

## Afropessimism and Palestinian Liberation

By [Scott Campbell](#)

[\*Falling into Incandescence\*](#)

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**Abstract:** This paper draws upon Black feminist theory and Afropessimism to interrogate Palestinian demands for liberation. In doing so, it figures Zionism as a project of modernity and evaluates its epistemology through Sylvia Wynter's formulation of the "genre of Man." Subsequently, it picks up Afropessimism's extension of Wynter's thought to critique the ontology of the Human. As Zionism, a modern endeavor, knows itself through the othering of Palestinians, an Afropessimistic reading of Palestinian demands is examined. It is argued that Palestinian liberation is an impossibility in the current ordering of knowledge and being, demanding the end of the Human and this world.

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In the face of genocide, the question of Palestinian liberation has never been more salient. Yet what liberation looks like and how to obtain it is a matter of debate. Formations such as the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Palestinian National Authority have accepted a two-state solution framework that would see a State of Palestine established alongside the State of Israel. Others have called for one binational state, where Israelis and Palestinians would live side by side under a secular, democratic government.<sup>1</sup> For its part, Palestinian civil society has focused less on a specific solution and more on the implementation of rights guaranteed under international law. This approach can be seen in the 2005 call for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions against Israel, which demands an end to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory, equal rights for Palestinian citizens of Israel, and the right to return for Palestinian refugees.<sup>2</sup> In a similar manner, scholars such as Rashid Khalidi have called for a focus on the inequality present in the Zionist project, proposing that a just solution in Palestine should be premised on equal rights for all inhabitants of the region: "Absolute equality of human, personal, civil, political, and national rights must be enshrined in whatever future scheme is ultimately accepted by the two

societies. This is a high-sounding recommendation, but nothing else will address the core of the problem, nor will it be sustainable and lasting.”<sup>3</sup>

On the surface, appeals to equality and international law hold a certain resonance. They are aspirational yet practical, fitting within the current discourse regarding the fair and just organization of societies. At the same time, such approaches are hindered by unquestioned assumptions regarding the origins and intentions of constructs such as equality and international law, as well as the possibility of obtaining true or absolute justice within the current world paradigm. This paper argues that the present ontological and epistemological foundations of human being in this world – on which claims to equality or international law are based – impede the realization of Palestinian liberation. It posits that Palestinian freedom necessitates the creation of new worlds and, rather than the legislating of equality, the jettisoning of constructs such as modernity and the Human.

To make its case, this paper will place questions of Palestinian liberation into conversation with Black feminist thought and Afropessimism. It will first demonstrate the Zionist project to be one firmly rooted in modernity and loyalty to whiteness. Subsequently, it will draw upon the critiques of modernity formulated by Black feminist theorists, primarily Sylvia Wynter, arriving at a problematization of Man, or the current supremacy of the white, Western bourgeois male. Afropessimism will extend Wynter’s judgment of Man to encompass that of the Human, showing that Humanity itself is contingent upon anti-Blackness. Having troubled the construct of the Human, this paper will apply an Afropessimistic reading to Palestinian liberation, asking if total freedom means destruction of the Human, and Palestinians have been rendered as not-Human by Zionism, how can Afropessimism inform Palestinian liberation? I argue that Afropessimism not only assists in descriptively generating a theoretical

reading of the Palestinian plight as the anti-modern Other, but also can prescriptively aid in conceptualizing resistance. My culminating argument, as mentioned above and built off the frameworks offered by Afropessimism and the Black feminist theory from which it emerged, is that true Palestinian liberation necessitates the end of modernity, the Human, and therefore, this world.

### **Zionism and Modernity**

Zionism is a project firmly rooted in modernity. Originating in Europe during the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it posited as a solution to European antisemitism the establishment of a Jewish national homeland elsewhere in the world. Adopting the European framework of settler colonialism, as Nadia Abu El-Haj argues, Zionism was conceptualized as “an outpost of European civilization, of whiteness itself.”<sup>4</sup> Muhannad Ayyash makes these connections clear:

Colonial modernity is the development of modern social, economic, and political life (the nation-state, private property, individualism, capitalist division of labour, international law, etc.) in and through the European colonial project from the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards, which is marked by the genocide, enslavement, and slaughter and exploitation of millions of colonized people.

