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Race, Violence, and the Law

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The Role of Politics in Liberation

In Frank Wilderson’s interview with IMIXWHATILIKE, he references the work of Saidiya Hartman several times to discuss the totalizing nature of anti-Blackness and the failure of politics to address it. While Wilderson sees politics primarily as an obstacle to Black liberation, Hartman’s newest book *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* captures the political nature of Black womanhood, and how the stories of “wayward” women bridge the gap between survival and revolution. In this essay, I am going to discuss both Hartman’s and Wilderson’s unique and opposing understandings of politics in order to explore the similarities and differences of their definitions, arguing that Hartman’s grasp on politics offers an important path towards liberation for all Black people, including certain groups that Wilderson’s definition excludes.

Wilderson understands politics as a force working against the liberation of Black people, which to him is only possible through to complete destruction of the anti-Black world. He views politics as an attempt at abstraction, to make totalizing existence as socially dead intelligible to the white and non-Black world. Trying to make this social death intelligible, however, is an impossibility, because the concepts of humanity that the non-Black world insist upon exist only in opposition to what it means to be Black. As Wilderson asserts, “we cannot enter into a structure of recognition as a being, an incorporation into a community of beings, without recognition and incorporation being completely destroyed. We know that we are the antithesis of recognition and incorporation.” (Wilderson 9). This juxtaposition of Blackness and humanity is what Wilderson claims makes Blackness, Black struggle, and Black liberation outside of the confines of politics.

Wilderson believes there is a level of instrumentality to the suffering of other groups that does not exist to define violence against Black people. In other words, he asserts, that every group except for Black people live within “a context of violence which has what I would call a sort of psychological grounding wire, which means that they can write a sentence about why they are experiencing that violence” (Wilderson 8). This “physiological grounding wire” is, for example, Native Americans being oppressed for the purpose of gaining land or women being oppressed as a means to sustaining patriarchy. Anti-Blackness, however, does not have this same kind of function. He argues that, “The violence against us becomes a tactic within a strategy to secure Humanity’s place. It’s not a tactic in an ongoing strategy to take our land away, or to take our rights away. We never had any rights” (Wilderson 8). And because of this, the scope of politics will never be able to address or redress the violence against Black people. Part of politics is the configuration of Blackness as antithetical to humanity, which Black people are not and will not be able to reach.

Not only is anti-Blackness unintelligible to non-Blacks, Wilderson argues that it is actually pleasurable to the white world. When discussing his comments on police brutality, he claimed that the Black community is faced with the problem that conversations around police brutality will never address the root of or the majority of anti-Black violence. Almost all anti-Blackness exists in the “libidinal economy”, which Wilderson defines as “the collective unconscious of everybody else” (Wilderson 6). Further, Wilderson asserts that this libidinal economy is not just a space of ignorance or unknowingness, it is a “form of psychic health and well-being for the rest of the world” (Wilderson 7). With this understanding, anti-Blackness is not just ignorance or senseless violence, but instead a site of pleasure and enjoyment for the rest of the world. He argues that a failure to understand this is rooted in the fact that Black violence is only explained in the language of politics, which he defines as excluding the Black world and the concepts of social death.

He clearly asserts this claim through the quote, “The other part is that, as Saidiya Hartman has said, Black liberation presents us with the prospect of a kind of liberation that is so totalizing… that it can’t be ratcheted down and put into political language. If I’m right that the problem that Black people are in is not colonial exploitation and not racism but social death -- which is not to say that Black people don’t experience racism and that Black poor people are not exploited, but that once all that’s over, we’re still going to be socially dead -- then I think that we actually don’t have a political framework to deal with that, certainly not in Marxism, Feminism, and post-Colonialism” (Wilderson 10). This point is incredibly important to Wilderson’s work and beliefs that, liberation cannot be achieved by ending racism, patriarchy, or exploitation. The problem Black liberationists are faced with is a reality of the whole world relying on anti-Blackness to maintain the world’s functions. Without destroying the entire world, Wilderson believes that violent anti-Blackness will still exist. This also exemplifies his idea that, any coalition that is built will maintain anti-Blackness. When working in coalition, non-Black coalition members will always turn against Black folks in the end, because their humanity depends on it. Wilderson argues that Black people must move past these movements that will only mobilize off of the energy of Black people and never do anything for their real cause, and “move into a conversation about what is to be done, realizing that our language and our concepts (post-colonial, Marxist discourse) are so much a part of other peoples’ problems, problems that can be solved, that we’ll really never get to the thing that solves our problem — because it’s already there in Fanon: the end of the world” (Wilderson 18).

