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Afropessimism and the Unbroken Chains: Rethinking Race as Primal Representation

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Afropessimism and the Unbroken Chains: Rethinking Race as Primal Representation



Details from Ark of Return the permanent memorial in acknowledgement of the tragedy and in consideration of the legacy of slavery and the trans-Atlantic slave trade —UN Photo by Devra Berkowitz

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Introduction

This thesis explores the Afropessimism framework for examining the dynamics of race and racial inequality in the United States and Brazilian contexts and its potential for advancing racial justice efforts.

The Conceptual Lens of Afropessimism

The question of race and anti-Blackness^{1,2} in the contemporary United States (U.S.) and Brazil continues to pose great challenges to their respective societies. An attentive observation of both societies allows for fact-finding pervasive racism and the lack of equality among the Black population; two facets of the same coin ‘race’. Based on this understanding, many different theories and approaches have been developed throughout history, to explain and remedy the complex dynamics of race and racial inequality encountered in both cultures. These wide range of approaches span from Black activist movements, such as the Civil rights movement (1954 - 1968)—which came into being as a force fighting legalised segregation and seeking for change—following the winds of the so-called Reconstruction Era, to Critical Race Theory

¹ ‘Anti-Blackness’, according to Natalie Morris is “a form of racism that is specifically damaging for black people”. Morris further emphasises that “the concept of anti-Blackness pushes back against the idea that all ethnic minorities have the same lived experiences and can be shoved under a singular umbrella”. metro.co.uk/2020/03/20/what-is-anti-blackness-12279678/.

² Like Crenshaw (1332), and for the purpose of consistency, this thesis uses upper case for Black, Blackness or any variant thereof to “reflect my view that Blacks, like Asians, Latinos, and other “minorities,” constitute a specific cultural group and, as such, require denotation as a proper noun”.

(CRT) with powerful names such as Kimberlé Crenshaw, American legal scholar and critical race theorist. Crenshaw works with the concept of intersectionality, central to the analysis of different forms of oppression. Crenshaw's intersectionality framework looks especially at how race, gender, and class intersect and overlap, creating unique experiences of discrimination and marginalisation for individuals belonging to different minority groups. In contemporary times, one cannot disregard the importance of Black movements, particularly one as representative as Black Lives Matter (BLM)—or ignore the human rights agenda which have been at the forefront, challenging racism in all aspects of society. However, such approaches, in the eyes of the Afropessimism theoriser Frank B. Wilderson III—professor and chair of the African American studies department at Irvine University, does not go far enough in addressing the deeply rooted issue of anti-Blackness. This is especially the case when it comes to addressing racial injustice and understanding the “unique suffering” faced by Black individuals (Wilderson *Afropessimism* 14). To closely examine the Black suffering, Afropessimism theory was created. Afropessimism should not be mistaken for the ‘afropessimist’ outlook, which focuses on the postcolonial state and potential of the African continent and gained popularity in the 1980's and 1990's. Although there are areas of overlap, these concepts remain distinct (Weier 419). Wilderson's book *Afropessimism* served as the catalyst for this thesis. In this book, the author blends elements of memoir, critical race theory, philosophy, and socio-political analysis. Given its narrative components and its exploration of deeply personal and subjective experiences, it could also be considered as engaging with the realm of literature. However, it is primarily meant as a work of academic theory, and that is how it is applied here.

The Black suffering according to afropessimists like Patrice Douglass, Jared Sexton and Wilderson, can only come to an end by “practicing an anti-racism with a view toward the total abolition of the state, and developing an anti-capitalism aimed at the destitution of race” (Wilderson et al. 13). In this regard, Afropessimism shares some commonalities with historical

materialism in their critique of societal structures—historical materialism focusses on class and economics, whereas Afropessimism highlights anti-Blackness and racial slavery's impact on society. Wilderson justifies his view by positing that “the eradication of the generative mechanism of Black suffering” is not in the interest of any existing societal structure (Wilderson, *The Vengeance* 145). This claim suggests that this lack of interest or inability to relate to certain experiences might stem from either the privileges held by those who capitalise on the vulnerable position of the Black population, or because it is problematic to merge the experiences of different groups without acknowledging their distinct ontological differences. Within this vicious cycle, Afropessimism considers that any movement out there fighting capitalism, patriarchy, or gender cannot help dismantling the systemic racial inequality “if they don't elucidate ontological disparities within a given site of oppression; and if they don't unqualifiedly seek to abolish the totality of race and anti-Blackness” (Wilderson et al. 12).

In this vein, Afropessimism underscores the need of an approach that addresses these distinct ontological differences and the representation of Black suffering, while positioning itself as a paradigm that acknowledges and respects the distinct experiences of those who are subjected to anti-Black racism, without inadvertently concealing their voices. It proposes a critical lens through which one can understand the pervasive and enduring nature of anti-Blackness. Additionally, it formulates that Black individuals occupy a unique position of perpetual marginalisation and oppression, rooted in the historical legacy of slavery and perpetuated through contemporary socio-political and cultural systems. This given situation reveals itself when patterns of racial disparities and unequal treatment are observed across various social, economic, and political institutions, such as law enforcement, courts, prisons,

and even the entire legal system.³ Take as example the criminal justice system, from an Afropessimist perspective, the violence in which it operates not only disproportionately targets Black individuals, but also perpetuates their status as “socially dead” (a term clarified below) and subjugated within a global hierarchy that is essentially anti-Black⁴ (Wilderson et al. 9). The violence inflicted upon Black bodies by this system is seen as a reflection and reinforcement of their dehumanised position since chattel slavery—rather than merely a series of isolated incidents or acts of individual prejudice. Statistics have shown that higher rates of arrests, convictions, profiling and excessive use of force by law enforcement, among other issues applied to Black people, are blatant when compared to other racial and ethnic groups;³ not to mention disparities in opportunities and the lack of other factors essential for livelihood. These patterns of disparities and unequal treatment, being well-established in societal institutions and systems, evidence the presence of a systemic racialised discrimination against Blacks that persists for centuries. Based on this perception, Wilderson’s work advocates the notion that slavery did not end in the nineteenth century. Instead, the world has just adjusted to “the force of Black resistance without diminishing the centrality of Black captivity to the stability and coherence of global civil society” (qtd. in Correia, *The Colonial* 4). Afropessimism goes to the root of the matter to demonstrate the way slavery’s systemic structure has never been undone.

³ www.sentencingproject.org/reports/report-to-the-united-nations-on-racial-disparities-in-the-u-s-criminal-justice-system/ and U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, Prisoners in 2016, 8 tbl.6 (Jan. 2018).

⁴ For the sake of clarity, the term anti-Black although being related to the concept of anti-Blackness, differs in that the latter encompasses systemic, institutional, and cultural forms of oppression and discrimination against Black people while the former is understood as hostile actions or attitudes against Blacks.

It asserts that slavery actually cannot be undone, and that slavery is still with us, manifested in the way Black bodies, Black psyche, and Black family structure are torn apart in order to sustain that system and its political structure. It sets the premise that “the ‘Black’ serves as a foil and counterpart, the counter-image to and, therefore, origin of the concept of ‘people’”.⁵ Hence the continuity of ‘Black captivity’. In Wilderson’s words the “antiblack violence is ... a necessity that allows everyone else to bloom and blossom”.⁶ In this statement Wilderson highlights the persistent aspect of society that relies on subjugation of a specific population to maintain the existing social order and privileges. From this understanding, Afropessimism states that previous theories have not actually gone far enough to explain what it means to suffer as a Black person. Wilderson further expounds that “the collective unconscious never actually accepted the black flesh as human kin and that is what it means to be a slave [today]”⁶ (Correia, *The Colonial* 5). This explains why Afropessimism categorically affirms that “slavery exists until today and [that] it is impossible to affirm that Black people have finally been granted their right to exist as a human being in the full conception. ... The outcome of it translates ... [into] the gratuitous violence inflicted to black bodies without prior transgression. Following this reasoning, Afropessimism sees the Black people integral to human society, however, “at all times and in all places excluded from it”,⁷ especially the Black diaspora which “functions ... as an enactment of the past ... in hostile environments that negate Blackness” (Gleich 40). Hence their state of the so-called “social death” (Wilderson, *Afropessimism* 226). Social death is an important concept in Wilderson’s elaboration borrowed from Orlando Patterson’s work *Slavery*

⁵ various-artists.com/afropessimism/

⁶ www.youtube.com/watch?v=WQB9qlGAwEo&t=712s

⁷ www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/07/20/the-argument-of-afropessimism

*and Social Death*⁸. Patterson coined this concept based on the three main components “natal alienation, devaluation, and gratuitous violence” (342). According to this concept Blackness and [slavery] are fundamentally interrelated and as such, it has become a permanent and irrevocable condition for Black people. Furthermore, this condition makes them a constant target of social or states’ violence due to their racialised identity (qtd. in Correia, *The Colonial* 6). In this regard, Afropessimism suggests that the conceptualisation and ontological understanding of what it means to be human, is made possible by the formation and perception of human identity upheld through the stark contrast between the violence that subdues marginalised communities, and the unique unparalleled violence endured specifically by Black individuals.⁹

Criticism of Afropessimism

While the Afropessimism theory has grown influential in the field of critical racial studies, it has also sparked significant debate among scholars, notably those who advocate for intersectionality, exemplified by the critiques of intersectional feminist scholars such as Surinamese Dutch anthropologist and gender theorist Gloria Wekker. Wekker’s research focuses on race, gender, and sexuality within the cultural legacy of Dutch colonialism. Wekker’s critique of Afropessimism goes toward what is perceived as a tendency to side line issues of gender and sexuality in its focus on race. In her 2021 article that goes by the name

⁸ Although Afropessimism draws on Patterson’s ‘social death’ concept, Patterson asserts that he does not identify himself as a pessimist. Nevertheless, he acknowledges the valuable insights of the afropessimists, especially in highlighting the continuing segregation within the private sphere. news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2018/03/harvard-professor-reflects-on-the-kerner-report-50-years-on/.

⁹ www.wesleyan.edu/humanities/html_email/fall2016/1010_wilderson_lecture.html

Afropessimism, the scholar raises objections to the fundamental premise of *Afropessimism* theory, specifically the claim that “the death of Blacks is essential to the material and psychic existence of the human species” (86). She uses this assertion as a catalyst to express her dissatisfaction with this theory. While acknowledging certain aspects of *Afropessimism* she finds compelling and innovative, Wekker sees herself unable to concur with the theory’s intellectual rigor or its foundational argument about Black death, as presented by Wilderson. She perceives *Afropessimism*, as articulated in Wilderson’s work, as “loveless, hopeless and divisive” (86). Moreover, she criticises the theory for not adopting an intersectional approach and reiterates that it is insufficient to analyse reality through a single analytical lens. She stresses that the different elements of identity (race, class, gender, etc.) operate concomitantly, influencing equally one another, and therefore, necessitating simultaneous examination. Wekker further argues that intersectionality is flexible enough to be applied to study various aspects of “structural power relations” (88), as opposed to *Afropessimism* which seems to limit itself to studying Blackness.

Indeed, *Afropessimism* dismisses other theories and approaches altogether, based precisely on an understanding that they do not fully account for the systemic nature of anti-Blackness. In the specific case of intersectionality, its broad scope encompasses many concurrent forms of oppression in society. By embracing multiple identities, in an attempt to address a spectrum of experiences, this approach can inadvertently dilute the focus on the Black cause, as it does not prioritise or single out this particular issue. In contrast, *Afropessimism* conveys the understanding that incorporating these multiple identities into the debate, potentially obfuscate the fundamental issue at hand, which is ‘race’. *Afropessimism* therefore, centres its attention on the anti-Black phenomenon. That is, it explicitly focuses on the oppression Black people have faced ever since their bodies were commodified in a system of legal slavery that gave birth to the construct of race. As facts have demonstrated, anti-Blackness

phenomenon can often go unnoticed until a violent event against this community sparks public attention, as exemplified by the killing of George Floyd in 2021 by Minneapolis police, or the mass killing in Brazil's Jacarezinho favela, in the same year. Given the exceptional gravity and far-reaching significance of these particular cases, they will be purposefully examined later. As a case in point, Floyd's killing significantly heightened global awareness and concern about violence against Black individuals, reigniting debates and creating a sense of urgency for changes inside and outside the academic world. While attention towards violence against Black people occasionally fades due to the emergence of new pressing matters, Black individuals consistently strive to combat systemic racism and foster social change through various forms of resistance.

