

book review

The US Decentred

From Black Social Death to Cultural Transformation

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Frank B. Wilderson III

Red, Black & White: Cinema and the Structure of US Antagonisms

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Patricia de Santana Pinho

Mama Africa: Reinventing Blackness in Bahia

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The following detailed quotations should help readers grasp core ideas of the two books mentioned above, before I proceed to evaluate critically, in a combined review, each publication's approach to its discrete topic.

Frank B. Wilderson III, activist-author-scholar-academic, tackles the topic of racial antagonisms and their representation in socially engaged films and related critical discourse. As such, the aim of his book is to:

embark on a paradigmatic analysis of how dispossession is imagined at the intersection of (a) the most unflinching meditations (metacommentaries) on political economy and libidinal economy (Marxism, as in the work of Antonio Negri, and psychoanalysis, as in the work of Kaja Silverman) (b) the discourse of political common sense, and (c) the narrative and formal strategies of socially or politically engaged films. (7)

For Wilderson, most 'non-White and nonheterosexual people in the United States exist in social and political conflict within its structure' which is different from 'existing in social and political antagonism to its structure', (149–50) and leads Wilderson to claim that his argument 'is one never before made in films studies, Native American Studies, Black Studies, or, for that matter, comparative ethnic studies'. (152) In other words, 'whereas the coherence of Native American cinema may not reproduce the White supremacy of Settler/Master cinema, its grammar of suffering, and the way that grammar labors cinematically depends on what I will call "Savage" Negrophobia—a Native American brand of anxiety as regards the Slave'. (152)

Patricia de Santana Pinho, Assistant Professor in Latin American and Cultural Studies, explores the meanings of Africa in Bahian (Brazil) constructions of blackness. Convinced that "'race" matters in Brazil,' (220) and with her own identity in mind, she goes on to argue:

[a] country that experienced more than three and a half centuries of slavery, and a more recent governmental policy explicitly aimed at whitening the population, not to mention everyday forms of color discrimination in domestic life, cannot be imagined to be immune to the power of 'race' ... All I can add is that, more important than being Brazilian, nordestina, female, Bahian, mestiça, or claiming any other identity that would grant me fragmented rights within the Babylonian structure of capitalism, I opt to be increasingly human. I want to strengthen my own humanity, and not in an egotistical way. (220, 223)

Wilderson's analytic framework is mainly structural and descriptive, while Pinho's accents the importance of reinventing Africa within diasporic black communities. Furthermore, Pinho demonstrates ways in which, even when abused, recreations of Africa have often incited and driven 'black resistance'. (1) Framing

her analysis between race, culture and identities in contemporary Bahia,¹ Pinho engages with three major debates in Cultural Studies: the importance of black diasporic cultures, race as a notion and 'the essentialism' of racial identities. (3, 4, 5, 11, 59–60)

—WILDERSON'S WHITE WATCH OVER BLACK AND RED: SOME STRENGTHS OF ANALYSIS

Wilderson's style of writing is persuasive while his passionate, uncompromising commitment to every word, passage, idea in his book is undeniable. At the same time, Wilderson shows impatience and, at times, barely controlled anger or irritation with aspects of his topic that leads to weaknesses in his book to which I shall return. In the meantime, *Red, White and Black's* most persuasive aspects are as follows.

As we shall see below, blacks in the US cannot and do not have ontology, or so Wilderson argues, denying with the same breath the workability of analogy as a method, because analogy can only be a ruse. Thus, what he calls 'the ruse of analogy' grants those who fall for it, for example, 'Black film theorists' or Black academics, an opportunity to reflect on (black) cinema only after some form of structural alteration. (38) Analogy does seem tricky if one follows Wilderson's line of thought, that is, the Holocaust/Jews and slavery/Africans. Jews entered and came out of Auschwitz as Jews whereas Africans emerged from the slave ships as Blacks.² Two types of holocaust: the first 'Human', the second 'Human and metaphysical', something which leads to Wilderson saying that 'the Jews have the Dead ... among them; the Dead have the Black among them'. (38) It bears reiterating that for Wilderson, blacks are socially and ontologically dead in the sense that the black body has been violently turned into flesh, 'ripped apart literally and imaginatively', that it is a body vulnerably open, 'an object made available (fungible) for any subject' and 'not in the world' or civil society the way white bodies are. (38)