Hartman, on the other hand, has a very different understanding of politics. Wilderson references Hartman three times in his IMIXWHATILIKE interview to speak to the totalizing nature of anti-Blackness, and uses this to prop up his understanding of politics. “If we can

help Black people to stay, as Saidiya Hartman says, ‘in the hold of the ship’, that is, to stay in a state of pure analysis, then we can learn more about the totality and the totalizing nature of Black oppression” (Wilderson 9). Despite alluding to Hartman in this interview, he misses the entire political context that Hartman introduces in her 2019 book *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*. While Wilderson’s interview was in 2014, five years prior to the publishing of Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments, the analysis that Hartman provides shows up regularly in the Black feminist tradition.

 Throughout Wayward Lives, Hartman works against what she calls the violence of the archive, the role that archives play in reproducing false narratives and erasures of Black people in history. She does this through telling intimate stories of ordinary Black women and girls she finds in her archival research, Black women who would never be found in a history book let alone a story of resistance and “social upheaval”. She brings the radical nature of these women’s lives to the forefront of their narratives, and discusses how their simple existence worked in opposition to law and social order. Here, Hartman contributes to the idea that for women, “the personal is political”, and that all of these women’s stories of survival, love and intimacy are also stories of radical resistance. Hartman asserts, “What the law designated as crime were the forms of life created by young black women in the city” (Hartman 310). She emphasizes the multitude of ways that mere existence is criminalized and thus politicized for Black women, no matter the specifics of their lives.

 In the chapter, “The Anarchy of Colored Girls Assembled in a Riotous Manner”, Hartman discusses the political implications of Esther Brown’s actions. Esther was a young girl living in Harlem who was bored with a life of working and desired to remain adrift and wandering. Esther’s life of “strolling along Harlem’s wide avenues to staying home and staring at four walls, and… losing herself in cabarets and movie houses” was not a life allotted for Black women at the time. To the white world, she was wild, devious, and “would not hesitate to smash things up”. To herself, she “longed for another world. She was hungry for more, for otherwise, for better.” (Hartman 235). Her free movement, her indulgence in her desires, and her retaliatory attitude made her a political advocate of herself and her dreams. She was a threat to the white world, and because of this, she became a political prisoner. Esther Brown was arrested for going in private with her friend and two men, which by law is not a crime. But because Esther Brown was a Black woman defying the laws of white civil society by exercising her freedom, she was “deemed an outlaw” who “should be sent away to be rescued from a life in the streets” (Hartman 239-240). Undoubtedly, Hartman sees Esther as a revolutionary living a life of insurrection.

Her life was defined by resistance to the norms. Hartman describes that the only ways to survive in an anti-Black world were defined by the law as illegal. She states, “The mutuality and creativity necessary to sustain living in the context of intermittent wages, controlled depletion, economic exclusion, coercion, and antiblack violence often bordered on the extralegal and the criminal. Esther’s beautiful, wayward experiments entailed an ‘open rebellion’ against the world” (Hartman 237). Understanding Esther’s life and inherent criminality in the context of 1920s anti-Black violence is inherently political in Hartman’s understanding of politics. Just through living, Esther was taking part in the radical world unmaking that Wilderson calls for. “The acts of the wayward—the wild thoughts, reckless dreams, interminable protests, spontaneous strikes, riotous behavior, nonparticipation, willfulness, and bold-faced refusal—redistributed the balance of need and want and sought a line of escape from debt and duty in the attempt to create a path elsewhere”, and this path elsewhere, is likely the world that Wilderson calls for, a world where anti-Blackness is destroyed (Hartman 237).

Though Wilderson and Hartman’s definitions of what politics is and its function in Black liberation are clearly different, if not directly in opposition, it is important to note that Wilderson’s disavowal of politics does not mean that Wilderson disagrees with Hartman. Wilderson calls for the end of the world, a complete destruction of the current world that anti-Blackness is based upon. Though Hartman’s focus is not the violent world destruction Wilderson directly calls for, she does make clear that the women she discusses are involved in the radical world unmaking project that is necessary in the interim for destroying the world. Each story is a story of world unmaking, and as I will discuss later, these stories are brought together as a collection to represent the radical survival and world destruction that takes place in the interconnected lives of these women.

