

***Notes on an Ex-White Man's Form-of-Life-Toward-Social-Death:  
Reading W.E.B. Du Bois Reading John Brown***

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**ABSTRACT**

*This paper considers John Brown as a paradigmatic respondent to James Cone's and Frank Wilderson's charges for Humanity to "become Black." More precisely, this paper takes Du Bois's reading of John Brown as a meditation upon what Nahum Chandler describes as the "soul of an ex-White man." For Du Bois, Brown's taking up of the "Negro question" proceeded to shape his entire existence. By drawing on Giorgio Agamben's messianic conception of "form-of-life" and Afropessimism's elaboration of the "Negro question" through the paradigm of social death, this paper offers a reading of Du Bois's Brown as a form-of-life-toward-social-death.*

Keywords: W.E.B. Du Bois, John Brown, Afropessimism, Social Death, Messianic

There will be no peace in America until whites begin to hate their whiteness, asking from the depths of their being: "How can we become black?"<sup>1</sup>

James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970)

[For] the notion of freedom to attain the ethical purity of its ontological status one would have to lose one's Human coordinates and become Black. Which is to say one would have to die.<sup>2</sup>

Frank Wilderson, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (2010)

We will not try to name all at once what [John Brown] became—avoiding, first, the idea that he became something else all at once or finally, and ... secondly, the idea that he became, simply, Negro, or Black. We can instead rest with Du Bois's formulation ... that Brown, perhaps of all "Americans has perhaps come nearest to touching the real souls of black folk."<sup>3</sup>

Nahum Chandler, *X—The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought* (2013)

This paper considers John Brown as a paradigmatic respondent to James Cone's and Frank Wilderson's charges for Humanity to "become Black." More precisely, this paper takes Du Bois's *reading* of John Brown as a meditation upon what Nahum Chandler describes as the "soul of an ex-White man." For Du Bois, Brown's taking up of the "Negro question" proceeded to shape his entire existence. By drawing on Giorgio Agamben's messianic conception of "form-of-life" and Afropessimism's elaboration of the "Negro question" through the paradigm of social death, this paper offers a reading of Du Bois's Brown as a *form-of-life-toward-social-death*.

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<sup>1</sup> James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation - Fortieth Anniversary Edition* (2017): ix.

<sup>2</sup> Frank Wilderson, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (2010): 23.

<sup>3</sup> Nahum Chandler, "The Souls of an Ex-White Man: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Biography of John Brown" in *X—The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought* (2013): 117.

My presentation is a metacommentary—a layered palimpsest—that reads Chandler’s essay “The Souls of an Ex-White Man” with Cone’s Black theology and Wilderson’s Afropessimism. The type of death in question with a form-of-life-toward-social-death could be cast in terms of a “spiritual” or “ontological” death. The question is how one exists within a type of death that stands in antagonism to the Human, Being, and the World. And this death, following Wilderson in particular and Afropessimism more generally, is synonymous with Blackness. And yet, this death is also the site of a gratuitous demand for freedom *from* the Human, *from* Being, and *from* the World. For the Human, fidelity to this demand entails iteratively taking a leap of faith toward becoming Black, even while this becoming could only ever be something akin to what Kant would call a regulative ideal as long as the World persists. Such is how I read Wilderson when he contends that “Black Studies in general and Afropessimism in particular present non-Black academics with ... a kind of problem of being because ultimately the work is moving towards the destruction of the very academic who’s doing the work.”<sup>4</sup> This is Black Study as form-of-life-toward-social-death.

This Afropessimist movement entails turning Cone’s Black theological desire for Black access to Being inside-out. “There is nothing in those Black sentiments,” Wilderson writes, “powerful enough to alter the structure of the Black’s seven-hundred-year-long relation to the world. ...” In other words, “there are no feelings powerful enough to alter the structural relation between the living and the dead, not if feelings are pressed into the service of a project which seeks to bring the dead to life.”<sup>5</sup> However, “one can imagine feelings powerful enough to bring the living to death.” This sentiment echoes 1 Corinthians 1:28, where Paul announces that “God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to abolish things that are.”<sup>6</sup> From this follows another Afropessimist revision of Cone’s theological anthropology. In the encounter with Afropessimism, Cone’s charge to White people to begin to hate their Whiteness becomes a charge to non-Black people to begin to hate their Humanity insofar as modern Man is reconstituted as an anti-Black parasite in its very Being. This impossible movement of becoming Black is one way to understand Du Bois’s claim that Brown perhaps came nearest to touching the real souls of Black folk from across the Veil.

In excess of Brown’s avowed patriotism, however, to accept, as Wilderson puts it, the Negro’s invitation to the dance of social death, the Human must not only assume the general dishonor that becomes of one’s standing in the World, but one must embrace the condition of natal alienation in relationship to one’s race, one’s nation, and one’s kin. “The flesh of the earth demands it,” Jared Sexton writes, “the selfless inhabitation of landless existence.”<sup>7</sup> In this way, Afropessimism’s ethics recalls Luke 14:26, where Jesus proclaims that “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.”