Furthermore, Wilderson argues that differences between black and white ethical dilemmas separate them dialectically into incompatible zones. As illustration Wilderson reflects on black women suffering in US prisons in the 1970s and then juxtaposes the suffering with white women's concurrent public preoccupations in civil society. For example, the violence and neglect underwent by Safya Bukhari-Alston³ in solitary confinement at the Virginia Correctional Center for Women is

linked to the similar plight of another black woman, Dorothy, in Haile Gerima's *Bush Mama* (1977) before Wilderson questions what both situations mean in relation to images of '[w]hite women burning bras in Harvard Square ... marching in ... Manhattan campaigning for equal rights'. (135) Wilderson's answer is that the images of female black pain and white activism are irreconcilable precisely because they cannot be read against one another without such an exercise appearing intellectually sloppy. However, he does not develop this point, preferring instead to examine suffering through 'a libidinal economy' (131) leading, predictably, to the conclusion that white radicalism, white political cinema and white supremacy are one and the same thing. Most unfortunate though inevitable is the reason Wilderson gives to justify this: a so-called 'anti-Blackness' that,

as opposed to white apathy, is necessary to White political radicalism and to White political cinema because it sutures affective, emotional, and even ethical solidarity between the ideological polar extremes of Whiteness. This necessary anti-Blackness erects a structural prohibition that one sees in White political discourse and in White political cinema. (131)

Fundamentally, the first three chapters of *Red, White and Black* are concerned with what it takes to think blackness and agency together ethically, or to permit ourselves intellectual mindful reflections upon the homicidal ontology of chattel slavery. Wilderson posits ways through which 'the dead' (blacks) reflect on how the living can be put 'out of the picture'. (143) There seems to be no let off or way out for blacks ('The Slave') in Wilderson's logic, an energetic and rigorous, if unforgiving and sustained, treadmill of damning analysis to which 'Indians' ('The "Savage"/"The Red") will also be subjected, first through "'Savage" film' analysis.

By a Savage film, Wilderson means one directed by an 'American Indian' and whose narrative has to plan for the film's ethical dilemmas to be carried by a Native American central figure.⁴ The Savage, and 'The Settler' (whites), two human communities, though separated from one another by auto-mobility,⁵ are united by spatial and temporal loss (for example, 'territorial integrity, political self-determination, economic independence, and religious freedom'), a grammar of suffering they share as follows: they cannot be antagonistic *vis-à-vis* one another because Savage and Settler cannot share their grammar of suffering with the Slave. In this line of thinking, Wilderson takes cue from the Savage film *Skins* (2002) to

argue that the masculine conservative figure of Rudy Yellow Lodge, a police officer in the Bureau of Indian Affairs, is, like the Settler, a 'postcolonial subaltern'. (160) Similarly, the black dead are killed again, since the Savage and the Settler are also united by Negrophobia even when it looks like their shared grammar of suffering might diverge. '[T]his is because the agreement is sutured by their common anxiety towards a body in bits and pieces, the threat of incoherence that sentient objects (Slaves) pose to subjects'. (160)

The Savage and Settler shared Negrophobia might be one of *Red, White and Black's* strongest arguments, alongside the notion of the body as contested zone and pornotroped, a two-pronged point raised in relation to Marc Foster's *Monster's Ball* (2001) and its star Halle Berry. Here, to read both the film and its star's performance, Wilderson thinks through Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt's post-industrial world (synonymous with a prison) in, and for, which the body (or 'flesh'), no longer perceived as freed, may nonetheless remain both contested and the ultimate refuge of civil society. For Wilderson, *Monster's Ball's* black flesh is fed upon; it confirms and endures the fact that, to be coherent and animated, *Monster's Ball's* ethical dilemmas necessitate a recurrent necrophilia through action-performances like 'ice cream consumption, cunnilingus ... body gazing, strip-searching ... electrocution—death'. (260) Likewise, one cannot be black and historic, and there have never been black bodies on screen (320) because, as already mentioned, blacks are socially and ontologically dead, and do not belong 'in the world' or civil society. At the same time, contradictorily perhaps, Wilderson finds the exploitation of Berry's femininity, or pornotroping, 'hard to shake' because Berry's Leticia's (in)famous sex scene with Billie Bob Thornton's character exposes 'a moment of anxious conflation between the speaking subject and the subject of speech' (323): drunk Leticia has no agency in that scene.⁶

