

## **The Contingency of Despair**

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*Forthcoming at American Political Thought.*

Johnson, Andre E. *No Future in This Country: The Prophetic Pessimism of Bishop Henry McNeal Turner*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2020.

Waters, Kristin. *Maria W. Stewart and the Roots of Black Political Thought*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2022.

In a Winter 2022 review essay in this journal, “Who Decides What We Do with Our Despair?”, Jared Loggins examines the role of despair in contemporary Black American political thought through a critical interrogation of its deployment in recent books by Eddie S. Glaude Jr. (2020) and Frank B. Wilderson III (2020). As reflected by the essay’s title, what is fundamentally at stake for Loggins is a question of authorization: who is rightly empowered to decide what is to be done in the face of ever-retrenching systems of anti-Black racism and white supremacist oppression? Despair “that the progress of all others is underwritten by the domination of black people” does not, Loggins urges, entail any one fixed set of political commitments (126). For Wilderson, honest confrontation with despair calls for “the end of the world,” a radical dissolution of the institutions and conceptual schemes in which Black people’s exclusion is encoded essentially (174). For Glaude, this despair spurs us to “begin again” in reimagining and recreating the American civic ethos through earnest recognition of our nation’s profound failures in securing liberty and justice for all. For Wilderson, an emancipatory politics animated by Afropessimism must orient itself toward the end of the world because Afropessimism— in its recognition of the depths of anti-Black racism— “describe[s] a structural problem but offer[s] no structural solution to that problem” (331). Glaude’s call for a commitment to begin again, in

contrast, is in the first place an assumption of one's power and duty to remake an unjust world, as reflected in the lines of James Baldwin's novel *Just Above My Head* from which Glaude develops the idea: "Not everything is lost. Responsibility cannot be lost, it can only be abdicated. If one refuses abdication, one begins again" (1979, 429).

Loggins compellingly demonstrates that the question "what do we do with our despair?"—asked by Black Americans in relation to the American polity or by the polity as a whole about itself—is one that must be answered by political judgment: it is a decision to be made rather than an answer to be discovered. It is here that the question of authorization arises: if the question of despair is in fact a decision to be made, who ought to make this decision and how ought they to make it?

At the same time, although there is no one fixed response to despair over the white supremacy and anti-Black racism entrenched into the American civic ethos, one might think that there are a determinate set of patterns of response among which to select. For instance, one might think that a pessimistic sensibility, an orientation toward what must come to an end, and resignation about the power of persons to bring this about naturally 'fit together' in the same way that a hopeful sensibility, an orientation towards the potentials of new beginnings, and commitment to our responsibility to actualize these potentials do. This would mean that while there is a decision to be made in response to one's despair, it is made upon a field of options where the battle lines are drawn, and one must make a judgment about one's political identity and allegiance. Am I, driven by despair to fixate upon what must come to an end, a pessimist? Do I, in spite of everything that warrants despair, hope to begin again?

It is here that recent scholarship on the history of Black American political thought in the 19<sup>th</sup> century offers a vital intervention. Kristin Waters' *Maria Stewart and the Roots of Black Political*

*Thought* (2022) and Andre Johnson's *No Future in This Country: The Prophetic Pessimism of Bishop Henry McNeal Turner* (2020) illustrate the deep contingency of despair's role in the tradition of Black American political thought. Waters' interpretation of Maria Stewart couples hopeful invocations of her audiences' moral responsibility with a vision of emancipation as salvation at the end of the world. Henry McNeal Turner in his later life, Johnson shows, marshals a prophetic pessimism to activate the political imagination of Black Americans and reconceive the shape of and means to emancipation. Waters and Johnson help us to see that judgments made in response to despair in the tradition of Black political thought are not alignments with a fixed political orientation (e.g. that of the optimist or the pessimist), but instead creative acts of political thinking through which novel political positions can be forged.

