The election of Barack Obama to the presidency has been widely perceived as proof of the post-racial nature of today’s United States society and the transcendence of its history of slavery and continued racial discrimination. Numerous publications on the declining relevance of activist notions of blackness or African Americaness in politics, as well as in arts and academia, have surrounded this election and have helped transform the perception of race from that of a morally legitimate socio-political position into that of an icon for interest-driven client politics (Cho; Dickerson; Purcell; Rich; Warren). At the same time, a group of authors has emerged that challenges these notions of post-racialism and insists on the radical potential of politicized notions of blackness. Referring to each other as “Afro-Pessimists,” Saidiya Hartman, Frank Wilderson, Jared Sexton and others argue that the race line continues to be the foundational socio-political fault line in the United States.

American Studies is located on this fault line like no other academic discipline, and, like few others, in order to proceed in its endeavor it must both take into account and account for the theoretical and political visibility or invisibility of race. In offering a short introduction to Afro-Pessimism, this article proposes a framework for understanding and navigating this fault line. Sketching key Afro-Pessimist works and concepts, the following pages argue against the notions of post-racialism that have been affirmed by American Studies in Germany and elaborate on the urgency for and potential of a wider consideration of Afro-Pessimist thought in this field.

Anti-Blackness and White Civil Society

Inspired by Saidiya Hartman’s book *Scenes of Subjection*, Afro-Pessimism as a school of thought began to emerge at the turn of the millennium.1 Unsatisfied with the expanding rhetoric of a post-racial United States and the failure of

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1 The terms ‘Afro-Pessimism’ and ‘Afro-Pessimist’ (uppercase and hyphenated) here refer to a stream of thought coming from African American or Black Studies. Although it must not be confused with the ‘afropessimist’ (lowercase and not hyphenated) approach concerning the postcolonial state and potential of the African continent that was popularized in the 1980s and 1990s, there are points of contact and works, such as those by Achille Mbembe, that are of relevance for both Afro-Pessimism and afropessimism.
existing political and cultural theories to explain what they perceived to be the continuing prevalence of racial discrimination within the United States. Afro-Pessimist authors such as Frank Wilderson and Jared Sexton began using Hartman’s analysis of an anti-blackness contained in everyday scenes—rather than in moments of spectacular violence—in order to develop a critique of the constitutive role of anti-blackness for United States civil society. Instead of accepting a post-racial paradigm, Afro-Pessimism’s core axiom posits that ‘Black’ still equals ‘slave’ in the United States as well as in the Western or ‘white’ world in general. ‘Black’ here refers not to an ethnic self-identification, but to a racializing “common sense” perception (Omi and Winant 11) and a specific structural position within civil society and its socio-economic, as well as its cultural and psychic systems. Although in practice it is not always possible to strictly separate this position from that of Asians, Latin-Americans, and Native Americans, Afro-Pessimism insists—for reasons elaborated on below—that these latter positions are “junior partners” in a white civil society (Wilderson, “Black Liberation”) and partake, if to a significantly lesser degree, of the profits of non-blackness. Only black people are “always already positioned as slave[s]” (Wilderson, Red, White & Black 7) in that their position within white civil society is still that of the “social death” that defined slavery (Patterson 38), that is, of a life exposed to gratuitous violence, injured or withheld personhood, and denied humanity. Only black people, Afro-Pessimism contends, are invisible in the discourse of a civil society that has historically been structured around the fact that blacks were neither citizens nor humans, but chattel that could be traded and mistreated in ways that contradict the role of civil society to protect its members.

The Afro-Pessimist axiom asserts not only that ‘civil’ has always meant ‘not-black,’ but insists that this continues to be so; it takes Trayvon Martin’s death and the acquittal of his killer, or the attempts undertaken by the states of Texas and North Carolina to change their voting rights immediately after the Supreme Court struck down Section 4 of the Voting Rights Act in June 2013, as just two recent cases in point. The invisibility of black humanity and the disregard of the rights attached to such humanity persist in spite of historical moments such as Jubilee, the passing of the Civil Rights Act, and the Obama presidency. This is not a static persistence, however, but continuity “in and as permutation” (Sexton, “The Social Life” 6).

One such permutation is the transformation of the perception of black people as willing slaves into a perception of them as pathological criminals. Starting with the post-Abolition Black Codes, this transformation first helped replace slavery with a system of mostly black convict labor and debt peonage and later lead to the mass incarceration of African Americans that marks the present. It is a transformation of the social death of the slave into the civic death of the ghetto dweller as “prison-slave-in-waiting” (Wilderson, “The Prison Slave” 18) and of the convict as “neo-slave” (James); it is a social death that can cost convicted felons anything from the loss of their driver’s license, to losing eligibility for welfare benefits and public housing, and even to losing the right to vote (Alexander 143). That this was

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2 In 2006, 1 of every 14 black men was in prison or jail in the United States, compared to 1 of every 106 white men (Alexander 100).
a permutation rather than a revolution is implicit in the thirteenth amendment’s well known subordinate clause: “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction” (emphasis mine) and explicit in the 1871 Ruffin vs. Commonwealth verdict’s description of the convict as a “slave of the State. He is civiliter mortuus, and his estate, if he has any, is administered like that of a dead man.”

The invisibility of black humanity is thus tightly linked to a hypervisibility of black people as a source of danger. The common sense perception of an ontological black inability to participate in civil society finds expression in a fear of blacks as a threat to that same civil society. This perception centers on stereotypes of black welfare queens, thugs, and gang-bangers, on depictions of blacks per se as parasites and criminals, rather than contributing members of society (Berg, “Struktureller Rassismus”; Wacquant).

Afro-Pessimist authors, such as Frank Wilderson in his “The Prison Slave as Hegemony’s (Silent) Scandal” and Red, White and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U. S. Antagonisms, propose an understanding of the circumstances of social and civic death as a constitutive structural exclusion of African Americans within United States society. They constitute, according to Wilderson,

America’s structuring irrationality: the libidinal economy of White Supremacy, and its hyper-discursive violence that kills the black subject so that the concept, civil society, may live. In other words, from the incoherence of black death, America generates the coherence of white life. (“Gramsci” 8)

