining it through a complex framework. At the onset of his investigation into the question, Sexton teases out the essential inquires that call into question the definition of black life, asking,

“What is the nature of a human being whose human being is put into question radically and by definition, a human being whose being human raises the question of being human at all? Whose being is the generative force, historic occasion, and essential byproduct of the question of human being in general? How might it be thought that there exists a being about which the question of its particular being is the condition of possibility and the condition of possibility for any thought about being whatsoever?”<sup>12</sup>

When deconstructed these questions highlight important contentions in black ontology, primarily, the disconnection between blackness and humanness. The question, “What is the nature of a human being ... whose being human raises the question of being human at all,” suggests that there was a theoretical moment in history in which white society determined that Black bodies were not human entities to be considered or treated as such. If a definition of what it truly meant by Anglo standards to be human was created in this moment, then what is learned from examining the consequences of this defining moment, and how does this defining moment relate to how Black bodies are treated and seen today?

Afro-Pessimism offers the story of an irreconcilable conflict, arguing that within this inability

to define the nature, social position, and political power of black people lies a source of “repression [that] happens on the level of representation, which then infiltrates the unconscious of both the black and the white persons.” The argument goes on to assert that, “Since these structures are ontological, they cannot be resolved (there is no way of changing this unless the world as we know it comes an end).”<sup>13</sup>

Afro-Pessimists see this antagonistic interpretation as the only conclusion that can be drawn from the regenerating cycle of violence against the black being, compounded with an ontological issue of misrepresentation. Aggravated by the inability to articulate the story and meaning of black lives, AfroPessimism accepts the lack of an identity within the reigning social/political structure and leaves the Black population in a position of social death. Not only are black bodies determined to be nonhuman entities, made object instead of subject, the plight of this oppressed class cannot be told through the language of the oppressor. This inability for the black person to articulate grievances and enumerate losses further diminishes the possibility of asserting power and participating in politics and society, assuming that there ever existed any power to assert.

An important aspect of the theory of Afro-Pessimism is the role that violence plays in upholding the central conflict between the black body and society. According to Afro-Pessimist theory, racial oppression functions as a foundational structure in society that is upheld through a system of permanent, cyclical violence.<sup>14</sup> Violence thus functions as a means of solidifying the position of the black body in a state of social death. Politically, the violence that becomes a characteristic part of the black experience creates a narrative of black identity that removes the black population from a space of equal citizenry. The white citizen is not expected to be a victim of violence, especially state violence, the way it is characteristically expected of the black pseudo-citizen. This aspect of reality as it exists for the black population is one of many factors that reinforces the detachment between the black body and social life and allows for the foundation of this oppressive structure to remain intact.

Yet, some Afro-Pessimist thinkers like Sexton find merit in the idea of working to alleviate the pervasiveness of cyclical, systemic violence and other symptoms of racially oppressive structures. From an Afro-Pessimist perspective, while black life operates from a position of social death within the

sociopolitical world that it cannot escape, there is a conceptualization of black life outside of this context this concept arguably simply does not matter in relation to the stronger oppressive forces that create the meaning through which black life practically functions. Sexton provides a defense of this position, arguing that Afro-Pessimism is more than just a call to accept oppression as a fact of life, but is in fact a call to understand a political structure designed to delude and detract from any conceptions of black life outside of its political function,

“What I take to be a certain aggression, or perhaps anxiety, in the deconstruction of the structure of vulnerability and the grammar of suffering that undergird Afro-Pessimism is not a sign of pathology in the moral register, but rather a matter of the apprehension of psychic—and political— reality in the properly psychoanalytic sense... The policing of black freedom, then, is aimed less at its dreaded prospect, apocalyptic rhetoric notwithstanding, than at its irreducible precedence. The logical and ontological priority of the unorthodox self-predicating activity of blackness... renders the law dependent upon what it polices...so long as we know that this pushing back is really a pushing forward. So you see, in this perverse sense, black social death is black social life.”<sup>15</sup>

Therefore, in defense of black life, outside of the function it serves to society as the matter that defines social death, it is reasonable and functional to give black bodies leave from the symptoms of oppression. Even if ending the violent cycle is not a foreseeable goal, resistance is required out of respect for this abstract notion of life beyond the purely political.