*Maria Stewart and the Roots of Black Political Thought* provides a biographical exposition of the key themes in Stewart's political thought, drawing on extensive archival work to trace their development from Stewart's early life to her antislavery activism in Boston. Maria Stewart (née Miller) was born in Greenwich, Connecticut in 1803. Orphaned by the age of 5, she was indentured to the family of a clergyman in Hartford, who Waters argues was likely Abel Flint, until 1818. Soon after moving to Boston, she married James Stewart, a shipping agent in 1826, who died of heart failure only three years later. Upon his death, Stewart was forced to confront an onslaught of efforts that ultimately deprived her of her husband's estate. A year later, the militant Black abolitionist David Walker—who was certainly a major influence on Stewart's own political thought, and perhaps a close personal associate—also died suddenly, leaving Stewart further unmoored. Stewart channeled her grief and despair, as well as financial need, into antislavery activism, publishing pamphlets with the support of William Lloyd Garrison and

delivering speeches to interracial audiences of men and women. Facing opposition to her active participation in public life as a Black woman, and with her closest personal anchors in the city deceased, Stewart departed Boston for New York in 1833. While Stewart's continued her involvement in the antislavery movement, Waters restricts the scope of her study through Stewart's time in Boston.

Waters places Stewart under the banner of Black revolutionary liberalism, a tradition of political philosophy most recently exemplified in the later work of Charles Mills (2017). Black revolutionary liberalism, as Waters characterizes it, is an emancipatory project that seeks to make the core liberal values of freedom and equality "into a truly consistent and universal set of ideas" (94). Stewart's Black revolutionary liberalism, according to Waters, is grounded in a moral theory with three core principles (see 9, 214-15). What Waters labels Stewart's "principle of everyday righteousness" calls upon her audiences to exhibit virtue in their lives as moral persons, family members, and citizens. Stewart's "struggle for freedom and equality" is a principle that both endorses the liberal commitment to the autonomy and equality of all persons and recognizes the need for struggle to actualize this liberal promise for Black Americans. These two principles crystalize into an insurrectionist ethics that ascribes to Black Americans a duty to resist their oppression. Stewart's insurrectionist ethics is one of the core commitments that unites her political philosophy with that of David Walker, particularly in his *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* ([1829/30], 2011). Finally, Stewart's "principle of justice on the Judgment Day" couples the power of everyday righteousness with the grace of God's ultimate intervention on the side of justice to explain how the struggle for freedom and equality will achieve salvation for Black Americans. By practicing an insurrectionist ethics, Black Americans put themselves in a position to be freed through God's grace.

Waters deploys an ambitious synthesis of historical exposition and philosophical analysis to illuminate the depth of Stewart's political thought. The tight link Waters draws between biography and theory helpfully echoes a common method among 19<sup>th</sup> century Black American political thinkers, and especially former slaves such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, who often philosophized through the narration of their own lives (Andrews 1986, Stepto 1991, Bennett 2019). It is also, Waters urges, a necessary approach to a thinker whose life and thought, in spite of the body of scholarship spurred by Marilyn Richardson's edition of Stewart's speeches and writings (1987), remains marginalized— in part because of a lack of preserved documentation, and in part because of a neglect of the documentation that does exist.

At times, however, Waters' techniques for rendering Stewart as legible and vivid to her readers as possible undermine her own efforts to capture the richness of Stewart's thought. By framing Stewart's thought in terms of concepts such as standpoint epistemology, epistemicide, and double consciousness, Waters does embed Stewart in ongoing philosophical discourses, but sometimes the anachronism inevitable in this approach comes at the cost of obscuring what Stewart has to say about these phenomena in her own words. One of the most jarring aspects of the book for this reader was Waters' tendency to insert detailed speculations about Stewart's life in places where the historical record is sparse (see, for instance, the author's extensive speculations about Stewart's plans to move to Boston (101-2)). While Waters is right that much of our ignorance about much of Stewart's life is the product of epistemic injustice, it may be better for historical scholarship to address such injustice by recognizing it rather than by attempting to rectify it in this way.

