

Onticide: A Differentiating Grammar

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Abstract: In “Black Nihilism and the Politics of Hope,” Calvin Warren writes that “any critical analysis of black existence in the twenty-first century will have to contend with black nihilism — either reluctantly or otherwise. It is the inescapable interlocutor in every utterance about blackness; it demands an address” (224). The following is the abridged script for a presentation unpacking Calvin Warren’s notion of ‘onticide,’ a black nihilist approach to anti-black violence. Through the piece, we will begin to understand onticide in the following way:

Onticide

Noun

1. The murder of black ontology that makes Humanism as ontological supremacy possible.
2. A procedure of writing difference under erasure to signal Humanism’s interdiction on black ontology that preconditions the possibility for a Humanist differentiating grammar.

Warren’s work has the reputation for density and intellectual difficulty, especially for those without a background in continental philosophy and Lacanian psychoanalysis. So, the goal of this piece is to make accessible to a wider audience the

broad strokes of Warren's black nihilist intervention. While demystification is, in a certain respect, at odds with Warren's thesis – namely, that grammars of understanding are denied to black bodies – this presentation seeks it nonetheless, not to undermine Warren's argument, but to encourage more people to contend with his line of inquiry.

Trigger warning: Anti-black violence throughout the piece but especially in the first paragraph where a specific murder is described.

Calvin Warren's piece "Onticide" begins with the brutal March, 2000 murder of Steen Keith Fenrich and the 'philosophical conundrum' it poses. Police concluded that Steen was murdered by his white stepfather. They found his body, preserved and stored in a tub, and "written on Steen's skull were the words 'Gay Nigger #1'" (392). Warren describes this gruesome murder as doubly violent: first for the murder and mutilation itself, and then for the fact that we do not have the grammar or philosophical tools necessary to describe the violence. Warren argues that modernity has denied markers of human differentiation to black bodies the world over, so the words inscribed on Steen's skull pose a contradiction. In the face of this contradiction, Warren asks how the violence Steen experienced can be understood as anything other than, or in surplus to, anti-blackness; in other words, how do we contend with the 'gay' written on Steen's skull?

To answer this question, Warren moves meticulously through continental philosophy, Humanism, and his intervention: onticide. Building on Steen's murder, Warren introduces Martin Heidegger's articulation of Humanism¹ and what Warren sees as the inseparability or mutual dependence of Humanism and 'differentiating violence.' From here, Warren moves to Afro-pessimism, fungibility² (as the underside of Humanism), and blackness to explain the centrality of violence and the significance of Humanism's monopoly on differentiation. Warren explains why an intersectional

¹ Heidegger famously critiques Humanism's metaphysical emphasis on cognition and subjectivity, focusing instead on the nature of 'Being' and 'nothingness.' While Humanism takes the 'essence of man' to be the 'rational animal,' Heidegger critiques this as obscuring questions of 'Being.' See Heidegger's *Letter on Humanism*.

² In economics, fungibility is understood as homogenization, which allows a commodity's units to be interchangeable with one another. In this case, Warren is using this notion of fungibility to describe both the economic base of racial slavery and how blackness has been constructed as non-differentiable.

approach does not solve this problem and why 'onticide' as a procedure is necessary. Warren ends by clarifying the roles of antiblack violence, ontological difference, and the modifier 'surplus' and by emphasizing the need to theorize around the tensions he has rendered visible. While I believe the organization of Warren's text is important, I am going to take a slightly different approach, what Warren would probably call a 'heuristic approach' or an approach that will not do justice to all the intricacies of Warren's argument but will hopefully help us understand how his argument roughly fits together.

First, I will talk about what I refer to as 'inheritance' or what people have already said or built before Warren came onto the scene around 2010. This second item is the problem Warren has identified through Steen's murder, namely the fracturing of 'the fungible commodity' and the way Humanism bars black 'difference,' making it impossible to talk about different vulnerabilities to, and manifestations of, violence against black bodies. Finally, we will talk about the article's namesake, 'onticide,' and how Warren uses onicide to intervene in this problem space.