In *The Gift of Death*, Jacques Derrida comments on this passage in his discussion of Kierkegaard’s citation of Luke 14:26 as paradigmatic of the teleological suspension of the ethical.<sup>8</sup> Derrida writes that “Abraham’s hatred for the ethical and thus for his own (family, friends, neighbors, nation, but at the limit humanity as a whole, his own kind or species) must remain an absolute source of pain.”<sup>9</sup> For the Human to hate its own kind or species is to take up Fanon’s decolonial demand for the substitution of one species for another. Fanon underscores this *tabula rasa* with a citation of Matthew 20:16, wherein “the last will be first, and the first will be last.” Decolonization, Fanon writes, is “the putting into practice of this sentence,” and if the last shall be first, he continues, “this will only come to pass after a ... decisive struggle between the two protagonists.”<sup>10</sup> In this vein, returning to Derrida’s gloss of Kierkegaard, what it means for the Human to assume fidelity to this decolonial calling can be understood as follows: “I must come to hate what I love, in the same moment, at the instant of granting death. I must hate and betray my own, that is to say offer them the gift of death by means of the sacrifice, not insofar as I hate them, ... but insofar as I love them. ... Hate cannot be hate, it can

<sup>4</sup> Frank Wilderson, “The Inside-Outside of Civil Society” (2016): 20.

<sup>5</sup> Wilderson, *Red, White & Black* 142.

<sup>6</sup> New Revised Standard Version Updated Revision.

<sup>7</sup> Jared Sexton, “The Vel of Slavery” (2014): 593

<sup>8</sup> Søren Keirkegaard, “Problemata I: Is There a Teleological Suspension of the Ethical?” in *Fear and Trembling / Repetition* (1992): 54–67.

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death* (1995): 64.

<sup>10</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (2008): 2.

only be the sacrifice of love to love.”<sup>11</sup> In following Kierkegaard by constellating Luke 14:26 with the binding of Isaac, I propose that we understand this gift of death as the pure potentiality of a sacrifice that *withholds* sacrifice as such—rendering it inoperative to put to a new use as a messianic form-of-life-toward-social-death. That is to say, to echo Cone, the hatred of one’s Humanity—which demands forsaking one’s kin while not, per se, sacrificing them—is in the name of a love for Blackness that the World prohibits. This is where we can turn to the example of John Brown and the icon he becomes in Du Bois’s hands.

Chandler offers a compelling formulation that helps to preliminarily stage the way in which the Black messianic, as I have conceived it, calls the Human to receive the gift of social death:

the telling of the story of the martyrdom of John Brown is also the story of his life as icon of the possibility of a new beginning, the story of a social being formed within the idea of belonging simply and purely to a “White” race who yet came to recognize himself as configured within the movement of an unsettled question, one that he, perhaps strategically, continued to call by the name of the “Negro question.”<sup>12</sup>

Though it may be obvious to grant *that* Brown was a Human who became animated by the “Negro question” the more difficult matter is to consider *How* this miracle occurred. As Chandler carefully draws attention to, Du Bois’s biography is motivated by the impossible-possibility of repeating, in Chandler’s words, Brown’s “fundamental and radical orientation” to the feeling that “in order for him to live he must give this socially granted life over to death,” which is to say “he had to take this socially and historically granted life and dispense with it, kill it, destroy it, give it up to the risk and possibility of absolute dissolution.”<sup>13</sup> This is a form-of-life-toward-social-death.

For Du Bois, as Chandler observes, the “telling of the story of the martyrdom of John Brown is also the story of his life as icon of the possibility of a new beginning.”<sup>14</sup> Such a possibility, I would add, coincides with the revelation of the Human’s ontological parasitism on Black social death. The example of Brown is significant not merely as a historical instance of a Human who, as Chandler puts it, “died to achieve the freedom of the Negro”; more fundamentally, and thus enigmatically, his significance is that of an eschatological index of what Chandler describes as “some historical being that is yet to come.” This eschatological being “survives,” Chandler continues, insofar as he “acquires its peculiar force only in and through the limits of his being, rather than because he transcended them.” As a paradigm irreducible to its historical example, Brown testifies to the Black messianic mode that is, in Chandler’s words, “always at stake in the struggle toward another liberty or liberation” that remains “always at risk of giving up or reproducing that which it seeks to overthrow, perhaps due to the very force with which it seeks to carry out this overturning.”<sup>15</sup> That is, this Human inhabitation of the anti-Black limit of its Being is never pure; the only Black messianic fidelity worthy of the name is one that accepts its structural susceptibility to failure and betrayal.