At its best, however, Waters' method illuminates generative points of contact between Stewart's personal life and political thought. Waters' analysis of the role of despair in the life and

thought of Stewart is an exemplary instance of this achievement. Facing, by the end of 1830, the death of her husband and of Walker, as well as financial insolvency brought on by the repeated attacks on her rightful inheritance, Stewart turns to writing, in the form of a series of meditations, through which she began “putting her despair into words” (200). In her *Meditations*, Waters argues, Stewart begins to organize her emancipatory politics around an ideal of “salvation” that she took to be “available to everyone, even white people,” but “that to be saved, those souls must lead virtuous lives and be cleansed of their racial hatred, a commitment leading to rights and liberties for her people and all people” (202). This picture of emancipation as salvation crystallizes into Stewart’s call for her audiences to practice everyday righteousness, through which they will come to fully and consistently endorse the moral values that guide the true struggle for freedom and equality for all (214).<sup>1</sup> As Water puts it, Stewart’s “despair was converted into an ongoing call for action” that took a hopeful orientation toward the emancipatory potentials of human agency. Such agency was, for Stewart, the engine of a systematic political strategy that included self-directed efforts by Black Americans at education and elevation, engagement in the formal political sphere through petition campaigns, and, potentially, violent resistance against slavery and white supremacy (226).

Yet we should observe, as Waters compellingly demonstrates, that Stewart’s hope for the emancipatory potential of human agency and politics is coupled with a vision of emancipation itself as apocalyptic salvation. For instance, in a letter published in the July 14, 1832 edition of Garrison’s newspaper *The Liberator*, Stewart writes:

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<sup>1</sup> As Stewart herself puts it “Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality:” “never will the chains of slavery and ignorance burst, till we become united as one, and cultivate among ourselves the pure principles of piety, morality, and virtue” ([1831] 1987, 30).

O, America, America! Thou land of my birth! I love and admire thy virtues as much as I abhor and detest thy vices; and I am in hopes that thy stains will soon be wiped away, and thy cruelties forgotten. O, ye southern slaveholders! We will no longer curse you for your wrongdoings; but we will implore the Almighty to soften your hard hearts toward our brethren, and to send them a speedy deliverance (1987, 43-44).

Waters takes the sentiment expressed in passages like this to embody “a belief that in time God’s love of all mankind will bring about justice— along with freedom and equality— for the virtuous and damnation for all others” (215). The purpose of cultivating righteousness in oneself and one’s family-- an important refrain for Stewart is the political value of maternal care that cultivates such righteousness in one’s children-- and of struggling for freedom and equality for all, is to put oneself on the right side in an apocalyptic confrontation between the virtuous and the damned, through which the world will be purged of injustice and remade in the image of God.

Waters does not claim, and I do not suggest, that Stewart should be read into the tradition of Afropessimism. The key point here is that Stewart’s despair over the loss and exploitation she experienced and the entrenched forms of oppression that Black Americans are forced to confront, leads her to theorize what righteous persons can do, not to begin again, but to bring about the end of the world. Stewart’s faith in the emancipatory potential of human agency is a faith that, having earned God’s grace, we have power to extricate ourselves from a world rotten with injustice.

Henry McNeal Turner was born free in South Carolina in 1834. After a religious experience

as a teenager, he resolved to join the ministry. Turner first served as a preacher with the Methodist Church South, was ordained in St. Louis by the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and was elected as an AME bishop in 1880. As detailed in Andre E. Johnson's earlier volume on Turner's life from 1865-1895, *The Forgotten Prophet: Bishop Henry McNeal Turner and the African American Prophetic Tradition* (2014), Turner was active in the Republican Party after the Civil War, and was elected to represent Macon in the Georgia Legislature in 1868; although he and 26 other Black representatives were prevented from taking their seats in the legislature for its first session by the state Democrats who controlled it. Facing the collapse of Reconstruction and the retrenchment of white supremacy under the banner of Jim Crow Turner, as he puts it in a 1902 article, came to "see nothing for the Negro to attain unto in this country" (qtd. in Johnson 2020, 7). Turner thus shifted his efforts for Black emancipation towards emigrations projects, associated himself with the American Colonization Society, traveling himself to Sierra Leone and Liberia, and organizing the emigration of approximately 1000 Black Americans to Liberia. Still, in the final years of his life, Turner became disillusioned with the viability of a mass emigration movement, and resolved to remain in the United States until his death in 1915.