In emphasizing “common sense” blackness as a position that defines the form of a social structure in which black humanity is present only as constitutive absence, Afro-Pessimism proposes a theoretical framework that does not consider black individuals or black culture as such, but focuses on the production of knowledge and its political consequences. Its aim is to deconstruct an epistemological blind spot in large parts of the humanities and social sciences that risks confusing hypervisibility and invisibility, misrecognizing representations as real, thus reiterating the black invisibility constitutive of white civil society. By doing this, even supposedly progressive or radical approaches can be transformed into conservative ventures. Instead of considering blackness as just one position among others in the discourse of civil society—akin to that of class, gender, or sexuality—Afro-Pessimism insists on thinking of the structural exclusion of black people as the necessary foundation for the articulation of the latter positions. In doing so, it proposes a critique of (post-)modernity’s theorization of the subject whose claims within civil society are based on a supposed possession of the self and right there-to that are constitutionally opposed to the literal possession of the slave or prison-inmate as commodity and chattel and the structural de facto (if not always de jure) exclusion of blacks from that same civil society. According to Afro-Pessimism, the structure of the subject’s claim, based on (self-)definition as ‘not-property,’ being neither dispensable nor disposable, ultimately amounts to asserting that one is not black in a white civil society and thus precludes any such claims from black people, both historically and today. Unlike ‘the’ worker, to give just one exam-
ple, whose political conflicts concern his labor, ‘the’ black’s antagonism with the structure of civil society concerns his increased risk of being killed by the police, his increased probability of incarceration, and his vulnerability to other forms of discrimination. ‘The’ worker, in other words, is recognized as fully human and a full citizen, and can articulate his claims because he has attained this recognition by distancing himself from blackness (Roediger). While the worker’s struggles are located in a specific symbolic realm in which he has been recognized as a rightful member, the black’s struggle is still about emerging from invisibility and attaining that recognition. Contrary to the worker, the black is not located within discourse as a subject with a specific set of rights, but is contained in the realm below these rights—a place where violence reigns. What is articulated by the human and civil subject as a conflict within the discourse of civil society amounts to (for the non-human and civilly dead black person) a structural antagonism that cannot be articulated within this discourse and can only be dissolved by dissolving that discourse, its modes of understanding, and its production. Opposed to the worker, who labors in the market or sells his labor as commodity, who can claim to be alienated and exploited in the process of producing the commodity and re-claim a reformation of the modes of production as a solution to his conflict with civil society, the black is the commodity itself, for example in the form of inmates delivered to prisons run by private corporations. Accordingly, in order to solve his antagonism with civil society, he must reclaim not simply a reform of his status, but a revolution of the mechanics of status-formation and -ascription. In order to recognize black people as human beings, it is not enough that production be organized more democratically among humans; production must stop entirely in order to stop producing blacks as commodities (Wilderson, “The Prison Slave” 230). It is the extreme improbability of civil society mustering the desire for, or even willingness to recognize the parameters of, such a revolution that grounds the pessimism in Afro-Pessimism. In a constant evocation and reworking of Frantz Fanon, authors such as Frank Wilderson insist that

 eradication of the generative mechanism of Black suffering would mean the end of the world and they [whites and their junior partners] would find themselves peering into an abyss (or incomprehensible transition) between epistemes; between, that is, the body of ideas that determine that knowledge that is certain at any particular time. In other words, they would find themselves suspended between worlds. (“The Vengeance” 33)

The deep structure of black social and civic death and the black “grammar of suffering” is thus political and epistemic at the same time (Wilderson, “Gramsci” 6). While it does signal itself in terms of immediate physical violence, this structure also translates into questions located more firmly within the humanities than the social sciences. It is through posing these questions that Afro-Pessimism is of utmost relevance for American Studies, especially in its attempts to come to grips with the so-called post-racial moment.

Tracing pessimist permutations, Afro-Pessimist authors insist that historical events such as the Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement have not changed the position of African Americans within civil society. Rather, these moments are read through the conservative dynamics they unleashed: the Black Codes and
the propagation of black convict labor after the Civil War (described by Douglas Blackmon as *Slavery by Another Name*); the instauration of the ‘War on Drugs’ and the crackdown on black political movements; the development in the 1960s of the Prison Industrial Complex (what Manning Marable has called *The Second Reconstruction*). Rather than declare that the term ‘African American’ lost its conceptual force when Jim Crow legally ended because the external threat that created racial unity had dissipated (Warren, *What Was* 2), Afro-Pessimism insists on understanding the present age as *The New Jim Crow* (Alexander). For these authors, this present is the continuation of slavery’s transformation of black bodies into black flesh, theorized by Hortense Spillers in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book”:

I would make a distinction in this case between the “body” and the “flesh” and impose that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject positions. In that sense, before the “body,” there is the “flesh,” that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography. […] a theft of the body—a willful and violent (and unimaginable from this distance) severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire. Under these conditions […] the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver. (67)

This “theft of the body,” this “zero degree of social conceptualization” of the “flesh” as Spillers contends, has neither gender nor history; it is a mere commodity that is subject to society’s whim and will, but has no part in it. Those who were reduced to flesh were severed from their culture and history and scattered across the globe in the process. They were historically cut off from lineage, as black flesh was constantly open to legal rape, an openness that turned birth into the mere reproduction of property that may be sold at any time and put the notion of family under permanent threat (Sharpe 27-66). From an Afro-Pessimist angle, to write of a black “grammar of suffering” is to highlight how the black flesh of the slave—cast outside humanity, history, and family—as well as its contemporary permutations, cannot be grasped in the standard framework of materialism, feminism, psychoanalysis, or postcolonial studies. All of these latter approaches focus on positions inside discourse. But unlike ‘women,’ the black cannot demand full participation in the profits of whiteness. Unlike Native Americans or other post-colonial subalterns, the black person living within white civil society cannot claim redress in the form of a return of the land and a rewriting of history (Wilderson, *Red, White & Black* 120). For these reasons the focus of Afro-Pessimism is not on the possible claims of African Americans—although they do reflect on and support claims such as those for economic reparations (Hartman and Wilderson 198; Wilderson, “Reparations”)—but on the impossibility of articulating these demands within the “American grammar” (Spillers, “Mama’s” 68) from a position of black social and civic death that is the constitutive moment of whiteness and white civil society.

This, then, is a variation on the Afro-Pessimist axiom: the black person is not a “body,” but “flesh,” not a “human subject,” but a “sentient being” (Wilderson, “Vengeance” 3); s/he is situated to discourse not in a relation of contingent violence, exploitation, alienation, and hegemonic contestation, but in a relation of gratuitous violence, accumulation, fungibility, and terror. The implications are manifold.
In “The Avant-Garde of White Supremacy,” Jared Sexton and Steve Martinot analyze contemporary racialized police violence in order to explain how the difference between gratuitous and contingent violence plays out the matrix of simultaneous invisibility and hypervisibility of black flesh within civil society. According to their argument, assuming that police violence is contingent upon acts of those suffering from this violence amounts to thinking in terms of transgression within a fundamentally sound system. Such a train of thought would insist that police violence is generally a legitimate response to a perpetrated or pending criminal act. It would admit that cases of excessive brutality and cruelty exist, but portray these as exceptional moments and articulate any demand to stop this violence in terms of containment of those exceptional moments. Sexton and Martinot oppose this focus on the spectacle of the exceptional to the quotidian experience of African Americans, for whom police brutality is not an exception, but a constitutive part of everyday life:

Most theories of white supremacy seek to plumb the depths of its excessiveness, beyond the ordinary; they miss the fact that racism is a mundane affair. The fundamental excess of the paradigm of policing which infuses this culture is wholly banal. (173)

A prime example of such banality would be the everyday nature of racial profiling and the successful attempts of its proponents to portray it as fundamental to the maintenance of law and order, following the decision by a federal court to declare the New York Police Department strategy of ‘stop and frisk’ unconstitutional for disproportionally targeting minorities. Partaking of the logic of banality and common sense quietly connects public perception to those concepts of pathological black criminality that were used to arrest and auction forced black convict labor. Assuming that police brutality is always contingent upon criminal acts amounts to believing in the necessity and righteousness of mass incarceration. Afro-Pessimism contends that this belief is reproduced every time a complaint about racialized police violence is not articulated in revolutionary pamphlets and violence but in appeals to the State and ‘the system.’ It is the task, they argue, of the avant-garde of white supremacy—the police, the media, the judicial system, and the education sector—to produce a perception of gratuitous violence as violence contingent upon criminal acts. The task is to create white ignorance of the structural nature of anti-black violence and therewith render invisible the constant gratuitous disrespect for and wounding of black humanity in civil society’s discourse and perception. The task is to assure the right questions about that violence and discrimination are not asked by promoting the spectacle of society’s excesses. It is to emphasize the descriptive surface question as to whether it is necessary to shoot at someone twenty-seven times in order to make the normative