—WILDERSON'S WHITE WATCH SEES RED ON BLACK: SOME WEAKNESSES

A few pages into *Red, White and Black*, I feared that it would just be a matter of time before Wilderson's black-as-social-death idea and multiple attacks on issues and scholars he disagrees with run (him) into (theoretical) trouble. This happens in chapter two, 'The Narcissistic Slave', where he critiques black film theorists and books. For example, Wilderson declares that Gladstone Yearwood's *Black Film as*

Signifying Practice (2000) 'betrays a kind of conceptual anxiety with respect to the historical object of study— ... it clings, anxiously, to the film-as-text-as-legitimate-object of Black cinema.' (62) He then quotes from Yearwood's book to highlight 'just how vague the aesthetic foundation of Yearwood's attempt to construct a canon can be'. (63)

And yet Wilderson's highlighting is problematic because it overlooks the 'Diaspora' or 'African Diaspora', a key component in Yearwood's thesis that, crucially, neither navel-gazes (that is, at the US or black America) nor pretends to properly engage with black film. Furthermore, Wilderson separates the different waves of black film theory and approaches them, only, in terms of how a most recent one might challenge its precedent. Again, his approach is problematic because it does not mention or emphasise the inter-connectivity of/in black film theory. As a case in point, Wilderson does not link Tommy Lott's mobilisation of Third Cinema for black film theory to Yearwood's idea of African Diaspora. (64) Additionally, of course, Wilderson seems unaware that Third Cinema itself has been fundamentally questioned since Lott's 1990s' theory of black film was formulated. Yet another consequence of ignoring the African Diaspora is that it exposes Wilderson's corpus of films as unable to carry the weight of the transnational argument he attempts to advance. Here, beyond the US-centricity or 'social and political specificity of [his] filmography', (95) I am talking about Wilderson's choice of films. For example, *Antwone Fisher* (dir. Denzel Washington, 2002) is attacked unfairly for failing to acknowledge 'a grid of captivity across spatial dimensions of the Black "body", the Black "home", and the Black "community"' (111) while films like Alan and Albert Hughes's *Menace II Society* (1993), overlooked, do acknowledge the same grid and, additionally, problematise Street Terrorism Enforcement and Prevention Act (STEP) policing. The above examples expose the fact of Wilderson's dubious and questionable conclusions on black film.

Red, White and Black is particularly undermined by Wilderson's propensity for exaggeration and blinkeredness. In chapter nine, "'Savage" Negrophobia', he writes:

The philosophical anxiety of *Skins* is all too aware that through the Middle Passage, African culture became Black 'style' ... Blackness can be placed and displaced with limitless frequency and across untold territories, by whoever so chooses. Most important, there is nothing real Black people

can do to either check or direct this process ... Anyone can say 'nigger' because anyone can be a 'nigger'. (235)⁷

Similarly, in chapter ten, 'A Crisis in the Commons', Wilderson addresses the issue of 'Black time'. Black is irredeemable, he argues, because, at no time in history had it been deemed, or deemed through the right historical moment and place. In other words, the black moment and place are not right because they are 'the ship hold of the Middle Passage': 'the most coherent temporality ever deemed as Black time' but also 'the "moment" of no time at all on the map of no place at all'. (279)

