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## Another decolonial approach is possible: international studies in an antiblack world

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### ABSTRACT

This article analyses important trends in contemporary decolonial approaches in the field of international studies and, drawing on recent work in critical Black studies, seeks to highlight some of the limitations in their assumptions. Anthropologically informed decolonial approaches argue for a pluriversal approach, where multiple ‘worlds’ can coexist, whilst sociologically grounded critiques seek to develop the field of international studies through adding social and historical depth to our understanding of power and challenging racial hierarchies. Both these forms of decolonial argument aim to pluralise and expand understandings, drawing in marginalised and excluded outsiders, in a bid to repair and revitalise international studies. However, we argue that a third approach, starting from the assumption of an antiblack world, raises important questions for decolonial study. Drawing from critical Black studies, we suggest that the dominant forms of decolonial critique may not adequately address the liberal modernist assumptions underpinning the field of international study. If another decolonial approach is possible it will bring a disruptive and deconstructive perspective, one that seeks to avoid inadvertently strengthening the antiblack foundations of the field.

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## Introduction

Decolonial approaches have rapidly expanded within international studies and beyond over the last decade into what is now a vibrant and growing field, which is increasingly influential in recent thinking on global politics (for good recent summaries, see Mignolo and Walsh 2018; Tickner and Smith 2020; Shilliam 2021). We are interested in thinking through the appeal of decoloniality but also its limits. In the process, we seek to highlight the importance of a train of thought that has received much less attention, loosely cohered around the problematic of antiblackness in critical Black studies.<sup>1</sup> We focus upon what is at stake in a foregrounding of antiblackness to explore whether an alternative decolonial approach is possible.

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In fine, we suggest that not only do perspectives that start from the assumption of an antiblack world problematise important aspects of some decolonial approaches, they also open the way for an alternative. Putting antiblackness at the centre of an alternative decolonial approach enables us to push further the key point of the Latin American modernity/coloniality research programme, that modernity and coloniality are inseparable (see Mignolo and Escobar 2010). For the authors we draw upon in critical Black studies, antiblackness is the ongoing process of modernist world-making, 'an evolving multiscalar field of inter(intra) acting systems ... that in its very *iterative* structure defers ontological finality' (Iman Jackson 2020, 214) (emphasis is original). Modernity and coloniality are inseparable not merely in the historical making of the world but at the deeper understanding of the nature of being (ontologically) – the process of ongoing cuts and separations, continually dividing being/non-being, subject/object and human/nonhuman. This would enable the deconstructive task of decolonial theory to extend radically beyond existing approaches. This radical extension is achieved by viewing antiblackness as inseparable from the acts of violence and exclusion it enables.<sup>2</sup>

To establish our thesis that another decolonial approach is possible, one that starts from the question of the antiblack world, we heuristically carve out two dominant approaches to decolonising the field which are overtly concerned with challenging the racism, Eurocentrism and white suprematism held to be at the heart of the key concepts and practices of international study.<sup>3</sup> We use this heuristic approach not to suggest or create new and better 'boxes' in which to put thinkers and understandings but to clarify what is at stake in certain conceptual and methodological choices and to open up the field to broader discussion and debate. The two dominant approaches that we draw out underpin much of decolonial work in international studies. The first of these focuses upon pluralising the field by taking on board epistemologies of the Global South, often drawing upon critical anthropology. The second focuses upon highlighting the structural racism smuggled into the abstract universalist categories and approaches of international studies, largely by drawing upon critical sociology. In this approach, the problem of coloniality and race within international studies is framed as a product of the Eurocentric roots of Western modern political thought, with the liberal framing of states and subjects held to reflect and to reproduce a racial hierarchy naturalised in the founding categories of the field after 'five hundred years of global white supremacy' (Mills 1997, 20; see also Henderson 2013). Both these approaches are read and found wanting through an engagement with critical Black studies conceptualisations that centre the analytical importance of antiblackness. We are open in terms of the possibilities raised in bringing a third approach into decolonial discussion and debate. For some readers the process of clarification this brings may appear to be adding extra division, while for others, conceptualising Blackness as an ontological position that makes whiteness/modernity possible may be viewed as enabling new opportunities for shared moves of disruption and refusal that bridge different decolonial perspectives.

This article is organised in three sections. Firstly, drawing upon theoretical work in critical Black studies – including the work of Achille Mbembe, Fred Moten, Saidiya Hartman, Hortense Spillers, Frank Wilderson, Calvin Warren, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, João Costa Vargas, Denise Ferreira da Silva, Christina Sharpe, Jared Sexton and David Marriot, among others<sup>4</sup> – we seek to contribute to debate in international studies on the importance of examining the problem and legacies of race and coloniality through the understanding of an antiblack world (see, for example, Howell and Richter-Montpetit 2020). Second, we bring critical Black studies

into discussion with the first strand of decolonial thinking, which calls for the 'provincialising' of Eurocentrism. In the third section of the article, we bring critical Black studies into discussion with the second set of decolonial arguments, that race is structurally central to the field as a set of policy practices and concerns. We conclude that starting from the problematic of the antiblack world enables an alternative approach to decolonial work in the field of international studies, which seeks to disrupt and deconstruct rather than to add or enable.

