

## BLACKS AND THE MASTER/ SLAVE RELATION\*

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Frank B. Wilderson, III  
Interviewed by C.S. Soong

C. S. Soong: *The question for today is how to properly situate Black people in today's world? What is their position in relation to other people? And what is the nature of their vulnerability to violence? Those questions can be addressed in a number of ways. Conservatives, Liberals, and radicals offer perspectives that perhaps you've heard over time. The answer offered by my guest today is singular and provocative, not least because he calls Black people, all Black people, slaves. But what does Frank Wilderson, III mean by slave? Why does he argue that the master/slave relation cannot be analogized with the capitalist/worker relation? And what does he mean when he asserts that slavery is social death? And that slaves, that is Blacks, are subject to gratuitous violence because their masters, that is all non-Blacks, need to exercise that violence in order to give their lives, their non-Black lives, integrity and coherence? Frank Wilderson is a writer, professor of African American studies and Drama at UC Irvine, and founder of what's called the Afro-Pessimism movement. His books include Red, White and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms, and Incognegro: A Memoir of Exile and Apartheid. Frank spent five years in South Africa as an elected official in the African National Congress during that country's transition from apartheid and he was a member of the ANC's armed wing. When Frank Wilderson joined me recently in studio I began by asking how important Marxism has been to his understanding of capitalism.*

Frank Wilderson: I think that when I began to study Marxism in college I understood that here was a theory that took a kind

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of attitude toward the world that was uncompromising. That was valuable to me because before that in junior high school and in high school I had seen the kind of performative political labor of people in the Panthers and people in the Students for a Democratic Society—part of that time was here—and I knew that these folks were on a mission that was more robust and more unflinching than the mission of certain types of Bobby Kennedy Democrats and members of the Civil Rights movement. When I actually began to study the theory I understood why their performance was so much more unflinching than other peoples' performance. So I think the study of Marxism helped me get into thinking about relations of power, which I think is more important than simply thinking about the way power performs.

*CSS: In other words, structures of power as opposed to how power tends to manifest itself in individual relations.*

FW: Yes, and I also mean that if you kind of turn your head sideways and listen to most Americans on the Left talk about politics, what you're going to hear is that the rhetorical weighting of their discourse tends to be heavily weighted on discriminatory actions, the effects of unfair relations on people. And so what we really don't do so much in this country is—and this is what I found to be very different when I started traveling the world, when I went to Italy, and various places in South America and Africa—we're not as readily able to think about power as a structure. We tend to think about power as a performance, a series of discriminatory acts. That's okay if you're a Liberal-Humanist-reformist, but if you're a revolutionary, that simply leads you down a track of increasing wages or getting more rights for women or ending racial discrimination and you're finding yourself in the same kind of cycle of performative oppression ten, twenty years later without an analysis of why the "fix" that you had years ago doesn't last and isn't working now.

*CSS: Well, the antagonism according to the Marxists is that between capitalist and worker. Would you agree that the essential antagonism in social relations and political relations is in fact between capitalist on the one side and worker on the other?*

FW: No. All of my work is an interrogation of that assumptive logic. I'm sometimes misunderstood to be saying that I have left Marxism. I'm sometimes misunderstood to be saying that the cognitive map that Marx gives us should be thrown out. That's not what I'm saying. How do you throw out a cognitive map that explains political economy so well? What I'm saying is that in *Das Kapital* vol. I, Marx has two opportunities to think the relation between the slave and everyone else and each of those opportunities presents him with a kind of paradox, a conundrum; and instead of meditating on that he bounces off of it and continues to posit that the world is out of joint because there is a dichotomy between haves and have-nots, because there's a dichotomy between those who accumulate capital and those who work for a wage. What I'm saying is that his hit on the slave and then bouncing off of that are a disavowal of the nature of the slave relation, which is symptomatic of the problems in political organizing and political thought on the Left. I'm saying that the antagonism in *Das Kapital* should be relegated to a conflict because there is an aspect of the thinking which presents itself with a coherent way out. The slave/non-slave, or the Black/human relation, presents us with a structural dynamic which cannot be reconciled and which does not have a coherent mode of redress.