Zionism, as a modern political ideology, is a child of this colonial modernity and arguably its most clear manifestation in our world today. Following in the footsteps of other colonial projects, the genocide of the colonized Palestinians was always the only path that Zionism could have traveled.<sup>5</sup>

Supported by European powers, notably the British, who after the end of World War I became the colonial rulers of Palestine, Zionist colonization of Palestine grew the Jewish population of the area from six percent in 1918 to thirty-three percent by 1947.<sup>6</sup> As Patrick Wolfe noted in writing about Zionism and Palestine, “Settler colonialism destroys to replace.”<sup>7</sup> With the possible exception of the ongoing genocide, this phenomenon found its ultimate expression in the Nakba, or Catastrophe, from 1947-1949, when Zionist and then Israeli forces systematically ethnically cleansed the Indigenous Palestinian population from territory it seized

to become the State of Israel. At least 750,000 Palestinians, three-quarters of the population, were forced to flee from their homes.<sup>8</sup> Once Palestinians were expelled from their homes, their villages were either destroyed or renamed and moved into by Zionist settlers. At least 530 Palestinian population centers were rendered into rubble.<sup>9</sup>

After seizing 78 percent of historic Palestine by 1949, in 1967 Israel occupied the remaining 22 percent, including East Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and began establishing illegal Jewish-only settlements on that land. In the occupied Palestinian territories, Israel has implemented practices that have been labeled as apartheid by organizations including Human Rights Watch and B'Tselem.<sup>10</sup> In Israel itself, where 20 percent of the population is Palestinian, the legal regime is reminiscent of Jim Crow, where there are more than 65 laws that discriminate against Palestinian citizens of Israel.<sup>11</sup> Not only does Israel openly discriminate against non-Jewish citizens and those it is occupying, that discrimination extends to the privileging of whiteness among Israeli Jewry, where Ashkenazi Jews form the racialized minority ruling class over Sephardic, Mizrahi, and Ethiopian Jewish populations. This phenomenon has been amply investigated by Edward Said, Joseph Massad, Sami Shalom Chetrit, Maya Wind, and Ella Shohat.<sup>12</sup> Shohat writes, “Within Israel, European Jews constitute a First-World elite dominating not only the Palestinians but also the Oriental Jews. The Sephardim, as Jewish Third World people, form a semi-colonized nation-within-a-nation.”<sup>13</sup> Envisioned as and implemented at the intersection of white supremacy and settler colonialism, Zionism must be read as a thoroughly modern, European project.

### **Modernity and Man**

Emerging out of modernity and reflecting its commitments, Zionism therefore holds certain epistemological investments. The formation of modernity’s epistemology and its

implications for humanity have been extensively articulated in a series of essays by Black feminist theorist Sylvia Wynter. She argues that, “My major proposal is that both the issue of ‘race’ and its classificatory logic (as, in David Duke's belief that ‘the Negro is an evolutionarily lower level than the Caucasian’) lies in the founding premise, on which our present order of knowledge or episteme [Foucault, 1973] and its rigorously elaborated disciplinary paradigms, are based.”<sup>14</sup> The “founding premise” is that humanity has been divided by modernity into “genres” of which the ruling genre is that of “Man.”<sup>15</sup> Man is understood to be defined sociologically, economically, and biologically as the white, bourgeois, Western male, whose way of being, understanding, and acting in the world “overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself.”<sup>16</sup> Through appeals first to religion, then reason, and later economics, always informed by biological supremacism, Man, with the spread of Christianity, colonialism, scientism, and capitalism, portrays itself as the normative human and maintains the ideological and repressive force to impose that worldview.

If the white, wealthy, cis-hetero male – or Man – is the norm and the human under modernity, then those who do not fit some or all those categories must be classified as Other. This is the flip side of modernity, which lifts up one class or genre of human at the expense of all others. In reifying one form of the human, it degrades other forms, figures, and knowledges. The supremacy of Man is contingent on the classification and marginalization of non-conforming versions of the human. As Wynter explains, “the invention of the global category of Human Others on the basis of the institutionalized inferiorization and subjugation of those human beings classified as Indians, Natives, Negroes, Niggers was indispensable not only to the enactment of the new sociogenic code and its dialectic of evolved/selected ‘symbolic life’ and non-evolved dysselected ‘symbolic death’ but also to the over-representation of this ethno-class or Western

bourgeois genre or mode of being human, as if it were that of the human itself.”<sup>17</sup> According to Wynter, one means by which Man knows itself is through this process of Othering. And in creating Others as inferior, it justifies the superiority of Man, such that the cycle is self-perpetuating, as we “inscript and auto-institute ourselves as human through symbolic, representational processes that have, hitherto, included those mechanisms of occultation by means of which we have been able to make opaque to ourselves the fact that we so.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, the end result of modernity is the supremacy of Man and the mass othering of humans who do not fulfill the qualities of Man.

