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The Freedom Handbook

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by

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Dedication

This project is dedicated to the little Black girl who ran on the court before learning the game of basketball. Let your flame burn bright and long.

Someday soon, you will spark that same flame in other little Black children everywhere.

Cheers to the Black flames, old and new. May you be loved, cared for, and free.

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Everything that I have done and will ever do has only been made possible through your grace, love, patience, and forgiveness. Thank you God for, well, everything. Aṣẹ

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and finally but certainly not least **To Mamo,** thank you for paving the way to what is possible. I hope that I have made you proud.

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Author's Introduction

When I was three years old, my mother took me to my very first basketball game. I had no idea who the Harlem GlobeTrotters were nor did I know anything about the game of basketball. My mother would always remind me of this very special day and marked it as the day that she knew that my flame burned bright. I find it quite astonishing that I have little to no reconciliation of this day, besides a blurred memory of my younger self standing on a basketball court with a pink puffer jacket on. My afro was split into two perfectly round puffs, and I held a basketball larger than my head in between my scrawny legs.

My mother didn't have any expectations of that day other than we were going to watch a game and have a great time. It was on a Sunday and we had just left Sunday Service. That morning, the pastor was going on and on about going after what you want. She said, as my mother quotes, "When you want something, don't let nothing stop you from getting it". When the evening rolled around, we went to the Harlem GlobeTrotters game and waited patiently for halftime. Oh that was my favorite part! The cheerleaders came out and did their stunts, and I was in my seat dancing along with them. The players soon joined them, but this time they came out shooting shirts to the crowd. Our seats were so close to the floor that those tall basketball players didn't even bother to bend down and see me. They were looking right over me as I cried to them asking for a shirt. At some point, my mother remembered looking at me with tears running down my face. Instead of crawling into her arms for comfort, I like to imagine that my little three year old self heard the pastor whisper in your ear, "when you want something, go get it". Time had stopped. With no hesitation, I ran on the court amongst the players who were ten times my size. I was David surrounded by Goliaths! Everyone in the stadium gasped, afraid that I may get

trampled on accident. My grandmother was sitting right beside my mother laughing and cheering me on. Eventually, someone came to get me off the court and could you believe that after all that hard work that I did, they had the nerve to not give me a shirt? I didn't pay them no mind, once I got back to my seat, my tears had dried and I was happy for the rest of the game.

At least that's how the story goes. When I began to think about a topic for my Senior Thesis, I thought back to this story that my mother never fails to tell me when I am feeling discouraged. *Remember that little Black girl who ran on the court when she had no direction. You followed your heart, and went for what you wanted. If you did it then, you can do it now.*

I never considered myself to be a philosopher. Yes, I have been studying to get my Bachelor's degree in Philosophy at Bard College for almost four years now and I have read at least one big writing by your favorite philosophers from Aristotle to Karl Marx; I've even regrettably read more than three of Ludwig Wittgenstein's works and please, do not ask me to tell you which three I read. I am overly familiar with Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*, have cried too many times while being forced to read Kant, and even tried to wrap my head around Nietzsche before coming to the realization that maybe I wasn't meant to be a philosopher after all. I was never the type of student who could easily word-vomit advanced vocabulary in my essays. I was more of the *Google, what's a synonym for 'big' and can you point me to the right thesaurus where I can find a fancier word to use so that I don't sound like a complete idiot* type of student. Even as I write this paragraph I am beginning to question if I chose the correct choice of study. Throughout this paper, I vow that I will be completely honest with you. Beginning here, you have read the title. I have a confession to make. I am writing this project on freedom during a time where I do not *feel* completely free myself.

James Baldwin's “A Letter to My Nephew” begins with the poignant line, "Dear James, I have begun this letter five times and torn it up five times," encapsulating a sentiment strikingly resonant with my own experience in crafting this senior thesis. The fear of falling short of the envisioned greatness, the apprehension about potential confusion for the reader, and the overarching anxiety about the project's overall impact loom large. Like Baldwin, I grapple with the uncertainty of not fully comprehending the essence of my project until mere weeks before its due date. There's a pervasive fear that the project might dictate my identity, much like I endeavor to define its purpose. The apprehension intensifies, dreading the potential lack of fulfillment compared to the profound satisfaction derived from reading Saidiya Hartman. A desire lingers for the project to write itself, an aspiration tempered by the recurring fear each time I confront the document. The fear is twofold—of failure and the accompanying disappointment. My disillusionment with academia's constraints, despite the support from my advisor and the Philosophy department, underscores a yearning for a different direction. The resistance, though challenging, is a stark departure from the idealized narratives of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. Yet, I've come to recognize that the hardest part of my quest to freedom is getting over myself. This project is not merely for academic validation; it is a personal endeavor, a gift to myself. It is a commitment to writing authentically for my community, an opportunity to share the unspoken, to resist, to conquer, and ultimately, to transcend the paralyzing grip of fear.

As you read this project in its entirety, I only ask of you to do one thing: read for yourself. This is not an academic essay for your critical review. This is your Freedom Handbook. Writing this project for me has been a process in exercising my freedom and all of the emotions

that come with it. I would like to share that experience with you. I began this project first by asking myself the following questions:

1. What does it mean to be free?
2. Where is freedom birthed from?
3. What was my earliest memory of freedom?
4. Are there limits to my freedom? If so, who decides this?
5. Can freedom be shared? Passed down?
6. If I cannot be free, then what can I be?

I invite you to find somewhere to jot down your initial responses to these questions. While reading the rest of this thesis, continue to make note of your thoughts and feel free to return to these questions as you go along. What do you feel? What are you thinking about? What angers you? Excites you? Puzzles you? This is an opportunity for you to grapple with your own fears and hesitations about freedom in all of its forms as I have attempted to do myself.

In reflecting on the echoes of my childhood experience at the Harlem Globetrotters game, I am compelled to navigate this intricate landscape of freedom in my senior thesis, titled "The Freedom Handbook." This autobiographical exploration is not only a personal endeavor but a response to the critical framework presented by Frank Wilderson in his book, “AfroPessimism”. For those unfamiliar with AfroPessimism as a theory, it ultimately positions Black people as socially dead, prompting me to challenge the conventional understanding of it solely as a critical theory. If we accept the claims that human life hinges on the complete objectification of a distinct people, the implications extend far beyond the realm of theory, urging us to confront the very essence of freedom itself. As you embark on this journey with me, consider your own thoughts, emotions, and questions about freedom, as we collectively grapple with the intricate nuances of this profound concept.