## The antiblack world

For many theorists within the field of critical Black studies, modernity as a coherent framing of the world available to the human as subject is grounded upon 'antiblackness'. Blackness is the material-discursive ground of difference (Fred Moten, articulates this as 'silenced difference').<sup>5</sup> Blackness is the 'absent presence' that makes the world as object and its knowers as subjects (and their relations) possible. This approach does not deny the centrality of coloniality in the socio-historical construction of the world, but unlike dominant approaches within the field of international studies, the focus is not so much on the contingent effects and forms through which difference is articulated and manipulated, but on attempts to broaden the analytical gaze to the materialisation and racialisation at the heart of modernist constructions of difference – of subject/object, human/non-human, thought/matter – and of 'the world' itself – understood as graspable through a grid of linear time and flat space. Thus, (anti)blackness is the ground upon which the subject and the world are made possible.

Antiblackness may not be reducible to racism or coloniality but it allows us to grasp and to problematise racism and coloniality in ways that can be understood to be more 'radical' – that is, to problematise them at their root – than normative or socio-historical forms of analysis and critique (Moten 2018a, 285 n36). This approach is particularly important to address the question of the traces, or 'legacies' – the 'afterlives' – of race and coloniality in international studies and enables the contemporary power of race and coloniality to be grasped at a deeper level. Therefore, antiblackness is less about surface manifestations and more about the libidinal desire to know, to order and to regulate a world whose reality (where there are no binary divides of human/subjects and nature/things/objects) must continually be violently negated (Sharpe 2016, 106; see also, Moten 2017, xi). Thus, analyses of antiblackness in critical Black studies seek to move beyond the antiblack world, rather than hypostasising it. Indeed, as Alexander Weheliye argues, thinking from the traumatic experiences of Black(ened) people in an antiblack world allows us to create a 'site for freedom beyond the world of Man [sic]' (2014, 125).

In fact, this work could be understood as reworking or rereading modernity as the production (and denial) of blackness. What is modernity but the imagination of the human as indefinitely progressing through overcoming nature/the non-human/blackness: the attempt to construct a world of being from non-being, to appropriate, to objectify, to extract, to make fungible and to tear from context and organic interconnection? The critique of antiblackness starts from a position which challenges this imagination and its necessary ongoing terror and violence, often taking inspiration from Orlando Patterson's pathbreaking work *Slavery and Social Death* (1982). The non-being of chattel-slavery provides an understanding of what it is like to be appropriated, to be made fungible, to lose your organic connections, to be broken from the world, to be liminal – neither fully human nor non-human, neither fully subject nor object. This liminal positionality does not provide an alternative worldview or a

political programme of reform (or revolution), but it does enable a problematisation of the desire to make and reify differences, cuts and distinctions (King 2019). In understanding the humanity of the slave as provisional, antiblackness opens up the problematisation of 'humanity' itself and its dependence upon the policing or regulation of a violent binary and hierarchical logic.

Drawing upon this strand of critical Black studies allows us to rethink the existing assumptions that underpin dominant strands of decolonial critique – to understand the construction of humanity as a universal subject as itself a process productive of the antiblack world. Antiblackness is thereby neither an historical event nor an instrument or tool to be manipulated; it is not contingent but essential to the normative imaginary of the 'human' as a universal, rational, autonomous subject, cut or separate from the world. While the modes of cutting, classifying and hierarchy may change, antiblackness is still the invisible and enabling ground. This argument pushes against the narrative of progressive change and Black empowerment, highlighting the persistence of the ontological condition of modernity (Sexton 2008). Antiblackness is ontological because the subject and the world are its product. As Saidiya Hartman (1997, 62) has powerfully argued, 'the slave is the object or the ground that makes possible the existence of the bourgeoisie subject and, by negation or contradiction, defines liberty, citizenship, and the enclosures of the social body'; thus, 'the meaning and the guarantee of (white) equality depended upon the presence of slaves. White men were equal in not being slaves'.