Not only does Pinho's more mature analysis expose this point as preposterous (see below), I also wonder what Wilderson makes of the countless historians' and sociologists' works on slave ships, shipboard insurrections and/during the Middle Passage,⁸ or of groundbreaking jazz-studies books on cross-cultural dialogue like *The Other Side of Nowhere* (2004). Nowhere has another side, but once Wilderson theorises blacks as socially and ontologically dead while dismissing jazz as 'belonging nowhere and to no one, simply there for the taking', (225) there seems to be no way back. It is therefore hardly surprising that Wilderson ducks the need to provide a solution or alternative to both his sustained bashing of blacks and anti-Blackness.⁹ Last but not least, *Red, White and Black* ends like a badly plugged announcement of a bad Hollywood film's badly planned sequel: 'How does one deconstruct life? Who would benefit from such an undertaking? The coffle approaches with its answers in tow.' (340)

—PINHO AS FRESH AIR: AFRO-MYTHS AND BLACK ATLANTIC IDENTITIES

Pinho favours detailed and measured presentation of an idea, term or argument, followed by an equally in-depth and careful critique. Her book is a breath of fresh air because, for one thing, Pinho knows that what blacks must breathe is called air and that it shall keep them alive. Metaphorically, of course, breathing means being aware that for scattered blacks Africa is not necessarily a nation-state or place of return. Rather, Africa can be an 'imaginary community', (25) albeit one which entails mythic connections to Africa-as-place. Lucid and fair, Pinho unambiguously identifies and critiques such linkages through the myth of 'Mama Africa'. Thus, Pinho focuses on what the term 'myth' means and three reasons for choosing it to study the *blocos afro*'s (Carnival Afro) reinventions of Mama Africa.

Myth embodies the subtleties and power of narratives explaining and interpreting the world. Myth carries 'values, messages, and ideals' and is therefore crucial to dispersed peoples' self-produced stories and representations (2) while connected to and contaminating 'reality'. (20) For example, Mama Africa generates and is in turn generated by identities, and only at the zones of contact between myth and identity can one hope to grasp its meaning. Bahia's own version is a 'metaphysical' nourishing body at once 'source of [racial] purity' and ongoing dispenser of the essence of black life. (30) Bahia activates this myth through different means: music, aesthetics and religion (32-3); the *blocos afro's* Africa as 'the "place of origin" of Afro-Brazilian ancestors'; and how it extends to countries in the African diaspora, such as Jamaica, Cuba and the USA, envisioned 'as branches of Mama Africa'. (39) Crucially, Pinho notes that the Bahian Mama Africa does not own her body, while the myth itself echoes problematic representations of black womanhood. (30)

Invoking such representations signals Pinho's serious commitment to seriously examining blackness as diasporic. For example, she investigates the role agency plays in embracing Afro-aesthetics (86) while arguing that a deeper meaning of such embrace comes from both an ongoing process of imagining and reinventing Africa (121) and that, in Brazil, adopting Afro-aesthetics changes according to age, gender, geography and political commitment to 'the black social movement'. (125)

But what does the 'Afro' of Afro-Bahian identities mean? Several things, according to Pinho: to embody Mama Africa through difference and by manipulating the body (89); tradition, for example, 'rhythms believed to originate from Africa'; 'purity', such as the ability to remain faithful to African roots (90) or, as Nelson Mendes of the *bloco Olodum* states in an interview, to defend 'the proposal of moving beyond boundaries'. (95) Therefore 'Afro' seems to signify an acknowledgement that race and blackness cannot exist separately while black identities must be mutable. (96-7) And yet, the *blocos'* anti-racist discourse keeps on retreating (in)to the body, and consequently undermines both the race-blackness connection and mutability of black identities: why?

Why? Because in Brazil the 'alleged smell of the slaves' bodies became an additional excuse for classifying them closer to animals than to humans'. (105) Attitudes resulting from this mindset permeate ways in which the body remains a place in which to re-inscribe Africa as source of beauty and restoration of dignity. Additionally, nowadays black bodies are present(ed) positively in Brazil's shopping malls, magazines, TV/soap operas, advertisements, and education. The *blocos afro*, created in the 1970s 'under the influence of' the US Black is Beautiful movement, can take credit for this presence'. (115) In other words, *blocos afro* develop a black identity through stories of 'Africanness and representations of blackness', an identity aligned with their 'strategies of social promotion [connecting] discourse and practice ... culture and politics'. (117)

