

Darkening Blackness: Race, Gender, Class, and Pessimism in 21st Century Black Thought. By Norman Ajari. Trans. Matthew B. Smith.

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At this time, Norman Ajari delivers a timely intervention through his instalment, a book entitled *Darkening Blackness: Race, Gender, Class, and Pessimism in 21st Century Black Thought*. With this, he throws his hat in the ring, and he goes on to make moves to declare “the pessimism of contemporary African American theory” (p. 5). The critique fundamentally informs this disposition of integrationist and pacifying shades of African American thought. By this form of examination, Ajari declares: “This book focuses on two contemporary currents within African American thought: Afropessimism and Black Male Studies” (p. 8). It is well-known that the figureheads of these traditions, but not reducible to them as it is popularly claimed, are Frank B. Wilderson, III and Tommy Curry, respectively. In Ajari’s hands, these two discursive strands are transformed into what he broadly calls “Black pessimism”, which he rightfully states is a long arc of various strands of the Black radical tradition. Even though he cites that there are accusations against Afropessimism and Black Male Studies, Ajari executes a well-argued case to the contrary. Ajari places Afropessimism and Black Male Studies at the pantheon of Black thought without apologia. And, as well, he does not argue for them to be palatable in the face of the ridiculous Donald Trump’s executive order, its mimicry, and far-right accusatory tone against Critical Race Theory. Starting with this as a pacesetter for the book, Ajari shows how there should be a turn against the tide of revisionism, which, in its anti-Blackness, will do anything to evade the dehumanisation of Blacks and yet play silly victimhood. The less said about this, the better.

With the concept of “Black pessimism”, Ajari goes directly to the point. It makes Black demands clear, which also means setting the record straight. “As opposed to an

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integrationist or reformist approach, Black pessimism sees anti-Blackness as intrinsic to modern European civilisation—not as a contingent ideological apparatus in the service of capital exploitation or other forms of social violence” (p. 9). This is a specificity which cannot be effaced by whiteness or anything that is invested in race denialism. Again, there is an important move that Ajari makes, which is to expose the edifice of the liberal consensus where Blacks are supposed to minimise or efface their Black pain to allow the myth of “coalition politics” or “new humanism” to be the defining contours of their struggle. It has proven to be true, despite the denial of this insistence, that Blacks have been at the forefront of the struggle of other races. When it comes to their own, they are, paradoxically, mediated to have a form of deputised speech. They are even made to doubt their own lived experience, and they are not allowed to formulate their terms, which speak against their dehumanisation. “Amid this grim setting, Black Male Studies and Afropessimism have emerged like the return of the repressed” (p.14). What comes out in Black Male Studies and Afropessimism is the stance that they have taken and that being a matter of principle, something which, in their discursive mood and mode, there is no comfort for any form of anti-Blackness. Where Blackness is a node, and where radical expressions are not wishy-washy, where there is a clear stance on what is being critiqued and affirmed, this is not something that an anti-Black world will be ready for. There is no use in having to be concerned with offhand dismissals and the call for both Black Male Studies and Afropessimism, or any other form of Black radical thought to be censored.

Ajari does what is necessary, which is expanding the scope of Afropessimism and, in so doing, making sure that it is in the ambit of the Black radical tradition, including its many iterations. By defying the limits of singularity and enclosure, there is an enrichment that rails against the justified and unjustified criticisms directed against Afropessimism.

Of course, the case is different when it comes to Black Male Studies, which gets criticised and attacked in private. The empirical proof that Curry advocates has not, thus far, made any cancel culture tendencies that have plagued some circles of black feminism hold sway. Instead, the indifference that Curry is met with demands a debate to ensue. There is, in anticipation, a persistent awakening of what will come as a refutation of Black Male Studies and for it being moved from private discourse to the public ones.

If something continues to receive its fair share of criticism, it is Afropessimism. This is what Ajari engages in, and much so. However missing, on this score, is Ajari’s take on Lewis Gordon’s *ad hominem* criticism of Afropessimism. In his book *Freedom, Justice, and Decolonization*, he has a chapter on Afropessimism. He also penned other dossiers, thus accusing them of having “poststructuralist” roots (something which he does not show evidence of and even if it were a case, that does make Afropessimism lesser of a robust thought). Ajari’s miss is mentioned because he engages Greg Thomas and somehow gives the latter a sort of an interlocutor premier status while something has

been happening a decade before him and years that followed. Specifically, this miss of what happened a decade before has been a seminal essay by Fred Moten, “The Case of Blackness” and who, in his intramural critique of Afropessimism, could not go unnoticed. Sure, Ajari knows this figure and the subsequent critiques he did on Afropessimism, which, by no comparison, are far more sophisticated than the ad hominem dismissals circulating even to date.