This is the positionality or perspective of the slave or of the non-being, excluded 'from the field of "the human"' (Mbembe 2001, 236).<sup>6</sup> It is a position that highlights the terror and violence of modernity's worlding of cuts and distinctions: the violence of cutting slave as object from master as subject, of cutting being from 'a world of becoming'.<sup>7</sup> This violence is essentially arbitrary; it has nothing to do with pre-existing essences or capacities. This is the gratuitous violence of antiblackness. The violence of antiblackness is the attribution of properties to one side or the other: antiblackness is the violence of cutting, attributing, judging, allocating, assessing, deciding. This violence is the making of the world of modernity, of entities in relations. Thus, for Frank Wilderson, for the Black to be 'within the world, rather than against the world ... is to be structurally adjusted' (2010, 142). According to Mbembe, the problem is rooted not in colonial violence per se but 'within Western cosmology itself', in the objectification of the Other in opposition to the Self as subject, which drives the 'constant impetus to count, judge, classify, and eliminate, both persons and things' (2001, 190, 192). We argue, with Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, that the desire to classify and distinguish, to register and know the world, is antiblackness; therefore, binaries of inclusion and exclusion that already assume a world of classifications and distinctions fail to engage antiblackness as the invisible or veiled grounds of modernity (2020, 28).

From this perspective, the 'afterlife' of racism, slavery and coloniality is found not in hidden 'traces', 'spectres' or 'legacies' but in the everyday understanding of subjects and world(s) in relations. As Hartman argues (1997, 100), 'What would be made possible if, rather than starting with the subject, we began our inquiry with a description of subjectification'? What if the freedom of the subject and the abjection of the slave were co-constitutive rather than separated in time and space? (Hartman 1977, 5) The 'afterlife' of slavery is the antiblack world. The structured positionality of slavery survives as the racial code of the binary categorisation of being itself, true across both the natural and the social sciences of modernity. Thus, the ontological focus enables the understanding that antiblackness is the process of

producing truths of subject/object, of human/world: it is not the contingent product of this process.<sup>8</sup> Antirblackness produces the disciplinary divides and ratifies their methodologies and findings. Antirblackness cannot be challenged or removed by practising disciplines better, being more sensitive to histories of chattel slavery and coloniality, or adding Black cultural and academic production to the academic curriculum. The problem is the unmarked and unregistered necessity of blackness for the modern subject with the world as universal object, which necessitates and grounds a totality, 'diffused' through the terror and violence of antirblackness (Hartman 1997, 4).

### Pluriversal approaches: rethinking the human

Critical anthropological approaches to decolonial inquiry focus on destabilising the epistemological and ontological foundations of Western thought, and promoting a range of alternative perspectives, developed by those on the margins of liberal modernity. For pluriversal approaches, modernist understandings are imposed upon other epistemological approaches, erasing them or seeing them as less rational. These approaches argue for a 'world of many worlds' (de la Cadena and Blaser 2018), where modernity is understood as just one way of being and understanding, rather than imposed as universal. The ontological turn in anthropology thus sees multiple ways to be human, which must be accepted and engaged with, alongside the increasingly discredited understanding of the rational liberal subject, which has imposed itself on Indigenous and other non-Western forms of knowledge through coloniality.

The drive to promote alternative ontologies is exemplified in the work of Latin American anthropologists who have engaged with indigenous ways of being (Blaser 2014; see also de Sousa Santos 2014; Mignolo and Walsh 2018; Escobar 2018). Marisol de la Cadena's work on Indigenous people in the Andes has been particularly influential in arguing for relational ontologies, which refuse the separation between nature and culture, human and other-than-human. Her studies of the Quechua people argue that they exist as a 'socio-natural collective of humans, other-than-human beings, animals, and plants inherently connected to each other in such a way that nobody within it escapes the relation' (de la Cadena 2015, 44). This relational ontology is incompatible with the idea of the discrete, rational, liberal subject, that is outside nature, able to observe and master the non-human through objective knowledge and strength of intellect. What is key for decolonial critique is that these alternative ontologies have not just been ignored or obscured, but have been actively suppressed and erased by coloniality, deemed primitive in the face of scientific modernity (Escobar 2016). The decolonial approaches that follow from these explorations of political ontology often focus on the need to work with the world to build more productive futures, through adaptation, experimentation and creativity (Rothe 2020).

Sylvia Wynter's work has been central to the understanding of plural societal forms of being and differentiation.<sup>9</sup> Understanding coloniality as one mode of being amongst others, Wynter traces the development of the idea of 'Man' from Medieval Christianity to colonial modernity, demonstrating that the shift from a religious subject to a secular subjectivity was achieved through the subjugation of the colonial process, and the ways that Black and Indigenous people were rendered Other and irrational (Wynter 2003). As Denise Ferreira da Silva argues, Wynter 'couches her analysis of modern thought on the promise of an answer to the ontological question that does not represent a particular version of the human as the Human as such'

(2015, 95). Thus, capitalism, the state, civil society and the rational citizen emerged as concepts from 1492 onwards, as colonial conquests and knowledge practices attempted to collapse many worlds into one world. Wynter is interested in moving from a universalist, modern understanding of the human to examining the 'relativity and original multiplicity of our genres of being human' (Wynter and McKittrick 2015, 31). For scholars of decoloniality and the pluriverse, Wynter's disruptive theorising and recognition of multiple ways of being human provides a crucial grounding (Blaney and Tickner 2017; Odysseos 2017; Rothe 2020).