CSS: *Alright, you see the master/slave relation as the essential antagonism, so what do you mean by that? A lot of people would think, okay, slavery in the U.S., so Black slavery, and then 1865, the formal end of slavery. But then of course you have slavery today and we hear about issues with people in bondage, debt bondage, and other forms of bondage, so when you say the master/slave relation, what are you specifically referring to?*

FW: There is no way I can actually answer that in a compact way, I think I have to step back a minute. So what Afro-pessimism—the conceptual lens or framework that myself and other people are working on—assumes is that you have to begin with an analysis of slavery that corrects the heretofore thinking about it. So the first thing that happens—and this is built on the work of Orlando Patterson's 1982 tome *Slavery and Social Death*—the first thing we have to do is screw our heads on backwards. In other words, stop defining slavery through the experience of slaves. What happens normally is that people think of slavery as forced labor

and people in chains. What Orlando Patterson does is shows that what slavery really is, is social death. In other words, social death defines the relation between the slave and all others. Forced labor is an example of the *experience* that slaves might have, but not all slaves were forced to work. So if you then move by saying that slavery is social death, by definition, then what is social death? Social death has three constituent elements: One is gratuitous violence, which means that the body of the slave is open to the violence of all others. Whether he or she receives that violence or not, he or she exists in a state of structural or open vulnerability. This vulnerability is not contingent upon his or her transgressing some type of law, as in going on strike with the worker. The other point is that 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. And the reason that the world can do this goes back to point number one: because you exist in a regime of violence which is gratuitous, open, and you are openly vulnerable to everyone else, not a regime of violence that is contingent upon you being a transgressed worker or transgressing woman or someone like that. And the third point is general dishonor, which is to say, you are dishonored in your very being—and I think that this is the nature of Blackness with everyone else. You're dishonored prior to your performance of dishonored actions. So it takes a long time to build this but in a nutshell that's it. And so that's one of the moves of Afro-pessimism. If you take that move and you take out property relations—someone who's owned by someone else—you take that out of the definition of slavery and you take out forced labor, and if you replace that with social death and those three constituent elements, what you have is a continuum of slavery-subjugation that Black people exist in and 1865 is a blip on the screen. It is not a paradigmatic moment, it is an experiential moment, which is to say that the technology of enslavement simply morphs and shape shifts—it doesn't end with that.

CSS: *If Orlando Patterson, who is a sociologist at Harvard, argues that*

*forced labor is not a defining characteristic of slavery, if he says that naked violence is one of the key elements of social death, which is slavery, and if the violence directed at Blacks is not based on, as you said, this person transgressing in some way, being disobedient in some way, refusing to consent in some way to what the ruling class thinks or does, then why is violence freely directed at Blacks? What is the reason that the non-white or the master in the master/slave relation treats Blacks violently?*

FW: The short answer is that violence against the slave is integral to the production of that psychic space called social life. The repetitive nature of violence against the slave does not have the same type of utility that violence against the post-colonial subject has—in other words, in the first instance, to secure and maintain the occupation of land. It does not have the utility of violence against the working class, which would be to secure and maintain the extraction of surplus-value and the wage. We have to think more libidinally and in a more robust fashion. This is where it becomes really controversial and really troubling for a lot of people because what Patterson is arguing, and what people like myself and professor Jared Sexton and Saidiya Hartman at Columbia University have extended, is to say that what we need to do is begin to think of violence not as having essentially the kind of political or economic utility that violence in other revolutionary paradigms have. Violence against the slave sustains a kind of psychic stability for all others who are not slaves.