It should not be difficult to locate Zionism within this picture of modernity and to reinforce the previous argument that it is a thoroughly modern project. Zionism is premised on the elevation of one type of human, that of the Ashkenazi Jew, as the hegemonic norm. In turn, it others non-Ashkenazi Jews, including Mizrahim, Sephardim, and Ethiopian Jews, as well as Indigenous Palestinians. This othering manifests in the forms of well-documented marginalization, discrimination, ethnic cleansing, occupation, apartheid, and now, genocide. Construction of the Palestinian Other as a being less than Man is how Zionism ultimately knows itself. Jake Romm captures the epistemological functions of the deployment of Zionist settler colonialism, which necessitates the creation of, and the use of violence against, the Other:

The violence of Zionism is not a response to the ideological dehumanization of the Palestinians but simultaneous to it: murder is the way in which the Palestinian human being is first reduced to a “thing” and then rendered incapable of disputing the ideological lie of dehumanization, the disputation of which requires nothing more than their gaze. Murder quiets the guilt of Zionism’s untrue thought that this human they see is not a human at all, and the Zionist must constantly enact new and ever greater violence to stave off the ultimate and inevitable realization.<sup>19</sup>

The hierarchical deployment of types of humans, with Man on the top, establishes epistemological supremacy buttressed through ideological and repressive force. While Zionism

may have been a latecomer to the game of modernity unleashed four centuries prior, it fits neatly within its fold. Read through Wynter's analysis, the Zionist is Man.

### **Afropessimism and the Human**

In Wynter's argument, she is careful to assert that those rendered as Other by Man maintain the quality of being human. Her case is a critique of modernity's epistemology rather than ontology. Man represents itself as the human and claims to be such, but this is ultimately a falsehood, for there remain other humans as well who do not fit into the category of Man and who know themselves by other means. In explaining her point, she offers the metaphor of the ladder, with the Western bourgeoisie at the top as Man, and a range of other humans occupying different rungs. At the bottom of this ladder are Black people: "The Black population group...has once again come to be placed at the bottommost place of that hierarchy. Others, including racialized groups, have claimed 'normal' human status as a result of claiming distance from the overrepresentation of Blacks at the bottom rung of the ladder of 'Man.'"<sup>20</sup> Anti-Blackness must therefore be understood as an inherent aspect of modernity which facilitates the differentiation of humans into distinct categories, leaving those labeled as Black outside of the realm of Man.

Afropessimism expands upon Wynter's claims by introducing questions regarding ontology and the construction of the Human. Certainly indebted to and influenced by Wynter, the Afropessimist argument nonetheless pushes past the conclusions at which she arrived.<sup>21</sup> The overarching premise of the theory is that the essence of the Human is anti-Blackness; that without anti-Blackness, there would be no Human.<sup>22</sup> Black subjugation, suffering, and ultimately, death, is what gives Humanity meaning as a construct. In Afropessimism, Blackness and Slaveness are equivalencies. Before Slaveness, there was no Blackness, and while others can be and were enslaved, they can and do also exist outside the realm of slavery. For Blacks, there is

no outside, for their very ontological construction is linked to slavery.<sup>23</sup> Frank Wilderson posits that, “Human life is dependent on Black death for its existence and for its coherence. Blackness and Slaveness are inextricably bound in such a way that whereas Slaveness can be separated from Blackness, Blackness cannot exist as other than Slaveness. There is no world without Blacks, yet there are no Blacks who are in the world.”<sup>24</sup> Excluded from personhood and Humanity, Blacks have no being in this world. As Calvin Warren observes, “Blacks are the nothing of ontology and do not have being like those beings for whom the ontological question is an issue (i.e., human being).”<sup>25</sup> In a shift from the Wynterian epistemology of modernity that leads to Man, Afropessimism utilizes ontology to interrogate the substance of the Human.

The distinction between the two is subtle, but crucial. Wynter may be read as the optimist in contrast with the pessimism of Afropessimism. She rejects Man’s epistemology that claims itself as the human, contending that in fact others outside of Man are and remain human. The battle is for all who are actually human to be included within a sufficiently capacious epistemology for them all to be read as human, not just Man. She writes, “The Argument proposes that the struggle of our new millennium will be one between the ongoing imperative of securing the well-being present ethnoclass (i.e., Western bourgeois) conception of the human, which overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself, and that of securing the well-being, and therefore the full cognitive and behavioral of the human species itself/ourselves.”<sup>26</sup> For its part, Afropessimism, rather than rejecting Man’s claim to the human, acknowledges the truth of it, capitalizes it, and moves the question from inquiring as to how Man as Human knows itself to ask, therefore, if Man is Human, what is the essence of the Human? The reformatting of the question moves the register from Wynter’s conclusion that Man is epistemologically anti-Black to Afropessimism’s fundamental thesis that the ontology of the Human is anti-Blackness. Or as