Inheritance

Ontology, or the study of the 'nature of being,' is essential to Warren's argument. According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "As a first approximation, ontology is the study of what there is [...] The larger discipline of ontology can be seen as having four parts:

(O1) the study of ontological commitment, i.e. what we or others are committed to,

(O2) the study of what there is,

(O3) the study of the most general features of what there is, and how the things there are relate to each other in the metaphysically most general ways,

(O4) the study of meta-ontology, i.e. saying what task it is that the discipline of ontology should aim to accomplish, if any, how the questions it aims to answer should be understood, and with what methodology they can be answered."

Afro-pessimism would have something to say about each of these, but Warren is primarily concerned with something like 'O3' or what it generally means to exist or 'be' in the world, especially what it means to 'exist' with what Warren calls 'low-

intensity' and how beings, but also being and non-being 'relate.' Heidegger, perhaps more than any philosopher, concerned himself with 'being' and what it means to 'be' in the world. He identifies an oversight in previous philosophy, which he calls 'ontological difference': the difference between the 'ontical' – facts about entities – and the 'ontological' – the nature of being (Wheeler). Heidegger argues that Humanism requires the absence of Being – 'nothingness' – but is philosophically unequipped to contend with nothingness. Warren picks up this line by arguing that blackness is the 'nothingness' that Humanism requires but cannot confront.

Warren defines Humanism as "A metaphysical discourse of humans, their unified essence, schematized/calculable nature, and the philosophy of their solipsistic, sovereign power" (394). According to Warren, Humanism seeks to define a subject's 'essence' as a "differentiating being," which allows the subject to experience their "uniqueness" (395). In simpler terms, we can understand Humanism "as a philosophy of difference" (395). At its most basic level, Humanism is in stark contrast to 'fungibility,' which could be described as a philosophy of non-differentiating amalgamation or interchangeability.

According to Warren, and this is where he pulls on Hegel, differentiating is really a question about violence, since "differentiation, or 'ontological cutting,' requires tremendous violence to carry out the task. To establish uniqueness, man must also establish an 'other'" (395). Racial slavery provided this 'other' for the creation of the 'modern subject' – providing not a different kind of human but, as the embodiment of 'nothingness,' a commodity that lay down the foundation for Humanism as a philosophical project. The oversimplified line I have given here is more a representation of how Warren makes this argument than how the chronology plays out:

Humanism → essence → uniqueness → differentiation → anti-black violence

Causally, it would probably be more like this, but that is also an oversimplification:

Humanism ← essence ← uniqueness ← differentiation ← anti-black violence

Warren describes the relationship between Humanism and ontology as "Humanism posit[ing] Man, ontologically, as the highest form of being" (395). Humanism is, in this reading, "ontological supremacy," and it "provides the fundamental structure for Being itself" (396). Warren says that Vittorio Possenti,

whose work he draws from, along with other philosophers, denies the violence inherent in 'ontological cutting' that not only differentiates between humans but between being and non-being. According to Warren, blackness exposes that the violence necessary for Humanism's ontological differentiation and the rise of the modern subject is not deniable, abstract, or random: it has been foundationally rooted in anti-blackness since chattel slavery. While human differentiation is violent and involves everything from anti-Palestinian violence to anti-gay violence, anti-black violence in Warren's view is different; it is not about marking out human difference but about creating the very foundation of being and non-being.

Warren tells us that understanding why the modern subject relies on anti-blackness is "the purpose of Afro-pessimism as a philosophical enterprise" (396). Warren explains that black ontology is rendered impossible because it is 'muted and denied,' but/and/so its status as a forced non-ontology of non-being preconditions what Frank Wilderson calls 'social life.' Under Afro-pessimism, "blackness is a (non)ontology – the 'non' foregrounding the inability to place black 'existence' within ontology and necessitating a term to express something like 'existence'" (411). If the *purpose* of Afro-pessimism is to understand why anti-black violence is necessary for the construction of the human, Afro-pessimism's *task* is to "expose, unveil, and remember [the] 'absent center of ontology'" (397). This absent center is what Warren refers to as the 'fungible commodity' or 'fungible object.'