The Black autobiographical tradition stands as a powerful testament to the resilience, agency, and multifaceted experiences of African Americans throughout history. Authors such as Bell Hooks, Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, James Baldwin, Nella Larsen, and so many more have contributed profoundly to this literary legacy. This tradition delves into more than just the personal narratives of individuals crafting their autobiographies; it uses those life stories to explore the broader inquiry of what it means to be Black. For instance, in Douglass's autobiographies, he initiates each with the probing question, "Why am I a slave?". Similarly, Du Bois labels *Dusk of Dawn* as "an autobiography of a race concept," emphasizing the collective dimension embedded within these autobiographical reflections. It is a tradition that poses the question: *What is Black freedom?* It does so at various stages of the history of African American struggle, those who were enslaved, those who suffered from Jim Crow, and those who continue to suffer. Frederick Douglass, a former enslaved person, provided a groundbreaking narrative with his "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave", offering a firsthand account of the brutality of slavery and the quest for freedom. W.E.B. Du Bois, in "The Souls of Black Folk," skillfully weaved together sociology and autobiography, addressing the duality of being Black in America. James Baldwin, through works like "The Fire Next Time," explored themes of religion, race, and identity, challenging societal norms. Nella Larsen, in her novel "Passing," delved into the complexities of racial identity and the consequences of societal expectations. Bell Hooks, known for her feminist perspectives, contributes to the tradition by intertwining personal reflections with sociopolitical analysis. Together, these authors have enriched the Black autobiographical tradition, creating a diverse tapestry that illuminates the struggles, triumphs, and profound humanity of Black individuals in America.

This tradition continues through to contemporary thinkers like Frank Wilderson and Saidiya Hartman who I directly draw on throughout this paper. They have come to question whether Black people *can* be free. In engaging with these present inheritors of the Black autobiographical tradition, I return to my ancestors who insisted on the possibility and the actuality of some form of Black freedom even in the face of despair.

Chapter 1: AfroPessimism and Her Burdens

I never believe writers when they say that the first chapter of a book is always the most difficult to write. To be completely honest and transparent with you (because I promised myself that I would), I couldn't tell you where or when I ever heard a writer say that. Maybe in passing or on some random Youtube video I watched at 3am…I couldn't tell you! But I know for certain that I heard it at some point in my life and for some *very* odd reason I find myself writing the first chapter of my senior project for, and yes I counted, the fifth time. I should have believed those imaginary writers. On the contrary, I find a particular comfort in knowing that it's taking me this long to write a few pages of a much larger work - a masterpiece if you will. As much as I would like for my egoistic personality to take over this first paragraph, telling you how much of a deep and thoughtful philosopher I am who loves to take her time on her work because Rome wasn't built in a day and Beyonce is somewhere in the world changing lives by the second - I would be lying to you. I'm a storyteller who loves to lie *but* I am not a liar. This first chapter is difficult for me to write because it is the beginning of the end. And not the end of my senior project, but the end of the world.

Throughout my three years as a student as a part of the Bard College Philosophy Department, it wasn't until recently that I learned about the *term* AfroPessimism. If I remember correctly, I first heard of the term after speaking with one of my peers about an idea that I had at the time to include an all Black philosophy course in the college's curriculum. I showed this peer of mine, a very *very* liberal white gay from the midwest, a working document of the books and articles that I wanted to cover in the course. They took one scroll of my exceptionally organized Google sheets document and said to me, "Sydney, where's the rest?". *The rest? What do you*

mean the rest, it's called a working document for a reason. "Yeah yeah I get that but you have all of these titles and authors, which is a great start…but where are the Black Queer readings, fiction, hell where is AfroPessismism?". I took a pause. What the heck is AfroPessimism? I understood everything that they were saying up until this point. I tried to not let my face tell on me nor to show the anger rushing through my body. They said *AfroPessimism* and all I could hear was *I'm blacker than you*.

I couldn't let some liberal white gay from Michigan think for a second that they were Blacker than me. So I nodded and fixed my lips to say, "You're right, thank you for looking this over" as I secretly wrote in my planner: RESEARCH AFROPESSIMISM.

And that I did.

I read up on Frank Wilderson and Jared Sexton. I watched so many hour-long lectures discussing the strengths and weaknesses of the AfroPessimist argument. I learned that there were many arguments in agreement with AfroPessimism - almost just as much as there were disagreeances. I learned quickly just how ironic it was for me to first hear the term from a liberal white gay. From the midwest. I quickly stopped laughing to myself when I realized that the Afropessimist would smack their lips at me screaming *I told you so* if they ever heard me say this.

I did my homework. *Thanks but no thanks to the liberal white gays of the midwest.*

The thing is, I've been a witness to AfroPessimism my entire life. I just never had a word for it. AfroPessimism introduced herself to me first as a whisper from the adult table during my summer family cookouts. *You know they won't fix up dem Black schools, ain't no point in wasting your time protesting fa nothing*.

In grade school, she would always tap on my shoulder when Black History Month rolled around. *Yup, that's your history and that's all there ever will be. They teach the same story of freedom every February and there's nothing you can do about it.*

In my senior year of highschool, she was like a chatty school girl that I couldn't get rid of. *B*tch it's 2020 and they still killing you in these streets. You think going to some white prissy school Upstate is gonna help you escape? As long as you're alive with skin like that, you can't escape sh*t.*

Now, almost regrettably, she has found herself in my senior project. But this time, she has a name. AFROPESSIMISM. We grew up together. She was there when I first found out that I was Black. My mother and I were living between Tampa, Florida and Nashville, Tennessee at the time and I had to have been two or three years old. This was during the time that I began taking the new vocabulary words from the flash cards that my mother would drill me on into the real world. The sky was no longer S-K-Y printed in bold black letters with a shade of blue behind it accompanied by a big yellow circle and black M-shaped creatures. It was a sky. A *real* sky with a real sun and real birds that aren't, may I add, M-shaped at all. Also, no one told me that that big yellow circle spelled S-U-N wasn't as close to me as it was on paper, it wasn't always yellow, and that it could blind me if I looked at it too long without some sunglasses over my eyes. I began to see the world in colors, shapes, noises, and smells. It amazed me every time I would make a connection between a word and picture on my flashcards to the real thing. I also learned that looks could be deceiving because before this point, I thought that hiding in the trash can would help me to finally meet my all-time childhood hero. Yup. Elmo. Elmo in fact never came to visit me and hiding in the trash can only earned me a stern talking to from my grandfather.

Then, if you had asked me to describe my grandfather, I would have told you that his name is Louis. That is when I could remember his name, he probably got tired of me asking. I just started calling him Pop-Pop because apparently calling your elder by their first name was disrespectful. Pop-Pop was a young man who was older than my mother and I but about the same age as my grandmother, Miam. He liked to drink Dr.Pepper and he loved to go to work. After a very long day of work, he would somehow always find the energy to pick my little two to three year old brain. *Okay Xan, what colors did you learn today?* At this point I would go grab my stack of flashcards, sit them in front of him, and prove to him that I knew a lot about the real world. I was the expert and he was my student.

Green. G-R-E-E-N. Green. Like the grass outside. Blue. B-L-U-E. Blue. Like the sky. Purple. P-U-R-P-L-E. Purple. Like you Pop-Pop!

Purple? Who told you that I was purple?

I took a pause. Looked at all the cards before me and began to perform my own scientific process of elimination and said…

Well, yes. See, you are purple. I am dark yellow. Mommy is brown.

My grandfather was in fact not purple. He's a dark skinned man. I was light skinned and my mother was somewhere in the middle. He laughed,

Little girl, what are they teaching you in preschool? If I could be purple I would, but I'm not purple. You're not dark yellow and your mom is not just brown. We are all Black. Everybody in this house is Black.

I was stunned. Have the flashcards lied to me again? I picked up the black flashcard and saw B-L-A-C-K with the dark shade of color that was associated with it. Black? We couldn't be

black, I looked more like a dark yellow than a black. My grandfather looked more like a purple than a black.

