(de)Humanization and Onticide:

Lexicography for Ontology

Dr. Calvin Warren's work "Onticide: Afro-pessimism, ~~Gay~~ Nigger #1, and Surplus Violence" proposes the word "onticide" as a lexicography to properly describe the specific type of systematic violence experienced by black individuals with minority identities, but neglects, to its detriment, an analysis of the function of history and the power of the contemporary moment to define the moral frameworks that create ontology. Warren uses "ontology" not just to describe the "study of" being, but also the process of defining, distilling, and divining the "unique" "essence" of being (Warren). He employs "ontology" as a noun that can be paired with adjectives like "white," "black," or "human," in order to indicate the type of identity that only a human "being" can possess. When incorporating a historical analysis of the ethics that governed the era of slavery and contemporary modern America, the results indicate an ever-shifting moral framework that white Americans use(d) to craft their own racial identities, and also present a potential for black Americans to create their own ontology within the logical fallacies of white supremacy. Using Dr. Sylvia Wynter's work on historically constructed ethical frameworks and Dr. Kate Manne's writings on posthumanist theories on the value of humanity, I propose here an alternative to onticide: **(de)humanization**, to describe active attempts at undermining *an already accepted fact of humanity*—not actually negating humanity. Thus, there is no reason for onticide—but there is still plenty of reason to worry about surplus violence and systematic violence in America. The white person's ontology is historically informed. Even when the white person attempts to (de)humanize a black person, that very process both indicates a recognition of the black person's essential humanity. The shifting methods of (de)humanization allude to white

American's consistent failure to strip black Americans of personhood. Therefore, ontological composition is subject to historical phenomena.

In her article "1492: A New World View," Sylvia Wynter argues that the triadic ontology of whites, blacks, and indigenous Americans was created by a clash of ethical frameworks. She borrows the phrase "symbolic representational systems" from Melvin Donald to refer to the "history of how the human represents to itself the life that it lives… on the basis of which our species-specific cognitive mechanism (the mechanism to which we give the name mind) has been instituted, transformed, and reformed" (Wynter 8). Wynter does not use the word "ontology" herself, but the symbolic representational systems, I argue, can serve as a potential backdrop to ontological cutting. Ontological cutting is the process by which the individual decides how to craft their personal ontology by forcing the "other" away, during which the individual uses any means necessary to differentiate between themselves and others in order to craft and then to maintain their sense of self and individuality. In order to create their own "mind," the individual is operating in a historical context and contemporary culture that informs their choices of who or what is "other." Specifically, Wynter investigates the construction of the European symbolic representational system by using Columbus's ontological make-up as her focal point. She argues that original European explorations along the West African coast provided the basis for the triadic model of White/Christian; indigenous/polytheistic; and African/Muslim (or non-Islamic) identities (Wynter). These explorations, which occurred half a century before Columbus's own, served two purposes: 1) they alerted the Christian European world to the fact that "God" had indeed put land where they had not thought there was land before; and 2) those voyages and subsequent settlements provided Europeans with an opportunity to assess West African cultures and identify similarities and differences to their own.

Europeans' conception of self in 1492 was primarily based on their understanding of their own place in relation to God and God's universe. The use of Christianity to understand the world and the self is an example of the way morality and ethics (sometimes formatted by religion) serve as the foundation for symbolic representational systems. However, Wynter also notes that during the late 15th century, Christendom was experiencing an ethical shift, one away from religious ethics, in which the state was the strong arm of the Church, and towards a secular (political) ethic, in which the Church became the avenue for the "juro-theological legitimation" (11) of colonization and slavery. This shift allowed Christians to substitute their "other-worldly" goal of attaining salvation in the next life, for the goals of this world: competition and control (Wynter). Wynter explains that the former Christian schema was based on an interpretation of Original Sin as sexual and bodily; the slight, but significant shift away from sexuality and towards sensuality resulted in an understanding of Original Sin as "mankind's alleged enslavement to the irrational or sensory aspects of its human nature" that made way for a new behavior-orienting goal: to "ensure stability, growth, and competitive expansion of the state" (14) as a way to protect the mind from the unpredictability of the body. Wynter summarizes this transition by stating that "This new ethic was that of reasons of the state, as articulated by the discourse of civic humanism and of a mode of political absolutism that would take the place of the earlier theological absolutism" (14). It was this new political ethic that allowed Columbus to experience the New World with the goals of expansion, exploitation, and religious conversion.