These efforts, aimed at empowering Black communities, hope to facilitate the realisation of equity and justice. Given that, Afropessimism provides a valuable epistemological tool for examining Black resistance through the prism of historical processes such as the Middle Passage (i.e., the middle leg of the triangular trade voyage undertaken by European ships which transported the enslaved Africans across the Atlantic, roughly from the late fifteenth-century through to the mid-nineteenth).¹⁰ The proponents of the Afropessimism theory generally agree that the contemporary condition of Black life, predominantly, is a nuanced continuation of original plantation violence. As such, Afropessimism understands the universal status of Black people as fundamentally bound to social death, due to the structures of pervasive anti-Blackness. Furthermore, the theory argues that anti-Blackness is an enduring and central component of societal fabric, and that liberation from this condition is unattainable within the current societal structures (Wilderson, *The Prison Slave* 78). Consequently, Afropessimism engages with critiques and recognises limitations aiming to further its

¹⁰ www.britannica.com/topic/Middle-Passage-slave-trade

development. While the framework offers valuable insights into the nature of racial oppression—essential to more comprehensive understanding of racial dynamics and the pursuit of racial justice. The debates around Afropessimism theory emphasise the complexities of understanding and addressing the adversities encountered by Black people. By doing so, these debates help shedding light on the challenges and strive towards identifying potential pathways for a more equitable and just society. In this thesis, I adopt this perspective; and as such, I depart from intersectionality. Consequently, for the purpose of coherence, only the Afropessimism framework will be considered in the analysis hereafter.

Research Questions and Methodology

Acknowledging these insights, this thesis sets out to examine and answer the following questions: how does the critical perspective of Afropessimism impact the experiences and identities of individuals of African descent in the Americas, specifically in the U.S. and Brazil? How does Afropessimism critique the effectiveness of the human rights framework in securing racial justice for individuals within the African diaspora? To examine the translatability of Afropessimism to a different cultural context other than that of the U.S., I will research whether this theoretical framework can also accurately explain the historical and contemporary experiences of Black individuals in Brazil. These questions aim to evaluate the extent to which Afropessimism, departing from other racial theories, such as intersectionality, questions the efficacy of the human rights framework in transforming society and its social institutions, as a means of irrevocably achieving racial justice.

This thesis acknowledges the valuable contributions that other frameworks have given to improve the circumstances of Black lives throughout history. It also recognises that the experiences and struggles of the descendants of enslaved Africans within the African diaspora in the Americas may differ in degree according to geographic location and socio-economic conditions. However, the focus of the thesis is specifically on the social death that a substantial

fraction of the diaspora in the U. S. and Brazil is forced to endure. Moreover, it is evident that each country, although similar in many aspects, also has its own particularities. As such, I have studied works by sociologists who researched the challenging conditions that the majority of the Black population endures, living in a system that often excludes them more than it includes them. The thesis also explores academic sources written by scholars who have engaged with Afropessimism, as a means to identify key tenets, arguments and debates to provide a foundation for the research. The data collected includes mainly research and books in the field of race studies, as well as reports produced by international organizations such as the United Nations, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch as well as online newspaper articles. These materials were carefully examined and explored through the lens of Afropessimism, to identify patterns in the socio-historical and political composition of both societies, in order to verify the translatability of this theory to a context other than the US. The data provided enough content to maintain reflexivity throughout the research process. Moreover, the variety of sources (not focusing merely on Afropessimism epistemology), enable a more iterative process, diminishing potential blind spots, such as lack of contextual understanding when thinking of those affected by anti-Blackness. The case studies are presented within their specific historical and contemporary context, examining events, social structures, and policies that have perpetuated anti-Blackness and oppression. By grounding the research in real-world contexts, the thesis aims to explore the potential cultural translatability of Afropessimism to a different cultural context and its potential in advancing racial justice.

Chapter one: *The legacy of the African diaspora in the United States and Brazil*, provides a historical and sociological account of the forced migration of African peoples to the Americas through the transatlantic slave trade. I do so by looking at the aspects and impact of the legacy of the African diaspora. The aim here is to examine how it continues to shape the experiences of Black people in both countries today to demonstrate that although chattel slavery was

abolished centuries ago, the chains of racism persist, revealing the enduring legacies it has left behind. As such, this chapter investigates race, racial formation, and the creation of the Black subject. I draw specially on Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, and his use of Hegelian dialectics as a theoretical framework (which he used to examine the Black experience of colonialism and racism). Hegel's dialectic process involves a thesis, an antithesis, and a synthesis, which provides a model for understanding conflict and the results thereof. In Fanon's adaptation, the thesis is the colonial society's racist perception of Black people, the antithesis is the internalised racism and self-hatred experienced by the Black colonised, and the synthesis is a potential future society in which these contradictions are resolved. In this "dialectical progression" (112), the Black subject moves from "alienation", that is, from internalising the master's dehumanising views, to embracing a shared struggle for liberation (206). In relation to Afropessimism, Fanon's dialectics provides a critique of the current societal structure, just like Afropessimism does. Afropessimism views Blackness as a position of "absolute dereliction" in an anti-Black socio-political structure (Wilderson 77). Thus, showing complete scepticism about the ability to completely resolve this conflict within the existing order. While in Fanon there is a potential future in which the effects of colonialism and racism can be overcome, in Afropessimism there is scepticism (hence the pessimism). Afropessimists view these societal structures as inherently anti-Black and where Black individuals are consistently devalued by a white hegemonic society. Which often leads to constant psychological, social, and physical violence against the Black population. Thus, the Fanonian dialectic process (i.e., the opposition between the Black enslaved and the white master) is used here to highlight the complexity of this conflict, rather than offering a plausible resolution. Chapter two: *Blackness in the United States and Brazil*, investigates questions such as what can be understood as the arrangement of Blackness in the racial context of the U.S. and Brazil. This chapter looks specifically into the correlation between Blackness and the Black subject in both countries.

Especially at the way Blackness is often used as a marker of difference and a way to justify the subordination of Black people in both societies. In the analyses I intend to assess to which extent this arrangement has become systemic and as such, reinforces racism while hindering racial equality and justice. Chapter three is a comprehensive study of the universality of *Human Rights and Racial Justice*. It provides a discussion and analysis of racial equity in a legal framework. The aim of this chapter is to discuss whether racial justice can really be achieved within a legal liberalism framework without addressing the specific ways in which racism and discrimination operate; considering that this approach seems to ignore the ways in which marginalised communities experience discrimination based on their identities, and particularly on their race. In essence, I intend to investigate whether racial justice is indeed more effective in addressing these issues and if it offers the possibilities to develop more effective strategies for promoting equality and justice for all. And finally, chapter four: *Closing Arguments* ties up the whole discussion, addressing the research questions while analysing the possible universality of Afropessimism, while testing whether Afropessimism theory can also be translated to another culture and contribute to the debate of race and racism in Brazil—by taking into consideration the particularities of the construction of Blackness or *Negritude* in that society, as well as investigating whether that society may be considered as a site of social death.

1 The Legacy of the African Diaspora in the United States and Brazil

ALL HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS are structured and defined by the relative power of the interacting persons. Power, in Max Weber's terms, is "that opportunity existing within a social relationship which permits one to carry out one's will even against resistance and regardless of the basis on which this opportunity rests."

—Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*

The slave ship is a womb/abyss. The plantation is the belly of the world. Partus sequitur ventrem—the child follows the belly. The master dreams of future increase. The modern world follows the belly.

—Saidiya Hartman in *Afro-Pessimism: An Introduction*

This chapter provides a historical and sociological account of the forced migration of African peoples to the Americas through the transatlantic slave trade by looking at the aspects and impact of the legacy of the African diaspora.

1.1 The 'New World' and Slavery – A Historical and Sociological Approach of the Birth of Racial Slavery

The colonial system of slavery in the Americas was one of the most brutal and inhumane institution that lasted for centuries. Registers of the trading of African peoples as enslaved labourers go back to the fifteenth century, when the Portuguese began exploring the African Coast and consequently initiating their business in slave trade,¹¹ which increased massively when the planting and milling of sugar cane expanded (Fausto 37). The slave trade in the Americas intensified during the eighteenth century, particularly in the British colonies of North

¹¹ www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/agex/hd_agex.htm

America and the Caribbean. By the middle of that century, the British colonies in the Caribbean were producing large quantities of sugar, which became a major commodity in the global economy.¹² The demand for sugar led to an increased capture of Africans to work on the sugarcane plantations. Sugar by that time was considered a “rare commodity”, therefore high in demand, used as much in “medicine” as in “cuisine” (35). In Brazil, this industry was “the nucleus of socioeconomic activity in the Northeast” and the production of sugar was firmly established in the land already during 1530s and 1540s (34). Although this commodity was central to the global economy, the production of other commodities such as tobacco and cotton in the Chesapeake region of the U.S. were also done on a large scale. This is roughly the setting which led to an ever-increasing capture of those who were made slaves. Their transportation became known as the ‘Middle Passage’, in reference to the stage of the triangular trade route beginning in Europe to West Africa and ending in the Americas.¹³ The transatlantic slave trade involved the forced migration of millions of Africans in a process that goes beyond the exchange of goods for slaves. It is estimated that from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, at least 12.5 million enslaved Africans from Central and West Africa were cruelly uprooted from their homes and brought to the Americas.¹⁴ During the colonial period, while the U.S. became the destination of approximately four percent of African peoples surviving the transatlantic Middle Passage, Brazil received nearly forty percent of that population. It is

¹² www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zjyqtfr/revision/2

¹³ www.britannica.com/topic/transatlantic-slave-trade

¹⁴ www.pbs.org/wnet/african-americans-many-rivers-to-cross/history/how-many-slaves-landed-in-the-us/

estimated that more than four million¹⁵ Africans reached Brazilian soil, most of them being young males (Fausto 18). The transatlantic slave trade was a system of racial slavery that became characterised by the dehumanisation of Africans and their forced exploitation as “[c]olonists knew about black abilities, especially about how lucrative their labour had been in the sugar industry of the Atlantic islands” (17). As such, it is incontestable that since the very beginning the colonies in the Americas were totally dependent on slavery of Africans and that slavery was the bedrock of their societies. This dependence was deeply embedded not only in the economy but also in the cultural norms and legal frameworks of these emerging societies. So much so that Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826), one of the Founding Fathers and the third President of the U.S., who authored the Declaration of the Independence¹⁶—which asserts that “all men are created equal”—contradictorily argued that slavery was a “necessary evil”.¹⁷ Jefferson was, on the one hand, a vehement defender of freedom and, on the other hand, largely an unrepentant slaveholder. Based on history, it is safe to say that Jefferson’s paradox had to do with the belief that the abolition of slavery would lead to economic collapse and social unrest, as the Southern economy was heavily dependent on enslaved labour for agricultural production, especially in the cultivation of cash crops like tobacco and cotton as already mentioned above.

Abolition movements gained momentum in the U.S. during the nineteenth century, and by the 1830s, they had become established nationally. On the one hand, abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison (1805-1879), advocated for the emancipation of slaves, and defended

¹⁵ Fausto states that “four million slaves came in through Brazilian ports” (18) while other sources estimate the number as high as 5,5 million. See also footnote 48.