When you go back to school, you tell all of your friends that you are Black. Say it loud and say it proud! Don't let those white teachers tell you ya dark yellow. You are Black and only Black.

I didn't realize it then but AfroPessimism, AP for short, came into my life as early as I could read. I want to make myself clear: AfroPessimism is not synonymous with being Black. When my grandfather told me that I was Black, I didn't understand what he meant at first. I just took what he said to be true and started calling myself Black from that day on. I couldn't help but to think about why he was so adamant about me realizing that I was Black. Why did my teachers' have to be white and not cream or ivory? Everything that I ever knew about the world and to be true was on those flashcards. Black people and white people were not. When Pop-Pop saw how confused I was upon learning this new information, he picked me up and, although I cannot remember everything that he said - I was only two or three, he told me…

You will understand as you get older like me and your mom and your uncles. You are a beautiful Black girl. People will try to tell you differently but you must never forget that. It's good that you're learning now, so young. But you will have to keep learning this. You are Black and that makes you different. Different is good, Black is good.

So I grew up knowing that I was Black and the older I got, the more it began to make sense. Black was no longer B-L-A-C-K. To be Black was to be different, another form of being. Another form of human. I wasn't normal, I was Black. AP was Black too. She was different like me.

I have gotten to know her more and more through the years. For example, she's the most pro-Black person that I have ever met. She's so pro-Black that she doesn't know how to be anything else. I can admire that about her. She knows her history and she owns it. She was the most popular girl in school. Everyone clinged to her showboaty personality. She was the type of girl who meant what she said and said what she meant. She was strong and alluring. She had all the answers.

When I graduated from highschool, I started to see beneath her chatty school girl facade. College does that to you sometimes. As a young adult, she struggled. She believed that her whole existence was needed for the world to function, and although I initially judged her for thinking that she's "bigger than life", I now understand where she gets it from. Our history is the magic that keeps capitalism and white supremacy going - we make the world go round. Without us, these things wouldn't exist. AfroPessimism made it her life goal to continue to make the world go round. She placed the world on her shoulders and believed that if she lifted her arms for even a second, the Earth as we know it would stop spinning and the cosmos would be in utter chaos. I like to think that she overexerts herself and she likes to think that I overexert myself in all the wrong places.

AfroPessimism stems from a focus on Black Struggle that is rooted in reality. It is the parts of us that we wish to hide, that we wish weren't true and although I find myself at odds with AfroPessimism, I understand her. I have thought about some of the things that she has thought about. I have felt like she has felt and sometimes I still do. I choose to gender AfroPessimism as *she* because that is how I have experienced her - through a Black, femme and queer lens. But she is genderless. She is fleshless. For the academic, she is a theoretical

understanding of what it means to be Black. For me, she is all of the things that I have hated about myself. She is the reason why I am so afraid to write this senior project and why I have started this chapter five times. She is my beginning and trying to not make her my end is difficult. It is laborious. It is taunting and painful. But if we are going to begin the process of thinking about freedom in a revolutionary way, we have to confront that pain. We have to understand our pain, we must understand our being. The Black being. The process of being Black. Let us explore our pain together. Explore a history of pain that is Black. A Black history is a painful history, you must understand this now as a starting point. If you want to be free tomorrow, you must learn about your past today. I understand AP because she is the piece of me that I have tried to avoid for so long.

AfroPessimism is a critical framework that situates the Black existence as the central operating force for humanity's continuance. *It is better thought of as a theoretical lens for situating relations of power, at the level of the political and the libidinal (Introduction, 1)*. It is the aftermath of slavery and the existing effects that the burdens of colonialism have left for Black people. To go a step further, AfroPessimist theory contends that Blackness itself is a perpetual state of enslavement that is integral to the whole of human life. In the chapters to follow, I will conduct a close reading of Frank Wilderson's 2020 publication of *AfroPessimism*, and instead of arguing against AfroPessimism in its entirety, I seek to challenge Wilderson and other AfroPessimist thinkers to move past theory.

I contend that AfroPessimism should not be confined solely to the realm of critical theory. If we acknowledge the assertions within this framework that hinge on the complete objectification of a specific group of people for the sustenance of human life, we must grapple

with the profound implications that follow. The perpetual reconstruction of a person's being prompts a fundamental inquiry into the very essence of humanity. Importantly, I reject the notion that Blackness equates to nothingness. There exists a culture, a language, and a history that ought to be understood from the lived experiences of Black people. These elements demand nuanced understanding, grounded in the lived experiences of Black individuals. This perspective challenges AfroPessimism's bleak narrative by emphasizing the resilience and vibrancy inherent in being Black. In engaging with AfroPessimism, a crucial dialogue unfolds, delving into the intricacies of where possibility lies—within the potential for recognition, appreciation, and a more holistic understanding of the multifaceted dimensions of Black existence.

At this point, you may be saying to yourself: *Okay…so if she's so against AfroPessimsim, why is she beginning her project here?* I want to make it clear that I do not wish to discard the AfroPessimist and their theories altogether. I begin my argument with AfroPessimism for a specific reason: it provides a comprehensive lens through which we can accept the various ways in which anti-Black violence occurs in society. AfroPessimism posits that there is no domain where Black individuals will genuinely experience freedom. Wilderson writes in *Afro-Pessimism, An Introduction*:

> "The distinction that Afro-pessimism makes is important because it problematizes any positive affirmation of identity... Stated otherwise, "the violence of antiblackness produces black existence; there is no prior positive blackness that could be potentially appropriated. 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, "Introduction", 9-10)

By acknowledging the inherent connection between being Black and experiencing what I will go into more detail about later, social death, AfroPessimism validates a historical narrative of anti-Black violence. This approach serves to underscore the deep-rooted impact of racism, offering insights that contribute to a more comprehensive and historically grounded assessment of the challenges faced by the Black community. I do not seek to ignore this fact because doing so would present a naive approach to solving the puzzle of how to achieve freedom as a Black individual. Instead, I encourage AfroPessimists to not just acknowledge the anti-Black violence that has been and continues to be a repetitive occurrence in history; I implore them to take action and recognize, as Saidiya Hartman does, the forms of action that Black people throughout our histories have taken that are forms of freedom. We create, maintain connection, care and mutual support within the larger systems of anti-Blackness.

AfroPessimism sets forth a cyclical understanding of history that leaves little to no room for the possibility of progress to occur. This is articulated by David Marriott, who, in the context of contemporary narratives writes:

> "In the current discourses of fear and terror, in which the slightest suspicion of a black presence can be steered into mass hysteria and hatred, and all the more readily when the object of distrust hovers uncertainly between the known and the unknown (though we pretend to know who the real enemy is), paranoia and destruction soon teach us that the future will always return in the form of negrophobic malice, in whose aggression black

> identity is attacked and scorned." (Marriott, "Whither Fanon? Studies in the Blackness of Being")

Conversely, critics of AfroPessimism propose an alternative viewpoint, seeing time and history as oscillating back and forth, akin to a pendulum. Amidst this oscillation lies a space for hope, agency, and change, challenging the fatalistic outlook of AfroPessimism. Saidiya Hartman writes about "the interregnum" in her work titled *Venus in Two Acts*:

> "It is much too late for the accounts of death to prevent other deaths; and it is much too early for such scenes of death to halt other crimes. But in the meantime, in the space of the interval, between too late and too early, between the no longer and the not yet, our lives are coeval with the girl's in the as-yet-incomplete project of freedom. In the meantime, it is clear that her life and ours hang in the balance." (Hartman, 2008, 14)

In this liminal space, Hartman contends that the project of freedom is not a straightforward, progressive undertaking. Instead, it hinges on the belief that the past is not concluded, and within its depths, potential futures can still be unearthed. In the next chapter, I would like to show you where possibility can lead us when we allow for it to take form. This multifaceted view invites contemplation on the intricate intersections of history, identity, and the potential for a transformative future. There is a possibility to make the seemingly impossible, possible. We already have.

