

## Preface:

As I prepare to send this book off to press in the last week of June 2020, two recent events in the United States compel me to add this brief preface. That fact might seem surprising insofar as *Bad Education* argues for a structural understanding of queerness and not, like much current work in the field, a primarily historical or ethnographic one. Without minimizing the value of scholarship that traces the cultural, political, legal, medical, erotic, affective, and communal experiences of those whom contemporary discursive regimes increasingly describe as *queer*, this book, like my earlier work in queer theory, reads queerness in the context of Lacanian psychoanalysis and de Manian rhetorical theory. While revising those two conceptual frameworks through a sustained encounter with queerness, it also puts them in dialogue with recent theorists of Afropessimism who draw on, extend, or respond to those psychic and linguistic inflections of the social. Notwithstanding their many profound and consequential differences, these critical perspectives share a common approach to political and ethical questions that centers, *mutatis mutandis*, on the subject's Symbolic determination. To that extent, though never divorced from the pressures of current events, they conceive those events as effects of a structure that demands an account as rigorous as those that engage its local expressions. Each produces a distinctive take on the "human" as linguistically determined, but both affirm an indissoluble link between politics and ontology, where the latter, which interrogates the order of being, follows from the subject's linguistic formation and the former contests the ontology of the "human" to define and control a community.

Given this book's commitment to thinking queerness in such a context, how could contingent historical events have generated this preface? To answer that question, let me sketch those events and suggest their relation to each other. Insistently, through the early weeks of June, protesters, first in the United States and then around the world, took to the streets in anger over the killing of George Floyd, an African American man accused of passing a fraudulent \$20 bill and murdered on May 25, 2020, while being taken into police custody. Despite his urgent calls for assistance (like so many Black Americans before him, his appeal—"I can't breathe"—was in vain), Floyd died of cardiopulmonary arrest induced by the force of a policeman's knee pressing into on his neck for an unendurable eight minutes and forty-six seconds, an act of brutality that continued not only after Floyd lost consciousness but also for almost a minute and a half after the paramedics arrived on the scene.<sup>1</sup> The depraved indifference of those who killed him rekindled already smoldering rage over the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Sandra Bland, Michael Brown, Philando Castile, Dominique Fells, Eric Garner, Balantine Mbegbu, Elijah McClain, Tony McDade, Riah Milton, Tamir Rice, Breonna Taylor, and hundreds upon thousands of other Black persons killed in acts of anti-Black violence either sponsored or tolerated by the state.

By mid-June, despite warnings against large-scale gatherings during the COVID-19 pandemic, the demonstrations, now stretching from coast to coast, had drawn crowds that were angry, diverse, and large, as well as largely peaceful. Responding to looting and property destruction on the fringes of the protests, however, government officials responded with force: the National Guard and law enforcement at the state and federal levels were mobilized to reassert control; President Donald Trump and Attorney General William Barr initiated and sanctioned violence against protesters gathered lawfully in Washington's Lafayette Park; and more than ten thousand protesters were arrested, while perhaps two dozen others were killed.

Amid all this, on June 15, the Supreme Court announced its decision in *Bostock v. Clayton County*. It determined, by a vote of six to three, that the Civil Rights Act of 1964, passed in response to earlier demonstrations against anti-Black terror and police brutality, made firing "an individual merely for being gay or transgender" unlawful because Title VII prohibits employers from discriminating on the basis of "sex."<sup>2</sup> Both the majority and the dissenting opinions invoked the "ordinary meaning" of *sex*: the former to assert that animus against lesbian, gay, and transgender individuals presupposes that certain "traits or actions" befit only a given sex, and the latter to claim a categorical difference between *sex* and *sexual orientation*.<sup>3</sup> Notwithstanding

Justice Samuel Alito's dissent, obtuse in its heterosexist gloss on dictionary definitions of *sex*, arguments about the meaning of that word did not determine the court's decision. The majority opinion asserted, instead, that however conservative one's definition of *sex* (and Alito's could hardly be more so: "the division of living things into two groups, male and female, based on biology"), discrimination on the basis of transgender status or sexual orientation necessarily rests on normative expectations about how sex should be expressed.<sup>4</sup> As such, it violates Title VII's prohibition on using gender stereotypes to discriminate in employment as determined by the court's decision in *Price Waterhouse v. Hopkins* (1989).