¹⁶ daily.jstor.org/who-wrote-the-declaration-independence/

¹⁷ www.cbsnews.com/news/tom-cotton-slavery-necessary-evil-1619-project/

that the same political and economic rights that were afforded to whites should be granted to Black people as well.¹⁸ On the other hand, opposers to that movement would do anything to halt these developments altogether. John C. Calhoun (1782-1850), an influential American statesman and political theorist from South Carolina, would play a significant role in the debates surrounding slavery and abolition in the U.S.. As the debates over slavery intensified, he argued that slavery instead of being a “necessary evil”, as Jefferson postulated, was a “positive good”. Calhoun’s viewpoint was rooted in the belief that the African American population was inherently inferior to the white population, which justified slavery. In 1837 as senator, he gives a forceful and aggressive ideological speech in defence of racial slavery, as the following fragment shows:

I hold that in the present state of civilization, where two races of different origin, and distinguished by color, and other physical differences, as well as intellectual, are brought together, the relation now existing in the slaveholding States between the two, is, instead of an evil, a good—a positive good. ... that there never has yet existed a wealthy and civilized society in which one portion of the community did not ... live on the labor of the other ... from the brute force and gross superstition of ancient times to the subtle and artful fiscal contrivances of modern. I might well challenge a comparison between them and the more direct, simple, and patriarchal mode by which the labor of the African race is, among us, commanded by the European.¹⁹

In that sense, slavery in Calhoun’s point of view is a positive good because, while it oppresses the Black population, it allows white people to be equal among themselves, i.e., it allows more political equality for them. According to this logic, Black people could never become part of

¹⁸ humanrights.iowa.gov/saa/abolition-movement

¹⁹ teachingamericanhistory.org/document/slavery-a-positive-good/

the political process due to their supposed inferiority. Calhoun's conviction concerning the inherent inferiority of the African American population was not merely personal; it was deeply ingrained in the culture of the South. His viewpoint was further legitimised and sustained by legal structures that enshrined racial disparities, thereby solidifying the racial hierarchy within society. It is thus clear that Calhoun saw slavery as a fundamental modern institution fully in line with the social, cultural, political and economic demands of the modern world. Yet in the same speech he states,

I fearlessly assert that the existing relation between the two races in the South, against which these blind fanatics are waging war, forms the most solid and durable foundation on which to rear free and stable political institutions. ... There is and always has been in an advanced stage of wealth and civilization, a conflict between labor and capital. The condition of society in the South exempts us from the disorders and dangers resulting from this conflict; and which explains why it is that the political condition of the slaveholding States has been so much more stable and quiet than that of the North.²⁰

Calhoun used the issue of working-class demands in more economically advanced societies, where political unrest was taking place, to defend the institution of slavery. In his speech he would evoke the emergence of the working classes in the textile manufacturing hubs in the North and in England as a source of increased social stratification. While these workers were often struggling to meet basic needs, the middle and upper classes enjoyed greater wealth and higher social status. A situation that led to labour movements to advance demands for better wages, shorter working hours, and safer conditions, among other workers' rights. Calhoun then uses that context to accentuate that racial slavery was effective in solving that problem. For

²⁰ teachingamericanhistory.org/document/slavery-a-positive-good/

him, the way this institution provided a stable and paternalistic social order in the South was evidence to how beneficial it was for both, the enslaved and the slave-owning class.

In Brazil it was not that different. While the U.S. abolished slavery in 1865, after its congress passed the 13th amendment to its Constitution—which later along with the 14th and the 15th amendment would extend the civil rights also to African Americans, abolition in Brazil would only be fully achieved in 1888 with the signing of the *Lei Áurea* (Golden Law). Although the slave's fate could have some variation from region to region, the abolition process happened in a gradual process. The mere idea of bringing slavery to an end was seen as a potential danger of collapse in society. Brazilian ruling class tended to think that 'this project' would pose "a great risk to social order". For them, passing a law to free Black people "would give [them] the idea [that] they had rights", which for the 'elite', "would lead the country into a race war" (Fausto 127). As abolitionist movements were gaining momentum in Brazil, 'the bargain' that was made to avoid the inevitable was passing the Rio Branco Law, also known as *Lei do Ventre Livre* (Law of Free Birth) in 1871. This law instituted that children born of enslaved women would be under the control of their master until they reach the age of twenty-one, at which point the master would turn them to the state in return for indemnity. In practice it allowed that "slave owners continued to use children's services" and in truth, only a "few were turned over to the state" (128). The end of slavery in both countries did not lead to full equality for the formerly enslaved populations. The U.S., attempted to address some of the inequalities through the Reconstruction Era, but its backlash was the rise of the Jim Crow laws and a system of racial segregation that persisted until the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. In Brazil, the abolition of slavery was followed by a period of marginalisation for the newly freed population, who after a long period of servitude, in general, were not turned into free workers. Instead, they were largely excluded from land ownership, education, and political power. Numerous Brazilian elites and landowners held racial biases against the recently liberated African-

descended population. As a consequence, after the abolition the government and private landowners turned to immigration in various European countries such as Italy, Portugal, Spain, and Germany. Under the promise of land, work, and a new life in Brazil, a large number of Europeans came to the country in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. According to Fausto's argumentation, it indeed has much to do with "racist thoughts" that were "influenced by writings of Buckle and Gobineau, [who] considered slaves and ex-slaves inferior" (117). Besides, it was also largely propagated that they were people inclined to criminality in face of their "dangerous nature" (131). Thus, also in Brazil abolition did not mean the end of "black's problems" as Fausto puts it. With their labour being almost completely replaced by European immigrant workers, the Black population was relegated to "a tremendous social disadvantage". Fausto adds that "[s]lavery had a long life [in Brazil] because it pervaded private and public domains", which contributed to their disadvantaged position (131). Presumably, in this context of plantation economy, both in the U.S. and in Brazil, the labour-intensive production of cash crops involved the exploitation, abuse, and oppression of millions of African peoples, as well as of their descendants who were treated as property rather than human beings. In the social and cultural sphere, in both countries, racial hierarchy was deeply ingrained, with white Europeans at the top and Black Africans at the bottom. However, Brazil is known to have a more complex racial hierarchy due to a higher degree of racial mixing between Indigenous, African, and European populations. This led to a more nuanced system of social stratification, while in the U.S., the 'one-drop rule' often dictated that anyone with any African ancestry was considered Black (Omi and Winant 123). The abolition of slavery was followed by a period of racial segregation and discrimination in both countries, which continues to impact the Black population until this day.

1.2 The Relationship Between Colonialism and Racial Formation

The logic of racial slavery was in no way based only on profit by exploitation of Black people, but it was strongly grounded on a racial ideology. An ideology that reduced African peoples to the degrading condition of properties. Achille Mbembe in *Critique of Black Reason* argues that “the gesture of race ... notably in the case of people of African origin, consists in dissolving human beings into things, objects, and merchandise” (11). And he goes on to say that race, “taken to its limits, ... becomes a perverse complex, a generator of fears and torments ...and terror, but especially of infinite sufferings and, ultimately, catastrophe” (12). This statement, strong as it is, emphasises the psychological effects produced by the construction of race and racial identity. These constructions have proven useful in creating racial categories and distinctions that, as Mbembe lucidly elaborated on, justified, and extended the subordination of Black captives to their descents for generations. This is how race and racial identity construction, both in the U.S. and in Brazil, have become the very elements which underline the Black experience or more precisely, “the black suffering” as Wilderson argues in Afropessimism theory (15). Racial ideology is emblematic in the sense that based on it, the power to be a subject—entitled to self-govern one’s own life and to pursue happiness—was purely conditioned to the colour of the skin. The skin colour was thus, a legitimation for the creation of the subject-master and the object-slave in the colonies. In this composition, the master had sovereign power over the object-slave; who was then made to be used or disposed of whenever suitable. Enslavement in its essence, denied men their social subjecthood and disallowed their humanity. This racial enslavement clearly created a hierarchy in a world that placed the Black, as opposed to the white man, in a position of inferiority and absolute subjugation. In Calvin Warren’s terminology, it marked the beginning of “ontological terror”. That is, as he explains “the terror of nonexistence, the unending trauma of being damned in the flesh” (172). No matter where the Black man would be placed, he would carry that stigma with

him. Indeed, the institutionalisation of slavery was the beginning of a history that marks the ontological subjugation of the Black population, and it was perpetuated through various means, including religious justifications, pseudoscientific theories, and cultural stereotypes. When Warren talks about ontological terror, he touches upon something very similar to what Orlando Patterson had already discussed at large in *Slavery and Social Death*. That is, the historical and ongoing oppression of Black people particularly in the context of slavery and its legacies. Patterson categorically affirms that “[s]lavery is one of the most extreme forms of the relation of domination, approaching the limits of total power from the viewpoint of the master, and of total powerlessness from the viewpoint of the slave” (1). In fact, from the viewpoint of the master, slavery grants almost complete control over the life and well-being of the enslaved man. The master can dictate the slave’s living conditions, and even whether he or she lives or dies. This level of control approaches ‘total power’ as the master can exercise his will over the slave with little to no resistance.

From the viewpoint of those made slave, slavery took away their individuality, agency, rights, and their humanity. This relation of domination crossed all boundaries in human terms and perspectives as it deliberately brutalised the enslaved and took from them everything that was essential for their psychological and social functioning. It means that family units could be broken apart at any moment without regard for any emotional or familial bonds between individuals. In this sense, Hartman, drawing on Hortense Spillers, says that “Kinship loses meaning” as it could be “invaded at any given and arbitrary moment by property relations. (84)”. This constant threat of disruption makes it difficult for stable and recognized kinship bonds. By taking away all that resembled belongingness, it effectively disrupted any durable possibility of social relationship or creation of strong family ties. Patterson is categorical when he states that,

[t]his is the essence of natal alienation, which, in addition to its crushing psychological impact for every individual slave, also entailed their inability as a group to “freely integrate the experience of their ancestors into their lives, to inform their understanding of social reality with the inherited meanings of their natural forebears, or to anchor the living present in any conscious community of memory. (ix)

Patterson’s statement suggests that this lack of connection of Black peoples to their cultural and social roots prevents them to fully understand and engage with the world around them, stripping them of all sense of belonging to a larger community. The concept of natal alienation designates the process by which the enslaved individuals were deprived from their families, cultures, and traditions, and forced to adopt the values and practices of their masters. The denial of social existence inflicted upon the enslaved highlights the extreme power dynamic that exists within the institution of slavery as well as the power dynamic of slave societies. Moreover, it characterises the devastating condition of what Patterson named “social death”—which in a concise way can be explained as the removal of individuals from the normal systems of social recognition and value. The emphasis on the social and cultural constructions of race and racial identity is valuable to demonstrate how these constructions have been used systematically to justify and perpetuate the subordination of Black people. The system of racial slavery extended far beyond mere economics; it was deep-seated into the social fabric, influencing interpersonal interactions, cultural practices, and societal attitudes. Therefore, it is not wrong to say that this system was not simply an economic system, but that it was also a social and cultural phenomenon. Patterson’s extensive historical-sociological research on race relations, slavery and freedom in *Slavery and Social Death*, clearly ascertains that slavery was built upon a complex hierarchy of racial categories and distinctions that constituted very solidly the basis of the New World socioeconomic structures and society.

The modern concept of race in its turn, is a controversial one that has been subject to much debate and discussion. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines ‘race’ in its biological sense and extends it to “a group or class of people”, part of a major division of humankind, and a term that can be traced back to the late sixteenth century.²¹ European colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade are *de facto* the moment when the ‘Black race’ emerged. In the book *The Theory of Racial Formation*, the sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant, confirm that by pointing out that the modern conception of race came into being when “the oceanic seal separating the “old” and the “new” world was breached”. By then, all “the distinctions and categorisations fundamental to a racialised social structure, and to a discourse of race, began to appear” (113). In this structural dynamic produced by the Middle Passage and the settlement of the New World, African peoples were placed as a mere object within a broader power relation supported by pseudo-scientific claims; employed to provide a seemingly rational and scientific basis for the ‘inherent inferiority’ of African peoples. This allowed slaveholders and proponents of slavery to argue that their actions were morally and intellectually justified. Based on this assertion, any analysis of the modern world, cannot be done without considering the role race and racism have in shaping its structures and dynamics since the beginning. This historical idea of race has been extensively subjected to significant scientific and philosophical examination. For example, Gustave Le Bon would say that “[p]eoples are guided in the main by the genius of their race ... that inherited residue of qualities of which the genius is the sum total” (171). In this passage, he suggests that people’s actions and attitudes are largely determined by the characteristics of their racial group. Moreover, that these characteristics are inherited and form a kind of “genius” or essential quality of the race. This essential quality being what guides people’s behaviour and influences

²¹ www.oed.com

their destiny. Le Bon goes on to say that “[r]ace and the slavery of our daily necessities are the mysterious master-causes that rule our destiny” (171). While traditional thinkers like Le Bon argued that the constraints of people’s physical and social environment, as well as their inherited racial characteristics play a powerful role in influencing behaviour and determining one’s fate, thinkers like Omi and Winant, in contemporary times, advocate that race does not actually exist. Or rather, race is understood as something socially constructed in order to perpetuate racial inequality and discrimination. As such, this concept of race is inadequate and needs to be reconceptualised to better reflect the reality of race as a social construct. Omi and Winant are emphatic in saying that racialisation is indeed “the foundation and consolidation of the modern world system” (111). What they suggest is that race and racism have played a fundamental role in determining the social, cultural, economic, and political structures as they are now. Which implies that any efforts to address social and economic inequality existent must grapple with the pervasive legacy of racial discrimination and oppression. Indeed, centuries of history have shown that the creation of race was a very powerful and useful artifact to assert who ought to have the upper hand. For scholars defending Omi and Winant’s position, race may be biologically grounded but not discrete or essentialist in the same way as the historical concept of race upholds. Alternatively, they may emphasise the ways in which racial identities are constructed by social and cultural factors, rather than biology alone. In other words, these mentioned factors are much more decisive in forming racial identities.