CSS: *When you say that—and I've read some of your writings on the subject—it seems like you're suggesting that only if some population perceives another population as inferior, or so degraded that anything can be done to them—unless they have that other in mind that somehow, psychologically and psychically—they can't have the integrity that they want. Is that correct? And why would that be the case psychologically? Why would somebody need to have some other person seen in that light in order to feel actualized, in order to feel worthy of life?*

FW: It's a very good question and we could spend several hours on it, but what I'm trying to do is give you short-hand answers that have integrity and hopefully your listeners will do some more reading and research to actually see how these mechanisms work. But let's take it for one second outside of the way in which I

and other Afro-pessimists are theorizing it. One of our claims is that Blackness cannot be dis-imbricated from slaveness—that is a very controversial claim; that claim is actually the fault line right now of African and Black Studies across the country, the claim that Blackness and slaveness cannot be dis-imbricated, cannot be pulled apart. But I can't argue against everyone who disagrees with that right now. One of the points that Patterson makes at a higher level of abstraction is that the concept of community, and the concept of freedom, and the concept of communal and interpersonal presence, actually needs a conceptual antithesis. In other words, you can't think community without being able to register non-community. His book *Slavery and Social Death* goes back thousands of years and covers slavery in China and all over the world and he says that communal coherence has a lot of positive attributes: this is my language, this is how I organize my polity, these are the anthropological accoutrements of how we work our customs—but at the end of the day what it needs to know is what it is not. So the idea of freedom and the idea of communal life and the idea of civic relations has to have a kind of point of attention which is absent of that or different from that. This is the function that slavery presents or provides to coherence so that prior to Columbus, for example, the Choctaw might have someone inside a Choctaw community who transgresses the codes of the community so fiercely that they're given a choice, and the choice at this moment of a transgression, which is beyond-the-beyond, is between real death—"We will kill you in an execution"—or social death. Nothing changes in the mind of that person tomorrow or the day after he or she chooses social death. He or she still thinks they have a cosmology, that they have intimate family relations, but the point that Patterson is making is that everything changes in the structure of that person's dynamic with the rest of the tribe. So now that that person is a slave, that person is socially dead. This is bad for that person, obviously, but what he is suggesting is that that type of action regenerates the knowledge of our existence for everyone else. Now where I and some others take Patterson further is to say that Black, Blackness, and even the thing called Africa, cannot be dis-imbricated, cannot be pulled apart from that smaller scale process that he talks about with respect to Chinese communities or the Choctaw. In other words, there is a global consensus that Africa is the location of

sentient beings who are outside of global community, who are socially dead. That global consensus begins with the Arabs in 625 and it's passed on to the Europeans in 1452. Prior to that global consensus you can't think Black. You can think Uganda, Ashanti, Ndebele, you can think many different cultural identities, but Blackness cannot be dis-imbricated from the global consensus that decides here is the place which is emblematic of that moment the Choctaw person is spun out from social life to social death. That's part of the foundation.

CSS: *This is really provocative. Are you saying then—let's just focus on the U.S.—that every African American, regardless of income or wealth or status, can and should be understood in the figure of the slave who is socially dead in relation to the master, who I presume is white?*

FW: Well, the master is everyone else, whites and their junior partners, which in my book are colored immigrants. It's just that colored immigrants exist in an intra-human status of degradation in relation to white people. They are degraded as humans, but they still exist paradigmatically in that position of the human. So yes, I am saying that. Now part of the reason is that one of the things that we are not doing is talking about the different ways in which different Black people live their existence as slaves. I'm willing to do that, but what's interesting to me is the kind of anxiety that this theory elicits from people other than yourself. I mean this is the calmest conversation that I've had on this subject [laughter]. You could say to someone that you are a professor at UC Berkeley and there is a person in a sweatshop on the other side of the Rio Grande. This person in the sweatshop is working sixteen hours a day, cannot go to the bathroom, dies on the job from lack of medical benefits... and you are a kind of labor aristocrat. And they could say, "Okay, well that's interesting." And you could say to that person, "But if you read the work of Antonio Negri, the Italian communist, you come to understand that even though you live your life as a proletarian differently than a sweatshop laborer, you both stand in relation to capital in this same way, at the level of structural, paradigmatic arrangement." That person would say, "Oh yeah! I get that, I get that." You say to someone that all Blacks are slaves and that we're going to change the definition of slavery because the other

things are not definitions, they are actually anecdotes, and your teacher in third grade told you that you don't use an anecdote to define something. And that person says, "Oh wait a minute, I know a person who's richer than me and also Black and they live in the Tenderloin..." and it just goes off to the races. It's a symptomatic response primarily because they understand that what Black people suffer is real and comprehensive but there is actually no prescriptive, rhetorical gesture which could actually write a sentence about how to redress that. Most Americans, most people in the world, are not willing to engage in a paradigm of oppression that does not offer some type of way out. But that is what we live with as Black people every day.