Wynter argues that the concept of *propter nos* allowed the new political ethic to assess geography and humans in the new paradigms that governed the triadic models between Europeans, Americans, and Africans. She emphasizes Columbus's hypothesis: that earth "had been intended for 'life and the creation of souls'" (27). Wynter "propose[d] that this was a

central part of the wider phenomenon that Frederick Hallyn (1990) has defined as that of the generalized poetics of the *propter nos*. It was the means by which the intellectual revolution of humanism was affected and our modes of human being thereby eventually degodded or secularized" (25). These new poetics confounded the prior dualistic organization of knowledge. The Manichean dualism of the prior religious schema was disrupted by the new poetics of *propter nos*, or the idea that God had made the *earth for humans*. According to Wynter, the new poetics included a "rule-governed model of divine creation" (27) in which God still made the rules, but the rules were open to human interpretation, thus producing a dramatic shift in the way Europeans understood geography, nature, and the humans who relied upon God's creation.

Wynter explains how this transition into the "new poetics" of the *propter nos* schema results in the historical social context that resulted in racism. Her argument hinges on Columbus's experience of discovering people where *there should have been no land*" (28) and immediately understanding them to be idolaters in the terms of the "emergent state's equally juridico-theological categorial models" (28). Columbus, and the ensuing Europeans, dragged their "mobile classificatory labels" over to the Caribbean and Latin America and used those labels (Christian/idolator) to create a new categorical model justified on Christianity and enforced by an emerging mercantilist categorical model.

This is a case of "the deployment of mobile classificatory labels whose 'truth' depended on their oppositional meaningfulness within their respective classificatory schemas" (Wynter 28). It was a redeployment of the Manichean dualism that Christianity is so fond of, but it is important to note here that the peoples of the Caribbean and Latin America were categorically sorted as "idolaters" (as opposed to Christians) *not* as inhuman as opposed to the European human. Wynter acknowledges that these representational systems, especially ones that rest on

dualism, are usually tautological and result in a feedback loop that is very difficult to halt. But, just as they can be made, they can be unmade. Wynter continues to explain that these categorial models regulate "the behaviors of [those] whose subjects are regulated by the narratively instituted programs that are the conditions both of *humanness*, the mode of the *nos*, and therefore of the cognitive phenomenon defining of the human, in other words, the mind" (Wynter 29). Thus, Wynter proves to the reader that the ethical foundation of European civilization was based on the historical processes of Church and State power. Those ethics then informed the white European individual's understanding of their own purpose and place within God's creation, which was inextricably linked to that of the idolaters' place as well. This is a historical analysis of ontological cutting on a societal level. Thus, ontology derives from historical context.

This is critically important to the argument I will apply to Warren. 1492 is undeniably only the beginning of the physical and psychological terror unleashed upon peoples of color by white Europeans, but if we follow Wynter's logic, it becomes clear that *even if* white Americans *eventually* view black Americans as actually inhuman, that was *not* the original dominant paradigm. However, I will continue to argue that Wynter's explication of systematic representational systems actually can prove that white Americans did not see black slaves or black American citizens as lacking humanity—white Americans simply didn't value that humanity.

Calvin Warren does not apply Wynter's systematic representational systems in his analysis (though he does reference Wynter), and by neglecting to fully investigate the context of surplus violence, Warren's conclusion is incomplete. There can be no doubt that Warren's article is grounded in philosophy and not in history, but his claim is subject to historical analysis

because he grounds his theory in a specific case study which necessitates an understanding of context.