Warren argues, by placing Blacks outside the epistemology of Man as an Other through which Man knows itself, it ultimately brings anti-Blackness to the center of an ontological question: “But given that this outside position is actually an intimate aspect of the inside, since it provides the inside’s condition of possibility, the problem is at the heart of the ontometaphysics of man. Black ~~being~~ is the absent center of the whole of metaphysics, and it, cartographically, constitutes the paradoxical inside/outside position of metaphysics.”<sup>27</sup> Anti-Blackness, again, is at the core of Humanity.

This move from Wynter to Afropessimism is more than a semantic turn. The distinct conclusions compel different questions as to possible solutions. If one accepts the argument of Afropessimism, the struggle is not, therefore, for those othered by Man to be incorporated into the Human, it is not a quest for equality, but must be directed towards the destruction of the anti-Black Human as a condition for total freedom. A common Afropessimist theme is therefore that this world offers no solutions to the Human essence of anti-Blackness, necessitating the end of the world. Wilderson concludes that, “Afropessimism has no prescriptive gesture: because the end of our suffering signals the end of the Human, the end of the world.”<sup>28</sup> Jared Sexton echoes this stance, noting, “No, blackness is not the pathogen in afro-pessimism, the world is. Not the earth, but the world, and maybe even the whole possibility of and desire for a world.”<sup>29</sup> Afropessimism demands an ontological reorientation towards how *Homo sapiens sapiens* know and give meaning to ourselves; it demands an end to modernity.

### **Palestinians and the Human**

It is Afropessimism’s problematization of the Human that I would like to incorporate into a discussion of the struggle for Palestinian liberation. Resonances of Afropessimism’s argument can be seen within Zionism as a movement that denies Palestinian existence and Humanity. In

1969, Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir famously told British journalist Frank Giles that, “There was no such thing as Palestinians...It was not as though there was a Palestinian people and we came and threw them out and took their country from them. They did not exist.”<sup>30</sup> This trope was resuscitated in 2023 by Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, who in a speech in Paris stated, “Who was the first Palestinian king? What language do the Palestinians have? Was there ever a Palestinian currency? Is there a Palestinian history or culture? Nothing. There is no such thing as a Palestinian people.”<sup>31</sup> During this genocide, dehumanizing and eliminationist rhetoric from Israeli officials became the norm, with calls for a second Nakba, to act against “human animals,” to “create an unprecedented humanitarian disaster,” and to deploy nuclear weapons against Palestinians, “crushing and flattening Gaza.”<sup>32</sup> Characterizing Palestinians as non-Humans worthy of extermination has long been a Zionist trope. The below table includes examples of the terms used by Zionist and Israeli politicians, theorists, and public figures to describe Palestinians.

**Table 1: Dehumanizing terms describing Palestinians used by Israeli leaders<sup>33</sup>**

inhuman	devious monsters
bloodthirsty dogs	preying wolves
vipers	scum of snakes
beasts and asses	two-footed beasts
vampires	pigs
wild predators	swarms of rats
monkeys	crocodiles
mosquitoes	cockroaches
locusts	worms
virus	cancer

In a study conducted during the 2014 Israeli war on Gaza, researchers Emile Bruneau and Nour Kteily found that, “[O]ur sample of Israelis (members of the high power group) expressed extremely hostile attitudes towards Palestinians (members of the low power group), including the highest levels of blatant dehumanization towards any outgroup observed to date using the ‘Ascent of man’ measure of blatant dehumanization (i.e., higher than has been observed among American, English and Hungarian participants rating over two dozen different groups, including ISIS; [10], [33], [34]). Indeed, we found that Israelis rated Palestinians closer to an animal on the scale than to a ‘fully evolved’ human.”<sup>34</sup> Interpreted through Wynter’s lens, Zionism as Man involves the othering of Palestinians to the extent that Palestinian humanity is denied, and they are reduced to animals.