1.3 Race as a Form of Primal Representation

In the face of all that has been discussed so far, it is incontestable that race identity was created and has been maintained through complex systems of power that operate as a way of dividing people into groups based on physical and cultural characteristics, to justify various forms of social and political inequality. The slavery system says much of the social-historical construction of race and its perpetuated mechanisms of oppression that allowed the exploitation

of body and labour of the racialised individuals, in a gross violation of their humanity. This is how race has ultimately become a mode of representation of Blackness, or rather a “form of primal representation” as Mbembe asserted (10). His use of the term “primal” suggests that race since colonialism has operated at a fundamental level of human experience. It is indeed a deeply rooted mode of representation that constructs the individual understanding of others and of the world around them. Race also forms the perception of the self, modulating one’s interactions with others, often in ways that are difficult to be fully aware of or overcome. It refers directly to the ways in which the psychological effects of racism rooted in colonialism have been internalised by Black individuals, as discussed extensively by Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin White Masks*. For Fanon, the Black individual, upon internalising the values and beliefs of the dominant culture, often experiences a distorted self-perception, typically characterized by feelings of inferiority and a focus on his/her most negative attributes. This process of internalisation further reinforces his/her subjugation and perpetuates the cycle of oppression. This is how the Black subject emerged out of subjugation and is compelled to assimilate the culture and values that obliterated his/her very being. The Black subject is, therefore, the object of this racial and cultural domination, and is ultimately subjected to the internalisation of racist beliefs and values. These psychological and social experiences have posed throughout time a profound impact on the sense of self of Black individuals, and on their relationship with their own body and soul. This process of internalisation resembles that of natal alienation initiated within the power dynamic of slave societies, which allowed for the continuation of the devastating condition of social death, as examined in Patterson previously.

It is in Fanon that ideas to overcome this systemic denial of Blackness originate scientifically. Fanon, exploring the relationship between the Black body and the consciousness of the individual, suggests that at certain moments, the Black individual may feel confined or

limited by the representation of their physical body and the social construction of Blackness, as observed in the fragment:

At certain moments the Black man is locked in his body. And yet “for a being who has acquired the consciousness of self and body, who has achieved the dialectic of subject and object, the body is no longer a cause of the structure of consciousness; it has become an object of consciousness. (200)

Fanon is arguing about the potential that individuals can transcend the limitation that centuries of oppression have imposed onto them. It is yet an encouragement to lift the Black subject from that place of inferiority that he or she was relegated to. According to Fanon’s argumentation, it can be achieved through the acquisition of self-awareness and consciousness when the individual achieves the “dialectic of subject and object”. That is, an understanding of one’s own subjective experience, as well as an objective understanding of one’s body and surroundings. This awareness then will enable the Black individual’s perception of his or her body as an object of consciousness rather than being defined solely by it. As it relates particularly to race and racism, the body can be a source of confinement and limitation, but the individual also has the power to transcend these limitations imposed on them by society in order to achieve self-determination and self-expression. In short, the Black subject will be able to fully embrace their own cultural identity and self-worth even when he/she still finds himself/herself in an anti-Black context.

This historical-sociological approach of the forced migration of African peoples to the Americas, through the transatlantic slave trade, provided and insight into the aspects and impact of the legacy of the African diaspora to the idea of race and the Black as a subject. It mainly acknowledges the enduring impact of colonialism and racism on the Black experience and how the ideology of race sets racial hierarchies as forms of oppression that still persist. These are

deeply ingrained in society and have a profound impact on the psyche and sense of self of Black individuals as it continues to shape their lives and communities today.

2 Blackness in the United States and Brazil

Black existence is simultaneously produced and negated by racial domination, both as presupposition and consequence. Affirmation of Blackness proves to be impossible without simultaneously affirming the violence that structures Black subjectivity itself.

—Wilderson et.al. in *Afro-Pessimism: An Introduction*

This chapter investigates and answers the question: What can be understood as the arrangement of Blackness, or *Negritude* in Portuguese, in the contemporary racial context of the U.S. and Brazil.

2.1 The Arrangement of Blackness and *Negritude*

The word arrangement in general, is defined as “[a]rranged condition, orderly disposition, order”.²² In this chapter, however, it takes the form of a concept to refer to the organization, configuration, or structure within the political and social system being investigated. As a concept, it will help to focus on the set of ideas and theories presented as a means to comprehend what Afropessimism refers to as Black suffering—moreover, as resistance to all forms of ontological annulment of Black existence. Furthermore, to describe how Black perspectives and experiences are interconnected with the concept of Blackness which in Afropessimism serves to critique an anti-Black world by highlighting the systemic, structural, and pervasive nature of anti-Blackness. The aim of the analysis is, on the one hand, to assess to which extent the arrangement of Blackness has become systemic and as such, reinforcing racism while hindering racial equality and justice. And on the other hand, to emphasise how Black people through a growing awareness of the historical-ontological racism imposed on their kind, have resisted. This is the very reason why Blackness is a central concept

²² www.oed.com

in race theory, where it is mutually understood as synonym for both exclusion and inclusion. This concept has been used to describe both “external and internal characteristics” of individuals who are considered to be part of the so-called “black group” (Hrabovský 65). In that sense, external characteristics may include physical features such as skin colour, hair texture, and facial features, while internal characteristics may refer to cultural practices, beliefs, and social behaviours associated with Black communities. These characteristics have been used extensively to justify systemic forms of oppression and discrimination against Black people. Notably, contemporary Black movements have been taking Blackness to the level of consciousness, using it as a way of shaping their experiences and identities. As such, embraced by the Black community, Blackness becomes a response to the racial aggressions suffered within an anti-Black world. In that sense, Afropessimism presents itself as a valuable tool to understand these dynamics of oppression and discrimination within an anti-Black socio-political system which persists in stereotyping and othering the racialised subject. Here is where Fanon’s dialectical progression comes in. Fanon envisaging a progressive overturning of the condition of the Black subject (the colonised ones) and a radical restructuring of society, dismantling once and for all the pervasiveness of anti-Blackness, while reclaiming their own identity and humanity. For Afropessimists, such overturning is considered improbable, however, Fanon’s dialectical framework remains significant for identifying and criticising the ways Blackness is positioned in juxtaposition to the white population.

Essentially, Blackness emerges and is connected to racism and to the structures that maintain racism operative. Such structures function as a type of “camouflage” as they do not hide the reality of racism, but rather convert it into a form that is difficult to identify (Martinot and Sexton 56). One might look at these structures without recognizing their role in perpetuating racism, because they appear as normal societal systems, thereby disguising their true nature. In Afropessimism, Blackness is presented not just as the target of individual acts

of racism, but as a position that is always already dehumanising and subject to “gratuitous violence” (Wilderson, *The Prison Slave* 77) within a world structured by anti-Blackness. For that reason, chapter one’s review of the historical and sociological aspects of the forced migration of Africans to the U.S. and Brazil is considered essential to demonstrate how Blackness is largely connected to the history of slavery and the African diaspora. Based on these aspects, the Congolese anthropologist and professor at São Paulo University, Kabengele Munanga, in his book *Negritude*, says that “If historically *negritude* is, without a doubt, a black racial reaction to a white racial aggression, we could not understand it and surround it without linking it to the racism of which it is a consequence and result [of]” (6).²³ Munanga’s research primarily focuses on the racial, cultural, historical, and political realities of African Brazilians. His insights are instrumental for Brazilian Black movements to understand and contextualise *Negritude* within Brazil, while also enabling comparisons with U.S. conceptions of Blackness. This is useful for examining the potential translatability of Afropessimism to the Brazilian context. This chapter argues that despite improvements in the conditions of Black individuals, these enhancements do not necessarily correspond to increased political representation, fundamental shifts in power structures or significant change in the overall plight of Black existence.

²³ Original text in Portuguese: “se historicamente a negritude é, sem dúvida, uma reação racial negra a uma agressão racial branca, não poderíamos entendê-la e cercá-la sem aproximá-la com o racismo do qual é consequência e resultado”

2.2 Understanding the Concept of Blackness

[T]hey were countering my rationality with the “true rationality” ... I wanted to be typically black—that was out of the question. I wanted to be white—that was a joke. And when I tried to claim my negritude intellectually as a concept, they snatched it away from me.

—Frantz Fanon

The analysis of the concept of Blackness is not possible without the acknowledgement that it is intrinsic to the idea of racial formation, as pointed out by Omi and Winant, as discussed in chapter one. In Fanon, Blackness, or *Negritude* emerges as a fragile phase within a “dialectical progression” where the assertion of white supremacy, both in theory and practice, serves as “the thesis”; while the role of “negritude” as an “antithetical value” represents the negative moment in this process (112). According to Fanon’s conceptualisation, the idea of Blackness or *Negritude* within a dialectical progression framework represents the opposing or contradictory element in this process. The dialectical progression suggests that Blackness emerges as a fragile phase in this ongoing interaction between the assertion of “white supremacy” (112) and its counterpoint, *Negritude*. Fanon highlights the idea that the concept of Blackness is, in part, created and defined by its opposition to white supremacy. By essence, this dynamic relationship is crucial when considering the complexities of racial identity and power structures. Blackness, being mainly a creation from race, embodies all people of African descent in the African diaspora. This population, as much in the U.S. as in Brazil, is often perceived as lacking the cultural, intellectual, and social attributes that are valued in bourgeois society. As such, Blackness is seen as a negative or inferior position, and Black humanity in its existence is paradoxically absent or excluded from full participation in society and its political manifestation. This happens because this population still has low representation in the political

scene and low participation in decision-making processes all together. It is this low representation and participation that constitute the absence of Blacks in the sphere of power and thus impeding real structural change as well as a more truthful perception of the Black subject by society. Sebastian Weier remarks that “‘common sense’ [views] blackness as a position that defines the form of a social structure in which black humanity is present only as constitutive absence”²⁴ (421). Namely, it stipulates an ongoing process that involves social structures and everyday interactions which point to practices such as racial profiling, police brutality or discrimination in housing and employment. The way in which this dynamic operates emphasises the idea that race is created and maintained as a means of sustaining a social, economic, and political structure that perpetuates racial hierarchies and race disparities; and even when laws, policies and regulations give the appearance of a normative equality, this structure still persists. It is important to note that normative equality does not imply that everyone should be identical or that all differences should be disregarded. Instead, it emphasises the need to recognise and value the inherent worth of every individual, ensuring they are granted equal rights, opportunities, and resources to flourish within society. In reality, what can be observed, however, is a mechanism of exclusion that feeds on itself continuously. W.E.B. Du Bois, one of the most influential figures for Black critics, including Afropessimists scholars, analysing the condition of Blacks in the U.S., in his work *The Souls of Black Folk* points out that,

the present social condition of the Negro stands as a menace and a portent before even the most open-minded: if there were nothing to charge against the Negro but his

²⁴ The term “constitutive absence” is a concept that refers to a condition where Black identities are fundamental to the structure of the society (constitutive), yet are not acknowledged and effectively erased (absent).