Central to Wynter's thought is the interaction between the symbolic and the biological, what she calls the *mythoi* and the *bios*, emphasising the importance of symbolic orders that sustain collective frameworks of meaning. Thus, for Wynter, human society should be seen as composed of interactive nature–culture systems, each distinct as an 'autopoietic, autonomously functioning, languaging, living system' (Wynter and McKittrick 2015, 32). Wynter's account of humanity depicts humans as nature–culture hybrids, with the *bios* and *mythoi* co-evolving in discrete social formations. This conception of human society and nature resonates with the critical anthropological studies of Indigenous ways of being and their relational cosmologies (Erasmus 2020). Wynter also offers a similar suggestion for new ways forward, beyond the coloniality of contemporary modern knowledge, through a speculative, interactive way of moving through the world. She draws on Aime Cesaire's theory of the 'science of the word', which argues for a 'hybrid science of the Word/Nature', which would proceed not through established scientific method, but through a poetic method, representing a more productive way to approximate reality than the oppressive rigidity of Western colonial science (Wynter and McKittrick, 2015, 73).

Key to the anthropologically informed approach to decolonising is the framing of distinct modes of socio-naturally being a subject in the world, an account that enables non-modernist understandings to exist untainted by the antiblack world, understood as an historically specific construction of colonial power. Thus, the totality of antiblackness is disavowed and it is antiblackness that is 'provincialised' rather than the world of historical subjects, relations and being. This is the important point argued by Tapji Garba and Sara-Maria Sorentino in their recent critique of decolonial approaches (2020). The grounding of socio-natural communities in land and relation constitutes a pluralised world of ontologies, cosmologies and subjects, such that:

Paradoxically ... land is the common ground that unites colonial projects of control and decolonial projects of reclamation: the fact of land (beyond or before ways of relating to land) is assumed, against both colonial (proprietary) and decolonial (relational) epistemologies. Land grounds both settler futurity and decolonial futures. (Garba and Sorentino 2020, 767)

Thus, the pluriverse of distinct social modes of being, of distinct cosmologies and ontologies, can be brought into the field of international studies without difficulty because there are shared grounds across these differences. Indeed, Arturo Escobar demonstrates the importance of land for decolonial approaches in his recent call for 'designs for the pluriverse', where he puts a 'politics of place' and conceptions of 'territory' as a positive communal space at the heart of his vision for a decolonial future (Escobar 2018, 164, 173). The grounds of absent and disavowed blackness bring these distinct social modes of being into existence precisely via their negation. This decolonial imaginary of distinct modern and non-modern modes of existence can be brought into relation only on the basis of a shared ground/world beyond difference. This ability to pluralise the world (of international study) disavows precisely these

grounds that enable it (Moten 2013, 749; also 2018b, 204). Critical Black studies work highlights the importance of the experience of the Black(ened) subject confronted with the impossibility of recognition, but does not suggest that it is possible to exist as a subject outside the antiblack world or that this world can be ended via the creation of new shared narratives or speculative encounters beyond difference (Marriott 2012; Moten 2018b, 223–30). It is for this reason that Tiffany Lethabo King is right to highlight ‘some theoretical tension’ between the focus of many critical Black studies scholars, discussed in the previous section, and that of Sylvia Wynter and decolonial approaches. This tension emerges precisely on the centrality of antiblackness and the question of the possibility of difference and plurality, which is occluded in discussions that accept at face value plural and alternative ‘genres of the human’ (King 2019, 17–18).<sup>10</sup>

Thus, it is little surprise that these arguments have been influential in the recent boom in decolonial scholarship, which has highlighted the centrality of coloniality to international studies and a desire to bring alternative ontologies and epistemologies into the field (Tucker 2018). Pluriversal approaches are about the addition of new perspectives, the broadening out of the field to include those that were formerly excluded. For instance, Inoue calls for a dialogue ‘with indigenous ways of knowing and considering them in epistemological and ontological parity with academic knowledge’ (2018, 28). Rojas (2016, 379) adds that colonial knowledge must be engaged and critiqued, but notes that ‘this engagement is not about “delinking” from Western knowledge, it sees such an engagement as an opportunity to challenge the limits of what modernity can conceive of within its limits.’

