

# On the Prospect of Weaponized Death

*John Gillespie*

## I.

When the idea for this essay originally came to me, I was at a neighborhood vigil for the late rapper Lor Scoota, an influential figure in the Baltimore hip hop scene.<sup>1</sup> After hours of Black tears and suffering, due to the murder of yet another Black person, a burst of black joy emerged as if from the ashes, as folks listened to Scoota's hit single "Bird Flu" on repeat, and danced around the neighborhood. This burst of black joy must have shook the entire city. Consequently, the Black mourners-turned-dancers were met by the police state issuing a curfew, forcing everyone to go home. The police, in riot gear, surrounded the mourners with guns pointed in their direction and helicopters that circled the West Baltimore neighborhood. Newscasters and cameras poured into the neighborhood as flashing lights beamed down throughout the darkness, where the shiny metallic balloons that read "SCOOTA" still danced in the wind. We were occupied in every direction.

There had been no riots, but the police prepared for war as if Baltimore was burning. I could not help but be mesmerized at the militarized guns, the riot shields, the coordination and discipline of the force. I could not help but observe the size and number of police officers-turned-domestic-military. I could not help but be enamored by the spectacular power of the State, and recognize this as the social utility of occupation—to stiffen black existence, to sustain the simulation of white superiority and black inferiority. I could not help but think about the need for a revolution. I was taken by an impulse to destroy the simulation and return to a new Real—a "zero degree of transformation," a "turn toward blackness."<sup>2</sup> Yet I was also struck by the thought that if a revolution were to come, we could never win.

We could never win a revolution, and the death that swallowed Lor Scoota is the same unceasing death that surrounds the people who mourned him, and anyone who attempts to challenge the anti-Black world. It was not easy to come to this conclusion. I still obtain glimmers of hope for the future, but the historical record shows that if the future is anything like the past, the only thing guaranteed is fungibility and accumulation. I remember running home, crying, and writing the beginning sketches of what would become this essay. These sketches became the building blocks for a theory of *weaponization*—one blackened answer to the question of "how should we live" in the unending age of anti-blackness. I did not write this out of self-righteous radicalism. In fact, I believe that those who write radicalism self-righteously forget that, "Normally people are not radical, normally people are not

moving against the system: normally people are just trying to live, to have a bit of romance and to feed their kids.”<sup>3</sup> I wrote this out of the sad belief that once we have lost all hope in the prospect of black lives ever being able to live, to matter, to sustain romance and feed their families without an unmoving proximity to death, once anti-Blackness has sucked every bit of spirit we have dry, our only hope is to lose hope, to recognize we cannot win. The end of the World begins once we recognize that a Black sentence is a death sentence, and learn to weaponize it.

## II.

*learning to die  
in the anthropocene  
must be done  
for those who  
were never invited  
to the  
anthropos too*

—Anthropos

Black life is lived in a white hyper-reality. By this I mean, black life is lived inside a constituted white fiction which concretizes itself as fact. Black life is a life lived in non-existence; blackness “exists” as a symbol of death that *is, but is not*. Blackness “exists” only insofar as White Being structures it onto a map of anti-black violence.<sup>4</sup> Achille Mbembe corroborates this in his *Critique of Black Reason*, stating:

Racism consists, most of all, in substituting what is with something else, with another reality. It has the power to distort the real and to fix affect, but it is also a form of psychic derangement, the mechanism through which the repressed suddenly surfaces. When the racist sees the Black person, he does not see that the Black person is not there, does not exist, and is just a sign of a pathological fixation on the absence of a relationship. We must therefore consider race as being both beside and beyond being.<sup>5</sup>

The reality that replaces that which *is* is a white hyper-reality. This white hyper-realism fixes blackness as “a sign of a pathological fixation.” White hyper-realism is the paradigm whereby consciousness is unable to distinguish between the fictions created by White Being and the Real.

It is this fact that permits black death to be subsumed in simulations by each and every (analytic) encounter with Whiteness and the World. Questions like, “Can the Black suffer?” and “Is it capable for the Black to be wronged?” arise due to the

inability to access a grammar of suffering to communicate a harm that has never ended, a harm that can never end without ending the World itself. It is for this reason that viral videos of black death, more than opening the possibility for liberal notions of justice, seem to suture the relationship between the mythical and the real that perpetuates itself through the reification of black trauma. Black death, more than deconstructing the ontics of the Human, seems to extend its hyper-reality. Black death makes it harder to distinguish white fictions from any sense of real harm being done to human flesh. The Black is meant to experience its death over and over and over again; and the World itself recycles all its fictions-as-the-Real. Put differently, the White World subjects the Black to perpetual, gratuitous violence, and then uses that violence as evidence to further suggest that the Black is not Human. *For how can a Human endure such a thing?* The experience of gratuitous violence secures the semiotics of the white hyper-reality. White Disneyland stays intact.