Chapter 2: Social Death in Conversation with the Black Matriarchy

The concept of social death was originally coined by sociologist Orlando Patterson in his 1982 publication, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, where he characterizes the dehumanization of enslaved Africans as an absolute erasure of their culture which ultimately becomes an erasure of human rights designated to the slave. Patterson writes:

> "As Siegfried Lauffer puts it, the power relationship (*Gewaltverhältnis)* that formed the basis of the slave relationship had to become a rights relationship (*Rechtsverhaltnis).* Those who were not directly involved with the relationship – though indirectly influenced by it – had to come to accept it not just grudgingly, but as the normal order of things…If the slave no longer belonged to a community, if he had no social existence outside of his master, then what is he?" (Patterson, 1982, 37-38)

Wilderson, like other AfroPessimist scholars and Black theorists, position the birth of Blackness as being synonymous to the birth of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Slavery gave birth to Blackness and to be Black is, abstractly, to be a slave. When we take a second to reread Patterson's quote, it becomes apparent that we must first analyze the position of our dear enslaved counterparts - of ourselves.

I fully came to an understanding of this ideology upon reading Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* during my second year studying Philosophy at Bard College. This class covered a comprehensive yet limited history of Philosophy which means, yes you guessed it, we only talked in depth about one Black philosophical text the entire semester. Still, that one week or so was very troubling for me. I struggled with the fact that I had to question my Blackness in a class taught by a white professor to an almost fully white classroom, as if that wasn't enough pressure

already. I remember the immense introversion that I experienced that semester as a student in the course; it sometimes felt like I was getting my own publicly-personalized therapy session with occasional opportunities for me to share out my thoughts and feelings on what it was like to be Black or as the professor put it, *class participation*. I couldn't read the texts without reflecting on my own Blackness. For our final essay assignment of the course, we were asked to write an eight to ten page paper about any reading that struck us the most during the duration of the course. Like any other Black student at a PWI in my predicament might do, I wrote my essay on the only Black text covered the entire semester, Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*. I wanted to express in writing this essay just how difficult it is to envision freedom for the Black individual when that freedom is constantly being tied to a relational dynamic where whiteness is superior in power to Blackness. I wrote the following in said essay:

> "The liberation that the Black man seeks is that from whiteness, opposed to Blackness. Whiteness, as defined by Teresa J. Guess, is the privileged othered of "the black/white binary paradigm" that can be identified as a social construction when addressing racial inequality. (Guess 649) Therefore, by employing Black and white as opposing dualisms in sociological discourse, "the terms "blackness" and "*whiteness*" represent conceptual machineries of universe-maintenance relative to the concept, race". (Guess 656) So what exactly does this mean? The internal struggle of the Black man is reduced to his desire to be actional in the human world, which, defined by Fanon, is a constant tug of war in which he is both an affirmation and negation. He is a Black man seeking to live a human experience that is dependent on whiteness socially, economically, and politically. (Guess 651) This then prompts the Black man to desire something that is outside of himself yet

> at the same time, something that is also “most human in man: freedom”. (Fanon 187) To desire such contradictory concepts troubles the Black man and leaves him, ultimately, not being able to achieve either. Opposed to his white master who may have lost property under the emancipation of slavery, the Black man has lost everything. His master is left with dominance over the non-white minority, while the Black slave is left to “pursue something other than life, insofar as...fighting for the birth of a human world, in other words, a world of reciprocal recognition”. (Fanon 193)”

At the end of my sophomore year, I had come to the conclusion that I was nothing without whiteness. No matter how much I wanted to change it, I couldn’t change who I was in the world around me. Being the only Black person in my classes stripped my possibility of having an academic experience that equated to that of my nonBlack counterparts and was only a reflection of what life for folks like *us* would look like. We can’t wipe our skin clean of its blackness. I was othered, alienated, and alone. If I would have known then what the term meant, I would have said that I was socially dead.

In this chapter, I seek to embark on the first step to emancipate my past self with the hope that you will join me. In seeking freedom, we must not only seek truth but we must seek to define what truth is to us. *What are your truths?* Truth can be hard to accept, especially when it hurts us. Especially when we are afraid. But, truth can also change and mold itself into a different world of possibilities. To demonstrate this, I will begin with my own truth. Particularly, I will focus on Black freedom as it is constituted through maternal relationships. Fanon speaks explicitly of the Black man. So, too, does Wilderson, though implicitly. I will argue that through

focusing on maternal relationships, freedom can be glimpsed in the intergenerational relationships of care and mutual co-creation that characterize those relationships.

Structural Understanding of the Black Position

> "What sets the Black apart from the Human? It is the division between social death and social life; a divide between the structural violence of, for example, capitalism, postcolonialism, and patriarchy, and the structural violence of social death."
>
> - Frank Wilderson, *AfroPessimism* (223)

For the AfroPessimist, Black people are not regarded as Human; rather, they can only be understood within an ontological structural understanding that positions the Black individual as "Slave". By 'ontological', I mean the fundamental level of being - what is and what is not. Wilderson writes: "The social death of the slave goes to the very level of their being, defining their ontology." (Wilderson, "Introduction", 8) That is, for Wilderson, Blackness is defined as "being for the captor," namely, for whiteness. The concept of the slave's social death extends to the core of their existence, shaping and defining their very ontology. This argument denies the claim that slavery ended upon the ratification of the 13th amendment for, as Wilderson writes:

> "The violence of slavery [...] did not end in 1865 for the simple reason that slavery did not end in 1865. Slavery is a relational dynamic—not an event and certainly not a place in space like the South; just as colonialism is a relational dynamic—and that relational dynamic can continue to exist once the settler has left or ceded governmental power." (Wilderson 41)

Since slavery functions as a relational dynamic, it can continue to exist even after emancipation. Thus the condition of social death continues. AfroPessimist theory argues that since Blackness equates to being a slave, the only way to end slavery is to end Black life. Slavery does not form itself as "an ensemble of empirical practices (like whips and chains)" (Wilderson 41). If we begin to understand slavery within this relational framework rather than simply "a moment in history", it becomes difficult to conceptualize achieving freedom without death.

Drawing on Patterson, Wilderson further notes that the slave's position of social death is characterized by three features. The slave as socially dead is:

> "1) open to gratuitous violence, as opposed to violence contingent upon some transgression or crime; 2) natally alienated, their ties of birth not recognized and familial structures intentionally broken apart; and 3) generally dishonored, or disgraced before any thought or action is considered" (Wilderson, "Introduction", 8).