*CSS: Let me take us on what sounds like a bit of a detour, but I think it will help you clarify certain concepts that you're forwarding, and that's to go to Antonio Gramsci's work and think about a word that he had a very specific definition of, which is "hegemony." And of course Gramsci, coming out of the Marxist tradition, was very interested in workers and capital and the struggle between capitalists and workers, although he was also interested in a lot of other things. What did Gramsci mean by the word hegemony?*

FW: In 1922 Antonio Gramsci was working for the Comintern and he asked Lenin the following question: "How did you create this successful revolution and I can't get it off the ground in Italy?" Lenin said, "Well there is no trough of civil society between our working class and the command modality of capitalism, the violent manifestations of the capitalist state. We go on strike and the Cossacks come out." And Gramsci began to theorize: between working class suffering and state violence and state institutionality there's this thing called civil society which captivates the workers—in other words, induces a kind of spontaneous consent to the values of capital. Guild associations, schools—today it would be talk shows, but not this talk show of course [laughter]—and he began to theorize that what Lenin meant by hegemony, which is the domination of imperialist countries over countries that are trying to evolve into a kind of revolutionary dispensation, is different than what he needed to develop his theory of hegemony and so he came up with three constituent elements: influence, leadership, and consent. By influence, leadership, and consent he means the influence of

the ruling class—not the influence of one person or another, but the influence of a class—the leadership of its ideas—which is to say the idea of meritocracy, which was a very bad idea for a Marxist—and the consent of the working class to that influence and those ideas. What he sought to do was to find ways to break the spontaneous consent to those ideas. Once he could break the spontaneous consent to those ideas, then the working class of a Western, so-called devout country like Italy would be able to see what Marxists think of as the antagonism between them and the ruling class. Then it would move from a passive revolution to a real revolution, which would be a violent overthrow of the state. The European Gramscians actually leave out that last part, the violent overthrow of the state, but that was actually his dream.

*CSS: Okay, so then we have on the one hand force and on the other we have consent. We have the force of the ruling class and we have consent, which you're suggesting if it is withheld, if it is abrogated to such an extreme degree, there might be social and political revolution. But how does, in Antonio Gramsci's conception, hegemony normally work in terms of the relationship between force and consent in a nominally stable society?*

FW: When a state is stable in a capitalist dispensation, such as Canada, then there is an equilibrium between force and consent. In other words, one of the things you have in a “good” (for capitalists) dispensation is a smooth situation. So for the hundreds of years it took to develop capitalism, there was all this violence. Once people have been remolded from peasants and whatever else into workers, then in a capitalist dispensation, just as in a patriarchal dispensation, the violence goes into remission. That's what Gramsci means by equilibrium. Violence goes in remission and it only needs to rear its ugly head in those singular moments, which hopefully are not global for the capitalist, when the working class refuses or transgresses those symbolic codes that it has consented to.

*CSS: Such as general strikes, mass aggression against the capitalist order...*

FW: Exactly.

*CSS: So then this equilibrium between force and consent, which constitutes*

*hegemony in Gramsci's mind, how does that notion apply or not in your mind to the relationship between master and slave?*