Chandler proceeds to note that Du Bois’s study positions itself “within the space of a certain horror” that “even if named primarily as an apocalypticism,” could be “usefully describe[d] as metaphysical.”<sup>16</sup> This metaphysical horror, Chandler continues, concerns how “death was the central meaning of life for John Brown,” which was reflected in the way that he “seems unable to inhabit the present in any simple fashion.” This incapacity to inhabit the World, Chandler elaborates, was “marked by a sense of the way in which the possibility of absolute loss remains open within the most mundane and secure activities of living.” This was Brown’s attunement to the gratuitous violence of social death. Chandler continues:

Is it only the Negro American ... is it only such a being who can live within death ... and yet give rise incessantly to stark, originary, perhaps meaningful life? ... The response, Du

<sup>11</sup> Derrida 64.

<sup>12</sup> Chandler 113.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 115.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 113.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Chandler 114.

Bois's or Brown's, formulated by Du Bois through Brown, is that it is not simply or only the Negro American.<sup>17</sup>

I believe this unthought and unthinkable question gestures toward how it is not only that the Slave's social death makes Human Being-in-the-World possible, but that the enclosure of social death also forecloses the modalities of gratuitous freedom in the World. What I am describing as Brown's form-of-life-toward-social-death "moves," as Chandler puts it, "in some tenacious relationship of maintenance or affirmation, as well as a sense of loss, of the sense of possible being that has been withdrawn."<sup>18</sup> This withdrawal dovetails with refusing the unconscious imperative to *not-be-Black*.

In Du Bois's study, "touch," as Chandler elaborates, is "always a response, a mark of a passion, carried bodily, invoked by a call or gesture, a solicitation that is otherwise than a simple or passive invitation."<sup>19</sup> If Brown comes closest to touching Blackness, it is because he found himself *having-become-touched* by the "Negro question," which called him to respond from the depths of his Being, yielding, as Chandler puts it, "a movement of becoming other." However, this Black messianic movement of unbecoming entailed, Chandler continues, "unavoidably reproducing [the] very figure of being [Human]." This unavoidability, I would add, is a structural consequence of inhabiting one's Human-Being as a problem. And yet, such a movement, Chandler writes, is "also to become what one 'is' through or by way of the other."<sup>20</sup> Put otherwise, the Human un/becomes itself through inhabiting the revelation of its anti-Black parasitism as the condition of impossible-possibility for self-abolition in the mystery of social death.

Later in the essay, Chandler draws attention to how Du Bois enacts, through the study and example of John Brown, what could be described as a Black messianic contraction of linear-diachronic time: in the first instance, the contraction of Brown's moment circa 1850 with Du Bois's circa 1910; in the second instance, the contraction of whatever moment of reading Du Bois's biography, say, in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, with that of Brown's *and* Du Bois's moment. By doing so, Chandler observes, Du Bois "turns to propose the principal question of his study ... comprising the last two chapters of the study, respectively."<sup>21</sup> The first iteration, concerning his trial, is called "What is the meaning of John Brown?". Chandler writes that here "the whole problem of justice has become distended by the question what is to be done in the relation of human to human, let us say, in the care for the other?". This chapter then gives way to the distinct, yet inseparable locution of the final chapter titled "What is the legacy of John Brown?". As Chandler describes it, this question is "able to unfold a question about futurity, in which death is something other than simply loss, and which may perhaps be thought also as a name for possibility, for that which gives, for generosity."<sup>22</sup> This eschatological futurity is the gift of social death—which is other than loss—in the abyss of gratuitous freedom.

By way of conclusion, Du Bois's revelation of Brown's eschatological *second-sight* was itself enabled, Chandler observes, by his own theorization of *double-consciousness*. As Chandler writes:

We can perhaps recognize the ... movement of two "souls," one bending into the other, one moving inextricably within the other, in a statement of [ ] Brown's ... with which Du Bois closes his study: "You may dispose of me very easily—I am nearly disposed of now, but this question is still unsettled—this Negro question, I mean. The end of that is not yet."<sup>23</sup>

At the end of this passage, Chandler adds a footnote where he observes the way in which these last words, as he puts it, "comprise an eschatological and apocalyptic discourse prophesying the second coming of the Messiah," specifically recalling the "words of Jesus ... issued on the

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 114–115.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 117.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 125.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 128.

Mount of Olives,” which mark the “the inception of a radicalized eschatology.”<sup>24</sup> With this quotation of Brown’s final will and testament, so to speak, Chandler suggests that Du Bois not only recalls thus the way that Brown’s voicing would place in question any or all forms of the worldly orders that would claim the sovereign right to judge him, but puts into rhetorical motion the possibility that future words, as action, might propose a supraordinate judgment ... upon the time and situation of his own passing.<sup>25</sup>

It is Du Bois’s study, marked by the gift of second-sight, that both realizes and enables the future words-as-action that advance a supraordinate judgment upon the time and situation of *their respective passings*. And Afropessimism’s abyssally Black theology intensifies this judgment in the messianic now-time of social death that immanently demands the abolition of the Human and the World alike.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 232–233, fn. 10.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 233.

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