In the next few pages, I argue that Black people have already begun the process of being free from slaveness. When we change the lens in which we view Blackness, that in *sole* relation to whiteness, there exists a possibility that Wilderson and other AfroPessimist thinkers fail to consider. Although the 13th amendment did not completely erase the violence of slavery, emancipation was just the first step to affirming Black life and Black freedom. I have been able to recognize this possibility of affirmation within my own relationships.

My first introduction to slavery was in the classroom. I spent most of my primary education learning in the Vicksburg Warren Public School District, one of the poorest and *Blackest* school districts in Mississippi. At the age of six, I was taught to understand slavery as obsolete. Every year during Black History Month, my teachers would take us on field trips to

visit historical Confederate battlefield sites and Civil War museums to learn about the history of slavery in the United States. A history that we did not live, but for some reason, it was still important for us to learn. Then, I would always think to myself, *if slavery is something of the past, why do we continue to learn about it every year?* I had asked my first grade teacher this question. She replied, "this is your history", as she pointed to the screen projection of a young Black woman dressed in all white with a basket full of cotton on her head standing in the middle of a grassy field. Her response to my question left me unsatisfied and full of inquiry.

The topic of slavery was unlike any other standardized lesson in our curriculum. From then on, I had come to the conclusion that I had to continue to learn about it over and over again because it was *my* history. The image of the young woman in the field became embedded into my brain along with all of the other images that I had seen over the years of Black people in fields, with wearied expressions on their faces and deep scars across their backs. I would sometimes get lost looking at the images, captivated by how much violence with an image could be understood yet never experienced. My six year old self had never once had my back lashed, yet it felt like the slave woman and I had shared some sort of shared past. Her pain was mine to hold.

These thoughts became poignant for me two months after my tenth birthday, when the world stood still. ***February 12, 2012***. The day that Trayvon Martin was shot and killed for no other reason than his Blackness. His picture permeated my memory as it did in homes across America. He looked like he could have been the brother of one of my first grade classmates. His eyes sunken like the woman in the field. I learned that day the lesson that Wilderson wishes to remind me of now. To be Black is to subject your body to gratuitous violence that "never goes

into remission…the prehistory of violence that establishes slavery is also the *concurrent history* of slavery." (Wilderson 224)

I was overwhelmed with fear upon hearing the details of Trayvon's death. I began to fear for my own life, for my siblings' lives. At just ten years old, I was afraid of dying. That day of hearing Trayvon's name whispered in school hallways turned into weeks, then months. I remember sitting in my room one day crying out to Trayvon. I couldn't quite understand the immense sadness that I felt, which frustrated me even more. I had wished that someone had been there to help Tray. I prayed that someone would be there to help me when it was my time to come face to face with my Blackness and surrender. My mother had heard my tears, and joined me on the floor.

She said, "Why are you crying Xan?"

I'm scared.

She had a puzzled look on her face, "What are you so afraid of?"

I don't want to die. I don't want to die and not know why.

She paused for a moment and turned off the Youtube video on my tablet that had been playing news coverage of Trayvon's mother speaking to the press. She picked me up to cradle me in her arms like a newborn baby. With my ear to her chest listening to her heartbeat, she told me frankly,

> "It's okay to be sad, it is okay to be scared. Mommy's scared too. But guess what, you still have to go to school and mommy still has to go to work. So you have a choice, are you going to stay home in fear or go to school and give yourself a chance to find something that makes you happy?"

Find something that makes me happy? How can I be happy when something like this happens?

> "You won't be happy all the time, emotions don't work that way. Life doesn't work that way. Sad things happen and when they do, we get to decide how we want to proceed. And as your mother I am telling you, *we* do not make decisions out of fear. No matter how much it scares us. So you have a choice, what are you going to do?"

I chose to get up and go to school.

I often think about this moment and the conversations that my mother and I had following that day. *You have a choice*. On the surface level, this may seem like a usual conversation that an encouraging mother would give to her worried daughter in a time of need, however, this conversation is grounded in a much deeper relationship that exists between my mother and I, further noting that Black people are not natally alienated as Wilderson suggests. I like to believe that that day was the day that my mother became aware of her Black motherhood, and her telling me that I had a choice was not wishful thinking. She recognized that although she couldn't change the world that she was raising her children in, she could change how her children thought about their position in the world. My mother had flipped Wilderson's relational theory on its head. Instead of seeing ourselves in relation to "nonBlack", my mother wanted her children to see themselves as they do in the mirror; she wanted us to exist in our Blackness purely for our Blackness, not for nonBlackness. In this way, she taught us that we had autonomy over our lives just like anyone else. Yes, we are Black but we are not slaves. The AfroPessimist operates under a theoretical lens that limits the possibilities of reimagining what agency and freedom looks like for Black people, beginning with the Black family.

Re-Inventing the Black Family

"But civil society would not know the boundary, the frontier, of such debates, which is to say it would lose all coherence and not be able to draw the line between social life and social death, if not for the presence of Black folks. Black people hold that line for White people and for everyone else. Blacks give even the most degraded position a sense of human possibility because we are the locus of human impossibility."

Frank Wilderson, *AfroPessimism* (222)

In this quote, Wilderson argues that civil society is deeply connected to anti-Black violence. There would be no civil society without violence against Black people. This 'all-encompassing' violence not only establishes the status of Black people in society as subordinate, but it necessitates the social death of Black people as the foundation of a civil society, which consequently further illustrates that slaveness cannot be dis-imbricated from Blackness. In other words, AfroPessimist theory argues that anti-Black violence is crucial for the psychic well-being of white and non-Black individuals. Those who are non-Black affirm their humanness in the non-humanness of the Black race. In addition to social death leaving Black folks open to gratuitous violence, Wilderson argues that the relational dynamic between master and slave leaves the Black individual subject to natal alienation. He writes:

> "The slave is natally alienated, which is to say that the temporality of one's life that is manifest in filial and afilial relations—the capacity to have families and the capacity to have associative relations—may exist very well in your head. You might say, "I have a father, I have a mother," but, in point of fact, the world does not recognize or incorporate your filial relations into its understanding of family…because you exist in a regime of violence which is gratuitous, open, and you are openly vulnerable to everyone else" (Wilderson, "Introduction", 18)

Wilderson's stance on natal alienation for the Black individual, as he continues to defend that Blackness equates to slaveness, makes the presence of the Black family non-existent. Not only that, but his argument also completely denounces the experiences of Black individuals who have resisted against natal alienation through cultivating community and care within the Black family. The Black family instead extends beyond just filial and afilial relations for through these

relations freedom is exercised through practices of individual agency, spiritual praxis, and political organizing. I will make this argument by drawing on conversations that I have had within the maternal relationships in my family, which Wilderson fails to explore. In the next few pages, you will read excerpts that will give you a taste of how my Black family, one that centers Black womanhood, exercises freedom. One after the other, you will find that these practices generationally build off of one another, making the position of the Black individual one that is not natally alienated.