FW: Consent is never a constituent element of the slave relation. If only Marx had picked up on this, but he says in *Capital* that he doesn't understand the slave to exist in a relation of pure force but then he moves away from that. So, why is that? Well, one of the things that Orlando Patterson points out is that any stratified society—by that he means for example a capitalist society—only comes into being through a kind of pre-history of violence—the violence that it takes to move from feudalism to capitalism. But once the state of capitalism is set up the violence goes into remission. But then he goes on to say that what's interesting about the slave estate—the slave estate is actually a phrase from the Black feminist Hortense Spillers—or the slave relation is that the violent pre-history of the slave relation carries over and becomes the concurrent dynamic of the current history of slavery. And that is really, really profound. It is so profound, that it's traumatic and painful even for Black politicians and Black writers and you see the pain of that coming through in slave narratives. In the film *Twelve Years a Slave*, there's a lot of narrative energy put into making sense of how and why Edwin Epps beats his concubine, Patsy, and why his wife wants him to beat her. So it kind of looks like ordinary sadism and jealousy on the wife's part and so it actually almost becomes a sort of sick love triangle. Alright, put the film away. Pick up the book and what you find is that the violence against the slaves in the book that became the movie actually has no utility, it has no rationale. For instance between a place like Berkley and San Jose there were about four hundred plantations—I know because my father is from one of those plantations—and you have what I would call a bacchanal of pleasure, not a kind of utilitarian need to extract work or obedience out of people, number one. Number two, what you find is that the families on these plantations all participate in the regular beating of slaves—children, wives, husbands... It sustains the psychic health of the people in the first ontological instance. In the second instance, it gets good sugar cane production out of them—and that could even be questioned.

CSS: *If you believe the plight of Black people does not mirror the plight*

*of the working class because of gratuitous, as opposed to reasoned, violence against Blacks, and that there is no consent coming from Black people as there is when workers buy into the capitalist order and agree to offer their services in ways that satisfy capitalists, then what about Native Americans? What do you say to those who say the plight of Black people mirrors the treatment of Native Americans?*

FW: A lot of people have been genocided so the middle 88 pages of my book, *Red, White and Black*, first begins by honoring the destruction of Native Americans and what that has meant for white Americans. However, to make it really simple, to pare it down, I do think that there is, in the main, a utility to the genocide of Native Americans that does not mirror the pre-logical “rationale” of the violence against Blacks. Indians are genocided, in the main, for the occupation of Turtle Island, which is primarily why so much Native American theorization builds upon Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* and does not build upon Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*. In other words, so much theorization under what I call the meta-commentary called Indigenism leads us back to thinking genocide as a mechanism for usurpation of cartography, of space. Violence against Black people is a mechanism for the usurpation of subjectivity, of life, of being. It’s great if you have a place to stay, but if you don’t have a sense of your own identity, that’s even worse. I think that the repetitive violence against Blacks, if we get back to social death, produces a regenerative form of being in everyone else.

CSS: *In other words, settlers wanted Indian land so they killed Indians in large part to get the land, whereas what non-Blacks want from Blacks is not land but...*

FW: ...but *being*. If you look at the Dred Scott decision, there’s a really interesting three or four paragraphs in this two hundred and fifty-page decision where Judge Taney says to the lower court, “We are returning Dred Scott to slavery.” One lower court had said, “Dred Scott made it to Minnesota, so he’s not a slave, he made it to a free territory.” The next court said, “No, he never got released, manumission from his master so he is a slave.” The Supreme Court returns Dred Scott to slavery and then does what is known in jurisprudential logic as a “Herculean opinion.” It says

to both courts, “We’re not siding with the court that returned him to slavery because he didn’t get freedom from his master; we are trying to correct your thinking in this. In order for Dred Scott to appear before the Bar, he had to become a jurisprudential subject and Africa is a place of non-community. As a result, we’re trying to teach you a lesson—there’s no such thing as a jurisprudential subject that can come out of Africa. We are returning him to slavery not because he didn’t get freedom from his master but because he had no standing before the Bar.” And then they go on to talk about Native Americans and they say that Native Americans actually have political community: “We recognize the arrangements of natality, affiliation, cartography. They have a degraded community in our eyes, and we’re trying to help them evolve to become a superior community, but they actually have community.” This is to say that the people on reservations are subjects worthy of jurisprudential adjudication. So in other words, return him to slavery not because he didn’t get permission to be freed, but because he is not a human being.

