

AFRO-PESSIMIST AESTHETICS

Spring 2020

Under/graduate Seminar in Art History and Critical Theory

Sampada Aranke, Assistant Professor of Art History, Theory and Criticism, School of the Art Institute of Chicago

Huey Copeland, Arthur Andersen Teaching and Research Professor,
Northwestern University

DESCRIPTION

Current debates in Black Studies have taken shape around interventions colloquially referred to as “Afro-pessimism.” Often associated with theorists Frank B. Wilderson, III and Jared Sexton, the term refers to a series of political orientations that help us understand the paradigmatic antiblack violence that structures everyday Black life. These theoretical interventions have entered the popular culture, as artists, critics, and cultural producers across various contexts have turned to Afro-pessimism as both a framework for artistic production and a means of critical engagement with it. This class will consider the possibilities of an Afro-pessimist aesthetics in the wake of such interventions. We will read works by thinkers including but not limited to Frantz Fanon, Saidiya Hartman, Arthur Jafa, Fred Moten, and Hortense Spillers in addition to relevant texts (co-)authored by the course instructors.

All course materials are available for free via Canvas.

ASSIGNMENTS AND EVALUATION

1. Regular Participation and Engagement
2. Weekly Discussion Questions (no more than 300 words, to be posted to the appropriate thread in “Discussions” on the course Canvas page no later than the preceding day at 5PM)
3. Pre-recorded Video Presentation (no more than 5 minutes, to be posted to the appropriate thread in Discussions by 5PM before the Week 5 course meeting).
4. 5-7-Page (12 pt. Times New Roman, double-spaced, 1” margins on all side of the page) Proofed, Footnoted, and Illustrated Final Paper (based on revised and expanded presentation script; due to instructors via email by 12PM on the Monday following the final course meeting).

Students must complete ALL assignments to pass the course; grading is on a Pass/No-Pass basis.

COURSE SCHEDULE

WEEK 1

Frantz Fanon, “The Fact of Blackness,” and “The Negro and Psychopathology,” *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 109-209.

WEEK 2

Saidiya V. Hartman, “Innocent Amusements,” and “Seduction and the Ruses of Power,” in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 17-48; 79-112.

Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17.2 (1987): 65-81.

Sylvia Wynter, "Sambos and Minstrels," *Social Text* (1979): 149-156.

WEEK 4

Jared Sexton, "Chaos and Opportunity: On *Training Day*" in *Black Masculinity and the Cinema of Policing* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 1-31.

Fred Moten, "The Case of Blackness," *Criticism* 50.2 (Spring 2008): 177-218.

Fred Moten, "The Resistance of the Object," in *In The Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003): 1-24.

WEEK 5

Discussion of Pre-Recorded Student Presentations

WEEK 6

Fred Moten, "The Resistance of the Object," in *In The Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003): 192-254.

Elizabeth Alexander, "'Can you be BLACK and Look at This?': Reading the Rodney King Video(s)," *Public Culture* 7.1 (Fall 1994): 77-94.

David Marriott, "'I'm gonna borer me a Kodak:' Photography and Lynching," in *On Black Men* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000): 1-22.

WEEK 7

Frank B. Wilderson, III, "Close Up: Fugitivity and the Filmic Imagination: Social Death and Narrative Aporia in *12 Years a Slave*," *Black Camera* 7.1 (Fall 2015): 134-149.

"Dossier: Afro-pessimist Aesthetics," edited by Sampada Aranke and Huey Copeland, *ASAP/J* 5.2 (Spring 2020): 241-280.

WEEK 8

Arthur Jafa, "My Black Death," in *Everything but the Burden: What White People are Taking from Black Culture*, ed. Greg Tate (New York: Broadway Books, 2003), 244-257.

Huey Copeland, "Cut and Cover," (unpublished manuscript).

James Snead, "Repetition as a Figure of Black Culture," in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russell Ferguson et. al. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 213-30.

Frank B. Wilderson III, "Grammar and Ghosts: The Performative Limits of African Freedom," *Theatre Survey* 50.1 (May 2009): 119-125.