During modernity (roughly the seventeenth century through the mid-twentieth century), blackness emerges alongside racial slavery, functioning as the "ultimate commodity" (397). Meaning, as Warren tells us, it was not merely that people were sold *as* commodities but that the very notion of a modern 'human being' was constructed on the idea that *blackness itself* is a homogeneous, replaceable, 'non-human' commodity, and it is this latter reality that was untouched by emancipation. This homogeneity that Warren argues is still in operation today is made possible through and predetermines "gratuitous violence (violence not predicated on transgression but simply on being black)" (399). When discussing slavery and this notion of the 'fungible commodity' of blackness, Warren cites Saidiya Hartman in *Scenes of Subjection*: "the fungibility of the commodity makes the captive body an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of others' feelings, ideas, desires, and value; and, as property, the dispossessed body of the enslaved is the

surrogate for the master's body" (398). This quote has eerie echoes of Stuart Hall's analysis of race as a floating signifier.³ In this reading, it is not merely 'race' but the black body itself that is forced into the role of 'floating signifier' where black 'being' exists for the captor "to serve as an empty, abstract, and abject vessel for the other's self-actualization, pleasure, and self-constitution [necessary for human uniqueness]" (398). Here, 'floating' is not merely a discursive process through which 'race' takes on the differentiating human meanings convenient for dominant society, but where the 'nothingness' of the empty signifier of blackness is the means whereby Humanism marks out the foundations of 'being.' The gratuitous anti-black violence of slavery enabled the captor-master to do more than define himself as other-than-slave. The violence defined blackness as fungible to such an extent that humanity itself could be defined as that which is *not* fungible, that is, that which is differentiating. The puzzle for Warren then becomes how to talk about differences in black experience when differentiation is denied to blackness.

The Problem: Afro-Pessimism Lacks a Grammar to Talk about Steen

Warren explains that "the violence of captivity expelled the African from Difference, or the Symbolic – the order of differentiating subjects – and relegated it to the vacuous space of undifferentiation" (398). Here lies the problem for Warren. If queerness is a form of *human* differentiation and Humanism denies human status and human differentiation to Steen, marking him as 'fungible' or homogeneous with the rest of blackness, how can the significance of his suffering be explained? This "antagonism between Humanism and fungibility" or 'gay' and the n-word is not unique to sexuality but applies to any 'marker' of difference that assumes a self or subject status: black woman, neurodivergent African-American male, etc.

Warren refers to the "fatal collision between these terms" (393) with many different phrases (an ontological violation, double exclusion, double bind, conceptual contradiction, impasse, unlocatable, unmappable, unthought, inconceivable, among others). I would argue Warren's abundant designations here have two uses. They show Warren's passion for this subject and the centrality this tension holds for this

³ See Stuart Hall's lecture "Race, The Floating Signifier" in which he explains how the signifier 'race' shifts in the interests of dominant society and 'race' itself becomes a system in which we are supposedly able to 'read the body' to say certain things about certain people (i.e. stereotype).

article. They also speak to the inadequacy of language that Warren seeks to emphasize in this piece; it brings to mind Meister Eckhart's line: the "unnameable is omninameable." Warren's task then is to provide an "alternative designation" for the violence Steen experienced in the face of all of this inadequacy (393).

Warren clearly does not want to disregard the marker 'gay' as what Wilderson would refer to as a 'structural adjustment error' but wants to inhabit the space of contradiction to conceptualize what it would mean for there to be something in excess of or surplus to anti-blackness, when anti-blackness is already, in Warren's terms 'gratuitous.' Warren says that ontology "conceals the *surplus*, which exceeds violence as a matrix" (399), showing how this 'double bind' itself is a manifestation of anti-black violence but cannot be read through Humanism's grammar of violence. He writes,

Without the differentiating grammar of Humanism, we are unable to talk about the fracturing between fungible commodities that renders some the targets of certain violence and others not [...] If fungibility creates a blob of black commodities, certain sociopolitical violence cuts this blob into unthinkable parts – parts that we have yet to name or provide a sufficient grammar to describe (401).