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3 U.S. District Judge Shira Scheindlin declared ‘stop and frisk’ unconstitutional on August 12, 2013. Both New York police commissioner Ray Kelly and Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg denounced the decision, saying it would lead to an increase in violent crime and ultimately cost lives (NBC; Bloomberg). Contrary to Bloomberg, Kelly did not try to dissociate ‘stop and frisk’ from racial profiling, instead attempting to legitimize the high number of black and other minority people it targeted. The ruling was put on hold, and Judge Scheindlin recused from the case on October 31, 2013.
depth analysis that even one bullet is too many to shoot anybody disappear under it (Sexton and Martinot 174). This analysis does not seek to deny that some blacks do commit crimes, but seeks to emphasize how white civil society constructs a perception in which black people as such are always-already criminals and how this perception is instrumentalized, among other things, to cover up strategies of racialized police terror. It is an analysis that considers the cases of Amadou Diallo—who was shot at 41 times and hit 19 times by New York police officers—or Darius Simmons, Oscar Grant, Jonathan Ferrell, and many others as examples of foundational structural discrimination rather than individual cases of police brutality and prejudice.4

The leading questions derived from the Afro-Pessimist axiom would be thus: how is the impossible and invisible black subject narrated, and how is the white subject implicated in this narration? This is a problem posed by Saidiya Hartman in her work Scenes of Subjection, which serves as a founding document for much Afro-Pessimist thought. It is here that Hartman introduces the shift in focus from the spectacular to the banal and attempts to produce an understanding of the constitution of blackness based on everyday practices, such as work or dancing, rather than spectacular events such as flogging and lynching. It is at once an enquiry into the mode of erasure of black life in historical and fictional documents and an interrogation of reading practices in which suture is produced through a mode of empathic identification designed on the replacement of the black subject by a projection of the writer/reader. Such a reading, to give an example, would amount to writing and reading the toils and troubles of a black mother through identification with ‘mother’ while ignoring ‘black,’ an identification whose mode would be the replacement of the invisible and often impossible black motherhood through a white motherhood unwittingly assumed to be universally valid. It is in this sense of erasing black particularity under a white self-overrepresentation, under a belief in the universality and thus transferability of life in the mode of whiteness, that the position of the invisible black (neo-)slave becomes “the position of the unthought” that lingers under an hypervisible ersatz-presence produced by discourse to structure its own coherence (Hartman and Wilderson 185). In tracing this position, Hartman demonstrates how black flesh is not only consumed as commodity, but how even its discursive position is subject to the same fungibility—a fungibility defined as “the joy made possible by virtue of the replaceability and interchangeability endemic to the commodity” (Scenes 21).

The ‘black’ position of the unthought, then, is a position that can be and has been traced in the form of the mark of constitutive and gratuitous exclusion that permeates the quotidian independent of any ‘black’ transgression, yet is con-

4 Like Trayvon Martin and Diallo, Simmons, Grant, and Ferrell are examples of black men killed through gratuitous violence. Darius Simmons was a teenager shot to death by a white racist in front of his mother a week after the killing of Martin. When the police arrived on the scene, his mother was questioned and his brother arrested while his murderer was later released on bail. Oscar Grant was shot in the back, while lying on the ground, by a police officer at the Fruitvale Rapid Transit Station on New Year's Day 2009. The event was filmed on digital video and cell phone cameras and disseminated on the Internet as well as through the media. Jonathan Ferrell was killed by ten police bullets in September 2013, while trying to get help after a car accident.
stantly being rewritten as such and thus made to disappear in the most diverse sorts of narratives: from the political events, historical documents, and theoretical and fictional texts already mentioned, to the film and photography analyzed by Kara Keeling, Frank Wilderson, and David Marriott, and beyond. This unthoughtness is the form in which the black ‘slave,’ both historical and contemporary, is present and reiterated in large parts of American Studies discourse. It not only describes the positionality of the black, but marks the constitution of the not-black through the exclusion of the black as the “political ontology” of the United States (Wilderson, _Red, White & Black_ 97), that is, as the essence of a society that could not be what it is without that exclusion. It is because of this ontological role that (anti-)blackness is not merely the subject of African American Studies, but the matrix of all of American Studies, and that Afro-Pessimism is of relevance not only to the former, but maybe even more so to the latter. The epistemological challenge posed by Afro-Pessimism consists in deconstructing a “people-of-color-blindness” of whites and their “junior partners” vis-à-vis blacks. Jared Sexton defines this blindness as a common refusal to admit to significant differences of structural position born of discrepant histories between blacks and their political allies, actual or potential. We might, finally, name this refusal _people-of-color-blindness_, a form of colorblindness inherent to the concept of “people of color” to the precise extent that it misunderstands the specificity of anti-blackness and presumes or insists upon the monolithic character of victimization under white supremacy—thinking (the afterlife of) slavery as a form of exploitation or colonization or a species of racial oppression among others. (Sexton, “People-of-Color” 47-48)

The fallacy of people-of-color-blindness is its implicit assumption that the problematic constitution of blackness and black social and civic death can be considered on a par with other problematics such as that of ‘the’ worker, ‘the’ woman, or ‘the’ postcolonial subaltern. Afro-Pessimism does not intend to deny or delegitimize the existence and importance of non-black contestations to white hegemony or the idea of a post-racial society (Wilderson, _Red, White & Black_). Nevertheless, it insists that within a white civil society those struggles are not only structurally over-determined by anti-blackness, but do, at a minimum, implicitly engage with its mechanics in the articulation of their own positions. The Afro-Pessimist critique of “people-of-color-blindness” is a refusal to accept racialization and the constitution of blackness as secondary problematics that may or may not be considered, as well as an insistence that there can be no consideration at all of the United States, its culture, and its white civil society without an understanding of (anti-)blackness as the matrix in which all other social, economic, cultural, and libidinal problematics are framed.

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5 Consider for instance the increasing debate surrounding the name of the Washington D.C.-area NFL team and the racist commodification of Native American culture (Zirin; “Obama Points”).
Afro-Pessimism in American Studies in Germany

Afro-Pessimism poses both a methodological and a moral challenge to American Studies in Germany, where its reception is still marginal and confined to the field of African American Studies. Apart from rare interventions indirectly touching upon the Afro-Pessimist critique of post-racialism through the question of the Prison Industrial Complex and political disenfranchisement (Berg, “Disenfranchisement”; Buschendorf; Knopf), the work done by Sabine Broeck and other at the University of Bremen constitutes the only engagement with Afro-Pessimist theory in German academia.

