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THE LIMITS OF HOPE: AN AFROPESSIMIST READING OF NIC STONE'S *DEAR MARTIN*

ABSTRACT

This paper examines Nic Stone's *Dear Martin* (2017) through the lens of Afropessimism and argues that the novel diverges from young adult fiction on police brutality in the United States by its scepticism toward hope. While recent young adult narratives address racial violence as a catalyst for personal transformation and growth, they rarely question the structural limitations. This study demonstrates how *Dear Martin* stages anti-Blackness' ontological and structural dimensions. Drawing on the work of Afropessimist thinkers such as Frank Wilderson III, Saidiya Hartman, and Jared Sexton, the study questions the possibility of redemption through concepts such as "social death" and "ontological exclusion". Rather than transforming personal trauma into moral growth and activism, the protagonist, Justyce McAllister, shows a resentment toward liberal ideals of equality and dialogue. The study contributes to the discourse around young adult fiction on police brutality and race by highlighting structural constraints instead of advocating liberal hope as a transformative force.

Keywords: Afropessimism, police brutality, racism, *Dear Martin,* Nic Stone

UMUDUN SINIRLARI: NIC STONE'UN *SEVGİLİ MARTİN* ADLI ESERİNE AFROPESİMİST BİR OKUMA

ÖZET

Bu makale, Nic Stone'un *Sevgili Martin* (2017) adlı eserini Afropesimizm bağlamında incelemekte ve romanın, Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'ndeki polis şiddetini konu alan genç yetişkin edebiyatından umuda duyduğu kuşku açısından ayrıldığını ileri sürmektedir. Son dönemlerdeki genç yetişkin anlatıları, ırksal şiddeti genellikle bireysel dönüşüm ve manevi gelişim için bir katalizör olarak ele alırken, bu dönüşümün önündeki yapısal sınırlamaları nadiren sorgular. Bu çalışma, *Dear Martin*'in siyah karşıtlığını hem ontolojik hem de yapısal bir olgu olarak nasıl sahnelediğini ortaya koymaktadır. Frank Wilderson III, Saidiya Hartman ve Jared Sexton gibi Afropesimist düşünürlerden yararlanan çalışma, kurtuluş olasılığını "toplumsal ölüm" ve "ontolojik dışlanma" kavramları üzerinden sorgular. Romanın başkahramanı Justyce McAllister kişisel travmasını ahlaki bir olgunlaşma veya aktivizme dönüştürmek yerine, eşitlik ve diyalog gibi liberal ideallere karşı bir hoşnutsuzluk olarak yansıtır. Çalışma, genç yetişkin edebiyatında ırk ve polis şiddeti üzerine yürütülen tartışmalara, bireysel dönüşümden ziyade yapısal kısıtlamaları öne çıkararak ve umudu dönüştürücü bir güç olarak savunan liberal yaklaşımı sorgulayarak katkıda bulunmaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Afropesimizm, polis şiddeti, ırkçılık, *Sevgili Martin*, Nic Stone

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Introduction

In his 2008 victory speech, Barack Obama declared that "in this election, at this defining moment, change has come to America" (C-SPAN, 2008). This statement reflected widespread hope for transformation in the American sociopolitical landscape. The election of a Black American president carried symbolic significance, signalling optimism as one of the latest milestones in the Black struggle for equality. Although there were improvements in certain aspects of this struggle, his two-term presidency did not bring about any notable structural changes to deep-rooted racism. In fact, during his term, two high-profile incidents of police violence occurred against Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown. As further evidence, in his article "The Obama Effect", John McAllister (2018) claims that "under the Obama administration, the police have become more violent, and they are being acquitted of the crime of murder at a 99% rate while only 1% have been convicted of any crime at all" (p. 70). McAllister concludes these statistics with the claim that the law enforcement and justice system sends a message to Black Americans by asserting that "Despite who the President of the United States is and despite his race, we (White America) are still in control" (2018, p. 70). Such contradictions undermined the prospect for change and optimism, even when hope was at its peak.