Warren opens his essay with a description of the murdered, dismembered body of a nineteen-year-old black, gay, boy named Steen Keith Fenrich. Fenrich's skull was flayed and inscribed on the skull was Fenrich's social security number and the moniker "Gay Nigger #1." Warren meditates on this particular branding and uses the phrase "gay n***** #1" to present his essential question to the reader: how do we categorize this specific type of violence? Warren presents "gay n***** #1" as a paradox as he enables both Humanism and Afro-pessimism to describe this surplus of violence. "Gay" indicates an identity, and according to Humanist philosophy, only humans can possess an identity. However, Warren contrasts this presupposition with the thesis of Afro-pessimism: that white identity is based on the repeated destruction of, and thus, lack of, black ontology. Thus, we have the paradox: how can a "thing," an object devoid of ontology, have an identity? Warren presents his idea of "onticide" as a lexicography to describe the surplus violence suffered by people with black skin and various other minority designations.

However, Warren's analysis is not solely based in philosophical logic games; it is also firmly grounded in contemporary and historical context, although Warren does not address the context of the victims or aggressors directly. I am not arguing that Warren's analysis *should* be purely philosophical. Rather, I think his argument could be more potent with an investigation into the historically informed symbolic representational systems that allow humans to conceive of themselves and others.

For example, Warren compares Fenrich's murder to the murder of Matthew Shepard, a young, white man who was brutally killed because of his sexuality only one year before Fenrich. Shepherd was murdered by two white men his own age, who orginally planned to rob him, but

escalated their crime to a vicious murder that involved beating Shepherd until his brain stem was permanently injured, and tying him to a fence and leaving him there to die. Warren contrasts the way Fenrich's and Shepherd's murders were received into the public domain. The results are not surprising: Fenrich's murder registered two articles in the *New York Times* (he lived in Queens), both of which focused more on his stepfather (his assumed murderer). Shepard's murder, on the other hand, launched a social justice movement motivated by national media attention. Warren uses this contrast to highlight his essential point: "the space that Fenrich inhabits is outside public memory, culture, and ethics—it is the 'unthought' space cut by the blunt edges of antiblack violence" (Warren 405). Fenrich's existence "inhabited such a low frequency on the onto-existencial horizon" (Warren) that his death might not even be a death, for he hardly possessed a life. While that conclusion is valid, consider how it might change were we able to define the symbolic representational system of the contemporary American moment. Choosing appropriate documents (in an age of digital media) to craft an adequate subjective understanding of the individuals involved in these murders would be incredibly challenging, but let us consider for a moment the categorial models these straight, white, male murderers used to craft their own ontology. Neither murders were crimes of passion—both would have taken hours to fully complete, allowing plenty of time for the murders to "cool off" and recognize their mistake. What reasons could these men have had to sustain their violence, based on their understanding of their world, and their place within it? Recognizing the time and place (contemporary America) is crucial to ascertaining how these perpetrators reasoned through their actions.

It is important to ask similar questions about Warren's other example of historic violence: slavery. The deliberate commodification of black bodies is essential to Warren's argument, but he does little to situate slavery in a historical context, and so it is necessary to return to Sylvia

Wynter's analysis that the European (and then white American) understanding of blacks in relation to themselves and their world evolved into this brutal, large-scale violence—and that this evolution was not a guarantee, nor a necessity. Part of this evolution involved an active, diabolical narrative perpetuated by those with stake in the slave market that black "people" were not "people." This theory then permeated the social fabric of the United States. Warren points to slavery as the historical moment where both "whiteness" and "blackness" are born, and argues that whiteness is based on the ritual and repeated sacrifice of black bodies and black souls. Not only is whiteness contingent on black erasure, whiteness also uses black murder to elevate whiteness to the ultimate form of Human: "the interdiction on black capacity provides the very possibility for Civilization (and civil society) to exist at all because it allows the human to differentiate himself from and define himself against an ultimate other—an other that lacks the capacity to resist ontologically if we follow Frantz Fanon (1967)" (397). Warren posits that "Blackness emerges in modernity as an adjunct to racial slavery, according to Bryan Wagner (2009), and functions as the ultimate commodity that preconditions modernity and its institutions" (398-7). Warren builds on Hortense Spillers' idea of "reducing" slaves to objects, and argues that "Reduction not only to a thing but reduction to being for the captor indicates that this reduction serves an ontological function" (398). This violence includes the reduction of the slave to a specifically *fungible* object, which "homogenizes blackness such that identities and subjectivities are absent" (399).