#### A VITALIST SOLUTION TO A FATAL PROBLEM

Putting this theory directly in conversation with BLM, Afro-Pessimism would consider BLM’s call for a widespread affirmation of black life as an impractical and impossible goal for a social movement. Afro-Pessimism not only asserts that life is a social position black bodies can never fill, but also that our political and social structure *requires* that black bodies remain in a position of death. Given this unbreakable structure, some Afro-Pessimists even go on to say that a call for the affirmation of life is itself paradoxical. If life, as defined by western political standards, is considered being other-than-Black, the black body’s cry for life could be heard as a call, not to equality, but to be defined as something that denies and antagonizes their existence as black people. In *Black Orpheus*,

a literary analysis of Negritude poetry, Jean-Paul Sartre references this conflict within the Negritude Movement, essentially calling the movement's aims self-destructive. In his analysis, Sartre noted,

"Negritude – with its past and future – is inserted into a universal history, it is no longer a state, nor even an existential attitude, it is a *Becoming*... Previously the black man claimed his place in the sun in the name of ethnic qualities; now he establishes his right to life on his mission; and this mission like the proletariat's, comes from his historic position... the Negro himself, we have said, creates a kind of antiracist racism. He wishes in no way to dominate the world: he desires the abolition of all kinds of ethnic privilege... Thus negritude is for destroying itself, it is a 'crossing to' not an 'arriving at,' a means and not an end."<sup>16</sup>

While Sartre's analysis of Negritude and its aims is problematic in that it mischaracterizes the goal of the Negritude Movement ending racial distinctions rather than affirming black life, it does put Negritude in conversation with an arguably less dire level of pessimism and fatalism than the one present in Afro-Pessimist theory. In his analysis, Sartre hypothesized that the ultimate goal of a movement that calls for life in a structure in which life is only defined as white would in essence be a call to end all racial distinctions in a way would not affirm or accept black life as its own entity, but simply make black life the equal of all others by destroying all racial distinctions. Here, Sartre suggests that Negritude serves simply as a collective force upon which the black community could break the slave/citizen dynamic—realizing that black life was as deserving of equal treatment as others. This realization could then only lead to a political struggle, calling for the end of all racial distinctions by destroying racial hierarchies. Such a movement would destroy the means through which the black body is oppressed. As Sartre saw the call for 'equal' as an end to blackness as a racial distinction, the Afro-Pessimist thinkers would see BLM's call to life as an end to the definition of life as it is understood, politically and socially. Whiteness, by definition, is everything the slave is not: free, in direct opposition to enslavement, full citizen, in direct opposition to a pseudo or second-class citizen. To ask for life is to ask for whiteness, a request which would essentially be the end of whiteness itself as it is defined, but also blackness as it is defined.

Afro-Pessimist theory takes this destructive conceptualization of the end goal a step further,

asserting that the black being could never make itself the equal of white life. To demand equality in a system where the social structure is arguably not slave/citizen, but life/death would demand others to regulate themselves to a position of death or demand that the black being acquire a position of life. Either transition would logistically destroy the structure of society and civility as we have come to understand and live by it.

In *Biko and the Problematic of Presence*, Frank B. Wilderson III addresses the impossibility of building social movements based on such a structure, stating, "A movement cannot be built, let alone sustained on behalf of 'nothing, absolutely nothing' – a nonentity. What would the politics of a dead relation, a slave, look like?" If an affirmation of life from society-at-large is deemed an impossible goal, is it then ineffective to structure a social movement against racial oppression from a Vitalist perspective? Is structuring a social movement that fails to address the nature of the fatal problem that perpetuates racial oppression a regressive tactic that will fail to bring an end to the central issue keeping black bodies oppressed?

#### POSSIBILITIES FOR RE-STRUCTURING THE MOVEMENT AGAINST RACIAL OPPRESSION

Putting this theory directly in conversation with BLM, Social and political movements developed from Vitalist or Pessimistic perspectives will structure different movements with different aims and tactics. Because scholars of Afro-Pessimism believe that the central conflict between black populations and society is an irreconcilable one, the solution they offer for political recourse is not one that would aim at ending racism or racial oppression, a goal which the theory argues is impossible. A movement structured from a pessimistic perspective would instead aim to improve some of the aftereffects of systemic oppression in respect to the aforementioned notion of black life outside any political structure, accepting that such resistance may not solve the ontological issue but only alleviate the symptoms.

Both Afro-Pessimists and BLM activists would advocate for addressing the continued violence against black bodies, but for different reasons and to different ends. As previously mentioned, BLM sees the end of systemic violence as a means to the affirmation of black life and solidifying its place as both human and citizen. Afro-Pessimists would see addressing systemic violence as a means of alleviating the hardships black



bodies face, but an end of violence would not definitely lead to an end to racial oppression. From these perspectives, I suggest there are three possible means of structuring social movements dealing directly with the issue of social death and detachment that is defined as the central conflict of racial oppression.