In addition to the insistence on the over-determining role of race for any consideration of the United States, two primary research dynamics arise from the Afro-Pessimist methodological challenge. The first dynamic concerns the consequences of the injunction that whiteness and white civil society are created and sustained by anti-blackness not only in the United States context, but globally as well. How and why, one might ask, is there a white ‘enslavism’ in Germany that reproduces itself by reproducing blacks as non-citizens and slaves? How can American Studies’s long-standing engagement with matters of race become fertile ground for an understanding of Europe? Is it possible, for example, to mine the potential of American Studies to offer a structural explanation for the deaths of Oury Jalloh and Laye Alama Condé, both of whom were killed in police custody in Germany? Through questions such as these, Afro-Pessimism permits not just a reworking of existing American Studies in Germany, but also a rethinking of the potential of American Studies for an understanding of Europe. Going beyond such obvious points of American Studies’s interest—Europe’s role in the colonization of the North American continent, in the Middle Passage, or in nineteenth-century migration—Afro-Pessimist approaches would force a reconsideration (to give another example) of the role of the contemporary European border and migration policy and politics in the production of not only black social death within European civil society, but also the very real deaths of the hundreds of people who drown in the Mediterranean Sea each year while trying to enter Europe.

The second research dynamic asks how we might deconstruct and avoid reproducing the epistemological blind spot that assures the invisibility of structural anti-blackness within the discourse of white civil society. One possible conclusion could be the “hermeneutics of absence and pedagogy of the trace” proposed by Sabine Broeck (“European Borders”), which attempts to undo white ignorance and approach white “enslavism” by mining discourse and its archives for dynamics and artifacts in and through which the closure of white civil society’s self-narrations fail, searching for moments in which the rewriting of invisibility into hypervisibility is ever so slightly disturbed, to permit the apprehension of absence and start its analysis (“Enslavement”).

The task of an Afro-Pessimist methodology is to locate and undo a suppressed absence within civil society and its discursive formations. For this reason it applies to fields of study where it would not necessarily be intuitively expected. It is a highly politicized approach whose moral challenge to American Studies in Germany consists of demanding that it not be a part of the “avant-garde of white
supremacy”—that is, that it recognizes and stops the possible production of “the position of the unthought” and applies its potential towards undoing anti-blackness in both academia and socio-political reality. American Studies in Germany is thus defied to navigate the pessimist desire for the end of whiteness, the unlikely end of white society, and the problematics of forming coalitions across the racial fault line. The challenge to any non-black academic is to put an end to white innocence, to dare to face and bear one’s structural involvement in, and profiting from, the reproduction of black social death and to work toward its undoing. This means not only thinking and acting against the obviously racist, even though current debates such as those concerning black-facing as Zwarte Piet in the Netherlands or as Rappaport in German theaters prove that this can be difficult. It also implies engaging in the deconstruction of an at times all too conspicuous compassion with black people that easily turns into proto-racist condescension in its brute simplicity. Such a condescension—familiar from Christian charity organizations’ paternalist depictions of a helpless and needy ‘Africa’—sustains the rereading of structural anti-blackness into transgressive events lamented by Sexton and Martinot. It propagates an understanding that promises the possible exoneration of one’s own structural enslavism at the least, while, through this promise, working towards the conservation of those structures.

The importance of Afro-Pessimism for American Studies in Germany is two-fold, first because it offers a meta-theoretical critique of its methodology and epistemology, and second because it promotes the potential of American Studies in Germany to articulate a specific critique of European society. The charge for American Studies scholars is not to renounce their structural whiteness in an impossible attempt to dissociate their existence from the anti-blackness of their society and culture. Rather, it is to seek to resolve this anti-blackness by unraveling the epistemological foundations of the white civil society that anti-blackness is made to maintain. What are the mechanics of making sense, when the Italian Minister of the Interior publicly suggests that those collecting the dead bodies of the drowned from the shores of Lampedusa should be nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, all the while defending a law that makes those who save ‘illegal’ immigrants from drowning liable to be sued in court for assisting illegal immigration? What is the structure of knowledge when the local government of the city of Hamburg threatens to sue anyone who shelters ‘illegal’ immigrants for assisting illegal residence and pursues a general policy of stopping-and-frisking anyone of black skin color in order to find such ‘illegal’ immigrants? American Studies has, for many years, developed a specific set of tools for deciphering such implicit statements on the common sense contradiction between blackness and citizenship, blackness and legality, blackness and humanity.

Afro-Pessimism offers a post-racial vision that is radically different from those contained in the versions of post-racialism and color-blindness that have been the subject of much recent debate, in that it identifies current white civil society’s discourse as racialized and racializing instead of locating race and its transcendence within this discourse. Anti-blackness, here, is not merely a form of racism; it cannot be made to disappear through educational and activist measures targeting individuals alone. Only a refounding of the basic intellectual and political frame-
work of society would permit a transcendence of anti-blackness.\textsuperscript{6} True to their name, most Afro-Pessimist authors’ attitudes towards the possibility of achieving such a radical refoundation through a politics of alliance (rather than a violent revolution) is one of skepticism as to the ability of white people to transcend an internal economical and libidinal prohibition of the white self-annihilation-as-white that such a reinvention would require. As Frank Wilderson puts it:

There’s a structural prohibition (rather than merely a willful refusal) against whites being allies of blacks, due to this—to borrow from Fanon’s \textit{The Wretched of the Earth} again—‘species’ division between what it means to be a subject and what it means to be an object: a structural antagonism. (Hartman and Wilderson 189-90)

Engaging with this skepticism, American Studies in Germany must continue to promote the decentering of its knowledge production with the help of work emanating from, among others, Black Studies. Breaking black invisibility within white civil society and its discourse necessarily implies breaking white academic dominance in this society and discourse. The extent to which this is possible in spite of the “structural antagonism”—that is, from within existing discourse—is a matter of debate among Afro-Pessimist authors. This is the point at which some writers, sharing the analysis of pessimist permutations, nevertheless articulate a:

metacritical optimism […] bound up with what it is to claim blackness and the appositional, run-away, phonoptic black operations—expressive of an autopoeitic organization in which flight and inhabitation modify each other—that have been thrust upon it. (Moten, “Black Op” 1745)

This belief of Afro-Pessimism’s all but identical twin, Afro-Optimism, is largely considered inconsistent with its structural analysis by many Afro-Pessimist authors and has been criticized as a refusal of its exponents to face the gravity of the Afro-Pessimist endeavor and a complicity in the expiation of white innocence (Hartman and Wilderson). Against the possibility of a performative undoing of black social death from within discourse, and against the idea of arts and other “phonoptic operations” as locations of black agency and articulation and cross-racial coalition building, most Afro-Pessimists would insist on the invisibility of any such acts within a white civil society and its modes of making sense and thus, in the end, would insist on the inaccessibility of the unthought to white people.

American Studies in Germany is, at this historical moment, condemned to be optimistic. It cannot follow Afro-Pessimism to its ultimate conclusion where, at the cost of navigating themselves into an argumentative dead-end that is racializing in its own right, Afro-Pessimists portray the racial fault line as unpassable. American Studies in Germany cannot share Afro-Pessimism’s (especially Wilderson’s and Sexton’s) always acknowledged but never openly articulated advocacy of violent revolution as the only thinkable solution to anti-blackness. What nevertheless legitimizes a consideration of Afro-Pessimism, in spite of the impossibility of ever completely adopting it, is that its epistemological critique and methodologi-

\textsuperscript{6} This argument is, of course, not restricted to Afro-Pessimist works. See for example Toni Morrison’s \textit{Playing in the Dark} or Elizabeth West’s article on the tropes of the founding fathers in African American discourses of democracy.
The political and moral challenges function even without completely accepting its political radicalism. Whatever degree of pessimism one finds convincing or bearable, it is hard to deny the urgency Afro-Pessimism gives to writing against the notion of a post-racial present. Whatever the potential for an intra-discursive emergence of the unthought, it cannot be denied that within the United States and other Western societies, black people are more likely than whites to be killed, incarcerated, or deported. Whatever the means one considers available for ending structural anti-blackness, any take on post-racialism as the end of pessimist permutations must always be about accepting that the enjoyment of structural white enslavism is the most central obstacle to surmounting the anti-blackness of civil society.