One of the most prominent calls for a pluriversal (as opposed to a pluralist or global) studies comes from David Blaney and Arlene Tickner, who centre political ontology in their quest for a ‘decolonial science’ that can challenge universalist framings (2017; see also Shilliam 2015). They argue that pluriversal thought aims to undo the universalism of modernity, shattering the illusion of a single, graspable world. Their conception

works to puncture single-world (colonial) logics that render human (and non-human) experience as singular and the same, while upholding the idea that ‘becoming worldly’ demands that we ‘become with many’. Contrary to the incredulity and uneasiness often expressed towards forms of practice, including knowledge-building and politics, in which ancestors, spirits and earth-beings partake, responding effectively and respectfully to the pluriverse presumes that we learn to bend in the face of and to walk with others in the cosmos, thinking and being beyond the familiar. (Blaney and Tickner 2017, 310)

Drawing on de la Cadena, Isabelle Stengers and others, Blaney and Ticker argue that this new decolonial science should be achieved through an ontological diplomacy, or ‘cosmopolitics’, where alternative ontologies achieve parity with modernity. This allows for a reparative politics, which focuses on coexistence and healing historical violences (Blaney and Tickner 2017, 310; see also Conway 2020; Rothe 2020).

Thus, whilst pluralising approaches rely on an ontological argument, they do not engage the antiblackness that grounds the modernist ontology. This misses that, for many critics, the problem is not merely the necessarily violent (colonial) imposition of modernist approaches, it is the unacknowledged grounds of these approaches per se, which enables these violences to be reproduced in alternative groundings of subjects in relations. Modernity could not exist without a grounding in antiblackness; without fully acknowledging this, the addition of other approaches that construct alternative ways of being human in the world



does not critique antiblackness but rather delimits and accepts it as one approach among others. It is a disavowal of ontological critique and its displacement by the politics of accommodation and acceptance in exchange for space and recognition, accepting without question the terms of antiblackness. Modernist thought cannot be improved, developed or made less colonial or racially biased by adding alternatives that share the need to disavow the foundationality of the antiblack world.

### Race as structure: rehumanising international relations

A different strand to decolonial thinking is provided by those who seek to highlight the structuring nature of race as one of the management of relations of power: the rationalisation and legitimation of colonial rule and the binaries of inclusion/exclusion, equal rights and subordination. Here, for critical sociologically informed approaches, race is less about knowledge practices, ways of being and interacting with the world and instead is highlighted as a social construct, an effect or product of racial and colonial practices of international politics. This imposition of racial difference is intimately tied to colonial and settler-colonial power as a technique of control and regulation, which naturalises and reproduces differential powers and capacities. As Kerem Nisancioglu (2020, 59 n3) states: this enables the study of 'sovereignty as a practice that does the work of producing racialised differentiation independently of any discursive or uneven application'.

This structural critique of racial differentiation understands the construction of racial hierarchies as essential to settler-colonial power and control. Racial differentiation as a dominant ideology or discursive regime reinforces and reproduces a structural hierarchy of white privilege supported by political discourses of 'methodological whiteness' (Bhambra 2017). Errol Henderson's 'Hidden in Plain Sight', a key work within the discipline, flags up the racist and exclusionary thinking at the heart of theoretical frameworks of state and subject formation. He builds upon Charles Mills' *Racial Contract* to argue that this presupposes and at the same time conceals the racial divide at the heart of its normative divide between sovereignty, as the product of 'white' civilisation, and the backdrop of nature, racialised as 'Black' savagery or anarchy.

This racial binary at the core of international politics' approaches and assumptions continues to produce powerful effects. The struggle against this hegemony is a struggle to reveal the hidden biases and coercion of power and for inclusion and recognition of those excluded. Henderson argues that the problem of 'racist intellectual foundations' (Henderson 2013, 90) lies at the heart of modern or liberal political theory. Similarly, for Nisancioglu (2020, 46): 'Race and racism are effects of the enactments through which colonial relations are created and reproduced, and products of colonial dispossession and domination'. Racialisation is the practice of colonial rule and the effect of colonial hierarchical ordering of the world. Here, race is the *effect* of strategies and techniques of hegemonic control – a response to the problem of rationalising and legitimising power (Nisancioglu 2020, 46). Racial sovereignty allows us to see how race as a hierarchical, bordering, ordering practice constitutes a racialised world which is then concealed through discourses of equality and rights. Racial sovereignty is an ongoing practice, a struggle for control and the reproduction of hegemony, rather than a formal or abstract category. Race as a governance technique, a

strategy for dividing and ruling, carves out the binaries of 'inside/outside', 'friend/enemy' at the heart of international studies, and thereby continues up to the present.