Articulating a widely held sentiment about this victory for gay rights, an analysis in the *New York Times* declared, "In many ways, the decision is the strongest evidence yet of how fundamentally, rapidly and, to some degree, unpredictably American views about gay and transgender people have changed across the ideological spectrum in less than 20 years."<sup>5</sup> Reinforcing this narrative of progress, the authors describe the decision as "the latest in a swift series of legal and political advances for gay Americans after several decades where gains came in fits and starts after the uprising at the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village helped usher in the modern gay rights movement."<sup>6</sup> Seventy years after the Mattachine Society was established to counter state-enforced animus against so-called sexual deviants; fifty-nine years after the Supreme Court refused Frank Kameny's request for certiorari after his firing by the Army Map Service on the basis of his homosexuality; fifty-six years after the Civil Rights Act was signed into law by Lyndon Johnson; and fifty-one years after the Stonewall rioters rose up against police abuse, the extension of employment discrimination protections to lesbians, gay men, and transsexuals could be greeted as proof of a "fundamental" change in America's social attitudes. At the same moment, however, and providing a different take on the linear progress of "change," Black Americans, more than half a century *after* they had won those same legal rights, were pushing the country, yet again, to confront its anti-Blackness.

In fact, the most "fundamental" change apparent in the wake of George Floyd's death has been the growth in the number of non-Black Americans beginning to see anti-Blackness as inherent in systems, not just individuals, including in the US political, legal, penal, and educational systems. The concept of structural racism has entered the popular conversation, but without any clear consensus on the nature of the structure to which it refers. A vast distance, for example, separates the "structured racism" articulated by Bobby Seale and other activists in the 1960s and 1970s from the discussions of

structural racism by theorists like Frank B. Wilderson III today. For those in the tradition of Black liberation, the “structure” in “structured racism” refers to control of the various institutions through which political power operates. Not only is Black liberation possible by changing who controls those institutions, but so, too, is multiracial cooperation in an anticapitalist context. In a 1988 interview, Seale reflects on that hope as expressed in the sometime alliance between the Black Panther Party and young, white opponents of the Vietnam War:

The young Whites who did really get out in the streets demonstrated against structured racism. We saw that as a resource. . . . [A]nother aspect of our analysis was that we’re talking about power to the people. We made a new analysis of what nationalism was about, Black nationalism. That, whatever Black unity we had, it was really a sort of a catalyst to help humanize the world and we were that catalyst here in Afro-America or Africa, that’s what it was about. And that the world was composed of more than just Black folks, you know. So, the coalition aspect to us being what one defined as a minority United States of America, if the White community showed some split, then we should side with that aspect of the group that seemed to be or would act as friends to us.<sup>7</sup>

As remote from Seale’s politics as it is from his moment, Ibram X. Kendi’s *How to Be an Antiracist* shares, nonetheless, his liberationist hope. Kendi writes that while he “still occasionally use[s] the terms ‘institutional racism’ and ‘systemic racism’ and ‘structural racism,’” he prefers “the term ‘institutionally racist policies’” because he sees it as “more concrete.”<sup>8</sup> Even more important than its concreteness, though, the phrase holds on to the possibility of “humaniz[ing] the world,” as Seale expressed it, since policies are, by definition, more malleable than structures. This faith, which derives from what Kendi calls “our underlying humanity,” constitutes the core of his argument: “We must believe. Believe all is not lost for you and me and our society. Believe in the possibility that we can strive to be antiracist from this day forward. Believe in the possibility that we can transform our societies to be antiracist from this day forward. Racist power is not godly. Racist policies are not indestructible. Racial inequities are not inevitable. Racist ideas are not natural to the human mind.”<sup>9</sup> For those who might question this attachment to the “human” and its openness to transformation, Kendi has this to say: “The conviction that racist policymakers can be overtaken, and racist policies can be changed, and the racist minds of their victims can be changed, is disputed

only by those invested in preserving racist policymakers, policies, and habits of thinking.”<sup>10</sup>