The high frequency of racial issues led to the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement in the 2010s, arguably the largest civil rights movement of the twenty-first century. With the movement's emergence, authors of young adult literature have increasingly begun addressing concerns such as police brutality and racism. For instance, Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely's *All American Boys* (2015) and Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give* (2017) both deal with these issues. The novels' defining characteristics are their commitment to hope and optimism for change. These novels, whose protagonists experience moral and political growth, reiterate faith in social progress and suggest that moral awareness and collective resistance can challenge racism. In other words, the protagonists' activism is framed as meaningful and potentially impactful. While police brutality and legal systems are explicitly questioned in these novels, failures in these domains are presented as catalysts for growth rather than as evidence of inevitable structural conditions. The arguments of these narratives contrast with the core claims of Afropessimism.

Afropessimism is a critical framework primarily grounded in the ideas of Frank B. Wilderson III, Sadiya Hartman, and Jared Sexton. The theory offers a critique of anti-racist struggles and a radical interrogation of the place of Black existence in the modern world order. Its central thesis is that Black existence is subject not only to historical oppression but also to a structural and ontological exclusion derived from slavery (Wilderson, 2020). This paper focuses on Nic Stone's *Dear Martin,* in which the hope for progress and change is weaker compared to *All American Boys* and *The Hate U Give*. This difference is instrumental for an Afropessimist reading of *Dear Martin*, in which the limits of dialogue and trust in institutions are more visible. The main character Justyce McAllister's experience with police brutality and other injustices does not lead to a transformation. Instead, Justyce attempts to overcome his problems through introspective moral reasoning, which falls short of recognition. In this regard, Justyce's trajectory can be a productive catalyst to discuss the central arguments of the Afropessimist framework.

This study argues that Nic Stone's *Dear Martin* underscores the structural nature of anti-Blackness, exposing the idea that liberal ideals such as equality and dialogue do not offer absolute protection for Black individuals. The novel, therefore, aligns with Afropessimist claims about the

futility of redemption within present social structures. The study fills a gap in the research, as no studies have demonstrated how *Dear Martin* departs from being a racial initiation story and uncovers the structural and ontological limitations of Blackness. Drawing on the Afropessimist concepts of social death and ontological exclusion, the study also aims to demonstrate how the novel digresses from the optimism that characterizes much contemporary young adult literature.

Afropessimist Framework: Social Death and Ontological Exclusion

Afropessimism interrogates the structural conditions of anti-Blackness. Wilderson et al. (2017) argue that this framework "picks up the critiques started by Black revolutionaries in the 1960s and 70s, elaborating their shortcomings and addressing their failures" (p. 7). Among the limitations of the Black radical tradition represented by Malcolm X and the Black Panthers is the tendency to locate racial inequalities within frameworks of economic exploitation or oppressive state institutions. Although the discourse and methods to confront these inequalities differ among the movements, Afropessimists see liberal and Marxist models as insufficient to explain the ontological exclusion of Black people. Black existence cannot find meaning within concepts such as equality and accountability, which merely offer an illusion that hides the true nature of the racist structure. These concepts are seemingly positive, yet they are actually rooted in anti-Black fundamentals and reproduce the existing oppressive institutions. Afropessimists find reform efforts problematic because they aim to preserve the existing social structure. Reform movements conform to norms that have been dictated by whiteness due to their desire to be "legitimate in society", which in turn, reinforces anti-Black practices (Wilderson et al., 2017, p. 11). The underlying stance suggested here is that Black people should be wary of reform movements that fail to question the structure of society, settling instead for superficial or temporary solutions. Ultimately, these efforts serve no purpose other than perpetuating the anti-Black system and fail to address the underlying structural problems of society.