Gurminder Bhambra's work on 'methodological whiteness' develops this point further. Race is seen to disappear under the abstract categories of liberal political theory, which portray the world of the white subject and structurally operate to occlude the centrality of race to contemporary political divisions and understandings. Whereas claims to identity and difference are seen to be racial, white-coded framings of 'sovereignty' and 'class' are seen to obscure their racialised grounding. This grounding is not consigned to a colonial past but seen to be clearly articulated in the present, as claims for white privilege are legitimised in non-identity terms, while claims for inclusion and equality are seen as identity-based. In this structural framing, from Mills' *Racial Contract* through to Nisancioglu and Bhambra, the problem of race as hierarchical ordering is repeated and reinforced. As Bhambra states (2017, 220):

The difference between minorities and majorities expressing group sentiments is that the sentiments of the former arise in the context of a wish for inclusion and equality, while those of the latter are a consequence of a wish to exclude and to dominate.

Sociologically informed critiques of constructions of liberal polities tend to seek reform and political change through adding social and historical depth to our understanding of power and forwarding a political challenge to the structures of racial hierarchy and the normalisation or naturalisation of the mechanisms of white supremacy through the demands for recognition and inclusion. Thus Mills, in *The Racial Contract*, states that the 'raceless' social contract understanding of liberal political theory needs to be 'reformed' and 'supplemented' 'with an account of the "Racial Contract"' (1997, 120). Tellingly, he argues (1997, 129) that he is not attempting a 'deconstruction' of the social contract; we should not see 'the ideals of contractarianism themselves as necessarily problematic but ... betrayed by white contractarianism'.

Reading this second decolonial approach through the critique of antiblackness enables us to see that the presentation of racial differentiation as a structure of and as structuring power only takes us so far, in that it risks reducing race to an ideological construct or discursive regime, whereby race and white supremacy is one amongst many forms of oppression and exclusion. It is important to underscore the difference between this structural argument being made by the critical sociology approach and the deeper ontological critique of antiblackness presented by critical Black studies scholars. Understanding race through critical sociology as structural to the concepts and technologies of control (as with critical anthropological work in the previous section) leads to calls for greater inclusion in discourses of liberal rights and equality via the rearticulation of the human. Thus, the human is remade through an open-ended intersectional struggle against the multiple oppressions and exclusions, or 'matrix of domination', of settler-colonial cis-heteronormative capitalist structures, which impose a radical positionality upon the struggles of the most marginalised, forcing them to the fore of movements for global justice (see, for example, Shilliam 2021, Chapter 5).

While this structural analysis of oppression inverts the Eurocentric or colonial hierarchy of centre and margins, it remains within the modernist framing of subjects, rights, justice and emancipation. In fact, the critical sociological approach could be seen as a radicalisation of the Enlightenment project, seeking to salvage its universal humanist promise and liberal telos of progress. The decolonial drive to expand international study and make it more inclusive and plural is powerfully illustrated in the desire to humanise, redefine and enlarge the

understanding of the human. Dehumanising is always seen as the problem in this critical tradition, rather than humanising. Yet if we accept that we live in an antiblack world, where the concept of being human requires Blackness as its other, becoming human requires the violence of antiblackness (Iman Jackson 2020; Hartman 1997). The problem with critical sociological approaches is that (as with the anthropologically informed decolonial approaches) they necessarily reduce antiblackness to an epiphenomenon – to a contingent result of violent cutting/worlding – rather than grasping it as the process of cutting/worlding itself.

This decolonial project highlights the importance of distinguishing a structural understanding of race and white supremacy, seen as deriving from colonial relations and coloniality, from an ontological framing, as articulated here via the engagement with the critique of antiblackness. This is where the intervention of authors often broadly aligned with Afropessimist approaches is so important. João Costa Vargas (2018) captures the distinction between structural and antiblack approaches well, distinguishing between the ontological understanding of antiblackness and its secondary modes of appearance or expression in the social, economic and cultural structures of exclusion and discrimination. Vargas highlights the distinction between a Black 'slave' and Black 'zombie' positionality (2018, 211–21). For Vargas, the structural approach, which seeks to reveal the reality of universal humanity, places Black(ened) subjects at the centre of the emancipatory project, by virtue of their being 'formally stripped of their very humanity and rendered fungible subjects' but held to have 'maintained their ethical principles intact – those Blacks were now hailed to put into practice their historical salvaging mission' (2018, 219). Vargas argues (2018, 260) that this coupling of universals of white supremacy and Blackness as a redemptive counter-universality of wrongful suffering and exclusion seeks to redeem and to disavow, rather than to abolish, the antiblack world: to reify the antiblack world of subjects in relations.