Blackness or other physical peculiarities, they argue, the problem would be comparatively simple; but what can we say to his ignorance, shiftlessness, poverty, and crime? (179)

Du Bois' work was published in 1903 and provides a foundational groundwork for the critical exploration of race, and before one could question its soundness in contemporary times, one should observe that he is a vital touchstone for Black critics in analysing the dynamics of Black social and political conditions. A dynamic still so present, as illustrated in the “timeline of racism” in the U.S. in figure 1.²⁵

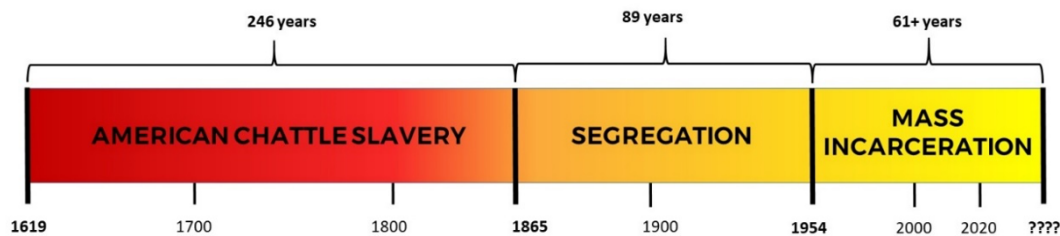


Figure 1: timeline of racism in the U.S.

The correlation between American chattel slavery, segregation, and mass incarceration of the Black population is rooted in the same underlying systems of oppression and racism that have shaped American society for centuries. That is why Blackness, and its representation continues to be a matter for debates concerning political changes and social demands.

In the development of Blackness as a concept, critical race theorists and Black activists from both countries have reinvented this concept as a means of lifting the Black subject from that place of exclusion and from the constitutive absence which Weier talks about, by recovering and affirming elements of Black identity and shared experiences. However, going back to Fanon's dialectical progression, this development is yet not sufficient to form the synthesis that is still absent. Fanon will say that, although the affirmation of Black identity, i.e.,

²⁵ fitchburgstate.libguides.com/c.php?g=1046516&p=7739449

Blackness, as an opposing value to the hegemonic culture, “serves to pave the way for the synthesis or the realisation of the human society without race”, it is in itself “not sufficient”. And he goes on to say that “the Blacks who employ it know it [well]” (112). Blackness, serving as a counter value to the dominant culture, represents a moment of shift and subsequent change. This moment is integral in igniting transformation and challenging established norms. Afropessimism builds on this concept, proposing a radical change, and advancing an anti-capitalist perspective to completely dismantle racial structures catalyst of racial discrimination in its entirety. To that end, recognising that the struggles against racism and racial inequalities are fundamental, as it is also fundamental the affirmation of Black identity. That is why Mbembe, partaking in Césaire’s affirmation of Blackness, will say that “it is important to continue to raise questions about the meaning of the term black as “synonym for “the stubborn struggle for liberty and indomitable hope” ... “[b]ecause [Blackness carries] the experience of so many trials”. And because it is a name “to express the quest for a humanism made to fit the world”, this humanism “can be articulated only in the language of what-is-to-come” (159-60). Therefore, Blackness metaphorically speaking, can be seen as two sides of the same coin: race. That is, if on the one hand it was created as a marker of difference and a way to justify the subordination of Black people, on the other, it has been reclaimed by many Black people as a motto of pride, resistance, and affirmation of their own identity in both societies. Yet, Blackness has allowed for the creation of multiple Black diasporic formations and subjectivities within that diaspora, because, as Mbembe observes, “defining oneself through lack is no longer enough” (154). In other words, the Black population, historically marginalised and oppressed, has formed an identity around what has been denied to them due to their societal and historical circumstances. They are now reclaiming their agency.

2.3 Negritude in Brazil

To speak of *Negritude* in Brazil is to bring about the complexity of that society and its formation. In Sexton—drawing from Wilderson’s *Red, White and Black*, one identifies that the conflicts and antagonisms generated by “the structural positions of European colonists, Indigenous peoples, and African slaves in the ‘New World’ encounter”, has forged “the contemporary parameters of the U.S. “political ontology” (Sexton 165); by extension this also applies to Brazil. The tensions caused by the conflicts and antagonisms among the diverse peoples, formed what is known as the Brazilian society. As such, the very concept of *Negritude* acknowledges its construction as one grounded in a specific historical context. As Munanga advocates, the historical consciousness, through the sense of cohesion it creates, constitutes the most certain and solid relationship for the people.²⁶ This knowledge of the past plays a critical role in forming present epistemes, or ways of understanding and interpreting Brazil in its contemporary times. Its colonial past influences the present in several ways, from shaping cultural norms and social structures to individual beliefs and values. It is indeed this past that informs present epistemes, providing a historical context for current social, economic, and political conditions of the population. By understanding the historical forces that have shaped the present, individuals and societies can better understand the roots of contemporary issues and develop more effective strategies for addressing them. It is the very reason why, according to Munanga, the separation and destruction of historical consciousness was one of the strategies used by slavery and colonisation to destroy the collective memory of the enslaved and

²⁶ Original text in Portuguese: “A consciência histórica, pelo sentimento de coesão que ela cria, constitui uma relação de segurança a mais certa e a mais sólida para o povo.”

colonised in Brazil.²⁷ Differently from the U.S., this process happened by means of ‘diluting’ the Black population and their culture, through the ideology of *mestizaje* (a concept explored in the section below) present in “family, friendship network and in cultural forms such as religion” (Telles 132). It proved useful as an argument of social integration and to challenge the existence of racial discrimination. This historical perspective is absolutely indispensable to understand the profound disparities, particularly along lines of race, class, and geography. Moreover, to understand how these lines are intrinsically connected and are determinant of the individual’s fate.

2.4 The Brazilian Strategy of *Mestiçagem* and the Myth of Racial Democracy

Mestiçagem or *mestizaje* is a term and a concept used in social sciences, as well as in cultural studies. This socio-cultural concept implies more than just mixed racial or ethnic ancestry. It represents the amalgamation of cultures, races, and ethnicities across biological, cultural, social, and symbolic dimensions. It plays a pivotal role in forming diverse regional identities through the fusion of Indigenous, European, and African influences. In essence, *mestizaje* constituted a deliberate and selective project of ‘blending’, sold as the embracing of racial and cultural identities in the Americas, especially in Brazil. It emerges at the moment “when nation-building elites sought narratives to create homogenous national populations by stressing strong national identities while downplaying racial and ethnic identities”, as sociologist Edward Telles explains (132). This concept differs significantly from the ‘one drop

²⁷ Original text in Portuguese: “É a razão pela qual cada povo faz esforço para conhecer sua verdadeira história e transmiti-la às futuras gerações. Também é a razão pela qual o afastamento e a destruição da consciência histórica eram uma das estratégias utilizadas pela escravidão e pela colonização para destruir a memória coletiva dos escravizados e colonizados.”

rule' or binary racial systems, imposed in the U.S., by emphasising racial mixing. However, this nation-building project comes to light as a denial of racial hierarchies and its complex racial relations and social composition. As strategy, it blurred racial divisions fashioning a narrative of a non-existing racism that perseveres until today. As ideology, mestizaje according to Telles, "undermines the formation of black identity" that is "needed to sustain effective social movements for combating persistent social and cultural exclusion" (132). This fragmentation resulted in the creation of a complex social hierarchy based on skin colour and racial ancestry, with lighter-skinned individuals typically occupying higher social positions. Mestizaje, while emphasising a system of inequality and discrimination, also became a marker of inferiority of the Black population, limiting their opportunities, and perpetuating poverty and oppression. Based on mestizaje, distinctions in that society are still made by taking into consideration the colour of one's skin. That is, the darker, the greater the hardship imposed onto the individual. It bears a resemblance to what Du Bois described as the "colour line" (172); which is indeed the prejudice and discrimination directed upon an individual considering his or her skin colour. Although Du Bois elaborated on this expression on the verge of the systemic forces and racial division between Black and white people in the American society, it also helps to underline the contradictions existent in Brazil. And because Brazil's racial landscape includes a broad spectrum of skin colours and racial categories (often based on the individual's physical appearance, family background, and social status), racism is something often disguised, understated, or even nuanced.

Brazilian historian, and sociologist Sergio Buarque de Holanda has been acclaimed by many scholars as the author responsible for setting parameters of Brazilian historiography and is considered to offer sound interpretations to understand the complexities of the land. His famous book *Roots of Brazil* influenced the nation's thinking of itself for generations (and to some extent it continues to do so). In that book, Holanda defends the idea of Brazil as a country

in which the “rejection of hierarchy” and a “relative absence of racial and color prejudice” allow for a “convergence toward democracy” (Candido xxxiii). This thinking is the core of Brazil’s myth of racial democracy. A myth which has been contested recently, especially because, as Candido rightly points out, it “was always a lamentable misunderstanding” (xxxix). Candido explains that this idea of democracy “was actually imported by rural and semifeudal aristocrats who tried to accommodate it, wherever possible, to their rights and privileges” (xxxix). And because of that, all movement for change in Brazil has always “been imposed from the top down by dominant groups” (xxxix), which has not allowed for meaningful or substantial structural change regarding race and equality. “Although Brazil never had a regime of separation in its laws or policies, such as apartheid in South Africa or racial segregation in the United States, the existence of a social apartheid that creates a visible separation of whites and non-whites is incontestable” (Correia, *Necropolitics 2*). That is why there is nothing like a racial democracy in Brazil. And this myth is totally discredited when confronted with economic literature and the pervasive racial discrimination that always stands out as determinant of the abysmal inequality which is characteristic of that country.²⁸ “Despite of Brazil being known as a ‘melting pot’, when it comes to wealth distribution Brazil shows an enormous gap in terms of income divide between whites and non-whites” (Correia, *Necropolitics 2*). As an example, a study conducted by the Brazilian Federal Institute of Geography and Statistics revealed that on average, white workers earn 74% more than black and brown workers (which is the official ethnic category used in Brazilian censuses to refer to mixed-race residents). This is a concerning statistic given that the same institute reports that Blacks make up a majority, or

²⁸agenciabrasil.ebc.com.br/en/economia/noticia/2019-11/blacks-make-majority-brazils-unemployed-and-informal-workers

54%, of the Brazilian population.²⁹ The present study's results are not unexpected, as they are congruent with the social makeup of Brazil, which can be observed through critical examination. However, it serves to contradict and demystify any notion of Brazil as a society without racial discrimination once and for all. A narrative largely disseminated inside and outside the country for many decades to conceal the existence of a structural racism; which since abolition, continues to operate subtly (or not so much) in the everyday practices of institutions and organizations, resulting in unequal distribution of services, benefits, and opportunities along racial lines.³⁰ "Extreme inequality no doubt leads to extreme forms of violence"; such violence is perpetrated by the police quotidianly in "Brazilian favelas, mostly inhabited by Blacks and Browns and where the most emblematic cases of violation of human rights continuously take place". Those areas clearly show an "ethnic separation in society and also demarcate the geographical and political space certain bodies [are allowed to] occupy. A work of separation previously exercised by the settlers in colonial times [that] nowadays is exercised ... by means of a social structure that perpetuates violence and racial exclusion" (Correia, *Necropolitics* 1).