Blackness exists at the nexus of fact and fiction, possibility and (non)value, inclusion and exclusion. Blackness is trapped even in saying it's trapped because the "trapped-ness" of the Black extends to locations where the diction and syntax of White "words don't go."<sup>6</sup> The Black does not have the grammar to speak against where and how it is trapped since Blackness can only articulate itself through the semiotics of Whiteness. That White Being continues to center black death as the matrix of possibility for its hyper-realist structure indexes the promise of death insofar that White Being is promised futurity. The Black was rendered fungible through the conjunction of the political and the libidinal economy of the anti-Black world. Blackness gave birth to the commodity and the economy of signification that structures the cartography of the Human's coordinates. This could be said to be *a still birth*, insofar as the nature of Black life in a white hyper-reality is conducted on a plane that guarantees natal alienation, social, and ontological death. The Black body lives to die; the specter of death shadows it everywhere.

What matters crucially here, in our invocation of the hyper-real, is the importance of the Symbolic. The Symbolic is what "structures the libidinal economy of civil society."<sup>7</sup> The Symbolic here is understood as "the representational process" that structures "the curriculum and order of knowledge" and/or "the descriptive statement of the human" in our contemporary World.<sup>8</sup> And in this World, white symbolism is everywhere. In fact, in an anti-Black paradigm, white symbolism is everything. White symbolism over-determines itself as the Symbolic itself, and denounces anything that challenges its genre-specific mode of knowing, seeing and understanding the World. In other words, white symbolism holds a monopoly on the Symbolic in ways that operate "lawlikely so within the terms of their/our order-specific modes of adaptive cognition-for, truth-for."<sup>9</sup> There is no outside to whiteness, to white semiotics, to white constructs of value and reality, to white structuring of libidinal value. And for this reason, like Wilderson, "[I] am more interested in the symbolic value of Whiteness (and the absence of Blackness's value)..."<sup>10</sup> in a world of white hyper-reality.

If Blackness is lived in the hyper-real, then there is a hyper-intensification—an *overrepresentation*—of semiology that dictates the coercive violence of the Black’s (non)existence. The semiotics of White Being is the factitious fiction that simulates the entire World. White Being and black death are part of a globally blood-soaked symbolic exchange that has extended itself over the terrain of the World to such an extent that there can be no distinguishing between the Real and the Non-Real. White Being is that Being for whom ontological capacity exists, whereas the Black is the antithesis to Being, that fleshly matter whose essence is *incapacity*.<sup>11</sup>

If “language is the house of being,”<sup>12</sup> as Heidegger puts it, then Blackness is trapped at the very center of White Being. Dionne Brand puts it concisely when she writes, “We are people without a translator. The language we use already contains our demise and any response contains that demise as each response emboldens and strengthens the language it hopes to undermine.”<sup>13</sup> This abject positionality was codified through a violence so epochal that Modernity itself can be said to have been inaugurated through it. However, at the same time, “the center is, paradoxically, within the structure and outside it.”<sup>14</sup> That black death and anti-blackness exist in this liminal positionality posits the impossible possibility of a rupture in the moment. For that which is inside the structure, only through being outside the structure, enables the possibility of both sedimentation and disorientation. Jacques Derrida writes, “The function of this center was not only to orient; balance, and organize the structure—one cannot in fact conceive of an unorganized structure—but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the freeplay of the structure.”<sup>15</sup> If black death centers the structure, then it is somewhere in the perfection and expansion of this antagonism (the inside-outside antagonism) that the cartography of gratuitous anti-Black violence is laid out. What might happen when what orients the structure becomes insurgent, attacking the structure through that which centers its very Being? What might happen if black death became weaponized in order to further limit the freeplay of the structure—the expansion of White Being?