The point we wish to highlight in this article is that there is an important distinction between a critique of liberal political concepts for a lack of social and historical accounting for colonial history and their role in promoting and rationalising the problem of international order – policing the 'colour line' – and understanding the problem in terms of antiblackness at the level of ontology (Moten, 2018a, 34). Fred Moten clarifies that antiblackness brings blackness 'into relief against the backdrop of its negation, which takes the form of epidermalization, of a reduction of some to flesh, and to the status of no-bodies, so that some others can stake their impossible claim upon bodies and souls' (Moten, 2018a 242; see also Spillers 2003). As Moten states (2018a, 242): 'The fact(s) of antiblackness, its specific operation/s, reveal, though, that a distinction exists and must continually be asserted between blackness and the people who are called black'.

From this position, the sociological critique therefore needs to be inverted. For structural understandings of racism, Black exclusion is the effect of racialised understandings of the subject used to instrumentalise, rationalise and legitimise colonial hegemony, appropriation and control. Therefore, the construction of the subject is inherently or ontologically racialising, not contingently. As Saidiya Hartman's groundbreaking *Scenes of Subjection* argues, sociological critiques, which accept the categories and distinctions of liberal modernity, essentialise exactly that which needs to be opened up. Hartman refuses the invitation of 'simply resorting to additive models of domination and interlocking oppressions that analytically maintain the distinctiveness and separateness of these modes and effects' (1997, 118). Thus, there can be no 'attempt to theorize blackness as such'; instead, we must theorise

how (anti)blackness is articulated in various modes of authorising power. The 'fabrication of blackness' even under regimes of democracy, equality of rights and social inclusion is the focus, hence 'the necessity of thinking about these limits in terms that do not simply traffic in the obviousness of common sense – the denial of basic rights, privileges, and entitlements ... – and yet leave the framework of liberalism unexamined' (Hartman 1997, 119).

The work of Denise Ferreira da Silva is on point when she argues that critiques of the categories of political theory as limiting or excluding the 'others', or political-economic critiques that see race as instrumentalised, seek to go 'behind the veil' of race, in Cornel West's expression, to reveal the objective 'reality' of universal humanity (2007, 14). The historical sociological critique of racial subjection fails to locate racial analytics as productive of the modern liberal subject; thus, for Ferreira da Silva, these critiques reproduce the liberal modernist 'transparency thesis', that the universal human subject is the autonomous self-determining rights-bearing subject of modernity (2007, 14). Race is understood neither as a naturalised or individual prejudice nor as instrumentalised to exclude or exploit in the service of power: it is not an add-on, but an analytic dependent upon presumptions of universal reason, which produces the modern rational subject ruled by reason and its 'others', 'affectable' and determined by exterior forces: one free, the other enslaved to unreason (Ferreira da Silva 2007, 20) and doomed to perish when in contact or relation with superior subjects. The 'other' therefore is always already excluded from becoming a modern subject except through its obliteration. Modernist discourses, even critically minded ones, which rehearse modernist tropes of universality, inclusion and progress, necessarily (re)produce the binary of subjects of becoming and those always already condemned to death. Antiracism is the 'structuring force of the modern world' rather than a contingent structuring of power within it (Moten 2018a, 25). Frank Wilderson therefore argues that the liberal subject is parasitical on Blackness and without it could not exist (2020, 16).

As Zakiyah Iman Jackson writes, whereas Charles Mills and his interlocutors explicitly or implicitly accept the contractarian view of the political subject, for the critique of antiracism, the 'social contract philosophy and scientific discourses ... co-produce fictions of the Self ... in that they establish, unquestionably, freedom (understood as mastery and self-possession) as the privileged value' over and against the non-human (2020, 151). The problem is the humanisation of the human cut from the world, which entails the attribution of certain affects and affordances to the human in distinction to the non-human. In the ontologisation of the human as distinct from the world, these distinctions, whether in terms of physiology, rationality, sexuality or whatever, are necessarily arbitrary. To construct the human is to dehumanise; there can be no project of rehumanising or of redeeming the liberal polity and the Black(ened) subject in a modernist world. Afropessimist, Black feminist and other strands of work within critical Black studies seek not to reconstruct the concept of human in more inclusive ways but to problematise and to disrupt this process of cutting and dividing itself.

## Conclusion

The two decolonial approaches we have heuristically identified come from different disciplinary, methodological and epistemological lineages, but ultimately rest on the same ontological commitments, which are challenged by work in critical Black studies. The critical anthropological approach argues for a pluriversal framing where many worlds can exist together through a

cosmopolitics of ontological diplomacy, and a more productive future can be built through adaptation, creativity and a science of poetics. The critical sociological approach focuses on exposing the racist power relations and political ideas that masquerade as objective, upholding a structural condition built on whiteness and colonialism. The alternative possible approach to decoloniality, informed by an engagement with critical Black studies and putting the ontological understanding of antiblackness to the fore, suggests a third and potentially more disruptive approach to the field of international studies. Disruption, negation and deconstruction works on a different register to the work of rethinking, expanding and pluralising.