This is what it would mean for American Studies in Germany to consider Afro-Pessimism. As this short introduction has shown, it is above all a meta-theoretical and “metapolitical” approach whose main thrust is the deconstruction of the anti-blackness structuring white western civil societies as well as large parts of their knowledge production (Sexton, “The Social Life” 15). Engaging both academic and common sense understanding, Afro-Pessimism traces this anti-blackness even in those fields where blackness or race seem not to be the imminent subjects of enquiry or are present in any way. Its proposition is not a programmatic vision of a world yet to emerge, but refers the questioner—specifically, as I have argued, American Studies in Germany—back to its methodology and morals. It proposes neither an end to achieve nor an undisputed set of means, as illustrated by the ambiguous status of violence within Afro-Pessimist thought. For American Studies in Germany, to consider Afro-Pessimism means considering a critique of a racial unthought, an entanglement with it, and the potential to undo this entanglement and the politics deriving from it.

Works Cited and Further Reading:


---. “Reparations … Now!” Unreleased movie.
Sebastian Weier has offered an impactful, succinct mapping through which we might grasp Afro-Pessimism as an intellectual and political project of the twenty-first century. He identifies its major theorists and briefly surveys historical and contemporary moments when black life experiences confirm Afro-Pessimists chief premise: Black life is by definition extinguishable, always subject to the whimsical and often sadistic designs of a nonblack public, which upholds institutions that reproduce and reflect that fact.

Afro-Pessimism distills the state of black beingness down to the quality and condition white-supremacist-capitalist-patriarchy always intended. It exposes modern society’s engagement with black people as a discipline-starved nonbody lacking worth, except to the extent they can be contained, rigidly governed, or otherwise extinguished by the state and persons representing state interests who have no intention of opening society for black people to exercise any real socio-political desires.

Comprised of a pastiche of scholarship that includes the work of Frantz Fanon, Saidiya Hartman, Hortense Spillers, Frank Wilderson, Jared Sexton, and others Afro-Pessimism thus laughs at pronouncements of social progress, preferring instead to unpack how such controlling discourses actually encase black possibility. At best such discourses can only distance an interested public from the actual state of nothingness in which blackness resides in modern society. Examples on this score are in abundance. Trayvon Martin, Renisha McBride, Jordan Davis, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Aiyanna Stanley Jones, and Freddie Gray are contemporary notables in this regard. Existing to be exploited, controlled and killed, is the lot of modern black communities, if they exist at all. It follows that Black bodies and culture (if something can be called such) have always been there for the taking, as it were. To be taken, consumed, devoured is the fact of blackness, a condition and context that is existentially, persistently and violently anti-black. For example, police shootings of black bodies are all but routine interactions. Ritualized aggressiveness by guardsmen, deputies, or otherwise appointed custodians of the state are mere reflexes.

Afro-Pessimism is therefore an attractive heuristic platform from which to launch ontological examinations of black life under modernity. Though largely emergent from a racialized U.S. context, Weier’s interpolation imagines its applicability in other global sites, alongside of U.S. racial contexts, earnestly linking Afro-Pessimism to Black Europe or at least Black Studies in Europe. As such, Afro-Pessimism is a rigorous, fine-tooth-comb indictment of global white supremacist discourses, knowledge production, and institutional behaviors.

Moreover, Afro-Pessimism takes the historical record to task, demonstrating the enduring textures of state brutality. U.S. history thus records the black body
as worthless, valuable only to the degree in which that body serves the interest of an antiblack society. Ultimately, the black body is denied civic access and is perpetually undeserving; denial is a tattoo upon the body of black flesh.

Weier’s exegesis animates Afro-Pessimism’s political project, however, it is not necessarily an activist discourse in the familiar sense of collectivized protest. Afro-Pessimism is a theory of the state’s persistent undoing of black bodies. It calls for an upheaval of modernity as civil society without calling for revolution in explicitly political terms. Even the language of politics, i.e. resistance, revolution, rebellion, insurrection, and even power as in Black Power, are ineffective in deeply mining black conditions, and limit the ability to describe the perpetual undoing of blackness. Afro-Pessimism thus comes to stand as both a discursive and disciplinary analysis. It provides a vocabulary and a constellation of meanings associated with blackness torn asunder at the seams, indicting the violence of white racial hierarchy and condemning liberal civil society for its complicity in the scheme.

Importantly, by locating itself at the crossroads of African diasporic radicalism and a modernity constructed at black people’s expense, Afro-Pessimism stands in contradistinction from some of the most recent popular writing on black conditions of captivity, notably Michelle Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow*. Rather than explain Civil Rights liberalism’s estrangement from racial justice, Afro-Pessimism is closely linked to a genealogy of black radical thought in solidarity and common cause with U.S.-based political prisoners.

For all of its inventiveness and capacity, Afro-Pessimism generates many questions and points of scholarly investigation. Does it describe a state of thought, as in a way to think through conditions for black people themselves, or does it connote a psychological condition, as in a state of depression? How different is Afro-Pessimism from discourses of twentieth century Nihilism? How distinctive is it from a theory of the blues as a condition and state of being? What is Afro-Pessimism’s critique of the academic stations and platforms its theorists occupy? Though undoubtedly linked to Black Studies and Critical Ethnic Studies, we might ask how these fields are reimagined through an Afro-Pessimist lens. How might the theoretical import of Afro-Pessimism yield a call for an intra-, cross-, and trans-ethnic solidarity politics rooted in an aggressive remonstration of capitalism as a site that reproduces the substantive violence of racial hierarchy?

Surely, black activist-scholars and theorists, especially those linked to the Black Lives Matter movement, will have to wrestle with and reconcile for themselves the utility of Afro-Pessimist thought to their analytical arsenal. Leaving these questions to future considerations, Weier has offered an expansive and provocative effort to decode this intellectual-political theory, locating it at the heart of ongoing Afro-diasporic projects in which the landscape of imperial racism absorbs black bodies on both sides of the Atlantic.
Fanon’s Heirs

RINALDO WALCOTT

Frantz Fanon concluded *Black Skin, White Masks*: “My final prayer: O my body, make of me always a man who questions!” Indeed Fanon’s demand for questioning concludes his significant and devastating argument against Western conceptions of the Human with a call for a new humanism to replace it. Fanon’s call remains a call in progress, an unfinished call. Sebastian Weier’s “Consider Afro-Pessimism” is an assessment of those whom I will call Fanon heirs, and they go by the moniker Afro-Pessimists. But Weier’s account is not merely one that re-tells what those heirs seek to articulate and put into thought, but to also make the intervention of Fanon’s heirs intervene into German American Studies as a force that might animate and produce a world that we yet do not know. Both Fanon and those who are now dubbed Afro-Pessimists seek the destruction of the world as we know it. Can German American Studies participate in the destruction of this world? The central problematic then, is what work does scholarship, politics, and thought have to offer in the production of new states of being that might contribute to the production of a world where anti-blackness is not a foundational structuring element of global life?