Afro-Pessimist thinkers, in favor of a diagnostic analysis, tend to veer away from the tradition of critical social theory that prescribes solutions to the analysis in the conclusion of their work. However, one finds throughout Afro-Pessimist literature a battle cry, a prophetic vision, a pulsing pessimist hope for the “end of the World.” For if Whiteness ended Worlds through its colonial simulations and violent transmutations of Africans into Blacks, then the only way out is an end to the White World. White Being is irredeemable, and so is the World it fosters. Sexton says, “In a world structured by the twin axioms of white superiority and black inferiority, of white existence and black non-existence, a world structured by a negative categorical imperative—‘above all, don’t be black’—in this world, the zero degree of transformation is the turn toward blackness, a turn toward the shame, as it were, that ‘resides in the idea that ‘I am thought of as less than human.’”<sup>16</sup> It’s only through black vigilance that the simulacra of White Being is made clear and the spectacle of

gratuitous freedom is made visible. It is somewhere in this structural antagonism, that on the one hand conditions the possibility of the World, and on the other hand conditions the possibility of its end, its limitations, its disorientation, that we found the language to say the unsayable and do the undoable. As Frank Wilderson reminds us:

Black Studies in general and Afro-Pessimism in particular present non-Black academics with more than an intellectual problem. It presents them with an existential problem. The reason is because there's an aspect of Afro-Pessimism that we don't talk about...which is that were you to follow it to its logical conclusion, it's calling for the end of the world...it wants the death of everyone else in the same way that we experience our death, so that one could not liberate Blacks through Afro-Pessimism and be who one was on the other side of that. That's the unspoken dynamic of Afro-Pessimism.<sup>17</sup>

If we are engaging in a war in which the symbolic value, the semiotics of this World itself, positions “the Black as death personified, the White as personification of diversity, of life itself,”<sup>18</sup> then resistance needs an “unspoken dynamic.” It needs a space where “words don't go”—a form of guerrilla linguistics, a submarined syntax, an undercommon communication. Perhaps, here, where the conversation is blackened, and the theory is phobogenic, and the journal is *Propter Nos*, we can allow ourselves to excavate insurgent dictions still lost in the lingua franca of White Being, but full of the specter of black terror, black disorientation.

If the Black is death personified, then what might happen if we weaponized our death? What might happen if we recognized the inevitability of that death? What if we began to think that the non-uniqueness of that death was an opening towards the “end of Humanity?” In *The Spirit of Terrorism*, Jean Baudrillard writes, “When global power monopolizes the situation to this extent, when there is such a formidable condensation of all functions in the technocratic machinery, and when no alternative form of thinking is allowed, what other way is there but a terroristic situational transfer?”<sup>19</sup> Terrorism consists of the militaristic tactics used by those who are facing globalized White Being with asymmetrical technologies of terror, violence, intimidation and war. A terrorist is any armed vigilante willing to rupture the system of semiotics through an equally confounding semiotic. A semiotic that returns one to the “desert of the [Black] Real”—where a “project of total disorder” is unleashed upon the semiotic system.<sup>20</sup> Black terrorism is a violence that re-appropriates the death embedded in the Black's ontological incapacity in order to enable the possibility of a radical capacity—gratuitous freedom. White Being itself is a decentralized onto-epistemic deployment of violence, and if violent insurgency is necessary, then the decentralized approach of the black terrorist is necessary to counter the terror of White Being. This being said, black terrorism is perhaps better understood as *counter-terror terrorism*. We do not have the power to end the World with life. We

only have the power to end the World through death. As Baudrillard writes, “The radical difference is that the terrorist, while they have at their disposal weapons that are the system’s own, possess a further lethal weapon: their own deaths.”<sup>21</sup>

The United States has an international military force, a storehouse of nuclear arms, and the capacity, within their police state alone, to “terrorize” not just one block in Baltimore, but the whole entire world. Black terrorism is what happens when we heed the Afro-Pessimist call that “A living death is as much a death as it is a living,”<sup>22</sup> it is what happens when we take seriously the unsayable in Afro-Pessimism. Black Terrorism is (non)ontological fugitivity that disavows any need to focus on social life—black terrorism steals black death itself from White Being. It is for this reason that Baudrillard speaks to his own White Being and the specter of terror when he says:

When Western culture sees all of its values extinguished one by one, it turns inward on itself in the very worst way. Our death is an extinction, an annihilation. Herein lies our poverty. When a singularity throws its own death into the ring, it escapes this slow extermination, it dies its own natural death. This is an immense game of double or quits. In committing suicide, the singularity suicides the other at the same time—we might say that the terrorist acts literally ‘suicided’ the West. A death for a death, then, but transfigured by the symbolic stakes. ‘We have already devastated our world, what more do you want?’ says Muray. But precisely, we have devastated this world, it still has to be destroyed. Destroyed symbolically. This is not at all the same undertaking. And though we did the first part, only others are going to be able to do the second.<sup>23</sup>