Mestizaje and the myth of racial democracy are thus important concepts to illustrate that the arrangement of Blackness or *Negritude* in Brazil is not clear-cut, that is, in this context of multiculturalism that gives the appearance of racial inclusion, Blackness often is still viewed as distinct, separate, or even marginalised. And because racial and cultural mixing carry nuances when determining who is the Black subject, similarly it obfuscates how to tackle the mechanisms responsible for propagating racism. While mestizaje initiated as a political project

²⁹agenciadenoticias.ibge.gov.br/en/agencia-news/2184

³⁰www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/HRBodies/CERD/ConsultationCivilSociety/NGOs/Museu_Afro_Brasil_MAB.pdf

architected to cover hierarchies and sustain structures of exclusion, it was also embraced by society, becoming the ‘conscious’ choice of individuals to identify themselves with, emphasize, or adopt certain aspects of racial and cultural identities when suitable. For example, a person of mixed-race heritage might choose to emphasise their European ancestry in certain situations to access better opportunities or avoid racial prejudice, while in other contexts, they might highlight their African or Indigenous roots to connect with specific cultural communities or benefit from affirmative action policies. An attitude that does not contribute to the Black cause in Brazil, instead it may in fact contribute to further deepen the socio-political and economic differences already existent. The narrative of racial democracy in its turn, was for decades the main obstacle to the possibility of Black people constructing a thorough racial consciousness, in Jesse de Souza’s point of view (2). Therefore, *Negritude* is not only related to skin colour, and to attempts at dehumanisation of Black people and their descendants, it also encompasses the systematic policies of destruction to which African peoples and their cultures have been the object of—being it by means of deliberate policies of dilution and whitening of the population or by attacking African culture, especially in the case of religion.³¹ In that sense, several Black Brazilian movements, such as the NGO *Criola*³¹ and *Quilombo nos Parlamentos*,³² seek and try to reclaim their historical consciousness and cultural identity that have been deliberately taken away from them for centuries; while fighting racial injustice. Due to these movements, just like Blackness in the U.S., *Negritude* in Brazil has been reclaimed as a status of resistance as well.

³¹ www.conectas.org/en/noticias/what-is-religious-racism-and-how-does-it-affect-the-black-population/

³² rioonwatch.org/?p=71272

In conclusion, it may well be argued that the very existence of Blackness is intricately tied to historical events shaped by the presence of racial domination. While the historical context is essential for understanding the development of Blackness from experiences of racism, oppression, and violence that Black people have faced throughout history, Blackness as a concept has also become a dynamic and evolving notion. In contrast to its original characterisation, it has been reclaimed and used to affirm Black identity. In essence, the arrangement of Blackness currently signifies mainly the organisation and configuration of these historical events, ideas, and the experiences that form the Black subject and subjectivity, determining the individual's position in an anti-Black world. It refers to Black existence and encompasses all aspects of being Black by different individuals and communities—to challenge persistent racism while fighting for racial equality and justice. In this context, the arrangement of Blackness both in the U.S. and Brazil can be seen as a way to explore the multifaceted nature of Black identity examining and assessing how their differences are interconnected and how they interact with broader social-political, and cultural forces. Forces that are both produced by and negated through persisting domination. Although the specific movements and issues faced by Black communities in these countries have their own particularities, they both share the common goal of challenging these historical legacies of racial slavery. Based on this perspective the Black subject is challenged to critically engage with Blackness as a means of addressing and dismantling the systems of racial domination that African descents continue to face today. For that, the fight for racial justice continues to be an imperative one—and equity for all, the desired synthesis upon which Fanon's hopes rested.

3 Human Rights and Racial Justice

Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

—Martin Luther King

[T]he battle against induced precarity ought to be simultaneously a battle against racism.

—Judith Butler

In this chapter I investigate and answer the question: How does Afropessimism criticise the effectiveness of the human rights framework in securing racial justice for individuals within the African diaspora?

3.1 Racial Equity Within the Human Rights Framework

The previous chapters dealt with the socio-historical construction and elaboration of a system of power that instituted the formation of what became known as racial slavery. Racial slavery thus defined the position of the Black subject within an anti-Black world, leaving him/her little room to redefine that position. The contemporary structure of the American and the Brazilian society continue to be influenced by the legacy of slavery and perpetuate social hierarchies. In this context, Afropessimism theory and afropessimists such as Martinot and Sexton, problematise the framework of human rights and racial justice, seen as components of “the liberal ethos”, which perceives racism as mere product of “individual ignorance” which can be purged from society through “education and democratic processes” (62). For Martinot and Sexton, “the more radical critiques” within this liberal approach, “subsume the issue of racism in promises of future transformations of the power relations to which deracialization is deferred” (62). As Martinot and Sexton noted, this deficiency merely defers the promise of future deracialisation and power transformation. Based on this view, Afropessimism argues that

Black people have actually never “transcended [their] slave status”, or even become entirely “human in the eyes of the law”³³—as they are still routinely subjected to systemic violence (Correia, *The Colonial* 3). Based on that, race and the racialised subject are situated at the centre of a system of oppression and exclusion, as well as the ideology that underpins this system. So, the concepts of race and racial formation (considered in the previous chapter) were created as a means to explain and demonstrate how race was conveniently often manipulated and exploited to maintain a racial hierarchy. Thus, racial slavery itself becomes understood as a “technology” (Wilderson, *Blacks* 18) responsible for the perpetuation and dissemination of grave violation of the humanity of the Black population and therefore, their human rights altogether; thereby contributing to their dehumanisation and continuing condition of social death. The abolition of chattel slavery is a significant victory in the struggle for civil rights and social justice. This pivotal moment was able to break the visible chains of bondage, giving way to new hopes of freedom and equality. Despite the significant progress achieved, the reality is that abolition was not able to break with many of the underlying systems of oppression that perpetuated racial inequality, neither in the U.S. nor in Brazil. These underlying systems of oppression are therefore the very ‘unbroken chains’ that have been dragged on for so long by the racialised subject.

This chapter is a consideration and a discussion of racial equity within the human rights framework. The analysis investigates the adequacy of the legal recognition of human rights in addressing racial discrimination. It also assesses how these legal mechanisms effectively identify the unique processes through which racism and discrimination operate, in order to promote racial justice.

³³ www.thenation.com/article/society/afropessimism-wilderson-critical-race/

3.2 The Universality of Human Rights

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), ratified by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948, served as the inaugural legal instrument delineating the essential human rights for universal safeguarding. After almost 75 years, the UDHR continues to be the bedrock for all international human rights legislation. Thus, to engage with the human rights discourse means to engage with a discourse centred on the principle of universalism. Article 7 of the UDHR—which states that “[a]ll are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discriminate”—is a great example of this universality. This principle, which emerged as a crucial component of international law in the twentieth century, underpins the entire human rights framework. As such, the concept around universality lies at the heart of the UDHR and serves as a foundational element of the global human rights system.³⁴ It means that human rights are applicable to all individuals, regardless of their distinguishing characteristics. Essentially, it asserts that every person possesses inherent and inalienable rights simply by virtue of their humanity. Based on this understanding, debates and analysis have taken place widely in the academic world—examining the historical and philosophical foundations of human rights and their manifestation as international legal instruments, used to challenge the absence and secure the application of these premises. Afropessimism inserts itself into these debates, when it challenges the prevalent “shadows and living legacies of racial despotism” existent in everyday societal structures. That is, the various institutions and cultural norms that uphold principles of individual liberty, equality, and justice (Martinot and Sexton 66). Especially because in these structures, the focus often lies on formal equality at the expense of

³⁴ www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-cultural-rights/universality-and-diversity

substantive equality or actual outcomes in society. That is to say, from a legal perspective, many issues and challenges concerning the application and enforcement of human rights continue to this day across diverse cultural contexts.

In this context, the significance of human rights is inherently connected to civil rights, as the latter has evolved from the former. Numerous matters regarded as civil rights are encompassed within the scope of human rights, and the prohibition of racial discrimination is one among these matters. Professor of International Law and Justice Gay McDougall, in a report generated from the Symposium on the Global Anti-Racism Architecture of the UN: *Can the United Nations End Racism?*, remarks that “[t]he prohibition against racial discrimination ... has been recognized as having the exceptional character of *jus cogens* which creates obligations *erga omnes*, an obligation from which no derogation is acceptable” (1). Within a legal liberalism framework, deliberations pertaining to the right to freedom from discrimination, and all that follows from the violation of this right, necessitates therefore, the historical tools of human rights to directly address these issues. In this context, it applies to present-day racial disparities in inequality that are, to a considerable degree, due to and consequence of historical racial policies and practices—as pointed out by Antonio Guterres, UN Secretary-General. In a speech delivered on the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade on 25 March 2020, Gueterres acknowledges,

Because while we reject racism, *we still live in the shadow of the Transatlantic slave trade* [emphases added]. Racism continues to play a strong role in our world. Racism is the reason why outside Africa, people of African descent are often among the last in line for health care, education, justice and opportunities of all kinds. We need to raise our voices against all expressions of racism and instances of racist behaviour. We

urgently need to *dismantle* [emphasis added] racist structures and reform racist institutions.³⁵

Guterres, speaking on behalf of the UN, shows an understanding that this ongoing racism fuels and is central to what sociologists call social stratification. Such societal divisions fortify and sustain inequalities which hinder the chances and opportunities for success or wealth for individuals of African heritage. As a result, reinforcing a continuous criminalisation that is faced by this population daily, wherever they are, as UN itself recognises. For Hartman though, this plight only persists because legal liberalism (as other racial theories), “has examined issues of race, racism, and equality by focusing on the exclusion and marginalization of those subjects and bodies marked as ... inferior ... [without, however,] ultimately challeng[ing] the economy of racial production or ... interrogat[ing] the exclusions constitutive of the norm” (38). As such, it is undisputable that today’s racial inequalities will hardly be overcome within a model or structure that refuses to address this anti-Black economy which Hartman underscores; and so, it further perpetuates racial stratification for future generations *ad infinitum*.

3.3 Human Rights – An (Un)Successful Means of Achieving Racial Equality

The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), in its article one, defines racial discrimination as “any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social,

³⁵ www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2020-03-25/secretary-generals-message-the-international-day-of-remembrance-of-the-victims-of-slavery-and-the-transatlantic-slave-trade-scroll-down-for-french-version

cultural or any other field of public life”.³⁶ The incorporation of international human rights standards into the legislation of a country does not happen at once. Instead, it is a rather manifold and gradual process which happens through a combination of treaty ratification, judicial interpretation, and the development of domestic laws and policies. In the U.S., this process has taken place throughout history by means of its Constitution, Bill of Rights, and various civil rights laws. However, the country has shown a persistent hesitance to fully adopt international human rights norms, often driven by concerns over national sovereignty and the potential for conflict with its domestic laws and practices. As Bradford and Posner’s article argues, the U.S. has shown “ambivalence toward international law throughout this entire period”. They further argue that “[m]ore than any other state, [it] put financial and diplomatic resources into advancing human rights; yet it refuse[s] to ratify most of the major human rights treaties” (3). Furthermore, they also recall that “[i]t hosts the United Nations and ... yet it has violated the UN Charter ... and frequently has been in arrears on its dues” (2). Such statements highlights concerns about the willingness of the country to comply with the UN Charter and its financial commitments to the organization and suggests also that it has not always adhered to its obligations as a UN member state. Yet, when it comes to its domestic policy in terms of equity, it is undeniable that the country has taken important steps toward racial equality, however, the pursuit of true equality among its population still faces considerable challenges. In a legal context, it is maintained that racial justice can be pursued and maintained through various means, including the elaboration of anti-discrimination laws to affirmative action policies in order to ensure equal protection under these very laws. A wholesome example of America’s steps towards racial justice is the Civil Rights Act of 1964—a legislation that outlawed discrimination based on race, colour, religion, sex, or national origin in various

³⁶ legal.un.org/avl/ha/cerd/cerd.html

aspects of American life, including employment, education, and access to public facilities.³⁷ This ground-breaking act had the effect of bending the nation to act towards guaranteeing equal treatment of every American regardless. Yet, through a careful examination, one can understand that these categories of rights although being clear advancements, are daily infringed by discriminatory conduct. That is to say, the U.S. has a long history of advancing and promoting human rights and it boasts the largest democracy in the world; formal racial discrimination is no longer present in its laws and is also considered socially unacceptable due to its morally reprehensible character. However, reality has proven that racial politics, combined with societal discrimination based on race, continue to play a significant role in contemporary society; being it from, what became conventionally called microaggression, to the killing of Blacks arbitrarily by police. The reproduction of discriminatory behaviours (consciously or unconsciously) are part of instances of racism which can cause significant harm to individuals and communities, perpetuating racial inequalities and tensions.