Weier’s argument positions Afro-Pessimism against the articulation of a much celebrated suggested post-racial United States and makes the case that German American Studies might engage Afro-Pessimism for its renewal since, “[a]s this short introduction has shown, it is above all a meta-theoretical and “metapolitical” approach whose main thrust is the deconstruction of the anti-blackness structuring white civil societies as well as large parts of their knowledge production.” By making such a claim Weier points out that ideas of a post-racial U.S. have achieved much more credence in German American Studies than Afro-Pessimist thought. Weier’s assessment draws my attention to some unspoken and unrecognizable elements of American Studies as a discipline/field and Afro-Pessimist thought that requires re-situation if indeed the destruction of this world as we now experience it is possible. First, the national frame of the argument announces itself quite forcefully. Indeed Weier’s own argument reaches across the geo-politics of Europe, but nonetheless, returns Afro-Pessimist thought to a radical reworking of German American Studies, a national frame that does not adequately account for what such a destructive move would mean for the national frame of his intervention and then beyond into the rest of Europe. Second, and more importantly, Afro-Pessimist thought might itself be too nationally construed to produce the fundamental critique that is necessary for its anti-black critique to produce its desired effects globally. Significantly, the limit of Afro-Pessimist thought might be the national frame through which its

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own articulation of the problem is posed. I raise this not as dismissive of Afro-Pessimism, but to rejoin its insights, along with Weier’s, as a call for a radically different global re-order.

Weier suggests that Saidiya Hartman’s *Scenes of Subjection* is the contemporary foundational text of Afro-Pessimists, but that Frank B. Wilderson and Jared Sexton, along with David Marriott might be its most sustained proponents. Indeed the genealogy that Weier proves fits well this moment of a renewed conversation on anti-blackness that the scholars above have brilliantly led. However, I have invoked the term Fanon’s heirs to point to a more global orientation of anti-black critique not always Afro-Pessimist, that has as central to it the thought of the Americas. By this I mean that Fanon, or rather the Caribbean basin or region, casts a long shadow over Afro-Pessimist thought. Indeed, using Orlando Patterson’s social death as a central idea of Afro-Pessimist thought might require us to ask that we think slavery beyond the United States and conceive of slavery in terms of the entire Americas. Again, then American Studies finds itself well beyond national borders. It might then be that German or European American Studies find that its obsession with the U.S. as constituting “American Studies” is its own repression of its colonial and now “junior partner” colonial role in the region and beyond. Thus institutionally national bounded American Studies—that is, the discipline/field—has (at least in the Americas) had to grapple in its most recent history with exploding its United States nation-centeredness at least at the Association level (The American Studies Association). Such an explosion is not always already evident, but debates in the discipline/field in the Americas must now think American Studies beyond the United States even when such thinking is disputed. What does it mean that German American Studies and European American Studies is still U.S.-bound? How might such nation-bounded-ness prohibit a thorough engagement with Afro-Pessimist thought and its trajectory of the destruction of European derived universality?

Weier’s argument is in part grounded in Afro-Pessimism concerns with “white civil society” as the site where black subjecthood is entirely foreclosed. I want to suggest that an engagement with the juridical nature of civil society is crucial to the ways in which Afro-Pessimists articulate how present global orders are foundationally anti-black. Indeed, I would argue that part of the necessary distinction here it that between emancipation and freedom. In my view emancipation is a legal, legislative, and juridical term and condition that is radically different from freedom. In what I call the long emancipation, that is since 1834 (the British colonies), 1865 (United States) and so on (Portugal, Spain, etc.), the various and multiple colonial emancipations that followed have put in place juridical conditions of “white civil society” that have continually preempted “black freedom.” Significantly, what Afro-Pessimists most powerfully demonstrate in their intervention is how white civil society’s juridical conditions continually structure anti-black conditions and black death from Ferguson to Lampedusa and all the way in-between as legal and legitimate on their terms.

So what is at stake then? Afro-Pessimists have launched a substantive intervention and assault on institutional forms of knowledge in American Studies and beyond that pose a significant problematic for what to do with its knowledges
inside an institution—the university—that continues to produce some of the most violent forms of knowledge against black life forms. But the tension or contradiction remains this: the elevation of Afro-Pessimism as a method, a way of reading and so on outside of a politics of post-enlightenment modernist destruction, can now proceed in similar violent form and practice to engage blackness without blackness and black people. Indeed, I am skeptical that Afro-Pessimism, as Weier proposes, can work to do something different in German or European American Studies. I am not sure that an Academy that is fundamentally white and produced out of the spoils of black enslavement and fugubility can use the insights of Afro-Pessimism to undo itself. Indeed, the promise is to turn the gaze back on whiteness, but if such a turn is dependent on the generative thought of black thinkers, thinking anti-blackness for use by white scholars, some forms of labor appear to resemble the relations of unfreedom once again. And yet, Weier’s desire to undo German and European American Studies so that black life might be possible is a sentiment and a politics with which I stand.
American Studies and the ‘Racial Fault Line’: 
Response to Sebastian Weier’s “Consider Afro-Pessimism”

Elizabeth J. West

Sebastian Weier calls our attention to academia’s arguably uncritical use of the popularized term, post racial. For decades, both in and outside the academy, we find a discourse of race and racial history proclaiming a new era marked by America’s conquest of racism, and Barak Obama’s election to the United States presidency is presumed the smoking gun of racism’s defeat. In these decades of a purported color blind society, striking data that reveals a racist structure well at work and the recurring eruptions of anti-black violence signal the underbelly of the U.S. united façade. Weier considers the import of this proclaimed new era of race relations and particularly what Afro-Pessimism tells us about academia’s part and its duty.

Weier’s historical summary of Afro-Pessimism explains the movement’s connection to academia’s engagement with discourses of post raciality and its complicity in the perpetuation of the myth. Seating the birth of Afro-Pessimism in the closing decade of the twentieth century and springing in part from Saidiya Hartman’s 1997 book, Scenes of Subjection, Weier provocatively establishes the pernicious nature of the seemingly optimistic term, post racial. Weier explains that in what has been hailed as the era that issued in race transcendance, where presumably blacks live on equal footing with whites, post racial is little more than a proclamation masking anti-black sentiment that is more institutionalized than slavery itself. Noting the persistent rates of black poverty and black imprisonment as the most striking civil evidence of the U.S. black/white divide, Weier insists that academics, especially those in the humanities—specifically American Studies—must understand the deception of post racialism discourse, how academia feeds the deception, and what role academia must play to break the persistent practice and ideology of anti-blackness that is deeply rooted in U.S. society and discourse.