In order to formulate the ontological condition of Black existence, Afropessimists draw on Orlando Patterson's (1982) concept of "social death." The term uncovers how enslaved individuals were considered invisible and disposable within the social order before. According to Afropessimist thought, Black people have already been excluded from the category of Human. It is important to note that this exclusion is not incidental but in fact structural. Afropessimists conceptualize this condition through the figure of the enslaved, whose status exemplifies the foundational position of Blackness in modernity. This perspective is further clarified through features that mark the enslaved subject's existence as one of total social abandonment. In this regard, their social death means that the captors broke their natal ties. Enslaved people were vulnerable to arbitrary violence, and they were "dishonored in a generalized way" (Patterson, 1982, p. 10). Of these three defining features, the latter two are clearly expressed in *Dear Martin*.

For Afropessimists, 'slaveness' is ontological. That is, the enslaved people are not merely oppressed subjects, but someone whose identity is wholly defined by the will of the captor (Patterson, 1982, p. 4). By adopting the vantage point of the enslaved person's ontological condition, Afropessimists see the Emancipation as "non-event" (Wilderson et al., 2017, p. 9). Acknowledging that enslaved person's freedom is only a formality, Wilderson et al. argue that "the same formative relation of structural violence that maintained slavery remained—upheld explicitly by the police (former slave catchers) and white supremacy generally—hence preserving the equation that Black equals socially dead" (p. 8). Being Black, in this framework, signifies not only social exclusion but a form of "non-being", a structural position of unrecognizability within

modernity. In contemporary society, Black individuals remain vulnerable to violence in ways that echo the gratuitous violence once inflicted upon enslaved individuals in the plantation system. This is not to say that enslaved people and modern Black people have the same struggles, as there is clearly a difference between slavery and freedom. However, Afropessimists emphasized the process of "resubordination of the emancipated, the control and domination of the free black population, and the persistent production of blackness as abject, threatening, servile, dangerous, dependent, irrational, and infectious" (Hartman, 2017, p. 34). Sebastian Weier (2014) suggests that the only way to achieve the transcendence of anti-Blackness is a "refounding of the basic intellectual and political framework of society" (p. 429). The critic adds that Afropessimism is skeptical of "the ability of white people to transcend an internal economical and libidinal prohibition of the white self-annihilation-as-white that such reinvention would require" (2014, p. 429). The Afropessimist framework suggests that while Black people are formally liberated, they are still subjected to an unrecognized existence.

Afropessimists also warn of a danger regarding the recent discourse of young adult literature. Dealing with themes of police brutality and racial injustice, novels frequently focus on the dichotomy of individual guilt and innocence. As a result, there is an increased risk of obscuring structural racism. According to the Afropessimist framework, both the emphasis on innocence and the demand for accountability for the police killing a Black person actually mask structural violence (Wilderson et al., 2017, pp. 11-12). This pursuit of accountability only targets individual agency, not the structure itself. In other words, this discourse assumes that the justice system is inherently just and that the state protects everyone. Most importantly, the belief in the possibility of finding solutions within the system disregards the ontological exclusion of Black people. While appearing on the surface as a call for justice, this discourse ignores the state's fundamental investments in preserving white supremacy and the capitalist order (Wilderson et al., 2017, p. 12). Therefore, the demands that only an individual perpetrator be punished in the case of the killing of an 'innocent' person obscure structural anti-Black violence.

According to Vinson Cunningham (2020), "civil society as we know it requires this category of nonperson to exist" (para. 2). In the Afropessimist perspective, civil society structurally produces and sustains this marginalized group, deprived of its human status in order to exist and function. This statement advocates the exact opposite of the liberal ideal that civil society provides equal rights and recognition for all. For Afropessimism, the functioning of society depends on some individuals not being considered fully "human." Wilderson and others do not, and cannot, offer a solution to this problem. The only remedy to this "pained condition", Wilderson claims, is "the end of the world" (2010, p. 91).

Afropessimism seems to be an entirely negative discourse at first glance. However, it can also be regarded as a profound affirmation of Black existence. Sexton (2011) claims that "Black social death is Black social life" to emphasize the persistence of Black cultural production and everyday creativity despite exclusion and threats (p. 37). In this way, Afropessimists hold that a negation of an anti-Black world can simultaneously be a maximum acknowledgement of a Black world. Sexton further adds that "Afropessimism is not but nothing other than Black optimism," reinforcing the paradox (p. 37). The acceptance of hopelessness at the structural level is the most radical expression of the self-worth of Black existence. Therefore, Afropessimism, through its harsh critique, becomes a political stance that is an existential affirmation of Black life.