Andre Johnson's central thesis *No Future in This Country: The Prophetic Pessimism of Bishop Henry McNeal Turner* is that, in the final two decades of his life (1895-1915), Turner develops a distinctive form of prophetic rhetoric, which Johnson labels prophetic pessimism.<sup>2</sup> Prophetic pessimism is a rhetorical style distinct from apocalyptic prophecy or jeremiad, because

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<sup>2</sup> It's worth noting that although Johnson states that the book's focus is on Turner's life from 1895-1915, much of the book details Turner's life and thought from 1865 onward in order to contextualize the development of Turner's prophetic pessimism.



the former does not assume a covenant with God that will eventually deliver Black Americans from suffering and injustice. Instead, Johnson argues that the aim of Turner's pessimistic rhetoric was to "stav[e] off communal nihilism and self-destruction" in the face of justified despair; Turner understood this as a precondition for Black Americans to exercise their political imagination and agency in radically innovative ways (16-17).

Johnson's book takes a thematic approach to his rhetorical analysis, tracing Turner's pessimistic prophecy in his reaction to the end of Reconstruction and Supreme Court decisions rendering the Civil Rights Act of 1875 unconstitutional and encoding the doctrine of 'separate but equal' (ch. 1), provocative theology embodied in his claim that "God is a Negro" (ch. 2), forceful condemnation of Black Americans' involvement in US military aggression in the Spanish-American War and the Philippines (ch. 3), controversial support for the Democratic presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan in the 1900 election (ch. 4), and projects for Black emigration (ch. 5). Turner's prophetic pessimism culminates in Chapter 6's discussion of his analysis of racism as structural patterns of degradation entrenched into the normative foundation of America that Black Americans themselves reinforced by failing to claim their own political agency (reflected, for Turner, in the absence of mass participation in his own emigrationist projects).

Johnson's ample use of direct quotation makes *No Future in this Country*, along with *The Forgotten Prophet*, an accessible introduction to Turner, acquainting the reader with the Turner's thought in his own words situated in historical context. There is, however, a disconnect between the rich analytical framework of African American prophetic rhetoric laid out in the introduction and the textual analysis of Turner's rhetoric in the book's main chapters. The key terms "prophetic pessimism" and "pessimistic prophecy" each appear a single time in the book outside

of its introduction and conclusion. In this reader's judgment, this is something of a missed opportunity, as the careful distinctions Johnson draws, for instance, between celebratory, disputation, mission-oriented, and pessimistic prophetic rhetoric would greatly enhance readers' understanding of what Johnson's declaration that Black Americans have no future in this country is (15-16).

One of Johnson's most illuminating points is a claim about what Turner's prophetic pessimism is *not*. Johnson urges that, in spite of superficial similarities, Turner's prophetic pessimism should not be read as a form of Afropessimism *avant la lettre*. While, Johnson acknowledges, Turner would affirm the position, exemplified today by Ta-Nehisi Coates, that "racism and white supremacy is a permanent thing in America, and that the destruction of the Black body is part of the American heritage," Turner nevertheless insists upon the emancipatory potential of Black Americans' political agency (17). Johnson puts this point particularly provocatively in the concluding pages of the book: "Unlike Afro-pessimism, which suggests there is no such thing as human agency, prophetic pessimism's hope is for people to (re)claim that agency and operate with self-determination" (176). Through his fiery condemnation of the American republic, and of Black Americans for their failures to free themselves from it, Turner's "pessimistic hope was to uplift the race by telling the truth about their situation" (169).