This cutting is what Warren is referring to when he uses the phrase 'fracturing of the fungible commodity' throughout this piece. This difficulty, or 'unthinkability,' rather than a failure of afro-pessimism, speaks to the violence of Humanism and the way it denies grammars of 'being' to the black body. Warren names this ontological violence 'onticide' to demonstrate how Humanism has 'killed' (or rendered impossible) black ontology.

Warren anticipates intersectionality as a proposed solution to the 'fracturing' problem. In Kimberlé Crenshaw's work, she talks about 'intersecting' oppressions, but for that to work, according to Warren, these oppressions have to be ontologically equivalent or inhabit something like the same 'plane,' otherwise, how would they intersect? Afro-pessimism argues that anti-blackness does not operate on the same plane as any other oppression, precisely because of the distinction between human differentiation and distinguishing being from non-being. Warren calls this a 'different relationship to nothingness,' or the limit between "'being-for-the-captor' (fungible object) and the 'human subject' experiencing oppression," also referred to as 'the

liminal subject' (403). This is also the difference between Humanistic differentiating violence and gratuitous violence (anti-black violence); the former has a 'grammar of suffering' while the latter does not. Warren explains that this distinction is why Matthew Sheperd,⁴ unlike Steen, could become a "*political synecdoche* with humanity; his 'queerness' is registered as 'part' of a larger whole of the human family" (404). Whether this synecdoche project was entirely successful is not the issue; the issue for Warren is that it was tried at all, which it could never have been for Steen since his suffering was 'unintelligible.' So, we still have our problem of lacking a grammar for the 'fracturing of the fungible object' that acknowledges that Humanistic terms are inadequate (406).

Warren's Intervention: Onticide

Because of this inadequacy, Warren explains that we need a procedure of 'writing with and against Humanism' to confront the 'double-bind' of Humanism's monopoly on difference. Writing under erasure allows Warren to name "features of human difference that exclude blackness but are necessary to articulate the fracturing of fungible commodities" (394). Warren says that "Writing under erasure [for example writing gay rather than gay] is a procedure that negotiates with a violent heritage by acknowledging its indispensability and exposing the violence that each sign conceals" (407). We can understand onicide as having something like the two following definitions:

Onticide

Noun

3. The murder of black ontology that makes Humanism as ontological supremacy possible.
4. A procedure of writing difference under erasure to signal Humanism's interdiction on black ontology that preconditions the possibility for a Humanist differentiating grammar.

So, on the one hand, we have onicide as ontological death. On the other, we have onicide as a method to speak through and against the homogenizing consequences of that ontological death. The 'strikethrough' line, the 'erasure,' demonstrates the "exclusion of blackness, the ban, but also the necessity of using a grammar that is

⁴ Matthew Sheperd was a 21 year-old gay white man who was tortured and left to die by his attackers. His murder sparked major media attention, especially regarding the role of homophobia in the attack.

inadequate" (407). Onticide, the procedure, is not a solution because, on the one hand, it is like a bandaid: a physical marker that does not address the root of the problem but shows there is a site of suffering. And on the other hand, unlike a bandaid, writing under erasure leaves the site of injury visible, drawing attention to the fact that time will not heal this suffering because Humanism depends on it.

Warren writes, "we erase the term of difference with the understanding that the erasure does not invert the vicious hierarchy of value but will, at the very least, highlight the interdiction on blackness that makes such terms possible" (408) and that "This procedure is an attempt to move us toward a new semantic field more appropriate to the fungible commodity" (409). In this vein, Warren does not call Steen's murder 'anti-gay' violence, crossing out the 'gay' but refers to it as 'surplus' violence because this is more in line with the semantic field he wants to move towards. This 'surplus' signifies the impasse of 'exorbitance' relative to anti-black violence since, as we know, anti-black violence is always already gratuitous violence, and as Warren asks, "How can 'something' be exorbitant to what is already an exorbitance?" (413). 'Surplus' signifies the conceptual contradiction of anti-black violence exceeding the very ontology it preconditions.

The last line of Warren's text speaks powerfully to the nature of his project, so we will end with it as well: "This is a dreaded condition, and it is a condition that we must continue to theorize around, even if we can never actually approach it" (414).

Works Cited

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