*CSS: Well, let’s engage in a thought experiment. I’m thinking back to your claim about the master in the master/slave relation: unless they dole out violence to Blacks, they can have no psychic or psychological integrity or security. Let’s posit that all Blacks are wiped out. There is a genocide and all Blacks are removed. In that case, in a sense, you are saying by implication that humanity would cease to exist because the conceptual coherence that it needs would be absent.*

FW: Exactly, and that will never happen. We need to bring people like David Marriott from UC Santa Cruz and Jared Sexton from UC Irvine to think more psychoanalytically about this. But in a nutshell, the reason that this will never happen is, remember, that the utility of violence against the slave is not the same as the utility of violence against the Indian, the post-colonial subject, the worker, or the woman. In Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*, he’s negotiating between two dynamics: one is negrophilia—“I just love Black people, I love Black music, I want to sleep with them, I want to be around them...”—and one is negrophobia—“Yeah you can come over to my crib but don’t bring your friends.” And so, what he’s saying is that the psychic arrangement of the collective unconscious is manifest with the push/pull in the

collective unconscious between negrophilia and negrophobia. It's not important how that gets worked out. What's important is that that is a process of psychic integration which is necessary for global community. So, one day there could be negrophobia in one psyche, the next day there could be negrophilia. One community could be completely, like teenage boys in the suburbs, negrophilic. Another community, like teenage boys in the deep south, could be completely negrophobic. The point is not that this gets worked out in a decisive way one way or the other because that would make Blacks like Indians, that they have something tangible to give up, like workers. The point is that it's there that this is the push/pull of collective unconscious meditations. In that push/pull, whether it's negrophilia or negrophobia, the concept that has to be reiterated is that the Black is an implement of that negotiation. If the Black does not become an implement of that negotiation then you have not a crisis but an epistemological break, a catastrophe in the knowledge-arrangement of the world. We would find ourselves on the cusp of a new world order, but one that could not be predicted in the way that Marx does.

*CSS: Let's talk more about the Black experience of social death. I'm wondering specifically if you feel that African Americans in this country can in fact consciously acknowledge the violence, the structure of violence, in which they operate and encounter every day.*

FW: Well, we can articulate it, but normally when we're by ourselves. Because when we get into Progressive communities—first of all it's not even heard of, I used to work in banking for eight years and you can't even talk about this stuff—but in Progressive humanities there's a policing action that happens, which is to say: "Make your grammar of suffering, your paradigmatic arrangement, your relationship to structural violence articulate with the other oppressed people in the room." Once that happens we're trapped. I mean we're surrounded by white supremacists, militarization, the police, the military, but we're also surrounded by people-of-color-consciousness that polices our capacity to flower, to expand upon theorization that I'm doing. A short anecdote: there was a conference years ago at UC Santa Cruz. At the end of the conference, Haunani-Kay Trask, the revolutionary from Hawai'i, spoke and then we were supposed to break away

into groups. The conference organizer said, “You must go into a breakaway room based upon your color—in other words how you are policed.” And immediately—this is how the antagonism manifests itself symptomatically—the Black people were like, “Yes! Now we get to be in a place where we can talk about how we are policed as Blacks.” But the people of color stalled by saying, “There’s no such thing as yellow. We’re Koreans, we’re Japanese, we’re Chinese, we’re Taiwanese. We’re not going to let you pigeonhole us into this position when we have our ethnic identities.” The Latinos did the same thing. The Native Americans did the same thing. My wife, who is white, went to the white room and they rejected the entire arrangement. They said, “We’re just going to talk about ourselves as Armenians, as women, as Jews.” It was the Black people who were energized by the prospect of leaving culture and identity by the wayside and having a conversation about how we fit into the gaze of the police. I think it was up to the other people to be authorized by that project and stop complaining about the fact that the exercise was putting them in a box that was positional and not cultural. But until that happens, there’s no real political coalition building that’s happening. What’s happening, as Jared Sexton says, is Black people become the refugees in everyone else’s political project.