We take inspiration from Zakiyyah Iman Jackson's subversive call for a reining back of disciplinary claims and her caution against calls for redemptive expansion and new forms of inclusion. She argues that a humbler approach is required, which does not take for granted that we already have the tools and understanding necessary to dismantle racial and colonial legacies articulated as operations of ontological antiblackness. This approach is one

... that neither presumes we already have an adequate epistemological model for comprehending the nature and stakes of [the force of antiblackness] nor presupposes that a sufficient political framework for intervention already exists ... If each introduction of regulation or policy holds the potential to expand disciplinary power, how might we disarticulate state authority rather than re-inscribe it? (Iman Jackson 2020, 212)

The distinctions between the focus and aspirations of these approaches seem clear: for the first two decolonial approaches considered above, the goal is to make international study more expansive, more 'real' or 'true' to the world and its plurality; for approaches informed by the critique of antiblackness, the problem is the uninterrogated assumptions of the 'real', of 'truth' and of 'world' (see also Wilderson 2020, 14). We have argued here that moving beyond Eurocentric or universalist or abstract categories and assumptions within international studies may not be all that needs to be done to decolonise the field. Modernist views of human exceptionalism and linear causality may be imploding (and may have been in crisis since the early twentieth century; see Henderson 2013; Du Bois 1961) but the anti-black world is untouched by this (Zalloua 2021). One could even foresee the field of international studies as burgeoning with plural posthuman imaginaries, rich and varied more-than-human ontologies and epistemologies, all manner of repositioned and repurposed subjects, in ever-expanding relations of care and nurturing. Yet the antiblack world – the world as a totality infused throughout with terror and violence – would be unchallenged by any such changes in how international study understands the world of states and the human (see the excellent discussion in Karera 2019).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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*Anthropocene Islands: Entangled Worlds* (with Jonathan Pugh, 2021), *Becoming Indigenous: Governing Imaginaries in the Anthropocene* (with Julian Reid, 2019) and *Ontopolitics in the Anthropocene: An Introduction to Mapping, Sensing and Hacking* (2018).

## Notes

1. We understand the field of critical Black studies as a broad one (see, for example, Brock, Nix-Stevenson and Miller 2016). As we set out below, we are drawing upon a selection of writers who emphasise the critique of antiblackness and its foundational role in Enlightenment and modernist thinking, so central to the field.
2. Thus, as Christina Sharpe argues (2010, 13): ‘the injury slips from slavery (colonialism, segregation, lynching, ethnographic display, incarceration, etc.) to blackness (or being blackened) itself. How is such an injury addressed or redressed?’
3. We note that these are not the only ways of carving out distinct approaches within the broad field of decolonial thought (we do not attempt to address all decolonial work or frame this field as in some way homogeneous; for example, we do not draw upon huge areas of postcolonial, postcolonial feminist, decolonial feminist or indigenous studies, and so on). We chose to focus upon the strands we are calling ‘anthropological’ and ‘historical-sociological’ as they have distinct disciplinary framings and cohered networks of authors. We treat these strands heuristically, to draw out the importance of the distinctions and stakes of antiblackness for a different decolonial approach.
4. As can be seen from their citational practices, most of these authors have been linked with and are sympathetic to some extent to the approach of Afropessimism (a term coined by Frank Wilderson), but it is important to stress that these links are highly variable, with few authors self-identifying as Afropessimist and leading proponents of centring antiblackness, such as Fred Moten, clearly stating their uneasiness with the label. It is the framing of an antiblack world which is our concern in this paper, not Afropessimism per se.
5. This ‘silenced difference’ is the ‘fundamental methodological move’ of Western Enlightenment modernity, grounded upon ‘a silent black *materiality*, in order to justify a suppression of difference in the name of (a false) universality’ (Moten 2003, 205) (emphasis is original).
6. A different ‘structure of feeling’ or ‘register of violence’, a structural antagonism, which is differentially excluded from the struggle of fully ‘human’ subjects over the uneven distribution of rights or resources (see Wilderson 2015, 232; 2010, 247–51).
7. To use William Connolly’s formulation of non-modern ontology (see Connolly 2011).
8. The productiveness of (anti)blackness for the modernist construction of subject and world is central to the ontological project of critique. The point is not that Kant was racist and that this limited the scope of the modernist project but that the non-being of blackness is the ‘para-ontological’ grounding for the possibility of the subject and the world of entities and relations itself (see Moten 2017, 312, n1).
9. Our critique here focuses on the elements of Wynter’s work that inform this strand of decolonial thought, but her work is open to a variety of other interpretations. Wynter has also been influential for important critiques in critical Black studies that have inspired our argument here (see, for instance, Karera 2019).
10. It should be noted that she chooses not to push further the stakes of this ‘tension’ (see King 2019, 228 n57).

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