But, again, consider how Wynter's description of evolving ethics set a standard for interracial interaction. Is it possible that, just as things once evolved into an active attempt at dehumanization, that the morality undergirding slavery had morphed once again? In order to

understand the way white American citizens exploited the humanity of black slaves, a critical historical analysis of societal ethics is required, and Warren does not provide that.

To bridge the gap between Wynter and Warren, I would like to introduce the work of Dr. Kate Manne. Manne's essay "Humanism: A Critique" deals with the issue of violence, and her critiques of humanism are quite similar to those of Afro-pessimists. However, Manne and Warren diverge at a crucial point in their logic: Manne hypothesizes, and I agree, that actually, completely, successfully dehumanizing another human is an incredibly rare and difficult phenomenon, and is rarely the actual goal of most perpetrators of brutal violence. Manne defines the Humanist outlook on violence as such: "reflexively attributing 'man's inhumanity to men' to some sort of dehumanizing psychological attitude" (390). Dehumanizing actions are defined as "interpersonal conduct of the kind that is naturally described as inhumane, in being not only morally objectionable, but also somehow cruel, brutal, humiliating, or degrading" (390). From the humanist perspective, as Manne describes it, such actions are the result of the perpetrator failing to recognize the victim as a human. Warren would agree: black Americans are not recognized as human, and therefore experience extreme violence as the vehicle for white ontology.

Manne proposes four claims that can be made based on the humanists' logic, and then proceeds to find the fallacies in each one. First, she describes the *conceptual-cum-perceptual claim* which asserts that humans are capable of recognizing others as *fellow human beings* not just as fellow homo sapiens. This suggests that, once one human recognizes another human as their "fellow" that the perceiver will view the perceived as part of their "group." The second claim follows directly from the first, and is titled the *moral psychological claim* which asserts that "when we recognize another human being as such, in the sense given by claim (1), then this

is not only a necessary condition for treating her humanely, in interpersonal contexts, but also strongly *motivates* and *disposes* us to do so" (396). Conversely, Manne identifies the "*Quasi-contrapositive moral psychological claim*" which suggests that in order for a human to treat another entity in a brutally violent fashion, that "failure to see them as fellow human beings is a powerful, and perhaps even necessary, psychological lubricant" (398). Finally, she identifies the *historical claim*: "when people who belong to certain social groups are the targets of the most morally egregious forms of widespread mistreatment… then this is typically due to their not being seen as full human beings in the first place, or dehumanized shortly thereafter, often due to the influence of dehumanizing propaganda" (398). The fallacy of the historical claim is my primary interest, but to get there we must first follow Manne as she dissembles the first three.

Consider Claim 1: that humans are capable of recognizing other members of their species as "fellows." Perhaps this is true, and let's agree, for the sake of argument, to allow it to pass without pushback. However, one essential feature of the argument as it is often presented neglects the negative side-effects of human interaction: threat and competition. Just as "fellows" are available to become spouses, siblings, friends, etc., a fellow human can also become your threat, your competition, your enemy. Then, bearing the full spectrum of these possibilities in mind, consider Claim 2: that recognizing a "fellow" human being motivates the perceiver to treat the perceived humanely, and in fact that the perceiver is strongly motivated to act with empathy for the human condition. Manne pushes back against this claim by reminding the readership that in recognizing another as human with human capabilities (including judging, feeling, and acting), it is equally as possible that the perceiver will interpret that other "human" as an enemy/usurper/competitor. If the "fellow" is a human, she can make judgements, and therefore judge you negatively. If the fellow is a human, he has needs—and can compete with you for

resources. If the fellow is a human, she can engage in higher order thought, and have values—and those values might be contrary to your own. Manne also notes that categorizing another human as a threat does not preclude one from also feeling empathy for them, and that oftentimes, that empathy will have to contend with "the dispositions associated with various hostile stances" (399).