The practice of animalizing Black people is examined in-depth by Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, where, while rejecting Afropessimism’s argument regarding the Human, she claims that Blacks remain Human, though subject to a “plasticity” that allows for the white supremacist reinterpretation of Blackness to suit its needs.<sup>35</sup> Jackson writes, “I replace the notion of ‘denied humanity’ and ‘exclusion’ with bestialized humanization, because the African’s humanity is not denied but appropriated, inverted, and ultimately plasticized in the methodology of abjecting animality. Universal humanity, a specific ‘genre of the human,’ is produced by the constitutive abjection of black humanity; nevertheless, the very constitutive function of this inverted recognition reveals that this black abjection is transposing recognition, and an inclusion that masks itself as an exclusion.”<sup>36</sup> In the Palestinian context, it can be seen how that same “plasticity” is deployed to render the Palestinian as a lower being, as an animal. As the essence of the Human is the “abjection of black humanity,” the essence of the Zionist, a form of Man or

the Human, is the abjection of Palestinian humanity, in addition to anti-Blackness. The Zionist produces and defines itself through the animalization of the Palestinian.

### **Afropessimism and Palestinians**

As *Afropessimism* troubles the concept of the Human, demonstrates its inapplicability to all beings, especially Blacks, and Zionism, a subsection of the Human, denies being and Humanity to Palestinians, how can *Afropessimism* inform the struggle for Palestinian liberation? A few matters must be attended to here, including claims made by *Afropessimism* and a desire to avoid conflation between the Blackness and Palestinianness.

In *Afropessimism*, Wilderson argues that the case he puts forward applies only to Black people, that other people of color and marginalized peoples are “junior partners” to whites in the project of the anti-Black Human, and as such are still Human.<sup>37</sup> They maintain their Human status because they can distance themselves from Blackness and profit off anti-Blackness, options that are unavailable to Black people themselves. In fact, in an anecdote at the beginning of his book, Wilderson depicts what he claims are the anti-Black sentiments of a Palestinian friend of his to argue this point and to paint Palestinians as anti-Black.<sup>38</sup> Another key factor in the Humanness of white people’s “junior partners” is that they have means of redress, whereas Black people do not.<sup>39</sup> For example, Indigenous people can get land back, Latinxs can get citizenship, or legalized transphobia can be ended. For Black people, there is no redemptive means for them to be included into the Human because the essence of the Human is Black people’s exclusion from it. This brings home a key point: that the Black struggle for liberation and the Palestinian struggle for liberation are not analogous, and it is not the intention of this article to argue that such is the case.

The distinction between struggles is perhaps best encapsulated by the metaphor of the door. Dionne Brand notes that for Black people, there is no door to walk through by which the past and present can be reclaimed or reconciled. “Having no name to call on was having no past; having no past pointed to the fissure between the past and the present. That fissure is represented in the Door of No Return: that place where our ancestors departed one world for another; the Old World for the New. The place where all names were forgotten and all beginnings recast. In some desolate sense it was the creation place of Blacks in the New World Diaspora at the same time that it signified the end of traceable beginnings.”<sup>40</sup> While trans-Atlantic slavery shut the door on Blacks people’s access to the past, and according to the argument of Afropessimism is the status – that of Slaveness – which continues to define Blackness, for Palestinians there remains the hope for return, also epitomized by the door. Many of the more than seven million Palestinian refugees – survivors of the Nakba and their descendants – still hold the keys to the doors of the homes they were forced from more than 75 years ago. This possibility of return, redress, redemption, and restoration, is a possibility that does not exist for Black people. Thus, while there are connections and solidarities between Blacks, Palestinians, and their respective struggles for liberation, those struggles and their structural components do remain distinct.<sup>41</sup>

## **Liberation**

If, as this argument suggests, Zionism is a project of modernity, and if modernity is a project that reifies white, Western, bourgeois Man, and if Man claims to be Human and the essence of the Human is anti-Blackness, and if Zionism posits that Palestinians are not Human, where does that leave questions of liberation? As indicated in the introduction, there are many formulae and approaches to the matter of Palestinian liberation. The most compelling adopt a stance of demands for equal rights and the application of international law.

The problem with such approaches is that they ignore that notions of equality, rights, law, and international law are fully modern concepts, Eurocentric in origin and enunciated from the bastions of modernity. Within such concepts, therefore, are latent assumptions of modernity – such as the “genre of Man,” the mass project of othering, and the anti-Blackness of the Human. The formulation of equality is thus premised on inequality, the law on its selective application, and the international order on the maintenance of Western hegemony. Abdaljawad Omar sums up the Palestinian experience with the colonial nature of law:

In a nutshell, Palestinians despise the courts. We hate the sight of a judge, knowing all too well that they are no different from the interrogator. We loathe the law and all it stands for in our context—a tool for oppression cloaked in legality. Even the lawyers, perhaps universally disliked, evoke our mistrust. But for us, the courts represent more than frustration; they are the place where our oppressive conditions are translated into legal language, where the weight of colonial domination is formalized with a veneer of legitimacy.<sup>42</sup>