Nothing could be further from the theoretical argument that Wilderson presents. Emphasizing an insight central to Afropessimist thought as a whole, he declares, “*Blacks are not Human subjects, but are structurally inert props, implements for the execution of White and non-Black fantasies and sado-masochistic pleasures.*”<sup>11</sup> By recognizing Blackness as external to the ontological framework of the human, Wilderson, building on earlier work by theorists like Ronald Judy, can identify anti-Blackness as inherent in the constitution of (human) being. It follows from this that politics can never escape the anti-Blackness that structures the human in the first place. Both Seale and Kendi, like Angela Davis, push discussions of racism beyond the trap of intentionality and individual guilt, leading to difficult questions about structural determination that remind us, in Davis’s words, that “if we don’t take seriously the ways in which racism is embedded in structures of institutions, if we assume that there must be an identifiable racist . . . who is the perpetrator, then we won’t ever succeed in eradicating racism.”<sup>12</sup> But in doing so they also insist that those structures, because they manifest themselves in human institutions, are therefore subject to change *by humans*. For Wilderson and others constructing the intellectual framework of Afropessimism, that very embeddedness in the human makes structural change impossible. Thus, Wilderson rejects the prospect of “coherent liberation campaigns” for Black subjects; Afropessimism, he writes, “describe[s] a structural problem but offer[s] no structural solution.”<sup>13</sup> From within the precepts of Afropessimism such a solution cannot exist.

The meaning of *structure* has shifted here from the contingent power to shape and control particular institutions to an ontological imperative bound up with social organization as such. That imperative, as *Bad Education* maintains, grounds being in being meaningful, in conforming to the logic of thinkability that organizes human community. As the introduction argues by attending closely to a passage from *L’Étourdit*, the Symbolic’s ontology arises, according to the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, through the exclusion of what he calls *ab-sens*, the nonrelation to meaning. Only this enabling subtraction of what, in itself, is subtracted from sense (even before there is a sense from which it could be subtracted), only this negation of a primal negativity, allows the ontology of the human through the language that differentiates culture from nature. To the extent that *ab-sens*, according to Lacan, is also what “designates . . . sex,” its ontology-producing exclusion

makes sex external to meaning and being, simultaneously incomprehensible and ontologically impossible.<sup>14</sup> Unlike the sex whose definition Justice Alito can blithely cite, sex for Lacan pertains to the Real, to the beyond of signification where definition does not obtain.

As discussed in *Bad Education*, then, the sex that ab-sens would designate, a priori absented from being, gives way to sex as the difference that governs the Symbolic as *sens-absexe*, Lacan's term for the ontological order linking sexual difference to meaning. Sens-absexe permits signification precisely by absenting sex as ab-sens. It creates, with that negative gesture, the world that swells into being through words. Because sex as ab-sens is exorbitant to the logic of difference and meaning, however, it can have no name of its own. Only through catachresis can it indicate the state of nondifferentiation made unthinkable by sens-absexe, which consigns it to the void of nonbeing that enables being to be. To that extent, the sex foreclosed with the subtraction of ab-sens coincides with incest in psychoanalysis, where incest is seen as impossible either to cognize or to enact, constituting as it does, in Lacanian terms, the impossible Real of sex. Inconceivable in its radical nondifferentiation, incest figures, like sex and ab-sens, the exclusion that structures the Symbolic (as the order of language, ontology, and the human) and permits it to function as the reality procured by sens-absexe.