Afropessimism in *Dear Martin*

Stone's *Dear Martin* reinforces the Afropessimist claim that anti-Black violence is not a deviation to be corrected but an inherent element of modern society. The novel revolves around the young Black American adolescent Justyce McAllister's reflections on racial issues in American society. Despite being an academically accomplished and law-abiding citizen, Justyce witnesses moments of discrimination and police brutality throughout the novel. In addition to these experiences, the novel includes letters that Justyce writes to Martin Luther King Jr. In these letters, which begin with the salutation "Dear Martin," he opens up about his personal struggles, both physically and mentally. As the frequency of the unpleasant incidents increases, Justyce stops writing these letters as the novel progresses. This indicates his growing distrust of the liberal notion of racial equality. This distrust reaches its peak when an off-duty police officer kills his friend Manny. Media and society's reaction to the incidents forces Justyce to reconsider the possibility of the two races living together equally. His experience shows the futility of these ideals, as Justyce sees no substantial change within the structures that are supposed to act to prevent racism. In a final letter at the end of the book, he explains his disappointment regarding the failure of his liberal experiment.

Early in the novel, Justyce's becoming the target of police violence simply because he is Black presents an example of 'arbitrary violence' directed towards the Black subject. This occurs when Justyce tries to prevent his ex-girlfriend from driving while drunk, and a police officer sees them and thinks Justyce is trying to take advantage of her. As a result, Justyce is brutally handcuffed. This moment stands as an example to the assertion that "when one is Black, one need not do anything to be targeted, as Blackness itself is criminalized" (Wilderson et al., 2017, p. 9). This moment is a typical pattern in American young adult fiction in which police officers are generally portrayed as brutalizing Black youth even when they do not commit any wrongdoing.

In an effort to express the injustice he experiences and find some consolation, Justyce writes his first letter immediately after this incident. Justyce affirms that not much has changed since the twentieth century's segregation practices:

> Yeah, there are no more 'colored' water fountains, and it's supposed to be illegal to discriminate, but if I can be forced to sit on the concrete in too-tight cuffs when I've done nothing wrong, it's clear there's an issue. That things aren't as equal as folks say they are. (Stone, 2018, pp. 12-13)

Justyce is aware that long-standing racism has maintained its impact on Black lives. However, he tries to uphold Martin Luther King's belief in "intergroup and interpersonal living" (Stone, 2018, p. 41) when he is asked to attend parties and meetings with his white and Black peers. Occasionally, writing to the idealized moral figure of 'Martin' and following his teachings shows that Justyce pursues the liberal dream that "the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at a table of brotherhood" (NJ.com, 2017). Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. was speaking of an abstract table in 1963, but there is an embodiment of it, a 'societal evolution' session, at Justyce's school in *Dear Martin*. These sessions bring together Justyce's schoolmates to discuss racial issues. In these discussions, there are two significant white schoolmates. Jared, who acts as a representative of white privilege, and Sarah Jane, who is a white ally and challenges Jared. Jared feels uncomfortable with the discourse of Blackness and believes the desire for equality in the 'Declaration of Independence' has already become a reality today. Jared states that "America's a pretty color-blind place now" (Stone, 2017, p. 24). However, this is not the reality in *Dear Martin*. It is rather a repercussion of Charles Mills' (1997) idea of

'epistemology of ignorance,' which can be defined as the condition of white people's 'not knowing' or not realizing certain facts and knowledge about white privilege. This is not an individual misunderstanding. Instead, white supremacist discourse produces this ignorance to preserve the status quo, overlooking racial inequalities.