Terranitrick Angelic "Angel"

In 2004, Terranitrick Angelic was a college sophomore studying dance and psychology at Fisk University. She found freedom in her ability to contort her limbs in any way that she

pleased, yet this freedom could only be felt in small doses. If she showed too much of an interest for the appreciation of her very own body, her parents just forty-five miles away from her would have soon been able to tell that she had once again changed her mind about what she really wanted out of life. She wasn't at college only to pursue a degree in the sciences. The truth is, Terranitrick had always been an explorer and wasn't going to stop until she found the answers to all of her unasked questions. Psychology was a coverup, one that she could only bear because she enjoyed learning how others think. Perhaps this helped her feel more confident and secure in her own thoughts, though she still wondered what her life would have been like if she made the choice to pursue a career in dance full-time. If she had ignored the pressure that her parents had put on her to choose one thing and stick to it.

Attractive by nature, she was raised to find the beauty in people not by their appearance, but through their actions. She didn't care much about the clothes that she wore, as long as she could bust a move in them regardless of the time or place. Worn joggers, wrinkled shirts, and weary bras compiled in her tiny dorm closet like they were Gucci or Prada - as neat as could be. Raised in Kings, Mississippi, no one cared about the clothes that you had on your back as long as you had something to wear, you were alright. She didn't have time to worry herself about the superficial matters of life for she was too busy chasing an ambition that she didn't know in certainty, but knew that whatever it was it is destined to be hers. Dancing and studying were her only two cares in the world, before she had me that same year. At just twenty-one years old, her life was uprooted from the damp ground and made anew. Motherhood was something that her parents failed to prepare her for, but Angel was always down for a challenge.

My mother is now 42 years young and still finds herself searching for answers to her unasked questions. During our interviews, I was always so curious to learn more about the moments in life that had made my mother happy before she became a mother. I would imagine what her life would have been like if she didn't have children at such a young age, let alone in the middle of her college education. One day she got tired of me asking such frivolous questions and said,

> *Angel*: Girl, I don't spend time wondering about what could have happened if so and so didn't happen. I'm enjoying where I am now in the present. I coulda been a lot of things and coulda been a lot of places. But I made choices that got me to where I am today and I don't regret any of them. If I didn't have you in college during that particular time in my life, I would have never had the courage to show my parents that I can make decisions for myself and own up to those decisions. Shoot, I would have never been able to prove to myself that *I* had it in me. If you would have told me the day that I took that pregnancy test and it came back positive that I was going to walk across the graduation stage as a single mother with a degree, I would have never believed you. But I did it.
>
> *Sydney*: Do you think that being a mother ever restricted your freedom?
>
> *Angel:* Well that depends on what you define freedom to be. I don't think anyone is ever one-hundred percent free all the time. You still have responsibilities, and my children are my responsibility. Freedom takes many forms, but when it comes down to it, freedom is having the ability to make a choice even if you ain't got many choices to choose from. Freedom isn't linear, it changes. I may have the freedom to treat ya'll to McDonald's one

day and the next day I may not. But do know, on those days that I could make it happen, I made it happen.

Sydney: As a Black mother, what did you teach your kids about freedom?

Angel: In a worthy sense, I haven't taught y'all anything about freedom. Freedom is something that you have to learn. You had to feel it for yourself and feel it in all its forms. You knew what freedom felt like when you had it, and when you didn't. You also knew what it felt like to have someone threaten to take it away from you. I'm a Black mother raising Black children, I know that I can't protect y'all from the world. I did my very best to prepare you and your siblings up to this point where you are now but you grew up knowing that you had choices and as time went on, you began to understand that freedom has always been a birthright. It's always been accessible to you. But because the world got some ugly and cruel people out there, you have to constantly prove to yourself that you are free. And prove it to yourself, not anyone else.

Sydney: I like what you just said about us having to prove it to ourselves and not other people, can you speak a little bit more to that? Why is it important to make that distinction between the self and what is outside of the self?

Angel: I mean, if you spend your whole life doing what other people want you to do then you'll never make choices that God said were yours to make. My mother would always tell me that she never thought of herself as not being free. And she went to school in the segregated South! She doesn't let things that can sometimes limit her freedom make her who she is. And that's the beautiful part about not teaching you all about freedom as a

> concept. Freedom is doing, you have to do it. Mamo taught me to always have a way to make my own way. Freedom for her was being able to stand on your own two feet, to have your own, and to have something that nobody can take away from you.

What I appreciate in my discussions with my mother is her clarity on the path forward. To attain freedom, I need to actively seek and experience it firsthand—it's not something that you can simply possess. She taught me to understand that freedom is an ongoing relationship with oneself that requires consistent nurturing.

Tracy Sullivan "Miam"

Tracy Sullivan spent her whole life in the church. From the moment she was born her mother had prayed over her: *Let this child know who she is and whose she is, she is a child of God*. Her mother, Alma Taylor, raised her children in the world to be God-fearing and they turned out to be just that.They feared little to nothing but the heavenly father up above. In Kings, Tracy and her siblings were known as "dem Taylor kids". You messed with one of them, you messed with all of them. As the second youngest of the bunch, Tracy followed in her older siblings' footsteps and always strived towards discipline. She had seen what happened when her brothers wouldn't follow the rules and pledged that she would do her best to be a well-mannered, kind young lady. In fear of getting disciplined by her strict father, she sometimes felt as though she had to walk on eggshells in her own home.

Being in church gave her the opportunity to make mistakes freely and with little consequence. She could try anything in the church. She may not have been the best singer but the chorus leader would let her sing in the choir every Sunday and even during Bible study if she wanted to. Throughout her time in the church, she had seen kids who didn't know the difference between their left and right feet on the front lines of the praise dance performances during service. If you could hold a note, you could be in the choir and if you could move your feet you were encouraged to dance. That's how it was in the church. It was the only place where she could truly be herself because God loved all his children; he would never punish them without reason.

Growing up, I didn't really know that much about my grandmother's life. Until recently, my grandmother was *just* my grandmother. It was hard for me to imagine her being anything else. One thing that was for certain, I always knew that my grandmother had a very strong

connection with God. She would always tell us: *If you're ever feeling down and feel like you can't talk to anybody about what you going through, talk to God first. Close your eyes and just listen real good, he'll give you the answer to what you looking for. Sometimes, he'd just ask you to sit and be with him.*

When Tracy had gotten older and moved away from Kings, she continued to grow her relationship with God, but had troubles finding a church like the one she had at home. She started going to church less but still managed to find her way back to a spiritual praxis that made her feel just as free as she did in the church choir. During our interviews, I was curious to hear more about how she came to experience freedom in this way, beginning first with her thoughts on how the quest for freedom is a spiritual one.

Sydney: How has your relationship with God made you more free?

Tracy: When I think of freedom, I don't think that it's always something that should be associated with getting to do whatever you want to do. If that was the case then we're all never truly free because we have responsibilities. When I think of freedom, I think of it being something that grows with you. You gotta continuously work to be more free, to know what the heck you're doing in life. Having a relationship with God helps you to have a vision and to work towards something because when you have faith, when you believe that something is going to happen because God told you that it would, you're already practicing freedom.

Sydney: What does practicing freedom spiritually look like then, on the day to day?

Tracy: Treating others the way you want to be treated. Being disciplined in the Gospel so that you become better at trusting your knowing. When you do right, you act right. So if God says that you have a gift, you have to use your gift. You have to be disciplined and you have to have a vision. I believe that if you don't see yourself in the future, you might as well not be in the present.

Sydney: What does freedom look like to you now in comparison to when you were younger?