It would be preposterous to talk about black Brazilians as socially or ontologically dead. At the same time, to take issues with Afro-Brazilian activists' and *blocos'* anti-racist discourse seems an arduous task. This is because it is grounded in engagement with history, place, federal and local government race policies (or race denials), and day-to-day anti-black racism. Nevertheless, as Pinho rightly remarks, this anti-racist discourse overlooks gender analysis: seldom do activists and *blocos* make reference to how 'racism affects men and women differently' while they fail 'to question' their own sexism, which leads to the female black body remaining 'the preferred locus for performing the pedagogy of blackness' through black beauty pageants for example. (136) Pinho objects to the policing of black women's bodies, opposes notions of ethnic black identities and Mama Africa (158) at the same time as she finds linkages between biology, culture and politics problematic. Her suggested alternatives are most enlightening:

one must remember that identities ... are constructed in the context of late capitalism, in which liberalism and discipline, coupled with bureaucracy, impinge on the most subjective conditions of identities ... we need to envision the possibility of constructing identities that are not based on the same terms that emerged out of colonialism and that circulated as a means to legitimize subordination and power. (175)

Pinho's above suggestions can be, but are not easily, achieved. At the time of (her) writing it was no longer a question of if, but one of how, to see the fusion of black culture with baianidade/Bahian culture. Aware of this issue, she suggests that we step out of 'Manichean and superficial' Afrocentrism so as to see the largely 'artificial' character of classifications 'black culture' and 'Bahian culture' and to take into account 'the agency of cultural producers'. (198-9) Accordingly, I find stimulating Pinho's courage to declare that to objectify identities does not necessarily create estrangement; without objectification cultures cannot expand and reproduce, (209) and cultural transformation needs to be promoted. In turn, to transform culture demands a re-thinking of what equality means because:

Equal should not be understood as same ... To see equality as sameness is like viewing racelessness as whiteness. It is a formulation that allows 'white' to be the neutral standard from which black differs; or 'man' to be the neutral standard against which women are compared. (220-1)

Put simply, I welcome the above statement and Pinho's overall thesis. I wish Wilderson paid attention to books like Pinho's, Cedric J. Robinson's *Black Marxism* (1983) or W.E.B. DuBois's *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935), and to the ideas of Kwame A. Appiah, Cornel West, Marc Reed, Simone de Beauvoir, Eric Robert Taylor, to name but a few. Had Wilderson done so, his book could have been balanced. *Red, White and Black* is of almost no use to film studies scholars. I find it additionally useless because I believe that the USA is not the world's centre, and that US antagonisms, related to cinema or not, are always-already multiply outernational.

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—NOTES

¹ Pinho's 'Bahia' is both the town of Salvador and the Bahia region.

² Wilderson seems to misunderstand or dismiss the importance of the slave ship in relation to black memory and social ontology.

³ Member of both the Black Panther Party and the Black Liberation Army

⁴ The Slave film is similar but its ethical dilemmas must also be 'elaborated by the conditions of the Western Hemisphere'. (95)

⁵ Wilderson's example is Chris Eyre's *Smoke Signals* (1998) where two Native American women always drive backward within the Reservation. Wilderson argues that 'the automobile cannot assist [them] in negotiating life as it does white women in settler cinema because the automobile would first have to bring the two native women back *to* life, before it could assist them in their negotiation *of* life. This ... is impossible because the automobile's symbolic capacity in civil society is, a priori, dependent on these two ... women's death.' (emphasis in original; 155)

⁶ 'And every ... person knows how necessary the Black is even to the most naked White pleasures. Halle Berry knows this as she is about to take off her clothes...' (325)

⁷ See also 224, 227–8, 232.

⁸ See P. Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Verso, London, 1993; M.M. Sale, *The Slumbering Volcano: American Slave Ship Revolts and the Production of Rebellious Masculinity*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 1997; M. Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History*, John Murray, London, 2005; E.R. Taylor, *If We Must Die: Shipboard Insurrections in the Era of the Atlantic Slave Trade*, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, 2006.

⁹ Wilderson is black, which has no bearing on my argument. The following is a copout: 'To say we *must* be free of air, while admitting to knowing no other source of breath, is what I have tried to do here'. (338)