As an advocate of mainstream discourse in America, Jared continues to defend the idea that there is no racial discrimination against Black people. Even though he believes there is no racial discrimination, he cannot understand and accept Justyce's admission to Yale. There is an added level of tension in these exchanges because these boys attend the same school and have achieved similar levels of success there. This refusal to acknowledge Justyce's success can be argued as an example of the 'dishonour' dimension of social death. Degrading and devaluing the accomplishment, the white subject overlooks the Black subject. Returning to the earlier incident of police brutality, for the police, Justyce's black skin was enough to criminalize him. For Weier, "the transformation of the perception of black people as willing slaves into a perception of them as pathological criminals" (2014, p. 420). The brutality in the novel can be considered an example of this perception of Black individuals. Similarly, in the school environment, Blackness is enough for Jared to negate the success. Justyce's encounter with the police officer and his schoolmate Jared is a continuum of anti-Blackness that is present at both institutional and interpersonal levels. Although these two spheres seem separate, they are two faces of social order that reinforce each other in excluding the Black.

These moments validate the Afropessimist claim that Blackness occupies a structurally excluded position that cannot meaningfully relate to other social positions (Wilderson, 2010). The persistence of what Patterson (1982) defines as "social death" becomes visible in two interconnected spheres: the sphere of state violence, exemplified by the gratuitous criminalization and physical coercion Justyce experiences at the hands of the police, and the sphere of social recognition, in which his white peer Jared refuses to acknowledge the legitimacy of Black suffering and undermines his achievements. Together, these domains illustrate that social death is not confined to spectacular moments of physical violence but is sustained through symbolic violence represented by everyday acts of exclusion and denial. One of Justyce's letters shows an example of such marginalization. Justyce laments that "there are people who do not see a man with rights when they look at me" (Stone, 2018, p. 38). The letter goes on to explain what heightens this feeling of ontological denial. He recalls, "being treated the way I was and then hearing Jared insist there's not a problem" (p. 39), which deepens his sense of existential rejection. His frustration and anger manifest themselves in another letter: "Every time I turn on the news and see another Black person gunned down, I am reminded that people look at me and see a threat instead of a human being" (p. 95).

The fact that his Black friend Manny does not challenge his white peers and instead behaves as if there is no discrimination further complicates Justyce's condition. Manny internalizes the white gaze's negotiation of Blackness, which aligns with W.E.B. Du Bois's notion of "double consciousness". For Du Bois, Black people have a "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (1903, p. xvii). Attempting to fit in with the norms of his white peers, Manny presents the tension between the self and imposed perception that Du Bois underlines. In the Afropessimist framework, such a negotiation underlines the inescapability of social death. Justyce expresses his discontent with Manny by saying to Martin, "What am I supposed to do? Be like Manny and act like there's nothing wrong with a white dude asking his niggas to help him exploit a black girl?"

(Stone, 2018, p. 95) Although his peers make derogatory, marginalizing, and excluding remarks about Black people, Manny does not end his friendship with them. Manny's inertia against is connected to the assumption that

> If we are to be honest with ourselves, we must admit that the 'Negro' has been inviting whites, as well as civil society's junior partners, to the dance of social death for hundreds of years, but few have wanted to learn the steps. (Wilderson et al, 2017, p. 13)

This innate feeling of inferiority has led Black people to stay quiet in such occurrences, as exemplified by Manny. This attitude highlights the 'internal' causes of social death of the Black subject.