Tracy: I have always been free. There's been no question about that. I think that over the years, I've just gotten more comfortable with saying that out loud, that I've always been free and that there are no limits to what I can do. I have to remind myself that God gave me dominion over my own life. Genesis 1:26, he made us in his image. So when I think

about my upbringing, I think about how I grew up in a house with a lot of rules. I had to be at home before the streetlights came on, if I wanted to go out I had to make sure that I made good grades, and of course I had house chores to do here and there. Even though in the back of my mind I knew that I had a choice of whether or not I wanted to follow these rules, a lot of the times it felt as though I didn't have a choice because my parents were just so darn strict about things.

Sydney: When you talk about your upbringing, you mention that there were some limits to accessing the freedom that you knew you had. Can you talk a bit about how your relationship with God helped you during those times to remember that you were free? What did that look like?

Tracy: Having a close relationship to God helped me more and more to be confident in who I was. If he said I was free, then I knew that I was free even when my parents or the world would tell me that I wasn't. You can't argue with God! But I think that it's more than just reading a Bible and going to church on Sundays. For me, my relationship with God has grown over the years to where I didn't even need to go to church all the time to know that he was with me every step of the way. God is hope and he is strength. I can't really explain all too well but when you know that you are God's child, and you've been able to see all the good things he's done in your life, it's hard to not want to embody that same hope and strength in yourself.

Sydney: What did you teach your children about God and how he showed up in their lives?

Tracy: I would reword that question and *ask what did my children teach me about God?* Because that's really what happened. When I had your mom, I had nothing but choices. Too many if you ask me. I had to decide how I was going to raise my children, every decision mattered then. I think because I had such a strict upbringing, I was scared of leading your mother and your uncles in the wrong direction. What would happen to my kids if I let them do this or that? Your mother had it difficult because I was so focused on protecting my kids from the world that I didn't let them make those decisions for themselves. I didn't let them exercise their right to be *free*. I realized that I was limiting their freedom. Your mom taught me to trust in God and to not let my own worry cloud my judgment. When I learned how to trust in God, and remember that he will keep me safe, I knew that he would keep them safe too.

Sydney: What about your grandchildren? What did they teach you about God and freedom?

Tracy: Oh you guys got all of his anointing over you! You aren't afraid of anything. When I saw that you were going to Bard and all of the amazing things that you were doing up in New York, it inspired me to keep doing great things for myself. Now look at me, sixty-two years old and in school getting my Bachelors in Theology. I lived a full life, raised children and had a full career. Now I'm doing things for me and you taught me that my freedom doesn't have to be limited either. The possibilities are endless. Watching you all grow, I learned so much more than what I would have on my own.

> Angel taught me how to be a better mother because she was a better mother than I ever was.

Through these conversations, I've gained a deeper understanding of my grandmother and who she is. Her experiences emphasize the significance of intergenerational learning, stressing the importance of continuous questioning, particularly within a family structure.This process of inquiry serves as a pathway to self-creation and, consequently, a manifestation of freedom, a principle she has personally embraced. Her acknowledgment that her children and grandchildren have contributed to her self-discovery underscores the transformative potential of intergenerational interactions. Freedom, viewed as a spiritual praxis, evolves with personal growth and flourishes in connections with family and community. This type of freedom is a potent force that expands through care and support, representing a positive affirmation of Blackness.

Alma Lee Fox Taylor "Mamo"

When Alma Taylor died, she took the spirit of Vicksburg with her. She cared about her community more than she cared about herself. Her moments of self-care were confined to the modest trailer adjacent to her home - an abode that brought her immense joy. Here, she crafted towering ceramics, reaching from the floor to the ceiling. My mother liked to say that Mamo would take a person's life and do what she would do with those ceramics. She wasn't just building ceramics, she was building the people. Before my great-grandmother's passing, I would remember spending long days with her and my cousins driving from neighborhood to neighborhood canvassing for the Mississippi politicians that she wished to have in office. Mamo always showed through her actions what she stood for - cultivating community and investing in the Black youth. If she was helping a politician get into office, she would round up all her descendants - old and young - to be in the streets encouraging people to vote. That's how you knew she truly liked a politician, when she brought all of the Taylors with her. Everyone in Mississippi knew that if you wanted to run for office and win, you had to come to Mamo. She would tell government officials who wanted her endorsement, "It ain't about you; it's about the people".

Mamo did what she wanted to do and would cut you up if you told her otherwise. She never took no for an answer, there was always a way. She would make a way out of no way if she had to. As someone who came to understand her Black womanhood during the Civil Rights Era, she understood that in order for any progress to be made in the Black community, it had to be done *within* the Black community itself. She would tell her descendants, "You have to show

up, always. If not for yourself then do it for your sister and your brother. Do it for the people you love. Something is better than nothing”.

Mamo instilled in me the importance not only of nurturing familial bonds but also of cultivating communal connections beyond our immediate family circle, emphasizing that it is not just a possibility but a vital necessity. Even after her passing, Mamo's impactful legacy endured across the state of Mississippi, where she dedicated herself to numerous community achievements. Her funeral, the most extensive I had ever attended, drew family and community members from all corners of Mississippi, uniting in mourning and celebrating the remarkable life she led.

Representatives from the United States House of Representatives even joined us to commemorate Mamo's life, culminating in the passage of a resolution in her honor:

MISSISSIPPI LEGISLATURE
2013 Regular Session
To: Rules
By: Representative Flaggs

House Resolution 14

(As Adopted by House)

A RESOLUTION COMMENDING THE LIFE, LEGACY AND LEADERSHIP OF MRS. ALMA LEE FOX TAYLOR AND EXPRESSING DEEPEST SYMPATHY UPON HER PASSING.

WHEREAS, Mrs. Alma Lee Fox Taylor departed this earthly life at the age of 78 on January 19, 2013, causing great loss to her family and many friends; and

WHEREAS, a native of Vicksburg, Mississippi, Mrs. Taylor was born on October 20, 1934, to her loving parents, the late Oscar Fox and Susie Norris, who reared her in Christian love; and

WHEREAS, as a believer in Jesus Christ, Mrs. Taylor confessed Christ at an early age at Faith Christian Center under the leadership of Reverend Dr. Ollie Hardaway and was the founder and mother of King of Kings Christian Center, which is under the leadership of Reverend Willie Patrick Taylor; and

WHEREAS, as a woman of virtue and beauty, Mrs. Taylor was united in holy matrimony to her late husband, Meredith John Taylor, Sr., and to this union five successful children were born; and

WHEREAS, knowing the importance of receiving an education, Mrs. Taylor was a graduate of Hinds Community College with a degree in nursing, and she went on to use her education at Kuhn Memorial Hospital where she faithfully served as a physical therapist until her retirement; and

WHEREAS, Mrs. Taylor, who had an entrepreneurial spirit and zeal for being productive, was the founder and owner of T & T Ceramics, where she provided elegant products to her countless customers; and

WHEREAS, in addition to being an entrepreneur, Mrs. Taylor was a community activist who helped establish the Head Start Centers in Warren County, which have helped hundreds of young

people of the county receive a strong educational foundation; and

WHEREAS, Mrs. Taylor was also active in making sure the community exercised its right to vote and was instrumental in getting Representative George Flaggs reelected numerous times to the Mississippi House of Representatives in his grass root political efforts; and