*CSS: Let me ask you a personal question, but you can of course refuse to answer. So your wife is white; given what you were telling me about the position of Blacks, what’s your sense that she could truly ever understand your consciousness, your positioning within society? And if she can’t, then what are the prospects of a relationship that could reach as deeply as, for example, two Black people or two white together could?*

FW: Well, she can’t. She tries, but what’s interesting and important is that I would never put my marriage out there as a kind of example of what people could aspire to. As a kind of short hand, I call her my wife and she calls me her husband. But the reality is that I’m her slave. And that doesn’t change because we have sentimental—as I would say, contrapuntal—emotions to the contrary. In fact, oftentimes those contrapuntal emotions are mechanisms or means of disavowing the true nature of the relation. Now, I will give her a lot of props for the past eight years that she has actually inculcated this logic. She did her best at that

Santa Cruz conference I talked about to tell the white people in that room, “We’re not here to think about how we think about ourselves, we’re here to think about our complicity as whites with policing. Not as women, not as gays, not Armenians, not as Jews, but as white.” On the other hand, if you read my book *Incognegro*, you’ll see that in the first eight years, there was nothing but resistance to that. So that resistance is as traumatizing as the second eight years are regenerative and I will say that the first eight years are what Black people should take away from that. There’s no way in hell we should have to go through the kind of resistance that white people and non-Black people have to this particular logic because they know it’s the truth. They know their own anxieties about the question, Where is Blackness?, but they can’t approach it because what it would mean is a kind of confrontation with people who are intimate to them that they don’t know they could withstand. And so the real question is, Will these people do all they can to fall into the abyss of nonexistence?, not about how they will perform as partial allies while keeping their cultural presence.

CSS: *Why would a Black person, why would you, choose intentionally, consciously, to enter into a life relationship in which you perceive yourself as the figure of the slave?*

FW: I don’t think it’s a fair question because the question implies that, knowing what I know, I can actually change my life in an essential way. The question actually takes us away from the problem that I’ve outlined and actually puts the responsibility of correcting the situation on me when actually it should be on you.

CSS: *I hear that and I think that prompts me to ask the final thing I want to bring up with you which is regarding how we hear a lot about groups and people who are victims. There is this victimhood frame and so these people have been victimized by, let’s say, another group of people and then the critique is that, by focusing on that, by concentrating on that, you then deflect attention away from their subjectivity, from their agency, from what they can do about their circumstance. Are you concerned that the master/slave relation, which is positioning Blacks as foremost a victim, in my mind, and then focusing only or mainly on a group status as victim, tends to deny—and we’re speaking here now about Blacks—the kind of agency, I think you would admit, that they*

*have at least some semblance of? And maybe some more than others based on their position in society?*

FW: I don't agree with that and we don't have the time to actually get into this, but my book, *Red, White and Black*, is a critique of agency as a generic category. What I'm saying is that, okay, I'm not Elijah Mohammed, I don't believe that the white man is the devil and that this is all divined by god. I do believe that there is a way out. But I believe that the way out is a kind of violence so magnificent and so comprehensive that it scares the hell out of even radical revolutionaries. So, in other words, the trajectory of violence that Black slave revolts suggest, whether it be in the 21st century or the 19th century, is a violence against the generic categories of life, agency being one of them. That's what I meant by an epistemological catastrophe. Marx posits an epistemological crisis, which is to say moving from one system of human arrangements and relations to another system of human relations and arrangements. What Black people embody is the potential for a catastrophe of human arrangements writ large. I think that there have been moments—the Black Liberation Army in the 1970s and 1980s is a prime example—of how the political violence of the Black Liberation Army far outpaced the anti-capitalist and internationalist discourse that it had and that's what scares people; and as Saidiya Hartman says, "A Black revolution makes everyone freer than they actually want to be." A Marxist revolution blows the lid off of economic relations; a feminist revolution blows the lid off patriarchal relations; a Black revolution blows the lid off the unconscious and relations writ large.

CSS: *I have to ask you, when you talk about this violence, in maybe the ideal situation of a Black revolution, what are we talking about concretely? Who or what is the violence directed against? Are we talking about literally the elimination of the master threat physically?*

FW: Well, the short answer is that's for me to know and for you to find out [laughter]. And the long answer is that as a professor I'm uniquely unqualified to actually make that answer. I rely on providing analysis and then getting those marching orders from people in the streets.