We are the others. Tasked with the (un)fortunate task of ending White hyper-realism, the White World, and White Being. Well aware that if White Fascism continues the project of black annihilation, the only choice we will have is to fight. Not because we want to, but because we have to. But, ultimately, we must remember the words of Huey Newton: “[T]he first lesson a revolutionary must learn is that he is a doomed man.”<sup>24</sup>

In the age of Trump, the perfection of slavery reaches its horizon.<sup>25</sup> The disavowal of the lives of refugees is White Being attempting to reconcile the “Nation-State” simulation with the free track and flow of bodies it’s been attempting to murder; the deportation of undocumented immigrants in conjunction with the materialization of borders is White Being attempting to secure its linguistic and economic integrity; the rise of the private prison and the militarization of the police force is White Being attempting to innovate the system of enslavement and necropolitics for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century; the plundering of indigenous land and bodies is White Being attempting to finish off the project of genocide; the disregard for the Earth is White Being ensuring the Anthropocene will also be the Apocalypse. Trump is a reinvigoration, a call to arms, for White Being, and White Being can only be “destroyed symbolically.” Black terrorism transfigures the symbolic stakes because it

steals away that condition of White Being's possibility in a kind of fugitivity that is a zero-transformation into Blackness. This being said, we all know that the only thing that follows the absolute loss of hope is this Black Spring, this Neo-Fanonian violence, this blackened terroristic situational transfer. In Baudrillard's words, in the Age of Trump, let us remember the gift of immorality, "Terrorism is immoral. The World Trade Center event, that symbolic challenge, is immoral, and it is a response to a globalization which is itself immoral. So, let us be immoral..."<sup>26</sup>



- <sup>1</sup> Lorn Scoota was a famous Baltimore rapper, known for his hit single "Bird Flu," who was murdered in Northeast Baltimore.
- <sup>2</sup> Jared Sexton, "Ante- Anti-Blackness: Afterthoughts," *Lateral 1* (2012)  
<http://lateral.culturalstudiesassociation.org/issue1/content/sexton.html>
- <sup>3</sup> Frank B. Wilderson III, "'We're Trying to Destroy the World' Anti-Blackness & Police Violence After Ferguson."
- <sup>4</sup> Dylan Rodríguez, "Policing and the Violence of White Being," *Propter Nos* 1.1 (2016): 8-18.
- <sup>5</sup> Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016, 32.
- <sup>6</sup> Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003, 42.
- <sup>7</sup> Frank Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and The Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010, 15.
- <sup>8</sup> Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/ Power/ Truth/ Freedom." *CR: The New Centennial Review* (2003): 326.
- <sup>9</sup> Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/ Power/ Truth/ Freedom," 295.
- <sup>10</sup> Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black*, 16.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.
- <sup>12</sup> Martin Heidegger, "Letter to Humanism," [http://pacificinstitute.org/pdf/Letter\\_on\\_%20Humanism.pdf](http://pacificinstitute.org/pdf/Letter_on_%20Humanism.pdf)
- <sup>13</sup> Dionne Brand, "An Ars Poetica from the Blue Clerk," 61.
- <sup>14</sup> Jacque Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,"  
<http://www.csudh.edu/ccauthen/576f13/DrrdaSSP.pdf>
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>16</sup> Jared Sexton, "Ante-Anti-Blackness: Afterthoughts."
- <sup>17</sup> Frank B. Wilderson III, "The Inside-Outside of Civil Society": An Interview with Frank B. Wilderson, III," *Black Studies Papers* 2:1 (2016): 20-21.
- <sup>18</sup> Wilderson III, *Red, White, & Black*, 43.
- <sup>19</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism and Other Essays*, New York: Verso, 2003, 8-9.
- <sup>20</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press, 1961, 2.
- <sup>21</sup> Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism and Other Essays*, 20.
- <sup>22</sup> Jared Sexton, "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism" *InTensions Journal* 5.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.
- <sup>24</sup> Huey Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*. New York: Penguin Books, 1973, 3.
- <sup>25</sup> Anthony Paul Farley, "Perfecting Slavery," *Loyola University of Chicago Law Journal* 36 (2004): 225.
- <sup>26</sup> Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism and Other Essays*, 12.