In the Afropessimist framework, the aforementioned interpersonal and structural dynamics are accompanying expressions of social death. However, death in its literal sense pervades the novel as well. Shemar Carson and Tavarrius Jenkins are two Black youth who are killed by police. They are not personally connected to Justyce, yet their stories are included in the novel's conversations as indicators of the vulnerability of Black lives. Although Justyce accepts the reality of unjustified violence and resulting deaths for all Black people, Manny's death leaves a profound impact on him. While listening to music together in the car, Manny and Justyce encounter an off-duty white police officer, Garrett Tison, who stopped at a traffic light. Tison demands they turn down the loud music. Manny refuses, then increases the volume. After an exchange of slurs, Tison shoots both Manny and Justyce. Manny dies at the scene, and Justyce is injured. It is Justyce's second and most significant trauma involving a police officer. This moment is pivotal for Justyce as Manny's death marks the definitive collapse of Justyce's belief in liberal dialogue and reform. The statement he writes immediately afterwards, "I can't do this anymore" (p. 124), foreshadows his abandonment of letters to Martin Luther King Jr. until the one concluding the novel. This also shows his loss of faith in the "Be like Martin experiment" (p. 201). From an Afropessimist perspective, this rupture relates to the Black subject's realization that liberation through individual transformation is impossible under the conditions of structural anti-Blackness. Thus, the novel does not follow the pattern of including a 'redemptive arc', which is often seen in young adult literature. In both *All American Boys* and *The Hate U Give*, the protagonists' trauma transforms into political consciousness and concludes with hope. However, Justyce feels a lingering sense of trauma and despair rather than hope for redemption.

Instead of drawing hope or strength from his trauma, after Manny's death, Justyce visits Martel, the leader of a radical gang. This visit reflects his intense anger and loneliness. While his conversation with Martel initially makes him feel understood, Justyce ultimately decides to leave when he realizes that the group's focus on violence and revenge offers no real solution to the structural circumstances. Within an Afropessimist framework, this scene demonstrates the Black subject's inability to find true liberation or resolution within both the white-centric social order and the closed Black communities based on a discourse of violence and revenge. Violence is also futile in the fight against the ontological exclusion of Blackness. Thus, Justyce finds himself caught in a position that would not be surprising to Afropessimists. After he sees the failure of liberal dialogue, he also experiences how radical organizations fail to reach a meaningful solution to the structural problems. He demonstrates his disappointment in his last letter to Martin:

> What was my goal with the Be Like Martin thing? Was I trying to get more respect? (Fail.) Was I trying to be "more acceptable'? (Fail.) Did I think it would keep me out of trouble? (Epic fail.) Really, what was the purpose?" (Stone, 2018, p. 201)

Justyce now has a pessimistic view of the future, no matter how hard he tries to reverse it. Justyce rejects the usual 'hope' narrative of an Afropessimist perspective in that he considers that individual moral betterment or seeking harmony with white society would be futile, because of structural anti-Blackness. Justyce's words, "No matter what I do, I'm going to find myself in situations like this for the rest of my life, aren't I?" (p. 201), can be interpreted as a literal reflection of Afropessimist thought that this exclusion will last forever. This sentence demonstrates Justyce's awareness that, whatever he does individually, the structural anti-Blackness is a reorienting force for him. He further adds that people "will always see me as inferior" (p. 201), showing his hopelessness. As Ryan Poll (2018) states, "To be Black, according to Afro-pessimism, is to be fundamentally, ontologically, marked as a slave, whether the year is 1617, 1717, 1817, 1917, or, … 2017" (p. 71). Accordingly, in his final letter to Martin Luther King, Justyce continues to admit that not much has changed since the mid-twentieth century, and he writes:

> I found this letter you wrote the editor of the Atlanta Constitution where you said, "We (as in Black people) want and are entitled to the basic rights and opportunities of American citizens..." It's from 1946, which means you were seventeen when you wrote it. That's the same age I was when I had that exact thought for the first time. (p. 202)

The demands of Black people struggling for equality have mainly remained the same over the decades. This proposition emphasizes that the anti-Black order has not transformed but has merely been reproduced in different forms over time. One can argue that there have been improvements in Black subjects' lives throughout the years. Still, Wilderson states that "our analysis cannot be approached through the rubric of gains or reversals in struggles with the state and civil society" (Wilderson, 2010, p. 11). Afropessimism highlights a broader reality in modern social order: the core logic of anti-Blackness does not cease to shape the experiences of Black individuals. This awareness reinforces the historical limitations of Justyce's individual efforts and the sense of structural exclusion that carries a sense of continuity rather than hope.