Weier summarizes Afro-Pessimism as resting in the axiom that in American racial cosmology “‘civil’ has always meant ‘not-black,’” and that the premise survives to date. While there are those among us in academia who doubt the veracity or immediacy of this problem, closer attention to news and media in the United States clarifies the point. Just consider the 2013 U.S. Supreme Court ruling that ended the protections of the 1964 Voting Rights Act and the Florida court’s exoneration of George Zimmerman, who, on 26 February 2012, gunned down seventeen-year-old, Trayvon Martin after stalking Martin under the pretext that Martin looked suspicious. Just as Zimmerman, Martin was a resident of the neighborhood. Martin was a black teenager, walking through his predominantly white neighborhood wearing a hoodie, making his way home with a package of candy, a can of iced tea, and a cell phone in his hands—a threatening sight in the eyes of his white neighbor. A year after Zimmerman’s 2013 acquittal, one of the
most publicized reminders that State-sanctioned violence against blacks has become passé is the killing of yet another unarmed black youth: on 9 August 2014, eighteen-year-old, unarmed Michael Brown was killed by a white Ferguson, Missouri police officer. The officer stood over Brown's bullet ridden body in the street for four hours while those in the community were held at bay, and no attention to Brown’s body was allowed. As is common in these cases, the officer’s report of firing in defense is a contrasting tale to the account of black witnesses at the scene. As The New Yorker reporter Amy Davidson noted in her coverage of the shooting, this treatment of an unarmed black youth in the middle of a bright sunny day bodes a message not too flattering about justice and race in America:

How does the choreography of Michael Brown’s afternoon form a story that makes sense? It cannot, or must not, be easier for the police to shoot at an eighteen-year-old who is running—a way from the officer, not toward him—with his empty hands showing, than to chase him, drive after him, do anything other than kill him. Teen-agers may not always be prudent; there is no death penalty for that, or shouldn’t be. Michael Brown was black and tall; was it his body that the police officer thought was dangerous enough? Perhaps it was enough for the officer that he lived on a certain block in a certain neighborhood; shooting down the street, after all, exhibits a certain lack of concern about anyone else who might be walking by. That sort of calculus raises questions about an entire community’s rights. One way or the other, this happens too often to young men who look like Brown, or like Trayvon Martin, or, as President Obama once put it, like a son he might have had.¹

As Weier notes, the point is not to deny that some blacks commit crimes, but the more critical examination rests in explorations of “how white civil society constructs a perception in which black people as such are always-already criminals and how this perception is instrumentalized, among other things, to cover up strategies of racialized police terror.” From private citizens to sanctioned law officers, the mood seems uniform that blackness, particularly in the form of young and male, invokes justifiable violence to those encountering it. This acceptable violence against blacks has as well become part of the landscape throughout American cities where poverty, poor education, and high unemployment numbers leave black residents victims of gang violence in their own neighborhoods.

Beyond its evidence in U.S. legal and social systems, anti-black racism in the United States is further promoted in popular culture and the media. Consider, for example, advertisements for an upcoming Fox Network fall 2014 reality television show called Utopia.² On the show’s website, utopiatv.com, Fox reports that the show sets out to “simulate what kind of world might result when a random group of people come together to shape it.” Among its diverse ‘reality’ cast is 32-year-old African American Dave, “a former drug dealer and burglar who’s been in and out of jail since 17.” Dave proclaims that he wants to “show the world that ex-convicts and felons can make a change,” and he states that in his estimation, Utopia will succeed if everyone works together as a tribe. While the show’s producers and

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advertising staff may not have intended the racial stereotyping at play in their previews of the show, these brief highlights of Dave connect with ongoing representations of black men as innately criminal, outcast elements of society. More troubling is the suggestion by extension that were we able to erase civilization and start all over, the frame of reference for blacks would be the “tribe” ethos ascribed to blacks dating back to Neoclassical thinkers in both Europe and America.

In two of the most high profile and high dollar U.S. professional sports—football and basketball—with predominantly white owners and managers but predominantly black players, the centuries old master-slave paradigm has reared its ugly head for public viewing. In the NFL, the league’s indifference to and more often complicitly with off the field player violence—particularly domestic violence—is under scrutiny. Star player Ray Rice, caught on security video punching his fiancee (and soon to be wife) and subsequently dragging her comatose body out of the elevator, initially faced only a two-day suspension from play. In the weeks that followed the disclosure of Rice’s violent act, additional cases of player violence meted out to spouses and children have come to the public light.3 Some consider it representative of football culture. The race factor here has gone undiscussed in news coverage, but clearly the matter of unanswered violence against mostly black women and children of NFL players would not go so rampantly dismissed were they white.

In professional basketball, the American public was bombarded by ongoing media coverage of Donald Sterling’s private chastisement of his young mixed race (African American/Latina) female friend/mistress, V. Stiviano, for fraternizing with black players and blacks in general in the basketball circle of his LA Clippers team. Sterling’s highly derogatory views of blacks were recorded by Stiviano, and for weeks in the early spring of 2014 Sterling’s words became known throughout American households. Highly provocative in the recorded conversations was Sterling’s assertion that dislike of blacks is a universal sentiment; a Jew himself, Sterling noted that even in Israel black Israelis are regarded with disdain. He tells the woman identified as his mistress: “You go to Israel, the blacks are just treated like dogs.”4 In his article “Black Jews Remark May Hurt Sterling as Well,” CNN reporter Robin Washington attempts to soften the unflattering picture of Israel’s race politics by explaining the humanitarian mission led by the Israelis to bring the Ethiopian Jews to Israel. Ultimately, however, Washington concedes that the facts do make a case for Sterling’s assertions about the status of black Jews in Israel: “Ethiopian Jews are among the poorest Israelis, with 72% living below the poverty line and unemployment affecting as many as six in 10 Ethiopian men and three-quarters of women, according to the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Boston.”5

In similar fashion and within months of the Sterling scandal, Atlanta Hawks General Manager Danny Ferry has been scrutinized in the media for his backroom racist comments about a black player. In a recorded discussion of free agent basket-

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5 Ibid.
ball player Luol Deng, Ferry offered the following observations: “He’s a good guy over all, but he’s not perfect. He’s got some African in him. And I don’t say that in a bad way.” As if to clarify what he meant with the reference to Deng’s African lineage, Ferry added a clarifying metaphor: “He has a store out front that’s beautiful and great, but he may be selling some counterfeit stuff behind you.”

Beyond and within the boundaries of academia, examples abound that feed the critical worldview of Afro-Pessimism, and Weier argues that while the deep issues of anti-black workings are clearly the subject of disciplines such as social science and psychology, the humanities is the more key place for these critical explorations if the academy will affect a game-changing paradigm shift in race thinking and relations. Here, Weier locates the need for German scholarship that considers Afro-Pessimism and its potential to inform “a reworking of existing American Studies in Germany, but also a rethinking of the potential of American Studies for an understanding of Europe.” He argues that Afro-Pessimism is a “highly politicized approach whose moral challenge to American Studies in Germany consists of demanding that it not be a part of the ‘avant-garde of white supremacy.’” Although he points to the usefulness of employing Afro-Pessimism’s critical lens to advance studies of racism in American society and the academy, Weier argues that we cannot follow Afro-Pessimism to its logical end. Weier’s point of departure rests in what he argues is Afro-Pessimism’s dead-end vision of an unpassable “racial fault line.” Weier maintains that analysis can move us further than deadlock, that it can lead to effective change.

While this reader is not convinced of the relevance of academic inquiry to real world paradigm shifts in racial discourse and perceptions, Weier’s challenge is nonetheless fitting. He challenges the safe and distant position of German scholars as geographical and cultural outsiders and observers of American society, suggesting that perhaps they may play an enabling role to the racial status quo. He asks that American Studies in Germany lead the way to employing critical methodology that exposes the origins and the propagation of anti-blackness, and to further lead the way to dissolution of that discourse. It is a mighty challenge, but the kind that academics are especially positioned to take on; Weier reminds us that to do less is to be negligent in our duties.