Equality and international law are not neutral terms, equally applicable to all, but epistemologically informed by the system from which they emerged. This point is perhaps captured most effectively with the example of emancipation and the end of slavery. As Saidiya Hartman notes, “From this vantage point, emancipation appears less the grand event of liberation than a point of transition between modes of servitude and racial subjection. It also leads us to question whether the rights of man and citizen are realizable or whether the appellation ‘human’ can be borne equally by all.”<sup>43</sup> With the legal end of slavery, anti-Black racism continued unabated, leading to the ongoing white supremacist project for the control and capture of now “free” Black bodies which are still subjected to social and physical death. Warren similarly asserts that, “A fundamental gap between freedom and emancipation exists that black humanists have collapsed in their philosophical romance. Black ~~being~~ only has access to emancipation, never freedom. Emancipation is an aperture on the domain of terror and not self-adequation.”<sup>44</sup>

Warren goes on to argue that freedom can be granted, but it remains a “legal fiction,” as the entire legal system, that apparatus of modernity, is premised on the non-Humanity of Blacks.<sup>45</sup> If Black people have no being, how can freedom be granted to them? If Zionism structures Palestinians as having no being, how can rights or freedom be granted to them? Rights cannot be bestowed upon those constructed as Slaves, non-Humans, or property, especially when such a status is the contingent basis of the worldview through which rights are given their coherence.

Under modernity, true equality is an impossibility because the entire ordering and essence of modernity is inequality. This is what makes Palestinian demands for liberation incoherent and illegible in the current paradigm. This is why to demand Palestinian freedom is to be constructed as violent. For indeed, true Palestinian freedom requires the deployment of epistemic and ontological violence *against* modernity, Zionism, and the Human. Palestinian freedom is world destruction. For Palestinians to truly be free would require an ontological reordering of existence. As such, Palestinian demands are truly radical and revolutionary as they are paradigm-altering. The same must be acknowledged of demands for Black liberation. Indeed, succinctly put, total liberation, liberation for all of us, is contingent upon the end of modernity, the Human, and this world.

## **Conclusion**

In *Afropessimism*, Frank Wilderson writes, “But if Blacks were completely genocided, Humanity would find itself in the same quandary that would occur if Black people were recognized and incorporated as Human beings. Humanity would cease to exist; because it would lose its conceptual coherence, having lost its baseline other. Humanity would find itself standing in the abyss of an epistemological void. The Black is needed to mark the border of Human subjectivity.”<sup>46</sup> Palestinians are being genocided after being rendered as the Other and non-

Human by Zionism. There is perhaps no greater expression of the dehumanization of a people than genocide. It is both abhorrent and incomprehensible while also intelligible as the logical culmination of modernity's teleology.

This paper has drawn upon Black feminist theory and Afropessimism to interrogate the Palestinian demand for liberation and what it entails. It has marked Zionism as a project of modernity and evaluated the epistemology of modernity through Sylvia Wynter's formulation of the "genre of Man." Subsequently, it has picked up Afropessimism's extension of Wynter's thought to critique the ontology of the Human, locating its essence in anti-Blackness. As Zionism, a modern endeavor, knows itself through the othering of Palestinians and is ontologically informed not only by anti-Blackness but anti-Palestinianness, an Afropessimistic reading of Palestinian demands seems appropriate. The conclusion, as far as one has been offered by Afropessimism, as to the possible exit from this ontology of anti-Blackness and the denial of Black being is the destruction of the Human and this world. Here I argue that, in the same vein, Palestinian liberation is an impossibility in the current ordering of knowledge and being, similarly demanding through its realization the end of the Human, this world, and modernity.

A natural next question to pose regarding such a conclusion is what does that look like? How is it done? These are difficult questions that require their own separate article, or as Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang argue, "decolonization is not obliged to answer those questions – decolonization is not accountable to settlers, or settler futurity. Decolonization is accountable to Indigenous sovereignty and futurity."<sup>47</sup> I would argue that to pose the questions that need answering, it is first necessary to understand the terrain upon which the struggle is occurring, which is what this article has tried to depict. Ultimately, it may be prudent to adopt the "pessimism" in Afropessimism, to acknowledge that, as Warren does, "Black being is always



already under attack; peace, within an antiblack world, is a fallacy (much like freedom). The metaphysical infrastructure that supports the fiction of the white human is sustained by antiblack violence.”<sup>48</sup> This world has no remedy to offer that would result in freedom for Black people or Palestinian people. Yet there are also gestures that are possible, such as what Abdaljawad Omar indicates in his analysis of the October 7 attacks and Israel’s response:

Though initiated by a nonsovereign decision by the Palestinian resistance in the Gaza Strip on October 7, the war’s progression toward the excessive destruction of Gaza has shattered the veneer of “peace” that masked the other enduring war. This other war is the decadeslong colonial condition itself, an expansive, pointillist war that allows for the accumulation of land and resources by settlers through a slow, though documented, process that remains veiled—a war that pervades daily life in Palestine. Here, through a nonsovereign decision, resistance emerges as an effort to deform the colonial condition, a task that is also “formless” and that seeks to bring the colonial condition down in the world, initiating a process of decomposition. At this zero point, it becomes possible to envision new beginnings and connections, to construct new associations, and to transcend and do away with the binary world that colonialism creates.<sup>49</sup>

Where there is resistance there is the possibility of “new beginnings and connections” that point to a break from modernity and its forms. Constant contestation, not on modernity’s terms of rights, equality, law, or states, but on the negation of modernity’s prerogative to dictate the terms of struggle or the desired outcomes in the first place, may be one suggested point of departure. What is evident is that liberation is not a simple task, but as captives of modernity, is one that we are all implicated in, for all our sakes.

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<sup>1</sup> Adherents of the one-state solution include a variety of notable Palestinian and Jewish Israeli leftists. For examples, see Ali Abunimah, *One Country: A Bold Proposal to End the Israeli-Palestinian Impasse* (Picador, 2007); Livia Bergmeijer, “Jeff Halper: ‘A two-state solution is no longer viable, we must stop talking about it’ Interview,” *Ceasefire Magazine*, April 24, 2012, <https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/jeff-halper-the-two-state-solution-longer-viable-stop-talking-it/>; Gideon Levy, “Who’s Afraid of a Binational State?,” *Haaretz*, February 2, 2014, <https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/2014-02-02/ty-article/.premium/whos-afraid-of-a-binational-state/0000017f-e29e-d38f-a57f-e6de1e250000>; and Saree Makdisi, “Forget the two-state solution,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 11, 2008, <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/opinion-la/la-op-makdisi11-2008may11-story.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Palestinian civil society, “Palestinian Civil Society Call for BDS,” *BDS Movement*, July 9, 2005, <https://bdsmovement.net/call>.

<sup>3</sup> Rashid Khalidi, *The Hundred Years’ War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917-2017* (Metropolitan Books, 2020), 236.

<sup>4</sup> Nadia Abu El-Haj, “Racial palestinianization and the Janus-faced nature of the Israeli state,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 44, no. 1 (2010): 32, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313220903507610>.