Whether Ajari can justify that his concerns lay elsewhere, there is this gap that needs to be filled in understanding Afropessimism in opposition and/or opposition to Black Op(timism) and, thus, going back to the textual scene, which is the heart of the debate—Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*. Again, the missing gap still must centre only on Hortense Spillers and Saidiya Hartman to engage flesh and fungibility. Instead of this duet being stretched to a quartet to have Assata Shakur and Joy James, a far-reaching reading could have ensued to hear the alternative take of the popular soundtrack. Yes, a jam session of Spillers, Shakur, James and Hartman would have been the intensity of engaging the analytics of Afropessimism and challenging Wilderson on the names he listed of people he called Afropessimists. All this is necessary because, in Ajari, the gestures have taken the understanding of Afropessimism to another level of abstraction.

The “eon of Blackness,” as inaugurated by Ajari, is the analytic that marks the long history of subjection and it is what goes against any form of denialism that seeks to invalidate the fact of anti-Blackness. Ajari writes: “The eon of Blackness thus begins by defining Black people as inhuman and fungible beings who can be readily disposed of by non-Blacks” (p. 86). It has been the power of Afropessimism to show the deep and perverse ways that the dehumanisation of blacks goes, and that being what cannot be reduced to analogy as Blacks are read outside the sentient schema. Blacks are those who are devalued so that they have no ontological currency. And, every form of ontological violation done to them is what has no structure of redress because there are no institutions that deal with the dehumanisation of Blacks. Anti-Blackness is in every polity, including only Black ones. Ajari amplifies: “Above all, Afropessimism believe Blackness is inextricably bound up with dehumanization. As opposed to other groups, Black people do not exist outside their own dehumanization” (p. 61). Blacks are rendered to be nothing but doormats of the world. The world makes sense of itself by dehumanising Blacks.

In having to give a detailed account of Afropessimism, Ajari does not do justice when it comes to Black Male Studies. What informs this concern is that Ajari stated, in the beginning, that Afropessimism and Black Male Studies inform the book. This, of course, is not at all the case. Only one chapter is dedicated to Black Male Studies, titled “From the Black Man as Problem to the Study of Black Men.” Even the chapter after that, “A Politics of Antagonism”, could, at least, have done justice to Black Male Studies and maybe compared or fused that with Afropessimism. There is no internal balance in

the book. Maybe to ask: How do Afropessimism and Black Male Studies form the anchor of the book?

With cases being made in the United States, Canada, and France, Black Male Studies were not foregrounding. This, in fact, is a missed opportunity. Even Curry's "Postface" does not redress the imbalance.

One commendable thing Ajari does at the book's conclusion is proposing "Black Communism," but, again, this is not taken to other discursive heights. Even if Black Communism is said to be a critical assessment that comes with "new projects, new strategies, new sets of beliefs" (p. 165), the impression that is left is that this formulation could have been dropped. It is a formulation that has not been given an extended treatment. Its justification and applicability do not even speak to the theoretical anchor of the book—Afropessimism and Black Male Studies. Ajari could have deferred Black Communism to another project because it does not even form the book's vocabulary; it is just a vignette. Even though Black Communism is in concert with the communalism of the political thought of Kwame Nkrumah and Julius Nyerere, or Huey Newton's intercommunalism, the conclusion of the book still does not tell how these vibrate and vibrate with Afropessimism and Black Male Studies (the latter being subjected to scant attention as earlier stated).

The book's main title, *Darkening Blackness*, is alluring. What is impossible to grasp, therefore, is how this "darkening" takes shape or is constituted. Is Blackness not a dark matter? There is still a need to come to terms with how this darkening comes into being. Is it a matter of Black pessimism? Or is this the darkening of African American thought through Afropessimism and Black Male Studies?

Despite some of its weaknesses, it is undeniable that Ajari delivered an indispensable book, and it is a weapon against the forever intensifying and proliferating anti-Blackness. This book, indeed, stands as a necessary read.