I do not find it wholly convincing to draw the contrast between Turner's prophetic pessimism and contemporary Afropessimism in terms of a belief, or lack thereof, in the emancipatory potential of our collective agency as persons. Take, for instance, the self-conscious ambiguities in Wilderson's discussion of interracial solidarity in *Afropessimism*. While it is true that Wilderson declares to an audience of hostile academics in Berlin that he doesn't "give a rat's ass about solidarity" (187), to an audience of activists in Copenhagen days earlier he describes

interracial solidarity as embodied in collective efforts to take up “discussions of Black social death” even though “there is no coherent form of redress on the horizon” (171). Wilderson himself calls attention to this contrast in his narration of the Copenhagen workshop; although not everyone is suited to help bring about the end of the world, Wilderson does represent it as a project to be undertaken in concert with others.

Yet I do think that the analysis of Turner’s prophetic pessimism Johnson provides offers a contrast with contemporary Afropessimism, concerning the orientation of each towards the ‘horizon’ of political action. Whereas for Afropessimists like Wilderson, despair over the depths of anti-Black racism leads to a call for the ‘end of the world,’ for Turner this despair transforms into a call to begin again. Turner’s advocacy for Black emigration from the United States was driven by the principle that “[t]he Negro can never hope to attain respectable recognition here, and I think he should go where he can” (qtd. in Johnson 2020, 140). Emigration was a means, in Turner’s view, for Black Americans to put themselves in a position to begin again. Even when, in the final years of his life, Turner judges emigration to be unviable as an emancipatory project, Johnson shows that he was still, as he had ever been, committed to the activation of Black Americans’ political agency for the sake of making a start at a different world.

Wilderson’s is a politics of what must be destroyed; Turner’s is a politics of what must be built. Both are pessimistic politics in that they proceed from an observation about what cannot be achieved with the tools available to us: for Turner, the institutions and values of the American polity; for Wilderson, any society organized around the concept of the human being. Both politics are cast in terms of what must be done in spite of profound limitations upon the political agency of Black people, rather than of what can be done in light of the potentials of such agency. But whereas, for the contemporary Afropessimist, what must be done is to “make my home in

the hold of the ship and burn it from the inside out” (Wilderson, 323), for Turner what must be done is the construction of novel, autonomous forms of political organization among Black Americans.

Loggin’s essay from the winter volume of this journal demonstrates decisively that despair is a site of contestation among alternative perspectives in the tradition of Black political thought. Through their examination of two Black Americans whose emancipatory politics are both animated by despair, Waters and Johnson enable us to push Loggin’s thesis even further. Loggin shows that we can’t neatly categorize Black American political thinkers between those who despair and those who do not. Waters and Johnson show us that there are also no neat categorizations to be made among what Black American political thinkers do with their despair. One can, like Maria Stewart, hope for the end of the world-- just as one can, like Wilderson, despair that the world must come to an end before Black emancipation becomes a possibility. One can, like Henry McNeal Turner, pessimistically declare that we *must* begin again-- that there is no other way— just as one can, like Glaude, hopefully declare that we *can* begin again— that it is in our power to do so. This historical analysis suggests is that scholars should expect to find dialogues over ends and beginnings embedded in a fractal fashion within different strands of Black political thought.

In terms of anti-racist politics today, the depths of despair’s contingency (i.e. the diverse sets of political affects and aims with which it is compatible) reflected in the thought of Stewart, Turner, Wilderson, and Glaude also reinforces Loggin’s assertion that the question “what do we do with our despair” must be answered by a ‘we’ that “remain[s] a live and open site of conflict, with all of the messiness and uncertainty this involves” (139). The political imagination needed

for such contestation must remain open to the messiness and uncertainty— and thus potential— not only of despair itself, but also of hope and pessimism, and of orientations towards what must come to an end and how we might begin again.

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