Two years after signing the Civil Rights Act of 1964, President Lyndon Johnson signed ICERD. By then, he observed that the country “has not always measured up to its constitutional heritage of equality for all” but that it was “on the march” toward compliance.³⁸ In 2000, thirty-four years after the signing of ICERD, the U.S. government submitted a report to the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, CERD/C/351/Add.1, admitting that “overt discrimination” including inadequate enforcement of existing anti-discrimination laws, persistent discrimination in employment and labour relations, diminished educational opportunities, lack of equal access to capital, and discrimination in the criminal legal system,

³⁷ www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/civil-rights-act

³⁸ www.hrw.org/report/2022/08/08/racial-discrimination-united-states/human-rights-watch/aclu-joint-submission

among others, are forms of enduring structural and everyday discrimination. The same report also points out the important fact that “[t]oo many persons [in the country] do not believe that racial discrimination is a common or active form of mistreatment and are therefore less supportive of race-conscious remedial actions” (19). This lack of support for race-conscious remedial actions is part of a culture of discrimination that further lessens the efforts to effectively address and combat racism. Over fifty-nine years have passed since the signing of ICERD, yet achieving compliance seems an elusive goal.

The appalling case of George Floyd, a forty-six-year-old Black man, who died in May 2020 after a Minneapolis police officer knelt on his neck for over nine minutes during an arrest, stands as a compelling example of the ongoing issue of racial discrimination and police brutality in the U.S.. Floyd’s death sparked nationwide protests and reignited discussions about systemic racism, the need for police reform, and the importance of addressing racial disparities across various sectors of that society. In 2021, only a few days after becoming president, Joseph Biden took another step toward a ‘formal’ racial equity by signing an Executive Order on the matter. During the signing act he made a symbolic statement by saying that “[t]hose 8 minutes and 46 seconds that took George Floyd’s life ... was the knee on the neck of justice”. And he promised that “it wouldn’t be forgotten”, because in his view, “it [has] marked a turning point in [America]’s attitude toward racial justice”. Biden also took the opportunity to share in this speech his experience of meeting Floyd’s six-year-old daughter, Gianna, who said to him in her innocence, “Daddy changed the world.” And he went on to say, “I believe she is right ... because the ground has shifted ... because it laid the groundwork for progress”.³⁹ Indeed, Floyd’s case has served as a sobering reminder that it is urgent to combat racism if we are really

³⁹ www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/01/26/remarks-by-president-biden-at-signing-of-an-executive-order-on-racial-equity/

determined to achieve racial equity. Certainly, a step forward was taken in terms of ‘awareness’ of the position of vulnerability of the Black subject. However, despite efforts, there is still much work to be done to achieve true racial justice and promote equality as evidenced by the findings of the U.S. Justice Department’s “Investigation of the City of Minneapolis and the Minneapolis Police Department” report published on 16 June 2023.⁴⁰ Among its key findings it states: “Our investigation found that the *systemic problems* [emphasis added] in MPD made what happened to George Floyd possible”, the MPD “patrolled neighbourhoods differently based on their *racial composition and discriminated based on race* [emphasis added] when searching, handcuffing, or using force against people during stops.” As such, the U.S. remains, quite paradoxically, among the nations with the most frequent and egregious racial human rights violations; the police violence against the Black population and the mass incarceration of that population, are the most blatant examples of such violations. This regrettable comparison is equally applicable to Brazil, where the resonance of Floyd’s case was profound, serving as a mirror in which the country could face its own racial issues.

3.4 Human Rights Practices and Racial Justice in Brazil

Osmundo Pinho discussing Afropessimism, anti-Blackness and *ancestralidade* (pertaining to African ancestry) in Brazil, states that “there is nothing that a Black body can do to avoid violence. There is nothing that a Black body needs to do to justify violence. [Their] main audacity is simply to exist” (28).⁴¹ From Pinho’s observation, it is apparent that the Afropessimism discourse, originally built around the U.S. cultural context, is being adapted to

⁴⁰ www.documentcloud.org/documents/23850131-doj-report-on-minneapolis-pd

⁴¹ Original text in Portuguese: “Não há nada que um corpo negro possa fazer para evitar a violência. Não há nada que um corpo negro precise fazer para justificar a violência. Nosso principal atrevimento é simplesmente existir.”

fit the Brazilian cultural context as well. The reality of this statement in the country is observed for instance, in the way people in the favelas can be socially ‘erased’ or dehumanised before being physically killed. These situations of extreme racial violence and “genocide” in those areas target mainly Black bodies (26), as Pinho points out, and as annually reported by media outlets and NGOs. According to the German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA), there has been “a constant and alarming rise in police violence [against Black people] during the last years”.⁴² According to statistics presented in GIGA, the number of homicides committed by police officers saw a growth of 19.6% in 2018 and continued to increase in the subsequent years. In the same article GIGA highlights that “[a]ctivists [have been denouncing] the systematic exclusion of Blacks [which] makes them more prone to losing their lives and limits their opportunities to fully realise their social, economic, and political rights”.⁴² It brings about the discussion of the so-called ‘war on drugs’ in Brazil, a long-standing and controversial policy that has been closely linked to the issue of police brutality, particularly impacting the Black population. This connection raises concerns about the disproportionate effects of law enforcement’s approach to drug-related issues on marginalised communities within the country. In line with GIGA’s information, non-governmental organization Amnesty International continuously reports on the “disproportionately mass killings” of Black people in marginalised neighbourhoods by public security officials. In its 2022 article on the matter, Amnesty International calls the killings “unlawful” and states that “[t]he logic and implementation of the “war on drugs”, which have governed public security policies in Brazil for decades, continues to feed the cycle of violence and killings by police in the country”.⁴³ This is a reality

⁴² www.giga-hamburg.de/en/publications/giga-focus/police-violence-against-black-people-is-on-the-rise-in-brazil

⁴³ www.amnesty.org/en/location/americas/south-america/brazil/report-brazil/

that consistently targets and victimises the young Black population the most. The same report also cites data from the non-profit organization Brazilian Forum on Public Safety; which reveals that during 2021, 99% of individuals killed by police were male, 84% identified as Black, and 52% were under the age of 25. These killings usually occur during police operations under the claim of combating drug trafficking operations. Consider the tragic event of Jacarezinho, a favela located in Rio de Janeiro, where 28 people died in May 2021 by the hands of police, as a poignant example of this issue.⁴⁴ Far from being an isolated event, it demonstrates, together with many other similar cases, a pattern of action. Moreover, it provides evidence to an intentional behaviour behind these institutional actors against the Black population. Amnesty International further states that beyond these heavily armed police operations, which very often result in “intense shootings in favelas and marginalised neighbourhoods”, the state’s disproportionate use of force also manifests itself “in raids on people’s homes, destruction of belongings, psychological torture, restrictions on people’s freedom of movement and the suspension of basic services such as schools and health centres”.⁴⁵ These actions are often based on false accusations or fabricated legal charges, which seem they are indeed conducted with the intent to harm that population or to punish them without legitimate evidence—as in Jacarezinho’s case, the police claimed 25 out of the 28 people who were killed had a criminal record, without proving any to have been convicted of a crime.⁴⁵ Also, the over-representation of Black people among the victims says much about and reinforces the existence of pervasive and institutional racism, which fuels the criminalisation of and excessive force against Black individuals, as Amnesty International

⁴⁴ theintercept.com/2021/05/08/brazil-police-massacre-rio-jacarezinho/

⁴⁵ www.hrw.org/news/2022/05/13/rio-police-tear-down-memorial-about-police-violence

observes.⁴⁶ The police officers' violation of human rights, reflect little or no concern for being held accountable for their violations, as they believe they have impunity or protection from the consequences. This points to the broader problem of how law enforcement employs their force, which may involve racial profiling or targeting specific communities as a matter of standard practice. This shows that these open manifestations of racial discrimination are part of the evident enduring effects of a historical racism, which perseveres and deepens socio-economic disparities. It undeniably emphasizes the mechanisms across diverse sectors of society which perpetuate existing racial stratification, which are difficult to dismantle as explained above.

When examining the phenomena of anti-Black violence perpetrated by the police through the lens of social death, as emphasised by Afropessimism—which postulates that Black people exist in a state of perpetual exclusion from the norms, values, and institutions that define humanity⁴⁷—it becomes evident that this postulation holds true in Brazil to a significant degree. In Brazil, the death of Black bodies happens historically by exclusion. That is, by limiting the areas that those racialised subjects are allowed to occupy. Consequently, limiting also their access to everything that could diminish wealth gaps altogether. In these areas 'reserved' mainly for the Black population, the physical death confirmed by a consistent high number of casualties during police actions, serves as a testament to the state's inability to adequately address this historical racial discrimination under human rights law. Back to that same report mentioned earlier, from the Symposium on the Global Anti-Racism Architecture of the UN, they categorically assert that Brazil's current racial disparities and discriminations are "legacies of [its historical] colonialism and slavery". The report also cites the estimated

⁴⁶ www.amnesty.org/en/location/americas/south-america/brazil/report-brazil/

⁴⁷ www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780190280024/obo-9780190280024-0056.xml

number of enslaved Africans “at about 12 million, 46 per cent of whom were taken to Brazil” (10)⁴⁸, where they endured “the grossest forms of human rights violations”. It further emphasises that despite the end of “[chattel]slavery, post-abolition racial segregation, ‘whitening’ policies, and other forms of institutionalized discrimination” perpetuated the racial hierarchies established by slavery. Furthermore, even though “Brazilians of African descent constitute a demographic majority, their inherited subordinate social status has deprived them of political power”. As a result, the descendants of the African enslaved population, according to this report, continue to face racial discrimination, institutional exclusion, and socioeconomic disadvantages, including lower average incomes, shorter life expectancies, insufficient education and housing, high unemployment rates, and greater food insecurity compared to Brazilians of European descent. Also, due to ingrained and state-endorsed discrimination, they are disproportionately subjected to criminalisation, imprisonment, and brutal violence, including extrajudicial killings. Issues to which the report concludes as being part of the prevailing structures of racial discrimination, inequality, and subordination, which are significant legacies of slavery and colonialism (McDougall 10). Once again, the protection of rights present in the modern human rights treaties, which Brazil is also signatory of, are not applied in equal measure as to guarantee the inviolability of Black people; neither “their right to exist as a human being in its full conception” (Correia, *The Colonial* 2). For the African descents to have all aspects of their humanity recognised and respected, the timid racial justice initiatives and promises, such as those urged by UN Secretary-General Guterres, have proven

⁴⁸ Note that various sources quote varying numbers of the total amount of Africans that were enslaved and taken to the Americas. Of the 12-12,5 million taken to the Americas, an estimated 10,7 million survived the Middle Passage of which an estimated 5,5 million arrived in Brazil.

inefficient. They merely propose reforms to the system that changes a bit but does not fundamentally change, neither in the U.S. nor in Brazil. Because to dismantle the racist structures and institutions that perpetuate social death, one must be confronting the systemic forces and underlying dehumanisation of Black people.

The parallel between the U.S. and Brazil, when it comes to their historical marginalisation of Black population in their territories, should be clear by now. The ways in which discrimination and anti-Black racism interrelate, placing Black people in a precarious position, highlight how important it is to rethink race as a form of primal representation. Anti-Black racism collaborates with other forms of bias to position Black people in a situation of heightened vulnerability, facing multiple layers of oppression. The course of the history of human rights has shown some level of progress, influencing the laws and regulations and ultimately society. However, as Hartman observes, “despite the symbolic bestowal of humanity that accompanied the acquisition of rights, the legacy of freedom was an ambivalent one” (40). In that sense, rights can often be viewed as an affirmation of one’s humanity. In other words, society may be formally recognising the humanity of minorities by granting them rights they were previously denied. Nevertheless, this recognition implies that the outcomes thus far have been unsatisfactory. Mostly, the expected social, economic, or political benefits expressed in legal texts do not materialise as expected. Or even, the newly granted rights often bring about new struggles or challenges. This is the reason why, from an Afropessimist viewpoint, “the prevalent liberal discourses” as well as the actions they normally inspire, tend to merely restructure existing institutions (which are *per se* anti-Black), rather than eliminating them entirely (Wilderson et.al. 11). These institutions, are thus the very structures that create, regulate, and, in the most extreme cases, lead to the physical death of Black individuals as largely discussed before.