Hartman describes Esther Brown’s life as one of resistance. Hartman asserts, “Her way of living was nothing short of anarchy” (Hartman 230) and “With no social considerations to constrain her, she was ungovernable” (Hartman 236). Though Esther Brown was just living her life, surviving, and following her desires, she was breaking the law. As previously mentioned, Esther lived in defiance to the law, and although she was just one person, her defiance of the law was part of a larger movement to destroy the world. Esther Brown, in her desires and life, was both making a world that she could live in and contributing to the project that Wilderson defines as destroying the world.

Hartman also discusses a prisoner, Eva Perkins as a woman who “would never stop fighting them [the conditions and enforcers of her suffering], she would never submit” (Hartman 281) In her time in the Rebecca Hall “reformatory”, Eva took place in a riot, because to survive in the condition that she was placed in, “riot was the only remedy within reach” (Hartman 283). Here, Hartman exemplifies the world destruction that takes place in these stories of survival.

 *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* affirms some of Wilderson’s key claims in his IMIXWHATILIKE interview. One of the main arguments in Wilderson’s interview is that politics fails in its attempt to make Black life intelligible to the white gaze. In the chapter “Riot and Refrain”, Hartman discusses the lives of “reformatory girls”, specifically Eva Perkins and her complicated love life through prison walls. Hartman includes detailed stories about Eva and Aaron’s relationship during Eva’s prison time – marked by Aaron’s frustration and embarrassment at his inability to take care of Eva. Aaron’s conscience was plagued with self-doubt and insecure masculinity, causing him asking himself questions like, “What kind of man couldn’t provide a home for the woman he loved?” (Hartman 274). Hartman includes a powerful section of the chapter on how this language of manhood and gender roles in a relationship did nothing but harm Eva and Aaron. She states, “Maybe if they could find their way beyond this language of being a man and being a woman, this grammar of the human that regarded them as both monsters and deviants, and break free from a scheme never fashioned for them but imposed indifferently and cruelly, the might find their way to another kind of love and support, one capable of withstanding the daily assault of a world dead set against them. Why should they be tethered to white folks’ notion of what or who they should be?” (Hartman 274). In this excerpt, Hartman illustrates exactly what Wilderson was calling for in his interview, abandoning the language and resisting being intelligible to the white world. Hartman clearly does not believe the political resistance lies in intelligibility or collaboration with the white world. Instead, she interrogates the failures of intelligibility, and calls for a world where Black people are able to “find their way beyond this language” (Hartman 274). To Hartman as well as Wilderson, this unintelligibility is key to destroying the world.

While Hartman’s and Wilderson’s understandings of politics merge in these ways, I argue that there are several areas that Hartman’s definition prevails. In Wilderson’s interview, he expresses his hesitancy around coalitions. He stresses that every group relies on Blackness to secure their humanity, and without Blackness, their humanity could be endangered. He argues that, “the collective unconscious is not ready to accept that Blacks are Human”. Within the non-Black unconscious, every non-Black person knows, “If I recognize the Black body as having lost something that it had prior to my oppression, then what does that mean for me? I lose my integrity as a human” (Wilderson 22). This reliance on Black non-being by other oppressed groups not only will make coalition with them impossible, but taking part in their “political projects will liberate one terrain, and intensify our suffering more by being parasitic on our inability to speak and on the Black energy that we lend to their questions and which crowd out an analysis” (Wilderson 20). With this in mind, coalition is more damaging and dangerous to Black liberation than anything. However, Hartman would argue quite the opposite. Book Three of *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* is titled, “Beautiful Experiments”, and focuses on the beauty of the collective. Building coalition of shared experiences was necessary for survival in this world where their existence was criminal, as Hartman claims, “survival required acts of collaboration and genius, guessing at the unforeseen.” (Hartman 237). Coalitions are not just helpful but necessary to survival for Hartman. And further, Hartman argues that the chorus is the only path towards true liberation. The individual can and must resist to survive, but without the chorus, there will be no change. In her chapter, “The Chorus Opens the Way”, Hartman asserts, “The chorus propels transformation. It is an incubator of possibility, an assembly sustaining dreams of the otherwise. Somewhere down the line the numbers increase, the tribe increases. The chorus increases. So how do you keep on? She can’t help it… The struggle is eternal. Somebody else carries on.” (Hartman 348). In telling beautiful, intimate stories of women living in what she would call the afterlives of slavery, Hartman does not only seek to provide an alternative narrative to the lives of wayward women, or attempt to redress the harm done by the archive, but indicate the movement towards something greater: the chorus, the eternal struggle against an anti-Black world, against the afterlives of slavery that every wayward Black woman takes on. While Hartman and Wilderson agree that the world is constitutively anti-Black and must be destroyed, Hartman focuses on the in-between, the living and small-scale efforts of resistance that are necessary for destroying this world that are taken up by Black women. She states, “In the surreal, utopian nonsense of it all, and at the heart of the riot, was the anarchy of colored girls: treason en masse, tumult, gathering together, mutual collaboration…” (Hartman 235).