With this we may seem to have wandered far from the murder of George Floyd, but *Bad Education* argues, to the contrary, that this is the immutable structure to which "structural racism" finally refers. While acknowledging historical differences in lived experience, socioeconomic mobility, degree of precarity, access to power, and positioning in the cultural imaginary among those read as Black, queer, woman, trans\*, or any other category of social (non)"being" collectively delegitimated as other than human, this book maintains that the stigma attached to such posited identities corresponds to their inflection (in particular communities and at particular historical moments) as embodiments of a negativity inassimilable to being, reflecting their figural status as personifications of ab-sens or of sex in its Lacanian (non)sense.

This claim may appear to privilege sex over other conceptual frameworks, like race, but only insofar as one confuses sex with the literalizations that (mis)represent it. *Sex*, in this context, does not refer to a conceptual formation at all but instead to what conceptual formation necessarily excludes. Lacan, to be sure, invites this confusion by naming as sex the nondifferentiation he attributes to ab-sens. But the movement from sex as negativity, as the nonbeing associated with the Real, to sex as the sexual difference on which the Symbolic seems to rest conforms to the logic of fantasy so rigorously theorized

in Lacanian thought—a logic that attempts to make sex make sense, to positivize its negativity, through the promise of sexual relation. Put otherwise: sexual difference, sexual relation, and the primal prohibition of incest make sex as ab-sens impossible, compelling it always to “mean” in the terms prescribed by sens-absexe. Those terms efface sex as the negativity of the primal nondifferentiation negated and replaced by sexual meaningfulness, which is what sexual difference “means”: the libidinized constitution of the subject through difference that libidinizes difference as such, making difference always sexual and sexual difference the Symbolic’s mandate that difference both “be” and be known.<sup>15</sup> We come, that is, to be beings through language, which extracts us from ab-sens while making ab-sens inconceivable in the topology of sens-absexe. Sex as determined by ab-sens, therefore, though catachrestically naming *nonbeing*, will seem to signify, nonetheless, the ontological order that *means* and that thereby makes sex as ab-sens unthinkable. Though referring to the nondifferentiation pertaining to incest and ab-sens alike, the psychoanalytic notion of sex, as understood by Lacan, will always be confused with sex as the name for what, in fact, absents it: the differential structure of positive differences.

But sex is far from singular as a catachresis of nonbeing. This book insists on the myriad names by which sex as ab-sens can go, including, but never limited to, *queerness*, *Blackness*, *woman*, and *trans*\*. Like *sex*, these terms never wholly escape their connections to the substantive identities that appear to flesh them out: *the* queer, *the* Black, *the* woman, *the* trans person, *the* genderqueer individual. But they exceed these literalizations to name, or misname, that which “is” not. As the introduction explains more fully, there are two main reasons this book elaborates ab-sens through the figure of queerness. The first is its relatively loose association with any specific identity. Primarily applied to something perceived as “strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric,” according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *queer* can refer to anything that thwarts, contradicts, or departs from a norm.<sup>16</sup> Even where its fluidity of reference, its resistance to taxonomic specificity, allows it to serve as a general rubric for nonnormative sexualities, *queer* so relentlessly challenges the boundaries of sexuality and normativity that no one can ever definitively succeed in escaping its connotative reach. Similarly, no one can fully secure it as a proper identity, either, insofar as it signifies diacritically in relation to a norm. What gets taunted as queer in a high school gym class in rural Louisiana may well look heteronormative at an academic conference in New York. By rejecting the positivity of *queerness*, or the prospect of owning it as an identity, I keep faith with its lexical history and its various social applications, something



less easily argued, perhaps, when prioritizing Blackness or woman, for example, as catachreses of ab-sens. But this book does not shrink from that latter claim; to the contrary, it gratefully acknowledges the feminist, Black, and non-Black scholars whose theoretical boldness sustains it. But given the entanglement of Blackness and woman with histories and identities more clearly defined (to others and themselves alike) than queerness, with its *determining indetermination*, I make my argument about sex and ab-sens by way of it instead. I am mindful of the political value, or strategic necessity, of affirming the specificity of delegitimated identities and of privileging their uniqueness. But the uniqueness of the histories those identities bespeak, and the differences in how they have functioned as embodiments of negativity, does not contradict their shared positioning precisely *as* such embodiments.