From all that has been argued and demonstrated here, it is reasonable to assume that race continues to be a factor that influences the full spectrum of human experiences and serves as an embodiment of the harsh reality of social death—an outcome directly linked to systemic racism and a precursor to physical death. This is a dynamic that circles back to Fanon's antithetical value, fairly discussed in chapter two. In other words, the achievement of the Fanonian synthesis, in which the ultimate goal of the dialectical process is to reach a human society without racial divisions or hierarchies, has yet to be implemented. While recognizing the crucial role of human rights in paving the way for a more inclusive society, it is important to note that inclusion alone does not guarantee equality. In face of that, one could infer that the legal promise of formal equity has not yet been fully translated into practical real-world justice. Therefore, failing to achieve a world free of racial discrimination altogether.

4 Closing Arguments

In this final chapter, the analysis is concluded by giving the answers to the research questions and arguing for the translatability of Afropessimism, acknowledging it as a suitable theoretical framework capable of accurately explaining the historical and contemporary experiences of Black individuals in Brazil.

4.1 ‘Universalism’ of Afropessimism

“What all universalisms have in common is a commitment to the view that the proper vocation of philosophy is to theorize the universal, to distinguish the essential from the contingent, the ontological from the ontic, and so on.” (Kapoor and Zahi 27)

Based on Kapoor and Zahi’s elaboration, the primary focus of universalist philosophies, in the broadest sense, is to theorise about principles, concepts or beliefs that may apply equally to all individuals or a particular group. In essence, universalist philosophies strive to identify principles or truths that apply universally, regardless of context or circumstance. In a similar vein, Afropessimism presents a unified argument for the experiences of the African diaspora, thereby offering a theoretical framework to comprehensively explain the suffering of Black individuals. As such, applying the philosophical concept of universality to Afropessimism is strongly founded on the idea of an existing structural exclusion of African-descended people worldwide, which is posed as a rallying point for action. These shared struggles are what may drive Black people to come together and challenge the status quo, i.e., the anti-Black racism, and to strive for a more just and equitable society. This is especially the case because, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, within the legal liberalism framework, these struggles are not being resolved. And that may be, as some critics observe, because this framework’s design obeys a logic that maintains “the rights of white men parading as universal rights” (Kapoor and Zahi 1). For instance, certain conceptions of what constitutes freedom, justice, or equality, as postulated in this ‘parading’ are influenced by the experiences and perspectives of

white men, while ignoring or downplaying the unique experiences and challenges faced by Black people. This position is well-substantiated considering the concrete examples that illustrate the previous chapters. The examples provide clear evidence that, even after formal legal barriers were removed, informal barriers and discriminatory practices continued to limit the ability of Blacks, and naturally non-whites in general, to exercise their rights fully and equally. The constitutive inequality in the liberal model is one that already creates “hierarchical class structure” by definition; from an Afropessimist perspective, race only adds another layer to these disparities (Kapoor and Zahi 3). The need then to increase Black ability to improve their condition and overcome the limitations imposed upon them, is what lay a foundation for these shared struggles. Hence, the universality of Afropessimism as a stream of thought that can account for such injustice wheresoever it occurs. That is also why, in Joseph Winter’s words, “Wilderson encourages ... to think of Afropessimism as a meta-theoretical framework and diagnosis”.⁴⁹ That is, it never claimed to be a remedy or a solution for these struggles, but rather a valuable tool for identifying, analysing and developing strategies to dismantle the racial antagonisms that still prevail. In Winter’s definition, Afropessimism is, in that sense, “a heuristic strategy for diagnosing how Black people are positioned, contained, and punished within prevailing discourses and arrangements”.⁴⁹

On the question of Afropessimism critical perspective impacting the experiences and identities of individuals of African descent in the Americas, in view of all that has been discussed throughout this study, it is important to emphasise this critical viewpoint of this theory, particularly when examining the influence of racially-biased structures within a society that claims to uphold the principles and practices of legal liberalism. By taking anti-Blackness as “a lens of interpretation” (Wilderson, *Afropessimism* 14), Afropessimism reveals the failure

⁴⁹ www.aaihs.org/afropessimisms-contributions-to-black-studies/

of conventional narratives to address the systemic and enduring nature of anti-Blackness. The limitations of these narratives or theoretical frameworks could relate to an inability to ever fully understand or empathise with Black experience when compared to non-Black ones, the persistence of inequality in even the most 'democratic' societies, or the impossibility of ever fully eradicating bias and prejudice, among other things. The logic thus being that the systems of oppression can function differently for different oppressed groups, the so-called minorities. "[T]he tendency of some theories to equate or draw parallels between Black suffering and the suffering of other oppressed groups", generally tend to oversimplify or ignore the unique aspects of each group's experience. As a result, such approaches might "overlook the specific forms of systemic injustice that Black individuals and communities face", according to Wilderson (14). In essence, this critical theory in no way intends to set a hierarchy between other forms of suffering, as it is often accused of when it points to and highlights that the condition of Black lives is, by and large, marked by social death and exclusion. And that Black suffering, *indeed* differs from other forms of exclusion, precisely because Black exclusion is due to "transcendental ontological presuppositions" (Pinho 24). And as one cannot depart from one's own constitution, i.e., from one's own skin, one cannot erase the cause of one's 'discredit'. It is thus a permanent state that triggers a distinct form of marginalisation, discrimination, oppression and ongoing racial inequality. And yes, there is poverty among all peoples, as sociological studies account for. However, none of these cases is based on one's skin colour. In this way, Afropessimism sheds light on the fact that the gratuitous violence imposed upon Black individuals, instead of being a temporary or isolated phenomenon, is first and foremost a fundamental aspect of our modern society. Therefore, the theory rejects any perspective incapable of understanding and distinguishing that Black individuals are subjected to violence, dehumanisation, and ongoing structural oppression because of their inherent

identity, which is inextricably tied to their race. Since race is an immutable aspect of their identity, society's attitudes towards them often remain hostile and biased.

On the question of how Afropessimism critiques the effectiveness of the human rights framework in securing racial justice for individuals within the African diaspora, it questions the notion of progress and the possibility of complete liberation within existing social structures, while emphasising the deep-rooted nature of anti-Black racism (which is fundamentally marked by the transatlantic slave trade) and the structural barriers that perpetuate Black subjugation. To this matter, in the context of the U.S., Wilderson suggests that the possibility of Black emancipation amplifies the perceived threats of radical movements. In his view, it is because "Black liberation, as a prospect, makes radicalism more dangerous" (78). In Wilderson's elaboration, the conditions necessary for this liberation are actually coupled with its defiant acts, and therefore they "function as a negative dialectic". In other words, these conditions for liberation are a type of politics that negates and dismisses the present system in all respects. And due to its perceived disruptive nature, this type of politics will always be suppressed by interest groups. And that resonates with and justifies his thinking that "the eradication of the generative mechanism of Black suffering" is not in the interest of any existing societal structure (as stated in the introduction). In this vein, within this legal framework, promoting reforms, amending outdated laws, or introducing new legislation, for instance, have not been efficient enough to bend the resilient racist structures and their supporters. When injustice is caused by racial discrimination, inequality will inevitably follow from that. Therefore, by highlighting the persistent realities of anti-Blackness, Afropessimism seeks to provoke critical engagement, challenge complacency, inspire resistance and provoke transformative actions towards dismantling systemic oppression present everywhere.

4.2 The case for the cultural translatability of Afropessimism

To argue the case of Afropessimism translating into another social-cultural context other than that where it was theorised, this thesis drew essentially on the historical and contemporary experiences of the Black diaspora in the U.S. in parallel with Brazil. The analysis of post-abolition policies in Brazil, specifically the ‘whitening’ policy or selective project of ‘blending’, revealed important findings. This policy was an attempt to obscure and even erase the country’s racial and ethnic history, which ultimately contributed to the continued marginalization of African people, culture, and heritage. Mestizaje as an ideology, undermined the formation of a distinct Black identity. This lack of a firm identity foundation is what has posed great challenges to combating the enduring social and cultural exclusion faced by Brazilians of African descent. This has further solidified the racial hierarchy in Brazilian society, as McDougall indicates in the report for the UN. Despite being a demographic majority, Brazilians of African descent are largely marginalised due to their inherited subordinate social status, which effectively denies them political power. They continue to bear the burden of institutional exclusion and racial discrimination, leading to widespread socioeconomic disadvantages. These manifest in their life condition and in the institutional violence they are forced to endure day-by-day. The persistent state-endorsed discrimination subjects them to disproportionate adversities compared to their European-descendant counterparts, reflecting a deeply entrenched systemic bias.

These findings have made it possible to present arguments in support of extending Afropessimism beyond the U.S.. By examining the particularities of each society, this thesis identified a wide range of similarities that allowed for the cultural translatability of the Afropessimism framework to the Brazilian society. Thus, recognising this theory as a valuable tool for the elaboration of strategies to overcome the shared struggles faced by African descendants in Brazil. That may happen especially by raising awareness of existing anti-Black

state mechanisms, which demand alternative forms of resistance that go beyond mere calls for reform. In Afropessimism perspective, these reforms, in their current conception, maintain the very structures that exclude Black bodies by design. Osmundo Pinho, focusses the translatability of Afropessimism in Brazil on the killings of Blacks, often in the context of structural racism and socioeconomic inequality. The blatant racial bias, as his studies demonstrate is responsible for systemic policies, practices, and norms that perpetuate racial inequality. The killing of Black people thus results from daily social violence or state violence by the hands of police, characterised as a “genocide” (26). One of the most visible manifestations of this alleged Black genocide, as it should be clear by now, is in the realm of law enforcement. Looking through the Afropessimist lens, Pinho says that the genocide of Black people in Brazil represents a historical example of systemic violence, configured in “transcendental ontological presuppositions”. Although Pinho points out that the acute nature of “the structural antagonisms that oppose Black individuals to humanity do not obliterate Black sociability”, he identifies that these antagonisms condition Black sociability altogether (25). As in Pinho’s understanding, the pain of loss of self-image and self-alienation rooted in the same conditions of “objectification defined by the slave form and colonial slavery”, echoes Wilderson, Fanon, Du Bois and all other authors presented in this thesis.

Ultimately, by focusing on the impacts imposed by social death and on the institutional violence, represented by police brutality in the Brazilian society against Black communities, one finds ways to signify the fundamental banality involved in a form of an existence defined by “absence” and “denial”, as argued and illustrated in the previous chapters. Indeed, violence and oppression experienced by Black communities in Brazil have been normalised or become ‘banal’, to such an extent that it has become a sort of symbol for Black existence altogether. About this reality, Friar David dos Santos—founder and executive director of Educafro—a NGO that works for the inclusion of Afro-Brazilians in higher education—reacting to another

common scene of structural racism says that “the way Brazilian society still treats Black people, projecting upon them the image of the enslaved, is something cruel and sick”.⁵⁰ He says so in an interview, contextualised by a recent case that happened on 4 June 2023, where a young Black man was arrested for the theft of chocolate in a supermarket by police officers, who carried him away through the streets of São Paulo, face down with his hands and feet tied to his back by a rope; in a shocking resemblance to the period of legal slavery. As a counterfactual exercise of imagination, a comparison can be made suggesting that if that man were a white person, such inhumane treatment would not have happened. This shows that Brazil, with its history of slavery and colonialism, seems to have been frozen in time in many aspects. This means that, drawing yet from Pinho’s understanding, fighting anti-Black arrangement in Brazil goes far beyond public policies, it must address the structure in which this violence is based. It converges with Wilderson’s discredit of the notion of progress and the possibility of complete liberation within existing social structures; something that the legal discourse, despite their ‘fundamental’ importance, will never admit. Again, echoing Wilderson’s understanding, Pinho believes that to change the existing structures involves indubitable confronting the fact that it is death, in a broad sense, and that it is gratuitous violence, which construct the ways through which Blackness can be located in the anti-Black world (24-5).

⁵⁰ www.youtube.com/watch?v=hKbihlb1tgQ

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