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- <sup>6</sup> Linah Alsaafin. "What's the Israel-Palestine conflict about? A simple guide," *Al Jazeera*, October 9, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/9/whats-the-israel-palestine-conflict-about-a-simple-guide>.
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- <sup>12</sup> See Edward W. Said, "Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Victims," *Social Text*, no. 1 (1979): 7–58, <https://doi.org/10.2307/466405>; Joseph Massad, "Zionism's Internal Others: Israel and the Oriental Jews," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 25, no. 4 (1996): 53–68, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2538006>; Sami Shalom Chetrit, "Mizrahi Politics in Israel: Between Integration and Alternative," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 29, no. 4 (2000): 51–65, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2676561>; Maya Wind, *Towers of Ivory and Steel: How Israeli Universities Deny Palestinian Freedom* (Verso Books, 2024); and Ella Shohat, "Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Jewish Victims," *Social Text*, no. 19/20 (1988): 1–35, <https://doi.org/10.2307/466176>.
- <sup>13</sup> Shohat, "Sephardim in Israel," 2.
- <sup>14</sup> Sylvia Wynter, "'No Humans Involved': An Open Letter to My Colleagues," *Forum N.H.I.: Knowledge for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* 1, no. 1 (1994): 3.
- <sup>15</sup> Sylvia Wynter, "On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory, and Re-Imprisoned Ourselves in Our Unbearable Wrongness of Being, of *Désêtre*," in *Not Only the Master's Tools: African-American Studies in Theory and Practice*, ed. Lewis R. Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon (Routledge, 2006), 117.
- <sup>16</sup> Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 260, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2004.0015>.
- <sup>17</sup> Wynter, "Mistook the Map," 128.
- <sup>18</sup> Wynter, "Unsettling," 328.
- <sup>19</sup> Jake Romm, "Elements of Anti-Semitism," *Parapraxis Magazine*, accessed November 22, 2024, <https://www.parapraxismagazine.com/articles/elements-of-anti-semitism>.
- <sup>20</sup> Wynter, "Unsettling," 261.
- <sup>21</sup> In the acknowledgements of *Afropessimism*, which thus far is arguably the defining text of the Afropessimist canon, Frank Wilderson notes that he is "deeply indebted" to Sylvia Wynter's work. See Frank B. Wilderson III, *Afropessimism* (Liveright, 2021), loc 5087, Kindle.
- <sup>22</sup> Wilderson III, *Afropessimism*, loc 200.
- <sup>23</sup> Wilderson III, *Afropessimism*, loc 1412.
- <sup>24</sup> Wilderson III, *Afropessimism*, loc 577.
- <sup>25</sup> Calvin L. Warren, *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation* (Duke UP, 2018), 14.
- <sup>26</sup> Wynter, "Unsettling," 260.
- <sup>27</sup> Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 30.
- <sup>28</sup> Wilderson III, *Afropessimism*, loc 4613.
- <sup>29</sup> Jared Sexton, "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism," *Intensions Journal*, no. 5 (2011): 31, <https://doi.org/10.25071/1913-5874/37359>.
- <sup>30</sup> Quoted in Dov Waxman, *The Pursuit of Peace and the Crisis of Israeli Identity: Defending/Defining the Nation* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 50.
- <sup>31</sup> Quoted in Hadas Gold, Amir Tal and Abeer Salman, "Israeli minister says there's 'no such thing as a Palestinian people,' inviting US rebuke," *CNN*, March 21, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/03/21/middleeast/israel-smotrich-palestinians-intl/index.html>.
- <sup>32</sup> Oscar Rickett, "Israel-Palestine war: The incendiary rhetoric deployed by Israeli leaders," *Middle East Eye*, October 12, 2023, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-palestine-war-extremist-incendiary-language-rhetoric>.
- <sup>33</sup> "Animal stereotypes of Palestinians in Israeli discourse," Wikimedia Foundation, last modified December 22, 2024, 9:51 (UTC), [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Animal\\_stereotypes\\_of\\_Palestinians\\_in\\_Israeli\\_discourse](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Animal_stereotypes_of_Palestinians_in_Israeli_discourse).

<sup>34</sup> Emile Bruneau and Nour Kteily, "The enemy as animal: Symmetric dehumanization during asymmetric warfare." *PLoS One* 12, no. 7 (2017): 8, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0181422>.

<sup>35</sup> Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World* (NYU Press, 2020), loc 158, Kindle.

<sup>36</sup> Jackson, *Becoming Human*, loc 542.

<sup>37</sup> Wilderson III, *Afropessimism*, loc 2033.

<sup>38</sup> Wilderson III, *Afropessimism*, loc 153. The anecdote, that his Palestinian friend likes dealing with Ethiopian Israeli soldiers the least out of all ethnicities of Israeli soldiers is unconvincing in my reading to indicate anti-Blackness nor to paint 13 million Palestinians as anti-Black. At the same time, this is not to deny the presence of anti-Blackness among Palestinians. However, it does also nothing to acknowledge the existence of Afro-Palestinians.

<sup>39</sup> Wilderson III, *Afropessimism*, loc 2919.

<sup>40</sup> Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (Vintage Canada, 2001), loc 61, Kindle.

<sup>41</sup> One could argue that many keys that Palestinians hold unlock doors that no longer exist. That the dead will not be able to enjoy the fruits of a future liberation. Both are true. Yet, an important distinction, as emphasized by Brand, lies in the capacity to have access to memory and a past, something that Palestinians have and Black people do not.

<sup>42</sup> Abdaljawad Omar, "The ICC warrants: Palestinian skepticism and the glimpse of justice," *Mondoweiss*, November 25, 2024, <https://mondoweiss.net/2024/11/the-icc-warrants-palestinian-skepticism-and-the-glimpse-of-justice/>.

<sup>43</sup> Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2022), loc 561, Kindle.

<sup>44</sup> Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 76.

<sup>45</sup> Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 109.

<sup>46</sup> Wilderson III, *Afropessimism*, loc 2301.

<sup>47</sup> Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization is not a metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 35, <https://jps.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/des/article/view/18630>.

<sup>48</sup> Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 67.

<sup>49</sup> Abdaljawad Omar, "Bleeding Forms," *Critical Times: Interventions in Global Critical Theory* 7, no. 2 (2024): 305, <https://doi.org/10.1215/26410478-11216928>.

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