From here, Manne uses her thesis—that one does not have see the "other" as non-human in order to aggress against them—to disprove Claims 3 and 4. If Claims 1 and 2 are not true based on her thesis, then it is easy to see that Claim 3 also cannot be true: one does not need to see another human as sub-human in order to commit aggressive violence. So, if these examples can be applied on an individual level to allow for acts of brutality from individuals, is it possible to apply this theory to groups? Manne argues that yes, the same construction of motivation can be applied to group violence. Here, she emphasizes "moral hierarchies" in regards to the way that particular groups of people who share identities will rank themselves and their values. She references Nazi Germany and American slavery, but Manne chooses not to engage with examples of dissembling the historical claim, and she glosses over the historic violence and direct attempts of white Americans to dehumanize black Americans. That is where I would like to pick up her work.

In the case of Steen Keith Fenrich, is there another way to analyze the surplus violence done to this teenager? Let us consider Fenrich from Manne's first claim. If his stepfather were to consider him as a human, what kind of threat would that human present? Warren says Fenrich was a fungible object, cut to smaller pieces because of his sexuality. From Manne's perspective, she agrees that there is no need for surplus violence (because why harm an object?) and would respond by first reminding us that ".... agents in a dominant social position often don't start out

with such a neutral or salutary view of things. They are perpetually mired in certain kinds of delusions about their own social position relative to other people, and their respective obligations, permissions, and entitlements" (407). From the straight white male moral hierarchy, maintaining whiteness and straightness rank highly because they allocate and protect power. To be in relation (stepfather-stepson) to someone who asserts the right to live as black and gay is a direct threat to a straight white man. Fenrich was his stepfather's 1) subversive subordinate (by refusing to follow his moral lead) and 2) his enemy by living and asserting his humanity via his assertion of identity. Manne notes that dominant perpetrators often perceive their victims as "far from innocent" because they are "judged by morally bankrupt yet socially prevalent norms" (Manne 407).

Slavery and the commodification of the black body is similarly morally motivated by values that were historically formed. Enslaving Africans became practice in the Americas when it became clear that the indigenous peoples were not "natural slaves" (to use Sylvia Wynter's terminology) because not only were they possible converts to Christianity (religious/spiritual capital), but they were also physically unfit for the intensity of plantation and encomienda labor (due to overwork, sickness, and depression). Thus, slaves from the west African coast were imported and provided contrast to the Europeans, mestizos, and indigenous people in regards to their function in the new poetics of the *propter nos* schema that was taking hold of the Americas. Eventually, the practice of enslaving Africans and their descendents became the practice of just the United States as European nations divested themselves of (or lost control of) their colonies in the Americas. Slavery in the United States took on a unique moral framework that can be understood through the opening statement in the Declaration of Independence: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. In the American ethos, as scholar Eric Foner has proven, freedom was

inextricably tied to property ownership (a concept that Americans inherited from the British). In early United States history, this conflation of property with freedom can be observed again and again, and Foner details specific examples painstakingly in his book *The Story of American Freedom*. However, some American thinkers began to write and think with a new definition of liberty, one that was not contingent on property ownership and was more focused on the freedom of action and thought. This transition recalls the moment of ethical shift of 1492 that Sylvia Wynter described. In the United States, there was an ethical shift from freedom-as-ownership to freedom-as-agency. This shift has a deep history and an impossible amount of consequences, but can generally be understood to be propelled by the United States' economic growth after the War of 1812, as well as the Second Great Awakening.