WHEREAS, as one who believed in fighting for what she believed was right, Mrs. Taylor was affectionately known as "Mrs. Scrap Taylor" to many, which reflected her feisty yet endearing personality; and

WHEREAS, Mrs. Taylor was also lovingly known as "Mamo" due to the numerous individuals she provided shelter for while simultaneously serving as a role model for her community; and

WHEREAS, throughout all of her endeavors, Mrs. Taylor was lovingly supported by her children: Meredith, Angelo, Tonia, Tracy and Willie Pat; and

WHEREAS, it is the policy of the House of Representatives to commend the life of such an outstanding and selfless individual as Mrs. Alma Fox Taylor, whose life served as a beacon of hope and inspiration to others:

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED BY THE HOUSE REPRESENTATIVES OF THE STATE OF MISSISSIPPI, That we do hereby commend the life and legacy of Mrs. Alma Lee Fox Taylor, a great Mississippian who gave selflessly to her family, church, community and overall county, which in turn has benefited this state as a whole.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, That copies of this resolution be furnished to the family of Mrs. Alma Lee Fox Taylor and to the members of the Capitol Press Corps.

I have been able to continue the legacy that Mamo began. During my junior year, I established the AfroLab, a semester-long course tailored for Black students. This initiative represents just one of the various ways I actively contribute to my community, going above and beyond to advocate for my convictions. The resonances of Hartman's *Two Acts*, interwoven with the discussions I've shared today, serve as a poignant reminder of the genuine afilial connection among women—a stark contrast to Wilderson and Fanon's portrayal of the Black Man—serving as a focal point for care and mutual support.

NORTH VICKSBURG — Cancer Crusade workers include from left, Mrs. Anita Overton, chairman, Mrs. Marie Pierce, co-chairman, Mrs. Alma Taylor, captain and Mrs. Gleneva Flowers, Captain. Workers will be covering the area Wednesday and Thursday evenings.

Patterson writes, "Nevertheless, freedom is more than just a double negation. It is continuously active and creative" (Patterson, 1982, 98). Although I have explained here three ways that I have seen freedom be exercised through maternal relationships, there are many other ways that this can occur. Let my Black family be proof to you of what is possible when we move away from academic isolation and abstraction, and instead, move towards analysis focused on the lived experiences of those in which we seek to examine. Wilderson writes:

> "I am not suggesting that Black people should resign themselves to the inevitability of social death—it *is* inevitable, in the sense that one is born into social death just as one is born into a gender or a class; but it is also constructed by the violence and imagination of other sentient beings. Thus, like class and gender, which are also *constructs*, not divine designations, social death can be destroyed. But the first step toward the destruction is to assume one's position (*assume, not celebrate or disavow*), and then burn the ship or the

> plantation, in its past and present incarnations, from the inside out. However, as Black people we are often psychically unable and unwilling to assume this position." (Wilderson 103)

I urge Wilderson to consider what I have illustrated above as evidence that Black people can move past psychic immobility and that we have been more than willing to assume this position.

Chapter 3: By a Way of Conclusion (sort of)

“No black woman writer in this culture can write "too much". Indeed, no woman writer can write "too much"...No woman has ever written enough.”

- bell hooks, *Remembered Rapture: The Writer at Work*

I am afraid that I cannot provide you with a conclusion that will answer all of the questions that you have taken note of while reading this thesis. To be frank, I am still left with questions of my own. This exploration of AfroPessimism has been a journey through the profound complexities of Black existence, anti-Black violence, and the struggle for freedom. This is the struggle that I hope you are feeling now. It is a necessary struggle that prompts necessary attention.While acknowledging AfroPessimism's valuable insights into the pervasive nature of racism and the cyclical understanding of history, I find myself unsatisfied with its seemingly deterministic conclusion. AfroPessimism, as a theoretical lens, magnifies the inescapable connection between Blackness and the enduring violence of social death. However, I resist the reduction of Black identity to perpetual enslavement, emphasizing the richness of Black culture. My engagement with AfroPessimism serves a specific purpose: to confront the harsh reality of anti-Black violence and its historical roots. By validating a narrative of Black struggle and acknowledging the cyclical nature of history, AfroPessimism lays a crucial foundation for understanding the challenges faced by the Black community. However, I advocate for moving beyond theoretical discussions to actionable measures. It is not enough to recognize the recurring violence; we must actively work towards dismantling its structures. As Hartman's concept of "the interregnum" suggests, there exists a liminal space where the project of freedom is ongoing and incomplete.

The thesis that sits before you today is incomplete. There is still much to uncover and discuss. I now require you to actively challenge the AfroPessimist narrative and explore the possibilities that emerge in the in-between, where past and future intersect. As scary as this task may be, you are not alone. My dear reader, it is time for me to ask you the question that I have been asking the AfroPessimist throughout this thesis: *What now?*

As we navigate the intricacies of history, identity, and the transformative potential of the future, it becomes evident that the complex view presented here allows for the consideration of where possibility can lead us. The exploration of this liminal space prompts reflection on the intersections of our shared histories and the potential for a future that transcends the limitations imposed by AfroPessimism. In embracing the possibility of the seemingly impossible, we pave the way for a future that holds the promise of true freedom.

The examination of social death, AfroPessimism, and the relational dynamics between Blackness and slavery has provided a critical lens through which to understand the profound challenges faced by Black people. The concept of social death lays the groundwork for AfroPessimist scholars like Frank Wilderson to argue that Blackness is synonymous with perpetual enslavement. This perspective positions Black people outside the realm of humanity, defining their ontology through the enduring violence of slavery.

My personal encounter with these ideas has led me to a deep introspection about my Black identity. This internal struggle has made me fear for my own life. Wilderson attempts to make this fear become palpable. But I will not let this happen. My siblings will not live their lives in fear, nor will my children and the little Black flames of the world. By emphasizing the

structural understanding of the Black position, I have explored Wilderson's AfroPessimist perspective, which asserts that the only way to end slavery is to end Black life.

Black People, you already have the tools that you need to be free. Ignite your flame! Let it burn bright for all the world to see and whatever comes after. I have shown you what is possible.

The re-invention of the Black family challenges Wilderson's claims of natal alienation, arguing that the Black family extends beyond filial and afilial relations. Drawing on personal experiences and conversations within my family, I have presented to you how Black women, particularly within maternal relationships, exercise agency, spiritual praxis, and political organizing to cultivate freedom. These practices, passed down through generations, demonstrate a continuity of resistance against natal alienation, affirming the autonomy and humanity of Black individuals.

In reconsidering AfroPessimism and social death, it is essential to recognize the nuances within the Black experience and the ways in which Black individuals actively shape their narratives. The journey toward freedom involves not only confronting the grim realities of anti-Black violence but also celebrating the resilience, strength, and vibrancy inherent in Black culture and community. In doing so, we yet again pave the way for a future that transcends the limitations imposed by AfroPessimism, embracing the multifaceted dimensions of Black existence.

I am everything that my mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother are. I am my ancestor's wildest dream. I am free. I was born free. And so were you.

With this, I shall hand over my thesis to you. It is yours to call your own. To share, to discuss, to give care, and to do so freely. This is not a conclusion, *this* is the beginning to your end.

The pen is now in your hands.

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