Book Three, “Beautiful Experiments” not only centers the collective, or “the chorus” of wayward girls that works to resist the enclosure of anti-Blackness, but also the beauty within moments of enclosure, and how the strategies of survival are an art form. Wilderson proposes that in order to survive, Black people need a place to analyze and then determine what must be done, “What I think that Black professors, psychologists and journalists can do is to provide a space for us to talk about the impossibility of Black life, and I think that is a revolutionary act and is highly significant” (Wilderson 12). Hartman on the other hand argues that each day, Black women have to calculate what must be done and improvise survival. Hartman emphasizes that Black women not only talked and analyzed the impossibility of their lives but also took part in the revolutionary act of, “Guessing at the world and seizing at change…”, and in this way, “she [a wayward girl] eludes the law and transforms the terms of the possible” (Hartman 349). Again, Hartman focuses in on the existence within the impossibility, rather than just an analysis of it. Another important aspect to Hartman is that this existence is more than just revolutionary, it is beautiful. In her final chapter, “The Chorus Opens the Way”, Hartman asserts, “The chorus bears all of it for us. The Greek etymology of the word chorus refers to dance within an enclosure. What better articulates the long history of struggle, the ceaseless practice of black radicalism and refusal, the tumult and upheaval of open rebellion than the acts of collaboration and improvisation that unfold within the space of enclosure? The chorus is the vehicle for another kind of story, not of the great man or the tragic hero, but one in which all modalities play a part, where the headless group incites change, where mutual aid provides the resource for collective action, not leader and mass, where the untranslatable songs and seeming nonsense make good the promise of revolution. The chorus propels transformation. It is an incubator of possibility, an assembly sustaining dreams of the otherwise” (Hartman 347-348). Here, Hartman emphasizes the dancing within an enclosure that Black women have been able to do. While Wilderson focuses on encouraging Black people to “pick up the gun and move against the system” (Wilderson 9) Hartman discusses the exquisiteness in the indirect ways of subversion.

Wilderson’s opposition to building coalitions also diminishes the intersecting identities of Black communities. He argues, “We can still fight for folks to get their land back, and still fight for folks to you know, get green cards and immigration, and all these demands that ultimately help civil society, and, at the same time, have an understanding that they are our next target” (Wilderson 21). In this example, this quote directly erases Black immigrants and Black indigenous people. While Wilderson accurately emphasizes that anti-Blackness is worldwide and omnipotent, in the context of *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, his anti-coalition stance invalidates centering feminism, trans rights, gay rights, etc, because they do not necessarily center Black life. In *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, however, Hartman’s focus on the coalition of Black women – cishet, queer, trans, poor Black women shows the power of coalition. Following the Black feminist tradition, all of these intersecting political injustices are necessary for Black liberation because Black women are often most vulnerable on all other political issues. Without Wilderson’s acknowledgement of these overlapping and intersecting struggles, Wilderson devalues.

After comparing Frank Wilderson’s understanding of politics to Saidiya Hartman’s grasp on politics in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, it is clear that Wilderson’s definition neglects the definition of politics in the Black feminist tradition. This negligence and disdain for coalition minimizes the overlapping oppressions of black women, trans women, queer women, and black feminists that Hartman works to unite in her description of the chorus. Wilderson also misses the beauty of resistance that Hartman draws out, maintaining a masculine understanding of what liberation must be: of picking up the gun and violently resisting. Wilderson claims, “what are they trying to do? They’re trying to build a better world. What are we trying to do? We’re trying to destroy the world. Two irreconcilable projects.” (Wilderson 20) Hartman’s *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* goes a step further than Wilderson, and reroutes the narrative to the beauty of intimate resistance, the beauty of the chorus, and a more beautiful project of destroying the world and making it better, or more livable, at the same time. Hartman proves that these projects of world making and world unmaking are in fact reconcilable.