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In the few days since I received the responses from Professors Elizabeth West, Christopher Tinson, and Rinaldo Walcott, police in Cleveland shot to death a twelve-year-old black child named Tamil Rice, and a Grand Jury decided not to indict the police officer who killed Michael Brown. It seems that to write anything more than that and to not simply close my response by thanking the respondents for their engaging and inspiring replies to my initial piece would be inappropriate, distracting from current events whose intensities should not be dimmed by academic arabesques. Following Professor West’s contextualizing of my article through events that occurred between me writing my essay and her writing her response, this update on the most recent events in the long and unending list of events of anti-black police violence and state terror should stand on its own and should need no further exegesis than that offered in the preceding texts. It is indeed a most perfect expression of the causes of Afro-Pessimism and its critique of post-racialism that every piece in this write-and-respond scheme should require its author to mention yet again a new incident in which a black boy was shot to death by police, yet another failure of the United States justice system and civil society at large to recognize, respect, and account for black life. In this light I should possibly have asked that the core message of the protests surrounding both Michael Brown’s murder and the Grand Jury’s verdict be printed here not only in bold but also extra-large letters, just as it was written in bold and extra-large letters on placards and shouted loudly and boldly by protesters: Black Life Matters.

But constraining my response to references to recurrent events in the United States would help in reconstituting what Professor West describes as “the safe and distant position of German scholars.” It would allow an easy forgetting of another fundamental issue indicated in all responses, but raised most emphatically by Professor Walcott: “Indeed I am skeptical that Afro-Pessimism, as Weier proposes, can work to do something different in German or European American Studies. I am not sure that an Academy that is fundamentally white and produced out of the spoils of black enslavement and fungibility can use the insights of Afro-Pessimism to undo itself.” Directing attention to yet another geographically distant police murder, yet another moment of justice denied on the other side of planet, would too easily ignore the question closest here: What does it mean when the standard ‘Forum’ format invites me, a white author, to reply to the responses from black Professors Tinson, Walcott, and West in a debate on blackness, post-racialism and Afro-Pessimism?

Some might consider this question to be misplaced here, precisely because the ‘Forum’ form is standardized and the same for all authors, irrespective of race, class,
gender, age, physical ability, sexuality, or any other factor. However, it is precisely this analogizing of all authorial positions as one and the same that the respondents, as well as my initial piece, put in question. “Consider Afro-Pessimism” pointed to the risk of this analogizing when it suggested that we (the American Studies community in Germany) should consider Afro-Pessimism among other things as a theoretical tool for analyzing the formation and function of race within knowledge production and dissemination. Referring to standardized scholarly form to summon a supposedly unraced space, however, would exemplify what Professor Walcott has delineated as a danger of using Afro-Pessimism as a methodology: that it risks being “just another form to engage blackness without blackness and without black people.” To consider academic form as unracialized would not only imply the exact kind of colorblindness and post/non-racialism both the initial piece and the responses to it have criticized. More than that, it would amount to reclaiming the existence of an implied formation of trans-racial academic alliance in which this author and the respondents (as simply other authors) differ only in their chronological position between the initial piece and this response to the respondents. It would imply a situation of epistemic homogeneity and shared communities of affect, in which all authors would engage blackness in the same way. This is exactly not the case because the respondents are black and blackness for them is an existential fact, while I am white and blackness for me is mostly an intellectual interrogation. In order not to reduce the existential to the intellectual and not to pretend that an emphatic transformation of the one into the other is possible, I must distance myself from the neutral ‘author’ and mark the socio-political and epistemic implications of my ‘I’; that is, I must mark my own existential facts. I must refuse to reply to the responses as if all responses were epistemologically equal. Instead of using the last word the author has been given in this exchange to reestablish hermeneutic dominance over his text, I will attempt to mark and explain a response that is an existential listening and not an intellectual reply. Ignoring the already dubious power function that the ‘last word’ has in an exchange between ‘authors,’ what I want to problematize here is how a reply that would transfer the responses to my own existential and academic horizon would amount to the exact white appropriation and ultimately erasure of black knowledge production and its specificities that “Consider Afro-Pessimism” argues must stop.

In emphasizing this, I do not wish to deny the possibility of alliance politics between authors/academics/activists that has been explicitly welcomed by all respondents. But I want to highlight the warning that the respondents have prefaced the conditions of possibility of these politics with: the warning that these will be strategic alliances of solidarity, not emphatic communities of analogy. In the present context, to assume academic homogeneity, to pretend that all authors are the same within the production and dissemination of knowledge, would be the most imminent of false analogies. This emphasis on the location of knowledge as opposed to its universal validity is what Professor Walcott points to when he writes:

Afro-Pessimists have launched a substantive intervention and assault on institutional forms of knowledge in American Studies and beyond that pose a significant problematic for what to do with its knowledges inside an institution—the university—that continues to produce some of the most violent forms of knowledge against black life forms.
We must acknowledge the epistemic divide that separates white and black and other positions within not only white dominated and potentially white supremacist societies, but also white dominated and potentially white supremacist modes of knowledge production, reproduction, dissemination, assimilation, and appropriation. We must problematize the presence of domination not only in Ferguson and elsewhere, but right here, right now, in this text and its contexts. Apart from the deconstruction of our own positions and functions within the (re-)production of power and knowledge, this problematization requires that we accept that what Professor Tinson points to as the “ontological examination of Black life under modernity” necessarily implies a destabilization of knowledge as we know it. As the conflict in the present response between the ‘I’ and ‘the author’ indicates, this has to be more than just a politics of writing or the formalist play on political correctness. It means not simply advocating or theorizing the end of anti-blackness, but engaging the end of white enslavism and the ultimate reduction of the pleasures of whiteness it works toward.

Professor Walcott expresses his doubts as to whether or not this can happen within the dominantly white European academy. Professor Tinson asks if the difficult translatability from academic discourse into concrete political action might be one of the deficits of Afro-Pessimism. And Professor West describes herself as “not convinced of the relevance of academic inquiry to real world paradigm shifts in racial discourse and perception.” But whether we are skeptical of the extent to which white people are actually able to participate in the demise of the foundations of their own identity and of a world in which whiteness is an important asset yielding high profits, skeptical of the political applicability of often highly abstract theoretical work, or skeptical of the political potential of academic inquiry as such, we must not forget that we ourselves always act and exist within these paradigms. American Studies in Germany are not outside racial and racialized discourse and perception; they are not outside the ‘real world’ but are a part of it. We must not pretend that race does not exist in our institutions, our relations to the non-academic worlds, or our research and writing. Skepticism about the ultimate capacity of white solidarity and about the academy’s potential to partake in the ending of anti-blackness is neither meant nor should be taken as an excuse not to engage oneself at all in the project of undoing instead of just unthinking anti-blackness. This is a common point I hear in all of the responses. I have tried to embrace it and take one such step by interrogating the premises of a supposedly ‘non-racialized because standardized’ scheme of write-and-respond-and-respond-to-respondents. Although I have attempted to respond with a text that marks a listening more than it offers a re-appropriating reply, I feel that the form itself partly prevents me from succeeding. This, exactly, is the dilemma of fighting enslavism within academia: it is not simply a matter of content, or a choice of politically correct vocabulary, but a challenge inherent to the forms and structures of academia itself. I want to thank Professors Rinaldo Walcott, Elizabeth West, and Christopher Tinson for not only critically engaging with “Consider Afro-Pessimism,” but most of all for reminding us of both the absolute necessity and inherent imperfection of academic solidarity in the face of anti-blackness.