Concurrently, an insidious and powerful narrative about the status of black slaves was growing in the United States. As US economic power grew, it became quite clear that the South's prodigious production of cotton, corn, and tobacco was propelling the economic wealth of the country. This shift towards a freedom-as-agency ethic also emphasized business acumen and accumulation of wealth. The Second Great Awakening crafted a specific reading of the New Testament which situated Christianity against slavery. Thus, slavers and those dependent on the slave economy, were forced to consider the morality behind slavery. Their answer was to promote a narrative that commodified and objectified black bodies.

Calvin Warren would pause here to reassert his claims about slavery—that slavery's economic violence created and reaffirmed the white identity, and did so through the commodification of the slave into a fungible object. My argument against him is twofold. First: if we can trace the history of the moral schema that produced this fungibility, does that not mean that fungibility was invented, and can be uninvented? Is it not *possible* (not a universally

recognized truth, but a possibility) that there is a way to unmake the schema that created whiteness and ritually sacrificed blackness? Perhaps Calvin Warren would argue that no, there is no way—because the black ontology is being perpetually sacrificed and destroyed, there is no way to stop that cycle. It is an endless feedback cycle, he would argue—and as it spins, it maintains its integrity (sacrifice and creation), and progresses forward, consuming each black ontology as each black baby is born.

But here we can return to Kate Manne. Ignore Warren's protestations for a moment, and consider the second part of my two-fold argument: even if the morality of agency schema brought about white identity, is it possible that black people have consistency rejected and fought off these assaults on their ontology? Is it possible that music, art, dance, religion, protest and defiance—all of which were rich traditions in slave culture—indicated a truth that white violence could not reach because it cannot understand?

Here I would like to propose a new way to look at dehumanization: (de)humanization. The parentheses indicate liminal space between action and thought, the place where destruction and construction are in harmony. To de-humanize, to take away humanity, is an action. By definition, it is an action that can only be done *to a human*. To strip away humanity, the perpetrator must actually (like Manne suggests) recognize their victim *as human*. You wouldn't call a monkey a "monkey!" as an insult because a) you recognize this to be a factual statement, and b) a monkey has no capacity to understand what an "insult" is, and cannot feel insulted. A person, especially a black person, can feel embarrassed, threatened, or degraded by being called a monkey. If slavers actually thought black humans were not humans—why build an ontology around (de)humanizing? How could that practice withstand the test of time: either it would have to stop, because black people were successfully denied humanity and there would be no more

reason to (de)humanize, *or* the very attempts of de-humanization actually reaffirm the essential humanity possessed by each human.

In an email I recently received from Dr. Warren, he told me that he is interested in finding a term other than "human" to underpin black self-worth. I am more inclined to agree with Dr. Manne, whose essay leads me to conclude that humans can and do inflict incredible violence on other humans—and thus, that being a human is actually not terribly valuable. To be a human is to be capable of great empathy and great violence, and to be subject to that empathy and brutality from others. Our humanity, even the humanity that we share with our "fellows" does not protect us from violence and may, in fact, make us more susceptible to violence. Dr. Warren and Dr. Manne are considering the same question, and their results differ in semiotics but both send a dire warning about the status of humanity. At the heart of their debate are those of us most susceptible to surplus violence, the minorities whose presence and identity challenge the predominant moral hierarchy.

Works Cited

Manne, Kate. "Humanism: A Critique." *Social Theory and Practice*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2016.

Warren, Calvin. "Onticide: Afro-Pessimism, Gay Nigger #1, and Surplus Violence." *GLQ:*
A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies, vol. 23, no. 3, July 2017, pp. 391–418.

Wynter, Sylvia. "1492: A New World View." *Race, Discourse, and the Origin of the*
Americas, vol. The Smithsonian Institutions.

Works Referenced

Foner, Eric. *The Story of American Freedom*. W. W. Norton & Company, 1998.