With that in mind, Sexton's clarification of the Afropessimist position on the possibility of Black lives becomes relevant:

> Nothing in Afropessimism suggests that there is no black (social) life, only that black life is not social life in the universe formed by the codes of state and civil society […] the modern world system. Black life is not lived in the world that the world lives in, but it is lived underground, in outer space. (Sexton, 2011, p. 28)

This statement reinforces Afropessimism's argument that it is not that Black life is not possible, but that Black life is not recognized as social life in the current world. Sexton rejects the modernist assumption that Black life must conform to categories such as state, citizenship, nation, culture, and history to be considered "social." Scenes of police brutality illustrate the fragility of his 'citizen' status within the modern world-system. Justyce's meeting with Martel is also significant, yet even this Black Jihad, another form of Black life, does not offer a solution that would fundamentally alter existing structural conditions. Aligning with Afropessimists' critique of Black radical movement of the 1960s, Black Jihad is trapped within a logic of violence shaped by the codes of the modern world system.

Even Justyce's acceptance into a prestigious university like Yale does not fully integrate him into this system. His new roommate, Roosevelt, still does not see him as an equal, mocking his name. Thus, Justyce is forced into an 'underground' existence, outside both the white centralized order and alternative forms of Black community. Justyce's story demonstrates that he, too, is forced to live "outside the world" and will continue to do so: "This is gonna be a long four years.

Hell, a long rest of my life" (Stone, 2018, p. 201). These words conclude his final letter, reiterating his pessimism for his years to come.

Justyce's "sense of defeat" (p. 96) haunts him throughout his story. In this context, Justyce's stance represents a decisive break with liberal optimism while also overlapping with the "Black optimism" that Afropessimism paradoxically defines. This optimism arises from the awareness that the world will not change, but that awareness is an expression of the acceptance of the value and reality of Black existence. Sexton's (2011) observation that "the most radical negation of an anti-Black world is the most radical affirmation of a blackened world" (p. 37) opens a window not to hope but to an understanding of the meaning of this pessimist approach. To radically reject the anti-Black order is actually to affirm Black existence powerfully and recognize its value. Here, negation and affirmation appear to be opposites, yet paradoxically, they occur simultaneously. To completely reject the existing racist world order means embracing the uniqueness and value of Black life.

Conclusion

This paper examines how Nic Stone's *Dear Martin* deviates from hope and optimism-centered narratives that often characterize young adult fiction about police brutality in America. Instead, the book focuses on the persistence of structural and ontological anti-Blackness. From the perspective of Afropessimism, this study identifies that social exclusion and police brutality are not fixed imperfections but are signs of a long-lasting social order. Contrary to the protagonists of *All American Boys* and *The Hate U Give*, whose redemption progresses side by side with the liberal ideals, Justyce's trajectory in *Dear Martin* emphasizes the unfeasibility of redemption within a system that excludes Black individuals. Justyce's liberal experiment is disrupted by police brutality, peer denial, and especially by his friend Manny's death. This validates the Afropessimist argument that Blackness occupies a position of social death, which is marked by vulnerability to both physical and symbolic violence.

In accordance with the Afropessimist thought, *Dear Martin* reveals how the belief in dialogue and accountability or confidence in institutions obscures structural anti-Blackness instead of confronting it. However, it can be suggested that Justyce's entrapment in the modern social order paradoxically serves as an affirmation of the value of Black existence. In this paradox, resistance emerges through radical recognition of Black life, not through reform. Such a reading underlines *Dear Martin's* contribution to literature by expanding young adult fiction's scope beyond tales of hope. This also puts the novel within larger theoretical debates on social death, ontological exclusion, and the limitations of reform.

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Ethical Statement/Etik Beyan: It is declared that scientific and ethical principles have been followed while carrying out and writing this study and that all the sources used have been properly cited. / Bu çalışmanın hazırlanma sürecinde bilimsel ve etik ilkelere uyulduğu ve yararlanılan tüm çalışmaların kaynakçada belirtildiği beyan olunur.

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