The pessimistic perspective would construct a political movement aimed at addressing the policies and practices that contribute to the systemic violence experienced by black populations. A social movement, pessimists argue, would aim only to alleviate symptoms of oppression, rather than change the social and philosophical structure of oppression itself. According to the pessimistic perspective, the violence experienced by the black community occurs on a permanent and cyclical basis. Therefore, a movement would have to establish a permanent presence to combat these issues of violence as they arise, since there would be no conceivable end. Such a movement would not aim to change culture or racist opinions in society for the sake creating empathy, because it would again be impossible for someone in a position of life to empathize with a position of death. Any notions of widespread social change resulting from empathy from those in a position of social life or a redefining the concept of life would be deemed impossible and therefore not addressed as an aim of the movement.

The Vitalist perspective would form a primarily social movement that rejects the irreconcilability offered by Afro-Pessimism. Such a movement, like the BLM movement, would continue in its aim to deconstruct the narratives and systems that deny equal lives and equal experiences of citizenship to black bodies. This position would be grounded in the belief that framing the central conflict as a one without remedy only enables and perpetuates systems of violence and oppression. Although many factors of Vitalist movements allude to the existence of the conflict defined by Afro-Pessimist theory, to accept that this conflict has no remedy would destroy the central goal of a movement like BLM, which calls for more than an end to violence, but also calls for overall social change. Such a change would require the oppressive structures and actors in society to abandon their privilege and claim to "life," as it is currently understood as the antithesis to blackness. This would call for a reworking of what it means to have social life and what life and citizenry looks like when it is not established in juxtaposition to death and varying forms of slavery and disadvantage.

A third option would argue for an amalgamation

of the optimistic and pessimistic outlooks. This option would force scholars of both perspectives to concede their hypotheses about the capabilities of political and societal structures to eventually create change and the means through which such a goal could be accomplished. Accommodating both the optimistic and pessimistic theory would functionally destroy important tenants of both schools of thought. If these differing perspectives should offer anything to each other in terms of structuring an effective social movement, the conversation would have to be one of priority, that differs greatly from the previous arguments of superiority or preference of one method over the other.

Both Vitalist and fatalist perspectives on black life have direct answers to the how the structure of oppression must be dealt with, but seem to speak past each other when addressing the tools through which these forms of oppression are upheld. Here, I want to revisit the conversation of violence upon which the Afro-Pessimist and more optimistic, Vitalist perspectives almost agree because both perspectives understand the necessity and functionality of addressing excessive violence against black bodies.

When Afro-Pessimism speaks directly about the irreparable condition of social death, there is an emphasis placed on the tools through which this conflict is upheld.<sup>17</sup> The normalization of excessive violence on the black body and the emphasis on how these mechanisms work to create a cycle of oppression from which black bodies cannot escape is defined as a central aspect of the conflict to which there is no resolution. From this perspective, where the system of cyclical violence and mistreatment of the black body are still normalized, it is impossible to have a conversation about a shift in the status of black life.

If the context in which black bodies are viewed takes place before the physical and political status of black life has functionally changed to give way to new meaning, there is no weight to the affirmation of life. Without first taking steps to dismantle the symptoms of oppression and change the physical and political realities of black existence, there can be no conversation about redefining the status of black life. Any renewed definition offered would have no meaning within a political structure that continued to function in the same manor that regenerated cycles of oppression. Ultimately, a pessimistic analysis of a movement calling for an affirmation from society-at-large would argue that such an affirmation could not occur, or, more importantly, would not have meaning

without a functional reconstruction of black life. An intervention on a dominant narrative is useless unless the narrative has truly changed—simply affirming life is meaningless unless the statement is true, and simply reinforcing the statement does not in any functional manner make it true because it does not change the conditions of life as they exist.

Understanding the remedies offered by Afro-Pessimist and Vitalist thinkers less as competing ideologies and more as steps to be taken in succession, as a conversation of priority and feasibility, it is possible that prioritizing one perspective's solution could create a political landscape in which pessimism creates room for optimism. It is arguable whether a pessimistic perspective would agree that an end to violence (or at least a drastic decrease in the levels of excessive violence) is possible. However, if it were possible, dismantling (or definitively reducing) the symptoms of the oppressive political structure could create the only means through which the social changes offered by the more Vitalist perspective could have practical and functional meaning.

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