This leads to the second main reason for my choice. Queerness, even when transvalued by those who assume it as an identity, implies a disturbance of order, a nonconformity to prevailing logic or law, a glitch in the function of meaning. It retains the pejorative force it confers when it nominates something unusual or out of place: something not meant to appear where it does or not legible in its appearance. The negative associations of queerness speak to the subject's investment in the system of differences that called it into being in the first place and its intolerance of anything that puts its investment in the stability of those differences at risk. Our constitution through the language of sens-absexe conscripts our thought—our conscious thought—to that differential logic and commits us to its preservation in and as that thought. By fracturing the ontological consistency of what “is,” queerness refutes the education in being—an inherently *aesthetic* education—that totalizes the empire of sens-absexe as a comprehensive and comprehensible unity. It insists on the outside of signification that make sens-absexe not all. Whatever asserts that incompleteness by representing or embodying ab-sens, whatever appears to instantiate queerness in a given order by doing so, will be charged with promoting a bad education: one inimical to the survival and transmission of meaning required by what this book will call the pedag-archival imperative.

Despite the claims advanced in support of liberationist pedagogies, education is inherently conservative. Even in countering a dominant narrative or advancing a progressive position, it enshrines, preserves, and passes on a construction of “what is.” Above all, it conjures the subject as an archive of sens-absexe. Whatever the content of an education, the pedag-archival law affirms the ontology of difference, ceaselessly imposing the conjoined imperatives



of knowing, meaning, and being. For just that reason, as this book shows, queerness *teaches us nothing* in two distinct senses of that phrase.

On the one hand, queerness adverts us to what ontology leaves out, if only by figuring—*within that ontology*—what that ontology excludes. It confronts us with a representation of what the Symbolic *posits* as nothing, as external to being or sense, lest *ab-sens* as the absence of differentiation make ontology nothing itself. The events that prompted this preface respond to an anxiety about human ontology induced by those figures whose presence insists that the world as it “is” is not all. After the Supreme Court announced its ruling in the case of *Bostock v. Clayton County*, for example, Archbishop José H. Gomez of Los Angeles, the president of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, lamented that the court, by altering “the legal meaning of ‘sex’ in our nation’s civil rights law,” was “redefining human nature.” It did so, as he saw it, “by erasing the beautiful differences and complementary relationship between man and woman,” which is to say, by undoing the sexual difference that *ab-sens* *ab-sens* to establish meaning and, in the process, “human” being.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, in the wake of George Floyd’s murder, when municipalities across the country authorized murals and street art meant to affirm that “Black Lives Matter,” white Americans in places as heterogeneous as New York, Cincinnati, and Fresno defaced or attempted to deface them, often justifying their acts, when caught, with the counterclaim that “*all* lives matter.”<sup>18</sup> For them, the “mattering” of Blackness seemed to violate “human nature”; they could register ontological totality only through the (literal) erasure of Blackness. Like queerness, that is, the Blackness that asserts a claim to human mattering can never enter the “all” that comes into being by excluding it. That explains why Calvin Warren, with whose thought my own work resonates, notwithstanding our serious differences, can write that “#Blacklivesmatter is *only* factual if it can reunite black life with a *valuable form*, a valuation determined by political calculus. But what if reuniting black life and form is impossible? What if blackness is always already dead, the ‘perfection of death’ as David Marriott would call it, so black life-form is but a fantasy? Can we think of blackness as incontrovertibly formless?”<sup>19</sup>

If my claim that queerness teaches us nothing gestures toward such a formlessness, toward the nondifferentiation that *incest*, *sex*, and *ab-sens* attempt to name, then it also acknowledges that queerness can teach us nothing of the sort. The same necessity that condemns us to designate the Real, the beyond of signification, only in catachrestic terms compels us to think nondifferentiation through the Symbolic logic of difference and merely to

imagine that we can imagine the nothing that is foreclosed as such from thought. *Bad Education* takes seriously the structural limit of language on thought, a limit that keeps us from thinking nothing, and so from thinking queerness—or, for that matter, Blackness, woman, trans\*, incest, “sex,” or any of the catachreses of ab-sens—*except* as posited and positivized in those made to embody nothing. To that extent, the beyond of meaning that these catachreses nominate functions in relation to the subject as irony functions in relation to language, undoing the legibility that is responsible for its production and evading every effort either to pin it down or to know it. Queerness can no more *present* us with nothing than the order of meaning can escape it.

By seeking to specify the consequences of that structural inevitability, *Bad Education* questions the recuperative possibility of progressive politics, including the progressive politics that represents itself as queer. By addressing the logic of exclusion inherent in Symbolic organization and the dependence of that organization on literalizations of figural identities, this book shows how queerness, in its status as a catachresis of ab-sens, exerts an ironic force incompatible with the aesthetic idealism that marks progressivism. A central strand of my argument poses such politics, and its philosophical underpinnings, from Plato to Alain Badiou, against the Lacanian psychoanalysis that insists on what politics, like philosophy, can never accommodate: the division of the subject, the Real of enjoyment, the insistence of the drive. These registers of negativity, as *Bad Education* suggests, correspond to the irony that interrupts every totalization of sense and that requires the designation of authorized readers—judges and courts among them—to assert the particular meaning of laws within a general law of meaning. Such readings, as in *Bostock v. Clayton County*, sublimate linguistic indeterminacy by *positing* the meanings they claim to discover—meanings they discover only by nullifying whatever contradicts them.

Thus, queerness, Blackness, woman, trans\*, as catachreses of what “is” not, must ironize *Bostock v. Clayton County* as well as both of these formulations: “Black lives matter” and “All lives matter.” Despite the “Q” included in the headline that appeared in the *New York Times*—“A Half-Century On, an Unexpected Milestone for L.G.B.T.Q. Rights”—*Bostock v. Clayton County* did not and could not advance “queer” rights. In extending employment protections to persons who are “homosexual or transgender,” it merely continued the juridical dissociation of those categories from queerness. As the murder of George Floyd reminds us, though, juridical recognition does not put an end to the communal construction of abjected identities made to literalize nonbeing. In the same way that *Bostock v. Clayton County* said

nothing about a right to queerness (whatever that would mean) but could only contribute to the normalization of “homosexual or transgender” persons, so too can “Black lives matter” only be “factual,” to borrow Warren’s term, by divorcing Black lives from Blackness. In the context of progressive politics, the Black Lives Matter movement exposes how the “human” leaves Black lives out of its count. But it does so precisely to press a claim for inclusion in that count, for comprehension within the all, and so for the realization of what “All lives matter” (only) promises.

“Black lives matter” rightly mobilizes us in our current social reality, but it does so, and this is implicit in Warren’s assertion as well, by reinforcing the ontological illusion of reality’s comprehensiveness, by perpetuating its unsustainable claim to totalize what “is.” No political transformation can alter or reduce the ontological violence in every word of “All lives matter.” There can be no “all” without the “not all” inaccessible to thought; no life, no mode of being, without the nonbeing posed against it; and no mattering without the foreclosure of ab-sens, of what the order of meaning casts out. Wherever lives matter—and assuring that mattering is the matter of education—queerness, Blackness, woman, and trans\* are always already excluded. And where Black lives, queer lives, women’s lives, or trans\* lives achieve legitimation, they will have ceased to signify in terms of queerness, Blackness, woman, or trans\*. The events of this June exemplify the imperative of affording the shelter of meaningful being to those living negated identities. But they also remind us that meaningful being occasions those negations in the first place. That is the structural lesson that *Bad Education* attempts to unfold: the lesson that, *as* lesson, can only ironize what it teaches.<sup>20</sup>

—Brookline, MA, June 2020